

The Culture War Misconception

In his book, Culture War?, Morris P. Fiorina refutes the concept that the electorate of the United States is divided in a culture war. Those who support the idea of a culture war believe that virtually the entire country has become polarized by the controversial issues being discussed by the nation's lobbyists and legislatures. Fiorina however cites the voting patterns of the nation's electorate for the past five decades to illustrate his belief that the people of the United States are not polarized but in fact quite similar in their beliefs. Fiorina writes that despite the truth about the country's recent voting record, the idea of a culture war persists because of the misleading and highly influential media as well as the elitist politicians and activists that decide which issues are discussed and decided upon.

According to Fiorina, the media presents misleading information to the people about political conflicts as well as a culture war that is supposedly taking place in this country. These are tactics that are meant to increase the revenue brought in from the stories that are printed and shown on television. Fiorina writes that "the commercial success of the newspapers and news shows depends on good story lines, and conflict is a good story line" (Fiorina 105). This is not to say that the stories presented are not factual; news distributors do however select stories that are more likely to sell copies and bring in viewers, which may as a result give false impressions regarding the majority of the country's opinions on certain topics. For example, Fiorina discusses an article printed in *USA Today* about the presidential election of 2000 that presented two extremely different cities; one of these cities, Montclair, New Jersey, was described as "left of center" and full of constituents that voted for Al Gore. The other city, Franklin, Tennessee, in

which George W. Bush won the majority of the votes, was described as being “right of center” and highly influenced by Christian values. These cities do not necessarily reflect the average population of the country. Fiorina claims that *USA Today* profiled these two cities in efforts to highlight their “preexisting conclusion that the country was deeply divided” (Fiorina 21). It is probable that this article influenced its readers to believe that these cities were true reflections of the populace of the United States. It is therefore evident that the media is a powerful force in the creation of these misconceived ideas about a culture war.

Fiorina writes that the persistent belief in a culture war is also due to the highly polarized positions that public officials and campaigners are taking. Politicians continue to change their positions on various issues in efforts to increase their political as well as social appeal. For example, over the past several decades and even going back to the 1930’s, Democrats have been strictly associated with fighting for social programs and environmental improvements while Republicans have become known for promising tax breaks and other sorts of programs. The media highlights these differences in the running candidates and then voters are forced to choose the platform they believe most in. Election results translate into “blue states” and “red states” and present the country as divided whereas in reality, the majority of the population is centrist and quite similar to one another. “The media undoubtedly reflects the fact that the thin stratum of elected officials...and party and issue activists who talk to the media...are more polarized than those of a generation ago” (Fiorina 28). It is therefore due in part to the different positions that campaigning politicians take that cause the nation to appear divided.

Fiorina also discusses the role of activists in the perpetuation of the culture war concept. Most of the highly controversial issues in the United States are argued by the small, extreme groups that are a minority to the centrist voting majority. Fiorina references Aaron Wildavsky

and describes these people to be “purists”. These groups and individuals make themselves known and fight for “what they believe deep down inside” (Fiorina 93). For example, Fiorina writes about the issue of abortion, a topic that has fueled a great number of debates, and illustrates with data from voters that most people take similar positions on the matter; most people feel that pregnancies that are as a result of rape or that have high probabilities of serious birth defects are worthy of abortions if the mother wishes to have one. Other situations that involve such scenarios as a mother not wanting another child are not regarded as worthy of abortion by the majority of the nation (Fiorina 36-38). However, the media presents extreme pro-life activists protesting and voicing their opinions that no abortion should ever take place. According to Fiorina, these are great stories for the media; television programs and newspapers use these stories to present a polarized nation that in reality is not as divided as it seems to be.

Moreover, Fiorina writes that there are opportunities for other non-activists to be involved in politics. Over the past thirty or forty years, the nation has become a place of public access; the public is allowed to and is encouraged to view records and to speak their opinions to their elected officials. “The problem is that relatively few people take advantage of those opportunities” (Fiorina 99). Due to the fact that the extreme activists are the primary groups forming protests and being seen by the media, it is no wonder that many feel as though this country is truly divided by a culture war. It is conceivable that if the majority of the nation does not speak out and if the media continues to present biased and selective information, that the people of this country will continue to believe themselves to be in the midst of a culture war, whether they truly are or not.