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Culture War? The Myth Of A Polarized America (3rd Edition)



Synopsis

Updated in a new 3rd edition and part of the "Great Questions in Politics" series, *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America* combines polling data with a compelling narrative to debunk commonly-believed myths about American politics—particularly the claim that Americans are deeply divided in their fundamental political views. Authored by one of the most respected political scientists in America, this brief, trade-like text looks at controversial and hot topic issues (such as homosexuality, abortion, etc.) and argues that most Americans are not polarized in relation to them.

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Customer Reviews

This is a very brief and tightly argued book of enormous relevance to us in 2004. It makes the following remarkable points: 1. On close inspection of individual opinions, the vast majority of the electorate in the U.S. are **moderate**, not radically polarized into liberals and conservatives. That is, most of us are, as we would like to believe, capable of thinking independently for ourselves rather than strictly along party ideological lines. We are a closely_divided nation, as reflected in the very close recent elections, however we are NOT a *deeply*_divided nation. That is, we are not really a nation of two distinct warring camps and a couple of swing states as the media sometimes present it for dramatic purposes. Fiorina suggests that we are actually something close to an ambivalent nation which divides itself in political matters because we have no choice when presented with highly divided options. 2. The American public has **not** become dramatically polarized even over such hot topics as abortion. Rather, relatively small differences among us have been magnified by

the rhetoric used to present the issues to us.³ The political choices we have are determined by a distinct class of politicians, party activists, and interest group leaders, who *have* become increasingly polarized over moral and religious ideology as well as economic ideology.⁴ A large part of the polarization of the political class has been the result of the realignment of the South, such that republicans aligned aggressive foreign policy with hostility to the welfare state, and democrats aligned antiwar sentiment with support of those at risk.

This is a great book, but I'm not sure that I feel comfortable fully embracing Fiorina's thesis. Fiorina argues that the electorate is not polarized, but we perceive it to be for various reasons (Polarized politicians, political activists, most voters are moderate with few extremists in the electorate, the media blows it all out of proportion, ect.). While Fiorina makes a compelling case and provides exhaustive evidence to support his claims, as much as I want to embrace his argument, my experience begs to differ. Perhaps I tend to be around extremists from both sides of the political spectrum and my experience is different than others, but as far as I can tell my peers are just as polarized as the political community. I've never lived in blood red America, but I've met enough die hard conservatives to know that lots are out there. I've also spent the majority of my life in some of the most liberal populations in the country, so I know there's a pretty strong coalition on the other side. Fiorina states that we are "closely but not deeply divided" meaning the median voter is the most common voter. That being said, I think most moderate voters just don't care and the ones who are really active politicians tend to be extremists. That being said, I think this book is important for the entire electorate or not. Because whether America is polarized or not, I think this book will challenge readers to consider how healthy deep partisanship really is as well as to be more pragmatic in our own political views and discussions.

We are using Fiorina's book as a supplementary text to the primary text book in our Introduction to Political Science course at the community college where I tutor. It helps to add dimension to the more basic exposition of the structure of government (separation of powers, federal systems, etc.) by looking at partisan and party political issues more in-depth, and more currently. This book starts with the wonderful quote from Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who once stated that all are entitled to their own opinions, but not their own facts. Fiorina walks a fine line between opinion and fact, and does so with skill. The book goes through the midterm elections of 2002 for its data; hopefully an update will be forthcoming soon. Still, the closely divided nature of the country is still present throughout, a roughly 50/50 nation of red states and blue states, with plenty of blue in the red, and

plenty of red in the blue. This is a key understanding for Fiorina - the nation is not sharply divided or deeply divided, but rather closely divided. He points to events such as Patrick Buchanan's speech in 1992 heralding a replacement of the Cold War with the Culture War, and showing that, despite the best efforts of commentators on all sides, the typical American will still be a centrist and moderate in many respects. The idea of a culture war is a myth, according to Fiorina. This is based on the misrepresentation of facts, or misinterpretation of such data as election results and polling data. The polarisation of America is more of an appearance or illusion brought out by statistical manipulation than a reality inherent in the system.

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