



# Red states, blue states: How well do the recent national election labels capture state political and policy differences?

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## ABSTRACT

The alleged polarization between the so-called red (Republican) and blue (Democratic) states during the presidential elections has been examined using only voter surveys. Focusing on the recent thirteen national elections from 1964 to 2012, we examine social, political, institutional, and policy indicators of the 50 American states to (1) gauge the extent to which national election results reflect significant policy and political differences between the red and blue states and (2) to assess the explanatory power of the dichotomous red–blue label relative to a continuous variable of “redness” or “blueness” by the percentage of votes received. We find substantial political and some moderate social differences between red and blue states but fewer institutional and policy differences than one would expect if there were actually deep divisions between the states. We find that the red–blue state distinction performs well when compared to the explanatory power of the more precise redness or blueness of a state.

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## 1. Introduction

Media coverage of recent presidential elections introduces a shorthand expression to capture national voting differences among the American states: red versus blue (Broder, 2000; Brooks, 2001, 2004; Dionne, 2003). In the recent 2012 presidential election, a blue state cast a plurality of its popular vote for the Democratic presidential candidate, namely President Barack Obama, while a red state cast a plurality of its popular vote for the Republican candidate, former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney. Obama carried 26 states, while Romney carried 24 states. Therefore, there are presently 26 blue states and 24 red

states. This designation has come to serve as a label for ideological and cultural differences among American states.

Campaign strategists and issue advocates use the red–blue label, as well. Lake, Ulibarri, and Kully (2007), Democratic strategists, recently advised “How Democrats Can Win in Red States: Ten Lessons from winning in Montana and other Senate Races.” Petit (2008, p. 2) employs the red–blue distinction in his investigation of state child welfare differences, showing that six of the top 10 states ranked on “child well-being” are blue states, while all of the bottom ten states are red. Somewhat conversely, Malkin (2004) argues that the top 25 states on a generosity index are all red states.

Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope (2006) agrees with Brooks, arguing that the alleged polarization is a media myth, while Abramowitz and Saunders (2005) find survey evidence supporting the reality of a red–blue cultural divide. Ansolabehere, Rodden, and Snyder (2006, pp. 103–104) take a middle ground asserting that the cultural war

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thesis is not supported by survey data because the public's preferences about social issues are converging, while their preferences about economic issues are growing.

These scholars who comment on the red–blue divide, however, do not actually examine evidence pertaining to red versus blue states, but instead examine Republican and Democratic voters in particular states. This emphasis is most apparent in Fiorina et al.'s *Culture War* (2006) with its colored map of red and blue states but only chapter two, “A 50:50 Nation? The Red and Blue States,” specifically focuses on states. In chapter three, “A 50:50 Nation? Beyond the Red and the Blue States,” the authors address major differences between red and blue states, returning to states only briefly in chapter eight where they discuss political reforms. Similarly, the chapters in Nivola and Brady's (2006) *Red and Blue Nation* describe political polarization at the national level and examine religion, media, and gerrymandering as contributors to the perceived increase in partisan politics. None of these chapters examine the policy consequences of such an increase, nor do they examine state-level factors.

Other scholars have considered the red–blue divide in states or regions, but with very limited breadth. Glazer and Ward (2006), relying on the General Social Survey and National Election Study data disaggregated to the state level, find significant differences in citizen beliefs about AIDS, September 11, and God, as well as differences in income and ideology between red and blue states, but they are uncertain about the cause of these differences. They observe that “people in different states have been exposed to quite similar evidence through national media outlets, but they have reached radically different conclusions, and continue to hold these conclusions despite being aware that others disagree” (Glazer & Ward, 2006, p. 131). They conclude that “the heterogeneity of beliefs and attitudes across the United States is enormous” and “political divisions are increasingly becoming religious and cultural,” yet they argue that the red–blue state framework is too simple because there is a “continuum of states ranging from the poor conservative places of the South and West to the rich, liberal places of the coasts” (Glazer & Ward, 2006, p. 142).

A limitation of debates about the nature and significance of any red–blue schism is the almost complete reliance on public opinion surveys, with only a few minor references to census reports describing social conditions (Petit, 2008) or life activities (Malkin, 2004). If, as Glazer and Ward (2006) find, there are differences in beliefs among residents of red and blue states, there should be differences in public policies adopted in red and blue states.

Davison (1991, pp. 42–43) argues that Americans are divided into the culturally orthodox and the culturally progressive, and thus they have been inevitably engaged in cultural conflict as “political and social hostility rooted in different systems of moral understanding.” As a result, substantial ideological or policy differences among the American citizenry should be observed in a polarized electorate, that is, the simple dichotomous region—red states that represent a number of orthodox regions on the right support the Republicans, and blue states that represent

a number of progressive regions on the left support the Democrats.

We examine two simple questions. First, we investigate how well the red–blue label, based on national election results, accurately describes significant policy and political differences between these two groups of states. Secondly, in addition to considering the accuracy of these labels, this paper explores the usefulness of the dichotomous red–blue state categories as a predictive tool compared to a more exact measure of the percent vote share of the Democratic candidate. Specifically, we examine how well the red–blue dichotomy comports with the explanatory power of a continuous variable of blueness. We develop four sets of indicators—political, socio-economic, institutional, and policy characteristics—that reflect the underlying culture of red and blue regions. After presenting these indicators, which are widely used in the literature of state politics, and estimating the difference between red and blue states, the explanatory power of the red/blue state labels is evaluated. This paper more specifically examines the extent to which the red–blue label reflects important characteristics of states. Empirically, we find that the red–blue distinction is helpful in understanding political factors but not as useful for understanding policy differences among the states.

## 2. Background and persistence of red and blue states

The political science concept closest to the red/blue state dichotomy is Elazar's notion of political culture developed from a state's fundamental political beliefs and values that are rooted in the historical experience of particular groups of people which affects their view of government and the way government operates (Elazar, 1966). Elazar (1966, p. 85) argues that there are two basic concepts driving these views: (1) the role of the free market in which the “primary public relationships are products of bargaining among individuals and interest groups,” and (2) the idea of a commonwealth or community where “citizens cooperate in an effort to create and maintain the best government in order to implement shared moral values.” He defines three dominant political cultures among the states as follows: (1) moralistic—states stressing cooperation in improving the collective interest; (2) individualistic—states emphasizing minimal government and minimal governmental interference; and (3) traditionalistic—states focusing on a strong commitment to the existing social and political order.

Elazar's rather simple and impressionistic categorization of the states is a mainstay of state politics research. Erickson, Wright, and McIver (1993, p. 175) examine state policy-making as a complex interaction of elite, legislative, and mass opinion within Elazar's typology of persistent state political culture and conclude that “our results offer strong support—sometimes startlingly strong support—for Elazar's formulation. In almost all instances, we find interaction or additive effects involving the sub-culture categories, the results are consistent with what we would expect from Elazar's discussion.”

One of the most apparent differences between red and blue states is the geographic region where they are located. Red states have a geographical continuity, stretching from

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