

RED AND BLUE NATION? CHARACTERISTICS AND CAUSES OF AMERICA'S POLARIZED POLITICS

(Brookings, December 2006)

How the Mass Media Divide Us

In the three and a half decades since 1970, when most Americans got their political information from the evening news and the local newspaper, the media landscape has been transformed by cable and satellite television, the Internet, cell phones, satellite radio, and iPods. The result, according to communications scholar Diana Mutz, is that Americans not only have more sources from which to get their news than ever before, they have more opportunities for tuning the news out altogether. In her chapter in *Red and Blue Nation? Characteristics and Causes of America's Polarized Politics* (Brookings, December 2006), Mutz explores how these technological developments—along with changes in the content of news programming—have caused mass media to come to be regarded by many as “engines of polarization.”

One theory cited by Mutz is that consumers of news programming, when presented with more sources from which to get their news, engage in selective exposure—choosing only those sources that “reinforce and intensify their preexisting views.” Mutz recounts another theory linking increasing media choice and political polarization in which the electorate is robbed of its moderate middle as citizens are more able to substitute entertainment programming for news. As less politically interested, more moderate citizens abandon news in favor of entertainment, they miss opportunities to learn about issues that might motivate them to take part in the political process. As a result, “more moderate voters are *less* likely to vote than before, while ... the electorate that does go to the polls is more polarized in their views.”

In addition to these technology-driven changes, Mutz identifies several changes in the content of news programming that could plausibly lead to increasing political polarization. Since the 1960s, coverage of elections and campaigns has increasingly focused on the “suspense and speculation about likely winners and losers” and behind-the-scenes strategizing instead of substantive policy differences between the candidates. As a result, “it is a much more polarizing experience to think that one’s candidate lost an election because of a minor misstatement, a failure to look good on television ... than to think that he lost because his policy ideas were less popular than his opponents.” Another potential cause of polarization in the public is that journalists, by relying on a more polarized group of political elites as their official sources, are presenting “a wider range of acceptable views to the public and thus discouraging consensus.”

Finally, Mutz points out an irony in the popularity of the “televised incivility” displayed on political talk shows such as *The O'Reilly Factor*, *Hardball* and *Hannity & Colmes*. Research indicates that after watching candidates engage in uncivil exchanges, partisan viewers’ “attitudes toward the ‘other side’ became much more intensely negative.... The more dramatic, uncivil exchanges encouraged a more black-and-white view of the world.” Yet it is precisely the drama and excitement of these shows that viewers like. Without that excitement, they may be unlikely to watch at all and “thus fall out of the reach of political information altogether.”

So the key issue for Mutz is this: “how to make a topic that is not inherently interesting to many Americans nonetheless exciting to watch. And if the answer is not behind-the-scenes coverage of election strategy, or mudslinging on political talk shows, or partisan extremists rallying the troops, then what will keep those politically marginal citizens from watching movies on cable instead?”

Diana C. Mutz is the Samuel A. Stouffer Professor of Political Science and Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. Her chapter on the role of the media as a factor in the polarization of U.S. politics will be published by the Brookings Institution Press in the forthcoming Red and Blue Nation: Characteristics and Causes of America's Polarized Politics (Brookings, December 2006), edited by Pietro S. Nivola of the Brookings Institution and David W. Brady of the Hoover Institution. Red and Blue Nation? is a project sponsored by The Brookings Institution and Hoover Institution.



Written by Richard Walker.

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