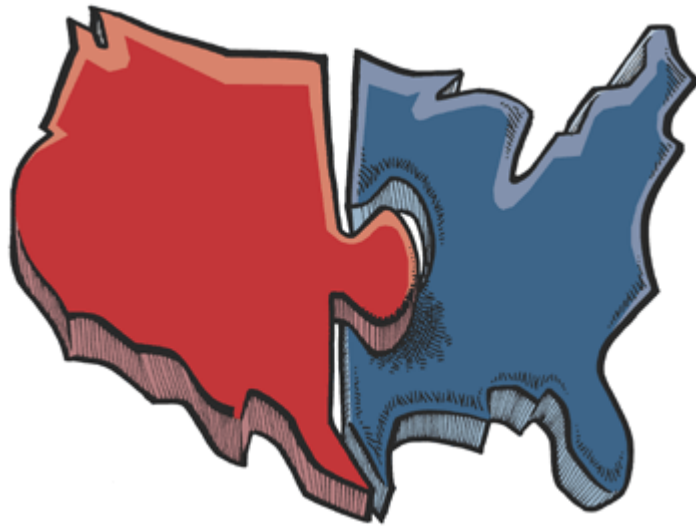


The Myth of the Red / Blue State Divide: The Paradigm That Defined and Divided the 2000 and 2004 U.S. Presidential Elections



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What is happening to the American electorate? This is the question that many political scientists have been asking themselves since the 2000 election. Since then, the American electorate has been described as being deeply polarized, falling into a paradigm of red states and blue states. In this paradigm, states vote uniformly red for the Republican Party or blue for the Democratic Party, however, the paradigm is more a myth than reality. A deeper look at the divide that existed in this country during the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections will show that the electorate was not polarized state-by-state. In 2004, the electorate was described as being even more polarized than in 2000. While this is partly true, the idea that the electorate was so deeply divided on a state-by-state level remained a myth. The increased polarization that was seen in the electorate during the 2004 election was largely tied to party politics and the issues. In 2000, the Republican Party took the Red State / Blue State paradigm and used it as a campaign tool to draw in voters and create a new electoral base. The voters that composed this new base voted according to their moral beliefs and not their rational interests. This same tactic was used to an even greater degree during the 2004 campaign. By emphasizing the issue of gay marriage and framing it around the institution of heterosexual marriage, the Republican Party was able to retain control of the Executive Branch and Congress while earning political capital.

The 2000 election will always be considered controversial. George W. Bush won although he did not win the popular vote and the outcome of the election ended up in the hands of the Supreme Court, which ruled in favor of the Republican Party 5-4. Whereas in 2004, the Republican Party enacted a strategy that would ensure their position as the Party in Government (PIG) as well as create political capital in the form of increasing

margins of victory and more seats in Congress. The strategy that was used emphasized moral issues that mobilize the religious right to vote for the Republicans. However, the Republican agenda has not implemented legislation in accordance with their campaign promises throughout the duration of their term. Therefore there have become two distinct bases for the Republican Party: one, which they are able to mobilize for elections, serving as a supplemental base. This is the base made up of the religious right and blue-collar working class Americans; they are characterized by their positions on moral issues, especially gay marriage. Similarly, they are the voters who are being exploited into voting on their moral beliefs rather than their rational, economic interests. They will be referred to as the “electoral base” of the Republican Party. The other base is the traditional, northern-Eisenhower Republicans, who are characterized by their position on issues like fiscal conservativeness, taxation and deregulation. They will be called the “traditional base” of the Republican Party because they are the voters whose interests are being represented in the governing agenda of the Republican Party.

Literature Review

Oppenheimer (2005) explores the relationship that exists between red states and blue states in his article entitled, “Deep Red and Blue Congressional Districts: The Causes and Consequences of Declining Party Competitiveness.” He looks at the paradigm as it applies to House elections over the past forty years. Although Oppenheimer is more concerned with incumbent success in elections, his findings delve into the partisan divide that exists on a congressional district level. His research assumes two factors that determine incumbent success in elections: the first, “Personal Incumbent

Advantage,” refers to the amount of political capital a representative has earned during their tenure, most notably by gaining support among their constituency. The second factor is “Partisan Incumbency Advantage,” which refers to the partisan split that occurs in congressional districts as a direct result of partisan redistricting. Personal incumbent advantage can be achieved by either focusing political resources on local issues, or by gaining public exposure through their work and placement on committees. The personal incumbent advantage works inversely against the partisan incumbency advantage.

Oppenheimer (2005) presents the idea that the increased partisan effect on redistricting, especially the increase in safe districts has caused U.S. Representatives to focus less on their constituent’s issues and more on their own personal agendas. This is especially for 1992-2000 when the amount of personal incumbent advantage was evidently low and the partisan incumbency advantage was high. On the issue of partisan redistricting, Oppenheimer focuses his research on whether partisan redistricting drives the partisanship in the electorate or vice versa. What Oppenheimer believes is that many Americans either consciously or subconsciously take their partisanship and partisan views in consideration when deciding where to live. This is the first explanation of the red/blue divide in the electorate. It is not so much that states are uniformly red or blue, rather it is that congressional districts are red or blue as a result of redistricting and the tendency of like-minded voters to live in the same areas.

Another author who looks at the Red State / Blue State paradigm is Thomas Frank (2004). In his book, What’s The Matter With Kansas, Frank focuses his research on the divide during the 2000 presidential campaigns and presidential election. Frank believes that moral values have trumped traditional class issues for a majority of the American

electorate. He bases this on the fact that during the campaign season leading up to the 2000 presidential election most of the major news networks analyzed the upcoming election in terms of 'red states' and 'blue states.' Many nights they would plaster a map of the United States on the screen with states being color coded for their expected outcome. For Frank, the red/blue state divide painted a picture of two America's. The blue states were states like New York, California, New Jersey, and Washington. The Republican Party portrayed the people living in blue states as 'Latte Liberals.' These people were the latte drinking, Volvo driving, wealthy intellectual elite who knew nothing about life in Middle America. On the other hand, red states were states like: Kansas, Texas, Nebraska and Oklahoma. The people living in these states were hard working, straight talking, average American's. The Republican Party was able to portray the U.S. as a divided nation and claim they were the party of working class Americans. Soon after, blue-collar America started thinking that the way to get back at the corporate elite was to vote for the 'non-elite' Republicans (Frank). This is what caused the initial growth in the Republican Party's base. It was the party's emphasis on the divide between the elite in blue states and the average Americans in red states that caused many union workers to defect from the Democratic Party. Since the New Deal Era, when Franklin D. Roosevelt captured the labor union support, blue-collar union workers have traditionally voted in favor of the Democrats for their stance on labor rights. The Republicans were able to create a second base for their party made up of these voters who voted for the party based on moral issues. These voters have been exploited into voting on moral beliefs causing many to shift their vote from the Democrats to the Republicans. Similarly,

in 2004, many of these voters turned to the Republicans again due to issue voting and the framing of homosexuality by the Republican Party.

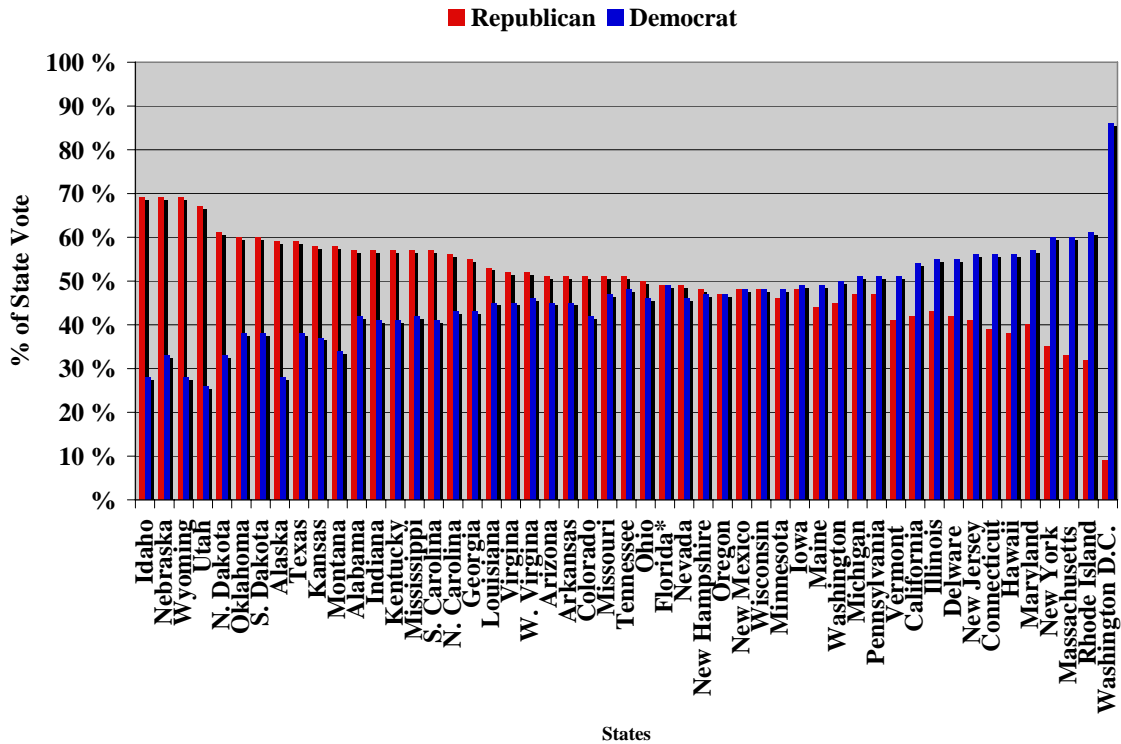
John Tierney (2005), in the article titled, A Nation Divided? Who Says?, looks at the red state / blue state divide, specifically with regard to the 2004 presidential election. Tierney believes that just because a state votes one way or the other in a presidential election does not mean that the voters in that state are strictly aligned to that side of the political spectrum. The evidence for this is in the 2000 presidential election, in that election he looks at the six bluest states, those in which George W. Bush fared worst. These states include Rhode Island, Massachusetts, New York, Hawaii, Connecticut, and Maryland. All these states voted heavily for the Democrats in the 2000 presidential election, yet all have Republican governors. For Tierney, this proves that most Americans are centrist and would prefer to have a government with split party control.

Data and Analyses

The data analysis will begin by looking at the red state / blue state divide in the electorate. The question that must be answered is whether or not the divide exists on a state-to-state level. The best way to evaluate this is to look at the election results from the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections. Table 1.1 shows the popular vote results by state for the 2000 election. States are listed from those that voted most favorably for the Republicans to those that were most favorable for the Democrats. The analysis will focus on whether a majority of states return election results that are uniformly red or blue, or whether a majority of states qualify as competitive races with only a few being staunchly

red or blue. For this research, any state that had less then 60 percent of their popular vote in favor of one party or the other will be considered a competitive race¹.

Table 1.1
Source: CNN Election Results 2000



Source (<http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2000/results/>)

Table 1.1 shows that in many states neither party was able to capture 60 percent of the popular vote. This will be the measure for polarization in the states. In congressional districts a safe seat can capture at least 60 percent of the electorate in every election. This is based on the concept of party in the electorate (PIE). In 2000, as this data shows, there were in fact only five red states, (Idaho, Nebraska, Wyoming, Utah and North Dakota),

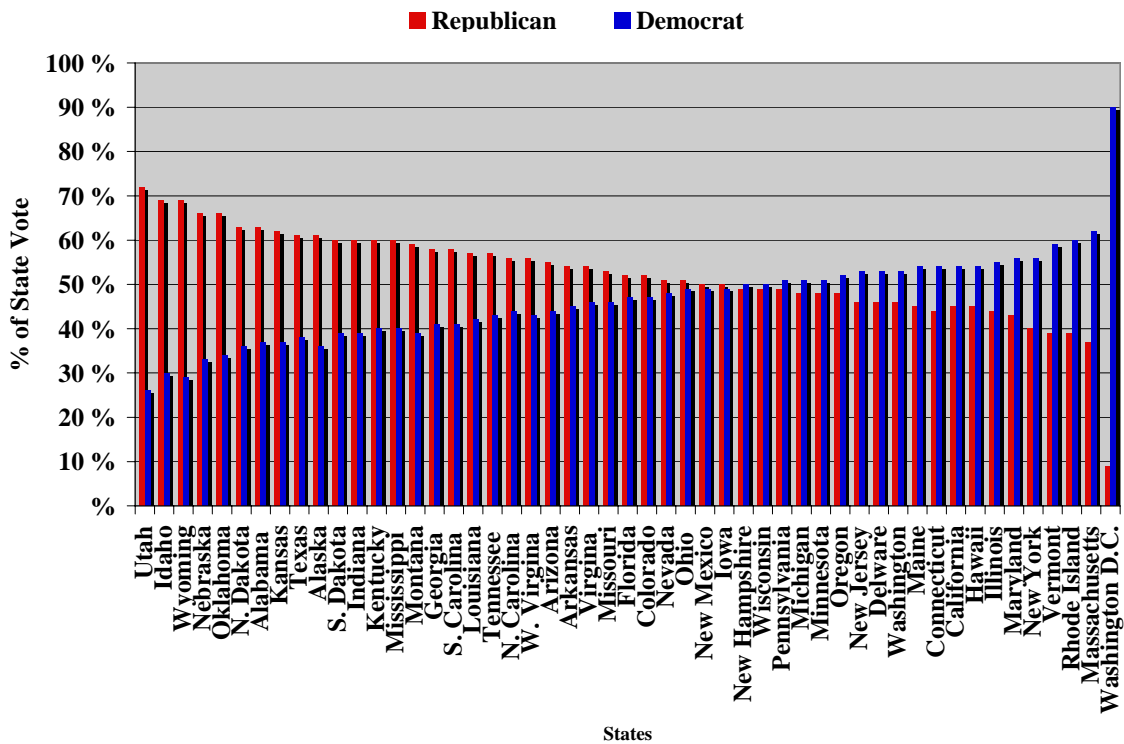
¹ In the study of congressional districts and safe districts versus competitive districts there is a general acknowledgement that 60% constitutes a safe district.

that exceeded the 60 percent margin and one blue state, Rhode Island, with Washington D.C. being a phenomenon that will be looked at later.

Oppenheimer's theory on the red/blue divide is useful to evaluate these results. Oppenheimer (2005) believes that the red/blue divide exists on a congressional district level rather than on a state-to-state level. This is due to partisan redistricting, which helps to create safe seats, as well as groups voters with others who vote the same way they do. Oppenheimer's theory helps to explain why the red states appear red. Out of the five states mentioned above Nebraska and Utah have the most voting districts with three each. Idaho has two districts, and Wyoming and North Dakota only have one. If a state only has a few districts, then the voting districts are good predictor of the state vote. This is also true of the one blue state, Rhode Island. Rhode Island has only two districts; therefore, if those districts are safe Democratic districts then the entire state appears Democratic even if 49 percent of the popular vote in those districts voted Republican. This leads me to believe that the idea that the nation is carved into red states and blue states is much the work of the media trying to extrapolate on the tendencies of state voting patterns. Washington D.C. is the one outlier on the graph but considering the socio-economic demographics of the D.C. area, it is not surprising that D.C., an area with a high population of low-income African-Americans, votes as highly Democratic as it does. Therefore, to say that the country as a whole during the 2000 presidential election was characterized by red states and blue states, with states voting with unwavering support for one party or the other, is statistically a myth. The table shows the opposite of that with forty-four out of fifty states being considered competitive elections with neither party claiming more than 60 percent of the vote.

Now to look at the 2004 election in which the American electorate was portrayed by the media as being even more polarized than it had been in 2000. Table 1.2 shows the popular vote for the 2004 election represented by states again in order of reddest to bluest.

Table 1.2
Source: CNN Election Results 2004



Source (<http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2004/pages/results/president/>)

From Table 1.2 it can be seen that not much changed between 2000 and 2004 despite the media’s diagnosis that the electorate was much more polarized than it had been in 2000. In 2004, there were ten red states that returned overwhelming victories for the

Republicans, four more than in 2000. This shows that although the electorate was still not completely polarized it was skewed in favor of the Republicans, whereas there was only one blue state in which the Democrats captured at least 60 percent of the popular vote. The only blue state in 2004 was Massachusetts, the home state of Senator John Kerry. However, there were still thirty-nine states in 2004 that could be considered competitive races. The one trend that can be seen from 2000 to 2004 is the curve in Table 1.2 is skewed more in favor of the Republicans than it is in Table 1.1. This shows the movement of the electorate toward the political right. One explanation for this is gay marriage initiatives. Scholars have shown that the Republican Party intended to emphasize the gay marriage issue knowing that it would work in their favor. The article, "50-State Rundown on Gay Marriage Laws," (Peterson 2004) states on Election Day 2004 eleven states passed constitutional amendments specifying marriage as strictly between a man and a woman. North Dakota, Oklahoma and Utah, which all voted highly in favor of the Republican Party, extended the ban on gay marriage to include civil unions or any other type of partnership. Many of the other states that passed gay marriage initiatives are considered competitive races according to the 60 percent standard. However, most have moved to the right in favor of the Republicans since 2000. For instance, the other states that passed initiatives in 2004 include: Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, Michigan, Mississippi, Montana, Ohio and Oregon.

Two relationships become clear looking at the states that banned gay marriage in 2004. First, out of the eleven states that passed gay marriage initiatives two went Democratic in 2004, Michigan and Oregon. This suggests that Tierney is right and that many Americans are not actually polarized, but in fact are centrists that agree with

policies from both sides of the political spectrum. Second, the nine other states that passed gay marriage initiatives all displayed greater polarization towards the Republican Party in 2004. The best example of this is Oklahoma. In 2000, the Republicans were able to capture 60 percent of the popular vote, whereas in 2004, with the gay marriage initiative on the ballot, the Republicans captured 66 percent of the vote. The same is true for Utah; in 2000 the Republican Party won 67 percent of the vote compared to 2004 with 72 percent, the highest percent of any state in favor of the Republican Party.

The next issue that must be examined is whether the issue of homosexuality played in favor of the Republicans in the 2004 election. An examination of the 2004 American National Election Study (ANES) helps to answer this question. Table 1.3 cross-tabulates partisan identification and stance on gay marriage, controlling for religion. In the 2004 election, partisan identification played a large role in how people thought about gay marriage. This is partly due to the Republican Party's firm stance against gay marriage. This was evident from their proposal for a constitutional amendment banning gay marriage.

Gay marriage can be considered an easy issue. In the article, "The Two Faces of Issue Voting," author's Carmines and Stimson (1980) discuss two types of issue voting that occur. Easy-issue voting occurs when a particular issue is so high profile that it ingrains in voters an automatic reaction concerning the issue, the parties and the candidates. According to the research, issue voting occurs most frequently during time of social and economic turmoil. This is because it is during these times that the differences in policy are most notable. Gay marriage is a perfect example of an easy-issue. Easy

issues are characterized by usually being symbolic rather than technical, more likely to deal with policy ends rather than means, and an issue that is long on the political agenda. During the 2004 campaign season, the GOP put their opposition to gay marriage into their platform. George W. Bush proposed a constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriages. This is why many voters identified with the Republican Party in the ANES. The table shows that 37.8 percent of Republicans think that gays should not be allowed to get married. This percentage is mostly made up of the religious right that started identifying with the Republican Party because of this issue. The 29.3 percent of Republicans that think gays should not get married, but should be allowed to get civil unions represents the views of many in the Republican Party's traditional base. These people do not really care one way or the other for gays, they would prefer it stay out of the political arena. That is why many of these voters would like to preserve the institution of marriage while still letting gays enjoy some of the benefits of marriage.

Table 1.3						
Source: American National Election Study (ANES, 2004)						
Cells contain: -Column percent -N of cases		v3210				
		1 Should be allowed	3 Should not be allowed	5 Should not be allowed to marry but should be allowed	7 Other (VOL) (SPECIFY)	ROW TOTAL
v3114	1: Republican	14.6 57	37.8 262	29.3 12	20.7 6	29.2 337
	2: Democrat	40.8 159	26.8 186	34.1 14	27.6 8	31.8 367
	3: Independent	38.5 150	29.7 206	31.7 13	41.4 12	33.0 381
	4: Other party (SPECIFY)	1.3 5	1.2 8	.0 0	.0 0	1.1 13
	5: No preference	4.9 19	4.5 31	4.9 2	10.3 3	4.8 55
	COL TOTAL	100.0 390	100.0 693	100.0 41	100.0 29	100.0 1,153

(<http://sda.berkeley.edu:7502/cgi-bin20/hsda3>)

Analysis

In 2000 the Republican Party took the Red State / Blue State paradigm and used it as a campaign strategy to draw in voters who would compose a new base for the party. Voters were exploited with the paradigm and believed that voting for the Republican Party served their interests better than the Democratic Party. The 2004 election was described as being even more polarized than in 2000, which is true, however, the electorate was still not polarized on a state-to-state level. Furthermore, the polarization that did occur in 2004 was partly due to the gay-marriage issue and the way the Republican Party framed it during the campaign. This can be seen through the expansion of the Republican Party's electoral base. By emphasizing the issue of homosexuality, the party was able to mobilize many voters in the religious right by pushing them into alignment with the Republican Party's stance against gay-marriage. This was the same issue used by the Republican Party to retain many of the blue-collar Americans who started voting Republican in 2000 because of the Red State / Blue State paradigm.

The Republicans started building their new electoral base during the campaign season leading up to the 2000 presidential election. They were able to utilize the visual paradigm of red states and blue states to sway many voters in Middle America into backing them. The strategy behind this was convincing blue-collar working Americans that while they lived in red states, the Democrats who lived in blue states were morally corrupt and unauthentic. This convinced many Americans to vote in favor of the

Republican Party. Presenting the Democrats as the elite gave the Republicans the advantage of claiming that people in red states needed to get revenge on the elite of this country by voting them out of office. What makes this interesting is since the New Deal Era when Franklin D. Roosevelt was able to capture the labor unions support, union worker voters have traditionally voted in favor of the Democrats. This is because the Democratic Party's policies included labor rights, wealth redistribution and government regulation of corporate America (Frank, 2004).

Starting where they left off in 2000, the Republicans took a new approach to building their electoral base for 2004. Rather than trying to convince blue-collar workers that the Republican Party best served their interests, they embarked down the path of moral righteousness. With many Americans not gaining economic wealth under this president and the controversy surrounding the War in Iraq, it was in the Republican Party's best interest to play the moral card with the electorate in order to divert their attention from the real issues. The strategy would ensure that they would get re-elected as well as gain some political capital by showing that their platform was the prevailing ideology within the electorate.

While the electorate leading up the 2004 election was described as being more polarized than ever, the validity of that statement is called into question with the evidence presented in Table 1.2, which shows that a majority of states in 2004 still fell into the category of being competitive elections. However, the polarization that did occur during the 2004 election was directly related to the issue of homosexuality. The Republicans were able to frame this issue so that many Americans would fall victim to the easy-issue voting; it is this type of voting that would determine the voting behavior of Americans in

2004. This is due to the fact that, according to Carmines and Stimson (1980), easy issue voting occurs most often during times of social and economic unrest, characteristics that defined the political climate of the nation leading up to the 2004 election. With the president being criticized for unemployment rates and the War in Iraq, the American Electorate was waiting for an issue on which to base their voting. The use of Carmines and Stimson's theory on easy-issue voting is critical to understanding the use of homosexuality and how it translated into electoral success for the Republicans in 2004.

According to "The Two Faces of Issue Voting," easy-issue voting occurs when an issue is so highly emphasized for a period of time that a voter can respond to the issue with a mere instinctual reaction. Similarly, easy issues are those issues that are symbolic rather than technical and deal with policy ends not means. Gay marriage was the issue that drove many voters to vote for the Republican Party. This is because the issue was framed so that the issue challenged the traditional institution of marriage between a man and a woman. First off, marriage is highly symbolic. Symbolic in this sense means that the issue is communicated and understood in simple terms. Likewise, the issue of gay-marriage that the Republican Party has presented is rather simple. The Party has framed the issue not on gay rights, but rather on the institution of marriage. The states that voted overwhelmingly in favor of the Republicans in 2004 were also states that had gay marriage initiatives on the voting ballots, which attempted to define marriage as strictly between a man and a woman (Peterson, 2004). This strengthened the electoral support of the Republican Party within those states for the 2004 presidential election. By framing the issue around the institution of marriage, voters only have to evaluate whether the government should define marriage as being strictly between a man and a woman. The

idea of gay marriage being a policy end rather than a means is evident in the Republican Party's campaign platform of wanting to propose an amendment to the U.S. Constitution that defined marriage as strictly between a man and a woman. That is the end of the policy, to ban gay-marriage. Republicans did not intend to accommodate gay marriage rather they affirmed marriage as legally being between a man and a woman with no discussion of any gay rights. It was then left to voters to pick a side. All these things point to the idea that gay marriage was an easy-issue for voters in 2004. And while the Republican Party seemed to be on the right side of the issue in 2004, with no gay marriage initiative currently on the agenda the electoral base of the Republican Party has been left at the voting booths.

While the Republican Party has been able to build this new electoral base composed of blue-collar working Americans and the religious right wing of the American electorate, the future of the Republican Party is in question. This is because while they have been drawing in all these voters on the campaign platform of moral issues, specifically gay marriage, the governing agenda of the Republican Party has yet to pay back the political debt to their electoral base.

Therefore, it is safe to say that the red state/ blue state divide is a paradigm that does not explain the American Electorate. Instead, it has become a political tool for the Republican Party to expand their primary voting base to include an electoral base that votes according to their moral beliefs as well as the easy issues that the party chooses to highlight. This electoral base can be mobilized for elections, but their interests are not addressed or resolved as part of the governing agenda.

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