Social Science in the Public Interest: To What Extent Did the Media Cover "Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America"?

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Wayne E Baker
University of Michigan
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Social Science in the Public Interest: To What Extent Did the Media Cover "Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America"?

Wayne Baker

Abstract

I consider the extent to which Culture War? reached its intended audience—the general public—using systematic data on print media coverage in the United States. Most major newspapers and national magazines cited the book’s findings. Coverage appears to be higher in the Northeast and South than in the Midwest and West. Proportionally more publications in blue states than in red states covered the book. Print media coverage peaked around the November 2004 elections. Overall, the book reached its target audience.

KEYWORDS: elections, political parties, media

Author Notes: Wayne Baker is Professor of Management & Organizations and Professor of Sociology at the University of Michigan, and author of America’s Crisis of Values: Reality and Perception (Princeton University Press 2005). www.waynebaker.org
Morris Fiorina and colleagues didn’t write this book for academics. They wrote it for the general public. Their purpose is to correct a widely held and broadly perpetrated fiction: the belief that America is a deeply, bitterly divided nation. In this (first) edition of the book, they compare Americans living in red and blue states in 2000, and also look at trends over the past 30 years. They use data from a variety of sources, such as the General Social Surveys, National Election Studies, Gallup, and Pew to examine a wide range of political, social, and economic attitudes. Based on the evidence, their conclusion is clear and unambiguous: “Reports of a culture war are mostly wishful thinking and useful fund-raising strategies on the part of culture war guerrillas, abetted by a media driven by the need to make the dull and everyday appear exciting and unprecedented” (p. 33). They are now updating the book, including a comparison of those living in red and blue states in 2004. This update yields the same results and supports the same conclusion.1

This book both draws on and adds to an existing body of social science research on the culture war. Those who have tested the culture war thesis come from various scholarly disciplines and use various sources of data, but all of the empirical work converges on the same conclusion. For example, using data from all four waves of the World Values Surveys, I examine America’s values and also conclude that the culture war is largely a myth.2 Most of this work has been written by and for academics. In contrast, Fiorina et al.’s book is intended to reach and appeal to a general audience. Part of its value is that it pulls together and synthesizes a great deal of evidence, presenting it in a compact, highly readable, and accessible format (and the publisher priced it to make it affordable).

Instead of recounting the authors’ findings and theories, I consider the extent to which they reached their target audience. I focus on coverage in the print media from 2004 to the present. (Data sources and search strategy are described in the Appendix.) This analysis does not include radio, television, or Internet coverage, though these media figured prominently in the dissemination of the book’s message. For example, Fiorina appeared on multiple CNN and PBS programs, and he or his co-authors were interviewed on an estimated 150 radio programs around the country, including national programs such as NPR and ABC.

Most major newspapers and national magazines cited these findings, including Newsweek, Time, The New Yorker, The Economist, U.S.A. Today, The Atlantic Monthly, Wall Street Journal, New York Times, and U.S. News and World Report. Coverage appears to be higher in the Northeast and South than in the Midwest and West (Figure 1). These differences might reflect the number of

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newspapers in these regions, regional differences in editorial policies and interests, local politics and political ideologies, or perceived reader interests.

One of the original contributions of this book (and its update) is that it explicitly compares Americans living in red and blue states. It uses hard evidence to demonstrate that Americans living in red and blue states have similar attitudes about a wide range of topics and issues. The findings show that the red/blue maps from the 2000 and 2004 elections are inaccurate and misleading metaphors of the true state of American society. The correct color metaphor for the American people is purple, a mix of red and blue.

The amount of media coverage, however, shows a red/blue split (Figure 2). This split remains even after “deflating” the number of blue-state citations to take into account the fact that blue states have more publications than red states. (The deflated number of citations is given by the dark blue bar in Figure 2.) Twice as many citations are from newspapers in blue states than in red states. Blue-state coverage, however, is highly concentrated. Publications in eleven blue states cited this work, but 56 percent of the citations are in New York and California publications. Red-state coverage is more diverse, including newspapers in fourteen red states; the top two states (Texas and Missouri) account for only 33 percent of all citations. Of course, national publications serve all red and blue states and the book was covered well by them.

The red/blue split in media coverage is curious. I don’t want to make too much of it because (as we know from this book) the residents of red states and blue states don’t differ very much. But could the difference in media coverage
mean that liberals (or a liberal press) are more receptive to the idea that the
culture war is a myth than are conservatives (or a conservative press)? It is at least
a hypothesis worthy of further investigation.

![Figure 2. Print Media Citations in Red and Blue States](image)

*Note: The dark blue bar represents the “deflated” number of blue-state citations, an adjustment made to reflect the fact that blue states have more publications than red states.*

Media coverage peaked just before the November 2004 elections, showing
that these findings were offered to voters at a time when this knowledge could
factor into their voting decisions (Figure 3). Coverage in different regions
followed the same temporal pattern (figure not shown). Given that the media has
played such a prominent role in perpetrating the culture war myth, it is good to
know that they considered anti-myth evidence to be newsworthy. We don’t know
the extent to which voters accepted the message, or whether or how it influenced
their voting. But it is still good to know that the message was delivered when it
could matter.
I conclude that this book indeed reached its target audience. Media coverage was uneven (which is not unexpected) but via regional publications, national publications, or both, a large percentage of the electorate had the opportunity to read about the lack of evidence of a culture war. This volume is a model of social science research conducted in the public interest.

Appendix: Data and Search Strategy

Melissa Forbes, doctoral student in public policy and sociology at the University of Michigan, conducted the search for print media articles and compiled the results. We examined the following news databases from 2004 to the present: Lexis-Nexis, NewsLibrary, Proquest Newsstand, Factiva, and InfoTrac Custom Newspapers. These databases include a wide range of print media and newspaper publications across the United States, though we do not know if these sources cover all regions equally. The average database indexed over 400 newspapers. None of the databases includes very small market newspapers, although NewsLibrary and Proquest Newsstand include some medium market local newspapers.

Only articles from print media sources are included, such as newspaper articles, magazine articles, and popular press journals. Articles and news stories from Internet-only sources, television interviews, and radio news stories are not included. Articles from foreign press sources are also excluded.
Our search strategy was twofold. First, we searched for “Morris,” “Fiorina,” and “culture war” in the full text of all indexed articles. Second, we searched for “Morris” and “Fiorina” in the full text of all indexed articles to capture references to Fiorina’s findings that did not include the title of the book. The articles located by these strategies were supplemented by copies of articles Fiorina sent to us.

We counted the same article found in multiple databases as a single entry. We counted articles from the Associated Press and other news wires as separate entries for each newspaper that printed them. In total, we located 97 articles referencing Fiorina’s findings.