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A Nation Votes, Ohio Decides

BATTLE IN THE BUCKEYE STATE

According to a formerly well-established American political tradition, the Labor Day holiday once marked the “official” beginning of the campaign season in every presidential election year. Candidates enjoyed the now-unthinkable luxury of departing the campaign trail for a few weeks after the summer nominating conventions in order to conserve their energy and make strategic preparations for the two-month national sprint that awaited them in the fall, habitually reappearing in public view on the first Monday in September. Like many other bygone campaign rituals, this practice has been rendered obsolete by technological change, reforms to the presidential nomination process (which now produces *de facto* party nominees by the preceding spring, well in advance of their formal selection at the conventions), and a progressively intensifying tactical arms race that has encouraged candidates to spare no opportunity to court and mobilize popular support. While presidential aspirants no longer wait until Labor Day to begin hunting for votes, however, they still find a way to commemorate the holiday by planning campaign activities intended to convince the electorate of their unshakable devotion to the interests and concerns of hardworking Americans.

The 2016 election was no exception. Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton observed Labor Day by attending an outdoor festival in the company of several national leaders of the labor movement, including Richard Trumka of the AFL-CIO and Randi Weingarten of the American Federation of Teachers. Her Republican opponent Donald Trump hosted a roundtable discussion with union members before making an afternoon

appearance at a county fair, stopping en route to greet lunchtime customers at a local diner. The most newsworthy aspect of the day was that Clinton and Trump had found themselves in close mutual proximity among the environs of northeastern Ohio; as press photographers snapped pictures, the two candidates' logo-emblazoned airplanes even sat in clear view of each other on the tarmac of Cleveland Hopkins International Airport. In a nation of more than 300 million people spread over nearly 3.8 million square miles, the two prospective presidents had found themselves in the very same place at the very same time.¹

While the simultaneous timing of the candidates' Labor Day visits to Cleveland was coincidental rather than coordinated, it was hardly surprising that Trump and Clinton both independently chose to spend the holiday personally seeking the votes of Ohioans rather than Texans, Alaskans, or New Yorkers. The strategy pursued by presidential campaigns predictably reflects the incentives presented to candidates by the electoral system itself. Presidents are chosen not by a simple national popular vote but rather by a majority of the electoral college, whose members are selected via a set of 51 simultaneous elections held in each state and the District of Columbia. In every state but two, a slate of electors pledged to a specific party's presidential nominee is elected in a winner-take-all fashion by a statewide plurality vote (Maine and Nebraska instead award two electoral votes apiece to the state-level winner and one electoral vote to the winner of each congressional district within the state). Candidates therefore direct their attention to the residents of states, especially populous states such as Ohio, where they believe either side has a chance of placing first in the statewide popular vote – and thus of receiving the state's entire cache of presidential electors – while virtually ignoring the rest of the nation.

The electoral college has existed since the ratification of the Constitution more than 225 years ago, while the selection of electors pledged to candidates via winner-take-all popular vote has been the procedural norm among states since the 1830s. But the influence of these structural features on the behavior of candidates and the outcomes of national elections has perhaps never been greater than it is today. Electoral rules may remain formally stable over decades or even centuries of history and yet vary considerably in practical importance from one period to the next

¹ David Jackson, "Trump, Clinton Launch Fall Campaigns on Same Ohio Tarmac," *USA Today*, September 5, 2016, www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/elections/2016/2016/09/05/donald-trump-labor-day-cleveland-hillary-clinton-ohio/89879896/.

due to changes in the direction and distribution of voting preferences within the mass public. Two important trends have emerged over the past quarter-century that have combined to bolster the influence of American electoral institutions – and, indeed, to define the essence of the current political era.

The first key development is the geographic polarization of electoral outcomes in the United States. While the two major parties once fiercely battled each other for popular supremacy across wide swaths of the continent, Republicans and Democrats today both maintain sizable regional bastions that reliably deliver majority support to the nominees of their favored party from one election to the next. The geographic scope of electoral competition has narrowed to a shrinking slice of territory where the parties remain evenly matched and where winner-take-all popular contests are still open to potential capture by either side.

Secondly, the rise of regional polarization over the past few decades has been accompanied by a parallel emergence of persistent electoral parity between the parties at the national level. The margin separating the two major-party presidential nominees in the national popular vote was less than 9 percentage points in each of the eight elections between 1988 and 2016, and did not exceed 4 points in four of the last five. Since 1994, narrow seat margins have also become commonplace in Congress, with majority control of the Senate, House of Representatives, or both chambers often open to serious contestation from one congressional election to the next.

American politics has therefore entered an age in which a close balance between the Democratic and Republican parties in the nation as a whole contrasts with the reliable electoral dominance of most congressional districts, states, and even entire regions by one party or the other. While the national outcome of presidential and congressional elections now frequently remains in doubt until the votes are counted late in the evening on election night, most Americans reside in electoral constituencies where the identity of the winning party can be predicted with confidence well before the campaign even begins. Many of these voters maintain an intense and deeply felt rooting interest in the results of national elections, but they remain spectators on the sidelines of a competition that is being actively waged elsewhere, in the few remaining corners of the nation where neither party can count on certain victory.

More than any other state, Ohio has come to symbolize the shrinking geographic battleground where America's perennially close elections are repeatedly decided: the bloody front lines of the national partisan

war. Trump, Clinton, and their vice presidential running mates visited Ohio a collective 48 times between the nominating conventions and the November 2016 election, while the candidates, parties, and allied groups spent over \$65 million on advertising designed to persuade the state's voters.² Four years before, Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney and his running mate Paul Ryan made 51 visits to Ohio between them over the final two months of the 2012 race (compared to 28 combined visits by Democratic incumbent Barack Obama and Vice President Joe Biden), while Obama opened 131 Ohio campaign field offices, stretching from Ashtabula in the state's northeast corner to Ironton near its southernmost point (compared to 40 state offices maintained by Romney).³ Some Ohioans report becoming weary of the incessant attention every four years. "I'm very tired of the ads, and it's only July," complained one state resident to a reporter several months before the 2012 election, while another sighed that "the phone rings three or four times a night and I'm screening calls."⁴ But a hardworking activist conducting door-to-door canvassing observed that "I don't ever get anybody saying 'I'm not interested,'" and, as Cincinnati City Council member P. G. Sittenfeld put it, "People do like being the center of the universe."⁵

Any American casually scanning news stories or flipping television channels when a contemporary presidential campaign is in progress will encounter numerous journalistic reports attesting to the massive electoral clout of swing states such as Ohio. Ubiquitous headlines inform their readers about "Ohio – the Heart of the Election Battle,"⁶ explaining "Why Ohio Will Decide the Presidential Election"⁷ and "Why Ohio Is the

² "Two-Thirds of Presidential Campaign Is in Just 6 States," [nationalpopularvote.com](http://nationalpopularvote.com/campaign-events-2016), www.nationalpopularvote.com/campaign-events-2016; Carrie Dunn, "Pro-Clinton Battleground Ad Spending Outstrips Trump Team by 2-1," NBC News, November 4, 2016, www.nbcnews.com/politics/first-read/pro-clinton-battleground-ad-spending-outstrips-trump-team-2-1-n677911.

³ Field office figures from Elspeth Reeve, "What We Know About Obama and Romney's Ground Games", *The Wire*, October 25, 2012, www.thewire.com/politics/2012/10/what-we-know-about-obama-and-romneys-ground-games/58348/; Obama Ohio field office location information from P2012, www.p2012.org/obama/ofaohfield.html.

⁴ Dan Eggen and T. W. Farnam, "Swing States to Weather Brunt of Deluge of Ad Spending," *Washington Post*, July 29, 2012, p. A07; Jonathan Lemire and Celeste Katz, "The 90M Voter," *New York Daily News*, October 14, 2012, p. 13.

⁵ Gail Collins, "Guess Who It's All Up To?" *New York Times*, November 1, 2012, p. A31.

⁶ "Welcome to Ohio – and the Heart of the Election Battle," *The Economist*, May 8, 2004, p. 27.

⁷ Alex Altman and Michael Scherer, "Why Ohio Will Decide the Presidential Election," *Time*, October 25, 2012, <http://swampland.time.com/2012/10/25/why-ohio-will-decide-the-2012-presidential-election/>.

Most Important State in the Country.”⁸ News accounts proclaiming the state’s outsized influence over American electoral politics have become sufficiently familiar standards of contemporary campaign coverage that readers and viewers might be forgiven for suspecting media organizations of reprinting or rebroadcasting the same story every four years, merely substituting the names of the current candidates. Ohio’s key electoral role has even become well-known enough to serve as the basis of wry, referential humor from reporters and comedians assuming that media consumers had gotten the message many times over. “Have we mentioned that it’s all up to Ohio?” joked Gail Collins of the *New York Times* in the first line of a column filed from Cincinnati several days before the 2012 election, while the late-night television comedian Stephen Colbert titled his live election night broadcast “A Nation Votes, Ohio Decides.”⁹

Colbert’s wisecrack actually contains a great deal of truth. Donald Trump’s larger-than-expected Ohio victory in 2016 mirrored his unanticipated strength in other key midwestern states, allowing him to defy media predictions to engineer an upset defeat of Hillary Clinton in the electoral college. The winner of the 2012 election similarly became clear at the moment that the major broadcast networks projected a narrow victory in Ohio for Obama shortly after 11:00 P.M. eastern time on the night of the election – a decision that prompted a memorable (and awkward) moment of spontaneous live television when Fox News Channel election analyst Karl Rove, a former presidential advisor to George W. Bush and the nation’s best-known Republican political operative, responded by openly disputing his own network’s decision to award the state, and with it the presidency, to the Democratic ticket.¹⁰ (In response to Rove’s objections, Fox News producers dispatched broadcast co-anchor Megyn Kelly down a back hallway off the studio set to conduct an impromptu, live, on-camera interview with two members of the network’s data analysis team, who assured Fox viewers of their confidence in the ultimately correct Ohio projection.) Ohio also gave then-senator Obama a crucial

⁸ Chris Cillizza, “Why Ohio Is the Most Important State in the Country,” *The Fix* blog, *Washington Post*, October 11, 2012, www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-fix/wp/2012/10/11/why-ohio-is-the-most-important-state-in-the-country/.

⁹ Collins, “Guess Who It’s All Up To?”

¹⁰ Jeremy W. Peters and Brian Stelter, “On Fox News, a Mistrust of Pro-Obama Numbers Lasts Late Into the Night,” *New York Times*, November 7, 2012, p. P13; Gabriel Sherman, “How Karl Rove Fought with Fox News over the Ohio Call,” *New York*, November 7, 2012, nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2012/11/how-rove-fought-with-fox-over-ohio.html.

victory in 2008 over his first Republican opponent, Senator John McCain of Arizona, who lost the state by a margin of 51 percent to 47 percent even after adopting Samuel Joseph Wurzelbacher, a plumber's assistant from the Toledo suburbs who became known as "Joe the Plumber," as a campaign sidekick of sorts to personify his identification with blue-collar Americans. In 2004, Ohio had quite literally decided the presidency, delivering a narrow victory to Republican incumbent George W. Bush in the early hours of the morning that secured his reelection over the Democratic nominee, Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts; just 120,000 more votes in the state – out of more than 5.6 million cast – would have sent Kerry to the White House instead.

The reduction of the active electoral battleground to a decreasing number of swing states such as Ohio has not merely led to the increasingly concentrated deployment of candidate resources or a decline in the proportion of American neighborhoods exposed to active persuasion and mobilization efforts by campaigns, parties, and interest groups. The solidification of large Democratic and Republican territorial strongholds over the past several decades has also worked to render each party more ideologically homogeneous by reducing the size and influence of regionally based moderate party factions such as southern Democrats and northeastern Republicans. Thus the geographic polarization of American elections has played a key role in advancing the ideological polarization of American parties.

The existence of electoral rules and institutions in which geographically defined constituencies serve as the fundamental component units also allows American elections to be decided simply by the ways in which Democratic and Republican voters happen to be dispersed across the political boundaries of the nation. The specific spatial configuration of the parties' regional coalitions is particularly critical for determining the control of the executive and legislative branches when the support for each party in the electorate varies significantly across geographic boundaries and when the national balance between the parties is close to even – two durable characteristics of our contemporary political age. Fully understanding the state of American electoral politics in the early twenty-first century thus requires a thorough examination of the causes and consequences of the two parties' increasingly entrenched geographic polarization.

The 2016 election provides an especially striking example of this phenomenon. The narrow margin of the national presidential vote and the particular state-level distribution of the parties' supporters interacted

Do Polarized Maps Require Polarized Voters?

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with the institutional attributes of the electoral college to provide Donald Trump with the majority of state electors necessary to assume the presidency even though he received nearly 3 million fewer popular votes nationwide than did Hillary Clinton. This was the second time in the previous five presidential elections that the national popular vote winner had been denied the White House; meanwhile, the candidate carrying Ohio has become president in each of the past fourteen consecutive elections, dating back to Lyndon B. Johnson's victory in 1964. The quip "A nation votes, Ohio decides" may have been meant as a humorous poke at the well-known idiosyncrasies of the electoral college, but recent history suggests that it is not a wholly inappropriate characterization of how the American electoral system operates today.

DO POLARIZED MAPS REQUIRE
POLARIZED VOTERS?

Perpetually vigorous competition between two closely matched parties that each maintain reliable electoral dominance over a significant, and roughly equal, proportion of the nation's geographic territory has become a signature characteristic of American politics in the twenty-first century. The appearance of distinct and stable geographic alignments on the contemporary electoral map thus serves as an apt visual symbol of an era defined by the emergence of intense partisan conflict among leaders and citizens alike. With the vast majority of voters now providing consistent support to the candidates of a single party in national elections, and with Democratic and Republican politicians collectively shifting toward opposite ends of the ideological spectrum, the United States has entered a political age characterized by the dual trends of mass-level partisanship and elite-level polarization – a development that has inspired a series of major academic studies and has received increasing attention from journalists, news media commentators, and the politically attentive public. Under these circumstances, it is only fitting that cartographic representations of recent election results have repeatedly revealed large, comparably sized territorial bastions of opposite partisan affiliations, with a smaller bloc of swing states holding the narrow balance of power between them – just as a dwindling number of voters who remain open to persuasion by either party now find themselves caught between two sizable populations of increasingly fervent, and mutually antagonistic, loyalists to the Democratic or Republican cause.



In a particularly eye-catching development, the states providing reliable support to each party are not scattered haphazardly across the nation, but are instead arranged in an increasingly familiar regional pattern. As Figure 1.1 demonstrates, 14 states (plus the District of Columbia) were considered securely Democratic in the 2016 presidential election and thus virtually ignored by the campaigns of both candidates; nearly all of these “blue states” – as they are known in American political parlance – are located either in the Northeast or along the Pacific Coast (including the island state of Hawaii). Except for noncontiguous Alaska, the 22 “red states” that were considered safely Republican by the Trump and Clinton campaigns lie within in a single *L*-shaped expanse stretching west from South Carolina and southwest from West Virginia through Missouri, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Texas, then turning north to the Dakotas and heading west once more to Idaho and Utah.

The 2016 election was unique in many respects: Clinton was the first woman in American history to receive the presidential nomination of a major political party, while Trump was a newcomer to electoral politics who found particular success in appealing to white working-class voters. Yet the state-level coalitions formed by the two candidates did not differ dramatically from those of preceding presidential elections contested by different nominees. In fact, the relative Democratic or Republican lean of each state in the 2016 election closely matched the 2012 results

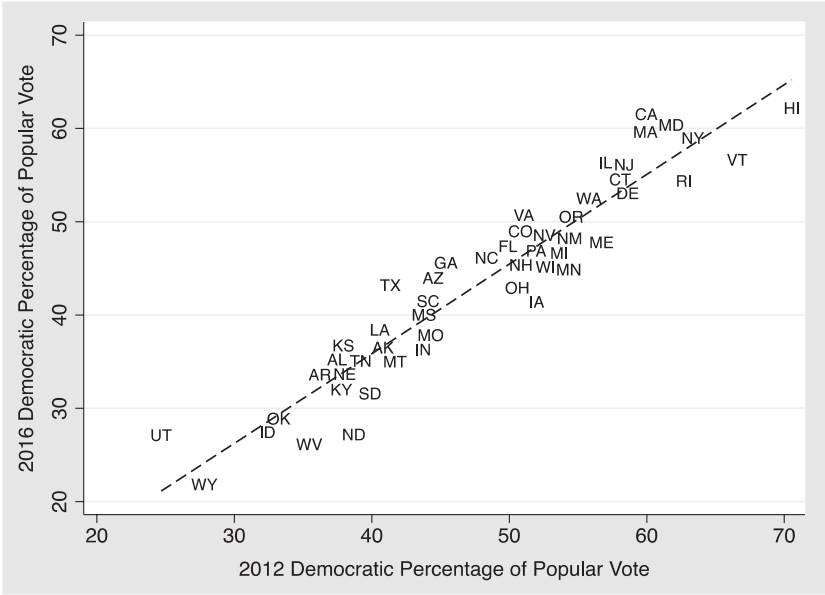


FIGURE 1.2. State-level partisan consistency in the 2012 and 2016 presidential elections.

(see Figure 1.2). The Pearson correlation coefficient between the 2012 and 2016 Democratic vote shares was .96 (on a scale in which 0 represents no statistical association and 1 represents perfect correlation). Trump successfully assembled an electoral majority in 2016 by winning six swing states (Florida, Iowa, Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin) that Obama had carried in 2012, while the remaining 44 states (and the District of Columbia) supported the same party’s candidates in both elections.

The division of the electoral map into large blocs of reliably “red” and “blue” partisan territory has come to symbolize the contentious character of contemporary politics in the eyes of many Americans. But while few experts dispute the conclusion that the elected leaders of the Democratic and Republican parties have become more ideologically dissimilar, procedurally aggressive, and personally hostile since the 1970s and 1980s, the question of whether these developments reflect similar trends or preferences within the mass public remains unresolved – and energetically contested – among scholars of American public opinion. Are strategically minded candidates simply responding to electoral incentives by appealing to increasingly polarized voters? Or, alternatively, does the

rise of polarization in government represent a failure of the democratic system, with elected officials in both parties rapidly abandoning a political middle ground on which most citizens still firmly stand?

One school of thought, principally identified with Morris P. Fiorina of Stanford University, contends that elite-level polarization has proceeded without the instigation or approval of the American public at large. Fiorina argues that Democratic and Republican politicians have moved respectively to the ideological left and right in response to intensifying pressure from party activists, interest groups, influential media sources, and primary electorates, leaving most voters with an unappealing choice in general elections between two increasingly extreme options. “There is little evidence that Americans’ ideological or policy *positions* are more polarized today than they were two or three decades ago, although their *choices* often seem to be,” he writes, proposing a memorable analogy: “The bulk of the American citizenry is somewhat in the position of the unfortunate citizens of some third-world countries who try to stay out of the crossfire while Maoist guerillas and right-wing death squads shoot at each other.”¹¹ To Fiorina, the advent of polarization has created an ominous “disconnect” between the populace and its political leadership that constitutes a veritable “breakdown of representation in American politics.”¹²

Other scholars, most prominently Alan I. Abramowitz of Emory University, view the trend of ideological polarization as extending beyond the political leadership class into the mass public as well, especially among the nation’s most attentive and engaged citizens. “To a considerable extent,” Abramowitz argues, “the divisions that exist among policymakers in Washington reflect real divisions among the American people.”¹³ Nor should observers worry that politicians have become less responsive to the preferences of the average voter, according to Abramowitz. “Polarization is not a result of a failure of representation; it is a result of successful representation,” he writes. “... If concerned citizens want to understand the root cause of polarization and government gridlock, they should ... look in a mirror.”¹⁴

¹¹ Morris P. Fiorina with Samuel J. Abrams and Jeremy C. Pope, *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America* (New York: Pearson, 2005), p. 5 (italics in original).

¹² Morris P. Fiorina with Samuel J. Abrams, *Disconnect: The Breakdown of Representation in American Politics* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2009).

¹³ Alan I. Abramowitz and Kyle L. Saunders, “Is Polarization a Myth?” *Journal of Politics* 70 (April 2008), pp. 542–555, at 554.

¹⁴ Alan I. Abramowitz, *The Polarized Public? Why American Government Is So Dysfunctional* (New York: Pearson, 2013), p. xiii.