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Matt Grossmann, David A. Hopkins
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POLARIZED BY DEGREES

Over the past several decades, American society has experienced fundamental changes – from shifting relations between social groups and evolving language and behavior norms to the increasing value of a college degree.

These transformations have polarized the nation’s political climate and ignited a perpetual culture war.

In a sequel to their award-winning collaboration *Asymmetric Politics*, Grossmann and Hopkins draw on an extensive variety of evidence to explore how these changes have affected both major parties. They show that the Democrats have become the home of highly educated citizens with progressive social views who prefer credentialed experts to make policy decisions, while Republicans have become the populist champions of white voters without college degrees who increasingly distrust teachers, scientists, journalists, universities, nonprofit organizations, and even corporations.

The result of this new “diploma divide” between the parties is an increasingly complex world in which everything is about politics – and politics is about everything.

Matt Grossmann is Director of the Institute for Public Policy and Social Research and Professor of Political Science at Michigan State University. He serves as Senior Fellow at the Niskamien Center and Contributor to FiveThirtyEight. He is the author of six books, including *How Social Science Got Better* and *Asymmetric Politics*.

David A. Hopkins is Associate Professor of Political Science at Boston College. He is the author of *Red Fighting Blue* and the coauthor of *Asymmetric Politics* and *Presidential Elections*. His political analysis has appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, Vox, and Bloomberg Opinion.

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“*Polarized by Degrees*, illuminates in detail the most consequential transformation of American politics since the New Deal realignment: The conversion of the working class Democratic party into the party of educated elites and the Republican transition from the party of business to a populist party of whites without college degrees. Written by two of the nation’s foremost political scientists, Matt Grossmann and David A. Hopkins, this book provides crucial understanding of contemporary elections that is both accessible to laymen and revealing for scholars. *Polarized by Degrees* is essential reading for everyone trying to figure out what the hell is going on in American politics.”

Thomas B. Edsall, Columnist, *The New York Times*

“In *Polarized by Degrees*, two astute analysts of American party politics examine how a culture war has transformed society and politics in recent decades. In their riveting account, as college-educated Americans adopted cultural liberalism on social issues, they turned away from their long-standing support of the Republican Party and embraced the Democratic Party; meanwhile, those with less education took the reverse course, and in the process remade the Republican Party into a populist vehicle fueled by distrust of experts. A deeply insightful journey through a tumultuous period that shows how, once the dust settles, the United States will have become a different place than it was in the late twentieth century.”

Suzanne Mettler, author of *Four Threats: The Recurring Crises of American Democracy*

“If you don’t understand the role that educational attainment plays in American politics, you can’t understand American politics. Nowhere have I seen this phenomenon better analyzed, explained and deconstructed than *Polarized by Degrees*.”

Amy Walter, Publisher and Editor-in-Chief, *The Cook Political Report*

POLARIZED BY DEGREES

How the Diploma Divide and the Culture
War Transformed American Politics

**MATT GROSSMANN
AND DAVID A. HOPKINS**



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Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

To our parents

Larry and Jan Grossmann

Allen and Joan Hopkins

Contents

<i>Inspiration and Acknowledgments</i>	<i>page</i> viii
1 Introduction: Changing Parties in a Changing World	1
2 How Educated Liberals Are Winning the Culture War	33
3 “Hope and Change” Meets “Make America Great Again”	76
4 The Rise of the Diploma Divide in American Elections	121
5 Trust the Institutions, or Burn Them Down?	162
6 Fighting “Woke Capitalism”: The Republican Rebellion against Corporate America	204
7 Are Policymakers Solving Problems or Imposing Values?	241
8 Conclusion: Why Everything Is about Politics Now, and Politics Is about Everything	279
<i>List of Figures</i>	304
<i>Notes</i>	306
<i>Index</i>	363

Inspiration and Acknowledgments

This book is partly inspired by personal experience. Matt grew up in Columbia, Missouri, a college town in the middle of what was then a swing state. Matt's father, Larry, was an amateur political consultant for Republican congressional, state legislative, and local campaigns in the area. He had the distinction of overseeing campaigns in (almost) the only area of the state to trend significantly leftward while Missouri became a solid red state. Some of Larry's campaigns featured what today seem like odd matchups: pro-choice, socially liberal Republicans associated with the University of Missouri facing pro-life, pro-gun Democrats from out-state rural areas. At the time, it was not obvious that rural Missouri would become overwhelmingly Republican or even that a college town was a poor choice to base a Republican political comeback. Northern Missouri was represented in Congress by the kinds of Democrat who do not exist today: Harold Volkmer, a lead spokesperson for the National Rifle Association and Right to Life movement, and Ike Skelton, the hawkish Armed Services Committee chair.

That is not to say the signs were not out there. Matt worked on Republican campaigns that were filled with religious right conservatives raised on Rush Limbaugh. Lefty campus politics became less subdued at Mizzou over time and Columbia became a refuge for those turned off by Missouri's red tide. But business leaders were still the main Republican force in town.

Over time, the political lines in Missouri have become more clearly defined by cultural conflicts. In the final week of his 2008 campaign, Barack Obama rallied students at Mizzou in a last-ditch effort to win the state. But despite Obama's national landslide, Missouri went red and stayed that way. As liberalism became increasingly associated with college-infused values and as metropolitan college graduates surrounding St. Louis and

INSPIRATION AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Kansas City joined the racial minority voters of those cities in Missouri's Democratic coalition, Republicans gained ground nearly everywhere else.

When Matt began work as a research institute director in 2016, he learned a hard lesson about the effects of education on polling data. The State of the State Survey run by the Michigan institute was alone in correctly foreseeing a close Democratic primary race between Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton but miscalled the general election by a large margin, vastly understating Donald Trump's support. In the aftermath, it turned out that the survey, due to response bias, had significantly overweighted the newly pro-Democratic views of the most educated citizens. It did not just have too many college graduates in its sample, a common problem that year; it also oversampled respondents with graduate degrees.

Dave also comes from a political family, encompassing four generations and two political parties. His great grandfather, Rodney G. Pownall, was appointed postmaster of Pike, a small town in western New York, by President Harry Truman in 1947. His grandfather, John T. Hopkins, was the Republican elected supervisor of Canadice, another small town in western New York, in the 1950s and again in the 1980s. His father, Allen Hopkins, was a longtime member of the Monroe County (NY) Democratic Committee, as well as a budget and personnel director in the Rochester city government. And his sister, Fiona Hopkins, works for the Democratic National Committee.

When Dave himself worked briefly in Rochester-area local government before attending graduate school, there were still at least as many Republican voters in the precincts near the golf courses as there were in those around the trailer parks. The affluent suburb of Pittsford was a reliably red bastion that loyally supported Bob Dole in the 1996 presidential election even as Bill Clinton was carrying the state of New York by nearly 30 percentage points, while the outlying working-class town of Caledonia opted for Clinton. But by 2020, Pittsford (where 75 percent of adult residents were college graduates) was giving 66 percent of its votes to Joe Biden – exceeding Biden's statewide vote share by 5 points – while Caledonia (where 73 percent of adult residents lacked a college degree) preferred Donald Trump by a 25-point margin.

As two college professors who remain fascinated by real-world politics, we have watched firsthand as the educational sector that provides our livelihood has become drawn into the culture war that increasingly fuels political conflict in the United States and around the world. But as children of the 1980s (and teenagers of the 1990s), we have also lived through a massive liberalizing shift in cultural values that is not always acknowledged by our colleagues on the left – as well as a growing reluctance within the

INSPIRATION AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

American conservative movement to defer to scientific and intellectual authority that has troubled our colleagues on the right. In telling the story of the partisan and electoral changes that have occurred during our lifetime, we are also coming to terms with the more politicized character of our chosen profession. As we explore and synthesize academic scholarship and social trends over the pages that follow, we hope to provide a glimpse of our own journeys along the way.

This is our second book-length collaboration. Once again, we wish to acknowledge the role of the political science department and the Institute of Governmental Studies at the University of California, Berkeley in bringing us together and providing an intellectual foundation that continues to inspire both of us today. We have enduring affection for the faculty and fellow students with whom we shared many happy years.

This book would also not have been possible without the help of our colleagues, families, and friends and the institutions which we now call home. Matt thanks his political science colleagues at Michigan State, including Ryan Black, Cristina Bodea, Ana Bracic, Eric Chang, Jeff Conroy-Krutz, Erica Frantz, Christian Houle, Eric Gonzalez Juenke, John Kuk, Nazita Lajevardi, Shahryar Minhas, Ian Ostrander, Raul Rodriguez, Josh Sapotichne, Ani Sarkissian, Dustin Sebell, Nura Sediqe, Cory Smidt, Michael Wahman, Megan Wilson, and Jenny Wolak, for their support and influential thinking. Brendan Cantwell in higher education was also a useful resource. Matt's partners at the Institute for Public Policy and Social Research, Bevertone Anyonga, Arnold Weinfeld, Linda Cleary, Kathy Cusick, Iris Harper, Karen Clark, Deb Rusz, Del Solis, and Tony Zammit, also encouraged these ideas and enabled Matt's work. Matt's graduate students, including Olatayo Bakare, Angelina Benli, Paige Haight, and Natalie Overton, have also been influential in thinking through the materials in this project. Matt's colleagues at Hooked (bookstore and café), including Caitlyn Lyles and Jay Scofield, enable a thriving community space and business where Matt was able to write part of this book. His colleagues at the Niskanen Center in Washington also influenced the book. Matt also thanks OpenAI and Chat GPT-4, which he used for language suggestions, timelines, and summarizing (though – don't worry – not for citations or political science analysis).

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Dave's parents, Allen and Joan Hopkins, have always believed in the capacity of education, political and civic participation, and the creative arts

INSPIRATION AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

to improve the fate of humanity and deepen the meaning of life, and this book appropriately reflects their passions and values. He gratefully thanks Fiona Hopkins, Caitlin DeAngelis, Mali and Sam Hopkins, Lucia Soare, and his aunts, uncles, and cousins (both official and unofficial) for their unwavering affection. Dave's wife, Monica Soare, shares his life with devotion and big-heartedness, and also serves as a brilliant intellectual authority on literature, feminism, and popular culture. It is hard to imagine this book existing without her.