

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

OK, but here's the fact that nobody ever, ever mentions—
Democrats win rich people. Over \$100,000 in income, you are
likely more than not to vote for Democrats. People never point
that out. Rich people vote liberal. I don't know what that's all
about.

—*Tucker Carlson, 2007*

CARLSON was half right. Nowadays the Democrats win the rich states, but rich people vote Republican, just as they have for decades.

What makes the statement interesting, though, is that it sounds as if it could be right. Consider the 2000 and 2004 elections, where George W. Bush won the lower-income states in the South and middle of the country, while his Democratic opponents captured the richer states in the Northeast and West Coast. As we shall discuss, this pattern is not an illusion of the map—the Democrats really have been doing better in richer parts of the country, and this pattern has become more noticeable in recent elections.

The paradox is that, while these rich states have become more strongly Democratic over time, rich voters have remained consistently more Republican than voters on the lower end of the income scale. We display this graphically in figure 1.1. Tucker Carlson's statement sounds reasonable given the voting patterns in states, but it doesn't match what individual voters are doing. If poor people were a state, they would be "bluer" even than Massachusetts; if rich people were a state, they would be about as "red" as Alabama, Kansas, the Dakotas, or Texas.

The point of this book is to explain where the red–blue paradox comes from and what it means for American politics. To answer these questions, we first ask who votes for whom. It seems that there

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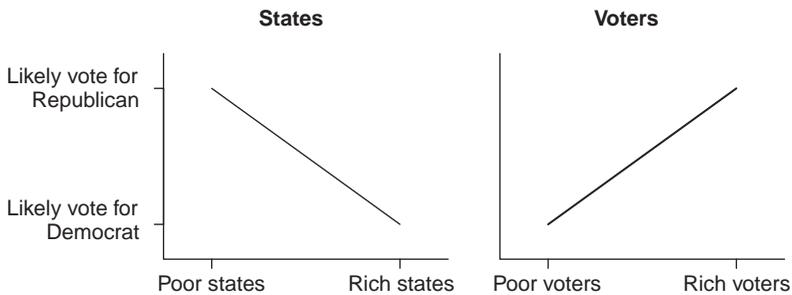


Figure 1.1: The red–blue paradox: Rich *states* vote for the Democrats, but rich *people* vote Republican.

are a lot of well-off urbanites who are voting for Democrats, but how do we square this with poll data showing that George W. Bush in 2004 received over 60% of the votes of people with incomes over \$200,000?

Rich people in rich states are socially and economically more liberal than rich people in poor states. But only in recent decades has this translated into Democratic dominance in the coasts. What’s new is polarization—the increasingly ideological nature of politics. Both parties are now more cohesive on issues than they were in the days of Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, and even Ronald Reagan. Liberal Democrats face off against conservative Republicans in Congress with little middle ground, and voters within each party are also more likely to agree with each other on issues ranging from taxes to gay rights to foreign policy. Again, the paradox is that polarization is going in one direction for voters and the other direction for states.

The resolution of the paradox is that the more polarized playing field has driven rich conservative voters in poor states toward the Republicans and rich liberals in rich states toward the Democrats, thus turning the South red and New England and the West Coast blue and setting up a national map that is divided by culture rather than class, with blue-collar West Virginia moving from solidly Democratic (one of the ten states that went for Michael Dukakis in 1988) to safely Republican and suburban Connecticut going the other way.

Income varies much less among states than within states—the average income in the richest state is only about twice that of the poorest (only one-and-a-half times after adjusting for cost of living), but, at the level of individual households, the top 20% have incomes that are more than ten times larger, on average, than the bottom 20%. What this means is that the political differences among states are driven by cultural issues, but within states, the traditional rich–poor divide remains.

States differ in other ways, too, both socially and economically. Conservative born-again Christians are concentrated in the relatively low-income states of the South where the split between rich and poor also overlaps with a racial divide. Another dividing line is immigration, which is concentrated in states with some of the largest differences between high- and low-income families.

In this book, we explore the red-state, blue-state paradox, starting with the basic facts on income and voting and then moving backward through the past several decades to identify when the now-familiar patterns began, with the breakup of the Democratic coalition of urban northerners and rural southerners. We also explore the ways in which race and religion intersect with income. Churchgoing predicts vote choice much more for the rich than the poor, but this pattern has only become prominent since 1990—it took a while for the mobilization of the religious right to appear in national voting patterns.

Now more than ever, Democrats and Republicans disagree on issues as varied as abortion and the Iraq War, on factual judgments about the economy, and even on assessments of their personal finances. Americans have not become ideological extremists by any means, but they are more coherently sorting themselves by party label.

Finally, we consider the political implications of the new red–blue divisions. We discuss how Republicans have consistently won elections with economically conservative policies that might arguably seem inherently unpopular with the majority of the voters, and why we don't think the Democrats would gain votes by shifting to the left on economic policy. We also show why

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congressmembers of both parties can remain in office even while holding ideological and policy positions that are more extreme than most of the voters in their districts. And, in a world where the two parties do have distinct policy positions, we show how the different patterns of income and voting in rich and poor states can influence the directions in which the Democrats and Republicans might go.

This book was ultimately motivated by frustration at media images of rich, yuppie Democrats and lower-income, middle-American Republicans—archetypes that ring true, at some level, but are contradicted in the aggregate. Journalists are, we can assume, more informed than typical voters. When the news media repeatedly make a specific mistake, it is worth looking at. The *perception* of polarization is itself a part of polarization, and views about whom the candidates represent can affect how political decisions are reported. And, as we explore exhaustively, the red–blue culture war does seem to appear in voting patterns, but at the high end of income, not the low, with educated professionals moving toward the Democrats and managers and business owners moving toward the Republicans.

After a study of Mexico and a comparison of voting patterns around the world—in which we find that the rich–poor gap in conservative voting is greater in the United States than in many other countries—we wrap things up by considering the factors that have polarized American politics and keep the parties divided. As historians and political scientists have noted, the political consensus of the 1950s and early 1960s was undone during the civil rights revolution, ultimately switching the political alignments of the North and South and freeing the Democrats and Republicans to become more consistently liberal and conservative parties. In the meantime, political divisions have become cultural for upper-income voters, who can afford to live in places suitable to their lifestyles.

We’re looking at a landscape of politicians trying to stay alive, voters searching for a party that feels like home, and journalists and scholars sifting through the polls to figure out what it all

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means. The red–blue map represents real divisions among Americans, especially at the high end of income, but not the simple contrast of rich Democrats and poor Republicans as sometimes imagined by pundits.