

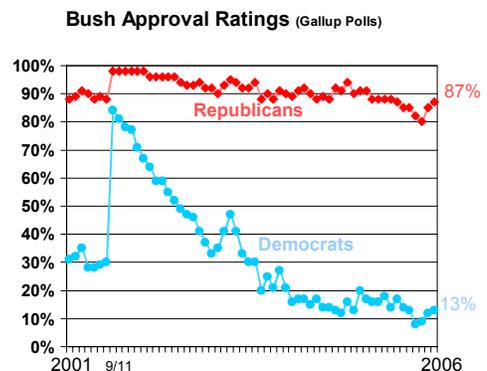
Bridging the Divide

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In response to Brenda Major’s invitation to reflect on “why the country seems so divided politically” and on religion’s part in this, I will, first, document the increasing red-blue divide and mention two social psychological principles that help explain it. Second, I will offer some observations about religion’s role in the current culture wars. Third, I will draw on public opinion trends to venture some predictions. Finally, I will illustrate my own effort to bridge the gay marriage divide.

A More Divided Union

My apologies to our international colleagues for focusing these remarks on the United States, but Brenda is right: We Americans have a problem that demands our attention. The red-blue divide, which is most obviously evident in the near 50-50 voting split in the last two U.S. presidential elections, is also evident in the passion with which so many Americans, left and right, are expressing their convictions. For example, Gallup analyst David Moore (2005) reports that we have progressively become “highly polarized” in our evaluation of President Bush, whose performance is, as of last weekend, approved by 87 percent of Republicans and (with perfect symmetry) only 13 percent of Democrats. Moreover, in a December



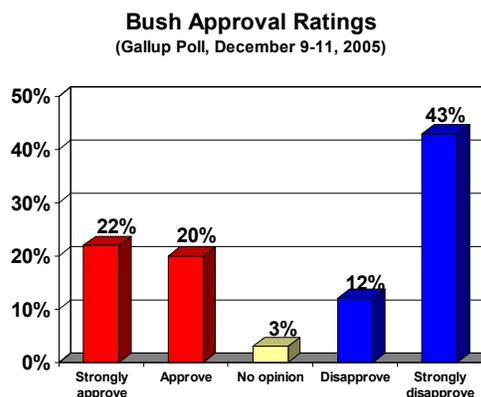
poll, two-thirds of Americans *strongly* approved or disapproved and virtually no one had “no opinion.” You know what your opinion of the President is, and you probably hold it intensely.

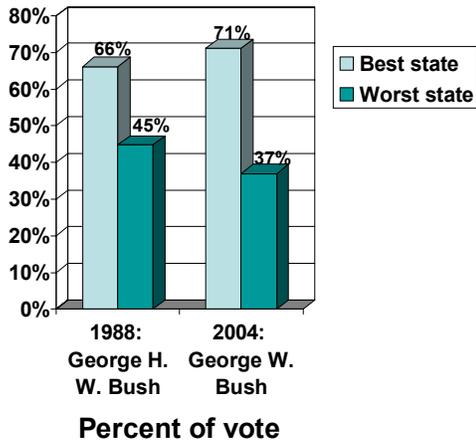
The red-blue divide is further evident

in the parties becoming more ideological, with a striking decline in the number of conservatives who call themselves Democrats and of liberals who call themselves Republican (Bishop, 2004). There’s probably not much doubt in your mind whether your leanings are traditionalist and Republican or progressive and Democrat.

The red-blue divide additionally appears in America’s Balkanization. We have become racially more integrated but ideologically more segregated (Logan, 2001; Galston & Kamarck, 2005). When Jimmy Carter defeated Gerald Ford in 1976, only 27 percent of Americans lived in “landslide counties,” where one candidate carried more than 60 of the vote. In 2004, 48 percent lived in landslide counties. Half of us now live in a county that is so solidly red or blue that one party effectively dominates, minority views may be stifled, and elected politicians may cater to the one party that effectively selects them in primary elections. And as Republican counties become more Republican and Democratic counties more Democratic, that leads to more ideologically polarized legislatures.

The red-blue divide is also occurring at the state level. For example, in 1988 when George H. W. Bush ran for president against a Massachusetts opponent, there was a 21 percent gap between his best and worst state. In 2004, when George W. Bush ran for president against a Massachusetts opponent, there was a 34 percent gap. As “Third Way” advocates William





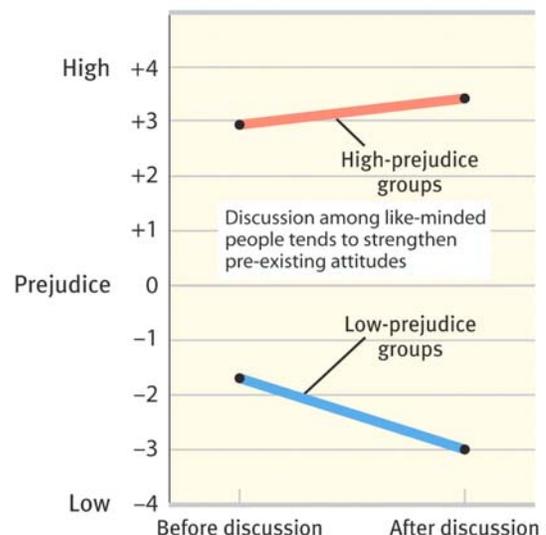
Galston and Elaine Kamarck (2005) put it, “Blue states are bluer, red states redder, and swing states fewer.”

To be sure, many people have moderate values or are politically

disinterested. And partisans tend to perceive exaggerated differences from their adversaries, who actually often agree with them more than supposed (Chambers, Baron, & Inman, 2006). Communitarian sociologist Amitai Etzioni (2001, 2005) has documented the common ground that most Americans share, and has launched a white paper that suggests how we might welcome “diversity within unity.” Still Brenda is right: we *have* become more divided, more red or blue.

Among our discipline’s principles that help explain the polarization are these two: First, similarity predicts attraction—and connection. With increased mobility, people are therefore self-segregating into communities with folks like themselves. As David Brooks (2005) wryly noted, “Crunchy places like Boulder attract crunchy types and become crunchier. Conservative places like suburban Georgia attract conservatives and become more so.”

Second, as we former group polarization researchers can explain, when people within a group discuss an idea that most of them either favor or oppose, they often gravitate to more extreme versions of their former positions. George Bishop and I observed this more than three decades ago (Myers & Bishop, 1970). When we simulated ideological segregation by grouping high-prejudice students to discuss racial issues with their kindred spirits, they came to express *more* prejudice. And



when low-prejudice students did the same, they came to express less prejudice.

Bridging today's ideological divide begins by understanding that we often agree with our adversaries more than we realize, and also by appreciating the reality and the results of self-segregation. The reality is that neighborhoods, counties, states, and political parties are becoming more ideologically homogeneous. And when nearly everyone around us thinks pretty much like we do, the result is that we become more confident and sometimes more extreme.

Religion and the Culture Wars

The bridge across the divide can gain strength as we counter simplistic stereotypes. As an enthusiastic interpreter of mainstream science, I wince when some people of faith naively equate science with dogmatic scientism. To some anti-evolutionists, notes William Grassie (2005), evolution equals materialism equals atheism equals immorality, which makes the teaching of evolution seem very bad.

As a person of faith, I also wince when some academics equate religion with fundamentalism. As Galston and Kamarck (2005) document, religious faith has indeed become an "overriding factor" in people sorting themselves into red and blue. But, they remind us, it's traditionalism versus modernism that matters, not broad religious affiliation. "Where once Catholics and Jews tended to vote Democratic and Protestants tended to vote Republican, today evangelical Protestants, traditionalist Catholics, and Orthodox Jews tend to be conservative and Republican voters; mainline Protestants, Vatican II Catholics, and Reform Jews tend to be liberal and Democratic voters."

Other behaviors also vary with the type of religiosity. Stephen Jay Gould (1998) reported that his "fascination" with religion lay "in the stunning historical paradox that organized religion has fostered, throughout western history, both the most unspeakable horrors and the

most heartrending examples of human goodness.” The “insane courage” that enabled the 9/11 horror “came from religion,” Richard Dawkins (2001) rightly reminded us. But so did the driving energy behind the founding of hospitals, universities, and civil rights campaigns. Religion, as both William James and Gordon Allport noted long ago, comes in varied forms that can either make or unmake prejudice. Religion can promote judgmentalism and a shrunken definition of ingroup. Or it can promote an expanded circle of moral inclusion—hence the high levels of volunteerism and charitable giving so often reported by deeply religious people.

Religion’s views on the teaching of evolution also vary, from fundamentalist young-earth creationists to devout people who have had no problem reconciling evolution with their religion—people such as the late Pope John Paul II, Human Genome Project director Francis Collins, and Theodosius Dobzhansky, the great 20th century evolutionist and the one who so famously said that “Nothing makes sense in biology except in the light of evolution.” Theirs is a view anticipated in the 5th century by St. Augustine: “The universe was brought into being in a less than fully formed state, but was gifted with the capacity to transform itself from unformed matter into a truly marvelous array of structures and forms” (Wilford, 1999). In simplistic terms, we can reassure troubled students, evolution’s story tells us when and how, and religion’s story—which was never intended to be a science story—proposes an ultimate who and why.

Finding Common Ground

We have all heard it said that reconciling Islamic fundamentalism with Western democracies will require, first, the West not doing things, such as invading Muslim countries under false pretenses, that feed extreme reactions and heighten ingroup passion and outgroup hostility. And, second, we hear that it will require moderate or progressive voices within the Islamic world to remind fellow Muslims of their religion’s humanitarian ideals.

Resolving the growing tension between science and conservative religion likewise will involve, first, framing scientific insights in ways not calculated to evoke backlash, and, second, looking to progressive voices within the faith community that can help reconcile science with humanitarian religious ideals.

Darwinian philosopher Michael Ruse (2005a), after fighting creationists “for more than thirty years,” regrets Richard Dawkins’ tying evolutionism to atheism. “He shows absolutely no understanding of the fears that people have about the ill effects of science and its supporters, yet he manages to reinforce their worries. As far as he’s concerned, if you disagree with him then you are stupid or wicked or (most probably) both. It is no wonder that a lot of Americans are not very keen on evolution.” If we admonish people to choose *between* science and a religion that gives them meaning and hope, many will dismiss science. Indeed, it was reading Dawkins and his describing religion as a virus—a great evil “comparable to the smallpox virus but harder to eradicate”—that provoked Phillip Johnson to propose his “intelligent design” alternative (Powell, 2005). Such hostility to religion and resulting anti-science backlash persuades Ruse (2005b) that “Those who love science (and I am one), including those of us who are nonbelievers (and I am one), should quit sneeringly giving religion the backs of our hands.” Rabbi Michael Lerner (2005) likewise faults fellow liberals for their “disdain for religion” and for being “tone-deaf to the spiritual needs that underline the move to the Right.”

American Association for the Advancement of Science executive director Alan Leshner (2005) similarly laments the polarization by those at the anti-religious and anti-science extremes. To resolve the tension, he believes, “we must take every opportunity to make clear to the general public that science and religion are not adversaries. They can co-exist comfortably, and both have a place and provide important benefits to society.” Thus in teaching evolution, we might

explain to students what Pennsylvania Judge John Jones III did in his December ruling against the teaching of intelligent design: “The theory of evolution represents good science, is overwhelmingly accepted by the scientific community, and . . . in no way conflicts with, nor does it deny, the existence of a divine creator.” And we can reassure people that the scientific understanding of human origins leaves open questions about life’s meaning and purpose, about what value we should place on other human lives, about whether there is any basis for hope in the face of death, about why the universe seems so astonishingly fine-tuned to support the emergence of life, and about that ultimate question—why there is something rather than nothing. In other words, we can present science authentically, yet also framed in ways that appreciate the human longings for meaning, significance, and hope.

I am *not* suggesting that scientists should restrain themselves from discerning and proclaiming discomfiting truth. My own approach to discerning and communicating scientific insights to the faith community has involved connecting big ideas about human nature as found in psychological science and in religious literatures, such as relating research on self-serving bias to religious wisdom about the potency and perils of pride. But it also sometimes offers challenging insights of psychological science. When doing so, I begin by reminding people of theism’s basic premise—that there is a God, but that it’s not us. Being finite and fallible creatures—having dignity but not deity—some of our assumptions and beliefs are sure to err. That’s a religious axiom. We had therefore best hold our own untested beliefs tentatively. And we had best listen to and learn from others, while assessing their claims with prudent skepticism. As Robert Nash (2001) suggested in his book on dialogue across religious divides, “The golden rule of moral conversation is a willingness to find the truth in what we oppose and the error in what we espouse.” Such religiously-rooted humility and skepticism not only helped fuel the beginning of science, it today mandates my participation in free-spirited scientific inquiry.

Opinion Trends

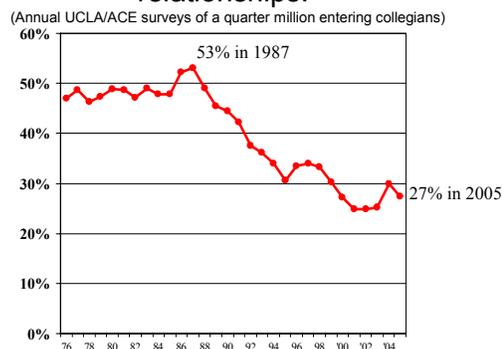
Unfortunately this happy congeniality between rigorous science and faith-based humility has not been making the news of late. Public opinion surveys show an enormous gap between distinguished scientists—95 percent of whom a decade ago agreed that “human beings have developed over millions of years” (Gallup, 1996)—and the lay public, about half of whom (42 to 54 percent, depending on the survey) report believing, as they have for at least the last two decades, that human beings were created in their present form within the past 10,000 years (Gallup, 2005; Harris, 2005; NORC, 2004; Pew, 2005).

But the national result obscures some interesting red-blue divides. First, among Whites there is a huge religious divide, with about one-third of evangelicals and more than two-thirds of mainline Protestants and Catholics accepting evolution (Pew, 2005). (I hasten to acknowledge the great diversity within each of those groups, which exceeds even the differences between the evangelical George W. Bush and the evangelical Jimmy Carter.) Second, analyzing the National Opinion Research Center’s 2004 survey data by age group, one finds only 33 percent of 18 to 29 year old Americans agreeing that humans were created at one time within the past 10,000 years (compared to 44 percent among other adults).

Another harbinger of future change in public opinion is the agreement by advocates of intelligent design—in contrast to young-earth creationists—that the earth is billions of years old and that “living things are related by common ancestry” (Discovery Institute, 2006). In the science-religion sphere the influence of the well-funded Discovery Institute, which promotes evolution via intelligent design, may in time be more than offset by the even better funded Templeton Foundations, whose staff and advisors are supportive of rigorous, mainstream science and whose founder’s science-supporting motto is “How little we know, how eager to learn.”

Turning finally to the gay marriage culture war, opinion surveys show two striking trends. The first is a dramatic increase over the last two decades in support for gay rights and gay relationships, including same-sex marriage. For example, in the annual UCLA survey of a quarter million entering collegians, support for “laws prohibiting homosexual relationships” has plunged from 53 percent in 1987 to 27 percent in 2005. Gallup reports

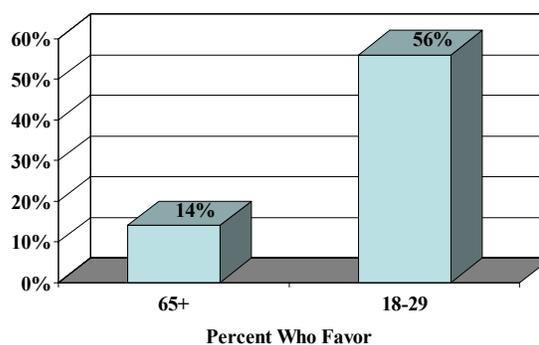
Entering collegians agreeing that “It is important to have laws prohibiting homosexual relationships.”



that support for legalizing same-sex marriage has increased from 27 to 42 percent since 1996.

The second trend is a huge generation gap. Americans over 65 overwhelmingly oppose gay marriage, while those 18 to 29 mostly support it. Few of us wish for opinion surveys to dictate social ethics, but this much seems likely: Given the increasing acceptance of gay/lesbian aspirations, and given also the inevitability of generational succession, the gay marriage culture war will likely resolve itself.

NY Times/CBS, 2003: Do you favor or oppose a law allowing homosexuals to marry?



Bridging the Gay Marriage Divide

I close with a personal example of my own recent effort to speak to the red-blue divide over gay marriage. Last summer, Letha Dawson Scanzoni and I offered the faith community a short book that makes, in the words of its subtitle, “A Christian Case for Gay Marriage.” We summarize the accumulating evidence that sexual orientation is (most clearly so for males) a natural, enduring disposition that rarely if ever changes through willpower, reparative therapy, or participation in an ex-gay ministry. But our aim is less to be argumentative than to help bridge the great divide that separates marriage-supporting and gay/lesbian-supporting people of faith.

Bridging the divide, we believe, requires progressives to acknowledge the evidence about marriage that traditionalists love to cite. Show them a community where marriages are plentiful and thriving, and they will show you (even after controlling for parental income, race, and education) a community with mostly healthy people, thriving kids, and low crime rates.

Bridging the divide also requires traditionalists to acknowledge the evidence about sexual orientation that progressives love to cite. We now have more than a dozen revelations of gay-straight differences in things ranging from hypothalamic neurons to fingerprint patterns to skill at mentally rotating geometric figures. From the confluence of findings, a scientific consensus is emerging: For men (and for many women), sexual orientation seems naturally disposed. So it’s not surprising that efforts to change sexual orientation so routinely end in frustration, shame, or depression.

Such findings have stimulated today’s biblical scholars to revisit and debate those mere seven verses, out of more than 31,000 biblical verses, that have seemed to condemn same-sex behaviors. This handful of verses, which gay Christians sometimes call “the clobber passages,” never involve a naturally disposed attachment. They typically involve child exploitation or

promiscuity or idolatry or acting against one's nature. Moreover, contrary to the presumption that supporting marriage requires keeping gays unmarried, marriage would, we argue, be strengthened by a consistent pro-monogamy norm. In a nutshell, one bridge across the red-blue divide on this issue is to show why both sides have important things to say, and why both science and biblical wisdom can be understood as supporting everyone's right to seal love with commitment. As both the culture and the faith community come to better appreciate the human "need to belong"—to connect, to attach—perhaps we will also more and more welcome a consistent pro-marriage norm. And as we do, the red-blue divide on this issue can subside.

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