

**Hopkins, David A.** *Red Fighting Blue: How Geography and Electoral Rules Polarize American Politics*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017. xii, 244 pp. (\$74 cloth, \$24.99, paper).

As a political geographer with a central focus in electoral geography, I was quite interested in reading *Red Fighting Blue* by David A. Hopkins, given its stated emphasis on the role of geography in the current politics of the United States. His goal is to broaden the study of the interaction of voter preferences and the polarization of politicians “to encompass the crucial intermediating role played by the interaction between political geography and electoral institutions” (13).

The book is broken into seven chapters with the first highlighting the central role of Ohio in determining the outcome in recent presidential elections. As Hopkins notes, Ohio’s electoral competitiveness and its number of electoral votes makes the state a prime target for campaign stops. The campaign strategies of both parties reflect the realities of the few remaining truly electorally competitive states, the geographically defined electoral college, and the limitations of the time and money allocated to campaigns. Analysis of campaign stops by both of the 2016 presidential candidates in the recently released *Atlas of the 2016 Elections* (Watrel et al., 2018, 36-42) cartographically confirms Hopkins’ assertion.

The remainder of Chapter 1 highlights that “Geography is thus a fundamental component of the mechanics of democratic representation” (11) in discussions of geographic polarization, geographic coalitions, geographic bastions of party support, geographically polarized electoral outcomes, the manipulation of district boundaries in the U.S. system of geographic representation, the resurgence of regionalism and “geography . . . [as] . . . a foundational element” of the electoral system (18). In the discussion of regionalism Hopkins notes “There are no consensus definitions of geographic regions in the United States” (26). Geographers regionalize the United States on any number of factors from landforms to religion, and there are models delineating electoral regions. Archer and Taylor’s (1981) S-mode factor analysis model delineated three principal electoral regions in the United States based on presidential returns beginning in 1872. The model can be updated as new elections occur and could be scaled to yield more than three electoral sections.

Chapter 2’s focus is on the development of regional polarization, making a distinction between individual voters and collective outcomes. Hopkins notes that even comparatively small differences in preferences can lead to substantial effects due in winner-take-all elections. At times such outcomes may lead some to conclude that geographic contrasts between places are even larger than they are in reality. This is an important point – we too commonly place seemingly electorally inflexible states in categories that hide their true diversity. Thus, while many consider Alabama among the reddest of all red states, over a quarter of its population is African American, strongly supportive of the Democratic Party and politically active. With a reduction in white voter enthusiasm for the Republican candidate in the December 2017 special senate election and

a simultaneous increase in African American turnout, the state now has a Democratic Senator, an outcome very few experts or pundits would have suggested was possible.

This chapter also critiques what others have argued is the “myth of American political geography,” which holds there is little or no geographic political polarization. Using an alternative calculation for vote margins in all states, Hopkins finds “steadily increasing state-level partisan polarization that began in the 1990s” (47), and that the level of polarization nearly doubled between 1992 and 2016. While the graphs used in the chapter are effective to make these points, additional cartographic analysis at the county and state levels would likely have aided in confirming the author’s points.

Chapter 3 reviews the twentieth century’s experience with geography, ideology, and partisanship which began in an era of internal factionalism and concluded in a pattern of regional partisan polarization. This is an interesting chapter which very ably distills a century of change in party politics in the United States. The chapter highlights the effects of the New Deal on regional partisanship, the election of 1964 on the electoral loyalties of the South, the post-1968 era of divided government with Republican presidents and a Democratic Congress, the influence and effects of “Dixiecrats” in Congress, the national party coalitions that developed between 1968 and 1992, and more recently the return to both elite and mass partisanship. This is an excellent chapter which nicely weaves together history and interpretation of American partisan politics over the past century.

Chapter 4 examines the reappearance of regional and partisan divisions in the United States and changes that occurred to the previous pattern of the electorate voting for a Republican president and Democratic member of congress. The root of many of these changes are arguably social issues and cultural politics. As Hopkins writes, “The significant divide between residents of Red and Blue America in collective religiosity and adherence to cultural traditionalism has gained a newfound political importance over the past three decades that is particularly powerful in shaping the geographic coalitions of the parties” (100). The author also notes that while these patterns may not produce substantial contrasts between individuals, they do in the aggregate provide geographic context and explanation to the national electoral map. I think these are excellent points and I fully agree, most particularly with respect to the South, where religion has become a compelling electoral cleavage arguably rising to the level of race. Thus, many traditional white voters in Alabama in the November special senate election to replace Attorney General Jeff Sessions voted for Republican Roy Moore in spite of accusations of sexual impropriety because he was much more strongly anti-abortion than Democrat Doug Jones. Finally, this chapter’s title is “Mapping the Cultural Battlefield” but it includes a single map. I suspect maps of religious indicators and social positions on issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage would have aided the discussion.

Chapter 5 focuses on changes in partisan regionalism as they affect Congress in terms of polarization. Hopkins highlights two specific issues that have affected Congress during the past thirty years: “the steady polarization of the congressional parties and the increased success of

Republican candidates in both House and Senate elections” (147). He attributes these changes to voters in different parts of the country becoming more ideologically consistent in their voting patterns, resulting in increasingly distinct electoral sections, and leading to a more polarized and Republican legislative branch. Clearly, a substantial portion of these changes has resulted from the movement of congressional seats from the North to the more conservative and religiously oriented South and growing Republican partisanship among traditional white voters in the region.

Chapter 6 examines the sub-state electoral geography of the United States, with an emphasis on the Democratic Party strength in large cities and the dominance of the GOP in rural settings. The chapter further includes a focus on the Midwest due to its greater balance in party support compared to other regions. From a geographic perspective, metropolitan, micropolitan and rural areas are increasingly distinct in their party preferences (Watrell et al., 2018: 93-101), meaning topically this is an important chapter. While the graphs in this chapter are helpful and indicate the differences between different types of population concentrations, maps presenting the geographic patterns of areas falling into different segments of the rural to urban continuum would have aided in the confirmation of these findings. Also, maps of precinct level returns for some large metropolitan settings could provide interesting local examples of the urban-suburban-exurban-rural voting patterns found across the country. Finally, I found the discussion of the Midwest both thoughtful and illuminating, though again a few maps of the contrasts in voting profiles between the region’s major cities and its rural environs would provide examples of the patterns Hopkins identifies.

Chapter 7 nicely pulls together the discussion and findings from the first six chapters. The chapter reviews the large body of literature pertaining to partisan change – this review is well-done. Hopkins concludes that neither party today has a “lock” on Congress or the Presidency with diverse outcomes in the past four elections. That being said, he argues that it is at the local level where electoral “locks” are becoming increasingly abundant. As he states, “The relatively even overall balance of the parties masks the proliferation of dependable local, state, and regional bastions on both sides at the expense of marginal battleground constituencies” (217). I fully agree and believe more finely detailed spatial analysis of lower level geographic units will both confirm and suggest this process is further along than many realize.

I believe political scientists, political historians, political sociologists, and political geographers will find much to like about this book. It is well-organized, well-written and thoughtful. My sole criticism is that it suggests substantial geographic analysis, but this is limited though it could have added a dimension to make a good book even better.

Gerald R. Webster

*University of Wyoming*

---

**References**

- Archer, J.D. and Taylor, P.J. 1981. *Section and Party: A Political Geography of American Presidential Elections from Andrew Jackson to Ronald Regan*. New York: Research Studies Press.
- Watrell, R.H., Weichelt, R., Davidson, F.M. Heppen, J. Fouberg, E.H., Archer, J.C., Morrill, R.L., Shelley, F.M. and Martis, K.C. 2018. *Atlas of the 2016 Elections*. Boulder: Rowman and Littlefield.