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Morris Fiorina, with Samuel Abrams and Jeremy C. Pope. *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America*. New York: Pearson Longman, 2004. 192 pages. \$14.95 (Paper).

[1] Fiorina's book, dedicated "to the tens of millions of Americans who have never heard of the culture war," is a crisply written and passionately argued case that "culture war" is a myth imposed upon Americans by our political and intellectual elites. The concept, Fiorina holds, is useful for political leaders in mobilizing voters, for interest group leaders in mobilizing contributors, and for journalists and pundits in attracting readers and viewers. Not only do elites have an interest in perpetuating the notion of a culture war, the insular character of America's elite-driven politics leaves elites disconnected from those millions of mainstream Americans whose pragmatism and common sense leave them thoroughly uninterested in culture war. In spite of America's pragmatic mainstream, the danger of the culture war thesis is that it may become a "self-fulfilling prophecy." Fiorina's project is to short-circuit the fulfillment of this dismal prophecy by demonstrating that the "facts" do not support the conclusion that America is in the midst of a culture war.

[2] Fiorina begins with the proposition that the U.S. is a "50/50" or "red vs. blue" nation. To be sure, American national elections have been closely contested since 1996, but Fiorina helpfully points out that this is not necessarily a sign of deep division. While it is conceivable that our nation is "closely *and* deeply divided" it is also possible that we are "closely *but not* deeply divided." Fiorina accepts the latter conclusion, finding on the basis of a Pew Forum survey that "very little difference exists statistically between residents of red and blue states." On religious and moral measures, Fiorina cautions, "The difference is statistically significant, but it hardly conjures up an image of two coalitions of deeply opposed states engaged in a culture war" (21). Fiorina may well be correct in concluding that talk of a "50/50" nation has been overwrought, but his argument begs the question of exactly *what* statistical evidence, if any, would allow social scientists to conclude that a culture war exists; the standard of statistical significance is imposed by the internal logic of mathematics, not by any particular insight into the requisites of political or social cohesion.

[3] Regardless of the factual validity of “red vs. blue” comparisons, it is clear that the press and pundits find such stark contrasts compelling. Fiorina criticizes one such comparison (from a story in *USA Today*) between the “red” town of Franklin, TN and the “blue” town of Montclair, NJ. The towns are clearly, even radically, different politically and culturally, but Fiorina objects to the journalist’s comparison. “Rather than draw the conclusion that the country is deeply divided from a systematic look at a broad array of data, *USA Today* reversed the process, seeking to fit its pre-existing conclusion that the country was deeply divided” (31). This passage illustrates the central difficulty of Fiorina’s project. The culture war, as his own account of it implies, is a subjective phenomenon. Those millions of Americans who “have never heard of the culture war” do not need to be convinced of its non-existence; will Fiorina’s objective data be sufficient to alter the subjective consciousness of those thousands of Americans who understand themselves as culture warriors?

[4] Fiorina gives special attention to the two issues that most strongly support the culture war thesis: abortion and homosexuality. With respect to abortion, Fiorina concludes that it is not a problem of ideological division but of political structure. “The great majority of the American citizenry rejects extreme positions and could be content with compromise laws, but such compromises are hard to achieve given the current state of American electoral politics . . . In Europe, where citizen activists and interest groups are less influential relative to party professionals, compromise abortion laws have been much less difficult to adopt than in the United States” (66). This reader was left wondering what responsibility, if any, Fiorina ascribes to the Supreme Court for taking this issue out of the hands of deliberative bodies. The answer to this question is relevant to the policy debate on issues surrounding homosexuality, a topic on which Fiorina finds a statistically significant (albeit shrinking) public opinion gap.

[5] Apart from the Supreme Court’s expanded role, Fiorina does list a series of other causes for our present predicament, including the emergence of an ideologically pure albeit politically inexperienced cadre of activists; the continual expansion of governmental power that has provided activists additional incentive for political action; and a series of democratically inspired reforms that have allowed activists greater opportunity to insert themselves into the political process. It is conceivable that a link among these causal factors is Americans’ increasing understanding of democracy as a substantive end or political ideology rather than as simply a procedural means for producing consensus through deliberation; here is a different kind of “culture war” in which Americans are cut between ideologues and pragmatists. If this is the case, his structural solutions - including reforms to the primary system, to the practice of drawing voter districts, and to encourage voter turnout - may have the salutary effect of diluting the influence of ideologues, though they will not reach the root of the problem posed by an increasingly ideological politics.

[6] The above criticisms should be considered secondary to the great praise that is due this book. Fiorina is persuasive in demonstrating that the culture war is far less widespread than our political and intellectual elites would have us believe. And though this does not make the culture war any less real to the individuals who experience it, Fiorina has done a great service by presenting substantial reasons to believe that there is an American mainstream that still possesses the common sense and character to deal with complicated and contentious issues civilly.

Jason Ross, Georgetown University