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WILKES' TOM BALDINO SAYS POLITICAL DIVISIONS ARISE FROM TENSIONS BETWEEN AMERICA'S TWO CONFLICTING VALUES:

LIBERALISM AND DEMOCRACY By Kim Bower-Spence



EVER SINCE THE CONTENTIOUS ELECTION of 2000, TV talking heads, pundits and now bloggers have divided the United States by color. Not the black, white and brown of race, but the blue and red of Democrats and Republicans, liberals and conservatives.

While it's convenient to color political disagreements along party lines, Wilkes University political scientist Thomas J. Baldino traces the perennial struggles to competition between two values on which the nation was built: liberalism and democracy. "We have inherently conflicting values. We are a liberal democracy."

Citizens value individual freedoms and their right to pursue their dreams. But the U.S. is also a democratic system, which empowers a government to act on behalf of the people. This means that a government may limit individual rights and freedoms to protect the majority.

Baldino cites polygamy as one example of where an individual's right to live as he or she wishes may be curbed. "That's a violation of community standards," he says. "You sense the balance that has to be struck there – to balance the 'right' of the individual to have multiple wives against the community's need to establish rules for an ordered society."

"Liberalism" early in U.S. history drew its meaning from its 18th Century origins, and was associated with individual freedom – of speech, of religion, of assembly, of self-determination. It reflected one understanding of equality: that everyone has the same opportunities and must be treated the same under the law. "As (Thomas) Jefferson understood equality, we will all be treated the same by the government, based on abilities and ambition," Baldino explains. This concept supports a capitalist system, where everyone can acquire property and pursue happiness.

Professor Tom Baldino asserts that the United States map is much more purple than red or blue. PHOTO BY MARK GOLASZEWSKI



Franklin D. Roosevelt transformed the meaning and use of “liberalism.” In trying to reconcile liberalism and democracy, Roosevelt argued that Americans couldn’t enjoy their freedom to succeed unless the community ensured citizens’ survival. “The community decides what the necessities for survival are,” explains Baldino, “and government provides them for those unable to acquire them for themselves.”

For example, the community decided to provide free public education to everyone. What a person does with that education is his or her choice. But providing free education has a cost borne by every citizen, even those without children or who send their children to non-public schools. Similarly, freedom of speech guarantees that the Ku Klux Klan can promote its views on race even though it offends a majority of people.

Over the course of U.S. history, Americans vacillated between promoting liberalism and promoting democracy, Baldino notes. He cites several “refoundings” since the birth of the United States. The Democratic-Republicans, led by Jefferson and James Madison, felt that Alexander Hamilton and the Federalists were concentrating too much power in the federal government. With Jefferson’s election in 1800, he sought to limit the power of the federal government and strengthen states’ rights. Other refoundings occurred in elections of 1828, 1860 and 1932.

Baldino also lists 1968 as a pivotal year. Roosevelt’s New Deal and Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society raised questions of “How much do we want the government to do for us?” With the anti-war, environmental, women’s, and civil rights movements dividing the country, political winds shifted toward the Republican Party with its promise of a smaller federal government and a greater emphasis on individual choice. The trend continued through Democratic President Bill Clinton, who revised the welfare system to put more responsibility on the individual, Baldino points out.

“The contemporary parties tend to muddle the issues by misidentifying the terms,” he says. For instance, party operatives quickly shriek “socialized medicine” at any attempt to reform health care, or “privatization” when changes are proposed for Social Security. The pejorative language taps into emotions and squelches constructive debate.

Even on abortion, Baldino contends, opponents who can get past the rhetoric can get to the heart of the issue – unintended pregnancies – and work

together to try to find solutions. “People who are willing to talk and listen can find common ground.”

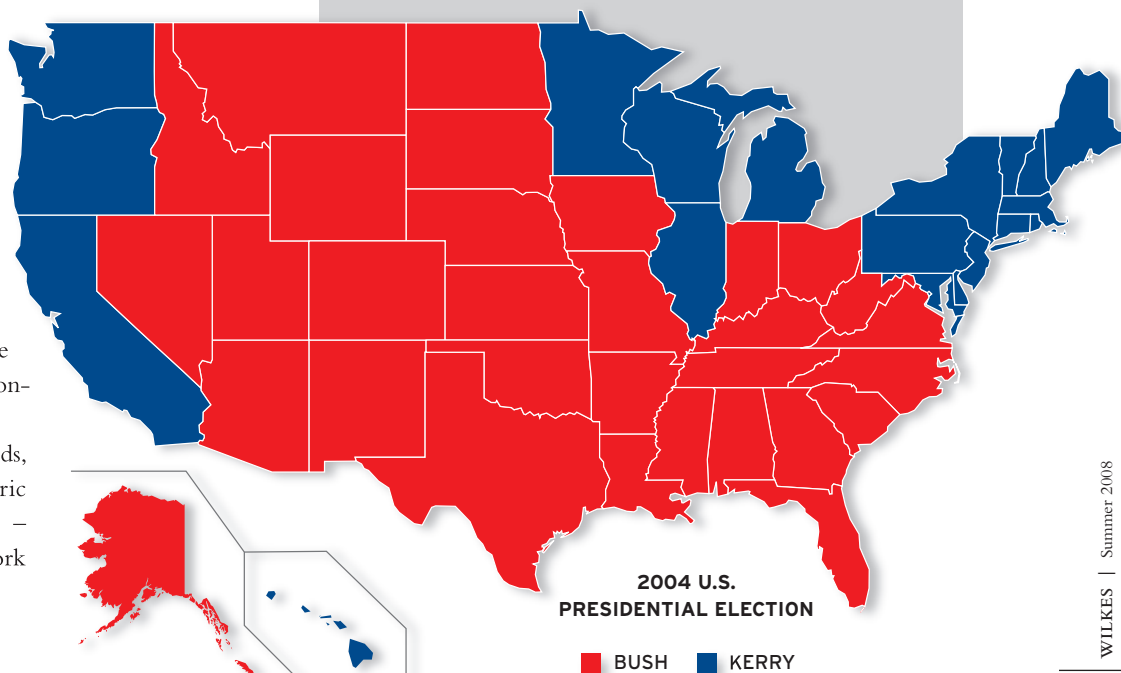
Despite the divide, Baldino asserts, the country is much more “purple” than simply red or blue. County-by-county break-outs show a mix of red and blue even within states. Pennsylvania itself sports nearly a red “T,” with Philadelphia and Pittsburgh heavily Democratic and the heartland more Republican.

“If you depoliticize the debate and remove the hyper-inflated rhetoric, people want their problems solved,” Baldino concludes. “We need to reduce the inflammatory rhetoric so people can understand both sides of each issue.”

ELECTION FACTS

- **Alabama** disqualifies from voting those who have committed a “felony involving moral turpitude,” without offering a definitive list of what qualifies as “moral turpitude.”
- **Seven states** require photo identification before voting.
- **Seven states** mandate that felons permanently lose the right to vote unless they are able to obtain a pardon.
- **In Pennsylvania**, felons retain their right to vote once they complete their sentence, probation or parole.
- **All Oregon** elections are conducted by mail-in ballot.

COURTESY OF KYLE KREIDER,
ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF POLITICAL SCIENCE



SOURCE FOR MAP: MICHAEL GASTNER, COSMA SHALIZI AND MARK NEWMAN, UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN