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CLARK BENSEN

POLIDATA · 3112 Cave Court, Suite B · Lake Ridge, VA 22192-1167
Tel: 703-690-4066 · Fax: 202-318-0793 (efax) · email: clark@polidata.org

PUBLISHER OF THE POLIDATA® DEMOGRAPHIC AND POLITICAL GUIDES AND ATLASES
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RED STATE BLUES

Did I Miss That Memo?

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CLARK BENSEN¹

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Over the past quarter of a century I have generated hundreds, nay thousands, of color-coded (thematic) maps illustrating political behavior for the nation. These maps have used election results as the source information and show the geographic distribution of voter preferences at various levels of political geography, state, county, town/city, precinct and congressional or legislative districts². In every one of these maps that indicate a political dichotomy of Republican vs. Democrat, the traditional color-coding scheme has been used: **BLUE FOR REPUBLICAN, RED FOR DEMOCRAT.**

When I first came to Washington following the 1980 elections to join the staff of the Republican National Committee, it was already a given that color-coded maps were generated in this fashion. In fact, having watched network news election night coverage over the years, this seemed to be a generally-accepted standard. As the elections ticked away, however, the networks started to change and one-by-one the new election night standard generally became just the reverse.

As we know, the color red is more “eye-catching” and perhaps it made graphic sense for the networks to color-in the vast Republican expanse of the country in red to create a more dramatic background map. However, the problem has now transformed itself into a shorthand notation whereby the color is not used solely to visually differentiate states or counties. It is on the verge of becoming a part of the political lexicon as commentators refer to the “red states” and the “blue states”. This is, to me, as a longstanding political operative, not only confusing but a disturbing trend of how the political paradigm has shifted.

There are two general reasons why blue for Republican and Red for Democrat make the most sense: connotation and practice. First, there has been a generally understood meaning to the two colors inasmuch as they relate to politics. That is, the cooler color blue more closely

¹ Clark H. Bensen, B.A., J.D., consulting data analyst and attorney doing business as POLIDATA® Polidata Data Analysis and a publisher of data volumes operating as POLIDATA® Demographic and Political Guides. POLIDATA is a demographic and political research firm located outside Washington, D.C.

² Numerous examples of these maps may be found online at www.polidata.org.

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represented the rational thinker and cold-hearted and the hotter red more closely represented the passionate and hot-blooded. This would translate into blue for Republicans and red for Democrats. Put another way, red was also the color most associated with socialism and the party of the Democrats was clearly the more socialistic of the two major parties.

The second reason why blue for Republicans makes sense is that traditional political mapmakers have used blue for the modern-day Republicans, and the Federalists before that, throughout the 20th century³. Perhaps this was a holdover from the days of the Civil War when the predominantly Republican North was “Blue”.

While not a unanimous practice⁴, there is significant printed evidence of tradition in favor of the blue for Republican and red for Democrat color scheme.

Nevertheless, the networks appear to be making this change full-bore during 2004. Even some conservative commentators⁵ have begun to use the “red state/blue state” break as a shorthand to “Republican state/Democrat state” as part of their terminology. Moreover, some younger political observers have been exposed only to the red for Republican scheme⁶.

Of course, while this just shrieks of inside-the-beltway elitism, it also tends to confuse the debate for many average Americans, especially those over 30. The sole premise for this short-hand is the color-coding of the maps, most of which have not been seen since the 2000 election night/recount coverage. The political parties have invested untold millions in brand recognition for their party labels. Now the media are poised to turn this around for the sake of inside Washington jargon.

The key issue here is not the color chosen for the maps. The key issue is how states, or areas, are described. What is needed is a return to clarity. Texas is not a “red state”, it is (at least now) a generically Republican state. New York is not a “blue state”, it is a generically Democrat state. There are no reds or blues living in America; only Republicans, Democrats and “Others”.

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³ Notable examples include:

a) Charles O. Paullin and John K. Wright, *Atlas of the Historical Geography of the United States*, (Washington, D.C., Carnegie Institution of Washington and the American Geographical Society of New York, 1932);

b) Kenneth C. Martis and Ruth Anderson Rowles, *The Historical Atlas of Political Parties in the United States Congress, 1789-1989*, (New York, MacMillan, 1989);

c) See also the National Atlas of the United States at nationalatlas.gov (a web update of Gerlach, Arch C., editor, *National Atlas of the United States of America*, (Washington, U.S. Geological Survey, 1970)).

⁴ My analyst counterpart, Kim Brace, of Election Data Services, who serves the Democrat side of the aisle, has been using red for Republican for as long as Polidata has been using blue for Republican.

⁵ Observed in a column by Bob Novak in Spring 2004.

⁶ Observed in a column in GOPUSA.com in a travel letter from a current college student.