USA AND CANADA:
The Political Geography of National Division in North America

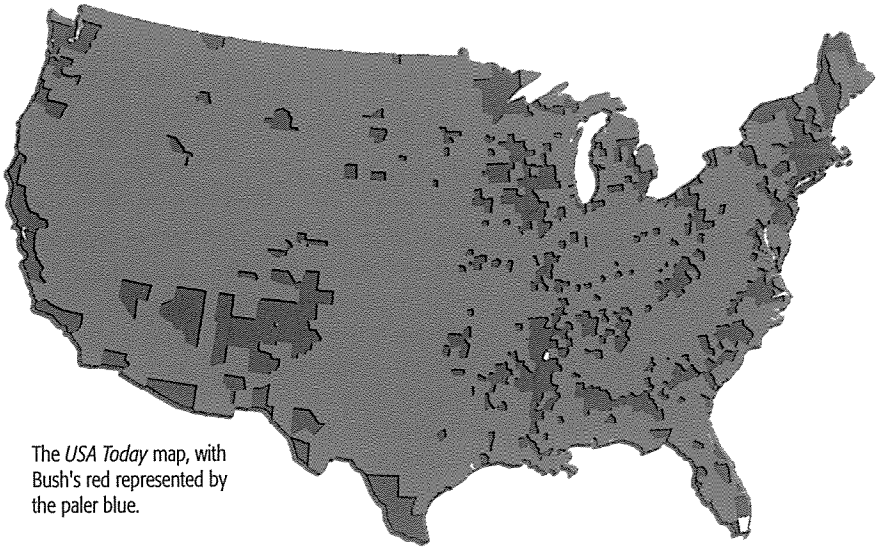
This article was adapted from an excerpt of the author's new book, "Fixing Elections: The Failure of America's Winner Take All Politics" (Routledge Press, www.FixingElections.com)

BY Steven Hill

"A HOUSE DIVIDED AGAINST ITSELF CANNOT STAND."
– ABRAHAM LINCOLN

ON NOVEMBER 9, 2000, TWO DAYS AFTER THE LAST U.S. PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION, AS THE NATION WAS BEGINNING TO ABSORB THE FULL EXTENT OF THE FIVE-WEEK DEBACLE THAT WAS ABOUT TO ENSUE, *USA TODAY* PUBLISHED A NOW-NOTORIOUS RED AND BLUE MAP OF THE UNITED STATES THAT WAS PORTENTOUS IN ITS MESSAGE. THEY SAY A PICTURE IS WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS, AND THIS MAP WAS LIKE FLYING IN A SPACESHIP HIGH ABOVE THE EARTH, SURVEYING AN AERIAL SNAPSHOT OF THE AMERICAN POLITICAL LANDSCAPE.

The snapshot revealed a demographic trend already familiar to Canadian audiences, but new to observers of American politics – alarming levels of partisan balkanization based on geographic regions. In the United States, as in Canada, whole sections of the nation have become monolithic strongholds for one party or the other. In the U.S., instead of ethnic nationalism or religion as the basis for sectionalism, we have substituted political party, and the parties have become in the public perception a proxy for race and culture. Moreover, like in Canada, America's clunky eighteenth-century electoral system, known as Winner Take All/First Past The Post, with it's zero-sum "if I win, you lose" calculations, is supposed to act as the electoral filter that translates votes into political power. As we will see, this augurs a worrisome national future.



The *USA Today* map, with Bush's red represented by the paler blue.

THE GEOGRAPHY OF DIVISION

In America, there is more space where nobody is than where anybody is – that is what makes America what it is.
– Gertrude Stein

What the *USA Today* map showed, specifically, was which candidate won the most presidential votes in each of the 3,111 counties in the fifty states.

Visually, looking at the national map, it was red versus blue like two rival armies, each with their own geographic strongholds and legions of foot soldiers.

The Gore counties were in navy blue, the Bush counties in a fiery red. George Bush's "army" captured an astounding amount of territory: 2,434 counties to Al Gore's 677, nearly 2.5 million square miles to Gore's 575,000 square miles. Yet Bush country was low-population and rural, while Gore's were the major population centers (*The Economist*, 2001), enough to give Gore over 500,000 more popular votes nationwide. Unquestionably, as the map revealed, the U.S. is a divided nation—but there is a particular geography to the divide: a vast sea of fiery Republican red across the rural heartland, particularly in the western Mountain and Prairie states and the South, framed and trellised by bicoastal and urban patches of blue, the island outposts of Gore and the Democrats. It looked like the territory of two conflicting armies in a new kind of uncivil war. And there was no mistaking its alarming message, nor its ramifications—railing national division with a distinct *regional* axis.

But there was another axis to the national division. As illuminated by exit polls, the *cultural* differences between Bush's and Gore's voters were similarly striking. For instance, Bush attracted people who go to church more than once a week; who think it's more important that the president be a moral leader than a good government manager; who oppose stricter gun laws; and who believe that if a public school is failing, the government should pay for private school (Lawrence, 2000). Voters with incomes over $100,000 also strongly preferred Bush (*San Francisco Chronicle*, 2000). Gore drew heavy majorities of liberal and more secular voters who rarely or never attend church; who support stricter gun laws; and who say a public school should be fixed if it is failing. Gore's more urban voters were defined by tolerance, progressive cultural views, and a fear that Christian conservatives want to impose their views on everyone. Union members went 63 percent to 32 percent for Gore; low-income voters (making $30,000 or less) favored Gore, as did heavy majorities of gay and Jewish voters.

Besides the stark regional and cultural divisions, the presidential exit polls revealed a third axis to the national division: racial polarization. Despite a relatively weak record by the Clinton–Gore administration on civil rights issues, an astonishing 90 percent of African Americans voted for Gore, as did 62 percent of Latinos and 55 percent of Asians, a stunning rejection of Bush's symbolic racial overtures and self-proclaimed "compassionate conservatism." Combined, people of color accounted for an unprecedented 30 percent of Gore's total vote, and nearly 20 percent of all voters. On the other hand, whites constituted almost 95 percent of Bush's total vote, with white men in particular preferring Bush. More revealing, while women overall voted 54–43 for Gore, white women actually favored Bush by one point, 49–48. *Women of color* created the gender gap (CNN exit polls, November 2000).

These combined axes of division – regional, cultural, racial, and partisan – in essence today defines the contested terrain between the two opposing

camps, and the national fractures and fault lines revealed by UnElection 2000. Visually, looking at the national map, it was red versus blue like two rival armies, each with their own geographic strongholds and legions of foot soldiers. And it solidified the suburbs and collar counties, particularly those in key battleground states, as the crucial swing districts for national politics.

THE NEW BERLIN WALL

Toto, we aren't in Kansas anymore.
– Dorothy, somewhere over the rainbow

Flying high above the political landscape, one gets an urge to descend like a lunar rover and explore a bit of the terrain below to really get a feel for the mise-en-scène of national disunity.

In western states like Idaho and Utah, Republicans now dominate the legislatures like never before, winning 70 percent or higher of state and congressional seats and nearly all statewide executive offices. In fact, the electoral outlook is so grim for Democrats in Utah that Democratic party leader Scott Howell has threatened the possibility of running no Democratic legislative candidates at all, the point being, said Howell, to "make Utahans wake up to what local political life would be like with no alternative voice, no alternative power, to the majority Republicans. We have one-party rule in Utah. Maybe it's time to have no Democrats in the Legislature. Then let citizens see how they like that" (Bernick Jr., 1998).

Liberals and Democrats in the Western and Mountain states of Montana, Wyoming, Nevada, North and South Dakota, Colorado, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Arizona can bleat similar complaints. They play more of a spectator role in state and local politics. That's a vast area of fiery red Bush country—for convenience of identification, let's call it Bushlandia—stretching from the Canadian to the Mexican borders, over 1 million square miles, the size of all of Western Europe including Scandinavia. If we add in Alaska, the region is practically the size of a continent. Bushlandia is its own nation of sorts, of over 26 million people, but sparsely settled with about the same population as the states of New York and Massachusetts—yet over five times the representation of New York and Massachusetts in the U.S. Senate, and nine more votes in the Electoral College[i].

While one would have to place the core of Bushlandia in the Mountain and Prairie states, the conservative South contributes its own Confederate flavor to the mix. The South may not be solidly Republican but it *is* solidly conservative, with the conservative vote generally pulling "R" for presidential and statewide offices and most U.S. House seats, and "D" for many state legislative and a few U.S. House races (for historical reasons, white Southern Democrats still get elected, but most are conservative and would be Republicans in any other part of the country. And island outposts of black and liberal Gore-blue voters elect some black liberal Democrats). Together, these two regions form the solid geographic craton of the conservative movement. In the cowboy and formerly Confederate nation of Bushlandia, liberals and/or Democrats are effectively politically smothered, like a field of flowers snowed over by an avalanche.

But let's not feel too badly for Democrats and liberals. Next we touch down in … liberal San Francisco. Here, we overhear standing jokes about that rare and exotic bird, a San Francisco Republican. This species has zero representation at the city, state Assembly, Senate, or congressional levels. In fact, a Republican candidate hasn't won a local San Francisco election in decades. In California at large, where fully 12 percent of the nation's population resides, Democrats control the governor's seat, both U.S. Senate seats, all state executive offices except the Secretary of State, and over 60 percent of U.S. House, state Assembly, and state Senate seats. In the Assembly races, the average margin of victory was nearly 35 percent.

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In Massachusetts, we discover a similar story. Democrats in Massachusetts have a complete monopoly on congressional representation; for the second election in a row, not a single Massachusetts Republican was elected to one of its ten U.S. House seats or to the Senate. Republican voters in the Bay State might as well not have showed up to the polls; they completely wasted their votes and their time. In the Massachusetts state Senate, six lonely Republicans hold the ramparts against thirty-four Democrats, and in the state House Democrats hold 86 percent of the seats.

Other states like Maryland and Rhode Island are similar Democratic Party strongholds. Both chambers of their state legislatures are at least 70 percent Democratic, and Republicans didn't bother contesting nearly 55 percent of the Rhode Island seats. Major urban areas like Los Angeles, New York City, Seattle, Atlanta, Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia, Newark, New Haven, Boston, Washington, DC, and others, where the population density is up to a thousand times greater than the sparse tundra of Bushlandia, are similar near-wastelands of GOP representation (and when Republicans do get elected—like New York City's last two mayors or recent Massachusetts governors—almost always they are pro-choice, pro-affirmative action moderates who never could get elected in Bushlandia). In these areas, elected Republicans are, practically speaking, spectators in the legislatures. These bicoastal areas and urban strongholds of Democrats, combined with still-strong labor areas in the Midwest and scattered urban islands in the heart of

Bushlandia red, comprise the latticework of blue Gore country – for convenience, let's call it New Goreia – that outlines and cross-hatches Bushlandia like a trellised picture frame. In the nation of New Goreia, conservatives and Republicans are effectively and politically smothered, just like Democrats and liberals are in Bushlandia.

One of the obvious ramifications of this demographic tide is that it is becoming increasingly difficult for a single representative to straddle the diverse constituencies residing in many of these districts. Between Bushlandia and New Goreia exist real differences of temperament, social values, and politics that appear to be, once again, muscularly implanted in regional geography, culture, and race. Whenever that combination has emerged in American history, the impact usually has been explosive. Other previous episodes of fervent racialized sectionalism were times of protracted political turmoil and violence. It is, of course, always challenging to see far enough to know where we sit on the great wheel of history. Certainly opinions range about how deep is the Red America/Blue America divide. But in thinking about the level of recent national division, historian Robert Dalek has observed, "Maybe it's an overstatement on my part, but I have the scent of the Civil War in my nostrils. It reminds me of the tensions in Vietnam during the 1960s. Now we are moving into a similar kind of moment" (Brownstein, 1998).

More to the point, these are the molten demographics that must be squeezed through the pinhole of the clunky eighteenth-century Winner Take All/First Past The Post voting system. Winner Take All, with it's zero-sum "if I win, you lose" calculations, is supposed to act as the political filter that translates votes into political power. But its exclusive reliance on geographic-based representation and a two-choice/two-party duopoly is exacerbating greatly this national division, and is polarizing politics along regional, racial, partisan, and cultural lines. And this in turn augurs a worrisome national future.

GEOGRAPHIC DIVISION = REPRESENTATION RIPOFF

Because we use electoral practices that elect one representative per district, Democratic and/or liberal voters in Bushlandia and Republican and/or conservative voters in New Goreia are consistently and unsurprisingly outvoted for just about everything. For each individual contest, for each single-seat race, there are simply too many of one type of voter – Republicans in Idaho or Kansas, say, or Democrats in Massachusetts or California or in most cities – overwhelming the other type of voter. The resulting monopoly politics not only affects representation – to the point where elected opposition has become a nearly extinct species – but also creates a new classification of voters: "orphaned" voters. Orphaned voters are those Democrats and Republicans who, like the supporters of third parties everywhere and most non-white voters, are *geographic* minorities in out-of-favor districts and states with little hope of electing a representative.

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Orphaned voters have no electoral or governmental outlet for their political sympathies or passions. Ironically, though, it's not as if there aren't millions of Republican voters *living* in Democratic districts, and vice versa, all across the country. It's just that these orphaned voters – these geographic minorities – never win representation because, district after district, they don't have sufficient votes and are outvoted. They are smothered by the opposition's avalanche.

Using the presidential vote as an indicator of the numbers of Democratic and Republican voters in each state, we can estimate how badly – and unfairly – these orphaned voters are smothered. We can compare the disproportion between the presidential popular vote and the number of legislative seats won by each party to arrive at a vote-to-seats ratio (the presidential popular vote is used rather than the aggregate statewide vote for each party in state legislative races, since so many state legislative races are uncontested – 41 percent in 2000 – which serves to depress voter turnout totals for state legislative races)[2].

So comparing the popular vote for Gore to the number of seats won by Democrats at the state legislative level, we find that the 29 percent of Idaho voters who pulled the Democratic tab for president in November 2000 ended up with only 13 percent of Democratic seats in the state House of Representatives. In essence, these voters won 16 percent less representation than their numbers would indicate they deserve. In Kansas, Democrats were similarly subsumed, winning 39 percent of the presidential vote but only 25 percent of state House seats. In Nebraska, Democratic voters didn't win a single seat in the U.S. House; just like Republicans in Massachusetts these voters have no representation at all.

Consequently, the political cultures of these states and regions, which ideally should thrive on exchanges of ideas and robust public debate, have become political monocultures, lacking the most basic levels of political pluralism.

This disproportionality works both ways, naturally, and in Rhode Island Republican voters accumulated about 34 percent of the presidential vote for Bush but ended up with only 16 percent of the

state representation, a "representation ripoff " of 18 percent. In Maryland, 42 percent of voters pulled Bush – approaching a majority – but they ended up with only 25 percent of the Republican state House seats, a ripoff of 17 percent. In Massachusetts, 35 percent of voters pulling R in the presidential race won only 14 percent of state House seats, a huge representation ripoff of 21 percent.

In all of these states and more, orphaned voters are smothered by the partisan avalanche that blankets the single-seat districts of their respective region or state. Consequently, the political cultures of these states and regions, which ideally should thrive on exchanges of ideas and robust public debate, have become political monocultures, lacking the most basic levels of political pluralism. The bitter partisan divide gets exacerbated by the Representation Ripoff, as one side effectively wins more representation than they deserve, while the other side is frustrated and unfairly marginalized. Oftentimes these representation ripoffs produce undeserved veto-proof majorities that can ram through radical policies without a popular mandate. The resulting monopoly politics creates a dangerous tension – fenced off, district by district, into political turf where victorious majorities lord over vanquished minorities, it's nothing less than a new kind of political feudalism.

"GOOD FENCES MAKE GOOD NEIGHBORS . . ."

Fortunately, there are alternatives to the vagaries of Winner Take All/First Past The Post. The poet Robert Frost, in his poem "The Mending Wall," after meditating over his neighbor's insistence that "good fences make good neighbors," wrote, "Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder if I could put a notion in his head: '*Why* do they make good neighbors?'" Similarly, in thinking about the single-seat, geographic districts that are suffocating orphaned Republicans in New Goreia and orphaned Democrats in Bushlandia, and everyone else as well, a mischievous impulse wants to ask: "*Why?*" Why must these be the primary methods for electing our leaders? Is this the best we can do, dividing whole regions of the country into neo-feudal Winner Take All fiefdoms of winners and losers? Are these the best electoral methods for ensuring that we remain good political neighbors?

What if we did not use single-seat district elections in monopoly politics states like Idaho, Utah, Kansas, Nebraska, Maryland, California, or Massachusetts? What if instead we combined three adjoining one-seat districts into a three-seat district? And what if we elected these three-seat districts with a voting system known as cumulative voting, which is used by various cities, counties, and even various corporations to elect their boards of directors,[3] so that only slightly more than 25 percent of the vote is needed to elect one out of three of these representatives? Might that give the orphaned Democrats or Republicans and other geographic minorities in these states a chance to win their fair share of representation? Might that break up the edifice of monopoly politics that is walling us into a corner and exacerbating partisan, cultural, and geographic and racial division, and allow a degree of cross-fertilization of politicians, ideology, and policy? And might that inspire orphaned voters everywhere to reengage in politics again?

Canadians might ask themselves similar questions, given the sectionalism and Quebecois-secessionism that has dominated national politics in recent years. Sometimes the particular electoral rules and practices employed have a lot more to do with who wins and loses elections than we realize. And by extension, conflicting tensions of national division and cacophony are exacerbated, and sometimes caused and maintained, by our eighteenth-century electoral practices – in this case, the widespread use of geographic-based, single-seat districts.

For instance, in the U.S. Democrats and Republicans live everywhere. Democrat Bill Clinton won at least 25 percent of the vote in every House district in the nation in 1996, and Republican Bob Dole slipped below 25 percent in only a handful of urban districts (Center for Voting and Democracy, 1998). But single-seat districts, whether in Illinois, South Carolina, Massachusetts, Idaho, Kansas or California, bury this natural diversity beneath the partisan avalanche. This further exacerbates regional and racial tensions, dividing us and tearing the seam of our national fabric. Demographically, the multiracial coloring of American society is in full swing, and will intensify over the next two decades. How will our nation prosper when it employs a Winner Take All system with single-seat districts where only one side of the divide can win in district after district? How will we defuse this national tension when the Winner Take All system allows entire regions of the country to be "captured" by one side or the other of this partisan war?

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FULLER REPRESENTATION IN THE HEARTLAND

Non–Winner Take All voting systems like cumulative voting and choice voting (the latter also known as preference voting or "single transferable vote") are designed to provide more opportunity for the electoral viability of orphaned voters – Democrats or Republicans, black or white, geographic minorities – than the traditional Winner Take All methods. Such a "full representation" system features elections using multi-seat districts (also known as "at-large") rather than single-seat districts, but unlike the traditional Winner Take All at-large system, these alternative multi-seat systems employ electoral rules of proportional representation designed to open up the political system and give a fair chance – fuller representation – to orphaned voting blocs of

geographic minorities (for more explanation of these electoral rules of proportional representation, see the footnote).[4]

The state of Illinois used such a full-representation system for 110 years, until 1980, to elect its lower state House of Representatives. In 2001, former Democratic Congressman Abner Mikva and former Republican Governor Jim Edgar co-chaired a high profile, blue-ribbon commission of seventy members that examined a return to this system (Parsons, 2001; Institute for Government and Public Affairs, 2001). The panel found that Illinois' use of cumulative voting in three-seat districts had a profound impact on Illinois politics that Americans and perhaps Canadians will recognize as speaking directly to the dilemma of entrenched national division.

For instance, nearly every Illinois three-seat district had two-party representation. Democratic strongholds like Chicago elected some Republicans, and Republican strongholds like downstate DuPage County elected some Democrats.[5] Consequently, voters had more options because every three-seat district provided access to representatives in both major parties. For Democratic and Republican sympathizers there was no such thing as an "orphaned voter." Moreover, independent and maverick Democrats and Republicans who bucked their party leadership were able to win election, providing *intra*-party ideological diversity and more viable options for voters. Crucial cross-fertilization of politicians and policies occurred under cumulative voting because both major parties had direct interest in serving the needs of all regions. Chicago's very urban needs had a voice in the all-important Republican Party caucus, and downstate's rural needs had representation in the Democratic Party caucus.

Former Republican Congressman John Porter has noted that in Illinois's three-seat districts "we operated in a less partisan environment because both parties represented the entire state." Illinois House Majority Leader Barbara Flynn Currie commented, "We had African-Americans representing majority white districts, and white representatives coming from districts that were predominantly African-American" (Center for Voting and Democracy, 2000). In fact, cumulative voting elected black Republicans, and now the Republican Party in Illinois – as in the rest of the nation – is virtually lily-white.[6]

As we soar over our *USA Today* map, gazing down upon the great red sea of Bushlandia framed by borders of New Goreia blue and contemplating how to bridge the political divide between Americans and between the two major political parties, the Illinois experience with three-seat districts and alternative voting schemes has a lot to lend. One of the alleged strengths of single-seat districts is representation of geographic interests. Yet when only one side of the political divide monopolizes a legislative district, region, or state, geographic representation becomes a zero-sum "If I win, you lose" game. Coherent policy for that region quickly becomes polarized. Without a balance of power, policy becomes subject to the whims of whichever party is in control. Single-seat districts greatly exacerbate this tendency toward polarization of representation and policy.

Nothing in the U.S. Constitution requires single-seat districts for the U.S. House or the fifty state legislatures.[7] Canadians also are not restricted from evolving past your single-seat districts and Winner Take All/First Past The Post ways. *What if* ... like Frost's protagonist, we examined with an open mind our eighteenth-century political institutions, electoral practices, and procedures? Might we discover that our current methods are actually contributing to, indeed causing, the current twin black holes of national division and political depression that are sucking the life out of our politics and launching us toward an uncertain future?

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The full references for this article can be found on the ACS web site at http://www.acs-aec.ca/e_magazine.html