

## *THE POLITICS OF HOPE EZINE*

*"For those who want to discover hope and possibility in these politically polarizing times."*

### **Beyond Red/Blue Politics**

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By Donna Zajonc

In March, 2005 I gave a speech in Fresno, California entitled "From Red to Blue to Purple." Since then I have become more curious about the impact of labeling local and national politics through the use of a color-coded map. **Is this metaphor a harmless description of a cultural phenomenon or is the Red/Blue descriptor actually contributing to a deeper cultural divide?**

On the eve of the 2006 national elections, I thought it would be useful to share a more in-depth look at how the simplistic notion of using two colors to describe our politics may be unwittingly increasing our political polarity.

The Red/Blue map was not a sinister invention from an elite political party operative. It was first printed in *USA Today* during the 2000 Presidential election to describe which counties supported President Bush. It immediately became the popular way to visually depict American's ideological differences with a geographical overlay. The media loved using a simple and eye-appealing visual display to analyze complex voting trends--probably the first visual "sound bite."

#### **Quote for the Month**

"As long as you place your focus on what you do not want regarding any situation, what you do want cannot come to you."

~Ester Hicks

**While this form of labeling is useful when rapid interpretation of voting trends is necessary, it is not useful when forging democratic conversations and multidimensional relationships that form the basis of our self-governing democracy. Here is why:**

(1) The Red/Blue label collapses a multitude of social identity groupings into one over-arching category. It implies all people who vote Democratic (Blue) think alike and vote the same on all issues and conversely, all Republicans (Red) think and vote alike. Forcing a multitude of issues and ways of thinking under one umbrella has been shown to increase group competition and prejudice toward the other opposing group members.

Sociologists have verified that strong identity with one group (called Social Identity Theory) can trigger group differences and increases polarization and conflict between opposing groups. Vilifying those in the opposing group has become an art-form. The Red/Blue scheme augments the "us and them" thinking pattern rather than encouraging a tapestry of diverse opinions, perspectives and positions. **Using only two groups to describe very complex issues and viewpoints creates a scorecard effect and fuels a "winner-take-all" attitude.**

The result is a heightened state of competition and a war-like atmosphere especially during election cycles. This thinking is not limited to candidates and political elite. Individual citizens are sometimes seduced into divisive behavior and language they would not otherwise exhibit. In the political world it sounds like: “If you are not part of my group, I don’t support you. In fact I will do or say anything to defeat you and your group because your group opposes my group.”

(2) Labeling geographical areas as Red or Blue implies the same thing---namely that an entire area thinks and votes alike. For example, if a state voted for President Bush by 50.5% that state is labeled Red. Using this simplistic approach to categorizing entire geographical areas discounts the 49.5% that held a minority viewpoint.

**When a large number of people feel they are not represented they begin to feel marginalized. Eventually the minority begins to feel their view is not being taken into account and the results of an election or decision will not seem fair. This ultimately will undermine the legitimacy of government and trust of public leaders.**

(3) When a group or person believes they are in the minority (A voter may say to him/herself “I am a Red citizen living in a Blue state so my views do not matter.”) it is common to keep silent believing you are the only one with differing viewpoints.

The group who won may believe they are all-powerful because they belong to the dominant group. The psychology of groups suggests that invincible, chest-thumping attitudes may further silence the minority who continue to question their views. **As the minority continues their silence a group-think attitude among the winning majority may deepen their attitude of invincibility.**

Neither of these positions is healthy for a successful democracy that thrives on honest and open airing of a multitude of perspectives.

**The Red/Blue symbol does more than just describe what is. More than likely, this diametrically opposing imagery contributes and deepens the current conflicts in American politics.** The way we frame and speak about relationships (after all, politics is about relationships) is crucial. Students of linguistic science understand that language can either divide or unite.

Conflict is inherent and essential to a democratic process. But when conflict is labeled in simplistic terms it encourages citizens to see themselves as non-complex beings and hope for leaders who will deliver simple answers.

As society becomes increasingly more complex, over-association with one group reduces our ability as citizens and governments to discover interconnected solutions. **The result of Red/Blue identity can prevent us from seeing that we have overlapping concerns and viewpoints with members of all groups.**

My wish is that whoever “wins” the 2006 elections will be leaders who honor diversity of viewpoints and have an ability to work across party lines so that a **new era of transpartisan Purple Politics** will begin!

For more reading on this subject see “A House Divided? The Psychology of Red and Blue America” by D. Conor Seyle and Matthew Newman from the University of Texas.

**Of Note:**

RedBlueUS.org is now conducting “beta” tests, and are looking for people from across the political spectrum who are interested in participating in a safe way to connect online with those who have divergent policy views. Please go to <http://www.redblueus.org>.

Testing takes place via the Internet and gets underway in mid November (so hurry if you want to be part of this test) The process will take place over the course of one month, and involves a direct dialogue online, between you and a “counterpart” whose political ideas are the opposite of your own.

This RedBlue web site represents an opportunity to develop a sense of trust, connection and relationship with others with whom we differ. The Producer of RedBlue, Evelyn Messinger is a friend. Tell her Donna sent you!