



The Coming End of the Culture Wars

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Introduction

The term “culture wars” dates back to a 1991 book by academic James Davison Hunter who argued that cultural issues touching on family and religious values, feminism, gay rights, race, guns, and abortion had redefined American politics. Going forward, bitter conflicts around these issues would be the fulcrum of politics in a polarized nation, he theorized.

It did look like he might have a point for a while. Conservatives especially seemed happy to take a culture wars approach, reasoning that political debate around these issues would both mobilize their base and make it more difficult for progressives to benefit from their edge on domestic policy issues such as the economy and health care. This approach played an important role in conservative gains during the early part of the Clinton administration and in the impeachment drama of the late 1990s, which undercut progressive legislative strategies. And the culture wars certainly contributed to conservative George W. Bush’s presidential victories in 2000 and 2004.

Yet these issues have lately been conspicuous by their absence. Looking back on Barack Obama’s historic victory in 2008, culture wars issues not only had a very low profile in the campaign, but where conservatives did attempt to raise them, these issues did them little good. Indeed, conservatives were probably more hurt than helped by such attempts—witness the effect of the Sarah Palin nomination.

Attempts to revive the culture wars have been similarly unsuccessful since the election. Sarah Palin’s bizarre trajectory, culminating in her surprise resignation from the Alaska governorship, has only made culture war politics appear even more out of touch. And culture warriors’ shrill attacks on Supreme Court nominee Sonia Sotomayor have conspicuously failed to turn public opinion against her.

Is this just a temporary breathing spell in the culture wars due to the sudden spike in concern about other issues—first Iraq, then the economy—or is a fundamental shift in our politics taking place? I believe the latter is the case since, as this report establishes, ongoing demographic shifts have seriously eroded the mass base for culture wars politics and will continue to erode this base in the future. That means that the advantage conservatives can gain from culture wars politics will steadily diminish and, consequently, so will conservatives’ incentive to engage in such politics.

There are numerous examples of how demographic change is undermining the culture wars. First, Millennials—the generation with birth years 1978 to 2000—support gay marriage, take race and gender equality as givens, are tolerant of religious and family diversity, have an open and positive attitude toward immigration, and generally display little interest in fighting over the divisive social issues of the past. The number of voting age Millennials will increase by about 4.5 million a year between now and 2018, and the number of Millennials who are eligible voters will increase by about 4 million a year. The 2020 presidential election will be the first where all Millennials will have reached voting age, and at that point the generation will be 103 million strong and have about 90 million eligible voters. Those 90 million Millennial eligible voters will represent just under 40 percent of America’s eligible voters in that year.

Second, the culturally conservative white working class has been declining rapidly as a proportion of the electorate for years. Exit polls show that the proportion of white working-class voters—scoring just 46.3 out of a 100 on the Progressive Studies Program comprehensive 10-item progressive cultural index covering topics ranging from religion, abortion, and homosexuality to race, immigration, and the family—is down 15 points since 1988, while the proportion of far more culturally progressive white college graduate voters (53.3 on the index) is up 4 points, and the proportion of minority voters (54.7 on the index) is up 11 points. State after state since 1988 has replicated this general pattern—a sharp decline in the share of white working-class voters accompanied by increases in the shares of minority voters and, in most cases, of increasingly progressive white college graduate voters.

Other demographic trends that will undermine the culture warriors include the growth of culturally progressive groups such as single women, and college-educated women and professionals, as well as increasing religious diversity. Unaffiliated or secular voters are hugely progressive on cultural issues and it is they—not white evangelical Protestants—who are the fastest-growing “religious” group in the United States.

These demographic trends are having their greatest effects in America’s metropolitan areas, especially the largest ones, and it is here that the culture wars are dying down the fastest. Residents in metro areas that have a population greater than 1 million, which contain 54 percent of the U.S. population, scored 53.6 on the Progressive Studies Program’s cultural index, while residents in metro areas with between 250,000 and 1 million in population—another 20 percent of the population—scored 51 on the index. In contrast, small town rural residents scored 45.4, and deep rural residents scored just 44.6. These cultural leanings are one important reason why America’s populous metros have been moving so heavily toward progressives. For full details on this shift, see the Progressive Studies Program’s updated [New Progressive America map](#), which provides trend data on America’s top 175 metros, and my companion report, [“America’s Progressive Metros.”](#)

Nowhere is the influence of demographic change clearer than on gay marriage. Millennials are so much more favorable to legalizing gay marriage than older generations that, by sometime in the next decade, there will be majority public support for legalizing gay marriage as

Millennials fully enter the electorate and take the place of much older, far more conservative voters. Other areas where big demographic effects can be observed are on gender roles and family values, and on race, where rising demographic groups' proclivities will tilt the country even further toward tolerance, nontraditionalism, and respect for diversity.

Immigration is another issue where demographic change will mitigate culture war conflict. For quite a while, polls have been showing public support for immigration reform that includes a path to citizenship, and a relative lack of enthusiasm for an enforcement-only approach. That support should grow over time, as should positive feelings about immigrants and immigration, since the white working class, which has relatively negative feelings in this area, is being supplanted by groups such as Hispanics, white college graduates, and professionals, whose feelings about immigration are far more positive. And then there is the rise of the Millennial generation. About three quarters (73 percent) of 18- to 29-year-old Millennials supported giving illegal immigrants “the right to live here legally if they pay a fine and meet other requirements” in an April 2009 *Washington Post/ABC* News poll, which is 31 points higher than support among seniors.

Demographic changes are generally reducing the salience of culture wars issues to politics, even when they are not shifting the distribution of public views. That is the case with abortion. Millennials want to see a smaller role for religiously motivated social views—64 percent in the PSP youth survey say “religious faith should focus more on promoting tolerance, social justice, and peace and less on opposing abortion or gay rights.” This will reduce the influence of conservative abortion views on politics. So will the rise of Hispanics, whose lack of interest in voting on the basis of abortion has been well documented.

The culture wars, far from coming back, are likely coming to an end as a defining aspect of our politics. This is good news for progressives, both because tolerance and equal rights will increasingly be the ethos of the country and because progressives will increasingly be able to make their case on critical policy issues without significant interference from “hot-button” social issues promoted by conservatives.

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