

Virginia Viewpoint

Avoid Seeing Purple

By Donald J. Boudreaux, J.D., Ph.D.

Summary

Over the last century it has become increasingly common for American politicians to try to improve the system the Founders left us. Over that same period it has also become increasingly common for our politicians to learn the hard way that our Founders rarely did anything without good reason. Take federalism, for example.

Main text word count: 724

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“Red states vs. blue states” has motivated much political discourse since the 2000 election. We all recall the map of the USA, with each state colored red or blue depending on whether its voters fell for Bush or for Gore. Blue states limned the coasts, with the great bulging bulk of middle America inked in brilliant red. Overlook the irony that religious, better-dead-than-red middle America is known today as “red.”

Much of the discussion has explored whether there really are two different Americas. Are red states really *that* conservative? How significant *are* the differences between red states and blue states?

Despite the fact that colors often run – blue into red and red into blue – no one who knows America doubts that real cultural and political differences exist and that these are distributed across the U.S. non-randomly. For each NASCAR dad in Boston, and each bi-sexual *bohème* in Peoria, there are dozens of citizens in these places who do snugly fit the stereotype.

So what?

Part of the original genius of the U.S. Constitution was its toleration of regional differences. Even though the America of 1787 was far more homogeneous than the America of today, founding-era Americans had some real differences with each other. The Framers understood that political stability not only is possible, but is more likely, if these differences are not forced into conflict. Such is a chief rationale for federalism.

James Madison & Co. knew two, sadly now-forgotten truths. The first is that few issues need be, and hence ought to be, made political. What I drink and eat, how much water my toilet-tank holds, the wage rate I accept, how and if I worship – these, and countless other decisions that affect mostly only the individuals making them, ought not be politicized. I can swig whiskey in the privacy of my home while you gulp only lemonade in yours. We coexist peacefully.

The second truth understood by Madison is that, despite Americans’ happy adherence to the first truth, most people are incurably political. Some questions, of course, *are* about issues affecting large swathes of us – for instance, how much to spend on national defense. As long as there is a nation to defend, this question is unavoidable and political. The Constitution

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delegates to Washington the power to answer questions about issues that affect the entire nation.

However, many other questions that do (or are thought to) require an answer by a collective do not require an answer by a collective as inclusive as the nation. For example, shall many multi-lane highways be built to encourage economic growth? Or should the number of highways be kept to a minimum to preserve trees?

Different people answer such questions differently. By segregating ourselves into different political regions – different towns, cities, and states – we group ourselves with people whose preferences are closer to ours than they are to any set of randomly chosen Americans. We can then make local collective decisions that affect us without affecting people outside our city or state. Coloradans can protect their scenic vistas while South Carolinians eagerly spread strips of asphalt from the Piedmont to Charleston.

A danger of heavy-handed Washington is that it presumes that there is One Right Answer – that if a rule for water usage is good for Arizonians, this same rule is good for Floridians. Peaceful co-existence is less likely the more Washington forces uniformity on us all, for then *the* political decision on, say, whether or not I can use medical marijuana will be made with input not only from me and my neighbors, but from voters across the country. Why should voters in Alabama or Utah have a say in whether or not Californians can smoke marijuana – or why should voters in California have a say in whether or not local governments in Alabama or Utah are allowed to display Christmas creches?

America is the most religiously tolerant society in history, unmarked by conflict over the content of church services or over how to deal with atheists. The reason is that the First Amendment keeps government largely out of the religion-regulation business.

Similarly, many fewer political conflicts would arise if red staters and blue staters each could go about their business unmolested by Washington. For if Washington forces reds and blues to mix it up politically, the resulting America will be purple – as in severely battered and bruised.

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