Red and Blue, Old and New

Choosing a name for your new baby? I hope you have a thick skin.

> *"What are you people trying to do to your kids? 'Oh, I want a unique name.' Give me a break. These kids are going to have freakish made up names."*
> *– internet messageboard post*

Baby naming is a personal choice that parents make in a spirit of joy, but the choice is dissected as a measure of their character.

> *"I can assure you that my children will definitely not be receiving boring names like John, William, or Mary. One only names their children such names if they lack imagination and don't want to bother expending any mental effort determining what to name their spawn." – blog comment*

It used to be just your in-laws and snarky old college buddies you had to worry about. Now in the internet age, strangers around the world can and do partake in bashing your name selection. Naming discussions on parenting forums can turn as heated as "breast vs. bottle" debates. Whole websites with titles like "Baby's Named a Bad, Bad Thing" are devoted to the blood sport of name criticism.

> *"How are you even finding these unbelievably pretentious names?? Don't try to distinguish your child with some odd-ass name that you made up." – blog comment*

Baby names come in hundreds of different cultural flavors, but the vitriol breaks down along one main divide. On one side are traditionalists who favor familiar names that their grandparents and great-grandparents might have used. For inspiration they turn to the Bible, to literature, to their own family trees. On the other side are modernists who treat naming as an opportunity for creative expression. They find ideas in surnames, celebrity names, common words, and fresh remixes of old name ingredients. Both sides look at each other and shake their heads in disgust.

"How old are you??? 80!!!This is 21st century its not 1919 for cryin out loud people dont want the same boring names anymore if we dont pick diffrent names it will be like the amish community and all our kids will be named Sam Miller!!!" - messageboard post

Living in the online baby name world, I see these comments every day. Parents with opposing tastes don't merely disagree but find moral fault with one another. Disliked names are taken as symbols of alien lifestyles and value systems.

"Do not name your child an American Indian name unless he or she is an American Indian. There are too many Dakotas running around Vermont and Hollywood."

"They are handing out these non traditional names so they can be the coolest parent at soccer."

"Giving a girl a boy's name is not the ticket to her being taken seriously later in life. Giving a boy a girl's name is a ticket to Hell for you." – blog posts

The more of these lifestyle attacks you read, the more familiar they start to sound. Traditional and rooted vs. modern and trendy, Bible vs. Hollywood…is the great baby name debate a microcosm of a broader American political and cultural divide? The rhetoric echoes the new national pastime of dividing the nation by color. Not by skin color—a centuries-old tradition itself—but by state color.

Reds to the right, blues to the left

Every four years on election night, television newscasts turn the U.S. map into a glowing electoral scorecard. It's an ideological quilt with contrasting patches of political preference from coast to coast. Starting with the 2000 Bush-Gore election, though, that patchwork pattern dissolved. The Republican areas cut a single broad swath of red across the nation's interior, leaving Democratic blue clustered around the edges.

That stark map became a symbol of a new American mindset. We were a polarized nation, bunkered in opposing color camps along a widening

philosophical cleft. We all know the caricatures. Red America is redneck America, clutching a bible in one hand and a bag of pork rinds in the other at NASCAR-sponsored lynchings. Meanwhile blue America has a Jane Fonda workout tape in one hand and a nonfat latte in the other as it heads off to a homosexual tryst in its imported car. The images are ridiculous, yet we also suspect there's a tiny grain of truth at the heart of them.

To some, the cultural split represents a battle for the country's soul. In the 1990s conservative Pat Buchanan defined a set of "cultural conservative" dividing lines: attitudes toward sex roles, abortion, the centrality of Christianity in culture, and a social traditionalism focused on patriotism and the family. If you were to translate that divide into baby names it might place Buchanan's name of Patrick—classic, Christian, masculine—on one side, staring down the androgynous pagan newcomer Dakota on the other.

When you try to pin down those cultural divisions, though, they turn out to be elusive. Take gun control, a supposed red/blue wedge issue. True to form, 79% of residents of the blue Northeast favor mandatory gun registration...but so do 77% of those in the red Southeast. If you look for conservative family values, you discover that Republican red states actually have a higher divorce rate than Democratic blue states. Sex roles? Blue state mothers are just as likely to stay home full-time with their children. What's more, the country isn't polarizing on values as the red-blue stereotype suggests. An MIT study of American opinions concluded that our views on moral issues have *converged* over the past thirty years, and that ours is an age of uncommon policy consensus.

So is America just one big purple family? And if not, let's put down our pork rinds and lattes for a moment and ask what differences we're genuinely responding to. Why does the cultural divide feel so wide? Are we really a nation of Patricks vs. Dakotas? That last question turns out to be one that casts the whole divide in a new light.

Patrick America vs. Dakota America

Naming a child is an exercise in identity and values. Whether you name your son after the Pope, after your father or after a soap opera star, you're encoding your own cultural connections in the name. And when you carefully avoid

names that stand out too much—or names that fit in too much—you're assessing your community's mores and targeting a role for your child in that community. If there is a red-blue split in cultural attitudes and self-image, names should be the perfect place to find it.

I began my hunt for the baby-name divide by devising a measure of the "redness" and "blueness" of names. My target was 2004, the year of the Bush-Kerry election that pushed red-blue commentary to new heights. I combined state-by-state voting percentages with state-by-state figures on the popularity of widely used names. If America is deep-down purple, there should be no discernible pattern. Names and votes shouldn't correlate.

So, do red and blue states name their babies differently? Oh, do they ever. Here are the reddest and bluest names in America.

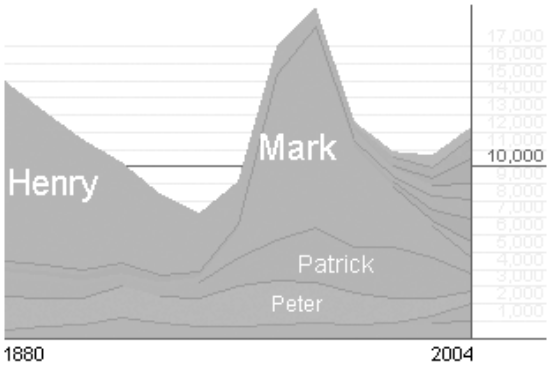
BLUEST (Democratic)		**REDDEST (Republican)**	
Girls	**Boys**	**Girls**	**Boys**
Charlotte	Peter	Aubrey	Preston
Gianna	Brendan	Mckenzie	Colton
Maya	Mark	Reagan	Conner
Jillian	Liam	Addison	Dalton
Angela	Henry	Abby	Gage
Sofia	Sebastian	Ashlyn	Kaleb
Sophie	Julian	Shelby	Peyton
Gabriela	Patrick	Gracie	Parker
Arianna	Jake	Kelsey	Carson
Amy	Colin	Ellie	Dakota
Margaret	Victor	Rylee	Landon
Catherine	Diego	Kylee	Tanner

Take a little time with those name lists. Form a mental image. Picture two families, one with kids named Henry, Margaret, and Peter, the other with Colton, Ashlyn, and Tanner. The cultural gulf is vast. And what is that gulf? Well, check out the positions of Patrick and Dakota. In the simplest terms, *progressives choose conservative names and conservatives choose progressive names.*

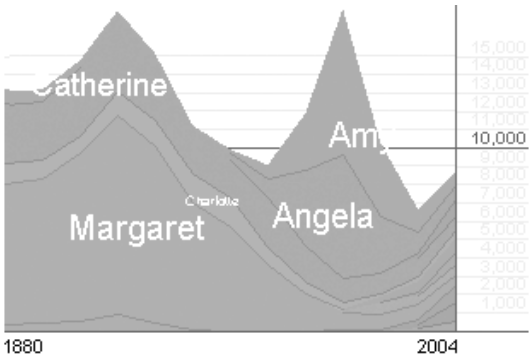
The names on the blue lists are firmly traditional. Most were in widespread use in America 50 and 100 years ago. Even the new names aren't exactly new, just new to us. Names like Brendan and Gabriela are perfectly traditional in other countries, and the impression they make in America is contemporary but rooted. As a group, the blue names are simply timeless. Have a look at their popularity history in the United States:

Blue name usage, per million babies born in the United States

BOYS



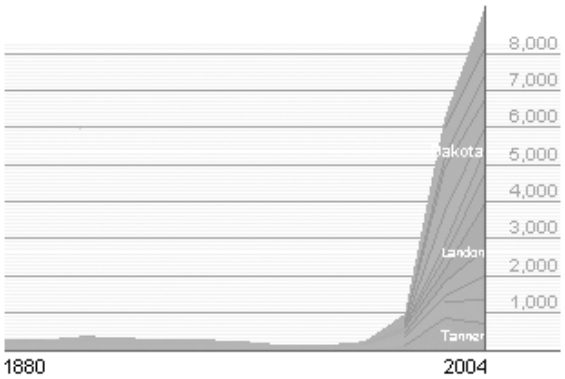
GIRLS



Those graphs may look bumpy, but in the roller-coaster realm of baby-name fashion they count as extraordinarily steady. For perspective, look no further than the red names:

Red name usage, per million babies born in the United States

BOYS



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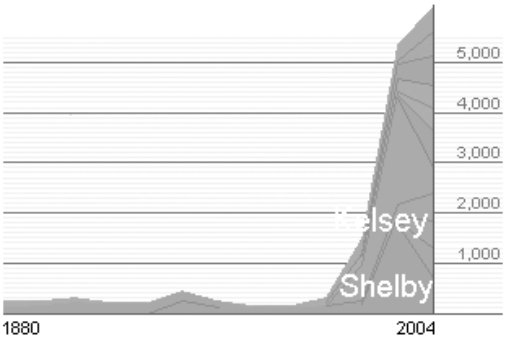

Where blue-state parents stick with tradition, red-staters are breaking with the past and making up style and culture on the fly.

It's not just a matter of fashion. Those dramatic graphs reveal a substantively different approach to names. For instance, red-state parents aren't using names as much to honor family tradition. We know that little Colton and Tanner aren't named after their grandfathers because those names scarcely existed in grandpa's day. (Red parents do, though, name after one father figure: former president Ronald Reagan. Reagan is the one name that we instantly recognize as politically conservative, so its prominence on the Red list is a good sign that the lists really are capturing a red-blue divide.)

The religious difference between the red and blue names is just as dramatic. The Democratic blue list is steeped in Christian tradition. Most of the blue names are names of saints and a good number have biblical roots, including Apostles Peter and Mark. The red list, in contrast, is strictly secular. It features just two names with biblical roots, the nickname Abby and the contemporary variant Kaleb. Notably, both are based on Old Testament names, while classic Christian names have always come from the New Testament. Not a single saint makes the red list.

Red-state parents are freer with gender identities in names, too. Half of the red names are androgynous, including unguessable gender-benders like Peyton and Dakota. Every name on the blue list has a crystal-clear gender assignment. Despite their phonetic similarity, Peyton and Peter suggest very different images of masculinity.

So do we have it all backwards? Are Pat Buchanan's keystones of social conservatism—distinct gender roles, maintaining cultural traditions, placing Christianity at the center of culture—actually the linchpins of liberalism? Not very likely. Republican voters remain much more ready to identify those values as their own. Some other variable, then, must be driving this naming difference between red and blue America.

One factor could be faith. Blue states have a greater proportion of Catholics, who would be expected to lean toward saint names. That could help propel names

like Diego and Patrick up the list, but most of the blue names (Henry, Amy, Maya, Jake) have no sectarian allegiance.

Another natural tack is to follow the money. The ten bluest states boasted a 20% higher per capita income than the ten reddest states in 2004. (Though paradoxically higher income *people* lean Republican; Bush claimed a strong majority of voters from households earning more than $100,000 a year.) But money can't explain the apparent flip-flop in baby-naming values, where blue-staters are the traditionalists. Isn't an affluent urban community supposed to make you into a liberal elite, not a cultural conservative?

Perhaps the problem is in our definition of "cultural conservatism." Culture, after all, isn't just about values. It's about style.

The name gap

Style divisions are easy to spot on the street or at the mall. At the time of the 2004 elections a stylistic conservative would have been listening to Ray Charles' *Genius Loves Company*, shopping for sweater sets, and heading to the movie theater to catch *Sideways*. Meanwhile the stylistic progressive loaded her iPod with the Black Eyed Peas' *Elephunk*, bought extra-low-cut jeans, and watched the horror-thriller *Saw*. Is that a division of values, class, or race? Perhaps somewhat. But the obvious thing separating the two of them is a generation.

Imagine that you see two groups of people on a street corner, one a cluster of teenagers, the other in their 30s. Look at the clothes each group is wearing and the way they carry themselves. Then imagine erasing the people themselves from the picture, leaving only the outfits and attitudes behind. Would the perceptible age difference disappear?

Chances are the generational divide would live on in the artifacts of the groups' tastes. The younger group would be radically casual, perhaps wearing clothes and using slang that would have seemed bizarre a decade before. Yet for all that inventiveness, as a group they'd look surprisingly similar. The older group's style is less date-stamped: contemporary versions of classic styles, with accessories that serve a function. That huge style difference arises within a single community from just a moderate age difference.

The same style contrast describes the red and blue baby names. If you look again at the red girls' names, you'll see that they're all either nicknames (Abby, Ellie) or surname-based inventions (Reagan, Rylee). The nicknames reflect youthful informality, the surnames a form of creativity within conformist boundaries. The blue names meanwhile are either contemporary glosses on familiar themes (Sofia, Liam), or American classics that forgo fashion for solidity (Peter, Margaret). A name like Peter with its ease of spelling, pronunciation and gender identification is as practical as a black briefcase with pockets for your keys and cell phone.

As with clothes and music, age begets name style. Blue state parents are more conservative baby namers because blue staters wait longer to have their babies.

The average age of a first-time mother in the United States is 24.9. 18 of the 19 states that voted for John Kerry average above that. And the more Democratic the community, the stronger the effect. When a New York City parenting magazine talked about tensions between older and younger parents in the city, they defined "younger" as *under 35*. Compare that to the typical 22-year-old moms in Arkansas and Mississippi and the new American divide starts to look like something old and familiar: a generation gap.

Economists know that maternal age is a reliable indicator of the economic and educational level of a community. Waiting to start a family is part of a self-reinforcing class cycle. Girls from educated, middle-and upper-class backgrounds are more likely to pursue higher education. Babies have to wait until that schooling is completed, and perhaps until the investment of time and money has paid off in a professional career. When the women finally do start families they're likely to be older than average, but also more financially secure. They can provide comfortable homes and good educational opportunities for their own children, starting the cycle anew.

You can see how political factors play into this maternal age cycle. Higher education, for instance, is a classic predictor of liberalism. A strict cultural conservatism, meanwhile—rejecting abortion, embracing traditional gender roles—would tend to lead you toward younger parenthood. A conservative community ends up with young moms and thus young-mom style, a liberal community with old-mom style.

That may make the age-based blue-red name divide look like nothing more than a reflection of the old standbys income and values. The style differences are so strong, though, that I'm not ready to write them off as a side effect. Remember that in the red/blue baby name choices, style and values are in direct opposition. Red *values* should lead to traditional, Christian-based, gender-specific names; red *style* (as shaped by age) should lead to contemporary inventions. Going head to head in a decision that parents take very seriously, style turns out to beat values by a mile. Perhaps it's worth unpacking the style-making variable of maternal age from the economic cycle and asking what effect it has in its own right.

Old mom, young mom

One of the most striking social differences between red and blue states is their rates of marital success. Massachusetts, pilloried as the "gay marriage state," is actually a leader in the strength of traditional marriage. The liberal bastion consistently records the lowest divorce rate of any state in America. The highest divorce rates, in turn, are found in the Bible belt and the Mountain West. This trend persists despite the conservative Christian values dominant in those regions...or perhaps because of them. Conservative Protestants have the highest divorce rate of any religious group while atheists and agnostics have the lowest, lower even than Roman Catholics whose religion does not recognize divorce.

A key reason, according to many studies, is age. Massachusetts, the lowest-divorce state, is also the state where people marry and have children the latest. That extra time gives parents a greater chance to establish financial stability, limiting some of the daily stresses than can damage relationships. The extra time also helps the partners get to know each other better to determine long-term compatibility.

Starting later also changes the shape of your family. Younger parents naturally have more children on average, which influences their choices and opportunities. Urbanites might stay in the city with child number one, but once two and three arrive city life becomes impractical and many head for greener pastures. Leisure and travel options also depend upon the number of seats that the family fills.

What it all adds up to is that the age when you have children isn't just one more variable in the cultural spreadsheet. It's your life story.

Becoming mom and dad

Having a first child is a defining event that divides your life into before and after. The whole shape of your daily life changes. You spend your time differently. You spend your money differently. Perhaps you move to a new community in search of a larger home or a better school system. Your social circle shifts, as you spend more time with people who share your new family-adjusted interests and options.

Even behaviors that we think of as values-based can be driven by this parental lifecycle. For instance, red-state residents are more likely to report that they attend worship services weekly, a cornerstone of the religion and values divide. But when do people attend church most? When it's time to introduce their children to the faith. Americans who are married with children are *twice* as likely to attend church weekly as their single, childless counterparts. It's "conservative" behavior, but a function of life stage as much as ideology.

Now consider how different a woman's life story will be if she steps over this parental divide at the age of 20 vs. 30. A typical 20-year-old mother hasn't yet established a career or completed a high level of education. She is likely to remain in the region where she grew up, close to family and childhood friends. She may turn increasingly to her religious congregation, both for her children's religious education and her own social support. If parenthood and church take these lead roles in her daily life from early on, they will naturally become pillars of her personal identity.

A typical 30-year-old first time mom, meanwhile, has spent a decade of adulthood establishing an identity apart from her family role. She is likely to have devoted herself to advanced education and a professional career. These pursuits may have moved her around the country, leaving her less connected to her local community. Her social circle is more likely to have formed within her professional and educational spheres. If the world sees her through her professional identity, that may be the way she sees herself too—even if she's now staying home with her baby.

A preponderance of 20- vs 30-year-old moms can shape the identity of a whole community. Most directly, it will influence young people's expectations for their own life stories. Parental age (and the associated difference in family sizes) may also affect philosophies of child-rearing and education. The effects can even spread outside of families to the community's business and social structure.

In a younger-mom town a lot of young adults spend their Sundays taking the kids to church. That helps establish a central role for the church in the community's social fabric. When the 20-somethings go out to eat it's a family affair, so the local restaurants and entertainment options lean heavily toward the family-friendly. In an older-mom town a lot of the (childless) 20-somethings head to brunch instead of church on Sundays. Dinner is late, entertainment options adult. In fact, a street life of restaurants, bars, cafes and performance spaces depends on a large population of childless young adults. Cities attract careerists with job opportunities, but those late-reproducing folks in turn enable the culture that defines city life.

For living laboratories of those lifestyles, consider America's reddest and bluest cities: Provo, Utah and Cambridge, Massachusetts. The two communities actually have a lot in common. They are almost exactly the same size, and both see their populations swell during the school year as college students swarm to schools like Harvard, MIT and Brigham Young. But Cambridge is a city of small, late-in-life families and Provo is the opposite. Cambridge ends up with three times as many art galleries, theater companies and sushi houses. Provo takes the lead in big-buffet restaurants, children's portrait studios and Baby Gap stores. The family lifecycle difference is woven into the fabric of the communities.

The widening gulf

To some extent, these differences have always existed. The suburbs were designed for families, city nightlife for singles. Parents have always bustled the kids to Sunday school while their single counterparts slept off their Saturday nights. Men from affluent, educated communities have always spent years pursuing education and careers. What has changed is women's pursuits—and the way those have changed varies from community to community.

In many areas young people head straight from secondary school into the local workforce. When that's the norm, opening jobs to women doesn't make a dramatic impact on the pacing of family lifecycles. Adulthood begins at the age of legal majority and parenthood is the next big step. In communities where college is the norm, though, life paths are taking new turns. Decades ago a budding young lawyer might have had children early, because he had a wife at home full time or simply because pregnancies were unpredictable. Today contraception is a surer bet…and our young male lawyer probably has a wife studying for the bar alongside him. That couple thinks about children, then pushes the thought aside for later.

In politics and moral judgments, the two communities may be no farther apart than they used to be. Their life stories are the place where the gulf is widening. In 1970, Arkansas and Mississippi had the youngest first-time mothers in America with an average age of 20. Connecticut, Massachusetts and New York were oldest with an average of 22, a difference of just two years. By 2000 those numbers stood at 22 and 27, a difference of *five* years.

That widening disparity represents a major difference in the lives of average families. It signals an even bigger difference at the extremes. The percentage of Democratic voters in a state correlates closely with the percentage of all births to mothers over 40. In places like Connecticut and Massachusetts the over-40 rate has passed 4%, and it's growing every year. The red-blue life story gap grows with it.

Perhaps it's no wonder that the Patrick and Dakota camps view each other with such incomprehension. That's always the case with old acquaintances whose lives have taken them in very different directions. And unlike a generation gap, a lifestyle gap isn't something you grow out of. To bridge a gap like that you have to look across the chasm and envision your own life as it might have been.