

THE CHRISTIAN RIGHT IN THE 1990s

By Ted G. Jelen and Clyde Wilcox

At the 1992 Republican National Convention, Pat Buchanan thundered that America was in the midst of a "cultural war," in which the core values of a "Jude-Christian tradition" were at stake. Other speakers highlighted the party's stand against legal abortion and laws protecting homosexuals, and seemed to imply that working women were less fit mothers than those who stayed in the home. Public airing of sentiments such as these have been widely regarded as serious political mistakes, and some analysts have argued that it may have been an important factor in Bush's loss.

The decade of the 1980s began with the public appearance of the Moral Majority, led by Baptist minister Jerry Falwell. Falwell claimed credit for the electoral victory of Ronald Reagan in 1980, and the defeat of several liberal Democratic Senators (such as George McGovern, Frank Church, and Birch Bayh) in that election.¹ Falwell declared that America was in fact a Christian nation, and sought political goals which would bring American politics into line with the values espoused by doctrinally conservative Christians. Later in that decade the Rev. Marion (Pat) Robertson mobilized some pentecostal and charismatic Christians behind his campaign for the presidency.

By the end of the decade, however, the Christian right appeared to be in disarray. Robertson's bid for the Republican presidential nomination in 1988 raised more money than any candidacy in American history, but failed to win a single primary election. Faced with declining direct mail revenues, Jerry Falwell first subsumed Moral Majority into a larger organization (the "Liberty Federation") and finally ended it altogether in 1989. Televangelists Jimmy Swaggert and Jim Bakker were publicly embroiled in personal scandals. After the defeat of George Bush in 1992, a number of Republican party officials, including Ronald Reagan,

suggested that the party should focus on its core issues of free-market economics, and stay away from the moral issues of the Christian right.

We argue that accounts of both the rise and decline of the movement which is sometimes called the New Christian Right (NCR) have been seriously exaggerated by political commentators. Although it has represented a potentially substantial constituency with impressive resources, it has never mobilized more than a small minority of its target audience. Conversely, despite a series of highly visible reverses, Christian right figures and issues retained a fairly constant level of support after 1988, and the Christian Coalition (a group nominally headed by Pat Robertson) now claims to have 450,000 dues-paying members. The NCR persists as an important force in American politics, with revised strategies, and with a greater appreciation of the limits under which a religious movement can operate in the United States.

An Incomplete Mobilization

Estimates of the popular strength of the NCR have varied enormously over the past fifteen years or so. Part of the problem is that many analysts have failed to distinguish between the movement's potential support and its actual number of members or sympathizers. The potential political support for the NCR is sizable. A number of NCR positions are quite popular among the mass public. For example, large proportions of Americans disapprove of homosexuality and pornography, favor school prayer and private school tax vouchers, and support sex education which emphasizes abstinence. Smaller, but still substantial, groups have serious reservations about abortion. A political movement capable of tapping supporters of such cultural conservatism would be formidable indeed. While such a coalition

of "traditionalists" would not constitute a majority of the American people, it could easily exceed 30% of the population.²

Similarly, if the NCR is considered a religious movement, its potential share of the population is quite impressive. Falwell and Robertson speak the language of evangelical Christianity which has many adherents. According to the 1988 General Social Survey, conducted by the National Opinion Research Center of the University of Chicago, approximately one white American in three belongs to a denomination considered "evangelical," regards the Bible as containing no errors, or reports having been "born-again." If we define "evangelical" as those who take a view of Scripture as inerrant, and report a born-again status, approximately 20% of white Americans so qualify. A somewhat larger percentage of African-Americans would meet these criteria, and many of them hold conservative positions on social issues.

Thus, leaders of the Christian right who would seek to mobilize doctrinally and culturally conservative Americans would seem to be plowing a fertile field. Yet the Christian right never succeeded in mobilizing its potential constituency. A number of studies which measure actual support for the NCR all converge on a common finding: Christian right leaders and organizations have been unpopular, even among evangelical Christians that comprise the potential constituency.

The most thoroughly studied Christian right organization has been Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority. Estimates of the "supporters" of Moral Majority (a larger group than actual, dues-paying members) have ranged from 4 to 10% of the American population.³ More tellingly, Moral Majority was evaluated negatively even by evangelical Christians who share

many of its political positions. Robertson's campaign also enjoyed only limited success. Although he succeeded in several Republican caucuses, where busing from local pentecostal churches allowed him to win because of generally low turnout, he failed to win a single presidential primary. Robertson's most spectacular failure occurred on Super Tuesday of 1988, when he lost every state in the "evangelical" South to Episcopalian George Bush.⁴

Impediments to Evangelical Mobilization

What might account for the failure of the Christian right to mobilize its potential constituency? For one thing, a large literature suggests that many Americans are quite capable of taking apparently "inconsistent" positions on a number of issues. This general finding becomes important when it is realized that Christian right leaders take positions on a wide range of issues, and that relatively few potential supporters share all or even most of these positions. For example, relatively few evangelicals take a strict, "pro-life" position on the abortion issue. Few perceive a strong connection between their religious beliefs and attitudes toward foreign policy, and many disapproved of Falwell's support for the white South African government. Several studies have shown that the economic conservatism of Falwell and Robertson is not shared by many evangelicals, who are actually slightly more liberal on issues of economic redistribution than the rest of the population. Thus, the very scope of the NCR political agenda may serve to discourage potential supporters.

A second consideration relates to the pervasive individualism of the American political culture. Most Americans seem quite comfortable with a distinction between "private" and "public" matters, and tend to confine religion to the former. For example, it is one thing to disapprove personally of abortion or homosexuality, and quite another to favor legal prohibition of the disapproved practice. Many evangelicals are quite comfortable with a distinction between "sins" and "crimes." The former constitute a private matter

between the individual and God, while the latter require recourse to civil authority. The private/public distinction, so pervasive in American politics, is reinforced by evangelical theology itself. Many evangelical ministers emphasize an individualistic theology, in which the believer's personal relationship with God supersedes temporal concerns such as politics or social reform. Some fundamentalist evangelicals have endorsed a concept of religious "separatism," in which authentically "Christian" people must remove themselves from the sinfulness of the world.

Denominational Splits

A third limitation on past efforts of the Christian right has been the problem of religious particularism, defined as a belief in the superiority of one's own narrowly-construed tradition or denomination. One important fault line within American Christianity has been the split between evangelical Protestants and Roman Catholics. While these two groups share positions on some political issues (e.g., an antipathy toward legal abortion), a potentially formidable evangelical Protestant/Roman Catholic "pro-life" coalition may have been held back by theological differences. Within evangelical Protestantism itself, theological differences have inhibited the full mobilization of the potential NCR constituency.

An important cleavage within conservative Protestantism has been the distinction between "fundamentalists" and "charismatics" or "pentecostals." Fundamentalists (such as Jerry Falwell) have emphasized the importance of Biblical inerrancy, while charismatics and pentecostals (such as Pat Robertson) have stressed the importance of spiritual gifts, such as faith healing, speaking in tongues, or the working of other miracles. While fundamentalists and charismatics share a belief in an inerrant Bible, fundamentalists have traditionally been quite skeptical of charismatic claims of spiritual gifts.

The effects of religious particularism appear to have inhibited the formation of evangelical coalitions among the general public and among political activists. For

example, a study of contributors to Republican candidates in 1988 suggests that neither Robertson nor Falwell was able to attract much support beyond their respective narrow bases of self-identified "charismatics" and "fundamentalists."⁵

Finally, some of the momentum which the NCR generated during the later 1970s and early 1980s may have dissipated as the result of the presidencies of Ronald Reagan and George Bush. The sense of cultural and spiritual crisis which Falwell was able to tap at the beginning of the 1980s had dissipated after twelve years of ostensible friends in the White House.

Retrenchment and Renewal

To the casual observer, the Christian right may appear to have entered a period of decline. The Robertson campaign was not particularly successful, Falwell has folded the tent of Moral Majority (perhaps temporarily), and George Bush was defeated by Bill Clinton in 1992. This last fact is most important, because many observers have attributed a substantial portion of the blame for Bush's defeat to the visible self-righteousness demonstrated by the NCR at the 1992 Republican National Convention.

However, a closer look at conservative religious activists suggests that writing the obituary of the New Christian Right may be premature. According to analyst Matthew Moen, religious conservatives have eschewed involvement with national political figures such as Falwell and Robertson in recent years, in favor of political involvement at the state and local level.⁶ Of particular interest is the Christian Coalition, which has focused primarily to date on training evangelicals to succeed in local political parties, county boards, and school boards.⁷

At the state level, the Coalition has sought to gain control of Republican party organizations, and so has acted as a party faction. Some journalists have estimated that the Christian Coalition has a working majority in 20 state Republican committees, and although this estimate is doubtlessly generous, it is clear that in many states battles are being fought for control

of the Republican party. Several national Republican figures have formed organizations to contest control of state party organizations by the Christian Coalition, and divisive battles have been fought in Houston, in Washington state, and in Oregon.

At the national level, the Christian Coalition has acted as an interest group, with a paid lobbyist and a demonstrated ability to generate a great deal of mail and many phone calls to Capital Hill. During the final weeks of January, 1993, the Christian Coalition flooded Congress with phone calls, telegrams, FAX messages, and mail opposing the elimination of the ban on gay soldiers in the military.

The tactics of the Christian Coalition suggest that leaders of the NCR have learned well the lessons of the 1980s. At the state and local level the organization serves as an umbrella for a decentralized collection of evangelical activists. In this way, the Christian Coalition may be able to avoid forcing activists to support positions on a wide variety of issues, and can encourage flexible, single-issue action in different settings. If, for example, school prayer is an issue in a particular community, Coalition activists do not need to risk fragmenting the alliance by taking positions on tax issues or women's rights. Moreover, although the Christian Coalition is associated with Robertson, the most visible spokesperson is Ralph Reed, a savvy and non-sectarian leader. By downplaying the religious affiliation of its leadership, the Coalition is in a position to minimize the fragmenting effects of religious particularism. Alliances among different denominations with similar policy goals may be formed as local conditions dictate.

Finally, the Clinton presidency may provide a focus for the political mobilization of evangelicals which was absent during the Reagan/Bush years. Clinton's

positions on gay rights, abortion, and school vouchers run directly contrary to the goals of the Christian right. Indeed Clinton's move to allow gays to serve in the military has facilitated fundraising by the Christian right, and doubtlessly spurred more organizational activity as well.

Conclusion

This analysis demonstrates both the strengths and weaknesses of the Christian right in the final decade of the twentieth century. Conservative Christians don't have the resources to dominate the American political agenda, as was thought by some to be the case in the early 1980s. The political resources of the NCR, while impressive, are nevertheless intrinsically limited. Although it is a relatively new organization, the Christian Coalition appears to have relatively bright prospects for success precisely because its leaders appear aware of the inherent limits to the organization's influence, and seem prepared to operate within those limits. Yet to date the Christian Coalition has operated far from the public spotlight, and unlike the Moral Majority of the 1980s, few Americans are aware of its existence or its goals.

A politically-active, conservative Christian constituency seems well entrenched in American politics, especially at the state and local level. The Christian Coalition and other sympathetic groups have recruited a number of new, religiously-motivated activists for involvement in local affairs and state-level Republican politics. These activists will doubtless have an impact on candidate recruitment in 1994, and a major voice in the race for the Republican presidential nomination in 1996.

Endnotes:

¹The actual impact of evangelical Christians on the outcome of the 1980 elections remains a matter of some dispute. See Seymour Martin Lipset and Earl Raab, "The Election and the

Evangelicals," *Commentary*, Vol. 71, 1981, pp. 25-31.

²John H. Simpson, "Moral Issues and Status Politics" in Robert C. Liebman and Robert Wuthnow (editors) *The New Christian Right: Mobilization and Legitimation* (New York: Aldine, 1983), pp. 188-207.

³See Emmett Buell and Lee Sigelman, "An Army That Meets Every Sunday?: Popular support for Moral Majority in 1980," *Social Science Quarterly* Vol. 66, 1985, pp. 426-434; Clyde Wilcox, "Popular support for Moral Majority in 1980: A Second Look," *Social Science Quarterly* Vol. 68, 1987, pp. 157-167; and Lee Sigelman, Clyde Wilcox, and Emmett Buell, "An Unchanged Minority: Popular Support for the Moral Majority in 1980 and 1984," *Social Science Quarterly* Vol. 68, 1987, pp. 876-884.

⁴It should be noted that although the popular support for NCR organizations was never particularly high, it was quite stable, and persisted even in the face of reverses suffered by Christian right leaders. See Clyde Wilcox, "Lingering Support for the Christian Right," paper presented at the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, April, 1991, Chicago.

⁵Ted G. Jelen and Clyde Wilcox, "The Effects of Religious Self-Identifications on Support for the New Christian Right: An Analysis of Political Activists," *Social Science Journal* Vol. 29, 1992, pp. 199-210. It must be noted that among our activist sample, there was little evidence of strong antipathy toward Robertson among fundamentalists, or Moral Majority among charismatics. However, there was no evidence of evangelical support for either NCR organization across these relatively narrow theological traditions.

⁶Matthew C. Moen, *The Transformation of the New Christian Right* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1992).

⁷Mark O'Keefe, "Evangelical Rally to Thwart Clinton: Grass-roots Campaign is Under Way," *Chicago Tribune*, January 29, 1993, Section 2, p. 10.

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