

The Politics of "Moral Values": From Status Group Conflict to Party-Movement Electoral Maintenance System

Steven Brint, Wayne E. Baker, and Seth Abrutyn

Sociological explanations of moral-values politics in American political life have emphasized status group conflict between traditionalist white Protestants and urban ethnic groups. In this paper, we argue that these explanations, however valid for earlier periods of conflict, no longer provide an adequate explanation for contemporary divisions and conflicts on moral values. We argue that over the last 25 years, moral-values politics has become institutionalized as a regular feature of political party organization. We show that, while moral-values have not been decisive in recent presidential elections, they are an anchor tying white, church-going Protestants (and increasingly also church-going Catholics) to the Republican Party. We develop a model of relations between the Republican Party, Christian social movement organizations, and the conservative Christian social base. We show that moral-values issues, judged from the perspective of the Republican Party, divide into three types: contentious, but winnable issues; exploitable consensus issues; and unwinnable issues. We discuss variation in Republican Party rhetoric and strategy related to these three issue categories. In the conclusion of the paper, we argue that American national identity has been built on two sources of strength: Protestant asceticism and Enlightenment liberalism. We discuss the current tensions between Protestant asceticism and Enlightenment liberalism in the arena of "moral values" and how these two cultural strands could be reconnected in the future.