

“Moral-Values Issues and Political Party Organizations”

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Religious conservatives have become part of the fabric of American political life over the past 25 years. Perhaps the most tangible and enduring result of the movement's presence in the American political arena is the effect its influence has had upon the Republican party in all its incarnations. In the past decade, we have seen this most dramatically at the state level. A growing body of research has shown the significant influence that religious conservatives exert in the Republican parties of many states. Notwithstanding popular accounts to the contrary, the influence of religious conservatives in Republican politics ebbs and flows along the traditional lines of party coalitions, public personalities, and political opportunity structures; the movement rarely takes over a state party wholesale. Most state Republican parties are now populated with religious conservatives and their fellow-travelers, more traditional Republicans who find the movement's efforts to build the party useful and its focus on moral values issues to be compatible with if not useful for the party's goals. How has this compromise come about? Through extended periods of deep conflict and the mastery of a significant learning curve by most religious conservative Republicans. This paper addresses this co-evolution of movement and state-level party. It attempts to analyze the difference the influence of religious conservatives makes to political party organizations themselves, and how both Republican and Democrat state parties have responded to the growing focus on moral values. Drawing on interviews with state party leaders and political activists from all over the country, as well as several national surveys of political observers and activists, this paper examines the dynamics of conflict and accommodation within state parties, focusing specifically on how Republicans have made peace with the religious conservative insurgents in their midst. Further, as Democrats seek to counter Republican successes of the past decade in states all over the country, the paper addresses the specific challenges to state Democratic parties as they look for ways to solve their "God problem."