

***Moral Values Issues and Political Party Organizations: Cycles of Conflict
and Accommodation of the Christian Right in State-level Republican
Parties***

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**Prepared for the *Christian Conservative Movement and American Democracy*
Conference. New York, New York. April 27-29, 2007**

The Christian Right has become a leading factor in Republican politics in the United States over the past 25 years. Perhaps the most tangible and enduring result of the movement's presence is the effect its influence has had in state level Republican parties. The movement is active in nearly every state and in many states exerts significant influence on the Republican party through grassroots mobilization and party personnel. Contrary to popular accounts, however, the movement rarely takes over a party wholesale. The influence of the Christian Right in Republican politics ebbs and flows along the traditional lines of policy environment, party coalitions, and public personalities. The relationship among the movement and state parties demonstrates cycles of conflict and accommodation, similar to the fluctuations that any party faction experiences as a normal part of their political life.

At the most basic level, fluctuations in Christian Right influence in state Republican parties is based on the character of the parties themselves. Whatever their other goals and roles in society, political parties exist to win elections. This is the motivation behind the vast majority of the behavior of both the party as an organization and of the people within it. Thus, whatever it takes to win any given election is what will shape the party's needs at that time. Policy environment, party coalitions, and political personalities are the outgrowth – the measurable result – of the election imperative. The Christian Right causes conflict, or engenders accommodation, most directly by their role in the Republican party's electoral coalition. This role is rarely unambiguous, however, and one of the movement's challenges is to continue to not only make a difference for the party in elections but to convince the party of the necessity of the movement to

Republican victories. In states where movement activists form large portions of the party's leadership cadre, this is not a difficult task. But in most states, the Christian Right operates as part of a political coalition within the Republican party and must continually fulfill their responsibilities to the rest of the coalition. The movement's fluctuating ability to do that is impacted by the policy environment, political coalition, and public personalities within the party.

In this chapter, we will observe in greater detail how this process of conflict and accommodation between the Christian Right and the Republican party takes place. Based on previous research on the movement and party politics, and on national survey research and interviews with over 100 political observers across the country, I offer a preliminary explanation of fluctuation in influence we observe in the relationship among the Christian Right and state Republican parties. First, I will examine how the Christian Right seeks influence in the Republican party and how the party responds. Then I will look at the subsequent relationship between the movement and party, focusing on how the movement navigates a state's policy environment, how it operates as a coalition member within the party, and how public personalities impacts the relationship between movement and party. Next, I turn to how the Republican party is changed by the presence of the Christian Right movement and how activists are assimilated into its ranks. Finally, we look at how the Democrats have begun to deal the issue of faith and values voters at the state level.

History and Previous Research

Other scholars have explored the history of the movement in great depth, particularly in regard to national level politics (Cromartie 2001; Diamond 1998; Martin 1996; Moen 1992; Oldfield 1996; Wilcox 2006). Here, I offer a more focused review of our current knowledge concerning the relationship among the Christian right movement and state level Republican parties. While much of the work is state specific, there is a growing recognition of the need to examine the movement across the states in order to more clearly understand the dynamics of conflict and accommodation exhibited within Republican parties.

Christian Right influence in state Republican parties is widespread, and there is anecdotal evidence from nearly every state concerning the movement's activities and goals concerning the Republican party. In many states, the movement has achieved at least a moderate degree of power within the party, the impact seen as early as the early 1980s (Bohannon, Buckley, and Osborne 1984). However, scholars did not set out to measure Christian Right influence directly until the mid 1990s. Early estimates of movement influence (Persinos 1994) suggested that the movement had significant influence in Republican parties in 18 states. In 2000, the movement held at least moderate power in 43 states (Conger and Green 2002), and in 2004, that number was 38 (Conger forthcoming). While it is clear that the meaning and impact of that influence varies among the states and their political and social contexts, it is also clear that the Christian Right is a force to be considered, if not reckoned with, in many state's Republican parties.

But measuring influence in the party does not explain how the movement seeks influence or how it uses the influence it has; arguably more important issues. A series of edited volumes have tackled this problem, probing the history and inner workings of the Christian Right and the Republican party at the state level (Green, Rozell, and Wilcox 2000, 2003, 2006; Rozell and Wilcox 1995, 1997). In each, a variety of scholars offer rich and detailed case studies of the Christian Right in states where the movement has had some success in influencing state politics. These studies provide us with a strong picture of the Christian Right and its role in the politics of each state; the prominent personalities, controversies, and overall political context are covered in gratifying detail. Reading these volumes gives a strong impression of the variety and diversity of movement goals and strategies across the country. But, the overarching message of these volumes – covering elections from 1994 to 2004 – is that while the movement has been largely successful in becoming a player in state politics and state Republican parties, it has not had great success in implementing its policy goals.

These studies have provided a wealth of detailed and comprehensive information about the role of the Christian Right in state Republican parties and politics. Another important question, however, is how the movement varies across the states and the reasons behind this variation. John C. Green, James L. Guth and Clyde Wilcox (1998) suggest that in states where the movement is large and well organized and faces a party system that allows for insurgency, the movement is able to wield significant influence. Further research backs up this assessment (Conger forthcoming) and suggests that movement leadership and the openness of the Republican party play a key role in the movement's ability to influence public policy.

Interestingly, research outside the religion and politics area suggests that how the party responds to outside groups makes an impact on the fluctuations in Christian Right activity within the party. Baer and Bositis (1986) suggest that social movements like the Christian Right have given new life and purpose to American party organizations. The authors point to the movement providing the party with a new reason to exist, an ideological core, and cadres of volunteers and activists to revitalize the party organization and functions. Thus, it seems clear that parties with more limited resources or greater needs for internal renewal will be more receptive to movement activity, while those parties with more extensive resources will likely resist the movement more vigorously. Conflict may occur in either case, but the outcome of the conflict and the final shape of compromise is affected by these factors.

The previous research on the Christian Right and its relationship with the Republican party demonstrates both the power and perseverance of the movement over time. It further shows that the movement behaves differently in each state in which it seeks influence over Republican politics. Building from that perspective, we now turn to examine the reasons for the cycles of conflict and accommodation so evident in earlier research.

The Process of Influence

While the Christian Right has its roots in national politics in the late 1970s and 1980s, it has had its most noticeable effects at the state level. This focus grew out of a realization in the late 1980s that national activity was not particularly successful for the movement. Although Ronald Reagan was a convinced conservative, his commitment to

the causes and issue of the Christian Right was little more than lip-service. As activists began to realize the true dearth of policy change produced by their national activity, Pat Robertson decided to run for the Republican presidential nomination against then-Vice President George H. W. Bush. Robertson was largely unsuccessful in his quest, but his campaign was very successful in mobilizing grassroots Christian conservatives in politics, and particularly Republican politics. At the end of Robertson's campaign, he formed the Christian Coalition, a national organization made up almost entirely of existing state level Christian Right organizations. Further, Robertson encouraged his former supporters to take their fight to the states, to run for state and local offices and to seek leadership positions within each state's Republican party (May 1988; Edsall 1995).

Thus began the Christian Right's foray into the realm of Republican state party politics. The movement and its activists sought for openings in the system and ways that the party could be influenced. In some states, the movement sought to take over the party wholesale, rarely with full success. In others, the simple presence of large numbers of Evangelicals proved to be the basis for movement activity. As changes in the subculture made it more acceptable and even praiseworthy to pursue politics as a means of societal change, more and more Evangelicals became mobilized. In many cases, activists began with involvement in the pro-life movement and then transitioned into the party or other movement activities. One of the clearest cases of a broad base of Evangelicals forming the motivation for the movement to be involved in Republican politics was the revitalization of Republican party organizations in the South. Many scholars and observers credit the movement with this change (Oldfield 1996; Menendez 1996; Moen 1992). While the South's movement into the Republican camp was a gradual process,

starting most notably with voting in presidential elections, by the mid-1990s, Republicans were being elected to all levels of state office in most parts of the South. Not insignificantly, Republican party organizations at the both the local and state level had new influxes of grassroots support around the same time. As Christian Right activists discovered that the Republican party organization was useful to the movement, they became more involved and built stronger parties.

In other states, there are specific catalytic events that spur the Christian Right to seek influence in the state's Republican party. Local issues like textbook adoption and city zoning ordinances tended to spur on earlier generations of activists. These were situations where concerned individuals basically built a movement to try to change public school policies, particularly in literature classes or in science and biology classes. Later activists were catalyzed primarily by the early years of the Clinton administration whose policies were considered extremely liberal and who brought to the fore issues like gays in the military and universal health coverage that would pay for abortions. In each case, movement activists saw state Republican parties as the most effective way to seek access to state policy making. Control of or influence in the party gives the movement access to a wide variety of elected and appointed officials with which activists would otherwise have to build individual relationships. The party gives the movement more bang for its buck and the Christian Right has sought to take advantage of that all over the country.

This search for openings in the party continues today and helps us examine the cycles of conflict and cooperation between the movement and the party. Republican parties respond to the movement's desire to use the party as a vehicle for their political goals in a variety of different ways. In some cases, the party has welcomed the Christian

Right as a coalition member because of the resources the movement brings to the table—particularly grassroots mobilization. In many cases, however, the advent of the Christian Right in party politics has caused significant conflict within the party. Generally speaking, state parties that are weak are more likely to welcome the movement, while parties that are strong are more likely to try to rebuff the movement's advances. In any case, the movement's quest for party influence seems to alter the party whatever the outcome as strong and weak parties alike respond to the changes the movement brings.

Conflict and Accommodation

There is no single model of the movement's experience across the states. In some states, primarily in the South, the movement has revitalized Republican politics, and gained significant and long-term access to state party decision-making. In other states, the movement has met with strong and coordinated opposition wherever it looked within the party. In many of those states, the movement has turned to other avenues of political influence, primarily the state legislature. In most states, however, the movement has achieved a moderate level of influence through a variety of means and we can observe how the fortunes of the Christian Right have ebbed and flowed over the past 20 years. In these states, the movement has at times caused conflict, but has consistently made peace with the party and remains part of its base coalition. To a great degree, observers point to the role of Christian Right activists being assimilated into the party as a factor in this process of conflict and accommodation. Most importantly, the movement's success fluctuates based on the policy environment in the state, the coalition of ideas that make up that party, and the political personalities that dominate Republican politics in a state.

A state's policy environment consists of the underlying conservatism or liberalism of the population, and the issues that are important to voters. Some of these issues are perennial and specific to the state, others are linked to larger national trends or new events or circumstances in a state. In any case, the Christian Right movement is a product of the state in which it operates, so its relationship with the Republican party will be impacted by the important issues current in the states' politics.

The changing nature of the policy environment—in one election cycle, taxes will be the dominant issue, while in the next it will be stem cell research—is a driving force behind the cycles of conflict and accommodation between the Christian Right and the Republican party that we observe. Parties from time immemorial have faced these conflicts as new issues and larger political conflicts have given new leaders and new factions power within the system. The Christian Right seems to have the ability to be the dominant party player in situations where the movement's primary issues are important in a state's current situation. But as economic issues become more dominant, the movement tends to recede in power as other, primarily business interests are better able to steer the Republican party toward success.

For example, the Christian Right has been largely non-existent in the Northeast, particularly in states like Massachusetts that have a strong tradition of secularization and Democratic politics. But the policy environment in the state changed radically in November 2003, when the state Supreme Court ruled that the state's constitution prohibited officials from denying marriage licenses to same-sex couples. While observers in other states had suggested that the issue would become an important one in the future, no one was sure from which state the challenge would come. The

Massachusetts Supreme Court gave the state six months to rewrite state law in line with its decision; the state legislature failed to do so, with a proposed constitutional amendment that banned same-sex marriage but permitted civil unions failing to receive enough support. Same-sex marriages have been taking place in the state since mid-2004. Another constitutional amendment campaign was launched by the religious conservative Massachusetts Family Institute in 2004. With help from the national Family Research Council, the group was able to collect the required number of signatures to place the amendment before the constitutional convention. Looking to capitalize on this issue, Republican governor Mitt Romney tried to move the Republican party in a more conservative direction, hoping to use family values as a wedge issue in the fall campaigns. While the party was not officially a sponsor of the marriage amendment, some anecdotal evidence suggests that the party partnered with the coalition that was trying to pass the amendment in order to attract more voters.

Currently, legislative wrangling and the uncertain status of the constitutional amendment make the future of same-sex marriage in Massachusetts unclear. But what is clear is that the Christian Right emerged to fight same-sex marriage in a state where the movement had had no profile previously. The Massachusetts family institute is a chapter of the national Family Research Council and was started with its help. But the organization seems to have taken on a life of its own as conservatives and Christian Right supporters in the state feel threatened enough to act, even in small numbers. The policy environment in Massachusetts changed significantly, almost overnight. This provides dramatic proof for the fact that the policy environment changes the way that the movement and party interact. In Massachusetts, Christian Right issues suddenly became

highly important and visible and thus the Republican party needed to account for this by accommodating a group that had largely caused conflict within its ranks in the past.

The role of the policy environment can be less dramatic, but no less important in other states. In Minnesota, Republicans followed national trends in the early 1990's, nominating a very strong Christian Right supporter, Alan Quist, for governor. While the state party organization opposed Quist, he won the nomination through the Republican caucus system and the party was forced to deal with his candidacy and supporters through the election. Many Christian Right activists became involved in party politics in response to his candidacy, particularly at the local levels. Thus, movement supporters gained positions of power in the party over the next 10 years. But economic issues came to the fore very significantly in the later 1990s as voters chose Jesse Ventura, an independent, as governor. The Christian Right began to lose power in the Republican party in Minnesota at this point because the perception was that voters were not responding to the movement's issues. Thus, a more socially moderate and economically conservative portion of the party coalition came to the fore in the early 2000s. Yet, as "values voters" began to focus again on social issues, the Republicans nominated and elected Tim Pawlenty governor, a man with a long history as a Christian Right supporter. Thus Minnesota's experience demonstrates how the policy environment surrounding the Christian Right and Republican party, and how voters react to that environment, significantly affect the relationship between party and movement.

As Minnesota's example demonstrates, the policy environment can affect part of the internal make up of the Republican party, namely, the coalition of interests that makes up the Republican party. The Republican party is generally made up of coalitions of

people who represent varying ideologies. In many states, the party contains both big and small business conservatives who are more concerned with economic than social issues. These business conservatives are less socially conservative than the Christian Right and see the movement as a threat to the party's ability to attract supporters across the wide spectrum of economic conservatives. Further, many parties, particularly in the West, have libertarian factions that are completely opposed to the kind of social control policy necessary to implement many of the Christian Right movement's policy goals. A Republican party's internal coalition depends both on the spectrum of voters' opinions within a state and the past experience of various coalition members' success in turning out those voters. The Christian Right was generally a newcomer to the party coalition mix in the 1980s, but has established itself as a legitimate member of the coalition in nearly every state. However, conflict still occurs and the movement must figure out how best to create influence in sometimes hostile situations.

The Republican party coalition in Arizona provides a good example of the way the movement navigates its attempts at influence in a hostile environment. The party is made up of traditional business conservatives, a strong libertarian faction, and social conservatives made up of both Christian Right and Mormon factions. The movement, while successful in filling local party committees in some areas of the state, is largely left out of Republican party organizational considerations. Even though the large numbers of Evangelical and Mormon voters in the state make socially conservative issues important in many election contests, the presence of a strong libertarian faction both in the party and in the electorate have made it almost impossible for the movement to exert significant power within the party. Even with one of their own winning the gubernatorial

nomination in 2004 – Len Munsil was the former director of the Christian Right Arizona Policy Institute – most observers believe it was a gesture to keep the movement in the party, not a real accommodation by the organization. The sitting Democratic governor, Janet Napolitano, was widely expected to win regardless of the Republican candidate.

In a similar way to the internal party coalitions, the importance of certain public personalities within the Republican party impact the Christian Right's ability to gain a place at the table. There are strong and famous people whose presence and opinions shape the Republican parties in their states. While in every state the Republican party has identifiable centers of influence, these individuals are overwhelming in their sway over the tenor and direction of party politics in their states. In many cases, these strong leaders are statewide elected officials, usually either governor or a senator. A Republican governor usually holds somewhat unique power because of her role in helping to choose the Republican party's state chair person. But other elected officials and even long-time party workers can have the level of personal popularity or notoriety that allows them to have special impact on the Republican party and its politics. These people tend to be wild cards in the calculations of the Christian Right. Their high profile personalities can be incredibly helpful to the movement if the individual proves supportive of the movement. However, the opposite is also true. They can be a significant hindrance if the individual is personally antagonistic or supports another faction within the party.

Again, Arizona provides the best example of this type of impact by a political personality on the fortunes of the movement in the Republican party. Barry Goldwater was seen as the quintessential libertarian conservative by many in the Republican party. His unsuccessful run for president in 1964 was the catalyst for a new conservative

movement in the United States, one which bore fruit with Ronald Reagan's election to the presidency in 1980. Goldwater is an Arizona native and he cast a long shadow over the politics of the state and the Republican party for many years. While Goldwater was certainly a conservative, at least in the libertarian sense, he had no great esteem for the Christian Right and opposed its incursion in to the politics of Republican party in Arizona. He even came out publicly against a proposed popular referendum banning abortion in 1992, airing television commercials opposing the measure. His opposition was instrumental in defeating the referendum and his influence on the Republican party to this day has hindered the movement in its quest for influence.

Thus we can see how particular public political personalities have the ability to shape the processes of conflict and accommodation between the Christian Right and Republican party. These processes of conflict and accommodation cause fluctuations in the ability of the Christian Right to exert influence in the Republican party at the state level. But a focus purely on the ways in which policy environment, internal party coalitions, and public personalities shape the processes of conflict and accommodation between the movement and party masks a larger, longer term phenomenon observable in the relationship between the Christian Right and Republican party. Over time, Christian Right activists have been assimilated into the Republican party organization. This has changed both the activists and the party to the extent that both the party and movement are distinctly different – some would say stronger – for their interaction.

Assimilated Activists and a More Conservative Party

As any type of political activist becomes more familiar with an organization over time, they come to understand the rules of the game and begin to feel as though they are part of the organization. In this way political organizations perpetuate themselves and train new leaders. This same process has helped to transform many Christian Right activists into party regulars; people who have moved up within the party organization and now inhabit positions of authority. Being involved in party politics has moderated their tactics, if not their policy goals. Many begin to act like Republican activists first, and Christian Right activists second. As we can imagine, this transformation has significant implications for both the Christian Right movement and the Republican party. It has made the movement more pragmatic, and the state parties more conservative. This process has occurred over time and has been noted by scholars (Moen 1992) and on the ground observers alike. My brief analysis of activists assimilation is based on data from two sources: a 2004 survey of Christian Right Activists (for details of the survey, see Green, Conger, and Guth 2006), and interviews I conducted with over 100 political observers in 13 states over the past 6 years. These observers consisted of Christian Right activists, Republican and Democratic party leaders, political consultants, members of the media, and academics.

In state Republican parties all over the country, Christian Right activists were mobilized into the party for a variety of reasons, starting with Pat Robertson's run for president. In most other states, Robertson activists were seen by state parties as a new grassroots resource on which to draw, and movement supporters began to wield influence in the party by their involvement in day to day party functions like voter identification

and fund raising. This process continued through the early 1990s, reaching a peak between 1992 and 1994, as Christian Right activists were motivated by the actions of the early Clinton administration to seek real power change in Washington. As these Christian Right activists became more involved in party politics, their sometimes more radical stances were moderated, at least outwardly. There is significant evidence that participation in the party taught Christian Right activists the logics of compromise and long-term goals, something clearly missing from many earlier attempts to change public policy. So the assimilation of Christian Right activists into the Republican party has been an important process in the evolution and development for the group as a whole.

A 2004 survey of Christian Right activists offers some evidence of the degree of assimilation that exists. Of the 612 respondents to the survey, 110 or 18%, currently serve in party leadership positions, while 136 or 22% have served in party leadership in the past. While there clearly is overlap among these groups, it seems likely that at least a quarter of the respondents to the survey have been or are currently part of the leadership structure of the Republican party. We can reasonably assume that the same proportion of the general population of Christian Right activists are involved in Republican politics. This suggests a significant portion of movement activists are successful in achieving leadership positions within the Republican party. And it further suggests that many of these activists are being moderated by their experiences with compromise and coalition building within the party structure.

The qualitative evidence for the assimilation of Christian Right activists into the Republican party is much broader than the existing quantitative evidence. Throughout the lifecycle of the movement, scholars and journalists have noted the differences in

newly minted activists and those who have been involved in politics, especially party politics, for a long time. One observer notes,

“You’ve got the religious conservative protestant Evangelical who is politically active and becoming more sophisticated politically over time. You see those folks a lot in positions of leadership; they’re elected officials, party leaders, that sort of thing.”

Further, there seems to be generational differences among activist strategy and goals. Activists mobilized at earlier times in the movement’s history exhibit more amateur “true-believer” behavior, while those mobilized later seem to be more professional politically. Finally, in almost every case, as activists be move into positions of authority within the Republican party, the ways in which they talk about the movement and its goals changes. They are much more likely to use the language of family and traditional conservative values than that of religious beliefs and moral values.

Many political observers believe that it is the experience of party politics and its attendant necessity of compromise and political expediency that transform movement activists into regular party participants. One Christian Right activist explains it this way,

“At least through the Robertson era I had that stigma as one of those far-right-wing kooks, but now some things have evolved and a lot of us I guess are being more perceived as...they know we’re [conservative on the] issues but at least we can talk to and work with. And to me, that’s not a bad deal.”

Another notes:

“What I’ve seen in the fifteen years or so there, is the ones that have stayed in have become more sophisticated as to expectations of working with the moderate wing of the party....”

These quotes demonstrate that movement activists are changed by their involvement in the Republican party. As they are assimilated into its ranks, they become more knowledgeable about the political process and are able to shift their strategies to be

more effective in the political arena. Most activists claim not to have changed their policy opinions, but only their tactics. Many explain the process as learning that politics are not an “all-or-nothing” enterprise, but one of small changes over time. A significant portion of the assimilation into the party and its norms comes about as movement activists learn more about the political process and how to be successful in it. Several activists pointed out that in order to be successful in promoting their policy positions, they had to learn the internal structure of the party and how best to operate within it. The very success of many Christian Right activists in becoming part of the leadership structures within state Republican parties demonstrate individuals’ ability to internalize the norms of the party and assimilate into the system.

It is also clear that there is generational change within the movement and this has made it easier for younger activists to assimilate into the Republican party structure. There is a significant difference in the goals and strategies of the younger, newer activists I interviewed from the older activists who had been involved in politics and the Republican party for longer. Most of the younger activists were very conscious of public perceptions of the movement, that the Christian Right is too conservative, too strident, and too powerful. Many took great pains to demonstrate their Republican or traditional conservative bona fides. When asked specifically about the movement and its impact on their own issues and behavior, most agreed with many of the larger movement’s goals, but not its tactics. They were to a person pro-life, anti-gay marriage, and pro-moral values in public life. But they were also much more likely to cite incremental goals as opposed to proposing sweeping changes in society and politics.

For example, older activists seem to worry that any acknowledgement of abortion through regulation helped to uphold Roe vs. Wade. One said, “Well, I just can’t be in favor of [regulating abortion clinics] because that will be the state’s legitimizing the abortion practice.” Younger activists, however seem to be much more comfortable with incremental change and limited goals, voicing the opinion that the all or nothing strategy has had little impact. On this issue, one activist remarks, “Look, there’s a way. We’re sort of the next generation; let’s actually try to advance the ball. Let’s stay on the ground, but do it in a wise manner.”

Most strikingly, many younger activists are somewhat loath to see themselves as part of the Christian Right movement. While many activists are uncomfortable with the label, finding it to be pejorative, these activists are more inclined to think of themselves as evangelical Republicans and not members of a movement. This seems to signal a larger shift in the movement overall, as those activists involved in the party are more comfortable with the practical politics it entails. The party itself is changing as well, which may explain part of this identity shift by some younger activists. Overall, there seems to be a demonstrable shift in the goals and strategies of the movement over time. Clearly some of these changes have been the result of the movement’s focus on state level politics, as movement activists spend more time seeking policy change in the most effective ways they can, through the Republican party. The party’s need to win elections has also rubbed off on many parts of the movement both within and outside the party. As a whole, the movement seems to be more focused on practical policy change and the ability to govern than it was in earlier incarnations. These changes in the individual activists and the younger generations of activists have had an impact on the movement,

sometimes bifurcating it into factions of those willing to work within politics and those who find purity of purpose more important than incremental change. But it is also clear that the movement activists who are working within the party have changed the party as well.

The Republican party is certainly different and probably stronger for its interaction with the Christian Right. Almost to a person, Republican leadership not affiliated with the Christian Right point to the role the movement has played in revitalizing grassroots politics in the party. This is both in terms of local level Republican politics and in the vast quantities of volunteers necessary to run political campaigns. Most speak with high regard for the movement's ability to provide these services for the party, even if their own ideological leanings do not mesh with the movement's. This influx of volunteers at all levels of the party has impacted not only the party's strategy, but also its policy program. State parties in which the Christian Right plays a significant role have moved to the right over the past 20 years. It is very rare to find a party that does not endorse a pro-life position or support local control of public schools. While some long-time Republican activists are uncomfortable with these shifts, many see them as inevitable as the party seeks to solidify its relationship with what has become the backbone of their voter base, rural and suburban Evangelicals.

These changes in the party are consonant with our theoretical understanding of the evolution of parties as well. In addition to a party's core purpose to win elections, parties need to have an ideological reason for being. In a sense, they need to provide some sort of program. Many scholars have felt that parties have deteriorated into purely candidate service organizations with little role in shaping the larger political conversation in the

United States. But some scholars have seen the advent of social movements in both parties as a way to give parties a reason for existence (Baer and Bositis 1986). The relationship between the Christian Right movement and the Republican party, particularly at the state level, bears this out. It is clear that the movement has in many ways returned an ideological dimension to the Republican party as well as providing needed resources, and the party has given the movement legitimacy. Ultimately, while there are clear and demonstrable fluctuations in the relationship, the movement has made itself a permanent player in Republican party politics for the foreseeable future.

The Democrats and Moral Values Voters

The Christian Right's relationship with the Democratic party can be generously described as conflicting. But that has not shielded the Democrat party from its share of controversy over social and moral issues. The phenomenon of the "moral values voter," identified in the aftermath of the 2004 election is significant as much for its impact on Democrats as for its explanation of the Bush victory. Increasingly, the Democrats have been identified as having a "God Problem" (Bolce and DeMaio 2002, Smith 2006). The party is seen as being uncomfortable with religion, at best, and at worst as hostile to it. This perception can be a problem in a country where more than 80% of the population believes in God. The Democratic party has a much higher proportion of seculars, those with no religious beliefs, than does the Republican party, but still the majority of Democrats hold some religious beliefs.

This image of a "Godless" Democratic party has only been reinforced by the statements of the several of the party's recent presidential candidates. Most exhibited

discomfort with religious themes, with misquoted and out of context Bible verses abounding. The problem was brought into high relief during the 2004 election with the controversy concerning John Kerry's Catholic faith and his vocal support for abortion rights. Some Catholic bishops stated publicly that Kerry should be denied communion, and the impression that his faith was less than serious was hard to shake. These issues resonated at the state level as well.

One Democratic state executive director explained that the party clearly lost religious voters in the 2004 election because the party's gubernatorial candidate simply was not credible on religious issues. When asked about faith, the candidate responded with an inconsequential story from childhood that demonstrated no real understanding or resonance with the question. The executive director believed that religious voters on both sides of the partisan divide were made extremely uncomfortable by a seemingly contrived and unthinking answer. And while the Democratic national committee hired religious liaisons in many states to help with the presidential races, they were widely seen as token gestures that had no real impact on the tenor of political debate in the state. State level Democratic leaders seem to be divided, however, on the impact of a religion gap in their state's politics. While many echoed the sentiments of the executive director mentioned earlier, others were strident in their belief that the Democratic party's lack of a religious base is a good thing and gives it a way to distinguish itself from the Republican party and appeal more to the mainstream.

All of this aside, however, there are a number of places, particularly in the Midwest, where conservative Democrats – well chosen candidates with unimpeachable religious credentials – have made inroads into Republican hegemony over conservative

religious voters. These tend to be pro-life Democrats, generally Catholic, who are able to convincingly combine a conservative social agenda with fiscal attitudes that are more progressive. An organization called Democrats for Life has been gaining supporters and starting state level chapters over the past several years, in many cases inaugurated by these type of religiously aware Democrats. While clearly this phenomenon varies by state, the fact that many state Democratic parties are encouraging a conversation about social issues, particularly abortion, suggests that the party is trying to understand its God problem.

But a basic question is why concentrate on this issue now? The answer is that the Democratic party has the same motivation as all parties; they need votes in order to win elections. So many observers, both Republican and Democrat, question the motivation of a revived conversation about social issues, and wonder how long it will last. Given the continued religious tone-deafness of many of the statements by national Democratic leaders, one suspects the move is purely strategic. But it is also clear that the sentiment at the state level is real, in many cases, as Democrats have faced significant losses over religious issues, particularly in the 2004 election cycle.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have examined the relationship between the Christian Right and the Republican party at the state level. In order to fully understand their interconnections, we have observed the cycles of the conflict and accommodation that characterize the relationship at the state level, observing particularly the process by which the Christian Right seeks influence within a state's Republican party. Over time, it is

clear that the movement and party learn to work together and that movement activists and party strategy are both changed by the contact. While Democrats have an antagonistic relationship with the Christian Right, it has not spared them controversy over social and moral values issues. Their trajectory is somewhat different, however, as these issues have only begun to impact Democratic politics.

The Christian Right is a significant force in the Republican parties of many states. Over the past 25 years, the movement has made inroads into the party as activists have acceded to positions of leadership and learned the rules of the party game. But the relationship among the movement and state Republican parties fluctuates based on the political realities of its context. The imperative to win elections makes the movement more or less attractive to the party depending on the policy environment. Internal party coalitions and public personalities also impact the cycles of conflict and accommodation that are evident within the relationship. Overall, however, it is clear that the Christian Right and the Republican party have significantly impacted each other's behavior and strategy. The contemporary Christian Right, with its more practical activists, is a direct outgrowth of the movement's concentration on success in party politics. A Republican party with a coherent ideological focus and a new core of grassroots supports is just as clearly a result of its interactions with the Christian Right all over the country.

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