

Evangelicals, the Religious Right and American Democracy: Integrative Themes

A major goal of the conference and the conference volumes will be to achieve a more integrated understanding of evangelicals, the religious Right, and American democracy. Toward this end, we have developed a set of general questions for reference in chapter preparation. Our hope is that these questions will help us collectively to achieve an integrated conception of how and why conservative Christians have become such an important influence in American social and political life, and the implications of their influence. In planning and composing your chapters, please be attentive to these themes.

Theme: Social Location and Mentality

1) To what extent have we seen a more or less constant socially conservative stratum in American society defined by race (white), gender (male -- and women oriented to male authority), religion (theologically conservative Protestant), education (less than BA), and region ("middle America," especially the South)? This stratum has been characterized in different ways since the 1960s: as "the silent majority," "white backlash voters," and "the moral majority," among other characterizations. To what extent can we say that this socially conservative stratum, although concentrated in the same social location over time, mobilizes around the most prominent threats defined by political and religious leaders: in the 1960s in relation to the "urban crisis" and anti-war protestors; in the 1970s in relation to feminism -- and, more recently, in relation to threats posed by shifting gender roles and the growing acceptance of homosexuality to "family values." To the extent that this interpretation is correct, how does the contemporary adoption of a strongly religious identity by members of this socially conservative stratum shift constraints and opportunities for political expression?

2) How should we characterize the mentality of evangelicals and other theologically conservative Christians? Is it fair to call this mentality "absolutist"? Is this characterization unfair to many evangelicals? What are the primary influences on the mentality: theological doctrines; stern upbringings; racial status; and/or privileged, but vulnerable socio-economic location? What is the interplay of mentality, social location, and political effectiveness? How does social location influence mentality (and vice versa) and how does mentality lend itself to organization and political effectiveness?

Theme: Sub-cultural and Political Organization

3) What is the relationship between sub-cultural organizational development and mobilization around public policies? To what extent do sub-cultural organizational developments (e.g., Christian academies, home schooling, Christian media) allow for more effective recruitment for political mobilization? To what extent do these entities provide civic training in democratic norms?

4) How important is Republican Party dominance to the continuation of the Christian conservative movement? Would divisions within the evangelical communities lead to splintering in the absence of a sophisticated national political party organization capable of identifying issues that maintain unity among social conservatives? In other words,

does the Republican Party maintain the movement as much as (or more than) the movement sustains the Party? How do conventional views of social movements need to be revised to account for party-guided and party-brokered social movements?

5) Does the organizational vitality of the evangelical movement (and of sectarianism generally in American society) insure that the dynamism of the movement will move along paths that are unpredictable in relation to the politics of the last 25 years? Can we see the possibility of an evangelical movement, under different leadership, that organizes religious identification to fight global warming or world poverty? (Growing efforts along these lines are obviously already underway.) If so, what does this tell us about the relatively autonomous force of organizational dynamism in the evangelical movement?

Theme: The American Case in Comparative Context

6) How can parallels and contrasts with the situation of similar groups in other countries help us to understand the American movement of theologically and politically conservative Christians? Less educated rural and suburban citizens in poorer regions form a conservative political base in the national politics of many countries. Does the absence of a strong socialist or Labor Party tradition in the United States make a difference? How so? How does the weakness of the state and the strength of American capitalism play into the influence of social conservatives? Why does religion remain such an important influence in the United States, even as it has declined as an influence in other industrialized countries? What other comparative factors are involved in the formation of the distinctively American stratum of social and religious conservatives?

Theme: Evangelicals, the Religious Right, and American Democracy

7) What are the strengths and weaknesses of an interest group model of politics when applied to socially conservative Christians? To what extent are socially conservative Christians best understood as essentially like other interest groups whose views are mobilized within the political arena – and whose influence waxes and wanes with changes in Administrations? Conversely, to what extent do socially conservative Christians, as a base for the religious Right, pose a present or potential threat to American democracy? What are the most important weaknesses in the political vision evangelicals bring to the public arena?

9) What potential exists for the development of stronger ties between evangelicals and a reformed Democratic Party responsive both to its traditional liberal constituencies and to the virtues and hopes of white, religious, working-class and middle-class voters? What are the most important strengths in the political vision evangelicals bring to the public arena?