

Symposium Introduction: The Politics of Religious Alliances

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INTRODUCTION

This symposium examines the politics of religious alliances. While the literature on religion and politics generally focuses on *differences* across individuals, congregations, denominations, or traditions, these articles instead ask how, when, and why religious groups do — and do not — form alliances with other organizations, both religious and secular. Specifically, this collection of original research examines the formation of multi-denominational coalitions among party activists, litigants, and religious leaders. These varied articles arose from a workshop at Oxford University in March 2015, an event hosted and funded by the Rothermere American Institute. The collection explores the impact of religious coalitional activity upon political attitudes, decision-making, and public policy development. It is wide-ranging, extending our understanding of religious coalitional activity beyond the United States and dealing with topics of vital current significance, including the swiftly changing landscape of school voucher and tax credit expansion, same-sex marriage, healthcare, and abortion advocacy.

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LITERATURE

On many public policy questions — not just hot-button “culture war” issues such as gay rights and abortion — religious organizations ally with one another despite sharp historical disagreements and differences in theology, church structure, and membership. Scholars have examined the way churches interact within America’s peaceful and plural religious “free market” (Wuthnow 1988; Stark and McCann 1993; Chen 2014), the role of religious “switching” in encouraging individuals’ tolerance of other religions (Putnam and Campbell 2011), and the causes and consequences of religious group position-taking on church-state separationism and related policy issues (Detwiler 1999; Lewis 2014; Adkins et al. 2013), but there has been limited scholarship on the elite politics of alliances between religious organizations on matters of public policy (Bendyna et al. 2001). Why do some policy issues attract multi-faith coalitions — even among churches with historical and continuing political and theological disagreements — and others do not? How do leaders of religious alliances manage the demands of their followers and intra-denominational disagreements while lobbying, advocating, and litigating on behalf of policies? This collection speaks not only to the literature on religion and politics, but to American and comparative politics more broadly. Sitting at the intersection of political science, public policy and law, it identifies causal antecedents of partisan polarization and the “rights revolution” (Pacelle 1991). It traces policymaking processes at the state and federal level, the relationship between interest group leaders and the rank-and-file, and the trajectory of the culture wars.

Battles over particular political issues are manifestations of a broader struggle to shape America’s political, religious, and cultural landscape (Layman 2001). Such efforts are influenced by historical animosities and their constitutional manifestations, America’s political institutions, and the rise of globalization and partisan polarization. These symposium articles set the politics of religious alliances in the broader temporal context. They explore rights claims, federalism, establishment, and free exercise — united around an emerging understanding of the coalitional activity of religious groups.

DEFINITION

As Clyde Wilcox’s contribution indicates, there are many ways to define religious alliances and understand their origins and impact. This collection

takes a broad definition that incorporates both *ad hoc* and permanent coalitions and religious and secular participants. Some coalitions, such as official alliances of religious bodies, are united explicitly around theological precepts. Others, such as coalitions active on school vouchers, early Christian Right public protest advocacy, and the “actively secular,” tend to be organized along ideological or partisan lines. The presence of strange bedfellows encourages us to reconsider definitional boundaries. In cases such as religious school aid, the relative scarcity of liberal and Democratic coalition participants underscores the conservative nature of the dominant pro-voucher coalition. However, in campaign finance reform and abortion politics, strange bedfellows of traditionalists and progressives provide evidence of shifting advocacy strategies and new strategic nodes around which groups are coalescing: party, policy, leadership, and law. We define religious alliances as politically engaged coalitions that include religious actors, groups or institutions, seeking to advance religious as well as secular goals through litigation or political activism.

THEMES

Collectively, these symposium essays make four key contributions to the literature on religious coalitions. First, we document shifts from religiously particularistic approaches toward *new inter-denominational partnerships*. In the context of “strange bedfellow” politics of the so-called culture wars, our articles examine how religious organizations and activists relate to one another within liberal and conservative coalitions. How should we characterize these coalitions, and what unites them? The answers in this collection are, *inter alia*, shared beliefs and understandings of theology, law, the relation between church and state (Hackett); religious practice; leadership (Lewis); public policy objectives (Hackett), and ideological commitment (Layman and Weaver, Olson). Yet religion is politically ambivalent (Philpott 2007; Appleby 2000). These articles explore that ambivalence by considering how religion can impede as well as facilitate coalitional activity (Wilcox). Amid the hardening of partisan polarization and softening of traditional denominational dividing lines in political activity, we find that religious commitment (Lewis), or the lack thereof, (Layman and Weaver) can unite elites and rank-and-file activists. Conversely, while the religious left has formed alliances with the secular left, it has arguably done so at the expense of cohesion and a strong sense of identity among religious progressives (Olson).

Second, we reflect upon the conflicts between *federal authority and states' rights*, in relation to *individualistic and social approaches to religious duty*. In the field of legal advocacy, Andrew Lewis examines rhetorical and theological tensions between individual rights and social common morality approaches. For Ursula Hackett, the evolving relationship between individualistic, decentralized denominations, hierarchical churches, and separationist or accommodationist beliefs has shaped the modern landscape of private religious schooling.

Third, we consider the importance of religious *phraseology, ambiguity, and framing*. Each of the articles considers language to be important because of the need for clear definitions, legal standards and methodological rigor. For example, Geoffrey Layman and Christopher Weaver disaggregate the concept of "secularism," yielding theoretical and empirical insights in relation to the behavior of religious activists. Wilcox argues that a common religious vocabulary can aid the building of inter-denominational coalitions. Laura Olson shows us that religious progressives face the challenge of framing a policy agenda that unites a movement generally characterized by diversity. For Lewis, the wording of constitutional provisions in the federal and state constitutions is central. The framing of rights talk and the delineation of "clear and precise standards" for interpretation of church-state law have implications for the evolution of religious advocacy, the legal status of religious aid programs, and the advancement of religious liberty in the United States and elsewhere.

Fourth, we explore the strategic choice of *purity versus pragmatism*. All of the articles examine the tactical choices of individuals and organizations faced with the friction between compromise and commitment to inflexible principles: vouchers and in-kind aid for religious schools (Hackett), abortion and obscenity activism (Lewis), party activism (Layman and Weaver), forging and sustaining a social movement (Olson), and the formation of coalitions (Wilcox). We seek a better understanding of how, why, and the extent to which pragmatism and purism are in conflict: for example, where secular beliefs coexist with religiosity (Layman and Weaver), activists and rank-and-file disagree upon matters of principle (Lewis), and disparate religious activists band together (Olson).

PAPERS

The symposium begins with Wilcox, who draws on his long experience observing, interviewing, and surveying religious activists to begin

developing a general theory of religious coalitionbuilding. He distinguishes seven types of religious coalition and considers what his categorization can teach us about the ways religious organizations and actors work together. He suggests that religious coalitions have become more common, broader and more diverse in the United States in recent years. Although religion has a double-edge in coalition formation — with the potential to promote trust but also intolerance — Wilcox identifies mechanisms by which religious activists may learn how to engage in the negotiation and compromise necessary for coalitional politics. Political engagement itself can aid the work of building ecumenical bridges. The paper ends on three warning notes: first, religion may cause individuals and groups to reject coalitional arrangements and the compromise it entails, and scholars have not yet established whether elite ecumenisms are easily transferred to the rank-and-file; second, the methodological challenges inherent in evaluating coalition *failure*, as well as success, remain compelling; third, scholars need to better understand the role of religion in political coalitions. In other words, Wilcox reminds us that there is much to learn about religious alliances, but has provided us all with a template for future research.

Hackett examines why religious elementary, middle, and high schools of certain religious traditions are over-represented in comparison with their share of the population and why state aid for students at private schools takes such varied forms. She demonstrates, by means of an analysis of critical junctures in American political development supported by statistical analysis, that Catholics who desire a religious education for their children have historically tended to exit for the parochial sector while Evangelicals having similar desires lobbied for reform of the public school system. The result is a connection between religious populations and certain forms of school aid that institutionalizes the legacy of historical religious divides and may slow or forestall religious coalitional activity. Hackett's article shows that while the exit option has become more attractive for *all* religious groups with the rapid expansion of school voucher programs over the last five years, these new fluid coalitional dynamics confront an institutional landscape profoundly shaped by theological division.

Using the Convention Delegate Study and a novel measure of secularism, Layman and Weaver examine the impact of religious divisions among party activists on party polarization. They demonstrate that active secularism and low religiosity are conceptually and statistically distinct. Demonstrating, by means of confirmatory factor analysis, that this

conceptual distinction captures real-world differences in values enables the authors to show how religiosity among Republican activists and active secularism among Democrats pushes their respective parties toward the ideological extremes. Layman and Weaver describe the inter-party and intra-party dynamics that shape the policy positions of the two parties and their willingness or resistance to compromise. The growth of the religious-secular divide in party politics helps account for the increasingly inflexible nature of politics in the United States.

Olson digs deep into the religious progressive movement, which is often drowned out by the outsize attention paid to the religious right. She draws on survey data from the general public as well as religio-political activists on both the left and right. She finds that, as a movement, religious progressives are a less unified coalition than the religious right. However, notwithstanding their relative lack of political cohesion, religious progressives see their movement as having more political influence than the religious right — and religious conservatives agree. The question for the religious left is where to go from here. In the wake of their policy successes during the Obama era, what should be their priorities?

Lewis explains why evangelical leaders and the rank-and-file shifted from a “common morality” approach to an “individual rights” way of thinking about free speech, and how Christian Right advocates have deployed rights talk to achieve success in a variety of public policy domains. Deploying both qualitative and quantitative data, he argues that abortion politics was critical in shifting the Southern Baptist Convention toward a rights-oriented approach in its advocacy. Lewis’s article combines systematic analysis of position statements, amicus curiae briefs, news archives and elite interviews with statistical treatment of rank-and-file opinions. He documents changes in evangelicals’ attitudes toward abortion, a reduction in their deference toward the Supreme Court, and disparities between elite and rank-and-file opinions on free speech. This article suggests that evangelical advocacy will continue to expand, capitalizing upon growing self-identification as a persecuted minority and the adoption of the language of rights.

These articles cover a lot of ground — theoretically, methodologically, and substantively — but together they begin to answer Wilcox’s call for more research into the dynamics of religious coalitionbuilding. They are far from being the final word, but, we hope, open a conversation among scholars of religion and politics about the myriad ways that religion, like politics, can make for strange bedfellows.

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