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The Christian Right, the South, and State Politics

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The Christian Right arrived on the scene dramatically in 1980, its membership in President Reagan's electoral coalition indicative of a new politicization among religious conservatives. The movement flourished during the 1980s, spearheading campaigns against abortion rights and mobilizing supporters to vote for Republican candidates.

The dawn of the 1990s saw the Christian Right as an interest group engaged in some of the most high profile battles in American politics. John Persinos, then editor of *Campaigns and Elections*, sent surveys to 395 political observers in all 50 states, asking them how much influence they thought the Christian Right had in the state's Republican Party. Persinos asked the respondents to estimate two factors in particular: what percentage of the state GOP central committee supported the issue agenda of Christian conservatives, and the percentage of those on the committees who were members of the Christian Right organizations. Results from the survey allowed Persinos to rank the influence of the Christian Right in the state GOP as weak, moderate or strong. Far from being a monolithic political force, he found that the Christian Right was strong in some places and weak in others. Eighteen states

reported that the Christian Right was in a strong position, 13 states were moderate, and 20 states reported weak influence.

Persinos found that much of the Christian Right's strength was in Southern states. Of the 18 states that reported strong Christian Right influence, 10 of them were in the South. Only two Southern states, Tennessee and West Virginia, reported weak influence. The story, then, was one with a distinctly regional tinge.

Kimberly Conger and John Green have recently revisited this research by re-administering the study to see how things have changed. They find that the South is still home to strong Christian Right movements, largely due to the large number of evangelical Protestants that live in the region. They find that the Christian Right has made gains in the Midwest, with little gained in the West and the Northeast. They conclude that the Christian Right is "spreading out and digging in," indicating that in many places its strength broadened (many states saw influence increase or decrease to the moderate category), but without a general move toward the Christian Right exercising political dominance.

The story in the South is one of continued strength, but the states where this strength lies is changing. While many states were classified as strong and continue to be classified so (Alabama, Arkansas, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Texas, and Virginia), several decreased from strong to moderate (Florida, Georgia, Louisiana and North Carolina). Two Southern states saw increased influence to become classified as strong (Mississippi and West Virginia), Tennessee increased from weak to moderate, and Kentucky was classified as moderate in both times. The effect of this, then, is that the number of Southern states reporting strong influence of the Christian Right in the Republican Party decreases from 10 to 8, the number of moderate states increases from 2 to 6, and the number of weak states decreases from 2 to zero.

But how does the Christian Right's changing influence in the South compare to other regions? To estimate a net effect, we have created a scale from Persinos' original measure of Christian Right influence. We have coded 1 as weak, 3 as moderate and 5 as strong. We then take averages for 1994 and 2000 by region to assess net increases or decreases in influence.

The most striking initial result is that the South

does have the highest amount of Christian coalition influence — a score of 4.1 out of 5. This is above the 3.4 national average in 2000. Its already high influence in the South is not increasing. The influence is increasing nationally, however, because it is increasing in every other region. The largest increase is in the Midwest, which had a 1.1 unit change, from below moderate influence (2.7) to above moderate influence (3.8). The other increases are small — 0.3 in the Northeast and 0.2 in the West, producing a 0.4 increase nationally.

Such findings are not entirely consistent with Conger and Green's characterization of the Christian Right as "spreading out and digging in." The vast majority of the "spreading out" obviously occurred during the 1980s. By 1994 the national average for Christian coalition

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Table 1:
Christian Right Influence in State Republican Parties by Region, 1994 vs. 2000

REGION	# STATES	1994 SCORE	2000 ^a SCORE
South ^b	14	4.1	4.1
50 States & DC		3.0	3.4
West ^c	13	3.6	3.8
Midwest ^d	12	2.7	3.8
Northeast ^e	12	1.5	1.8

^a John Persinos, "Has the Christian Right Taken Over the Republican Party?" *Campaigns & Elections* 15:9 (September 1994): 20-24 and Kimberly H. Conger and John C. Green, "Spreading Out and Digging In: Christian Conservatives and State Republican Parties," *Campaigns & Elections* 23:1 (February 2002): 59.

^b To get a quantifiable scoring system for this measure of the strength of the Christian Right in the state's Republican Party the following scores were assigned: 5 = strong; 3 = moderate; 1 = weak.

^c AL AR FL GA KY LA MS NC OK SC TN TX VA WV

^d AK AZ CA CO HI ID MT NV NM OR UT WA WY

^e IL IN IA KS MI MN MO NE ND OH SD WI

^f CT DE DC ME MD MA NH NJ NY PA RI VT

Table 2:
Christian Right Influence in Southern State Republican Parties, 1994-2000

STATE	INFLUENCE IN STATE GOP 1994 ^a	2000 ^b
AL	Strong	Strong
AR	Strong	Strong
OK	Strong	Strong
SC	Strong	Strong
TX	Strong	Strong
VA	Strong	Strong
MS	Moderate	Strong
WV	Weak	Strong
FL	Strong	Moderate
GA	Strong	Moderate
LA	Strong	Moderate
NC	Strong	Moderate
KY	Moderate	Moderate
TN	Weak	Moderate
#Strong	10	8
#Moderate	2	6
#Weak	2	0

^a John Persinos, "Has the Christian Right Taken Over the Republican Party?" *Campaigns & Elections* 15:9 (September 1994): 20-24.

^b Kimberly Conger and John C. Green, "Spreading Out and Digging In: Christian Conservatives and State Republican Parties," *Campaigns & Elections* 23:1 (February 2002): 58-60, 64.

influence is already at the moderate level. After this point we do not see "digging in," which would describe stagnating levels of influence, but instead increasing influence. This influence increases in every region of the country except for the region where it is already very strong — the South. This increase, while greater in some regions than others, accounts for a national increase of .4 units. Instead of the Christian Right "digging in," or taking a defensive position to maintain their political gains, these results indicate they are "going on the offensive," looking for gains in influence wherever they present themselves. From 1994 to 2000 the Midwest was the ripest region for these gains, but as stated before, they occurred in all regions.

While Conger and Green argue for "digging in," they provide quite a bit of anecdotal evidence for "going on the offensive" as they describe the electoral exploits of the Christian Right in different regions. This is especially true for the Midwest, where the authors describe the Kansas Christian Right challenging

the incumbent governor in the primary and also taking control of the state school board to institute a pro-creationism education agenda. The Christian Right in both Ohio and Wisconsin have worked with their respective governors, in Illinois they mobilized for Sen. Peter Fitzgerald's win in 1998, and in Missouri they worked for Sen. John Ashcroft's losing campaign in 2000. Looking outside the Midwest, even in the toughest region for the Christian Right, the West, it is apparent that they engage in ambitious political battles. In 1998 and 2000 Washington state Christian Right candidates won Republican nominations for governor and senator, respectively. While they did lose the eventual elections, the Christian Right is competing politically whenever they can in a bid to increase their power. ■

¹ John Persinos, "Has the Christian Right Taken Over the Republican Party?" *Campaigns & Elections* 15:9 (September 1994): 20–24.

² Kimberly H. Conger and John C. Green, "Spreading Out and Digging In: Christian Conservatives and State Republican Parties," *Campaigns & Elections* 23:1 (February 2002): 58–60, 64.

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"Extensive powers for governors to constrain spending, including line-item veto authority and the ability not to spend appropriated funds."

"Large reserves held as balances or rainy day funds."

"Understandable budgets that reveal the impacts of current decisions on future budgets, the use of Generally Accepted Accounting Principles (GAAP) in budgeting, coverage of all state money and disclosure of why and on what money is being spent."

In the 2002 version of the index, the scores in the 50 states range from a high of 93 in Georgia to a low of 36 in New Hampshire. The 50-state average score is 70, and the 14-Southern state average is 62.

Three Southern states have scores above the national average — Georgia, Louisiana and Florida. Seven of the Southern states score between 44 and 56 and rank 40 to 47 among the 50 states.

So as these lower scoring states address the budgetary problems brought on by our current economic situation, they might also address the very budgetary process itself so they would be better able to handle future problems the economy might visit upon them. ■

NOTE: This article is adapted from "Ranking State Budget Processes," *State Policy Reports* 20:6 (March 2002): 9–22.

³ Hovey served as state budget officer in Ohio and Illinois, was a consultant to many states and state organizations such as the National Governors' Association and was founder and editor of *State Policy Reports*.

⁴ NASBO, *Budget Processes in the States* (Washington, DC: NASBO, January 2002). This report is also available on the organization's Web site — www.nasbo.org.

⁵ "Ranking State Budgetary Processes," 9–10.

Southern State Budget Process Quality¹

RANK	STATE	INDEX
1	GA	93
15	LA	77
19	FL	73
US Average		70
24	OK	69
25	KY	68
25	WV	68
32	MS	64
South Average.....		62
40	TX	56
40	TN	56
42	SC	53
43	AR	52
43	VA	52
46	AL	48
47	NC	44
50	NH	36

¹ From "Ranking State Budget Processes," *State Policy Reports* 20:6 (March 2002): 9–22.