Towards a political-cultural explanation of the "Christian Right": Bellevue Baptist Church and the republicanisation of American evangelicalism


Abstract

Even since the pivotal 1980 United States presidential election, historians and political scientists have attempted to understand the rise of the so-called 'Christian Right', as well as the political loyalty of white evangelicals towards the Republican Party. What explains evangelicals' long-term abandonment of the Democratic Party in favour of the GOP? This thesis reinterprets the rise of the Christian Right by examining the features of contemporary evangelical history from a congregational perspective. Through the case study of Bellevue Baptist Church in Memphis, Tennessee – one of the largest and most well-known evangelical congregations in the country – the thesis situates evangelicals' post-war political realignment in the local context. It is argued that from the beginning of the 1980s a new form of political culture had started to exist at Bellevue which mirrored that of Republican Party and Christian Right conservatism; this, when extended to similar evangelical congregations elsewhere in the South of the country, helps explain the unprecedented political and electoral loyalty towards the GOP that conservative evangelicals had started to display during the Regan presidency and beyond. However, rather than being a symptom of direct political mobilisation or partisan endorsement from the pulpit – as conventional explanations often assume – it is demonstrated that Bellevue’s Republican-friendly political culture actually emerged indirectly, through a combination of the church’s theology and its connections with urban change in Memphis during desegregation.

Item Type: IMT PhD Thesis

Subjects: J Political Science > JC Political theory

PhD Course: Political History

Identification Number: 10.6092/imtlucca/e-theses/205

Date Deposited: 22 Mar 2017 12:11

URI: http://e-theses.imtlucca.it/id/eprint/205

Politics, of course, hardly captured the full power of evangelicalism within American culture. But it influenced all impressions of that power. The process happened very quickly. The romance between Reagan and the Christian Right quickly experienced prominent hiccups. Christian Right leaders were not inclined to strike the more inclusive tone required of a successful presidential campaign. Baptist minister and former Carter backer Bailey Smith, speaking at the Dallas gathering, saw fit to aver that “God Almighty does not hear the prayer of a Jew.” Then, Falwell felt compelled to clarify that God did hear the prayers of any Jew or Gentile, provided that they were converts to Christianity. An “old Christian Right” existed well before men and women like Falwell came on the scene. But political quiescence, at least on the national stage, had been the rule among conservative Christians for at least a generation: Ribuffo, Leo P., The Old Christian Right: The Protestant Far Right from the Great Depression to the Cold War (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983). Also see Carpenter, Joel A., Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Marsden, George M., Fundamentalism and American Culture, 2nd ed. 93 The historian Grant Wacker has demonstrated the pervasiveness within evangelicalism of the “custodial ideal,” which frames Christianity.