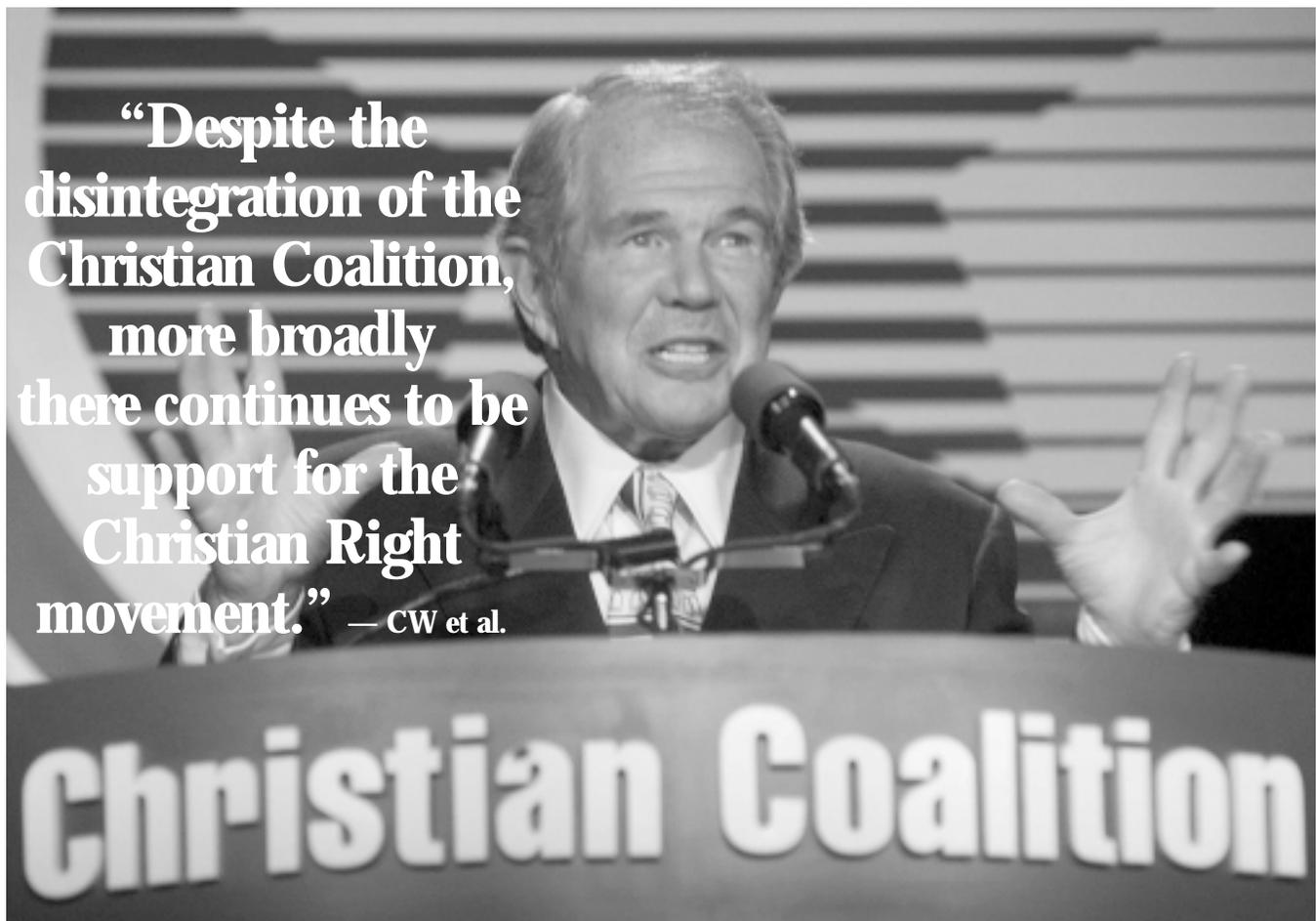


Full Pews, Musical Pulpits

The Christian Right at the turn of the millennium



AP/Wide World Photos

By Clyde Wilcox, Ted G. Jelen, and Rachel Goldberg

In early 2000, newspaper columns announced the death of the Christian Coalition. The *Virginian-Pilot*, which takes a special interest in the Virginia-based organization, ran a series of stories detailing organizational chaos and financial bankruptcy. Before the South Carolina Republican primary, the *Washington Post* wrote that the Christian Coalition was mostly MIA in the contest, and that its organizational strength in local churches had evaporated. Across the country, formerly active state Christian Coalition chapters were in disarray, and a spate of state and county leaders abruptly left the organization. Reporters routinely ask us if the Christian

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Right is finished, themselves confident that the movement is destined for the dustbins of history.

But this is not the first time the media have tolled the bell for the Christian Right. The most recent occasion was in 1987, when Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority ceased operation. At that time, many reporters and even scholars wrote about the "inevitable failure" of the Christian Right. Those same reporters had depicted the Moral Majority as a potentially explosive force in 1980, as weak in 1982, and as a juggernaut in 1984. And their premature obituary for the movement in 1987 proved embarrassing when Pat Robertson launched the Christian Coalition in 1989. The Christian Coalition quickly became a major force in GOP politics, leading to a spate of stories that portrayed Robertson and Ralph Reed as GOP kingmakers. Clearly, either the Christian Right is as unstable as the Nasdaq, or reporters are missing at least part of the story

when they offer widely erratic assessments of the movement's strength.

Yet it is also clear that the reporters are onto something this time. Organized activity by Christian conservatives in the 2000 presidential primaries has been a pale shadow of the massive mobilizations of previous presidential elections. And, the Christian Coalition *is* in organizational disarray. Could this mean the end of a movement that some observers once feared would seize control of the Republican party?

In order to understand the prospects for the Christian Right in the new millennium, it is important first to differentiate among various levels of support and activity in the movement. Americans who indicate in surveys that they support the Christian Right, feel warmly toward the movement and its leaders, and support its goals can be classified as *supporters*. Supporters are not members of Christian Right organizations, nor are they likely ever to pay dues or attend meetings. Many respond positively to voters' guides and public pronouncements, however, and are therefore important even if they never consider themselves to be members of specific organizations.

Activists are members of Christian Right organizations. Many distribute the voters' guides, attend regular or occasional meetings, contact policymakers to promote the movement's issue agenda, or volunteer their time and money to support movement-backed candidates. It is this activist base that has enabled the Christian Right to be so successful in national, state, and local GOP organizations.

Organizations of the Christian Right are groups that attempt to appeal to supporters and to mobilize activists into political action to influence elections, policies or institutions. Because the Christian Right is a social movement, these organizations and their leaders often compete with one another to define the movement's priorities, to develop a coherent ideology, and to attract the money and time of activists. There are several large national organizations of the Christian Right that vary in size and strength, as well as a number of niche groups and important state and local organizations.

Data from the National Election Studies (NES) show that between 9% and 11% of whites were supporters of the Moral Majority in the 1980s. This support was concentrated among those who attended evangelical (and especially fundamentalist) churches and who held evangelical doctrinal beliefs, such as the inerrancy of Scripture and the importance of a "born again" experience. In 1984, approximately 42% of evangelicals who attended church weekly supported the Moral Majority. When the Moral Majority went bankrupt in the late 1980s, white support for the organization and the movement, more broadly, was unchanged.

In 1996, approximately 16% of whites supported the Christian Coalition. Among evangelicals, support for the Christian Coalition was about as high as it had been earlier for the Moral Majority, but the Christian Coalition was much more popular than the Moral Majority had been among morally-conservative Catholics and mainline Protestants. Apparently, efforts by the Christian Coalition to broaden the movement's appeal beyond its evangelical base were modestly successful.

Exit polls ask less precise questions than the NES, and it is likely that their measure of support for the Christian Right is inflated. Even so, the results are telling. In 1994 and 1998, nearly 20% of voters identified themselves as part of the religious right; in 1996 the figure was 23%. This suggests that the movement continues to be an electoral force in the US, its adherents numerically equal to or more numerous than African American voters and labor union members (see Figure 1).

The Christian Right is most important to GOP nomination politics, because the movement's efforts are concentrated in the Republican party. In 2000, those who identified themselves as "members of the religious right" constituted 34% of the GOP primary electorate in South Carolina, down only 2% from 1996. Indeed, even this tiny decline was probably due more to the mobilization of Democrats and Independents by John McCain than to a real shrinking of the activist pool.

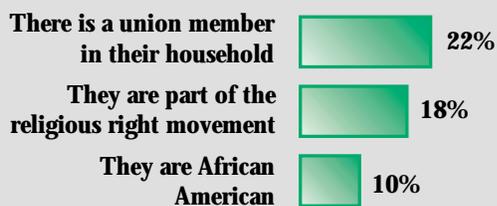
Overall, then, it appears that support for the Christian Right has increased slightly over the past 20 years, and has not dipped precipitously in the past year. Whatever happens with the organizations and leaders of this wave of the Christian Right, a potential constituency for the movement continues to exist.

Masures of the activist base of the Christian Right are harder to come by than estimations of supporters. Moreover, there are varying levels of activism in the movement—some members give only money, while others volunteer time and energy to election campaigns, pass out voters' guides, or lobby state and local governments. The membership claims of the Christian Coalition have become more elastic over time, and disgruntled former employees argue that the organization has always inflated these numbers by claiming as members anyone who ever contacted the organization and by never purging the rolls. At its peak the organization claimed to have over two million members, but it mailed only 400,000 copies of its magazine. Political scientist John Green estimates there may be as many as four million names on the various membership lists of all the Christian Right groups in the country combined, but only about 400,000 of those listed do more than occasionally contribute money, and fewer than 40,000 are very active in election campaigns; these numbers reflect a decline from just two years ago.

Figure 1

Voting Blocs in the 1998 Elections

Percent responding:



Source: Exit poll survey by Voter News Service, November 3, 1998.

Many former Christian Coalition activists, including county and precinct leaders, are no longer active in politics. Whether this represents a permanent retreat from the political realm, or whether they will eventually become active in other Christian Right and pro-family organizations such as Focus on the Family, remains to be seen. Currently there is a debate within the evangelical community about the utility of political action, with some former activists arguing that electoral politics has not led to success in enacting the movement's policy agenda. Some activists recommend a withdrawal from broader political action and the building of evangelical social infrastructure. If this position becomes more widely accepted, the activist base of the movement could erode further. At present, however, the activist base remains sizable, and it is an important electoral resource for both the movement and the GOP.

Several national organizations cooperate and compete to define the Christian Right, along with countless state and local organizations. Most visible in recent years has been the Christian Coalition, formed from the detritus of Robertson's 1988 presidential campaign. With chapters in every state and active chapters in at least two dozen, as well as many active county and precinct chapters, the Coalition was at one time a formidable political force.

The Coalition's ideological niche is pragmatism; it urges its members to support moderate GOP candidates who might actually win elections, rather than more ideologically pure but less viable movement favorites. The group's political niche is electoral mobilization. It has distributed millions of voters' guides in churches on the Sunday before each primary and general election. The moderate face of the Christian Coalition in the 1990s was Ralph Reed, whose facility with political symbols led some observers to predict that the Coalition would institutionalize into a large, moderate social movement organization like the NAACP or NOW.

Today, however, the national organization of the Christian Coalition is in shambles, its once-impressive network of state affiliates reduced to a handful of functioning chapters. The sudden collapse of the coalition, which caught many observers by surprise, appears to be linked more to internal organizational issues than to support for the Christian Right movement more generally.

The collapse of the Christian Coalition has rendered the Christian Right less visible as an electoral presence. Political scientist James Guth reports that while the Christian Coalition managed to mail postcards to its membership in South Carolina before the 2000 GOP Presidential primary, it was far less active than it had been in 1996. Yet the total numbers of voters who identified with the "religious right" increased in South Carolina, albeit less than the overall increase in turnout. This suggests that the GOP now has communications channels to mobilize evangelicals without the Christian Coalition, and that many movement activists are now firmly ensconced in the Republican establishment.

One development suggesting that the breakdown of the Christian Coalition does not presage a more general dissolution of the religious right has been the increasing activity over the past couple of years of Focus on the Family. Although the Christian Coalition was the media favorite in the 1990s, behind the scenes Focus on the Family was building stronger state organizations.

Focus is the radio ministry of Dr. James Dobson, broadcast on more than 4000 stations worldwide in 15 languages. Focus employs 1300 employees and sends books, tapes, and videos to more than 9000 people daily without charge (although there are suggested donation amounts). Dobson's broadcasts reach five million listeners a day, and his constituent mailing list contains more than two and a half million names. Both broadcasts and direct mail are heavily laden with politics, although the ministry places a heavy emphasis on personal salvation and family counseling.

The ideological niche of Focus is ideological purity. "My goal is not to see the Republican Party prosper," Dobson says, and if he leaves the party he will "do everything I can to take as many people with me as possible." The political niche is the research that the state affiliates produce and share, in loose coordination with the Family Research Council.

Another organization that appears healthy and active, despite some contraction over the past few years, is Concerned Women for America. CWA is the grandmother of the contemporary Christian Right. Active since the late 1970s, it has local chapters in hundreds of areas, providing it with a very efficient grassroots network. The ideological niche of CWA is that of a moral crusade, and its political niche is grassroots contact with national and state legislators.

Like most social movements, the Christian Right is a coalition of “issue publics” concerned with overlapping policies. It is fair to say that most activists would like to ban all or almost all abortions, to restore religion to the public schools, to enact laws and economic policies that encourage women to work in the home, and to limit equality protections for gays and lesbians. However, the various organizations and leaders of the Christian Right have somewhat divergent agendas and, occasionally, very different views on what issues they should emphasize.

The latest wave of Christian Right activity began in 1978 and then refocused itself in 1989. To examine changing levels of public support for the movement’s agenda, we looked at attitudes before the Christian Right mobilization (1972-1977), during the first fundamentalist wave (1978-1988), during the period of Christian Coalition activity (1989-1995), and today (1996-1998), using data from the General Social Survey.

The data suggest that the public has become slightly more pro-choice over time; before the Moral Majority mobilization, 37% agreed that abortion should be allowed for any reason, compared with 43% today. Attitudes have moved much more sharply on gay rights—52% of Americans supported allowing gays and lesbians to teach in colleges before the Moral Majority was formed; today the figure is 77%. During the same time period, belief that gay and lesbian sexual relations are always wrong declined from 71% to 59%.

Support for traditional gender roles has also declined sharply. Before the Moral Majority mobilization only 51% of the public disagreed with a statement that men are better suited for politics than women; that figure today is 78%. The percentage of Americans who strongly believe that preschool children suffer if their mothers work outside the home has declined from 21% to less than 10%.

Even on school prayer, public attitudes are moving away from the Christian Right position. Only 35% of the public supported Supreme Court decisions to remove prayer and Bible reading from public schools before the Moral Majority mobilized; that figure is 43% today. Data from the National Election Studies show that over the past 12 years, public support for spoken prayers in schools has declined somewhat, while support has grown for a voluntary moment of silence.

This does not mean, of course, that there is no public support for Christian Right positions. There is considerable support for many restrictions on abortion access, including waiting periods, parental notification, and bans on some late-term procedures. The public supports teaching creationism in public schools as an alternative to evolution, and there is considerable support for vouchers to pay for private school

education. Yet, clearly, the Christian Right has not persuaded the public to support its key agenda. This may represent the limitations of an explicitly electoral strategy; the Christian Coalition chose to play insider GOP politics instead of engaging the culture in a broader discussion. The “Truth in Love” campaign last year marked the first time that the Christian Right made a unified attempt to launch a widespread public debate, and although the campaign was ultimately not successful, its inception does suggest that many activists also see the failure of electoral politics.

In the past few years, the movement has begun to couch many of its policy positions in terms of religious freedom. Instead of promoting school prayer for all, movement activists argue that current policies forbid students from practicing their freedoms. Instead of calling for laws to criminalize homosexuality, movement activists argue that anti-discrimination laws force them to violate their religious convictions by compelling them to rent to or hire gays and lesbians. Such “rights talk” shows an increasing accommodation of the movement to American culture, and may well presage an increase in support for a narrower movement agenda.

While the undeniable disarray of the Christian Coalition and its less than impressive electoral efforts this year do not bode well for that particular organization, other indicators suggest that the social movement itself may not share its fate. Political support for the movement remains unchanged, and the activist core, though diminished, is still a potent force. Despite the disintegration of the Christian Coalition, more broadly there continues to be support for the Christian Right. The Republican Party is unlikely to ignore that, even in the face of media death pronouncements for the movement. Thus far the Bush campaign has appealed strongly to movement activists; it remains to be seen whether Bush will steer to the center and deny the movement the right to write the GOP platform.

It would be a mistake to take too seriously eulogies for a movement the media confuse with an organization. In past eras when movement organizations have crumbled, evangelicals have built new infrastructure—schools, communication channels, and alternative cultural institutions. The collapse of the Christian Coalition may be an opportunity for Focus on the Family and other organizations. The Christian Coalition may very well dissolve, but the Christian Right movement is likely to be with us for some time. 

