

THE FAMILY AND “FAMILY VALUES” IN AMERICAN POLITICS

An Interview with Richard B. Wirthlin

PUBLIC PERSPECTIVE: The airwaves are all abuzz these days with paeans to the importance of “family values.” Just where does the family and concerns about its health as a primary social institution fit in American politics?

RICHARD WIRTHLIN: To answer that, we have to go back to 1980. The Democrats then held a 23 point margin over the Republicans in party self-identification. In putting the Reagan strategy together, we were looking for a way that we could tap into large coalitional blocs that would blur this established partisan affiliation. One of the main strategic positionings we used was to approach coalitions not in the classical sense of collections of groups defined by age, income, social status, race, and so on, but instead as groups bound together by common values. Then, we assessed where those values were congruent with Ronald Reagan’s agenda. As you may remember, the five component messages that framed a large part of the Reagan campaign were family, first, then workplace, neighborhood, peace, and freedom.

It was believed then—and I think this has been brought into clearer relief through work we have done recently for Reader’s Digest—that those married with children were not only a large group, but one with a consistently strong leaning toward conservatism. Many of the issues that were salient in the 1980 campaign tapped into things of special interest to voters who lived in families with children. We found that to be true not only of whites but also of blacks, of younger as well as older voters. So, identifying the family as a significant voting bloc around which we might build a party and a presidential strategy made a good deal of sense.

Of course, this whole issue has now been raised again. And, we see as always in politics that no party and no presidential candidate owns completely any issue or any coalition. Both parties recognize the importance of the family and both are attempting, in somewhat different ways, to garner support from appeals to this social unit.

The words, “family values,” have almost become an icon in this election. In some ways it’s a fairly empty icon. Simply saying that “we believe in the family,” doesn’t gain the candidate much at all. It may even lose votes. Very early on when we were dealing with this matter of applying values to drive a political message, we found that if you attempt to tap into something that is as closely, sensitively and personally held as a basic value, you can quickly get a backlash if you treat it too blatantly or too exploitively.

Also, it’s so important if you want to tap into values, that you underpin your appeal with some concrete, specific components of policy that actually strengthen the positioning of the value and the institutions associated with it.

This is where, in my opinion, the present dialogue really falls short. One can describe family values in terms of family assistance, or of traditional religious beliefs, or of conservative proclivities on a variety of issues. But family values is an empty vessel politically until linked to relevant policy. The word “values” is probably one of the most misused words in the English language today. When we speak properly of values, it should always be in the context of our views of the world and of ourselves that guide our behavior over long periods of time. Values are stable, enduring, and

very personally held. Political communication requires that if you want to motivate people, you must take the rational specific components of your message and link them persuasively and sensitively to the more emotive and enduring components of values.

PP: Besides this, for an issue area to be important politically, presumably people must believe there’s something wrong with the status quo. If everything is absolutely wonderful, it’s hard to see precisely how you fashion an appeal. Do Americans think things are really wrong with the family, to an extent that makes this issue, properly addressed, important now in the ‘92 campaign?

RW: Yes, there has to be a worry, or concern, or the belief that something might be wrong, or that something needs to be changed to leverage an issue. If you raise the question of what’s wrong with the family, you generate a wide diversity of answers. There is the sense that the family is becoming more unravelled than it’s ever been before, which does concern a large number of Americans. The difficulty in turning this into a political issue is really two fold. First, is this a problem that government can and should be involved in attempting to resolve? How may government create stronger bonds of family? One response may be that our welfare system is perversely designed to destroy families rather than to strengthen them. Other things may be cited, too, but they’re relatively limited and relatively few. In addition, there has to be a significant point of difference between your position and your opponent’s that puts you in a positive light comparatively. That may be difficult to establish in this area of family values. This suggests to me that, while we are going to see a great deal of

attention paid to the family, it might not redound to the overwhelming benefit of either Bush or Clinton.

PP: In a recent piece in *Reader's Digest* on your survey, Fred Barnes wrote that families with children are "a large, cohesive voting bloc." Do you see it that way?

RW: There's no question that they're large. Of the U.S. population 25 years and older, 57% are married couples who have had children. There's also no question that they have the potential of being a significant voting bloc. The challenge politicians may face is: "Are they actually cohesive?" In one dimension there is considerable cohesiveness. Because of the experiences that come from being married with children, they do tend to share a series of common interests and values, which are salient, and strongly reject other values.

PP: Barnes went on to argue that families with kids are especially strongly associated with "traditional values," "conservatism," and "religion." He seems to see them, then, still as a natural Republican group. Are they that, even if the Republicans may muff it in a given election?

RW: They are a group that has to be given considerable attention by the Republican party, and potentially they can make a big difference in this fall's results. But things are terribly volatile now with regard to party ties in general. I'm just in the process of doing another national survey, post-Perot. We found party ties loosening between March and July (pre-convention). The proportion who are either strong Democrats or strong Republicans dropped in our surveys (March to July) from high 20's and low 30's (percent) to the low 20's. So while families with children are a base that's potentially very responsive to the Republican messages, they will listen carefully to the Republican position and may not really turn out to reflect a partisan bloc at all. Again, there are no coalitions or issues that belong solely to

either party. It's absolutely clear that the Democrats recognize this particular voting group as one they must woo actively—as they did at their convention.

PP: Yes, but it wasn't very long ago that the conventional wisdom saw Bill Clinton as especially vulnerable when the focus is on traditional family values.

RW: This is one of Clinton's dilemmas. As you know, whatever position you take, whatever issue you propose, whatever group you go after, you are always subject to hostile fire from your opponent. The question is: How far can Clinton move into this area without exposing himself to a pretty devastating cross-fire that some of the other things in his life may reflect values quite contrary to those held by the group to which he's now appealing?

PP: In a release that *Reader's Digest* put out on the survey you conducted for them, you were quoted as saying that "instinctively, people may feel that when you're married and have children you become more traditional and conservative. But until now nobody had data to back up that instinct—and it's amazing how wide the family gap is." Let's talk about this a bit. Back in the '50s, a literature on suburbanization was very much in vogue. The idea was that when you moved to a suburb—the old Sam Lubell idea of moving out of the tenement and into the single-family house—and took up various other aspects of middle class status, your politics changed. "Suburbanization" was a way of locating a variety of important changes in social status and social interests. Do you see getting married and having children in much that same way—that it locates the assumption of a new status which is in some way transforming of social and political outlook?

RW: I would agree with that. It's one of those axial events of life that changes your social relationships and, frequently, that is accompanied by a change in your economic status—both in terms of new obli-

gations that you assume and the kinds of assets you own. And clearly the entire social and, I would suggest, political environments shift. It would be wonderful if we had some longitudinal studies with a political emphasis, that followed a sample of five or six thousand Americans from the time they were 18 through their entire life cycle. That would offer some empirically based answers to some of the questions you are now asking. At present, we can only speculate on those relationships by using cross-sectional data.

PP: I think of the huge literature on how people's politics is affected by their income and occupation. But I don't recall much literature at all exploring how particular family statuses can shape political outlook.

RW: It's been very sparse indeed. And we see some blindspots in this type of analysis in other countries. Many observers in Britain have ascribed Margaret Thatcher's long political ascendancy in large part to the transformation of home ownership, which she initiated. The economics of this are important, but they may tell only part of the story. In addition, expanding home ownership may have created a new social and political environment that had every bit as much effect on political behavior as the economic variables. Once again, it's important to view the political process not just through the prism of the standard demographics of age, income, occupation, and so on. Voting behavior is influenced if not driven by values, and values are molded and formed by a very broad range of social experiences. The family is an important political focus precisely because it's the most important of all social institutions.

Endnotes

¹Fred Barnes, "The Family Gap," *Reader's Digest*, July 1992, p. 54. The survey was conducted in March 1992 by the Wirthlin Group, for *Reader's Digest*.

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