"So Far the Religious Right is Playing an Inclusionary Game"

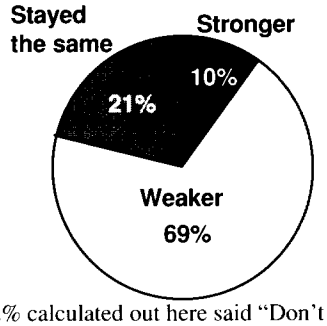
Interview with Richard B. Wirthlin

Public Perspective: Have religious beliefs and commitments in fact become more of a cutting edge factor in contemporary politics?

Richard B. Wirthlin: Yes, and as with most emerging coalitions, this hasn't happened overnight. It has come to the fore recently with a vengeance. We began looking at the born-again Christian group as particularly receptive to the Republicans back in the late 1970s, when we started to put the Reagan coalitions together.

Two or three things have happened almost simultaneously to give greater visibility to the emergence of the religious dimension in politics. First, there is a rising concern among Americans about moral or value issues. Even three or four years ago, when we asked respondents what they considered to be the most important problem facing the United States, the percent mentioning "decline in moral values" was generally between one and three percent. Most recently, it's ranging between 8 and 11%—very consistently so. Over the last couple of years, that is, there has been a rise in concern at the *extreme*. You would expect— other things equal—people to mention economic issues, or crime and violence, etc.

Question: Over the past 10 years, do you believe that this country's spiritual and moral standards have become stronger, weaker, or have stayed about the same?



Note: 2% calculated out here said "Don't know."
Source: Survey by the Wirthlin Group, August 1-3, 1994.

Another factor that has given visibility to the religious factor comes from the successes the conservative coalition—I use that term generically, not specifically—has had both in winning campaigns at the grass roots, and in party conventions that have led the group to take a more dominant role in party politics, as in Texas and South Carolina. Religious conservatives have achieved impressive success in the last six or eight months in helping the Republicans win some very interesting seats. The race that I was most involved in was the special House election in Kentucky. Ron Lewis, the Republican, beat Joe Prather, the Democratic nominee. A good part of the strategy here was tying Prather to Clinton, but the other component of that campaign was an extremely strong and effective grass roots organization that was staffed and fueled by the religious coalitions in the district. We never showed Ron Lewis ahead; he was always behind until the last ten days. Again, this attests to the importance of the efforts mounted by the religious coalitions.

The consciously orchestrated attack on the Christian Right, by DNC chairman David Wilhelm in June, and then the comments from people as diverse as California Democratic Congressman Vic Fazio and Surgeon General Joycelyn Elders, and President Clinton himself, further fueled interest in the press. As we know, once the press develops a theme, it generates a spate of articles. All those things working in conjunction have given a sharp prominence to the political impact of religious groups that wasn't extant even two years ago.

PP: You probably picked up on the "religious factor" in modern American politics sooner than anyone else.

RW: I remember an event where we had Ronald Reagan address an evangelical conference in Texas early in 1980. An influential reporter came up to me as that convention was well underway and said, "I just can't understand why you spent the time and effort to address this group. Please explain it to me." At that point I wasn't about to go into what we had learned: Namely, that this was an extremely valuable and large contingent of Democrats we felt we could pull over to us in large numbers.

In general, Americans continue to be a very religious people. Large majorities say they pray regularly and believe the Bible to be the word of God. If you even take a more generic measure, which I did in a new survey we conducted in August, on attendance of religious services, you find close to 50% saying they attend church every week or almost every week. This broad religious commitment brings into sharp relief why an orchestrated attack on the so-called Christian Right was probably the most serious political error that the Democratic administration has made. It's so difficult to feather out the difference between condemning political enemies, and condemning all people of faith. In my view, it's such a narrow and straight road that it was almost doomed from the day it was launched.

In our August survey, we asked a series of questions about this issue. We first asked people if they had "read or heard any comments by President Clinton or other Democratic spokespersons about the 'religious right'?" Only 19% said they had,

which is not too surprising given the communication clutter that we have. So only about 1 in 5 Americans even recalled those attacks. The follow-up question, to those who could recall, was: "Were you favorably or unfavorably impressed with those comments? ["And, would that be strongly or just somewhat?"] Sixty-four percent were *unfavorably* impressed, 44% were strongly so, while just 15% were strongly, *favorably* impressed. So, in terms of really driving a message, this particular gambit fell a bit short.

PP: Let's look further at the Democrats' position. As the religious factor plays out, what do you see as its impact on that party's future?

RW: If I were in the Democratic camp, all kinds of alarm bells would be going off for me, because of what's happened over the last two or three months. I would be worried not only about the rising saliency of the whole social/moral issue, but also about the ability of the religious right to organize. What's more critical, look at where the most damaging body blows have been delivered against Democrats or against Clinton—in the South. Two very critical things: Clinton support in the South has eroded more dramatically than any place else in the country, and Republican self-identification has increased more dramatically there than elsewhere. This has been a continuing phenomenon, of course, but it is picking up in tempo. When Reagan ran for the presidency in the 1980s, 51%, counting leaners, were Democrats and about 28% Republicans. But that gap has closed, going from 23 points to something between 3 and 6 points today.

In this setting, suppose that in the South there begins to be a big move in the fall elections, resulting in the Republicans picking up a lot of new congressional seats—that would be the potential "bottom line" result which would frighten me more than anything else, if I were a Democrat. That is, that the combination of Clinton's unpopularity in the region, and the long-term move that has been going on to the Republicans anyway, when coupled with a negative reaction to the Democrats' attacks on religious conservatives, could together fuel a major shift in legislative seats across the southern states.

PP: We've read many press stories where prominent Democrats were quoted as saying that they worry about questions of intolerance in religious belief, and thus don't like what they see the religious right doing, but at the same time the Democratic politicians are delighted because the reaction to the religious right is pushing people their way. What basis do you see for such an assessment?

RW: There is none. The only case I could point to would be the Virginia lieutenant governorship. But that exception really proves the rule. The Democrats also went after George Allen with the same vengeance because of his tie to Pat Robertson, but Allen was elected governor by a large margin. The point is that a good amount of resources were brought to bear to run a negative campaign against a second-order figure (Republican lieutenant governor candidate Michael Farris), and in this case it succeeded. But I can't think of another case where association with the so-called radical Christian right has yielded results in the contests themselves.

PP: Let's look at this matter from the other side. What about the problems for the Republican party arising from its increasingly close association with religious conservatives?

RW: The Republican party must be sensitive to the potential that the religious right has for creating a schism, but again, we've had these kinds of battles before. Whenever you have a group aligning itself to a party so as to have a distinct impact on the political agenda, there's always a danger that the results the group are seeking will alienate other groups the party needs. But, as the man falling from a 15 story building said when he had dropped five stories, "So far, so good." So far, the religious right in the party has in fact been able to distinguish between simply going in lockstep for their distinct agenda, versus electing or helping elect people who *generally agree* with their agenda.

The key component in determining whether or not the Christian right is going to help or hinder the party turns on the words "exclusionary" and "inclusionary." And so far, the religious right is playing an *inclusionary* game. For example, Paul Coverdell in Georgia and Kay Bailey Hutchison in Texas are both pro-choice, but won Senate seats last year with considerable support from Christian conservatives. The count is that the Republicans have won nine victories in nine off-year elections, since the 1992 presidential contest, and in almost every one of those nine elections the pro-family, pro-values-driven voters have played a fairly major role.

PP: So the key factor involves the leadership of politically active religious conservatives. And it's your view that on the whole they know how to play democratic politics.

RW: Yes, and it's taken a while. Going back to that convention of evangelicals in early 1980, they were very naive as far as politics were concerned. But the Christian right has learned a great deal about how to play the game with considerably more skill and more effect over the last fourteen years—now to the point of reaching out to blacks. We know that black voters are considerably more prone to identify themselves as born-again Christians than are white voters. It's also clear, of course, that blacks may continue to weigh "justice" and "economic growth" more heavily than "morality." The fact that Ralph Reed and the Christian Coalition would make an attempt to appeal to black voters on shared religious beliefs, even though they might disagree on role of government questions, is an excellent example of the extent of which parts of the Christian coalition are inclusionary, rather than exclusionary.

PP: It's often said, in effect, that the Houston convention in 1992 was controlled by the "religious right," and that this turned the country against the convention and set the Republican party off badly for the campaign. What do you make of that argument?

RW: Perhaps that could be true. People don't really play the game of politics that

finely. Still, the candidate, the issues, the record dominate and override what goes on at conventions.

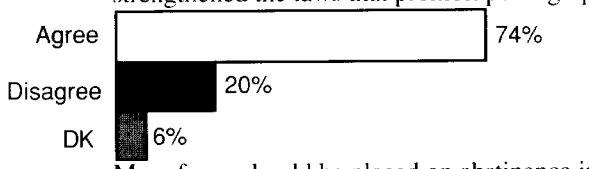
What's most important, the groups of religious conservatives we've been discussing just don't have a negative standing overall among the American people. In the August survey, I used the feeling thermometer to measure this. The phrase "religious right" was known well by 53% of the populace, with a thermometer rating of 50 (0 being the lowest possible response, and 100 being the highest). The Moral Majority was located by 61%, and it had a rating of 46. The Christian Coalition was located by 66%, with a 54 rating. It's very hard to demonize groups with that level of identification and thermometer ratings. If the ratings had been in the 30s, that would suggest a political attack might pay off. But the fact is that these groups are not seen negatively by most Americans.

For the future, the key thing is whether the various groups of religious conservatives remain inclusionary or not, and whether they talk about mainstream or radical issues. In the instances I have observed, they are talking about crime, reducing taxes, less government, and term limits.

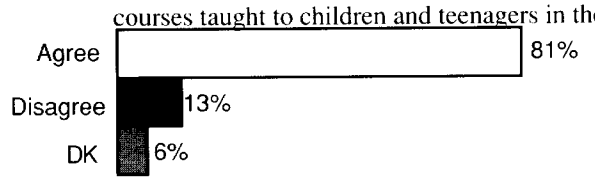
However, even if you do get into the classic religious right issues, such as teaching sexual abstinence or prohibiting pornography, you again get some fairly interesting results. I asked in an agree/disagree format if it would be a good thing in this country if we strengthened laws prohibiting pornography (see figure below). Seventy-four percent agreed, 59% strongly. Only 9% strongly disagreed with strengthening such laws. I also asked if more focus should be placed on having abstinence taught in sex education classes. Eighty-one percent agreed, 65% strongly.

Question: Please tell me if you agree or disagree with the following statements:

It would be a good thing in this country if we strengthened the laws that prohibit pornography.



More focus should be placed on abstinence in sex education courses taught to children and teenagers in the schools.



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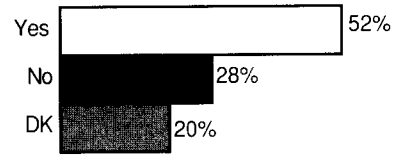
Question: The above statements represent some of the positions of the Religious Right. Would you say that you, yourself, share the goals of the Religious Right, as described above?



Source: Survey by the Wirthlin Group, August 1-3, 1994.

After asking these questions, we posed another one in which respondents were told that positions of the kind that they had just been asked about—prohibiting pornography and emphasizing abstinence—are positions of the religious right, and then were asked whether they shared such goals of the religious right. A large plurality said they did (see figure). Now, admittedly this is only one way of getting a reading of the public's feelings bearing on the group, and it's tilted in a certain direction, but almost any effort to ask people to assess a group they don't know much about is probably going to be tilted in one way or another. The important point is that the "religious right" is not seen for the most part in negative terms.

PP: In your view, then, if the Democrats are going to have success with this issue they need to make the case that there is a link between "religious right" and intolerance—that the religious right is intolerant or inflexible?

RW: Yes. But when you condemn your political enemies, and the political enemy is the religious right, you run the risk of seeming to condemn all religious people. You run the risk that you yourself seem religiously intolerant. What evidence is there that the religious groups are in fact intolerant? Looking at their agenda and commitment in the nine off-year races since November 1992—it would be hard to hang the title of "intolerant" around the necks of the religious conservatives and make it stick. If they were saying, "if you don't believe just what I believe, you're unacceptable," that would be one thing. But rather, they are concerned about crime, strengthening the family, what's happening in Washington. These are pretty mainstream, "non-radical" issues.

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