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RESEARCH NOTE

POLITICAL IDEOLOGY AND POLITICAL ACTION IN THE NEW CHRISTIAN RIGHT

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In attempting to explain the recent prominence of politicized Evangelicalism, many researchers have used exposure to religious television as an important intervening variable between religious fundamentalism and the politicized attitudes of the New Christian Right. Using Tamney and Johnson's data (1983; 1984), we try to refine that model by distinguishing between televangelists with specifically political messages from those who emphasize a more traditional, salvation-oriented message. The resulting statistics, however, do not show any improvement in explanatory power. Some possible reasons for this, as well as an alternative conceptual scheme for studying American political ideology, are presented.

Martin Marty's 1970 Righteous Empire divided Protestantism into two camps, the public and the private. The former was liberal or mainline (or as some now suggest, old-line) Protestantism and the latter was conservative or Evangelical Protestantism. The distinction hinged on the differences in the central concerns of the two groups: public Protestantism tackled issues of public concern (social, political, and to a lesser degree economic) while private Protestantism kept itself centered on individual piety, worship and salvation.

The late 1970s exploded that distinction; the rise of a public politicized Evangelicalism has been perhaps the religious story in the past decade. From World War II organized Evangelicalism had been politically quietist until the late seventies; it then dived into conventional political action with a powerful mixture of ideological zeal and technological sophistication. The question has been, naturally, what happened? Why this change? In our research we are searching for the mechanisms, or channels, that helped to foster the expansion of a conservative religious world-view to a worldview which includes religiously informed positions on issues not commonly thought

1. Authors listed alphabetically. We wish to thank Joseph Tamney and Stephen Johnson for lending their data and James Wright for comments on a first draft. A version of this paper was presented at the 1985 Annual Meeting of the Association for the Sociology of Religion.
of as moral or religious; primarily this means economic issues. Certainly Wuthnow’s (1983) essay on the national cultural changes which set the stage for political rebirth is persuasive; we hope to go a step further and explore the actual links between ideology and action.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

American politics has never developed the explicitly class-based political ideologies that are common to Europe. Rather, our Puritan/Protestant heritage has helped produce a mobility ethic and standards of social identity that are based on individual achievement. Yet Protestant individualism existed within a moral community, a community of saints, in fact, that had equality as an important religio-cultural theme. This has left American culture with a somewhat paradoxical legacy of both individualism and collectivism as important social and political principles. Bellah, et al. explore some of these tensions between individualism and commitment in the lives of Americans in their recent Habits of the Heart (1985).

Thus ideology in the American political left and right, rather than being tied directly to class interests, forms some cross-cutting distinctions. An elaboration and historical development of these ideologies exist elsewhere (Platt and Williams; forthcoming); we need only lay out the basic outline here.

**FIGURE 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Moral/Cultural</th>
<th>Economic/Resource</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Right</td>
<td>Collectivist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left</td>
<td>Individualist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Collectivist</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Our scheme has two dimensions: first, naturally, is the distinction between the political left and right; the second is between issues that are generally considered moral or cultural and those that are economic or deal with the allocation of material resources. These categories are not pure, of course, but the difference is generally understood (at least by the body politic, if not by academics). Moral or cultural issues are those which deal with personal and sexual morality, so-called “family” issues such as gender roles, and culturally symbolic issues like the saliency of religious myths and symbols in public life.

This is the top left quadrant of Figure 1 and is the so-called “social agenda” of the New Christian Right. As we see it, the Right has a decidedly “collectivist” view on these matters. The moral superiority of the community, and its religio-moral tradition, supersedes the private preferences of individuals. The obligations of the individual to, and the survival of, the moral community are primary.

On economic matters, however, the Right has a distinctly “individualist” ideology (quadrant 2 of figure 1). Anchored around the concept of “free enterprise” and its connotations of unfettered individual initiative, this ideological perspective offers a religious (or a somewhat secularized religious) justification for utilitarian individualism and inequality. In fact, the acquisition of resources is almost a moral duty, as
well as a right, of the individual; collective interests, or the "public good," are secondary concerns.

As we have noted, it is the public and political concern for issues in this dimension which is the sine qua non of the New Christian Right. The religious leaders of the NCR have taken positions on economic issues and electoral politics in a way that was almost unknown until recently. Further, they have added an explicitly religious justification to their pronouncements. This is what separates the NCR from conservative Protestantism generally: public, religiously-informed positions on issues that are usually thought of as narrowly economic or political. Social research has consistently shown a much higher degree of agreement among evangelicals and fundamentalists on issues such as homosexuality and school prayer, issues in our moral/cultural column, than on issues such as employment policy, environmental quality or electoral politics (e.g. Johnson, et al; 1983). Traditional socio-moral positions draw support from religiously fundamentalist people of both the political right and center; economic conservatism draws support only from the political right. The question remains: within the ranks of conservative Christians, what mechanisms make the expansion to a politicized religious world view possible?

One mechanism investigated frequently is religious broadcasting, or televangelism. It is the organizational and financial heart of most of the leadership of the NCR. Many studies have included watching religious television, or frequency of watching, as variables. The work by Tamney and Johnson (1983; 1984) is a good example. However, like many others, they often treat religious broadcasting as a lump, a homogeneous variable in which the content of any particular show is ignored. At one point they conclude:

... the independent significance of religious television suggests that some people support the Moral Majority simply because they have experienced effective persuasion urging such support (1983:154).

We want to refine this view; in fact the messages of various shows are not synonymous. Frankl's (1983) empirical work demonstrates that religious broadcasters differ markedly as to the political content of their message. We will test whether the differences in content is a significant force in shaping the religious-informed politics of the supporters of the NCR. 2

METHODS AND DATA

We borrowed the data that Tamney and Johnson have gathered. The Muncie Area Survey is an annual survey done in the Muncie, Indiana, SMSA. This allowed

2. We realize that our language implies a temporal ordering in which conservative Christians are first "narrowly" religious, then experience some type of process which changes them to persons with a broadly conceived notion of the religious. This may not be the case for many people. But in our differentiated and largely secularized society, it is more culturally accepted to confine religious beliefs to areas generally thought of as "moral" or cultural. We maintain that it is the adoption of a religiously informed economic ideology which is the problematic variable. Supporting this argument are the consistent, and rather weak, correlations we found between measures of religious fundamentalism, such as Biblical inerrancy, and measures of politicized religiosity such as compose Tamney and Johnson's "Christian Right Index."
us to replicate Tamney and Johnson's work with our own refinements; their data sets have a good combination of religious and political information. The MAS is a stratified random sample with 281 respondents. Done with both face-to-face (13%) and telephone (87%) interviews, the final N is 60 percent female and 83 percent white, with 14 percent black. We used data from the 1981 survey. This forms the basis of two articles by Tamney and Johnson: a 1983 article in the Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, and a 1984 article in Review of Religious Research. We began by reproducing their models using their scales. The scales which figure most prominently are: religious fundamentalism (the degree to which the respondent believes in the Second Coming of Jesus, the existence of Satan in the world, and the literal truth of the Bible); and their Christian Right index (the degree to which the respondent agrees with statements endorsing school prayer, a religious political party, clerical endorsements of political candidates, and America as God's chosen nation). The variables which concern religious television are: the frequency of watching, and an additive index which includes ten televangelists having shows in the Muncie area.

Tamney and Johnson's 1984 model used fundamentalism and the Christian Right index to predict watching what they termed "conservative televangelists." We took these ten names/shows and, based on Frankl's and on Hadden and Swann's work, divided them into those that have explicitly political messages and those that have more traditional, less politicized religious messages.

Frankl does statistical analysis of the content of several televangelists. One dimension along which they array these is called "fundamentalist ideology" and includes messages which promote free enterprise and patriotism, oppose homosexuality, and have a secular emphasis. Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson and James Robison score highest on this dimension, meaning their shows most frequently contain these more overt political messages; Oral Roberts, Jim Bakker and Rex Humbard all have significant negative scores, indicating a relative absence of these same types of messages. Hence we included the first three in our variable of politicized televangelists, and the latter three in our non-politicized variable.

The data also include questions concerning the programs of Jack Van Impe, Ernest Angely, Kenneth Copeland and the PTL club with Paul Crouch. We placed them in either the politicized or non-political group based on the descriptive work of Hadden and Swann (1981) and Horsfield (1984). Van Impe and Angely were assigned to the former, Copeland and Crouch to the latter. We coded these two variables as additive indices and used them in Tamney and Johnson's 1984 model as the dependent variable (transforming these variables into dummy variables did not improve our explanatory power).

Other primary variables included in our analysis include frequency of prayer, self-described support for the Moral Majority, and frequency of watching religious broadcasts.

FINDINGS

In Tamney and Johnson's 1984 work, "watching conservative televangelists" is
the dependent variable. This is an aggregate variable made up of all ten of the religious broadcasters mentioned above. We reproduce this model for comparison.³

**Diagram 1**

[Significance levels in parentheses]

![Diagram 1](image)

As described above, we decomposed their TV variable into one variable of televangelists which stress moral issues and salvation ("non-political televangelists") and another of those which explicitly address economic, political, and other ostensibly secular issues ("politcized televangelists"). The resulting models are presented in diagrams 2 and 3.

**Diagram 2**

[Significance levels in parentheses]

![Diagram 2](image)

Thus diagram 2 has as its dependent variable watching the politicized televe
glists, while diagram 3 has as its dependent variable the tendency to watch non-
politicized broadcasters.

3. Readers will note that our replication of Tamney and Johnson's model does not yield the exact coefficients that appear in their published reports. There are enough ambiguities in the treatment of missing data, the construction of the additive indices, and the fluctuations due to the inclusion and exclusion of minor variables to allow us to conclude that the discrepancies are not serious. The signs all run the same direction and the magnitudes are of the same relative size within each model; overall the model is a reasonable approximation. Of course we will compare our revisions of the models to our replication of the models rather than the published versions.
Compared to Tamney and Johnson's (1984) original model, ours do not do as well. We predict less of the overall variance as well as having uniformly smaller path coefficients among the principle variables. But what is even more surprising is that the Christian Right Index is a stronger predictor of the tendency to watch the non-politicized televangelists. And our index of religious fundamentalism is a weaker predictor of watching the traditional non-politicized programs than it is of the tendency to watch shows by the leaders of the NCR. We expected the opposite. If the political part of the NCR’s electronic message is its salient characteristic, those persons scoring higher on the Christian Right Index should be more inclined to watch the politicized televangelists. Concomitantly, given the weak link between the index of religious fundamentalism and the Christian Right Index (Pearson’s $r = .197$), those scoring higher on fundamentalism were expected to find the appeal of the traditional, non-political evangelists more attractive.

In spite of these unexpected results we pushed on to replicate, and then refine, Tamney and Johnson’s 1983 model predicting self-described support for the Moral Majority. Diagram 4 is the Tamney and Johnson model.
In this model, the religious TV variable is an independent variable with regard to the ultimate explanatory end of support for the Moral Majority. It is still, however, in a dependent relationship with the exogenous variables of age and education, and in a relationship of "reciprocal causality" with the Christian Right Index.

There are two differences to note here. They use the frequency of watching religious TV in their model, while we use the additive indices which measure how many programs are watched; the distinction between whether the programs fit into the politicized or more traditional column is also maintained. Thus we are making two comparisons; first, of the pure frequency of watching with the watching of specific programs; second, distinguishing between the relative political content of the programs watched.

The coefficients reported in Diagrams 5 and 6 are only those that differ from the replication of Tamney and Johnson"'s model (Diagram 4). Once again, the betas attached to our televangelism indices are not as strong as the "frequency of watching" variable in Diagram 4 (Diagram 4: .195; Diagram 5: .147; Diagram 6: .127). Since the $r^2$ of the regression equation that has Moral Majority support as its dependent variable is only slightly smaller in the refined models than in the replicated model (Diagram 4: .17; Diagram 5: .16; Diagram 6: .15), the path coefficients on the Christian Right Index and the Status Quo Index are correspondingly higher.
Further, the partial regression equations in which the television variables are the dependent variables (regressed against the Christian Right Index and age) perform better with frequency of watching (Diagram 4) than with the variables which reflect the programs of specific televangelists (Diagrams 5 and 6). The $r^2$ is significantly higher (.24, .12, .18 respectively), and age as an independent variable is much stronger (.30, .103, .074, n.s. respectively). It seems clear that the frequency with which one watches religious television is a more important factor in conditioning support for the Moral Majority than is the watching of specific programs, contrary to our expectations.

However, in comparing Diagrams 5 and 6 there is a difference (albeit modest) between the betas attached to the variable that reflects watching the politicized televangelists of the NCR and that which measures watching the more traditional, less political broadcasters. In Diagram 5, the beta coefficient between politicized TV and Moral Majority support is .147; in Diagram 6 the figure using non-political TV is .127 (with a significance level that is only marginally acceptable). The tendency to watch the politicized televangelists is a stronger predictor of support for the Moral Majority than is the tendency to watch non-political programs.

But again the Christian Right Index is more closely associated with watching the non-politicized televangelists. The beta coefficients going both to and from the Christian Right Index are significantly stronger in Diagram 6; one result is a higher $r^2$ attached to the non-politicized variable, another is a more attenuated relationship between Christian Right Index and Moral Majority support in Diagram 6.

Considering all the models we have presented, we are forced to conclude that watching the televangelists who incorporate a strong political content into their message is not tied strongly to the attitudes which Tamney and Johnson call the Christian Right Index or to self-described support for the Moral Majority. The one exception is the stronger beta for the politicized programs to Moral Majority support (.147) than from non-political programs to Moral Majority support (.127). Even this finding, however modest, is overshadowed by the better performance of frequency of watching any religious TV in the same model (.195).

CONCLUSIONS

We cannot draw the conclusions we would like. We had expected exposure to politicized televangelists to be the key which linked conservative religious positions on moral/cultural issues to conservative religious positions on economic/political issues. At least in the context of Tamney and Johnson’s models it is clear that it did not work. Yet there are some observations that can guide future research and make some sense of our findings.

First, of course, different measures of exposure to politicized televangelism might produce different results, particularly if accompanied by questions exploring why respondents viewed particular programs. It may be that in Muncie the political televangelists are less watched because of their time slots, or channel. It also does not seem unreasonable to ask respondents about their reactions to the shows’ influence on their behavior and why, if at all, they donate money (in our data, so few viewers...
actually donate it might be more profitable to inquire why they resist the financial appeals.)

But at a deeper level, we may have made a more sophisticated version of the error for which we criticize Tamney and Johnson. While they treat all televangelists as interchangeable, we sort them on the basis of their message. Both of these variables focus on the production of the message, rather than its consumption. That is, we assume the political message is the salient content and that viewers choose based on their sympathy with that content. But these programs have many messages, and viewers are not merely passive receptacles. Along with the active decision of which program(s) to watch, viewers may also selectively receive messages within any program. The translation between the pastor and his television flock is no more automatic than is any form of communication, and analysts should not assume what the viewers receive. The consumption of culture is generally less studied than cultural production in all sociology (see Demerath and Williams, 1984). This may be an area where attention to the reception and meaning of the message is particularly profitable.

REFERENCES


