

Representing God in Washington

The Role of Religious Lobbies
in the American Polity



ALLEN D. HERTZKE

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Representing God in Washington

*To my family,
Barbara, Patrick, and Simon*

Preface

I am concerned in this study with the collective function of national religious interest groups in the American political system. My argument is that they play a unique representational role in the "pressure system," articulating the values of many non-elite citizens and modestly correcting the skewed nature of the lobby universe.

Because little has been written about the national religious lobbies, I have attempted to assess them in the broadest possible manner, incorporating as much elaborate texture as possible without compromising the clarity of the central argument. I did this because I believe Washington lobbying provides a telescopic view of religious political engagement in the United States. Thus, I have included considerable material on individual groups and leaders, in part to illustrate how the pluralism of American religion is manifested in political action. In addition, I have tried to document the ways in which the congressional system, as a strategic milieu, in turn shapes and constrains religious political "witness."

In reviewing the work of other scholars I found a disjointedness that seemed to explain why the subject has not been treated in this manner before. Interest group scholars have not paid much attention to religious interests, for example, while scholars of religion and politics have largely ignored the lobbies, concerning themselves instead with either philosophical and con-

stitutional questions or mass attitudes and voting behavior. In addition, those few scholars who have dealt with representational issues have largely concentrated on a narrow band of religious groups without attention to broader interactive effects, leading them to underestimate the religious contribution to national representation.

Religious lobbies mirror the theological, organizational, ethnic, and regional diversity of American religion. In a sense, then, this study of religious groups is not only about Washington lobbying but will offer, I hope, insights into the deeper connections of religion to society and politics in America.

Acknowledgments

In tracing the evolution of this book, I am profoundly aware of the extent to which it is not alone my work but represents in a fundamental way the enormous contributions of others. This study began as a Ph.D. dissertation in political science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The three people most responsible for guiding the initial research were Leon Epstein, who served as my dissertation chairman, Booth Fowler, whose pioneering work on religion and politics paved the way for this study, and Graham Wilson, who suggested the focus on lobbies and the title. Leon and Booth, in particular, read numerous drafts of chapters, and I gained immeasurably from their insights and sage counsel. Significantly, they encouraged me from the beginning to write it like a book and not a dissertation. I also benefited from the suggestions of Richard Champagne, Cathy Johnson, and Robert Frykenberg, who read portions of the manuscript. Finally, I am indebted to the many professors and graduate students at Wisconsin who contributed immensely to my intellectual growth, and to the Wisconsin Alumni Research Foundation, which provided a travel grant to defray some of the expenses of my research trips to Washington, D.C.

The Carl Albert Congressional Research and Studies Center at the University of Oklahoma provided tremendous institutional assistance in the final stages of editing the manuscript. Ron Peters, Director of the Center, was extremely generous in pro-

viding support, and Gary Copeland, Associate Director, read the manuscript and shared his valuable insights. In addition, Albert Fellow Ken Cosgrove conducted extensive and thoughtful editorial work.

It is fitting, too, that I acknowledge the people I interviewed for this study, all of whom, as busy people in the Washington pressure cooker, shared their time, insights, and frank musings on themselves, their religious beliefs, and their political strategies. I know that my work has not done them justice, but I thank them all the same.

I am grateful, of course, to the University of Tennessee Press, and especially to Cynthia Maude-Gembler, a particularly aggressive and astute editor. Skillful and thorough reviews conducted by James Guth and Kathleen Beatty helped me to avoid several problems and clearly enhanced the quality of the final book.

Finally, I turn to the center of my universe, my family. My parents, solid farm folk from the heartland, have suffered a never-content searcher of a son with love and patience. Their financial help and encouragement were invaluable in enabling me to pursue a scholarly career. My wife's parents similarly assisted us in making the transition. There is one person, of course, without whose support I literally would not have made it. My wife, Barbara Norton, not only encouraged me to return to the academy, financially supported us during graduate school, proof-read several drafts of this book, but along the way bore two sons, who have a way of putting all vocational quests in perspective. I can say no more but to express my undying devotion.

Representing God in Washington

Contents

Preface xiii

Acknowledgments xv

1 Religious Interests in the American System 1

Contemporary Religious Political Engagement 3

Political Science and Religious Interest Groups 6

Oligarchy, Representation,
and Religious Lobbies 14

Organization of Chapters 17

2 American Exceptionalism and Religious Political Activism 20

Religious Lobbies and American Exceptionalism 28

Liberal Protestants 28

Fundamentalists 32

Roman Catholics 36

Jews 37

Evangelicals 40

Black Evangelicals 42

Summary 43

3 Political Strategies, Effectiveness, and the Congressional Milieu 44

Home District Pressure 49

Mass Constituency Mobilization 49

Elite Mobilization and Key Contacts 63

Direct Electoral Mobilization 65

Media Strategies 68

Classic Insider Strategies 69

Religious Weakness at the Micro Level 70

Episodic Effectiveness on the Inside 79

Religious Political Activism

and the Congressional Milieu 87

Summary 93

4 Representation and Religious Lobbies: An Introduction 94

The Concept of Representation 94

Representation of Church Institutions 101

Representation of Theological Traditions 104

Representation of a World Constituency 111

Summary 116

5 Representation of Domestic Constituencies 117

Domestic Social Issues 119

Foreign Policy 129

Domestic Spending and Economic Policy 137

The Texture of Religious Opinion 142

Representation and the Direct-Mail Groups 145

Summary: Representation

and the Broader Picture 153

6 Religious Lobbies and Congressional Policy-Making on Church-State Relations 161

- Equal Access—Background and Legislative History 162
 - The Courts and Student Religion* 163
 - School Prayer Sets the Stage* 165
 - The Equal Access Battle* 167
 - Implementation Guidelines* 172
- The Religious Constituencies:
 - Motives, Positions and Strategies 175
 - Fundamentalists* 176
 - Evangelicals* 179
 - The Anti-Pietist Alliance* 185
 - Summary 193

7 Representation Theory and the Religious Dimension 199

Appendix 209

- Methodology 209
- Research Interviews 213

Notes 217

Bibliography 243

Index 249

Tables

- 1 Opinion on School Prayer 120
- 2 Opinion on School Prayer, by Religious Affiliation 120
- 3 View of the Bible, by Opinion on School Prayer 122
- 4 Opinion on Abortion 122
- 5 Opinion on Abortion, by Religious Affiliation 124
- 6 Opinion on Abortion, by Church Attendance 124
- 7 Church or Synagogue Attendance, by Religious Affiliation 125
- 8 Opinion on Abortion, by Attendance for Selected Denominations 127
- 9 Opinion on Abortion, by View of the Bible 128
- 10 U.S. Involvement in Central America: Comparison of Respondents' Preferences with Their View of Reagan's Preference 131
- 11 Opinion on U.S. Involvement in Central America, by Religious Affiliation 133
- 12 Opinion on U.S. Posture toward Soviet Union 135
- 13 Opinion on Defense Spending, by Religious Affiliation 136
- 14 Opinion on Federal Spending for Food Stamps, by Religious Affiliation 138

1 Religious Interests in the American System

If 1976 was the “year of the evangelical”¹ in American politics, then 1984 was surely the year of “religion and politics.” In nationally televised debates presidential candidates Walter Mondale and Ronald Reagan clashed over church-state relations. The Reverend Jesse Jackson brought black evangelism to the Democratic convention, culminating a campaign based largely on a network of black congregations. New York Archbishop O’Connor sparred with Geraldine Ferraro over abortion, sparking both Mario Cuomo and Ted Kennedy to issue carefully reasoned statements on the proper relation of religious values to political obligations. Meanwhile, evangelical and fundamentalist conservatives flexed their muscles at a Republican convention that featured the Reverend Jerry Falwell and a platform heavily influenced by the New Religious Right. For intellectual elites it was significant that the pages of the *New York Times* were filled with lead stories, speech transcripts, and full-page advertisements discussing, debating, and analyzing the crosscurrents of religious political activism in America.

This study grew out of the conviction that one cannot adequately understand American politics without understanding the dynamics of religious political engagement.² Yet, over a decade after the election of a “born again” evangelical as president, our understanding of this religious dimension in American politics remains oddly incomplete and impressionistic.³ True, we know

something about the influence of religion on voting behavior⁴ and a great deal about the courts as a battleground for religious interests confronting secular powers or each other.⁵ Congressional lobbying, however, has received scant attention, and most studies of religious lobbies are dated, limited in scope, or incidental to other research foci.⁶

Moreover, where scholars have dealt with the representational issues involved in lobbying, they have tended to concentrate on a narrow band of ideological groups, about which they are often critical. Thus, critics of the liberal churches tend to discount them as out of touch with lay members,⁷ while other scholars view the fundamentalist activists as intolerant and lacking public support.⁸ In neither case are the actual policy impacts of the activism assessed, nor is there much attention paid to the activities of groups in between the ideological poles.⁹

What is lacking in the study of religious political engagement, I would argue, is an approach that encompasses the breadth of religious interests; and it is precisely the nature of Washington lobbying that makes it an especially fruitful field for just such a comparative analysis, for three reasons. First, in contrast to the relatively narrow band of religious groups that actively engage the courts,¹⁰ it is in Washington that nearly every modern permutation of religious belief or interest is represented, drawn by the same imperatives that have brought hundreds of groups to the nation's capital in what Jeffrey Berry calls the "advocacy explosion."¹¹ Indeed, lobbying reflects well the pluralistic nature of religious activism, even if some interests are better represented than others. Second, the Washington milieu represents a common ground where groups with different regional, ethnic, theological, or ideological bases meet in close proximity. It is here that leaders develop strategies, coalitions form, issues are framed, bedfellows emerge, partisans mutually adjust, and members are mobilized.

Finally, Washington presents a common challenge to religious interests, an environment to which they must adapt to be effec-

tive. It is in the capital, perhaps more than anywhere else, that the “absolutes” of religious faith confront the hard and seductive reality of practical politics. The congressional system, with its norms, rituals, parliamentary intricacies, and multiple points of access, must be mastered if a religious group wishes to achieve some success. In interviews with congressional staff members the same theme repeatedly emerges: to be effective, religious lobbyists must learn to play the game, to think strategically, and to understand the norms of congressional politics. Differences and similarities between antagonistic groups, thus, emerge within a common environment, potentially suggesting, for example, what distinguishes Catholics from Episcopalians, Lutherans from Mennonites, or evangelicals from fundamentalists, as they translate their religious values into political action.

In short, the diversity of religious groups in Washington, their close proximity to each other, and the common political constraints they face, provide an excellent opportunity for insightful analysis and for isolating those variables that pertain to religious groups in particular from those that reflect the nature of the American political system. This treatment of religious lobbies, then, attempts to examine not only how religious interests shape American politics but how the American political system, particularly the congressional milieu, in turn, channels, constrains, and in some cases alters that religious political “witness.”

Contemporary Religious Political Engagement

A Lutheran pastor, upon returning from a church-sponsored trip to Nicaragua, stuns his rural congregation by attacking American support for the Contras. The collection plates at a Presbyterian congregation fill up one Sunday, not with money, but with an offering of letters to Congress supporting more food aid to Africa. An Episcopal church houses refugees from El Salvador; a Catholic community votes to support the nuclear freeze; and