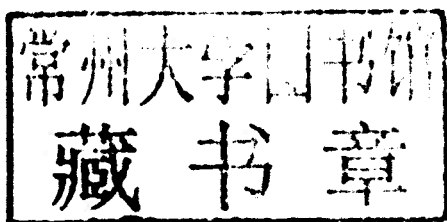# SOCIAL CONSERVATIVES AND PARTY POLITICS IN CANADA AND THE UNITED STATES

James Farney

Social Conservatives
and Party Politics in Canada
and the United States

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SOCIAL CONSERVATIVES AND PARTY POLITICS IN CANADA AND THE UNITED STATES

The strength of the Tea Party and Religious Right in the United States, alongside the Harper Conservatives' stance on same-sex marriage and religious freedom in Canada, has many asking whether social conservatism has come to define the right wing of North American politics.

In this timely and penetrating book, James Farney provides the first full-length comparison of social conservatism in Canada and the United States from the sexual revolution to the present day. Based on archival research and extensive interviews, it traces the historic relationship between social conservatives and other right-wing groups. Farney illuminates why the American Republican Party was quicker to accept social conservatives as legitimate and valuable allies than the Conservative Party of Canada.

This book will be indispensable for understanding why a movement so powerful among American conservatives has been distinctively less important in Canada and how the character of Canadian conservatism means it will likely remain so.

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Preface

As I write this preface in the spring of 2012, contraception has become a significant issue in the Republican primary campaign, American courts at the state level are ruling on same-sex marriage as well as laws requiring ultrasounds before abortion, and state initiatives on same-sex marriage promise to be important in the fall general election. In Canada, a private member's bill seeking to define the start of human life, and court cases concerned with polygamous marriage, the legalization of prostitution, and freedom of religion, have brought renewed attention to the issues examined here. This book does not provide an up-to-the-minute treatment of these issues, but it does offer historical context and a theoretical blueprint for understanding them.

Such contextualization and theorizing are important, for social conservatism is often treated simply as a backlash – as the province of simple-minded religious believers who seek to roll the clock back to the 1950s. Such an image of social conservatives fails to explain why it has appealed to so many people or to shed light on the convoluted way in which our societies have sought to deal with the political implications of the sexual revolution and the important normative questions raised by social conservatism about the boundary between private choices, social mores, political decisions, and religious belief. Contention over these boundaries is unavoidable in liberal societies, but misunderstanding how they came about and their substantive nature can be avoided, and I hope this book helps resolve this.

Similarly, this volume tries to offer a better treatment of the distinctive nature of Canadian conservatism. By examining the most striking difference in the conservatisms of Canada and the United States – the relative strength of social conservatism in party politics –

this book seeks to explain the nature of the conservative coalition in both countries and the ways in which the different historical legacies of the two countries continue to shape the partisan options presented to their citizens. Particularly in Canada – where Stephen Harper's success at reshaping the federal political landscape has been remarkable – accurately understanding the nature of his party's ideology takes us a long way to understanding our political future.

This book began at the Political Science Department at the University of Toronto. Don Forbes was a wonderfully supportive mentor who let me run with an interesting story. Linda White, Rob Vipond, David Rayside, and David Laycock were very helpful readers; Victor Gomez, Joshua Hjartarson, Celine Mulhern, Reuven Scholzberg, Luc Turgeon, Jenn Wallner, and Steve White were constantly encouraging friends and colleagues. Most of the transformation of that draft into this book was done in 2009–10, when I was the Skelton-Clark Postdoctoral fellow at Queen's University. There, Robyn Brooks helped with the research for chapter 5; Oded Haklai, Scott Matthews, Royce Koop, and Elizabeth Goodyear-Grant were very encouraging colleagues; and Keith Banting was the very model of the supportive senior scholar. The final stages of the manuscript's preparation took place at the University of Regina, where I have found myself in a very supportive department. All three universities provided institutional support at one time or another. Daniel Quinlan, my editor at University of Toronto Press, has been tremendously encouraging and helpful.

My final debt of thanks is to my family. Christina has lived with this project almost as long as I have, but has shown considerably better humour and more patience with it. Bridget won't remember her signal contribution to it (accepting Hayek as a reasonable bedtime story) but has brought me tremendous joy during its writing.

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SOCIAL CONSERVATIVES AND PARTY POLITICS
IN CANADA AND THE UNITED STATES

Introduction

Social conservatives – that is, those conservatives whose political activities focus on topics like abortion and gay and lesbian rights – represent one conservative response to the sexual revolution of the 1960s. Like their progressive opponents, social conservatives accept that the 'personal is political' and advocate the use of state power to advance their beliefs about the proper ordering of society. Often, they also promote the application of religious mores to politics. This book's starting point is the observation that social conservatives have found different places in Canadian and American party politics. Understanding why this is the case means dealing with two puzzles: how the definition of conservatism has changed since the 1960s and how the different histories of Canadian and American conservatism framed the relationship between social conservatives and other conservatives as this shift took place. The first question – how the meaning of 'conservative' has changed since the 1960s – receives explicit attention in chapter 1. It identifies a group of conservatives, usually called social conservatives, who have emerged since the 1960s. They are distinguished from two older types of conservatives: traditionalist conservatives and laissez-faire conservatives. For different reasons, both traditionalists and laissez-faire conservatives are hesitant to treat issues like lesbian and gay rights or abortion as political or to allow explicit religious doctrine much political importance. Social conservatives, alternatively, argue that social changes in the sphere of personal morality create crucial political questions on which religious tradition often has much to say.

To say that social conservatives represent a new form of conservatism that has contributed a great deal to our image of the United States as a more conservative country than Canada is important.

Observing such a similarity naturally leads us to trace the different evolution of social conservatism, especially the relationship between social conservatives and other conservatives, in the two countries. This comparative-historical accounting of the evolution of social conservatism will not only help us understand the different paths of social conservatives, but should offer a more accurate characterization of Canadian conservatism as a whole than a number of recent accounts (MacDonald 2010, Warner 2010, Martin 2010), all of which, to one extent or another, have over-emphasized the power of social conservatism in Canada and, by so doing, overplayed the similarities between Canadian and American conservatism.[1]

With a typology of conservative subgroups developed, chapter 2 turns to examine American conservatism from the Second World War until the late 1970s. Unlike in Canada, and despite the American constitution's separation of church and state, conservatives in the United States generally accepted the social conservative concern with sexual morality and allowed that religious arguments had a place in the public square. Moreover, all sorts of conservatives shared the sense that they were outside the normal Republican party establishment. This made them eager to build alliances so as to enhance their chances of political success when they competed with liberal Republicans for control of the party.

Chapter 3 examines conservative mobilization in support of Ronald Reagan between 1978 and 1980 and the place of social conservatives in the Republican Party under Reagan and his successor, George H.W. Bush. It was during this time that social conservatives first made their presence felt in the Republican Party in a significant way. Reagan confirmed that there existed a legitimate place for social conservatives in the party while the Moral Majority and similar organizations proved to be powerful social movement actors. While social conservatives were not able to shift government policy as far as they had hoped during this period, the Reagan and Bush presidencies did see the cementing of the alliance between the conservative movement (with which social conservatives were full partners) and the Republican Party.

Chapter 4 looks at social conservatives in the Republican Party since 1993. The transition from social movement allies to co-partisans that occurred during this period, as social conservatives integrated themselves into the grass roots of the party, allowed social conservatives to consistently keep their concerns among the positions taken by the Republican Party but has also greatly limited their independence. It was

during this organizational transformation that there was conflict over the place of social conservatives in the party. This conflict was but one part of a period of general debate among American conservatives about the meaning of conservatism. By the late 1990s these disputes seem to have been more or less resolved. Social conservatives moderated their policy demands and provided strong support for the party while other Republicans renewed their commitment to the recognition of social conservative concerns.

Until the late 1990s, the relationship between different types of Canadian conservatives was quite different from that in the United States. Chapter 5 examines the Progressive Conservative Party of Canada. It finds that the party defined social issues like abortion or gay and lesbian rights as moral issues that were improper subjects for political mobilization. This norm lasted from the emergence of social issues in 1968 until the collapse of the Progressive Conservatives in the 1993 election. Outside of party politics, the pro-life movement, the locus for social conservative activism at this time, was committed to a non-partisan approach and was internally divided, so it could offer little support to social conservatives in the party.

Chapter 6 examines the Reform Party. Here, the story is more complicated. Initially, the party's dominant approach to social issues (abortion still being the most prominent) was to declare them moral issues best decided by a referendum, not through partisan posturing. This populist preference for direct popular input affected social conservatives in a similar manner to the norm embodied in the Progressive Conservative Party. This changed during the mid-1990s, when gay rights replaced abortion as the dominant social issue and the party leadership's ability to enforce internal discipline declined. Reform then took a much more socially conservative position on gay rights than it had on abortion – a transition that marks the beginning of social conservative legitimacy on the Canadian right.

Reform's populism and its western roots prevented it from having a serious chance of forming the government. In an attempt to attract new supporters, Preston Manning, the Reform Party's founder and leader, initiated the United Alternative project in the late 1990s. While successful in creating a new party (the Canadian Alliance) this process also left Manning vulnerable to a leadership challenge. Stockwell Day, who defeated Manning in the resulting contest, gained a significant part of his support from social conservatives. Day's downfall, the rise of Stephen Harper, and the pressures facing the Canadian Alliance and the

Conservative Party of Canada are the topics of chapter 7. Despite the new parties' shared desire to form the government, and Day's rapid downfall, social conservatives enjoyed more prominence after the creation of the Canadian Alliance in 2000 than they ever had before. At least in part, this new prominence can be attributed to a change in the beliefs of Canadian conservatives generally, for many on the right came to recognize the concern of social conservatives as politically legitimate even if Canada's demographic realities and institutional configuration meant that social conservatives would never wield the political power that they do in the United States.

This focus on the legitimacy of social conservatism stands in a particular tradition of political science which emphasizes the influence that organizational forms have on political behaviour.[2] Other traditions of inquiry would emphasize other ways in which Canadian and American politics, such as political and religious cultures, legal traditions, federal structures, and social movement environments. The rest of the Introduction sets out both the specifics of the approach used here and the outlines of possible alternatives.

From the organizational perspective on political parties, American parties are similar to Canadian parties insofar as they are not mass parties, but they differ with respect to almost every other organizational feature (Young 2000). Indeed, from a comparative perspective, American parties sometimes scarcely seem to be organized parties at all (Katz and Kolodny 1994), as members of Congress and senators have a great deal of autonomy from the party's organization (Eldersveld and Walton 2000). Potential presidential candidates, in recent times, have generally drawn on networks of people personally loyal to them rather than on members of the party establishment for support (Wattenberg 1991). This situation gives outside social movements and policy entrepreneurs considerable opportunities to gain influence without the support of or sometimes even in opposition to the party's central organization. Not only do they have access, but – given weak party discipline – they can pursue a piecemeal strategy of winning influence over members of Congress or senators one at a time. Such influence can be gained either through conventional lobbying or through organizing in an electoral district to gain control of the party organization in that district (Wilcox 2006).

Canadian parties are – at least in contrast to their American counterparts – centralized organizations. They are tightly disciplined parties operating in a Westminster parliamentary system. This combination

gives the party leader enormous power over decisions about personnel, policy, and strategy. This strength is compounded by the increasingly professionalized staff that supports the party leader but which is available to the rest of the party only in a much more limited way (Carty, Cross, and Young 2000). This disciplined parliamentary party is the only element of the party that can really be said to exist between elections, for the extra-parliamentary party is a short-lived campaigning device (Wolinetz 2002). The environmental pressures that cause convergence on this form of organization are great. Even the Reform Party, which initially sought to be less bureaucratic and less partisan, was eventually forced to conform to this model (Ellis 2005). The nature of Canadian party organization means that Canadian political parties are disciplined on questions of both office and policy, so that the views of the leader are critical to the position that the party takes (Carty 2002). The formal organization of Canadian parties, therefore, confronts groups like social conservatives with a clear challenge: the party's leadership has firm control of the agenda. Getting a social conservative position onto a party's agenda means convincing that party's leadership that it ought to be accepted. For, without that acceptance, only grass-roots mobilization strong enough to unseat a leader could hope to put new issues on the party's agenda.

This is not to say that Canadian parties are completely monolithic. As Perlin (1980) shows regarding the Progressive Conservatives and Ellis (2005) shows with respect to the Reform Party, such formal unity is often not fully realized. Factions do sometimes form, leaders are sometimes challenged (if often informally), and issues are placed on the agenda against the wishes of the leadership or in the face of what seems the electoral self-interest of the party. The question becomes which factions, with what type of challenge, on what type of issues, successfully challenge the leadership? Answering such questions means that it is necessary to do more than classify a party as franchise, cartel, cadre, or mass party (to mention only a few of the classic distinctions) on the basis of its formal organizational structure. Rather, it is necessary to work within a framework that allows a nuanced accounting of internal party dynamics – the sort of approach to political institutions generally described as the new institutionalism.[3] This approach views institutions as much more than collections of formal rules or organizational hierarchies. Instead, they represent particular ways of political organization that are defined in both formal and informal ways. They organize those active within them through

collections of interrelated rules and routines that define appropriate be-
havior in terms of relations between roles and situations. The process in-
volves determining what the situation is, what role is being fulfilled, and
what the obligations of that role in that situation are . . . When they [mem-
bers of an institution] encounter a new situation, they try to associate it
with a situation for which rules already exist. (March and Olsen 1989, 160)

Action within an institution is about questions of correct identity, obli-
gations, shared assumptions, and duties defined both in formal organi-
zational rules and, our focus here, informal norms of appropriateness.
This approach allows that parties are influenced by external factors
such as popular opinion, political events, and the nature of the com-
petition they face, but treats them as more or less autonomous agents
whose interactions with their environment is neither entirely reactive
nor determined completely by that environment. Instead, parties are
understood as the institutional setting for debates and competition be-
tween different groups of partisans.

For our purposes, the central question in the reception of social con-
servatives concerns the appropriateness of their claims – were they
asking political questions in an appropriate way, as membership in
the Progressive Conservative or Republican parties (for example) im-
plied? Social conservatives were rarely involved in full-scale debates
with other conservatives about what constituted the political parties
in which they were involved. Indeed, they seem to have taken the par-
tisan organizations that structured their activity as given. What was
important, though, was what they and other conservatives thought
were appropriate topics for political parties to address. The norm about
the boundary between politics and morality held in conservative par-
ties both constituted the conservative identity and defined certain be-
haviours as appropriate for those holding that identity. They helped
to define the actors who had interests to be pursued and identified the
constraints on how those actors could pursue their interests. Recog-
nizing these features helps us to understand how conservative leaders
viewed public opinion and the nature of the competition they faced
with other parties; it does not discount such factors. Indeed, one would
hardly expect an institution to survive for long if the rules that defined
it were too out of touch with its environment or weakened it in rela-
tionship to its competitors. At the same time, given the path-dependent
logic inherent in this type of argument, norms may embody a view of
what is in the actors' best interest that is no longer entirely accurate.

When the gap between norms inherent in an institution and its environment becomes too great, institutional change can occur.[4]

Other approaches to the different place that social conservatives have found in Canadian and American politics would stress different factors, though none would offer us the insight into the nature of conservatism or internal party dynamics that the approach outlined above does. These other factors weave in and out of the account that follows, but it is worth stating the most important of them up front so as to make clear the other constraints within which conservative parties operated. These different contextual factors can be loosely grouped into differences in governmental institutions, different sociological contexts, and different systems of party competition.[5]

In addition to how differences between the presidential and parliamentary systems have influenced the structure of political parties, the broad institutional differences between Canada and the United States have created different opportunities for social conservatives to form alliances on the right. In both countries, litigation has become an important strategy for both sides in the debate over social issues. In Canada, this strategy became available only with the passage of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms in 1982. The Charter, which entrenched a bill of rights in the Canadian Constitution, is very popular in Canada. In the United States litigation is much more contentious, so that progressive court decisions have provided social conservatives common ground with other conservatives concerned with a governmental process that gives too much power to the courts. Futhermore, Canada's unitary judicial system and the nature of its constitutional division of powers have kept debates over gay and lesbian rights and abortion primarily at the federal level. This has prevented especially conservative provincial governments from making provincial laws more socially conservative or tweaking federal guidelines in a socially conservative manner. In the United States, alternatively, many of these issues are decided at the state level. This both creates more opportunities for social conservatives to influence policy and allows the movement to make progress in Alabama or North Dakota even when it loses ground in Massachusetts or New York State (Smith 1999).

Social movement scholars have made much of these broader institutional dissimilarities. For those who study political parties, a more customary area to focus on has been differences in the sociological makeup of the two countries. On the whole, Canadians are more socially liberal than Americans as well as being significantly less religious (Adams

2003). This obviously creates less fertile ground for social conservatives north of the border, a deficit that has been exaggerated by the different ways in which regionalism has interacted with the party system. In Canada, competition between the Liberals and Conservatives for office has been decided on the basis of one or the other party making gains in the suburbs around major metropolitan areas or in Quebec. In other words, the socially liberal areas of the country are the ones that conservatives need to appeal to if they want to win office. Since the 1960s in the United States, on the other hand, it has been either southern or border states (like Ohio) that have tipped the balance towards one party or another. These areas are much more socially conservative than the American average. Canadians are also much less religious. While defining terms is difficult here, 10–12 per cent of Canadians can be classified as evangelical Christians, compared with 25–33 per cent of Americans (Reimer 2003), and Canadian Roman Catholics have been less involved in socially conservative activities than their American counterparts (Byrnes 1991, Cuneo 1989). This means not only that there are more religious people in the United States who may find socially conservative positions appealing, but also that the religious networks that can mobilize believers are far denser in the United States than they are in Canada.

Finally, the party systems of Canada and the United States place social conservatives in subtly different situations in each country. In both Canada and the United States, competition for office is between a large party of the centre-left and one of the centre-right. This situation often leads both parties to appeal to the median voter, muting their ideological differences. In the United States, though, social issues were a key part of what drove conservatives (especially in the south) of the Democratic Party into the Republican camp. They were moving precisely because they were dissatisfied with the soft centre-left position the Democrats were taking and were unlikely to allow their new partisan hosts to take similar positions. In Canada, alternatively, social issues did not cause a rift with the Liberals to the same degree, and therefore appealing to the median voter from the right was a far less complicated concern. Where Canada's party system did allow an opening for social conservatives that was absent in the United States was in the Canadian system's greater openness to new parties. Canada's existing parties may be leader-dominated and difficult to influence, but they are vulnerable to challenges from new parties in ways that the Democrats and Republicans are not (Carty, Cross, and Young 2000). The Reform