

SAMPLE RESEARCH REPORT

**THE ROLE OF THE RELIGIOUS RIGHT
IN TEXAS ELECTORAL POLITICS**

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THE ROLE OF THE RELIGIOUS RIGHT IN TEXAS

Over the past 100 years, the Christian Right has seen an increasingly important role in U.S. politics and elections. From the days of William Jennings Bryan or Martin Luther King, Jr. to the present days of Ralph Reed and Randy Tate, the growth of the Christian Right has been a nationwide effort, especially at the grassroots level. The recent goal of the Religious Right has centered around an effort to mobilize its supporters at the state and local level. They have formed organizations in almost every state, and they have made an impressive connection at the local level as well.

In the following paragraphs, I would like to take a closer look at the organization of the Christian Right. Although they have had some success in almost every state, their organization and involvement is different in each one. In some states, the Religious Right plays a very significant role, and in others, their effort has been less effective. Therefore, I have chosen Texas. It is a state that has involvement and organization on all different levels, and I feel that it warrants explanation and analysis of the past, present, and future.

First, a little background about the state could be helpful. Texas, like many other southern states after the civil war, was very heavily democratic. It is a state that is made up of thousands of conservative churches, whose members are mainly Baptists, Fundamentalists, and evangelicals. Texas is also home to more than five million Catholics, most of whom are Hispanic. As a result, the Democratic Party dominated politics in Texas until the 1960's and the rise of the civil rights movement. It was considered to be, in most cases, a one party state, where winning election as a

Republican candidate was almost an impossible feat. However, the rise of the civil rights movement began to cause friction within the Democratic Party, which eventually led to the defection of many supporters to the Republican side of the aisle. In 1978, Texans elected their first Republican governor in more than 100 years, but the Democratic Party didn't lose all of its business. For the next few elections, the two parties struggled for power, but the Democrats managed to keep a slight edge.

The role of the Christian Right also grew during this expansion period for Republicans. Much of the success of the Republican growth, especially in the past decade, has been attributed to Dick Weinhold. He was the chief fund raiser for Pat Robertson's presidential campaign in 1988, and in 1991 he assumed the role as the new director for the Texas Christian Coalition. Within the first five years of his leadership, the enrollment of members within the group rose from 10,000 to more than 120,000, which was quite an admirable accomplishment. Other groups also began to emerge with some influence. Some of these groups included the American Family Association, Concerned Women for America, Eagle Forum, Associated Conservatives of Texas, Concerned Texans, the Texas Home School Coalition, and Citizens for Excellence in Education. As a result, the stage was being set for the 1994 and 1996 elections, as well as future endeavors. (Rozell, Mark J. and Wilcox, Clyde, God at the Grassroots, 1996).

THE TEXAS RELIGIOUS RIGHT IN THE 1994 ELECTIONS

The 1994 elections saw a very heated race between incumbent Democratic governor Ann Richards and popular Republican candidate George W. Bush Jr., son of former President, George W. Bush Sr. (George Jr. is often referred to as George W. to distinguish between the two). The race included harsh comments from both sides as well. Richards pounded Bush for not taking a

stand on the religious conflicts within his own party, in which the Religious Right was gaining considerable control, and the Bush camp retaliated by calling Richards a failed leader, who faced problems within the state prison system and raised taxes by \$2.6 billion (Mathis, Nancy and Ratcliffe, R.G., Houston Chronicle, June 8, 1994). Bush, also stated that he would not get involved in the struggle for the chairmanship in the Texas GOP Party, the struggle that Richards was referring to, which involved a passionate fight between traditional conservatives and social Christian conservatives. Rather, Bush said that he would wait for the battle to come to an end at the upcoming state Republican convention.

The tension between the two candidates was also evident in voters. The outcome of the election was tough to determine down to the wire. In the end, however, Bush emerged as the victor with 53 percent of the vote, compared to 46 percent claimed by Richards. In exit polls taken as voters exited their respective precincts, it also seemed that the Christian Right had emerged as a victor as well. According to the data, people who considered themselves to be part of the Religious Right movement made up 22 percent of the white voting participants, with Bush claiming an overwhelming 81 percent of their support

(www.cnn.com/ELECTION/1998/states/TX/polls/TX94GH.html, “1994 Texas Exit Poll Results for Governor”). *This exceptional turnout of movement* supporters proved to be a significant portion of Bush voters and established a true sense of respect for the Christian Right. It also

gained the attention of many other potential candidates for office, who were looking forward to 1996.

THE TEXAS RELIGIOUS RIGHT IN THE 1996 ELECTIONS

As a result of their profound influence on the 1994 elections, the Religious Right movement in Texas was placed in the spotlight in 1996, and this newly found attention would bring some newly found dilemmas within the group. One of these new dilemmas involved the choice between a pragmatist approach or a firm purist stance. As a new political power, it was more difficult for the movement to take a purist point-of-view, because doing so could cause them to lose potential supporters. On the other hand, it could prove to be difficult for current members and followers to learn to compromise by using a pragmatist approach. In the past, the group had supported pro-choice candidate Kay Bailey Hutchinson in 1992 and moderate conservative George W. Bush Jr. for governor in 1994, but now they wanted to use their influence to elect candidates that would push for their own agenda. In the end, they chose to stand ground on a more purist campaign and began to lie out a plan to do just that.

To support a purist plan, the Christian Right began to think of activities to improve their chance of winning. One of these activities involved training sessions, at least 25, on how activists could become precinct chairs, which proved to be very effective. At the conclusion of the state Republican convention, the Christian Right was estimated to have held 80 percent of the precinct chairs throughout the state. Consequently, they achieved an enormous ability to control the platform of the Republican Party and used that control to put their own agenda into the party platform. The 1996 Republican Party platform included encouragement to ban all abortion (including those in the case of rape, incest, and life of the mother), encouragement of the

legislature to outlaw birth control for minors, and withdrawal of support for the use of referendums and initiatives. The Christian Right also gained major control of the party's nominating process for delegates to the national convention. By the end of the convention, many of the recommended delegates submitted by presidential candidate Bob Dole were ignored and replaced by those who were more sympathetic to the movement's cause. In fact, 72 of the 90 district delegates elected to attend the national convention were reportedly members of the Right (Rozell and Wilcox, 1997).

Another tactic used by the Christian Right in the 1996 elections was the distribution of voter guides. The Christian Coalition distributed more than five million guides throughout the state in churches and mailings, but gained some negative attention from the NAACP when one of the guides featured a white candidate agreeing with the coalition's views and a black candidate disagreeing. These voter guides, which claimed to be non-partisan, typically supported Republican candidates and also encouraged church-goers to support the Republican Party (Rozell and Wilcox, 1997).

In a final tactic for the 1996 elections, the Christian Right utilized its financial backing to support certain candidates. Through the use of political action committees (PACs), the Right found new ways to assist candidates in their bid for election. These PACs used their monetary backing to provide candidates with direct contributions, public attention, advertisements, and other means of compensation. Some candidates even allowed direct involvement in their campaign (Rozell and Wilcox, 1997).

At the conclusion of the 1996 elections, it seemed that the Religious Right had once again made a mark on the outcome. The Republican Party maintained control of the governorship, both

U.S. Senate seats, about one-third of the Representatives to the U.S. House, and the state Senate. According to exit polls, the white voters that associated themselves with the Religious Right movement, about 19 percent, once more made up a large portion of the ballots. Of those 19 percent, 78 percent supported Bob Dole as the candidate for President and 82 percent supported Phil Gramm for re-election to the U.S. Senate. These impressive figures continued to leave hopeful thoughts in the heads of movement supporters and suggested that the Christian Right could not be ignored by future candidates, especially those in the Republican Party.

THE TEXAS RELIGIOUS RIGHT IN THE 1998 ELECTIONS

With the 1994 and 1996 elections now in the record books, many wondered if the Christian Right could maintain its political power in the upcoming 1998 elections. In the middle of a presidential scandal that could bring impeachment charges against the President and a time of tremendous economic prosperity, the movement definitely had its work cut out. The polls showed that two-thirds of the American people felt that the Republican Party was doing a terrible job of handling the impeachment process and that same two-thirds firmly supported leaving the President in office, even though some 65 to 75 percent felt that he was not a trustworthy person. Still, the Christian Right searched to find a way to maintain its support, especially within the Republican boundaries. This would prove to be a difficult task since they were in total support of removing the President from the White House.

In an attempt to hold that support, the Christian Right continued to hold its training sessions to help activists gain spots as precinct chairs and the Christian Coalition continued to distribute voter guides. Another good thing going for the group was the tremendous popularity of Texas Governor George W. Bush, who was almost guaranteed re-election. One-third of Texas

voters are also registered as independents, who commonly tend to lean more to the conservative side of the aisle than the liberal side. With these variables leaning in their favor, the Christian Right was looking to make another big impression on the political nature of Texas.

Election Day 1998 brought another impressive win for the Republican Party throughout the state of Texas. For the first time in more than 125 years, Republicans gained control of every statewide elected office. Beginning with the landslide re-election victory of Governor Bush (Bush 69%, Mauro 31%), the Republicans continued to rack up the victories of lieutenant governor, attorney general, state comptroller, land commissioner, and all statewide court seats (Robinson, Clay, Houston Chronicle, "Election Aftermath / The State / Democrats Try to Smile", November 5, 1998). The Republicans also picked up three seats in the state House, trimming the Democratic majority to eight (79-71). In fact, their only loss came in the state Senate, losing one seat, but maintaining a 16-15 majority.

However, it is safe to say that the Christian Right was not as responsible for this remarkable victory as they have been in the past. Rather, the election seemed to be more heavily influenced by swing voters and, possibly, their turnout for the governor's race. According to exit polls, Governor Bush received, 27 percent of the African-American vote, 31 percent of the Democratic vote, 50 percent of the Hispanic vote, 73 percent of the Independent vote, and an amazing 74 percent of women's votes. This trend appeared to continue in the U.S House races as well. Many of the Republicans vying for a congressional seat also seemed to win by large margins, suggesting the involvement of swing votes in their victories too. In fact, only 12 percent of all voters (16 percent of white voters) identified themselves as supporters of the Religious

Right in 1998, compared to 22 percent and 19 percent of white voters in the past two elections (www.cnn.com/ELECTION/states/TX/G/exit.poll.html, 1998).

This apparent drop in participation is disappointing news for the Christian Right. After a slight decline in participation at the polls in 1996, the Right had high hopes of carrying a strong influence into the 98 elections, but with the numbers in and the decisions made, it turned out to be their worst performance in years. In addition, the election also pointed out the powerful influence that the swing voters carry in the election process. Nevertheless, this came as an unexpected blow to the advancement that the movement has made over the past decade.

THE TEXAS RELIGIOUS RIGHT IN THE 2000 ELECTIONS

Looking ahead to the 2000 elections, I feel that I would be correct in saying that the Christian Right will be working vigorously for the next two years. After a declining turnout in the 1996 elections and an even more disappointing show at the polls in 1998, I feel that the leaders will be concentrating extremely hard on re-mobilizing their troops. Although this past year's turnout may not have been as efficient as years past, the group still has a strong base. They still hold many of the precinct chairs and influential political positions around the state and they must learn how to use those more effectively.

In doing so, it may require that the Right place less emphasis on a purist stance and experiment with a pragmatic approach. They may also gain more support from moderate voters who feel that they are too extreme at this time. After all, its easy to take a purist approach when you have nothing to lose, but prevailing political groups must become pragmatist to accomplish their goals. Politics is about compromise.

Additionally, a pragmatist approach could help curve some of the opposition to the Right. In the past two elections, the Christian Left has begun to mobilize supporters who feel that the views of the Right are too excessive. Moreover, the Texas-Faith Network (TFN), made up of 600 clergy, expressed their thoughts that the Christian Coalition is a tool of Pat Robertson and the Republican Party. They feel that the Christian movement should be more acceptable and pragmatic in their support for candidates and involvement in politics. The TFN also feels that the movement should not be placing its support solely in one party. Rather, they should support the candidate who is best for the job.

The year 2000 will also, more likely than not, bring a vacancy in the governor's office, because current governor, George W. Bush, Jr., will almost certainly run for President. With that in mind, I feel that the Christian Right will make an attempt to replace him with someone who holds more traditional, rather than moderate views. This opening could also encourage Christian Right followers to return to the polls, and returning with them the powerful influence of the movement. Nevertheless, Governor Bush's decision will have a profound impact on the choices of the Christian Right in the 2000 election.

In closing, I would just like to point out that my opinions of what may happen in the 2000 elections are just that, they are opinions. However, after researching the past three elections and looking to the future, I feel confident that I will be at least partly right. With a potential influence that could possibly accommodate millions of voters in one state alone, I feel that the Christian Right must change its image. They must take the pragmatic approach that I mentioned earlier, and they must learn to compromise across boundary lines. There are over five million Catholic voters in Texas, and many more Independents, that could possibly be reached by opening their

arms a little. If they do not, I think that it is safe to say that the group may be reaching their maximum potential. After all, powerful political structures were not built by slamming the door in the face of those who do not agree with every aspect of the group. Instead, they were built by learning to compromise. Compromise, this is the true challenge that faces the Christian Right and whether they are willing to do so could determine their strength in the future.

Table 1
Bush and Mauro Support in 1998 Texas-Gubernatorial Pre-election Polls
(in percent)

Pre-election Poll	Ending Date	Vote Intention in Texas Governor's Race			Error Margin	N
		Bush	Mauro	Difference		
The Texas Poll	6/12/98	70%	17%	53%	± 3.7%	691 LV
The Texas Poll	8/27/98	67%	20%	47%	± 3.7%	718 LV
Mason-Dixon	10/11/98	70%	24%	46%	± 3.5%	802 LV
The Texas Poll	10/18/98	66%	21%	45%	± 3.5%	764 LV
Mason-Dixon	10/29/98	69%	25%	44%	± 4.4%	504 LV

Table 2
Size of Selected Voter Groups
in the 1994 & 1998 Texas-Gubernatorial-Election Exit-Poll Samples
(in percent)

Voter Groups	Exit Poll	
	1994	1998
	Bush-Richards Election	Bush-Mauro Election
White Christian Right ^a Identifiers	17	12
African Americans	9	10
Hispanics	13	16
Other Whites	61	62
(N)	(1605)	(1256)

Source: recalculated from exit poll results collected by Voter News Service, reported at www.cnn.com/ELECTION/1999/states/TX and www.foxnews.com/national/features/election98/xp/tx_g01_xp.htm

^a“Are you part of the conservative Christian political movement known as the religious right?”

Table 3
Republican Voters Within Selected Voter Groups
in 1996 & 1998 Texas Exit Polls
(in percent)

Voter Groups	% of Group Who Were		
	1996	1996	1998
	Gramm Voters	Dole Voters	Bush Voters
Republican Identifiers	90	89	98
Conservative Identifiers	79	75	90
White Christian Right ^a Identifiers	82	78	92
Reported Family Income Over \$100,000	71	68	74
White Men	70	65	81
Family Finances About the Same	59	54	72
Family Finances Worse	72	67	76
Reported Family Income \$75-100,000	66	63	68
Age 60 or Older	52	47	71
(N)	(2363)	(2359)	(1256)

Source exit poll results collected by Voter News Service, reported at
www.cnn.com/ELECTION/1998/states/TX and
www.foxnews.com/national/features/election98/xp/tx_g01_xp.htm

^a“Are you part of the Christian political movement known as the religious right?”

Table 4
Democratic Voters Within Selected Voter Groups
in 1996 & 1998 Texas Exit Polls
(in percent)

Voter Groups	% of Group Who Were		
	1996		1998
	Morales Voters	Clinton Voters	Mauro Voters
Democratic Identifiers	85	87	69
Liberal Identifiers	81	81	68
African Americans	78	88	71
Hispanics	78	75	50
Family Income Less Than \$15,000	73	74	N/A
No High School Degree	68	82	N/A
Moderate Identifier	54	56	40
Family Income \$15-30,000	50	49	41
Family Finances Better	56	59	38
Women	46	49	34
Post-Graduate Degree	41	40	32
Independent Identifier	35	37	24
Age 18-29	44	48	33
Age 30-44	41	41	32
Age 45-59	44	42	31
High School Degree	46	50	35
(N)	(2363)	(2359)	(1256)

Source: exit poll results collected by Voter News Service, reported at www.cnn.com/ELECTION/1998/states/TX and www.foxnews.com/national/features/election98/xp/tx_g01_xp.htm

Table 5
Opinions on Presidential Impeachment Issues
by
Reported Vote in the 1998 Texas-Gubernatorial-Election Exit Poll
(in percent)

Issue Positions	% of All Respondents	% of Opinion Holders Who Were		% Difference
		Bush Voters	Mauro Voters	
Believe that Clinton should be impeached	40	97	3	94
Voted for Congress to oppose Clinton	27	96	4	92
Disapprove how Clinton handles job	53	96	4	92
Believe Clinton should resign	48	93	6	87
Unfavorable opinion of Clinton as person	65	87	12	75
Approve how Congress handled scandal	38	83	17	66
Believe that Clinton should be censured	46	80	19	61
(N)	(1256)			

Source: exit poll results collected by Voter News Service, reported at www.cnn.com/ELECTION/1998/states/TX and www.foxnews.com/national/features/election98/xp/tx_g01_xp.htm

Table 6
Most Important Issue in Determining Respondent's Vote for Governor
by
Reported Vote in the 1998 Texas-Gubernatorial-Election Exit Poll
(in percent)

Most Important Issue	% of All Respondents	% of Opinion Holders Who Were		% Difference
		Bush Voters	Mauro Voters	
Education	36	65	34	31
Economy/Jobs	16	59	41	18
Taxes	12	81	19	62
Crime/Drugs	10	83	17	66
Budget Surplus	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Welfare	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Trade	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
(N)	(1256)			

Source: exit poll results collected by Voter News Service, reported at www.cnn.com/ELECTION/1998/states/TX and www.foxnews.com/national/features/election98/xp/tx_g01_xp.htm

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