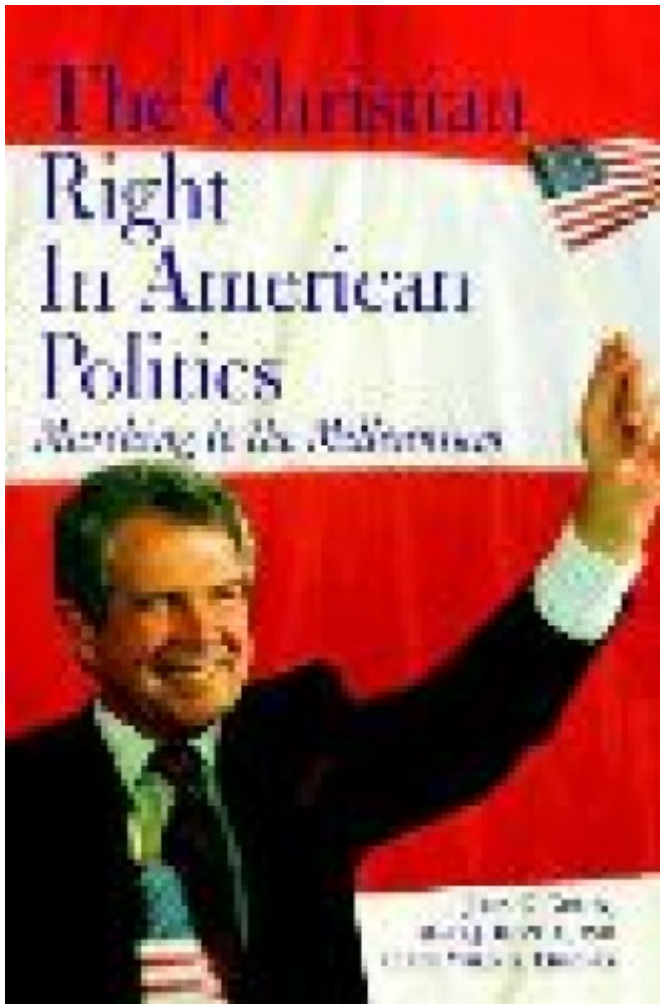


Movement on the right

By [Kimberly H. Conger](#) in the [April 20, 2004](#) issue

In Review



The Christian Right in American Politics: Marching to the Millennium

John C. Green, Mark J. Rozell and Clyde Wilcox
Georgetown University Press

In 1976 Jerry Falwell got a phone call from Jody Powell, special assistant to Jimmy Carter—a call that launched the Religious Right. Powell asked Falwell to tone down his criticism of Carter’s interview with *Playboy* magazine. Falwell learned, to his amazement, that a presidential candidate was paying attention to what he said from his pulpit on Sunday morning. *The Christian Right in American Politics* takes us from that inauguration to the movement’s current, more ubiquitous form. It helps us to understand the shape and trajectory of the Christian Right’s place in state politics, where it has become ensconced during the past decade.

Although the book’s primary audience is political scientists and other scholars of religion and politics, its scholarly conclusions are drawn from an engaging narrative detailing the political machinations of the Religious Right in the 13 states where the movement has been most “in contention” for power and influence (South Carolina, Virginia, Texas, Florida, Michigan, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Colorado, California, Washington, Oregon and Maine). These case studies are lively and readable, and it is clear that the authors want to share their fascination and enthusiasm for their subject.

Though some readers may be overwhelmed by the sheer volume of information in each account, the book gives both an excellent overview of the current activities and strategies of the movement and a solid explanation of the nuances in each state’s political environment. The case studies differ in their level of detail. Some provide numerous tables and graphs concerning everything from public opinion polling data to denominational membership. But all provide enough information to make clear the importance of the Christian Right in the state’s politics.

The book’s editors, John Green of the University of Akron, Mark Rozell of Catholic University of America and Clyde Wilcox of Georgetown University, are widely known as the most prolific and well-regarded academic observers of the Religious Right. In various combinations, these three men have published most of the important scholarly work on the movement, particularly at the state level. The contributors are similarly well qualified. Many have been deeply involved in studying the movement at the grassroots level for many years.

The subtitle, *Marching to the Millennium*, defines the book’s core intention. The themes of evolution and change pervade the case studies and their authors’ approaches. Not only does the book assess the movement’s strength and activities,

but it also explores the ways in which it has grown over its lifetime. This is clearly the book's most important contribution to the larger conversation about the Christian Right. After every election political pundits have predicted the movement's demise, but it consistently returns in a new form, defying expectations.

The authors conclude that the Christian Right has become a fixture in many states' Republican parties. Many of the case studies point to changes in activists' attitudes and in movement strategies as the Christian Right has become more politically sophisticated.

Some of these changes have been brought about by the opposition to the movement and its goals, an opposition that has become widespread and well organized. Indeed, in western states like California, Oregon and Washington the Christian Right is defined by its reaction to opposition.

Overall, however, the volume suggests that little has been achieved in the policy area. Internal division seems to have been the culprit. Some Christian Right activists have chosen confrontation. Their success has been limited because their rhetoric marks them as a fringe group. Others have chosen consolidation, primarily in the Republican Party. These activists have enjoyed more mainstream acceptance but frequently have had to compromise on their policy agenda. The movement overall "has evolved and matured over time but also continues to struggle with its identity and place in American politics."

This struggle for identity is made clear in the case studies. Denominational and theological fractures among Christian Right activists are at the heart of the conflicts frequently visible in state movements. The movement has been most successful in states in which large numbers of nonevangelical Christians and others share its policy goals. In states with fewer supporters, other avenues of influence, like ballot measures and referenda, are important.

The Colorado case study is an example of this. While the state is home to many evangelical organizations, Colorado also has large numbers of liberals, particularly in Denver and Boulder. Many of the usual Christian Right organizations are active in the state, but the most obvious and successful way the movement has affected state politics is through the use of ballot measures. In 1992 Christian Right supporters succeeded in placing on the ballot Amendment Two, which outlawed "special rights" for gays and lesbians. The measure passed after a significant media

and grassroots battle, though it was later struck down by the U.S. Supreme Court.

What do the successes and failures of the movement mean for American democracy? Many who oppose the movement and its goals have made the argument that religious reasoning has no place in public discourse. In their conclusion Green, Rozell and Wilcox take an important scholarly step by suggesting that the time has come to evaluate these claims. Are members of the Christian Right good citizens and are their activities good for U.S. politics? They challenge other scholars to make use of the wealth of information to look at those questions more deeply and systematically. The movement's long-term effect on American politics will be discovered by those who take up this book's challenge.