

People power: How majorities rule denominations

by [Arthur E. Farnsley II](#) in the [October 5, 2004](#) issue

Many Episcopalians, Methodists and Presbyterians must cringe when they read the newsletters and Web pages of activists within their denominations. Sometimes the partisans carefully couch their warnings and strategies in cooperative language, but generally their pronouncements leave no doubt that they are spoiling for a fight.

When the Institute on Religion and Democracy's Web site outlines "issues facing the Episcopal Church," it lists "unrelenting pro-homosexual advocacy," the "undermining of the family by church leaders" and "a House of Bishops that is divided and no longer offers moral leadership." On the other side, the Affirmation United Methodist site promises to "relentlessly pursue policies and processes that support full participation of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in all areas and levels of the United Methodist Church."

Terms like "advocacy," "undermining," "divided" and "relentless" are fighting words. The people who use them are not engaging in a process of discernment; they are mounting arguments. Political maneuvering is inevitable because most denominations—despite their members' cultural and socioeconomic similarity—are too diverse to resolve disputes easily. Sometimes disagreement about religious values becomes so intense that the ties that bind—shared histories, beliefs and practices—become weaker than the issues that divide.

Certain basic political values, by contrast, are shared by an overwhelming majority of Americans. People who argue vehemently over biblical interpretations share a common belief in equality of opportunity. Those who disagree deeply over whether God is infinitely forgiving or ultimately judgmental still agree about freedom of speech. Many Americans who would be willing to die for their particular religious convictions would also be willing to die for the right of others to believe something else.

Sometimes theological, ethical or biblical agreement is impossible. Consensus is out of the question. Compromise might be politically desirable, but the nature of the debate—and its eternal consequences—means that expediency cannot be the main consideration. Neither individual leaders nor institutions have enough power or authority to force agreement and keep the peace. In such situations, Americans rely instinctively on democratic political mechanisms to mediate claims. They divide even highly complex issues into two sides and form two parties, each with its own leadership, newsletters and Web sites. They know intuitively that democratic authority will be accepted by both sides.

Democracy does not promise that the sparring factions can be brought together; it does, however, hold out the possibility of compromise. Failing that, it promises that both sides can have their say and that the winner can claim legitimacy. The majority rules.

It is precisely in this light that the current sexuality controversies in the Episcopal, Methodist and Presbyterian churches should be viewed. Some people may whisper of takeovers, revolutions and coups, but those descriptions seldom fit the facts. No group is instituting its views by force. The most compelling reason why none could do so is that denominations are not closed societies. Any member can refuse to cooperate or, ultimately, can walk away. In each of these denominations, the contestants have formed parties that can be roughly identified as “conservative” and “liberal,” each staking its claim to the moral high ground.

Not everyone has taken sides. Most members are torn, not certain they agree fully with either party but very certain they do not want to see their denomination sundered. This quiet majority would prefer a peaceful resolution even if it involved an uneasy compromise.

The recent history of the Southern Baptist Convention shows how the democratic process worked in one conflicted denomination. For Southern Baptists, the issue was what was being taught in seminaries. As is true of every denomination, Baptist seminaries were more liberal than the mainstream laity. Biblical “higher criticism” was part of the curriculum. Biblical literalists sought to change this by convincing folks in the large middle—most of whom hold what might best be called a “commonsense” view of scripture—to vote for SBC officials and seminary trustees who would insist on a more literal emphasis.

This internal controversy about the interpretation of scripture was “religious” in the purest sense. The constituents were relatively likeminded. The issue might have been settled by appeal to theological principles and obvious points of reference in scripture itself. But theological principles and scriptural referents are neither fixed nor stable, even within subcultures that look homogeneous from the outside. Unable to settle their differences on religious grounds, activists took sides, formed political parties, printed propaganda and decided by ballot. The conservatives won easily and the seminaries became more fundamentalist in their approach to scripture.

The radical individualism built into Baptist polity allowed these democratic changes to play out relatively swiftly. Southern Baptists emphasize the “soul competency” of individuals, believing that ordinary people can read and understand the Bible clearly. Congregations own their buildings and call their pastors. Most congregations are democratically governed, even if the pastor often has considerable de facto power. The denomination’s national polity is therefore intentionally cooperative. The national group spends funds voluntarily pooled for cooperative purposes—mostly for missions and seminaries. Some additional authority remains with the state organizations, but no cooperative body has direct control over the congregations.

Because most Southern Baptists were so alike, both culturally and theologically, when the polity was formed, they did not build democratic protections into their system. Virtually every congregation—whether it has 100 or 10,000 members—can send up to ten “messengers” to the annual denominational meeting. These are not “delegates” representing others, but simply individuals voting their own consciences. In stable times, most congregations send only the pastor and his wife. Traditionally, these messengers vote a high-profile pastor into the presidency. The president nominates board members for the mission organizations and seminaries, and the whole body routinely rubber-stamps these slates. This informal and collegial system works fine when there is sufficient mutual trust.

But when conservative activists felt their complaints about biblical liberalism were being ignored, they created a strategy to exploit the semidemocratic system’s informality. They encouraged like-minded congregations each to send ten messengers to the annual meeting. Activist leaders met privately in advance to choose candidates for the presidency. They began publishing their own newspaper to offset the liberalism they claimed had infected the establishment organs. Because board members rotate at a rate of 10 percent a year, conservatives knew they needed to win ten years in a row to control the denomination’s cooperative

agencies. During those years, attendance at the annual meeting increased from a few thousand to as many as 35,000 or 40,000.

Establishment supporters, for their part, did not see themselves as liberal (and have always preferred the term “moderate”). They characterized themselves as protectors of the Baptist heritage of religious liberty. But conservatives easily defeated them, not only because the conservatives were better organized, but because they were able to frame the debate in ways that drew the denomination’s large middle to their side. Most Southern Baptists are not fundamentalist activists. But forced to choose between the conservative and liberal sides, most either sided with the conservatives or, more to the point, didn’t side with the liberals. They were sympathetic to a conservative reading of scripture even if they were disheartened by the tone of the conservative rhetoric. The conservatives won by defining where the lines were drawn and by getting out the vote; they took full advantage of a very informal polity.

Episcopalians, Methodists and Presbyterians are now experiencing a similar kind of party politics, but with important differences. Not in our lifetimes are Southern Baptists likely to quarrel over homosexuality. Moreover, Episcopalians, Methodists and Presbyterians have more formal polities, with more formal channels for exercising authority. This works against rapid change. In none of these denominations is a communal decision made entirely democratically (Presbyterians, who lack an episcopal structure of governance, are most similar to the Baptists). Nonetheless, the forces of democracy are at work in each case.

Denominations must rely on democratic authority because their type of religious organization is an American compromise between the classic forms of church and sect. No denomination is America’s established religion; each has only as much social and cultural legitimacy as it earns day by day. Members are often bound to the group by birth or ethnic origin, but these bonds can be severed; denominations must convince their members to stay attached. The majority has power precisely because the denomination cannot constrain people to join, to participate or to donate. It may not always look like it, especially to the bishops, but denominational governance rests on the consent of the governed. Democratic authority will always trump ecclesiastical authority.

Overarching ecclesiastical authority may still be possible in the Catholic Church, where cardinals and bishops, under the leadership of the pope, can enforce an

official version of shared beliefs. But the leaders of American Protestant denominations cannot enforce compliance, since disaffected members can simply walk away. None of today's denominational leaders can impose a solution through force of will. Not even economic leverage—locking out disobedient clergy, withholding retirement benefits or disenfranchising the unrepentant—can compel obedience.

Such tactics worked in some denominations during the civil rights movement, when liberal reformers were sometimes able to drag conservative holdouts along by the hair. But the church has undergone changes that point toward very different outcomes to current conflicts. It is always possible that a new Gandhi or Martin Luther King Jr. will arise to wield a charisma that wins the day. But even churches praying for such a miracle would do well to acknowledge that a political struggle is under way, and to strive to make the best of it.

Because they are voluntary organizations—not really church or sect—American denominations share many organizational characteristics, despite their different constituencies, beliefs and polities. It would be unwise for participants in the current mainline struggles to ignore the lessons of the Southern Baptists. From the Baptists they can learn never to underestimate the power of democratic political pressure. A denomination that vests considerable authority in bishops—as Episcopalians and Methodists do—will not quickly be overtaken by dedicated efforts to get out the vote. But unless the governing minority is able to rule by force, the true majority, if well organized, will eventually see its will enacted. People donate more money to some causes and less (or no) money to others. They make bequests that allow their loyalties to outlive them. And they vote with their feet to support whom and what they wish.

An episcopal polity will not insulate any denomination from majority pressure; it will only slow the process of majority rule. It would be a grave mistake for liberals to assume that an extended timeline gives them security, that conservatives will eventually give up and go away. In a November 2003 statement, the Institute on Religion and Democracy said of the ordination of Episcopal Bishop V. Gene Robinson, “Right now, the Anglican Communion lacks legal structures necessary to respond quickly to this crisis. The call to ‘make adequate provision for episcopal oversight of dissenting minorities . . .’ will offer helpful interim relief in some areas. But in the longer term, more will be necessary. . . . Realistically, the process of restructuring the Anglican Communion so that substantive discipline is possible will take time.” A

slow process of change favors those already in power, but it will not thwart a committed opposition if that opposition can win majority support.

The Baptist example also shows that there will be real winners and losers. The winners will not always be gracious and some of the losers will leave. Denominations can stem this tide by creating venues for creative dissent and endeavoring to protect the interests of minorities, whichever side the minority turns out to be. In the 1970s the Southern Baptist Convention did not make adequate provisions to include biblical literalists, assuming that the “commonsense” middle would not side with what the establishment saw as hard-core fundamentalists. Today the liberals find themselves nearly totally excluded; a number have left the convention and others are still considering their future.

In 1994 I predicted that, once the dust from the upheaval settled, the SBC conservatives would become less strident because the large middle had no stomach for ongoing struggles. I was wrong. Once the big political issues were resolved, the middle lost interest in the struggle. The relatively small group of determined literalists continued to cleanse SBC institutions, especially the seminaries, of liberal influence. In the 1970s Paige Patterson, a leading conservative organizer, was president of Dallas’s Criswell College, a literalist Bible school offering an alternative to the city’s mainstream Southwestern Theological Seminary. Today, Patterson is president of Southwestern.

In the mainline denominations, many people stoutly refuse to define their internal controversies as political battles, often because only a minority seems truly interested in fighting. But it only takes 10 percent or so on either side to define the issues and draw the lines so that everyone will eventually have to choose sides or have their side chosen for them. Those who refuse to acknowledge the political nature of the conflict might wake one morning to find that the battle is over and they have lost.

Denominations should consider in advance the institutional and administrative mechanics of a significant split. Though Southern Baptist congregations own their own buildings and call their own pastors, those pastors and their congregations often pay into commonly held pension funds. And everyone invests time, money and energy in common programs—both missions and seminaries—that are hard to walk away from. How much more difficult will a split be in denominations that own congregational properties or pay their pastors from a common pool?

Each denomination must decide whether to make it harder or easier for the losing activists to leave when the shouting ends. Ecclesiastical leaders could take a hard line, demanding that malcontents turn in their keys. But any who try this approach should make sure the majority is with them, since they are unlikely to have either the authority or the power to sustain an unpopular strategy. It makes sense to think sooner rather than later about the administrative consequences of potential schism.

Fortunately, there is a silver lining to the intrinsic power of the political process: those who stop resisting democratic pressures and seek to channel them constructively might find that politics offers a way forward. The promise of democracy is that people will cooperate even when they do not get everything they want. Compromise and conciliation appeal to many people, even if the true believers on either side are dissatisfied with it. Public cynicism about politics—in secular as well as religious life—might stem not from the failure of democracy as a mechanism but from its abuse by people who refuse to negotiate honestly, preferring instead to issue demands and caricature their opponents.

Majority opinion will play a strong, ultimately decisive role in the future of all denominations. The manner in which each denomination discerns and then channels that opinion will go a long way toward determining whether the outcome will be a negotiated settlement, an amicable divorce or a bloodbath. The quiet majority in each denomination would likely prefer a peaceful compromise, and there is much Christian precedent for peacemaking through prayer, theological reflection and thoughtful, civil debate. But there is also a strong Christian precedent for drawing a line in the sand and saying, “Here I stand; I can do no other.” Since a significant number of activists have decided to fight, there will be a fight. Those who do not wish to be activists cannot afford to remain passive bystanders. At a minimum, they must insist on fair rules of engagement and forcefully reject either side’s misrepresentation of the opposition.

Even within communities of faith, democratic process trumps theology and scripture in times of crisis because the latter are subject to interpretation. Their authority gradually has been eroded by a nearly universal acceptance of relativism and individualism. People simply disagree about God’s will, about the parameters of the Christian community and about the meaning of scripture. But the will of the majority carries an authority strong enough to move any voluntary organization, whether or not it intends to be democratic. Denominations involved in seemingly irresolvable conflict should acknowledge the political nature of the struggle, insist that conduct

be civil and constructive, and plan for the inevitable fallout.