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(Review) Perspectives on the Politics of Abortion

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Comments

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Perspectives on the Politics of Abortion by Ted G. Jelen

Review by: MaryAnne Borrelli

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toward the poor and powerless. Though poles apart ideologically, religious lobbyists share a prophetic disillusionment with the state of society. Moreover, they struggle with a poignant dilemma: Should they aim at faithfulness or success, at winning or witnessing to the faith?

Unfortunately, Hofrenning's attempt to sustain the prophetic theme leads him to unsubstantiated conclusions. Taking their rhetoric at face value, he argues that religious lobbyists are fundamentally radical, even extreme. But if we look at the actual agenda, we find religious groups battling over such issues as single-payer health care or a \$500 child tax credit. Perhaps they are more of *Washington* than they would like to admit.

Failure to appreciate this possibility leads Hofrenning to conclude that "because of their unwillingness to compromise, religious lobbyists favor outsider strategies" (p. 58). If that is so, then why all the congressional testimony and inside-the-Beltway meetings? Hofrenning apparently operates with this formulation: insider = compromise/outsider = radical. Yet the most astute groups—Jewish organizations—see insider and outsider tactics as complementary. Hofrenning has also equated largely symbolic gestures with mobilization tactics. Such symbolism may reflect desperation more than principle, with prophetic rhetoric covering for inadequate clout.

Hofrenning does not quite know how to handle the discrepancy between prophetic claims and action. He concedes that there are "profound differences between religious lobbyists and the long tradition of prophets" (p. 93). Yet his analysis generally does not take into account those differences. Part of his reticence flows from an acknowledgment that judging the truth or falsity of a prophet is beyond our competence as political scientists. But Hofrenning's own analysis seems to suggest that some lobbyists attempt to buy their prophetic credentials on the cheap, with a news release or a coalition letter. But do they really live like prophets in the biblical tradition? Are they immune to the blandishments of power, such as an invitation to the White House or a citation in the *Washington Post*? These are questions left unanswered.

Hofrenning has embraced a worthy subject. But nettlesome lapses suggest a rush to publication when more field research, analysis, and theoretical refinement would have helped immensely. The book is not quite ripe.

Sweeping assertions, for example, litter the manuscript. Hofrenning claims that religious lobbies "significantly transform politics" (p. 5), "shake the foundations of the entire political structure" (p. 48), "reject" insider tactics (p. 137), and shun a "mainstream style of political compromise and incremental change" (p. 53). None of these assertions can stand without hefty qualification. Moreover, Hofrenning's thesis papers over key differences among evangelical, "mainline," Catholic, and Jewish groups.

Another problem is that Hofrenning includes extensive treatment of such defunct groups as the Moral Majority, but slights the Christian Coalition and the Southern Baptist Convention. He is apparently unaware that both maintain Washington offices.

Hofrenning's categories are sometimes strained. One table lists "Nontraditional Evangelicals" (p. 81) as including the Episcopal Church and the U.S. Catholic Conference, a placement that would be likely to surprise leaders of both bodies. This questionable categorization leads Hofrenning to infer that grounds for unity exist between people of vastly different worldviews.

Awkwardly operationalized concepts are a problem, too. In addressing the connection between lobby leaders and

members, Hofrenning employs a measure of *salience* to determine if "prophetic" leaders avoid lobbying against member opinion on salient issues. He finds they generally do. He determines salience, however, by visibility in press coverage, not actual member sentiment. This leads to questionable leaps of inference. With respect to "mainline" Protestants, he concludes that "the picture of a church lobbyist as a crusading oligarch, a 'general without an army,' is refuted" (p. 159). "Refute" is a strong word in our discipline, and Hofrenning's analysis cannot approach that certainty.

The book is also time-bound in a curious way, considering its recent publication. In two separate places Hofrenning suggests that religious conservatives have "withdrawn" from Washington, an assertion that was not fully accurate when some scholars made it in the late 1980s and is surely not true in the 1990s. Religious conservatives are more robust, sophisticated, and hooked into Congress than ever.

Ultimately, Hofrenning's attempt to chart new territory—both when it succeeds and when it falters—points to a larger problem in the field of faith and politics. We have growing research on religious groups and movements; what we lack is a decent understanding of actual impact. Like many analysts of religion and politics, Hofrenning can only point to isolated examples of influence. We simply need more research on effectiveness, especially from the perspective of those on the receiving end of religious advocacy. Thus, while this analysis provides a window into the clashing perspectives of the religiously inspired, it does so "through a glass darkly." We await further clarity.

Perspectives on the Politics of Abortion. Edited by Ted G. Jelen. Westport, CT: Praeger, 1995. 216p. \$49.95.

MaryAnne Borrelli, *Connecticut College*

This book is well titled: Its four substantive chapters present highly contrasting perspectives on the politics of abortion, each employing the methodologies of a different subfield within political science. What is most distinctive about this collection, however, is its commitment to reaching across the boundaries imposed by profession and by discipline. To achieve this end, the introductory chapter is authored by a community activist who details the personal and corporate costs of abortion politics as they are currently practiced. The four political scientists submit strongly, though not polemically, argued analyses. The conclusion, written by five professors from Illinois Benedictine College, then offers an unsparing and distinctively interdisciplinary critique of the complete work. In its structure as much as its topics, then, this is a book about confrontations and conflicts—and about how they may be constructively managed and mediated.

The political scientists, whose chapters set the standard for the text's contribution to the "public conversation regarding abortion," have submitted research that is of uniformly high quality with distinctive queries. Still, because the chapters are so independent of one another, the reader is sometimes left with an inventory of interpretations rather than a single and tightly integrated theoretical framework.

For example, Mary Segers's assessment of the U.S. Roman Catholic Church as a quasi-federal interest group and as a prophetic community follows immediately upon Clyde Wilcox's examination of public opinion and political parties in the post-*Roe* years. Singly, these chapters contribute distinctive insights into the practice and dynamics of abortion politics. Having considered the structural charac-

teristics that facilitated the church's political success, Segers considers the consequences of that success for the church's practice of its "Gospel norms" of justice and equality. Here the differences that inevitably emerge between interest group leaders and members are viewed as destructive of canons and creeds, some religious and others secular. Wilcox, in turn, notes that public opinion concerning abortion has been remarkably constant for more than thirty years, though political parties and electoral contests have become increasingly polarized about this issue. His testing of various hypotheses is painstaking, disproving theories that attribute such apparent contradictions to partisan extremism among primary voters or convention delegates, campaign contributors or party elites. Rather, he describes a gradual realignment in party affiliations among those who are essentially single-issue voters, such that the national party platforms are able to hold the firmly pro-choice or pro-life voters without alienating moderates. Having studied both chapters, however, the reader is left wondering whether Segers has identified a particularly telling instance of the citizen-institution divergence investigated by Wilcox. If so, does the church position alienate a significant proportion of its membership? And how is this religious alienation to be conceptualized, given its apparent similarities to an electoral realignment? These questions, which seek to determine more about a church's political identity in a supposedly non-churched political system, are premised upon the themes of moral decision making and political calculation present in every chapter.

If the chapters are topically distinct even in the conclusion, the final chapter does draw upon their divergent methodologies in evaluating their contributions. Eileen McDonagh's insistence that the abortion case law be reconsidered, its conceptions of pregnancy critiqued and reformulated, receives its own jurisprudential critique. Writing in tones that echo the precision of the constitutional law commentary of Kent Sezer's chapter, the conclusion authors consider the extent to which a medical definition of pregnancy alters the status of the fetus as an "innocent" and thereby justifies the use of force to protect the woman's bodily integrity. The commentators ultimately express reservations about McDonagh's conception of "feminine subjectivity" while acknowledging that her work proves the limitations of rights-based abortion debates. In an even more striking reinterpretation, the Illinois Benedictine College professors apply McDonagh's cultural-cognitive models to the Wilcox findings and proceed to explore abortion as an "American cultural construct" whose meanings are multiple, ambiguous, and paradoxical. The political parties then emerge as boundary-setting institutions that provide struggling individuals with coherent policy alternatives. Too often, such a mixture of standards would serve merely to indict the researchers or to confuse the reader. Here, the ability to demonstrate the fragility of all interpretations further explains why, when public opinion is so enduring, political decision makers have become so volatile.

The commitment to reinterpretation and to moving past established barriers, however, is compromised by the lack of a pro-life author among the political scientists. While McDonagh and Segers are unabashedly pro-choice and Wilcox and Sezer are carefully objective, the remaining position on this spectrum is unrepresented. In light of the introduction's concerns regarding the shift away from non-violence within the pro-life movement and its changing political ideology and membership, the absence of a respondent is particularly unfortunate. Alternatively, a pro-life writer as constructively critical of pro-choice institutions as

Mary Segers is of the U.S. Roman Catholic Church could stimulate further reflection, research, and political change. The challenges issued by the conclusion do provide a measure of ideological balance, however, if not an independently assertive voice for the pro-life perspective.

Perspectives on the Politics of Abortion is an intriguing collection, rigorously presenting new patterns of conceptualization and aggressively pursuing new forums for political debate. If its dialogue is occasionally limited, it is nonetheless carried farther than has previously been observed. This is, therefore, a text of interest to those who are as diverse in their concerns as the authors are in their own.

Reconceiving Decision-Making in Democratic Politics: Attention, Choice, and Public Policy. By Bryan D. Jones. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994. \$15.95.

Barry Rundquist, *University of Illinois at Chicago*

This book includes a theory of attention shifting, a critique of rational choice theory, explanations of various empirical patterns in American politics, a discussion of governments as adaptive systems, and spatial modeling of attention dynamics, among other things. Given the range of subjects, most political scientists should find something of interest in this book.

The book's central concern is with change: changing individual decisions, changing policy agendas, changing public policies, and changing politics. The theoretical problem it addresses is how change, even abrupt change, can occur while both decision makers' policy preferences and the structure of policymaking institutions tend to be relatively stable (p. 133). Jones's answer is that policy change occurs because over time individuals and collectivities shift their attention from one problem or dimension of a problem to another problem or dimension of a problem. When attention shifts, choices change, despite the stability of policy preferences and policymaking institutions. For example, when President Bush announced his War on Drugs in a televised speech in 1989, the number of people responding to Gallup polls that drugs were the most important problem in the country increased from less than one-third to almost two-thirds. The author concludes that "changes in attentiveness toward the drug problem, then, shifted dramatically during the early Bush years, a change that was far more abrupt than changes either in policy preferences or in the severity of the problem" (p. 108).

Why does attention shift? Attention shifts, Jones argues, because decision makers view an environmental change as a problem that cannot be solved by simply applying or modifying decisions regarding similar problems that they have made in the past. So they begin a new search for possible solutions and, by paying attention to new environmental cues, they may make decisions that are quite different from the ones they made earlier. The cues on which decision makers focus may have always been in the complex environment, but previously they paid attention to different cues and therefore made different decisions.

Policy change occurs, according to Jones, because "decision-makers become attentive to aspects of the decisional situation that were previously ignored. They don't change their minds, in the sense of changing preferences, but they change their focus by attending to preferences that they had previously eliminated from being relevant to the choice situation" (p. 10). "Changes in choice are caused not so much by changes in preferences as by [decision makers'] exquisite sensitivity to contextual cues" (p. 13). "They are