

Chapter 99

Introduction to Faith in State Legislatures:

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ABSTRACT

This chapter introduces the complex history of the relationships among faith, politics and culture in state legislatures. Each of these concepts is explored by organizing them into three themes: separation, demography and polarization. The direction and content of public policies across the United State are influenced by these elements contributing to either the support or opposition to social change. State legislators are on the front line of these ideological divides. These variations by region contribute to the increase in single party control and have generated pronounced policy differences.

Land of the Brave and the Home of the Free (The Star-Spangled Banner)

INTRODUCTION

Religion has played a role in political activity in America since its founding. The role of religion in the making of public policy has always been a subject of great debate. The debate persists in part because of those who argue against the advocacy of organized religion in the body politic as a conflict between the separation of church and state; and those who claim its part of America's Judeo-Christian faith tradition. In order to understand American politics, an appreciation of the enduring tension between the church and state is imperative. The American story of relating and separating religion and politics is paradoxical; church and state are legally separated but are intimately related. This historical intimacy between faith and the political has affected our culture, shaping the operation of its institutions and participants.

Since colonial days, faith has played a profound role in molding American culture. The American Constitutional Republic was forged through an intermingling of faith and political imperatives to create a form of government in which the people are the ultimate source of authority, electing representatives

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to make laws that advance the common good. Through the creation of a Constitution and a Bill of Rights asserting that each individual possesses unalienable rights, this unique type of democracy implemented a form of democratic republicanism, not a pure democracy (Reid, 2003).

This constitutional democracy is predicated upon the belief in the sanctity of the individual and requires the protection of individual rights against governmental encroachments. Among the widespread political ideas in eighteenth-century America was the concept that people can shape their government, community and society in accordance with the laws of nature. Associated with this belief is the conviction that government does not grant rights. Rather, rights are inherent, part of what makes people human and referred to as natural rights (Woll & Binstock, 1984); and whenever possible, government exists to protect these rights. In the United States, these rights and freedoms cover a broad spectrum, including the freedom to speak, to write, to associate in groups; and to practice religious faith as one pleases. These individual freedoms and rights are at the heart of American democracy and are based on an underlying set of values or beliefs which has created the dominant political culture in the United States and consists of: individualism, democracy, liberty, property rights and religion, all tied together by the value of equality (Coleman, Goldstein, & Howell, 2011). This set of beliefs has been labeled, the American Creed (Hartz, 1955; Ericson & Green, 1999; Lipset, 1997). Americans embrace these concepts in the abstract; however, these values frequently clash with one another separating Americans into two categories: conservatives and progressives. James Hunter (1991) in *Culture Wars* describes the differences between these factions by distinguishing “orthodoxy¹,” between conservatism (conservative, the Right) from progressivism (liberals, the Left) which embodies contemporary life. These differences are rooted in their contrasting attitudes toward change and produce the struggle to define which direction America takes in the future. These competing groups struggle for dominance in American political culture and to define the role of religion in government, irrespective of geographic boundaries and individual lives (Wuthnow, 1988). The association among these constructs forms the foundation for a broader perspective of what Hunter (1991) refers to as the “cultural wars.” This theoretical interpretation asserts that faith and politics in America today are best understood by recognizing the existence of deep social divisions over changing values and lifestyles. The emphasis of this book is to explore how faith operates among state legislators while describing the nature of values that have so much effect on their political beliefs and behaviors.

BACKGROUND

The colonization of the United States was fueled in part by the European upheavals unleashed by the Protestant Reformation. The Pilgrims were the first of the European immigrants who fled the volatile political environment in England looking for religious freedom. They established the Plymouth colony in 1620 becoming the second successful English settlement in North America (after the founding of Jamestown, Virginia in 1607). Unlike the Plymouth colony, the settlement at Jamestown, Virginia was comprised mostly of noblemen and was not a family-oriented community. The Jamestown settlement was used as an economic front for the London Company. These two British colonies came to the United States for different reasons and with dissimilar ideologies. In 1630, another religious group left England in search of religious freedom, where they could worship the way they wanted without fear of persecution. This group was called the Puritans². Both Pilgrim and Puritan migrants were dissenters from the Anglican Church of England motivated to create a new church in the colonies. The Pilgrims held Calvinist religious beliefs similar to the Puritans. However, unlike many Puritans, Pilgrims maintained

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