

Sin, Sex, and Political Science

Cynthia Burack, The Ohio State University and Centennial Center Visiting Scholar

Sin and sex are not the usual fare of the discipline of political science, but they are the stuff of domestic American politics. Those who oppose rights and social recognition for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people most often rely upon values derived from religious belief as grounds for the position that discrimination is a social good. In the U.S., Christian conservative opponents of LGBT rights engage in a variety of practices that include lobbying government officials to influence law and policy formation, executing grassroots campaigns to mobilize followers, organizing public initiatives against same-sex sexuality and transgender identity, and creating instructional materials that shape negative perceptions of same-sex sexuality and transgender identity. In turn, conservative political elites actively cultivate Christian Right opinion leaders and use informal networks, church organizations, and the resources of national Christian Right groups as platforms to mobilize electoral support.

Through a variety of organizations and projects, Christian conservatives work to reinforce the stigma associated with same-sex sexual behavior and identity and to block policies associated with sexual nondiscrimination and with equality between gay and straight citizens. Despite the stability of this agenda, however, the strategies and tactics associated with the movement's antigay politics vary widely. Students of sexuality in American politics identify what appears to be a contradiction in the operation of the Christian Right: as the movement has made antigay politics more central to its political mission the movement's public antigay rhetoric has seemed to soften and become less vituperative.¹ This apparent contradiction is explained by the fact that since the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and the antigay ballot initiatives of the early 1990s the contemporary Christian Right has become more adept at crafting multiple forms of political discourse about LGBT people and same-sex sexuality. These different forms of political discourse are nichemarketed to different audiences: unapologetic antigay depictions and political instruction to Christian conservatives and more moderate rhetoric to mainstream audiences. Thus, Christian conservative leaders routinely use ingroup venues to link lesbians and gay men with the threat of terrorism while they use mainstream media as vehicles for discussions of religious freedom and the democratic rights of antigay citizens and communities.

My current research focuses on the antigay beliefs and political rhetoric of the Christian conservative movement. In particular, I am interested in the modes, venues, and organs by which such rhetoric is transmitted, its pedagogical functions for Christian conservatives, its ideological precursors and effects, how and why the various modes of antigay rhetoric change over time, and how different kinds of antigay arguments are put to use in different kinds of social and political contexts. With regard to context, besides its political dimension, the Christian Right has a therapeutic dimension that is concerned with explaining the causes of same-sex desire and with curing homosexuality and childhood "prehomosexuality." By contrast, the political side of the movement is concerned with legal rights, constitutional

interpretation, public policy, electoral politics, grassroots mobilization, and the distribution of public goods.

Antigay political rhetoric is intended to be consumed by different groups of citizens. For those who do not support the agenda of the movement, antigay Christian Right rhetoric focuses on the meaning of democracy. These arguments include support for simple majoritarian solutions to such contentious issues as the teaching of evolution in public schools and same-sex marriage. Arguments about democracy also include pedagogy on the meaning and importance of individual rights—particularly the right to discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation. Antigay rhetoric transmitted in ingroup venues and media, by contrast, emphasizes the wealth and power of LGBT people and their control of American social and political institutions, the desire of lesbians and gay men to destroy marriage and religious freedom, and the Satanic nature of sexual diversity. What complicates this distinction between inside and outside is that the political education of Christian conservatives consists of both ingroup rhetoric that is not intended for outsiders and arguments that the movement employs in presenting its positions to courts, public officials, and mainstream media.

With the recent death of the Reverend Jerry Falwell, many pundits have inevitably forecast the death of the Christian Right movement. Given the landscape of contemporary American politics, such a conclusion owes much to intellectual optimism about the triumph of rationalism that has been consistently debunked by scholars of traditionalist religion.² On the other hand, the political agenda of Christian conservatism is not static, and changes in leadership do affect its agenda and activities. In recent years the movement has broadened its interests to include environmental stewardship, foreign policy, and a range of compassionate approaches to traditional issues such as abortion. In spite of some appearances, however, the movement has not changed its position on sexual diversity, conceptualizing it—especially to its supporters—as an abomination and as a precursor of God's impending punishment on the Republic. As Republican presidential contenders compete for the support of Christian conservatives by emphasizing their positions on LGBT rights and Democratic contenders try to remain silent on the same, it is useful to consider the role of sex and traditional religious belief in American political life.

Notes

1. For changes in movement strategies, see Rozell and Wilcox (1996).
2. See, for example, McGirr (2001), Jenkins (2002), and Lincoln (2003).

References

- Jenkins, Phillip. 2002. *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lincoln, Bruce. 2003. *Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- McGirr, Lisa. 2001. *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Rozell, Mark J., and Clyde Wilcox. 1996. "Second Coming: The Strategies of the New Christian Right." *Political Science Quarterly* 111 (2): 271–94.

Cynthia Burack is associate professor of women's studies at Ohio State and is currently a visiting scholar at the Centennial Center. Her new book is *Sin, Sex, and Democracy: Antigay Rhetoric and the Christian Right*, forthcoming from SUNY Press in 2008. She is co-editor (with Jyl J. Josephson) of a new SUNY book series: *Queer Politics and Cultures*.