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David C. Leege, Kenneth D. Wald, Brian S. Krueger, and Paul D. Mueller: The Politics of Cultural Differences

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PART ONE

Cultural Theory and Recent American Politics

This section develops a cultural theory of American electoral politics and applies it to campaign strategy. Chapter 1 presents the puzzle and discusses limitations in the customary theories that mainstream American voting behavior specialists have developed to understand elections. It previews a theory of cultural conflict and campaign dynamics, lists assumptions, and offers caveats. Chapter 2 initiates development of a cultural theory by looking at recent campaigns. It argues that the political mobilization of cultural differences did not begin with the Republican convention of 1992 but has been characteristic of the politics of the entire post–New Deal period, 1960–1996. The chapter makes rudimentary distinctions between economic and cultural politics and looks to the nature of discourse about "a way of living," *moral order*, as the key to cultural appeals. It suggests what is and what is not cultural politics. It concludes with a discussion of reasons for the rise of cultural politics in recent years and previews the instruments of cultural politics.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 take us into the components of a cultural theory. Chapter 3 explores the problem of predictability in life and the ways in which culture builds on science and religion to offer solutions to questions of identity, norms, and boundaries in society. It then addresses the uses of politics to resolve competition among values, with attention to the instrumental uses of sanctions, compensations, and ideology. Value differences result from the variety of groups and social identities in any society. Whether political conflict occurs depends on the salience of competing values at different times, group cohesion, and the ambitions of politicians. Social heuristics undergird cultural appeals.

Chapter 4 looks at elections as important rituals in a democracy and describes the president as the most significant cultural icon in the United States. Elections legitimate the ruler-ruled social hierarchy, and campaign rituals are built around symbols that reaffirm collective values and attribute blame for societal dysfunctions. They reduce uncertainty. The campaigners must respond to long-term social change that disturbs the moral order. Typically this is done in relationship to a variety of ideological movements. But campaigners must also respond to sudden or episodic events. The campaign is often a mosaic of symbols that manipulate a group's sense of relative deprivation, structure group consciousness, heighten the perception of threat, offer symbolic and material rewards, hive off parts of the opposition to build a winning coalition, purify an unwieldy coalition, and forestall a nascent coalition.

Chapter 5 explores the psychological mechanisms that operate in political campaigns. It is anchored in the notion that political parties are composed of core groups and "owned" issues. For the most part, party identifications, once established, remain stable through life. But turnout varies, and susceptibility to appeals to defect fluctuates. In any given campaign, voters are cognitive misers, gathering only enough information, often through social attribution, to settle on a course of action. Campaign strategy is a mix of turning out the faithful, discouraging turnout among the opposition, and converting wavering groups among the opposition's identifiers.

Each of these chapters discusses the general contours of the theory, offers illustrations from recent America presidential politics, and concludes with testable propositions and generalizations. Many of the propositions and generalizations will be tested in the three case studies of Part 2. Many will not, but we offer them in the hope that they will stimulate both further research on the cultural politics of the era and the development of additional datasets that will yield fruitful empirical tests.

CHAPTER ONE

Anomalies of Post–New Deal Politics

SCIENTISTS LOVE TO solve puzzles. Over the last three decades, political scientists who examine American voting behavior and party politics have faced an unusual challenge. The tools they have developed to analyze an almost unbroken string of fifty years of data from the National Election Studies have yielded strong, but only partial, solutions. Some pieces interlock, but others do not.

A central political puzzle persists throughout the period we call *post–New Deal*, the period beginning with the presidential election of John F. Kennedy. As we shall see in subsequent chapters, the character of the period was rather different from the period of depression, New Deal, war mobilization, and readjustment. Nearly three decades after Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal had realigned the electorate and spent its energies, Democratic party identification remained very high, sometimes doubling Republican identification. Even from 1968 to 1988, the Republican party never constituted a majority of party identifiers, and only among non-Latino whites did the party achieve parity or superiority over the Democrats. Yet Republican presidential candidates won five of those six elections. The one loss was by a very narrow margin in the aftermath of the devastating Watergate scandal. During this entire period, Democrats held solid to massive majorities in the House and lost the Senate only for a brief period. Most observers contend, however, that from the first Nixon administration onward, Republican presidents have defined the *agenda* of American politics, that is, the basic issues and symbols around which political discourse swirls. Curiously, throughout the period, electoral turnout continued to decline, with the exception of a modest recovery in 1992.

In the full period, 1960–1996, Republicans won big, time and again. When they had won as the minority party in the 1950s, it was with a war hero who symbolized unity and normalcy for a nation recovering from the displacements of depression and war; no one knew at first whether he was a Republican or a Democrat, and not many cared. But at the heart of the post–New Deal era, the party won with masterful politicians—*Republican* politicians—like Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan, and continued with less adept but lifelong politicians like Gerald Ford and George Bush. On the five occasions during the post–New Deal period when Democrats won, three times it was not even by a majority of the popular vote (John F. Kennedy's and both of Bill Clinton's elections). Once it was by a very narrow majority (Jimmy Carter), as the country continued to do penance for the collective shame of Watergate. And only once was it by an overwhelming majority (Lyndon Baines Johnson), as a nation wept for its slain prince. For Republicans, however, landslides and clear majorities routinely described the people's choice. The paradox formed by persistent pluralities in Democratic party identification and Republican presidential victories in the context of declining turnout does not match the expectations of party systems theory (Burnham 1970; Clubb, Flanigan, and Zingale 1980).

Scholarly literature for the period relies on several tools and achieves partial success with the paradox. *Party identification* (for the classic conceptualization, see Campbell et al. 1960) explains many of the Democratic victories but fails to account for sudden declines in turnout by key blocs of party identifiers or the widespread defection of identifiers on a recurring basis. Theories about the *rise of independents* (see De Vries and Tarrance 1972) either are based on a measurement artifact or fail to comprehend the size of political generations. With regard to the former, the proportion of independents in the electorate has not risen appreciably when one considers that independents who "lean" toward a party are often more loyal than weak partisans, and they constitute most of the growth in independents (Weisberg 1980). With regard to the latter, Miller and Shanks (1996) have shown how weaker party identification and lower turnout in the electorate are functions of disproportionate generational replacement, but these are concentrated among the less educated and among people who have not yet reached a stage in the life-cycle where they align. *Realignment theory* looked quite appropriate, given the Nixon and Reagan landslides and the partisan movement of underlying social groups (for a fully developed theory of the processes surrounding partisan alignment, see Beck 1979; for the classic statement, see Key 1955; 1959). Yet scholars have searched in vain for either the cataclysmic event—depression, war—that typically precipitated previous realignments, or even the consistency of voting at lower levels of the ticket that had also accompanied previous realignments (Ladd 1991). *Issue voting* was thought to be on the rise since the 1964 Goldwater candidacy (recent work on issue voting takes most of its cues from Enelow and Hinich 1984; see Key 1966 for one of the earliest and still germane statements about voters and issue voting). Yet it too has floundered: (1) on the low levels of cognition about issue differences; (2) on voters' routinely rejecting a candidate whose issue-positions are more consistent with their own positions than with his or her opponent's positions (Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde 1994); (3) on the predominance of image appeals to the sectors of the electorate who defect (Levine 1995; Newman 1994); and

(4) on evidence that only small numbers of sophisticated voters can make rational decisions based on "hard issues," but most voters respond to "easy issues," a style of response that lends itself to the cultural politics we will shortly describe (Carmines and Stimson 1980). *Economic interest voting* deriving from *rational choice theory* (see Downs 1957 for the classic statement of the theory) also appears to be a powerful tool. Yet "pocketbook voting," where individuals are directly affected by unfavorable economic conditions, seems less evident than "sociotropic voting," where voters assess the general health of the economy (Kinder and Kiewiet 1981). And often compounded within "economic" language about taxes and benefits are negative symbols of cultural outgroups (Edsall and Edsall 1991; Jacoby 2000) to which the voters are responding. Of the bodies of propositions derived from rational choice theory, perhaps the most powerful has been *retrospective voting*: voters are cognitive misers who ask simply, "How do I feel about the incumbent?" and, if satisfied, seek no information about the challenger (Fiorina 1983). Paradoxically, the objective economic content one may infer from such decisions may be illusory: retrospective voting accounted for Republican victories precisely at the time when the economic well-being of the working and middle class underwent a steady decline, and they were the voters who shifted in a Republican direction. "Good" performance apparently was rationalized from other dimensions of presidential activity.

Thus, the arsenal of tools to understand post–New Deal elections is often powerful but seems to break down at critical points. We think there are forces even more general than those tapped by these tools that can be understood through the explicit use of *cultural theory*. In fact, we think of post–New Deal politics as the epitome of cultural politics.

Toward a Cultural Theory of American Presidential Campaigns

The argument we propose to develop in this book is as follows: People who identify with different social groups often have different, deeply held perspectives not only on how they should live but also on the scope of the political community and its purposes. They have a sense of a legitimate moral order, and they expect other citizens and their government to further that design. They often dislike and distrust groups with rival perspectives, and they even feel that some groups have no right to participate in democratic politics, much less to have their rivals' perspectives become binding on society. Parties become anchored in social groups, and political leaders fashion value and interest coalitions for electoral advantage. Campaign strategies involve intricate plans to mobilize the faithful, demobilize parts of the opposition by sowing the seeds of anxiety, and attract defectors from the opposition through negative symbols of the opposition's leadership. The salience of cultural issues will wax and wane as a function of group identifications, historical events, and coalition needs. Patriotism and nationalism, race, gender, and religion have all been the stuff of one or another campaign in the post–New Deal era. The most efficient campaigns involve themes that bundle several of these cultural bases together in a symbol or code word.

The argument rests on several assumptions. First, at root, political conflict concerns who we are, how we are to behave toward each other, and who or what is not of us (an elegant statement of this position in found in Wildavsky 1987). Other social control mechanisms address these issues, but often they spill over into politics. Seldom is a society sufficiently homogenous and small that divergent views on these cultural matters have not formed. Because citizens think of right and wrong ways of living, because they get enthused and proud, dejected and embarrassed over the course of public life, political elites—i.e., those who seek to lead—will address cultural issues. There is both advantage and risk in doing so. In America, since every presidential outcome is built on an electoral coalition, coalitional structure and loyalty are central to political campaigns. Ambitious elites must solve both the matches and mismatches between group attachments and current party or candidate orientations, mobilizing the electorate along the matches and demobilizing the electorate along the mismatches.

Some observers might argue that there was a declining sense of group identification among Americans during the post–New Deal period. The forces of modernity—mass education, mass communication, geographic and social mobility, economic integration, scientific worldviews—had loosened primal loyalties. Since political conflict may at times reflect such changes and at times lead such changes, it would seem reasonable to expect the attenuation of group bonds. Further, scholars have argued that Americans are less likely nowadays to be "joiners" than they were in Tocqueville's America (Putnam 2000). As a result, they would have fewer connections to the civic and political orders and be less attentive to the importance of participation.

We argue that although there is strong evidence for both of these trends, it nevertheless does not diminish the strength of an argument based on group approaches to politics. For example, Wuthnow (1988) notes the decline of confessional conflict and the rise of ecumenism in a formerly denominational society. Yet he also notes the burgeoning of new groups that transcend old group boundaries, that have articulated a clear set of values, that mobilize passionately for their political agendas, and that know which other groups' values they respect and which they view as a threat. Hunter (1991), in particular, argues that the agenda for conflict between rival groups embraces so much of the way we live and has been contested in public life to the point where it has become a virtual *culture war*. The names and bases of the groups may change, but the phenomena of group identity, loyalty, boundaries, and conflict persist with new bases. Further, Huckfeldt et al. (1995) have argued that informal but regular conversation partners continue to perform all of the mobilization functions attributed to groups. Baumgartner and Leech (1998) document the current relevance of group approaches to political conflict. At both the mass and elite level, Americans continue to differentiate themselves into groups with distinct values and conflicting political agendas.

Some have also questioned whether *group* analyses of party identification and partisan behavior are useful anymore. Again, we contend that such arguments confuse change in the intensity of historic group attachments to a particular party with the question of whether group members have attachments to parties at all. In a monumental study, Petrocik (1981) showed that it was possible to sensitively follow groups that compose electoral coalitions through electoral history. In a long succession of publications, Niemi and associates (cf. Stanley, Bianco, and Niemi 1986) have documented the changing proportions of group members from the original New Deal Democratic coalition who have remained in that coalition; they have also measured the proportion of a party coalition composed by a given group's members. Even when change occurs in a given group, analysis of group coalitions within parties remains productive. Further, Manza and Brooks (1999) trace the manner in which recent voter alignments are based on groups representing different class, religion, and gender locations; group differences that have partisan consequences remain stark.

The propensity for party coalitions to represent group conflicts is a durable feature of American politics long after the advent of modernity. In fact, in the next chapter, we will argue that modernity even heightens the propensity. Chapter 3 will show the various ways in which group membership and group identification function politically. Because political elites think in terms of group orientations, campaigns may make group values salient in any given election. For example, Richard Wirthlin, the polling specialist for the 1980 Reagan campaign, used surveys "to pinpoint . . . the values and aspirations that appealed to our key coalitional groups." Some were Republican groups that needed reinforcement and mobilization, but others were vulnerable Democratic groups that needed persuasion. Once campaign themes were developed and a key-state strategy was in place, tracking polls monitored progress with groups and states, as themes were deployed. One theme, "religious traditionalism," was employed to reinforce and enthuse evangelical Protestants Republicans, at the same time that it tried to discourage and dislodge Catholic Democrats. "Strength of leadership" was aimed at "target groups [that] reflected a high commitment to obedience, honor, and willpower" (1981, 243). Appeals combining these with themes of government-induced economic failure were packaged to reach "the less educated, the less affluent, the blue collar, the union members, and Hispanic voters" and "Catholics" (245). Thus, even when the candidate is not linked by affinal ties to a group, the campaign organization constructs themes that resonate with a group's fears and aspirations.

Another assumption is that, while cultural politics is available and is used by both political parties, it is of particular tactical import for the minority party. If all that the parties did during campaigns was to mobilize their respective coalition groups, the minority party would never win. Instead it must mobilize its own groups and dissemble parts of the majority coalition. In any given election, whether the minority party dissembles its opponent through discouraging turnout or encouraging defection is not essential. It must reduce the majority party's support so that the minority party's numbers exceed the majority party's voters. The mechanisms for accomplishing this are detailed in chapter 4, and the general theory of campaign dynamics is presented in chapter 5. Over the long haul, however, defections are more advantageous. They not only interrupt a learned habitual behavior but develop a new habit—one that may facilitate permanent realignment.

For many, political parties and their standard bearers are the embodiment of "our kind." Reflecting on the early voting studies conducted by the Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia University and the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan, Talcott Parsons observed: "the individual seems to vote, other things being equal, with the people whom he most directly feels to be of his own kind, who are in social status and group memberships like, and hence like-minded with, himself. . . . [T]he question is not so much . . . *for what* he is voting as it is *with whom* he is associating himself in voting" (Burdick and Brodbeck 1959, 96).

The minority party must show disaffected groups in the majority coalition how the dominant groups in their party are no longer of "our kind." In like manner, if the minority strays too far from its own kind in making such claims, the majority party will remind "threatened" groups in the minority party coalition that their leaders no longer represent them or are paying too high a price to broaden the party's base. Again the party hearkens to how culturally strange these new bedfellows are.

As generations pass, and intergenerational family socialization processes decay, the reasons why our kind "belong to party X" are hazy or forgotten; oral history is superceded by current events. Thus, new generations come to evaluate the parties either by current performance or by current cultural cleavages. They lose the party of their forebears and align with a different party (Beck 1979).

Yet another assumption needs to be made explicit: the work of political campaigns is not limited to getting to the polls those already converted. Rosenstone and Hansen (1993, 161) argue that "People participate in electoral politics because someone encourages or inspires them to take part. The very nature of elections motivates political leaders to mobilize public involvement: More votes than the opposition means victory. Accordingly in an election campaign, candidates, political parties, campaign organizations, interest groups, and other activists do their best to muster participants." In general, we support this view; it is well substantiated in the empirical literature. However, in this book we wish to initiate research that argues there are times when campaigners seek to *minimize* turnout. In fact, we have devised a measure of party loyalty that builds in turnout failure as one form of disloyalty, and we then assess the impact of campaign themes, issue positions, and group feelings on the failure to go to the polls. Among some target groups from the opposition party, the rival party's themes attract defectors, but among other groups the themes yield turnout failure. All three—turnout, defection, and abstention—can push a presidential campaign toward its goal of victory on election day. Party elites have been remarkably candid in public talk about "stimulating the base," using "wedge issues" on vulnerable parts of the opposition, and seeking to keep part of the opponent's peripheral and even core constituencies at home (cf. Edsall 1999, A1).

The reader will quickly notice that a disproportionate share of our attention focuses on cultural appeals by the Republican party, as the minority party throughout the post–New Deal. Some observers, however, have claimed that the Republican party became the new majority (or plurality) party during President Reagan's first term. They argue that the proof is either in continued Republican victories or that Democratic defection in presidential contests was so habitual that a system of national Republican and local Democratic identification replaced totally aligned Democrats (see Ladd 1981 for an early formulation of this argument). Joining most voting behavior scholars, we argue to the contrary. The time-series data from NES (see chapter 7), the Gallup organization, the Times-Mirror surveys (Shafer and Claggett 1995), and the macropartisanship studies (MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson 1989) remove any doubt: however measured, with the exception of one month following the 1994 election, either the majority or more likely the plurality of party identifiers remained Democratic. Although the year 2000 may have ushered in a new era—and the end of the era we have attended—the Republican party has yet to gain the plurality of identifiers, at the same time it controlled both branches of the national government and both branches of the majority of state governments.

One final matter must be addressed before embarking on this study: the reader's possible surmise that this book addresses the darker forces in American politics, that it deals with "demagogic appeals" to "irrational" impulses, that its substance is limited to "negative politics." Political elites, as noted in the earlier quotation from Wirthlin, study the electorate to find out what matters to them and to locate strategically important sectors of the electorate who could determine the outcome in a given presidential election. Our approach does not see their activity as the exploitation of dark psychological forces. We expect politicians to act like politicians. From our observations of them, they operate by three cardinal rules: (1) What a politician wants most is a place in the sun, to be out front, to have the opportunity to make decisions. (2) Most politicians would rather be live politicians than dead statesmen or stateswomen. (3) In politics they will get what they can and tolerate what they must. Paraphrasing old-time journalist John T. McCutcheon, one of our students argued that the term "ambitious politician" is a "repetitive redundancy." In short, this book is couched in *ambition theory* (Schlesinger 1966).

From the other side of the campaign relationship, voters typically do have value cores, and in general ways understand which candidate shares or at least espouses their values (Popkin 1991). Some things bother some voters. Some things are not right. Midlevel managers, downsized out of jobs in the 1980s while young Wall Street arbitrageurs played the merger mania for all it was worth, came to dislike the people who profited from the trickle-down economy; eventually they punished the Reagan-Bush regime. In their minds, these greedy profiteers were not civic-minded Republicans who lived by the rules. Democratic politicians played to their estrangement. In like manner, middle-American Catholic women who had long experienced pay discrimination welcomed ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment. But when the women's movement in the later 1970s enjoined an agenda of ERA, abortion rights, equality of opportunity in the military, and approval of lesbianism as true feminism, these Catholic women hoisted anchor. They listened to Republican politicians who said the values of these feminists are not the values of Catholic mothers and working women. Opponents, of course, will cry foul, charging "class warfare" or "gender bashing," respectively. But among the people who sense something is not right, they do not feel their darkest psychological recesses are being manipulated by cunning politicians. They consider the conflict over values, over the role of government in achieving society's goals, to be real. They consider attention to such themes to be legitimate.

Informally, the gatekeepers in the American political system set up boundaries on cultural content and campaign discourse. When gatekeeper consensus says a boundary has been traversed, political elites backpedal with retracted ads or scapegoating a "distant" organization beyond the control of the central campaign apparatus. The 1988 Bush campaign, particularly the different versions of the Willie Horton ad, is a case in point. (These are discussed in chapter 6.) By informed accounts, Lee Atwater, the campaign manager, knew that the issue was not simply the prison furlough but a racially charged fear of crime, specifically, in his words, "a big black rapist." While the official campaign organization quickly withdrew the original ad and Vice President Bush disavowed it, an even more explicit racial version continued to run in many locales, along with printed material. The press, as one gatekeeper, did not let the public forget this transgression of the boundaries on cultural discourse. While many other ads and speeches with explicit cultural content have aired during the post–New Deal period, none has so clearly made the public aware of legitimate boundaries on campaigners' actions and voters' values, aspirations, and fears.

With these statements of the puzzle, the argument, basic assumptions, caveats, and disclaimers, we now embark on the project. Part 1 will develop a cultural theory of American politics sufficiently, we hope, to understand presidential campaign dynamics. It is not designed to speak directly to the "culture wars" thesis but to social scientists who are trying to make analytical sense of American political campaigns in the post–New Deal period. At the same time, we hope that scholars who contribute to the culture wars literature will find that our analyses give pause for thought. While culture war theory may arguably do a good job of delineating conflicting worldviews, it says very little about the process by which such differences are politicized, and it contributes no empirical tests that would illuminate the *translation* mechanisms. As Elaine Sharp's recent volume (1999) indicates, it is not enough to note the salience of cultural differences and then assume some automatic translation into political positions. What is problematic is the manner in which such differences are placed on the electoral agenda. We are not satisfied with a theory that puts politicization in a black box, drawing a straight line, for example, from religion to culture to politics. Unlike culture war theory, we assume considerable autonomy for the political impulse, an autonomy strong enough to shape any stage of an apparent teleological process. We expect politicians to act like politicians. They recognize that to accomplish any normative purpose for society, they must seek and stay in power. Voters are their resources. To mention two recent examples of the political impulse among apparent ideologues: witness the transformation of the ideologically purist Class of 1994 in Congress into seasoned political survivors by 1998, or the evolution of 1960s' radicals into legislative leaders at the state and federal levels. Both Max Weber and Reinhold Niebuhr urged social scientists to be alert to the autonomy of the political, even within the web of culture.

After a narrative history of the period and an introduction to our analytical tools, Part 2 will present three case studies of cultural political strategies and outcomes, dealing with patriotism and nationalism, race, gender, and religion. The section will conclude with a reiteration of empirical findings and a discussion of the quest for efficient cultural symbols in American presidential campaigns.