The Christian Right in the US

The Christian Right is a group of organisations and individuals, deriving from a variety of Christian denominations or churches, who actively mobilise together to prioritise a conservative political agenda. The origins of the Christian Right can be traced back to the start of the twentieth century, for example, the publishing of the fundamentals of faith and the Scopes Monkey Trial in the 1920s. However, the movement really came to the forefront of public attention in the 1970s, and has continued to be politically prominent up until the present day.

The Christian Right emerged as a response to the liberal, or left-wing, US Democratic President Jimmy Carter in the mid-1970s. Many conservative Christians believed that Carter was not doing enough to protect their interests in times of growing secularisation in the modern US. Several political lobby groups including Christian Voice, Religious Roundtable, Christian Coalition and the Moral Majority, rose to prominence in this period and proved to be such a powerful voting base that they were given credit for the election of Republican conservative Christian Ronald Reagan to the presidency in 1980. Among the leading figures in the movement were Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell.

The Christian Right’s main political issues included campaigning against abortion and contraception. The movement strongly supported their idea of family values, placing a strong emphasis on marriage, which led them to campaign against homosexuality, and more recently same-sex marriage. The rise of secularisation in the post-World War Two period was perceived as dangerous and something that needed to be countered. The Christian Right also campaign strongly to allow prayer in state schools. This is a contentious issue in the US, as it is seen to be in direct opposition to the division of church and state, as laid down in the US constitution. The Christian Right also campaigns for the teaching in schools of intelligent design as an explanation for creation, and are amongst those Christians that strongly support the state of Israel and are hostile towards Islam.

Conservative Christian groups are known for their use of emerging popular culture in their worship. Churches have harnessed new media technology using television, radio, music and eventually the Internet to promote their political message. Christian Right leaders were particularly successful due to their newfound prominence on television. Individuals such as Jimmy Swaggart, Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell became known as ‘televangelists’ and dominated 1980s public life. Christian groups in this period also used media within their worship, including popular music and audio-visual technologies.

- Watch these two contemporary examples from the Mars Hill Church in Seattle, and the Saddleback Church in California.
1) What are the age, gender and ethnicity of both the leadership and the worshippers in these videos, and who do you think they are appealing to?
2) What type of music are they using and why might they be using it?
3) How are the videos on YouTube using mass media and the internet to promote their Churches?
4) What else do you notice in the videos that might be other examples of the Churches using emerging popular culture within their worship?

The Christian Right has become a powerful movement within domestic US politics in the period since 1980, in large part because it was able to organise effectively and, through church based links, mobilise many people to campaign on their chosen issues. The Christian Right are often touted as the reason conservative Christian Republican George W. Bush was elected President in 2000, and re-elected in 2004. The Christian Right became an important bloc of voters, which any potential leader needed to take seriously, and led some to claim that it became 'the most powerful interest group in the Republican Party'. More recently, the US has seen the rise of the Tea Party movement, as a response to the presidency of Democrat Barack Obama. While a more explicitly economic conservative movement, many Tea Party supporters come from a conservative evangelical background and so, for some, the Tea Party movement is the contemporary manifestation of the Christian Right in US politics.

- Read the following articles:
  


1) What are the similarities and differences between the Christian Right and the Tea Party movement?
2) What are the Tea Party’s main objectives and does this reflect those of the Christian Right?
3) How did the Tea Party Movement emerge, and from what sort of political climate?