

Social Conservatives and Economic Conservatives

Andrew E. Busch

Published online: 1 December 2011
© Springer Science+Business Media, LLC 2011

In recent years, some commentators have expressed a fear that social conservatives are a constituency for big government in the economic realm. For example, in a 2006 essay, former Republican congressman and House Majority Leader Richard Armey noted that “There was a day when social conservatives were united with economic conservatives in the belief that small, limited government was not only good for our economy and the prosperity of American families, but essential to protect traditional family values.” In Armey’s estimation, “for most in the Christian conservative movement these issues still resonate,” but some Christian political leaders and organizations had strayed into a heavy-handed support for big government. Overall, “In America today, too many of our Christian leaders fail to recognize the temptation to power and the danger it holds for our society and our faith.” Armey frequently aided social conservatives during his time in Congress, but decried recent events including the decision by Alabama governor Bob Riley to seek a major tax increase for education (on grounds it was “what Jesus would do”), support by the national Christian Coalition for Riley’s tax increase and internet neutrality, opposition by social conservatives to some trade agreements, and above all the Terri Schiavo intervention.¹

Social conservatives are defined by their positions on social issues. As one might expect, they are less unified when the discussion turns to other subjects. Indeed, the reality of social conservatism is much more complicated than the picture

painted by these critics. Scripture condemns both greed and envy, calling on believers to aid the poor while saying “Let him not eat who does not work.” These ambiguities sometimes lead to significant tensions even among observant traditionalists. However, while not unified, social conservatives are likely to support values and policies that defend freedom in economic affairs, a conclusion that is supported by writings of key social conservative leaders, survey evidence, and an examination of voting records in Congress. Moreover, they have long proven capable of being comfortable partners with free-market advocates in an enduring political coalition whose primary political value is liberty.

Social Conservatism and “Fusion”

The inclusion of social conservatives in a coalition with economic conservatives and foreign policy conservatives within the modern Republican Party came in stages, and began long before the organization of the religious right in the 1970s. As the conservative movement began organizing in the 1950s, an antecedent to today’s social conservatism came in the form of an intellectual movement led most notably by Russell Kirk. Self-consciously Burkean, Kirk’s anti-utopian movement emphasized the role of tradition, property, decentralization, and religion in a properly ordered society—that is, a society that aimed for the promotion of virtue.

Traditionalist conservatism became one of three strands of an increasingly active conservative movement. The other two strands were economic conservatism (or, as many of its proponents preferred, classical liberalism) and anti-communism. With the establishment of William F. Buckley’s conservative journal *National Review* in 1955, it was the open aim of *National Review* and its senior editor Frank S. Meyer to promote “fusionism,” a conser-

¹ Dick Armey, “Christians and Big Government,” October 12, 2006. <http://www.freedomworks.org/publications/Christians-and-Big-Government>. Accessed January 14, 2010.

A. E. Busch (✉)
Department of Government, Kravis Center, Faculty Support,
Claremont McKenna College,
850 Columbia Avenue,
Claremont, CA 91711, USA
e-mail: andrew.busch@cmc.edu

vatism that would embrace and satisfy all three strands, traditionalism no less than the others (Meyer 1964).

Barry Goldwater's 1964 campaign marked the rise of the conservative movement to power within the Republican Party and laid the foundation for Ronald Reagan's victory 16 years later. Today, Goldwater has become an icon of opposition to social conservatism. However, a closer look reveals a very different Goldwater in 1964, one who embraced many features of social conservatism as natural components of a broader conservatism. Several of the hot-button issues that later mobilized social conservatives *en masse* were either non-issues or had only begun to stir. Consequently, there was not yet a distinct mass movement of religious conservatives. And, of course, Goldwater's main themes were limited government and anti-communism. Nevertheless, the modern Republican Party's social conservatism was actually anticipated and advanced by Goldwater's 1964 campaign.²

For one thing, Goldwater articulated a view of the American founding and the purpose of America, as well as the nature of man, that was fundamentally moral and even religious in character. In his 1964 nomination acceptance speech, Goldwater extolled "freedom under a government limited by the laws of nature and nature's God." He warned that "those who elevate the state and downgrade the citizen must see ultimately a world in which earthly power can be substituted for Divine Will, and this Nation was founded upon the rejection of that notion and upon the acceptance of God as the author of freedom."³

Described by one political historian as "preachy" and a "half-crazed moral zealot (Martin 1971)," Goldwater also identified and decried a national moral decline. Indeed, Goldwater made morality the centerpiece of a 30-min televised address that aired on CBS on October 20, 1964. In the address, delivered at the Mormon Tabernacle in Salt Lake City, he declared that "The moral fiber of the American people is beset by rot and decay," cited George Washington's dictum (beloved by today's social conservatives) that "Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports," and pledged his "every effort to a reconstruction of reverence and moral strength" in America.⁴

² For elaboration, see Andrew E. Busch, "The Goldwater Myth," *Claremont Review of Books*, Winter 2006.

³ Barry Goldwater, Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in San Francisco, July 16, 1964. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=25973>. Accessed June 23, 2010. See also (Goldwater 1960).

⁴ "Nationwide TV Address on 'Morality and Government' Over the CBS Network, 9:30–10 P.M., October 20, 1964, by Senator Barry Goldwater, Republican Candidate for President of the U.S." Republican National Committee News, October 20, 1964. Barry Goldwater papers, University of Texas at Austin.

Goldwater and 1964 Republicans took a socially conservative stand on a number of specific policy issues, as well. Above all, Goldwater and the 1964 Republican platform endorsed a constitutional amendment that would have overturned the Supreme Court's recent school prayer decisions and allowed voluntary school prayer. The 1964 Republican platform also called for stricter limits on obscenity and for tuition tax credits for elementary and secondary school children attending private and religious schools. Altogether, political journalist Theodore H. White contended that the Republican nominee's "greatest contribution to American politics" and his "great credit in historical terms" lay in the way he forced the moral issue onto the national agenda. White also had no difficulty identifying Goldwater's solution: "the Bible and the God of the desert (White 1965)."

Goldwater's transformation into an opponent of social conservatism was not apparent until the twilight of his Senate career or after he had left the Senate in 1987. Yet it was the 1964 Goldwater—who talked of moral decay, extolled the religious underpinnings of American society, supported school prayer, and called God the "author of freedom"—who was crucial in molding modern American conservatism.

Another step in the Republican Party's growing appeal to social conservatives came with Richard Nixon's emphasis on cultural conservatism to attract blue-collar ethnic voters (often Catholics) that some GOP strategists envisioned as the decisive constituency. Ultimately, a series of secular liberal advances in the 1960s and 1970s spurred the mobilization of religious conservatives. When Ronald Reagan announced at a meeting of the Religious Roundtable during the 1980 campaign that "I know that you cannot endorse me, but I endorse you and everything you do," he made it clear that in his mind there was no significant conflict between their aspirations and his own limited government conservatism.

The Republican electoral alliance with the nascent religious right and conservative Catholics cemented by Reagan was notable for the way it brought a large number of previously apolitical or Democratic-leaning voters into the Republican coalition. With the exception of the Republican reversal on the Equal Rights Amendment, the alliance was not notable for having fundamentally altered Republican positions, and certainly not for having altered the positions of conservative Republicans. Before 1980, they already supported school prayer, limits on obscenity, the traditional family, and tuition tax credits and already opposed newfangled education theories, counterculture mores, and judicial activism on social questions. GOP platforms in 1964, 1968, 1972, and 1976 all expressed support for some form of government aid to parents of private school students; voluntary school prayer was endorsed in 1964, 1972 and 1976; and stricter limits on

obscenity received support in 1964 and 1976. Even on abortion, the Republican Platform had already moved substantially in the pro-life direction in 1976. It is simply not the case that social conservatism is a recent aberration unnaturally fixed onto a once-pure “Goldwater conservatism,” or that the Republican Party was “hijacked” by the religious right when it provided a partisan home for social conservatives.

In recent years, the *National Review*-1964 Goldwater-Reagan fusion has been called into question. Most importantly, George W. Bush and some other Republican leaders alienated economic conservatives by downplaying limited government themes. There is no evidence that Bush was more socially conservative than Reagan—it was Reagan, not Bush, who published a widely distributed essay appealing to the conscience of the nation to limit abortion. However, despite his tax-cutting record, Bush failed to hold up the limited government mantle, offering instead policies that included a large increase in domestic spending, substantially greater federal involvement in K-12 education, and the creation of the Medicare prescription drug entitlement.

Authors such as Ryan Sager and Shikha Dalmia observe that, after the Bush years, the Republican coalition must become more fully devoted to liberty in order to rebuild its electoral foundation. However, as we will see, social and economic conservatism are not engaged in a zero-sum contest, so the road to a more liberty-focused GOP could lay in the strengthening of limited government themes, not in the subtraction of social conservatism. The rise of federal power, federal spending, and the national debt as compelling issues has already driven Republicans in this direction, as the 2010 elections and 2011 debt ceiling debate demonstrated. As a coherent program, Bush’s passionate conservatism seems to have departed the scene with its most famous advocate, though elements of it will undoubtedly continue to have appeal in some quarters.

Perhaps the most serious obstacle to the maintenance of Grover Norquist’s “Leave Me Alone Coalition” between fiscal and social conservatives is, and always has been, the question of emphasis. Social conservatives are understandably reluctant to put their votes and their energy behind candidates if their concerns are likely to be shelved after Election Day. Yet many economic conservatives object to placing social or moral concerns as a high political priority. It is not that economic conservatives, as a bloc, support gay marriage or abortion on demand (though many libertarians do). Often, they just do not want to think about those issues very much, and resent social conservatives for making them do so.

Nevertheless, when the Times Mirror Center for the People and the Press put Americans into ten political categories in the mid-1990s, including “enterprisers” who were most focused on free-market economics and “moral-

ists” who were most concerned with values issues, it found to its surprise that “Enterprisers are more conservative on social issues than might be expected, expressing strong disapproval of federally-funded abortions and solid support for a school prayer amendment.” They were also the group most favorable toward evangelical Christians.⁵ For their part, the “moralists” were a bit more suspicious of business than “enterprisers,” were slightly more likely to support income tax increases to curb the deficit (24% to 16%), slightly less likely to support a capital gains tax cut (71% to 83%), and less likely to endorse free trade (55% to 75%), but these were differences of degree.⁶

On the whole, a decade and a half later, the grounds for coalition continue to be strong. Indeed, other notable coalitions have lasted decades with much less holding them together than sustains economic and social conservatives today. When he delivered the Republican response to President Obama’s 2010 State of the Union Address, Virginia Governor Bob McDonnell brought together themes that showed that modern-day fusion is far from impossible. McDonnell, a Catholic, a strong social conservative, and the recipient of a master’s degree from Pat Robertson’s Regent University, had only recently won a landslide victory in a state that 1 year before had been trending Democratic. In his speech, the new governor touted entrepreneurship and innovation, saying “What government should not do is pile on more taxation, regulation, and litigation that kills jobs and hurt the middle class.” After quoting Jefferson’s First Inaugural paean to limited government, McDonnell argued that our circumstances demand that we “restore the proper, limited role of government at every level. Without reform, the excessive growth of government threatens our very liberty and prosperity.” In the end, McDonnell put forward the principle of limited government while acknowledging social conservatism, saying that “America must always be a land where liberty and property are valued, and innocent human life is protected.”

In February 2010, representatives of a number of influential organizations representing a broad spectrum of conservatism issued a statement (the “Mt. Vernon Statement”) pledging to “recommit ourselves to the ideas of the American Founding,” including limited government, the rule of law, national independence, economic opportunity, religious liberty, and republican self-government. In their view, “A Constitutional conservatism unites all conservatives through the natural fusion provided by American principles,” reminding economic conservatives that “morality is essential to limited government” and social conservatives that “unlimited government is a

⁵ *The People, The Press, and Politics: The New Landscape*, Times Mirror Center for the People & the Press, September 21, 1994, pp. 12, 111. <http://people-press.org/reports/pdf/19940921.pdf>. Accessed October 11, 2010.

⁶ *The People, The Press, and Politics: The New Landscape*, pp. 85–86.

threat to moral self-government.” The Mt. Vernon Statement holds that the practical program of such a conservatism applies the principle of limited government, honors the central place of individual liberty in American politics and life, encourages free enterprise, and “informs conservatism’s firm defense of family, neighborhood, community, and faith.” Signatories included, among many others, the leaders of the Family Research Council, Concerned Women for America, Focus on the Family, and the Council for National Policy.⁷

As the Tea Party movement gained strength, a legitimate question arose about how compatible its limited-government, anti-spending agenda would be with social conservatism. There is no question that there was a libertarian strain within the movement. However, the key 2010 Republican primary victories that the Tea Party movement racked up in states like Alaska, Delaware, Colorado, Nevada, Kentucky, and Florida came with candidates who were also social conservatives. News reports indicated that the 2010 Values Voter convention was filled with activists who had also attended Tea Party rallies. Delaware Senate candidate Christine O’Donnell, perhaps the most famous and controversial of the Tea Party primary victors, had long been active in the abstinence movement. O’Donnell told the Values Voter convention that “Those of us who have toiled for years in the values movement found ourselves surrounded by Americans who had rediscovered the most fundamental value of all, liberty.”⁸ Evidence shows that Tea Party members are significantly more likely than the average American to call themselves “pro-life,” to consider the *Roe v. Wade* decision a bad thing, to favor restrictions on abortion, and to oppose gay marriage⁹; one survey showed that Tea Party members were more likely to oppose gay marriage than self-identified Republicans.¹⁰ An extensive survey conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute concluded that on most dimensions Tea Party members were considerably more traditionalist than most Americans though less so than white evangelicals. Nearly half (47%) of Tea Party members also thought of themselves as part of the Christian conservative movement, and Tea Party members were even more likely than white evangelicals to say that the United States is a “Christian nation.”¹¹

⁷ <http://www.themountvernonstatement.com>. Accessed February 17, 2010.

⁸ See Kathleen Hennessey, “Republicans seek to address issues of ‘values voters,’” *Los Angeles Times*, September 18, 2010, pp. A8–A9; Michael M. Phillips, “Social Conservatives Line up To Get a Seat at the Tea Party,” *Wall Street Journal*, September 18–19, 2010, p. A4.

⁹ Gallup April 2010; CBS/NTU April 2010.

¹⁰ Kathleen Hennessey, “Republicans seek to address issues of ‘values voters,’” *Los Angeles Times*, September 18, 2010, pp. A8–A9; Michael M. Phillips, “Social Conservatives Line up To Get a Seat at the Tea Party,” *Wall Street Journal*, September 18–19, 2010, p. A4.

¹¹ Public Religion Research Institute, October 2010; <http://www.publicreligion.org/research/published/?id=386>. Accessed December 2010.

The ongoing viability of fusion can be seen by taking a close look at the voting records of members of Congress as summarized in the congressional ratings published by a variety of interest groups in Washington. For these purposes, the ratings offered by the Family Research Council (FRC) are a good measure of social conservatism; ratings by the National Taxpayers Union (NTU) and the Club for Growth (CFG) stand in well for economic conservatism. The National Taxpayers Union is most concerned with fiscal issues of limited government, such as taxation, spending, and bureaucracy. The Club for Growth is a supply-side organization most concerned with maintaining low marginal tax rates, deregulation, and free trade. The 2010 *Almanac of American Politics* supplies these ratings for 2007–2008 for every returning Senator, every returning member of the House of Representatives, and new Senators who previously served in the House. The results can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1 Social and economic conservatism ratings, 2007–2008

Senate Republicans			
FRC score	#	Avg. CFG	Avg. NTU
100	23	77.7	66.7
0–99	16/15*	57.1	49.2
House Republicans			
FRC score	#	Avg. CFG	Avg. NTU
100	82	81.0	71.3
90–99	20	81.8	72.7
80–89	26	66.8	60.0
70–79	15	65.5	60.1
50–69	5	53.2	56.4
0–49	6	46.5	48.5
Senate Democrat			
FRC score	#	Avg. CFG	Avg. NTU
0	29	7.4	7.7
1–100	20	11.0	11.7
House Democrats			
FRC score	#	Avg. CFG	Avg. NTU
0	41	2.3	9.4
1–10	90	4.8	10.7
11–20	48	6.6	12.1
21–30	13	3.1	9.7
31–50	5	3.2	11.2
51–100	18	8.9	15.5

FRC = Family Research Council

CFG = Club for Growth

NTU = National Taxpayers Union

*One Republican Senator in this period received a CFG rating but not an NTU rating

Almanac of American Politics 2010. Calculations by author

In 2007–2008, 23 Republican Senators had a perfect 100% score from the Family Research Council. In 2008, those Senators averaged economic conservatism scores that were roughly 20 percentage points higher than the average economic conservatism scores of the remainder of the Republican Party in the Senate. Another way of looking at this is by examining the top ranked economic conservatives to see how many were also top ranked social conservatives. Of the top 13 Republican Senators as far as the Club for Growth was concerned—those with scores of 80% or higher—12 also had perfect Family Research Council scores. Similarly, eleven Republican Senators had National Taxpayer Union scores of 70% or better. Every one of the eleven had a perfect Family Research Council rating. Other key social conservatives in the Senate during the party's 1995–2007 ascendancy followed the same pattern. In the last full session before they left the Senate, John Ashcroft, Rick Santorum, and Wayne Allard each scored a 100% on their key social conservatism rating. They also scored 80s, 90s or a 100 from key economically-conservative organizations. The picture at the bottom was the reverse. There were five Republican Senators in 2007–2008 with Club for Growth or National Taxpayers Union scores below 50%. Only one of the five was in the group that had a perfect Family Research Council score, and the three who had by far the lowest ratings on fiscal issues—Olympia Snowe, Susan Collins, and Arlen Specter—were also the three with the lowest social conservatism scores. (Specter became a Democrat in 2009).

House Republicans presented a similar picture, while Democrats formed a picture at the bottom of the scale which is a mirror image of the top, reinforcing the conclusion that economic and social conservatism go together. Those who scored lowest on social conservatism also scored lowest, on average, on economic conservatism. In both the Senate and the House, some Democrats (such as Ben Nelson and Robert Casey, Jr.) scored well on social conservatism and extremely poorly on economic conservatism, but they were not typical.

The picture was little different the previous time Republicans were in the majority in Congress. Looking at the scores from 2006 does not change the general outlines. Economic conservatism scores were a bit lower among Republicans (and a bit higher among Democrats) in 2006 than in 2008, but the most socially conservative members of each party in Congress remained the most economically conservative on average (See Table 2).

The simplest explanation for these results is that there is an internal logic providing a natural cohesion between social and economic conservatism (and between social and economic liberalism) which shows itself in the genuine opinions of the members themselves. Another possible explanation is that voting records of the elected representatives

Table 2 Social and economic conservatism ratings, 2005–2006

Senate Republicans			
FRC score	#	Avg. CFG	Avg. NTU
100	18	85.2	81.7
0–99	29	66.1	69.7
House Republicans			
FRC score	#	Avg. CFG	Avg. NTU
100	100	65.4	63.7
90–99	0	–	–
80–89	44	57.7	58.7
70–79	24	54.6	58.7
50–69	7	55.7	55.3
0–49	44.0	48.8	
Senate Democrat			
FRC score	#	Avg. CFG	Avg. NTU
0	25	2.5	12.6
1–100	20	9.5	18.8
House Democrats			
FRC score	#	Avg. CFG	Avg. NTU
0	128	9.9	14.0
1–10	0	–	–
11–20	10	16.2	17.3
21–30	13	15.7	18.0
31–50	12	19.9	18.0
51–100	24	30.4	26.7

FRC = Family Research Council

CFG = Club for Growth

NTU = National Taxpayers Union

Almanac of American Politics 2008. Calculations by author

simply reflect the demands of their electoral coalition. The interest group ratings are based on the relative handful of votes deemed most important by each group, so one can deduce that the strongest demands made by the champions of social conservatism are generally compatible with the strongest demands made by the champions of economic conservatism. Whether directly in the thinking of the members or indirectly as the members channel constituency demands—they are not mutually exclusive explanations—the evidence is strong that social and economic conservatism usually go together.

Social Conservatives and Economics

This long history of fusion and notable overlap between social and economic conservatives in Congress is supported by some key features of social conservatism. Many of the basic assumptions and principles of social conservatism actually converge with many of the principles of economic conservatism and limited government. Opposition to the deification of the state, anti-utopianism, individualism,

belief in natural rights, an emphasis on the importance of civil society, and a strong belief in structural defenses of liberty such as federalism and separation of powers are all principles that other conservatives and libertarians generally share. Social conservatives are more likely than the others to see these principles through a religious lens— anti-statism justified by the equation of statism with blasphemy, anti-utopianism undergirded by the doctrine of original sin, individualism (especially among evangelical Protestants) tied to the importance of individual salvation rather than collective social reform, natural rights grounded directly in God, and civil society valued not only because it blocks over-powerful government but because it molds the virtue of free citizens—but the principles are, in the end, the same. These social conservatives agree with economic freedom, but for reasons that are moral and political as much as economic.

Surveys of the clergy and members of most of the religious denominations that serve as the foundation for social conservatism confirm broad agreement with themes of limited government and fiscal probity, though with some variations. Perhaps not surprisingly, given the long identification of Protestantism with capitalism, the clergy of the evangelical Protestant core of American social conservatism are deeply skeptical of bigger government. Fewer than half—depending on the denomination, often many fewer than half—agree with the view that “The federal government should do more to solve social problems such as unemployment, poverty, and poor housing” or that “We need government-sponsored national health insurance so that everyone can get adequate medical care.” In comparison, a majority of mainline Protestant clergy were found on the big government side of those questions, and more than nine out of ten of the Unitarian-Universalist clergy were.¹²

Among church members, when asked whether they would prefer “smaller government providing fewer services” or “bigger government providing more services,” evangelical Protestants as a whole answered “smaller government” by a 48–41% margin, as did Mormons by a 56–36% margin—at a time in 2008 when, nationally, Americans said they preferred bigger government and more services by a 46–43% margin.¹³ Other research shows that committed evangelicals are, on average, also the most economically conservative religious grouping in the country (Kohut et al. 2000). Among evangelicals, there was substantial variety: Support for the limited government option ranged from a 46–45% split among members of the Churches of Christ to a 71–21% majority in fundamentalist

non-denominational churches, while pluralities in a handful of denominations actually preferred the bigger government option by small margins.¹⁴ These variations are probably due to differences in the theological emphases and economic base of each denomination.¹⁵ Surveys also show that a significant majority of conservative Protestants as a whole do not believe it is the job of government to reduce income inequalities, a view shared in equal proportions by members of mainline Protestant churches.¹⁶ Contrary to the tendencies of their clergy, mainline Protestant members were actually slightly more likely to prefer smaller government than were the evangelicals (by a 51–37% margin rather than 48–41%). Consistent with these findings, an October 2010 USA TODAY/Gallup poll identified 17% of the electorate as “religious right,” and found that three out of four of them “say the government has too much power and should take a smaller role on the economy.”¹⁷

The frequent agreement of social with economic conservatism has sometimes been perceived more clearly by the outright opponents of social conservatives than by their ambivalent allies. In *American Theocracy*, Kevin Phillips observes that the Christian Right has embraced free markets while voicing skepticism of environmental and economic regulation. There was, in his view, an unfortunate marriage between conservative religion and American capitalism in the 1980s (Phillips 2006). Chris Hedges, in *American Fascists*, complains that the Christian Right is too wedded to free-market economics (curiously, after accusing it of “totalitarianism”). To Hedges, “The message being preached [by social conservatives] is one that dovetails with the message of neoconservatives who want to gut and destroy federal programs, free themselves from government regulations and taxes, and break the back of all organizations, such as labor unions, that seek to impede maximum profit (Hedges 2006).”

¹⁴ Altogether, members of the Church of Christ supported the smaller government option by a 46–45% margin, the Southern Baptist Convention by 48–41%, independent Baptist churches by 51–39%, Church of the Nazarene by 52–39%, the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod by 58–33%, the Presbyterian Church in America by 58–32%, nondenominational evangelical churches by 59–33%, and nondenominational fundamentalist churches by 71–21%. The Assemblies of God Pentecostals and nondenominational charismatics were an exception (favoring the bigger government option 48–41 and 48–42), as were the Seventh-Day Adventists. Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, *2008 U.S. Religious Landscape Survey*, <http://religions.pewforum.org>. Accessed January 19, 2010.

¹⁵ See (Greeley and Hout 2006).

¹⁶ Greeley and Hout, *The Truth About Conservative Christians*, pp. 85–90.

¹⁷ Susan Page, “From right and left, differing views of the government’s proper role,” USA TODAY, October 11, 2010. http://www.usatoday.com/news/washington/2010-10-11-1Abiggovernment11_CV_N.htm. Accessed October 11, 2010.

¹² Surveys reported in (Smidt 2004; Djupe and Gilbert 2003).

¹³ Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, *2008 U.S. Religious Landscape Survey*, <http://religions.pewforum.org>. Accessed January 19, 2010.

An extended recitation of the economic views of prominent evangelical political leaders over the last three decades establishes their commitment to free market economics and Lockean property rights, though of course they do not see that commitment in the same light as Hedges does.¹⁸ Jerry Falwell, for instance, declared that “the free enterprise system is clearly outlined in the Book of Proverbs,” emphasized that the Founding Fathers believed in free enterprise, and endorsed the view that “economic freedom is directly related to political freedom,” a key tenet of economic conservatives and libertarians. Throughout his 1980 book *Listen, America!*, Falwell referred to the ideas of free-market economic thinkers such as Milton Friedman and William Simon.¹⁹

For his part, Pat Robertson severely criticizes the New Deal, the Great Society, and the failures of the welfare state, quotes Milton Friedman at length, and contends that “more and more people are coming to see the federal government as the monster that devoured not only New York City but an entire nation.” Robertson directly connects social and economic conservatism, referring to “assault on religious faith and huge centralized government” as the “twin thrusts of the statist society.” Locating the right to property in God’s commandments not to steal or covet, Robertson intones that government’s duties should be “limited to performance of the collective tasks that are beyond the scope of the individual, particularly including public safety and national defense.” In economic policy, he endorses a balanced budget amendment, a line-item veto for the president, inversely tying congressional salaries to the size of the deficit, a flat income tax, and privatizing of Social Security (Robertson 1993). In certain respects, Robertson’s economic views are idiosyncratic, focused on the alleged schemes of central bankers; his conspiracy theories sometimes distract attention from his free-market principles (and have led to accusations of anti-semitism). However, while criticizing the Federal Reserve Board and other unaccountable bureaucracies that influence the economy, Robertson declares that “We need our economy controlled by action of a free market under regulations laid down by those whom we vote into office by free and open elections to serve as our representatives. Nothing else is acceptable in a free society (Robertson 1992)!”

D. James Kennedy notes that socialism destroyed Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Kennedy touts evidence for the success of Reaganomics, supports a balanced budget and spending cuts, and says that welfare has “failed miserably,” bureaucracy is “mushrooming,” and

“government is already trying to confiscate the wealth of the nation.” Sounding like many public choice economists and libertarians, Kennedy declares that “[E]very public institution is a threat to individual freedom and the right to self-determination.” In his view, “The simple fact is that everything that government subsidizes gets worse. *The way to restore the freedom of the individual is to get government out of our private lives*” (Kennedy 1994) (Kennedy’s emphasis).

To George Grant, the executive director of Kennedy’s Coral Ridge Ministries and an author in his own right, the American Founders and Scripture agree that “the protection and proper administration of private property is central to both the expression of faith and the preservation of freedom.” Grant fears that modern liberalism “attempts to create a messianic state, offering salvation by law (Grant 1995).”

Noting the difference between emerging countries that follow free-market economics and those that implement central planning models, Richard Land of the Southern Baptist Convention proclaims that the neo-socialist economic and welfare state model does not work. In contrast, “The free-market economic model does work.” Land also describes the tax burden of Americans as “immoral (Land 2007).”

Gary Bauer, one-time head of the Family Research Council and founder of American Values, advocates tax relief, pro-growth policies, maintenance of the tax deduction for charitable contributions, welfare reform, enhancement of workplace flexibility, and other regulatory reforms to protect property rights. Altogether, “advocates of state-controlled economies are losing ground to those who believe people should have the right to earn, save, and invest free of government meddling (Bauer 1996).”

Tony Perkins, who succeeded Bauer as head of the Family Research Council, and Harry Jackson Jr., the African-American Pastor of New Hope Church, agree that “oppressive taxation hinders economic growth of both individuals and society as a whole by discouraging work and productivity.” Jackson and Perkins attack the minimum wage and rent control as counterproductive, call for religious institutions to take the primary responsibility for alleviating poverty, and strongly criticize welfare (while admitting that it is sometimes necessary). To these two social conservatives, European-style universal health care is broken and the attempt to replicate it in America “puts every American’s health care at risk (Jackson Jr and Perkins 2008).”

Aligned with the thinking of these evangelicals is Orthodox Jewish Rabbi Daniel Lapin, who devotes considerable attention to questions of economics and limited government. Lapin declares that “God smiles upon the free and open marketplace” because it

¹⁸ Social conservatives also usually applaud Aristotle’s rejection of the leveling found in Plato’s *Republic*, and agree with him that the laws regarding economics contribute to the formation of a particular sort of character among citizens.

¹⁹ Jerry Falwell, *Listen, America!*, pp. 7, 12, 13, 25, passim.

promotes spiritual qualities of integrity, faith, service, charitable giving, deferred gratification, and creativity. The Rabbi says that Jewish law “unapologetically endorses private property rights.” In Lapin’s view, the inheritance tax is immoral; high taxes, wage and price controls, and the dole contributed to the fall of Rome; and the welfare state is “disastrous.” The Talmud calls for religious and moral obligation to the poor, not “government compulsion.” In the end, Lapin holds that atheism and a successful free market are not compatible; likewise, the Judeo-Christian ethic and overweening government are not compatible (Lapin 1999).

Catholics such as William J. Bennett, Phyllis Schlafly, and Rick Santorum have added their voices. Schlafly declares that “The real liberator of women in America is the free enterprise system” and fears that militant anti-capitalist feminists will “kill the goose who laid the golden egg (Schlafly 1981).” Santorum maintains that government cannot “provide” or “secure” the general welfare, but only “promote” it, and observes that conservatives “believe in lower taxes; common-sense, predictable regulation; free trade; and less litigation. They believe in the power of markets more than they do in the power of government...Free markets are also the basis of all real and lasting wealth creation.” To Santorum, these principles mean that government’s primary economic obligations are to preserve property rights, maintain a sound currency, and prevent fraud (Santorum 2005). William J. Bennett also praises the free market, noting:

Capitalism has created a degree of opportunity unimaginable only a few generations ago. While lifting an unprecedented number of people out of poverty, moreover, the free market and private property have also helped to further political freedom and to secure basic rights. The market economy rewards human initiative, creativity, and excellence. It is, quite simply, the most efficient and humane economic system the world has ever known (Bennett 2001).

Many of the prominent political organizations of social conservatives present a common front against liberal economics and activist government. The Eagle Forum, for example, endorses tax cuts and declares that “We support the private enterprise system and reject the false dogmas that tax-and-spend government or a global economy can solve our social and economic problems.”²⁰ The Traditional Values Coalition includes among its key principles that “We support free enterprise, limited government, low taxes, and personal responsibility. We do not believe the federal government should extend its power over every aspect of

our lives. The best government is the one that governs least.”²¹ In describing its agenda for the 111th Congress, the Christian Coalition included winning energy independence by opening America’s energy resources for development, defending the 2001 tax cuts, and opposing nationalization of health care on the grounds that “The solution to our health care problems lies with more patient and consumer control, not more government control.”²² The Christian Coalition and the Family Research Council have also favored abolition of the estate tax and strongly criticized the *Kelo* Supreme Court decision on eminent domain as a blow against fundamental property rights. The Family Research Council has demanded that President Obama and Congress “make permanent and increase the child tax credit—and put more money in the hands of those who earn it, not burn it!”²³ It has also called for Americans to “Repeal the disastrous health care law, and Restore founding principles in America.”²⁴

In fact, in late 2009 and early 2010, prominent social conservative organizations including the Christian Coalition, Family Research Council, Traditional Values Coalition, Concerned Women for America, Eagle Forum, American Family Association, American Values, National Right to Life Committee, and Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission all posted information critical of President Obama’s proposed health care reform on their websites and called on citizens to mobilize against it. Some had specific concerns about abortion funding, but most attacked it on broader grounds of political economy and government intrusiveness. The first lawsuit against Obamacare to be ruled on by federal courts was sponsored by the Thomas More Law Center, which describes itself as a “public interest law firm dedicated to the defense and promotion of the religious freedom of Christians, time-honored family values, and the sanctity of human life.”²⁵ If social conservative organizations can be accused of coercion or social engineering, it is not in the economic realm, where their spending ambitions have been confined to small sums for faith-based social service programs, abstinence education, or marriage counseling.

There are, of course, challenges in holding together social conservatives and economic conservatives. Economic issues are not purely a matter of abstract principle. Economic interest always plays a role, and social conservative voters perceive those interests in a variety of ways. There are also specific

²⁰ “Join Eagle Forum so you will have a voice at the U.S. Capitol and at State Capitols,” Eagle Forum, <http://www.eagleforum.org/misc/descript.html>. Accessed October 15, 2009.

²¹ “Traditional Values Defined,” Traditional Values Coalition, <http://www.traditionalvalues.org/defined.php>. Accessed October 15, 2009.

²² “Christian Coalition’s Agenda for the 111th Congress,” http://www.cc.org/2009_legislative_agenda. Accessed October 15, 2009.

²³ Tony Perkins, Family Research Council Action Alert, April 8, 2010.

²⁴ Tony Perkins, FRC Action Alert, April 15, 2010.

²⁵ “About the Thomas More Law Center,” <http://www.thomasmore.org/qry/page.taf?id=23>, accessed October 11, 2010.

issues that generate tensions. For example, social conservatives often push for tax relief targeted to families, such as elimination of the marriage penalty and expansion of the child tax credit, while supply-side tax cutters prefer to focus on reducing marginal tax rates as an incentive for economic activity. However, this disagreement has been easily solved: since the mid-1990s, Republicans have simply combined the two approaches.²⁶

Another source of tension with free-market conservatives is that some social conservatives place such a high premium on American sovereignty that they are not favorably disposed toward economic globalism, which they fear will lead to global governance structures. The Eagle Forum announces, under the category of supporting American sovereignty, that it opposes “opening U.S. northern and southern borders to a North American Community, or Security and Prosperity Partnership, or any kind of economic integration.”²⁷ In a similar vein, deep concerns over religious liberty have sometimes compelled social conservatives to oppose trade ties with oppressive regimes, as when the Christian Coalition fought an all-out battle against entrance of communist China into the World Trade Organization. In sum, social conservatives cannot be counted on to always support free trade.²⁸ When they do not, though, it is usually not on behalf of economic protectionism, but rather of international human rights or the preservation of consent of the governed at home. In a similar vein, some free market advocates strongly criticize social conservative organizations such as the Christian Coalition for supporting “net neutrality,” a proposal to require non-discrimination by internet providers. Social conservatives want a guarantee that website operators can not discriminate against religious sites, while economic conservatives oppose the internet regulation the proposal entails.

More broadly, their religious orientation sometimes leads social conservatives to perceive moral perils in capitalism that free-market purists do not. D. James Kennedy, a strong Calvinist, fears the negative moral effects of too much luxury. Echoing Tocqueville’s emphasis on the need for a moderate “self interest rightly understood,” Pat Robertson cautions against making capitalism a theology of its own in which “the god of the new secular religion is the self.”²⁹ On

similar lines, other social conservatives caution that “The free-market system shouldn’t elevate self-interest to a virtue, as does Ayn Rand libertarianism,”³⁰ and express concern that “[T]he values of capitalism, with the premium it places on acquisitiveness, competitiveness, ‘creative destruction,’ ‘rational choice,’ innovation, and self-interest, are often incompatible with and may even be antithetical to the qualities important to marriage and family life—sympathy and deep devotion, patience and restraint, the deferral of gratification, loyalty, and the willingness to lay aside self-interest.”³¹ These social conservatives would say that the application of morality to economics works in the other direction, too. Not only should Americans be wary of moral traps that come with capitalism, but they should be aware that the free market system, like democracy, is “not sustainable except under certain moral conditions and among citizens of specifiable moral habits (Novak 1999).”

These sorts of concerns are unevenly spread through the social conservative world, and the biggest challenge to an alliance with economic conservatives lies in the fact that social conservatism is not just part of a coalition, it *is* a coalition. Some leading “new evangelicals,” such as Rick Warren of the Saddleback megachurch, have begun putting greater emphasis on poverty, and have proposed a more activist governmental approach to it. The clergy of the other circles of the social conservative coalition—Catholics, relatively conservative mainline Protestant denominations like the American Baptist Church and Reformed Church in America, and historically black Protestant churches—are more favorable to federal intervention and national health insurance than are the evangelicals or Mormons. Ordinary Catholics and members of historically black Protestant churches are also more likely to have economically egalitarian views and to prefer bigger government (Catholics by a modest margin, blacks by a large margin).³² In 2008, two in five Catholics preferred smaller government, but there are indications that more committed Catholics—exactly the kind who are most socially conservative—are also more liberal on economic policy than other Catholics.³³

In particular, some components of the Catholic concept of human dignity having to do with the community’s economic obligations to the individual can create tensions with the conservative Protestants when discussion turns to economic issues. The Church’s longstanding fears of excessive individualism led to the 1891 Papal statement *Rerum Novarum* criticizing laissez-faire economics and to

²⁶ In the mid-1990s, Republicans proposed a combination of the child tax credit and a capital gains tax cut; George W. Bush melded together an increased child tax credit and tax credit for adoption expenses with across-the-board income tax rate reductions and cuts in taxes on capital gains and dividends.

²⁷ “Join Eagle Forum so you will have a voice at the U.S. Capitol and at State Capitols,” Eagle Forum, <http://www.eagleforum.org/misc/descript.html>. Accessed October 15, 2009. See also Bauer, *Our Hopes, Our Dreams*, pp. 70–71.

²⁸ For an example of a general skepticism—though not all-out hostility—toward free trade, see Bauer, *Our Hopes, Our Dreams*, pp. 70–71.

²⁹ Robertson, *The New World Order*, p. 169.

³⁰ Land, *The Divided States of America?*, p. 144.

³¹ Bennett, *The Broken Hearth*, p. 36.

³² Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, *2008 U.S. Religious Landscape Survey*, <http://religions.pewforum.org>. Accessed January 19, 2010.

³³ Kohut, Green, Keeter, and Toth, *The Diminishing Divide*, p. 43.

support by 1930s American Catholics for schemes to control wages and prices.

In *Centesimus Annus*, Pope John Paul II reiterated the traditional Catholic position opposed both to socialism and a market unguided by moral considerations. In that 1991 encyclical, the Pope noted the importance of “initiative and entrepreneurial activity” and called the free market the “most efficient instrument for utilizing resources and effectively responding to needs.” Yet “economic freedom is only one element of human freedom,” and contains the dangers of materialism and “idolatry of the market.” In order to be just, the economic order should guarantee a wage sufficient to support a family, social insurance for old age and unemployment, and good working conditions for employees. (In line with this thinking Santorum argues that conservatives in the past have not done enough to aid the poor, and he was sharply criticized by Ryan Sager in *The Elephant in the Room* for supporting a proposal to provide American children with a government-funded savings account upon birth.) The Church, John Paul II said elsewhere (in *Ecclesia in America*) rejects “a purely economic conception of man” (in words, it should be pointed out, that closely followed those published by Barry Goldwater in *Conscience of a Conservative*). His solution was not the secular religion of socialism but real religion that could add humanity, humility, and ethical ballast to man’s acquisitive instinct.

This social doctrine, which eschews materialism of left or right and aims for social balance, leads to serious disputes among Catholics about which elements to emphasize. While it can sustain a statist approach to economics, it does not have to. In the United States and abroad, the Catholic leadership simultaneously endorsed labor unions and stoutly opposed socialism. Leading conservative Catholic Archbishop Charles Chaput makes clear his commitment to an anti-utopian politics that is skeptical toward overweening government. Chaput emphasizes the principle of “limited government under God” and implies that secular statist schemes cannot come to a good end: “Without God, no matter how good our intentions, all our humanitarian ambitions eventually drift toward tyranny (Chaput 2008).”

Altogether, historian John T. McGreevy sees a new emphasis on free markets as the most salient element of *Centesimus Annus*, and notes that pro-market conservatives such as William F. Buckley and Michael Novak were “less heterodox” and more mainstream within Catholic thought by the 1990s (McGreevy 2003). In fact, Buckley and Novak did not just benefit from the shift, but helped drive it. Novak, most notably, has spent a career offering a vigorous defense of democratic capitalism within the context of Catholic social thought. In books such as *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* and *The Catholic Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Novak embraces not only the

practical efficiency of capitalism as a source of material wealth but its moral superiority as a system that centers on man’s God-given creativity and that both relies on and cultivates a wide range of moral virtues. Novak’s extensive intellectual project of reconciling Catholic doctrine with free-market economics demonstrates both that such a reconciliation can be achieved, and that it has not been automatic.

Moral Dimensions to Economic Policy

On balance, social conservatives are more likely than not to be defenders of economic liberty. Their principles generally incline them in that direction, their organizations have regularly embraced policy positions favoring tax cuts and property rights and opposing Obamacare, and the strongest social conservatives in each party in Congress tend also to be the strongest economic conservatives. At the same time, social conservatives see some moral dilemmas in the free market, they sometimes set free trade aside in favor of other considerations, and the Catholic Church adheres to a social doctrine that has often justified more active government (though it does not have to). White evangelicals and Mormons are most likely to embrace free markets; Catholics and Black Protestants are more skeptical. Nevertheless, the tendencies are real enough. More often than not, social conservatives are a force for economic freedom and a limited state. They also offer a moral dimension to policy in areas where analysis can easily be overwhelmed by cold calculation and narrow financial self-interest. Yet, unlike critics on the left who are sometimes deeply hostile to free markets, these social conservatives offer a moral ballast that seeks to guide free markets without repudiating them—a sort of sympathetic critique that would otherwise be largely absent in America’s politics. The coalition between economic and social conservatives has benefited from deliberate cultivation by figures including William F. Buckley and Frank Meyer, Paul Weyrich and Richard Viguerie, and Ronald Reagan and subsequent Republican presidential nominees. It will undoubtedly require continued cultivation in the future. Yet one cannot conjure into existence an enduring coalition that lacks a prior basis in substantial common interest or conviction. That the social conservative-economic conservative coalition is not a mere artifact of construction by Republican political elites can be seen in congressional voting records, where the two types of conservatism tend to go together on the Democratic side, as well.

Political coalitions are about forming majorities in the electorate and in governing institutions, and a crucial question is whether the economic conservative-social conservative alliance can still produce election victories. On one hand, this coalition is not a majority of the country, though it seems at the

moment to be a growing plurality (according to recent Gallup polls, about 40% of Americans identify themselves as conservatives, slightly more than moderates and almost double the number of liberals). If the coalition sticks together, it starts with a lead. Its ability to get over the top will depend from election to election on circumstances and quality of leadership, but this has always been the case.

Demographic trends do not supply a clear answer for the future, either. In polls, younger generations of Americans are less religious, more supportive of gay marriage, and less supportive of legalized abortion than their elders. Immigration is bringing to America waves of newcomers, most of whom hail from countries with more traditionalist cultures, but many are quickly assimilated. In the longer-term, the birth-rates of Americans who attend church regularly are 50 percent higher than the rate of the secular. How all of this will balance out in the end is hard to say.

From an electoral standpoint, Republicans will undoubtedly seek to make inroads into the African-American and (especially) rapidly-growing Latino populations, and social values will be one of their key arguments. However, they will face challenges in managing such a coalition on the economic side, not because economic conservatism and social conservatism are inherently contradictory, but because the social conservatism of those groups coexists with a different moral understanding of political economy and/or a perception that they have a strong self-interest in government activism in the economy.

Setting aside demographic uncertainties, social conservatives will have a strong case to make, based on recent national experience, for both the viability and the importance of an alliance with economic conservatives. It is clear in retrospect that what social conservatives would call a national loss of morality contributed heavily to the financial collapse of 2008 and subsequent economic distress: the greed of mortgage lenders, the materialism and dishonesty of borrowers, the irresponsible carelessness of financial institutions, the demagoguery and shady dealings of politicians such as Christopher Dodd and Barney (“I’m willing to roll the dice”) Frank, and the arrogant empire-building of government-backed entities including Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac all contributed heavily to the crisis. The result of the crisis has been the greatest loss of economic freedom suffered by the American people since 1933. Social conservatives have good reason to argue that virtue and freedom were connected after all.

Further Reading

Bauer, G. L. 1996. *Our hopes, our dreams: A vision for america* (pp. 65–68). Colorado Springs: Focus on the Family Publishing. 120, 10.

- Bennett, W. J. 2001. *The broken hearth: Reversing the moral collapse of the american family* (pp. 35–36). New York: Doubleday.
- Chaput, C. J. 2008. *Render unto Caesar: Serving the nation by living our catholic beliefs in political life*. New York: Doubleday, pp. 71, 194.
- Djupe, P. A., & Gilbert, C. P. 2003. *The prophetic pulpit: Clergy, churches, and communities in american politics*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Goldwater, B. 1960. *The conscience of a conservative* (pp. 10–11). Shepherdsville: Victor Publishing Co.
- Grant, G. 1995. *Changing of the guard: The vital role christians must play in America's unfolding political and cultural drama*. Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, pp. 74, 59, 37.
- Greeley, A., & Hout, M. 2006. *The truth about conservative christians: What they think and what they believe* (pp. 48–52). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hedges, C. 2006. *American fascists: The christian right and the war on America* (pp. 179–180). Free Press: New York.
- Jackson, H. Jr., & Perkins, T. 2008. *Personal faith, public policy*. Lake Mary, FL: FrontLine. pp. 102, 112, 113, 126–128.
- Kennedy, D. J. 1994. *Character & destiny: A nation in search of its soul*. Zondervan: Grand Rapids, pp. 27, 31, 37–40.
- Kohut, A., Green, J. C., Keeter, S., & Toth, R. C. 2000. *The diminishing divide: Religion's changing role in American Politics* (p. 43). Washington: Brookings Institution.
- Land, R. 2007. *The divided states of America? What liberals and conservatives are missing in the god-and-country shouting match*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, pp. 179, 144, 182.
- Lapin, D. 1999. *America's real war*. Colorado Springs: Multnomah Books. chapters 34–39.
- Martin, J. B. 1971. Election of 1964. In A. M. Schesinger Jr. (Ed.), *History of American presidential elections 1789–1968 vol. IV* (p. 3589). New York: Chelsea House.
- McGreevy, J. T. 2003. *McGreevy, catholicism and american freedom: A history* (p. 287). New York: W.W. Norton.
- Meyer, F. S. 1964. Freedom, tradition, conservatism. In F. S. Meyer (Ed.), *What is conservatism?* (pp. 7–20). New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.
- Novak, M. 1999. *On cultivating liberty: Reflections on moral ecology* (p. 14). Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Phillips, K. 2006. *American theocracy: The peril and politics of radical religion, oil, and borrowed money in the 21st century* (pp. 238–249). Viking: New York.
- Robertson, P. 1992. *The new world order* (p. 267). Dallas: Word Publishing.
- Robertson, P. 1993. *The turning tide*. Dallas: Word Publishing. pp. 17, 20, 40–41, 90–91
- Santorum, R. 2005. *It takes a family: Conservatism and the common good* (p. 212). Wilmington: ISI.
- Schlaflly, P. 1981. *The power of the christian woman* (pp. 37–39). Cincinnati: Standard Publishing.
- Smidt, C. E. (Ed.). 2004. *Pulpit and politics: Clergy in american politics at the advent of the millennium*. Waco: Baylor University Press.
- White, T. H. 1965. *The making of the president 1964* (pp. 313–314). New York: Atheneum.

Andrew E. Busch is Chair, Department of Government and Crown Professor of Government and George R. Roberts Fellow at Claremont McKenna College. This article is based on a paper given as part of a workshop on the future of social conservatism, directed by Jon Shields and sponsored and funded by the Henry Salvatori Center for the Study of Individual Freedom in the Modern World at Claremont McKenna College, May 20–21, 2011.