



SCHOOL OF POLITICS & ECONOMICS

UNDERSTANDING THE “VALUES QUESTION” IN POLITICS: A TRANSDISCIPLINARY APPROACH PROFESSOR JEAN SCHROEDEL

Following the 2004 presidential election, public attention was captured by reports about the importance of “moral values voters” in deciding the outcome. Exit polls revealed that between 20-25% of the electorate cast their votes on the basis of an evaluation of the candidates’ moral values. Since the election, scholars have begun to question whether moral values really mattered as much as was initially reported. Moreover, there is tremendous ambiguity over the meaning of moral values. For some it was a short hand way of talking about other concerns, in particular perceptions of presidential leadership. For others, moral values voting is a means of expressing views about some of the most contentious and emotional issues of our day (e.g., end-of-life issues, reproductive rights, women’s rights, homosexuality and religion in the schools). While these are the “values” issues that have mobilized many people holding traditionalist religious views, many others would argue that their core beliefs have led them to take socially and politically progressive stances with respect to the environment, war and peace, and ending poverty.

For these reasons, a more probing and complete assessment of the “values question” is needed, if one wishes to understand contemporary American politics. This, however, can only be done by venturing beyond the traditional disciplinary boundaries. For example, very few political scientists understand how differences in the eschatology of Reformed and Baptist believers affect views about the extent to which religion should govern American law. In fact, most political scientists are

clueless about the meaning of eschatology.¹ Conversely, scholars of religion, who are immersed in exploring nuances in the thinking of Thomas Muntzer, are equally clueless when confronted with questions involving the median voter theorem. In short, a careful and thorough understanding of the impact of moral values on contemporary American politics can only be done by drawing upon the expertise of several different academic disciplines---religion, political science, sociology and history.

While the small size of Claremont Graduate University precludes our having all of the requisite expertise in-house, we are able to draw on the resources of several CGU schools, as well as those of the Claremont Consortium and Claremont School of Theology. Within SPE, all of the American politics faculty (Schroedel, Merolla and Uhlmann) have research projects that deal to various degrees with the intersection of religion and politics. Professor Uhlmann has a very strong background in Catholic philosophy, which undergirds his research on euthanasia. Religious variables figure prominently in Schroedel and Merolla's research on women and politics. Professor Schroedel also is a co-principal investigator on a Russell Sage Foundation funded project exploring socially conservative Christianity and American democracy. She also is a consultant on an Institute for Signifying Scriptures project, being run by Professor Wimbush, exploring scriptural fundamentalisms among African-Americans, Asian-Americans, Native Americans and Latinos/Latinas in the United States. Professors Merolla and Schroedel are working with Professor Easton from Philosophy on a student-faculty research project aimed at developing better measures of religion's impact on an individual's political behavior. The SPE faculty are working closely with Dean Karen Torjesen and several CST faculty members on developing an MA degree in religion and politics.

¹ Even fewer political scientists are familiar with Arminian soteriology, much less how it replaced Calvinist belief in predestinationism as the dominant strand among evangelicals.