



The Christian Right Goes to Congress

Achievements, Failures, and Political Trajectories of Republican Oklahoman Representatives (1994-2010)

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The Christian Right Goes to Congress: Achievements, Failures, and Political Trajectories of Republican Oklahoman Representatives (1994-2010)

ELIZABETH LEVY

To anyone interested in the relationship between religion and politics in America, and more precisely in the Christian Right and its successes and tribulations, the state of Oklahoma provides a fascinating case study. With the 1994 mid-term elections, the Sooner state became a glorious example both of the Republican Revolution that swept the country and of the growing influence of the Christian Right in American politics.¹ Indeed, on November 8th, 1994, a complete Republican realignment took place in Oklahoma as the GOP picked up almost all of the seats: Tom Coburn, Jim Inhofe, Ernest Istook, Steve Largent, Frank Lucas and J.C. Watts were all elected to Congress, which gave the Republican party a 7-1 majority in the Congressional delegation when only the day before Democrats had outnumbered Republicans 5-3. In this Bible-Belt state which has consistently made the top ten lists of the most religious states in past decades and where more than half the population affiliates itself with the evangelical Protestant tradition, the five Republicans elected to the House of Representatives could all boast a close relationship with the Christian Right, which indeed played a pivotal role in their elections (Bednar and Hertzke).²

1. Countless studies have demonstrated that the Christian Right is not a unified movement and that it is very diverse in nature. In this essay, the term refers to networks of leaders and followers of both national organizations and local chapters. More precisely, the Christian Coalition played a significant role in Oklahoma while local organizations such as the Resource Institute of Oklahoma, founded in 1990, also became major figures in the Sooner state activist landscape. Likely followers of the movement, such as Oral Roberts University students, are also included. In Oklahoma, the Christian Right is overwhelmingly of the Protestant tradition, but has been able to work with people of the Mormon faith such as Republican congressman Ernest Istook, first elected in 1992.

2. Pew Research Religion & Public Life Project. "Religious Landscape Survey." 2008. Web. Accessed Dec. 26, 2014; Gallup. "Mississippi is Most Religious U.S. State." March 27, 2012. Web, Accessed Dec. 26, 2014.

The study of members of Congress elected in Oklahoma in 1994 sheds light on the scope of the Christian Right's impact on American politics, a controversial topic in the literature on the relationship between religion and politics. Despite various interpretations, the Christian Right can be defined as "a social movement that attempts to mobilize evangelical Protestants and other orthodox Christians into conservative political action" (Wilcox and Larson 6), and therefore ultimately wishes to see its faith-and-family centered agenda turned into policies. Media pundits have disagreed over the Christian Right. Whereas Patrick Hynes has argued that the "Religious Right is an important subgroup of American society that exercises its God-given right to free expression and political activism in the face of monstrous insults from its enemies" (Hynes xi), others, such as Chris Hedges, have contended that the radical Christian Right is reminiscent of a young fascist movement that "does not want a dialogue. It is a movement based on emotion and cares nothing for rational thought and discussion" (Hedges 205). Scholars have also been prolific. In their classic study, Clyde Wilcox and Carin Larson underlined that Christian Right activists were at times too extreme and that this precluded any real debate from taking place (Wilcox and Larson 187). In a time-related perspective, Steve Bruce has argued that the movement had lost its political efficiency by the late 1980s, whereas Ted Jelen showed evidence that support for the Christian Right comes and goes according to a cyclical pattern. Duane Oldfield has demonstrated that there has been a growing overlapping between the Christian Right and the Republican party, and studies by Alesha Doan, Didi Herman, or Melissa Deckman—to name only a few—have shown that issues such as ending abortion, outlawing same-sex marriage, and promoting the role of religion in public life and in schools have received the lion's share of the movement's attention both at the federal and state levels.

If there is little doubt that the Christian Right is a force to be reckoned with, its ability to turn its social concerns into national policies has been qualified. As Congress "drafts and passes legislation, passes the budget and approves treaties and appointments" (Wilcox and Larson 111), its members theoretically have the power to implement the Christian Right's social agenda in an efficient way. In his seminal work, Matthew Moen showed that the Christian Right had the ability to shape Congress's agenda during the Reagan presidency, but that its legislative victories were nevertheless limited. More generally, critics have raised the possibility that some politicians use religious concerns during their campaigns in order to get elected, but have no real intention of trying to turn the Christian agenda into law once in office (Ben Barka 146).

If the impact of the Christian Right has carefully been studied election after election since 1994, oddly enough, the question of the Christian Right's influence within Congress since the Republican Revolution has been little examined. Moreover, the impact of specific members of Congress in policy

making is very seldom studied. Congressmen have different backgrounds, priorities and styles that play out in their voting decisions, and the study of Congress as a single entity tends to rub out these differences. These oversights are all the more surprising since the context of the 1994 elections allowed for a great deal of hope on the part of the Christian Right to see its family-centered agenda turned into law. Several Republican electoral victories in 1994 were accounted for by the mobilization of the Christian Right and most members of the 1994 Congressional Freshman class saw themselves as “reformers” who would not turn politics into a career, but instead act as “citizen legislators” and quickly reform Washington before going back to their regular lives.

This study is an attempt to understand the perceived difficulty experienced by the Christian Right in pushing its agenda in Congress by examining three members of the legislative body who were elected for the first time in 1994 and who have had very different careers afterwards. Our question will be a simple one: What happens when the Christian Right gets its way and manages to get quality candidates elected? The paper focuses on three of the five Republican Oklahoma elected to the House of Representatives in 1994: Tom Coburn of the second district (who then became the junior senator in 2004 and retired in 2015), Steve Largent of the first district (who retired from politics after an unsuccessful run for Governor of Oklahoma in 2002 and worked as a lobbyist in Washington until 2014), and Frank Lucas of the sixth district (still a representative, but now of the third district following the redistricting of 2003). It will show that the Christian Right played a crucial role in these representatives’ elections in 1994 and that the three congressmen tried to reform both Congress and America, albeit to a different degree once in Washington. Eventually, Coburn’s, Largent’s and Lucas’s careers will help us underline possible shortcomings in the Christian Right’s long-term functioning and strategy.

All-Time High: The Astounding Victory of the Christian Right in Oklahoma in 1994

Tom Coburn, Steve Largent and Frank Lucas were all elected to Congress for the first time in 1994, at a time when the Christian Right had been trying to acquire a less threatening image and find its place in the policy-making process. Ralph Reed, then first executive director of the Christian Coalition, one of the main national religious organizations at the time, explained that Christian activists were seeking representatives that would voice their concerns: “The American people need to know that we do not desire to exclude our political foes, only to gain our own place at the table. [...] We are attempting to give our values—the values of mainstream Americans—a voice in the process” (Reed 222-223).

If Frank Lucas had held an office in the Oklahoma House of Representatives between 1988 and 1994, Tom Coburn and Steve Largent had never run in an election before. Their very inexperience was one of their strong suits since it also signaled that they were foreign to what a great number of Americans had grown to consider the corrupt Washington establishment. Even though the three Republican candidates came from different backgrounds, they all looked like quality contenders who would be articulate spokespeople for the Christian Right once elected.

In the sixth district, Frank Lucas was only thirty-four years old and the first to run for national office when it appeared that a special election had to be organized in April-May 1994 after Congressman Glenn English decided to step down to devote himself to full-time lobbying. Born and raised in Cheyenne, Oklahoma, Lucas's greatest strength was his acute knowledge of agriculture both in theory and in practice. Even as an elected official he had kept running the farm his family had owned for over half a century and he had studied agricultural economics in college. A married member of the First Baptist Church, he stated that one of his main reasons for running was his strong anti-Clinton sentiment, which implicitly made him a defender of morality.³ He was thus an adequate candidate for the Christian Right as he stood for the heartland's core values: family, tradition, hard work, and stability.

In the second district, Tom Coburn was a forty-six-year-old doctor who specialized in family medicine. He was vocally opposed to abortion and his personal experience of delivering over a thousand babies made him a gatekeeper of the sanctity of life. His own personal life suggested a strong attachment to constancy and moral values: Coburn had been married to a former Miss Oklahoma for twenty-five years and had three daughters. He was also a Southern Baptist deacon, which implied that he had some solid religious connections in his district.⁴

In the first district, Steve Largent had just retired from a successful career as a football player for the Seattle Seahawks. He held many records and was no less than a superstar nationwide. Married to Terry, his high school sweetheart, and a father of four, he had used his fame to encourage the spreading of family and Christian values when participating in James Dobson's 1992 video "Sex, Lies and... the Truth," in which he called on teenagers to refrain from premarital sex.⁵ He had also been a loyal member of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, an "international Christian ministry [hoping to] see the world impacted for Jesus

3. Paul English. "Lucas Calls for Term Limits 6th District Election Set for May 10." *The Daily Oklahoman*, April 7, 1994. Web. Accessed Dec. 26, 2013.

4. "New Member Profile: Tom Coburn, R-Okla. (2)." *CQ Weekly* (January 7, 1995): 86. Web. Accessed July 18, 2012.

5. Source: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0qS-nPvf3FU>>. Accessed Dec. 26, 2013.

Christ through the influence of athletes and coaches,” according to their website. Largent wore his faith as a badge of honor and envisioned every issue through a pro-traditional family lens: “Strong families equal a strong America. With all these issues, we need to pass them through the grid and ask ... ‘Are they going to make our families stronger, or will they continue to undermine our families?’”⁶

Lucas’s, Coburn’s and Largent’s 1994 campaigns illustrate the many different ways in which the Christian Right could mobilize to ensure electoral success for people deemed reliable, quality candidates. First of all, the Christian Right influenced both the terms of the debate and the electorate. The second district race shows how influential the Christian Right was perceived to be by Republicans and Democrats alike. With a view to designing its voters’ guides, the Christian Right had sent questionnaires to every candidate, asking them about their opinions on various issues. Virgil R. Cooper, Tom Coburn’s main Democratic opponent in the race, boasted of having sent back that questionnaire adorned with the mention “Check me out, I’m what you are looking for” during the primaries, thus unabashedly seeking Christian Right support (Bednar and Hertzke 99). Even though Coburn and Cooper’s views were identical on most issues (taxes, abortion, school vouchers, gays in the military and gun control), the Christian Coalition’s voter guides gave a slight advantage to Coburn during the general election, establishing a difference between the candidates by stating that Coburn was opposed to “strikes by federal government workers” whereas Cooper was listed as “undecided” on this matter.

Secondly, Christian Right networks helped raise money. Frank Lucas’s main campaign themes (disapproval of President Clinton, term limits, and a twelve-point program to boost the economy) were issues that would resonate with a Christian Right audience even though he never publicly aligned himself with the movement during his campaign. Even before Lucas won the primary, he was in contact with Don Nickles, the then-Republican senator of Oklahoma. Once Lucas secured the Republican nomination, Nickles helped him by organizing fundraisers and is said to have made his mailing list of supporters available to him (Bednar 156). As Nickles was a Christian Right favorite, Lucas’s fund raising was thus likely to be also based on Christian Right support.⁷ In the end, Lucas spent \$542,270 on his campaign, while, Dan Webber, his opponent spent \$476,743.⁸

Lastly, the Christian Right helped mobilize volunteers. Steve Largent ran a campaign based on door-to-door canvassing. On the eve of the election, he stated

6. Patrick B. McGuigan. “Strong Families, Strong America.” *The Daily Oklahoman*. August 9, 1994. Web. Accessed Dec. 26, 2013.

7. Chris Casteel. “Nickles Urges PACs to Shun 6th District.” *The Daily Oklahoman*, March 14, 1994. Web. Accessed May 26 2014.

8. Chris Casteel. “Lucas Funding Heavy At End of Campaign.” *The Daily Oklahoman*, June 15, 1994. Web. Accessed May 26, 2014.

that his campaign team had knocked on almost every single door in his district. A campaign of this magnitude would not have been possible without at least three hundred volunteers.⁹ His fame and charismatic persona already gave him access to a great number of volunteers, but the unanticipated help of students of Oral Roberts University, a Christian College located across the street from Largent's main campaign office, also played a major part. In the middle of the fall semester, a government professor gave his 225 students a practical assignment: they should devote six to eight hours of their time to volunteering with the campaign of the congressional candidate of their choice. Given the conservative inclination of the university and the proximity of Largent's headquarters, a great number of students ended up volunteering for his campaign (Bednar 233).

Steve Largent's and Frank Lucas's rises to Congressional positions in 1994 are good examples of substantial electoral victories (as they respectively won 63% and 70% of the popular vote) made possible by both relentless campaigning as well as vigorous support and assistance from Christian Right networks. Tom Coburn's 52% victory was no less formidable, as he was campaigning in a heavily Democratic district.

Ambiguous Institutional Lows and Clear Cultural Highs: Coburn, Largent and Lucas in Washington

By the time Lucas, Largent and Coburn arrived in Washington along with the rest of the freshman class of 1994, there was no doubt that the Christian Right had made its way through Congress as never before. However, whether or not the Christian Right coloring of Congress could really make a difference remained to be seen. The period mostly examined here is the 1995-2001 period, when Coburn, Largent and Lucas were all in Congress at the same time. Unsurprisingly, the more connected to the Christian Right a Congressman had appeared to be during his campaign, the more likely he was to push their agenda once in Congress. Thus, Largent appeared as the most motivated of the three, followed by Coburn and Lucas.

There are several indicators of a Congressman's willingness to support the Christian Right and turn its family-centered agenda into law. Yearly ratings awarded by several Christian Right groups such as the Christian Coalition and the National Right to Life Committee on the basis of roll call votes, for instance, indicate whether the votes that these politicians cast in the House were consistent with the Christian Right support they had received. Based on this, both Largent and Lucas have a lifetime rating of 100 (the highest possible grade) with the National Right to Life Committee and Coburn has a "low"

9. Mick Hinton. "State Races for US House Ripe for Battle." *The Daily Oklahoman*, Oct/17, 1994. Web. Accessed May 26, 2014.

98.4. As far as the Christian Coalition is concerned, Lucas gets the lowest lifetime grade: 95.¹⁰ Since Congressmen can either vote *for* or against a bill, these grades indicate that Coburn, Largent and Lucas have both consistently *supported* bills in keeping with the Christian Right's agenda and *blocked* bills that went against what the movement stood for.

The question becomes more complex if one surveys the legislation these representatives drafted and tried to pass. Steve Largent was the one who *sponsored* the greatest number of bills related to the Christian Right's agenda during the 1995-2001 period. One of the two bills he tried to pass as soon as he arrived in Congress was the ambitious *Parental Rights and Responsibilities Act* of 1995, which was meant to "protect the fundamental right of a parent to direct the upbringing of a child" by preventing the government from interfering—and which could thus in part be construed as a way to protect parents who wanted to provide a religious upbringing to their children from any secular influence.¹¹ Largent then sponsored the *Illegal Pornography Act* of 2000. During the 106th Congress, Coburn offered an amendment (H. Amdt 962) to prohibit the development or approval of any drug intended solely for the chemical inducement of abortion.¹² Over the course of his first three terms, Lucas never sponsored a bill directly linked to the Christian Right's social agenda.

All three of them, however, were involved in the co-sponsoring of bills that would advance the Christian Right's agenda. Both Coburn and Lucas co-sponsored Largent's *Parental Rights and Responsibilities Act* of 1995. The three of them co-sponsored the *Defense of Marriage Act*, which became public law in 1996 and allowed states to refuse to recognize same-sex marriages granted by other states as well as restricted federal marriage benefits to heterosexual marriages. They also co-sponsored the *Marriage Tax Elimination Act* during the 105th Congress or the amendment to "restore religious freedom" during the 106th Congress. In 1995, Tom Coburn was co-sponsor of the *National Gambling Impact Study Commission Act*, which became public law, and he co-sponsored the *Right to Life Act and the Partial Abortion Ban Act* of 1997. As for Lucas, he was a co-sponsor of fellow Oklahoman Ernest Istook 1995 resolution, "Proposing a religious liberties amendment to the Constitution of the United States to secure the people's right to acknowledge God according to the dictates of conscience," which was killed in committee, as well as a co-sponsor of *Marriage Tax Penalty Relief Act* during the 106th Congress.¹³

10. Source: < <http://votesmart.org/>>. Web. Accessed Dec. 26, 2013.

11. Source: < <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/BILLS-104hr1946ih/pdf/BILLS-104hr1946ih.pdf>>. Web. Accessed Dec. 26, 2013.

12. Source: < [https://www.congress.gov/amendment/106th-congress/house-amendment/962?q={%22search%22%3A\[%22h+amdt+962%22\]}](https://www.congress.gov/amendment/106th-congress/house-amendment/962?q={%22search%22%3A[%22h+amdt+962%22]})> Web. Accessed Dec. 29, 2014.

13. Source: < <http://thomas.loc.gov/home/ViewList.php?n=Member&c=106>>. Web. Accessed Dec. 26, 2013.

One should bear in mind that bills rarely turn into laws. Over a period of six years (1995-2001), Coburn, Largent and Lucas mainly managed to pass two laws related to the Christian Right agenda: the *Defense of Marriage Act* and the *Assisted Suicide Funding Restriction Act* of 1997. Important bills such as the *Partial Birth Abortion Ban Act* of 1995 did not pass (although it eventually did in 2003), and most bills were simply killed in committees. As for the *Defense of Marriage Act*, it is worth noting that, at the time, the measure did not prompt any struggle or institutional crisis, as Bill Clinton publicly stated that he was opposed to gay marriage and signed the bill into law.¹⁴ Overall, there is no questioning Coburn's, Largent's or Lucas's involvement as co-sponsors; however, one can point out that the social legislative victories they brought were at best modest. It is of importance to note that, at the time, the GOP controlled both houses of Congress. The 2006 elections, which resulted in the Democratic Party capturing both the House of Representatives and the Senate, made it all the more challenging for Christian Right supported social pieces of legislation to be turned into laws.

The most undisputable consequences of the arrival of Christian Right favorites in Congress had to do with cultural attitudes. Tom Coburn is reported to have organized mandatory slideshows on the effects of STDs in order to deter his staff from having pre-marital sex.¹⁵ Steve Largent was in charge of chairing the National Prayer Breakfast of 1999 and famously told Bill Clinton that he loved him.¹⁶ In a more formal fashion, Largent and Coburn are said to have founded a number of Bible study groups and Coburn was the creator and head of the Congressional Family caucus.¹⁷

The reality of that cultural change was obvious when Steve Largent was handpicked, along with Jennifer Dunn, to deliver the Republican response to President Clinton's State of the Union Address in 1998.¹⁸ This showed that his family-and-faith centered message was deemed attractive by the GOP, which was at the time trying to restore its image and appeal to new voters.

14. J. Jennings Moss. "Bill Clinton." *The Advocate*, June 25, 1996. Web. Accessed Dec. 26, 2014. It is, however, worth noting that Bill Clinton later advocated the repeal of the *Defense of Marriage Act* in 2011.

15. Hanna Rosin. "The Senator's Guide to Safe Sex." *The Washington Post*, May 27, 2005. Web. Accessed May 27, 2017.

16. "National Prayer Breakfast." C-Span, National Cable Satellite Corporation, Washington D.C., Feb. 4, 1999. Web. Accessed Dec. 26, 2013.

17. Tim Jones. "*Schindler's List* Critic Apologizes." *The Chicago Tribune*, Feb. 27, 1997. Web. Accessed Dec. 26, 2013.

18. Source: "State of the Union Response." *C-Span*. National Cable Satellite Corporation, Washington D.C., Jan. 19, 1999. Web, Accessed Dec.29, 2014.

Obstacles to the Establishment of Christian Right Advocated Social Policies

In his classic study *Congressmen in Committees*, Richard Fenno underlines that Congressmen have three prime goals: getting reelected, achieving influence in Congress, and making good public policy. If Coburn's, Largent's and Lucas's careers in Congress unequivocally show that the election of quality candidates is an effective means for the Christian Right to see its agenda pushed in Congress, they also expose the limitations of the strategy, which, in the long run, is not necessarily compatible with the three goals defined by Fenno.

In the case of Coburn, principles trump the desire to get reelected. In 1994, just like Largent and Lucas, Coburn was dead set on shaking things up from the inside once in Congress and was unwavering in his convictions. These character traits were precisely what got him elected and what prompted him to neglect the seniority rules of the House. Not only did he sponsor and co-sponsor ambitious bills right from the start, he also unabashedly blocked bills that were popular within the GOP but that he himself deemed unnecessary. This tendency earned him the nickname "Dr. No," which he has held as a badge of honor to this day.¹⁹ However, his uncompromising views were also an impediment to the long-term establishment of Christian Right views in Congress. Indeed, Tom Coburn's support of a Christian Right agenda went hand in hand with a deeply held conviction that politics should not turn into a permanent job. Being a strong believer in term-limits, he willingly retired from the House in 2000 after three terms. He was then elected to the Senate in 2004, but later on announced that he would retire before the end of his second term and indeed left office at the end of the 113th Congress.²⁰ He was very popular with the Tea Party, which heavily overlaps with the Christian Right in Oklahoma, and he was considered one of the fiercest defenders of conservative values, be they fiscal or social, in the Senate.²¹ Hence, due to the nature of the principles he intended to fight for in Congress, his influence was bound to be limited in time.

At the other end of the term-limit pledge spectrum, Frank Lucas is still in Congress today. His ratings with pro-family organizations such as the Christian

19. Chris Casteel. "Dr. No to the End: Oklahoma Sen. Tom Coburn Blocks Bills in Last Day in Senate." *The Daily Oklahoman*, Dec. 17, 2014. Web, Accessed Jan., 2, 2015.

20. Even if Tom Coburn's retirement from the Senate took place sooner than expected due to health troubles and Coburn's beliefs that he would best serve his country by "shifting his focus elsewhere," he had previously expressed his intent to spend no more than two terms as Oklahoma's junior Senator and was expected not to seek reelection in 2016.

21. Although more research is needed, it very well seems that there is an overlap between the Christian Right and the Tea Party in the state of Oklahoma. The OKC Tea Party has an entire "chaplain's corner" on its website (<<http://www.okcteparty.org/>>) and flyers handed out by the Oklahoma Tea Party Express are loaded with religious rhetoric.

Coalition remain excellent, since his lifetime rating is now 95. He has not let go of social issues and has co-sponsored a number of Christian-centered pieces of legislation such as the *Right to Life Act*, the *Pledge Protection Act* of 2007 and the *Public Prayer Protection Act* of 2007. Nevertheless, it is quite clear that his desire to make good policies has led him to devote most of his time to agriculture as he rose to the prestigious position of Chairman of the Agriculture Committee.²² He has thus specialized in one field and is considered the absolute expert in that department.²³ If there is no questioning his loyalty to the Christian Right and to the Tea Party, it cannot be said, however, that he is a driving force in Congress as far as social issues are concerned.²⁴ As opposed to Tom Coburn or Steve Largent, there is no mention of social issues on his Wikipedia bio page, a possible indication that he is not perceived as a social conservative crusader.²⁵ The fact that the “issues” section of his official Congress page is also devoid of any mention of issues such as “Sanctity of Life” or “Traditional Marriage” (which was not the case on Tom Coburn’s website) is even more telling.²⁶ In other words, Lucas’s case shows that the more prominent he has become within the Congress apparatus, the more involved he has been in the process of drafting “good policy” bills that have nothing to do with direct Christian Right concerns.

Steve Largent’s desire to gain influence within Congress points to the fact that one final obstacle to the advancement of Christian Right’s issues in politics seems to be none other than the Christian Right itself. When Steve Largent ran for the position of House Majority Leader in 1998, his struggle revealed two of the main difficulties that a Christian Right supporter could face. His strong Christian beliefs and his perceived unwillingness to compromise were precisely what kept him from rising to the leadership even though he argued that his intent was to build a coalition of moderate and more conservative Republicans. The fact that he seemed too radical in his social views to be a compromising, hence effective, Majority Leader is often mentioned to account for his defeat.²⁷

22. Frank Lucas was chairman of the Committee on Agriculture between 2011 and 2015.

23. Personal interview with Elizabeth Shelton, Senior Legislative Assistant for Congressman John Garamendi and former staffer of Congressman David Boren. July 2012.

24. One should however notice that Frank Lucas’s relationship with the Tea Party has deteriorated since 2010, as he was surprisingly accused of “being dead since 2011” and replaced by a “look alike” by a Tea Party opponent during the 2014 Republican primary. Jessica Chasmar. “Tea Party Candidate Accuses Rep. Lucas of Being Dead, Replaced by ‘Body Double’.” *The Washington Times*, Jun. 29, 2014. Web. Accessed Dec. 29, 2014.

25. Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frank_Lucas_%28Oklahoma%29> (last accessed Dec. 26, 2013)

26. Source: <<http://lucas.house.gov/issues>> (last accessed Dec. 26, 2013)

27. Guy Gugliotta and Juliet Eilperin. “House Republicans Embrace Livingston, Arney, Watts.” *The Washington Post*, Nov. 19, 1998. Web. Accessed Dec. 26, 2013.

One would think that the Christian Right would have backed Largent in his struggle to rise to the position of Majority leader, especially since he was attacked for being too extreme and too conservative. Since the Majority leader is often in charge of scheduling the legislative calendar, having a sympathizer holding that position would have been of great help. James Dobson, the leader of Focus on the Family, voiced his support for Largent, but the Christian Coalition did not and decided instead to back Dick Armey, who eventually won the elections. Even though the impact of such support may appear limited in the case of a House GOP leadership election, this prompted an immediate reaction from Largent, who reportedly declared: “The Christian Coalition had no business going into a House Republican election” and “there was nothing Christian about the way they muddled this.”²⁸ This raises not only the question of Christian support through time, but also the question of the movement’s cohesion. In this particular case, Christian Right leaders, who overall shared the same goals, did not devise a coherent strategy, thus fostering arguments and resentment.

The answer to the question “what happens to the Christian Right when it manages to get quality candidates elected to Congress?” is not a simple one, but Coburn’s, Largent’s and Lucas’s trajectories are consistent with a number of points usually made in the literature about the Christian Right. First of all, success is possible when the Christian Right uses its greatest strength: its capacity to organize efficiently. In 1994, and in the elections that followed, the ability of the Christian Right to align itself behind a single, quality candidate and help him achieve electoral victory by mobilizing all means necessary was remarkable in Oklahoma. Second, the Christian Right is likely to experience disappointments and failure because of its inability to devise long term planning. People like Coburn, who are most devoted to the advancement of the Christian Right’s agenda, are also most likely to step down from Congress leaving the decision-making process in the hands of people like Lucas, who are strong allies of the Christian Right, but cannot be considered driving forces on social issues. People like Largent, who have the drive, stamina and determination not only to push the Christian Right’s agenda, but also to rise to prominence within the leadership run the chance of being blocked in their ascent. It was one thing to appeal to Christian voters by putting Largent on television; it would have been another to scare moderate Republicans by granting him a leadership position.

28. Alan Cooperman and Juliet Eilperin. “On the Religious Right, an Alliance Torn Asunder.” *The Washington Post*, Nov. 3, 2006. Web. Accessed Dec. 26, 2006; Steve Beren. “The Church-State Grudge Match is Set To Resume In Congress.” *Church & State*, Jan. 1999, Web, Accessed Dec., 30, 2014

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In short, the cases of Coburn's, Largent's and Lucas's congressional careers confirm that although Ralph Reed claimed that the Christian Coalition represented the American mainstream, it certainly did not. Whenever a minority decides to be an exceptionally motivated, vocal, and rebellious one, it does achieve change. However, it remains a minority within Congress, which means that its members are unlikely to achieve the amount of change they ultimately wish for.

It is worth noticing that Congress remains the least popular branch of power.²⁹ Congressmen who have been backed by the Christian Right may only come to modest results when pushing its agenda, but they can repeatedly block bills they do not approve of—and they do, hence perpetuating the image of a “do-nothing” Congress. Trying to determine if there is a causal link between this and surveys suggesting that Americans are growing increasingly uneasy with the mixing of religion and politics may be an interesting question for future study.³⁰

29. See for example, Jeffrey M. Jones. “Congress Approval Rating Remains Near Historical Lows.” Gallup, Aug. 13, 2013. Web, Accessed Jan. 2, 2015; Rebecca Riffkin. “2014 U.S Approval of Congress Remains Near All-Time Low.” Gallup, Dec. 15, 2014. Web, Accessed Jan. 2, 2015.

30. See for example, Pew Research Religion & Public Life Project. “More See ‘Too Much’ Religious Talk by Politicians.” March 21, 2012. Web. Accessed May 27, 2014; Sandra Stencel and Michael Lipka. “Most Americans Oppose Political Endorsement from Churches.” Pew Research Center, Aug. 16, 2013. Web. Accessed May 27, 2014.

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