Religious Lobbying in Virginia: How Institutions Can Quiet Prophetic Voices

By

Carin Larson, David Madland and Clyde Wilcox
Georgetown University
The 2004 legislative session in Virginia was a tense one. A string of fiscally conservative governors from both parties had cut spending on higher education, transportation, and social services, and still the state faced a huge projected budget deficit. Republicans in the Assembly refused to support a tax increase, although they could not propose a budget proposal that could balance the budget through spending cuts alone. They had strong support from white evangelicals and Christian Right groups, who argued that high taxes are harmful to the family because they force women into the workplace. Republicans in the Senate were more attentive to the business community, who argued that Virginia’s roads and highways need repair and expansion, and that previous cuts had eroded the prestige of the state’s colleges and universities. The Democratic governor proposed additional taxes, Senate Republicans wanted a smaller and somewhat different tax hike, and the Assembly wanted no new taxes.

Although economics dominated the legislative agenda, the legislature considered many other issues of interest to religious constituencies, although as elsewhere these groups sometimes lined up on opposite sides of issues. Overall, the scorecards for Virginia’s Family Foundation (representing mainly white evangelicals and conservative Catholics) and the scorecard for the Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy (representing more liberal Christians and Jews) reflect the different priorities that have come to characterize these constituencies (Guth, Green, Smidt, Kellstedt, and Poloma, 1997; Djupe and Gilbert, 2003). The Family Foundation focused on measures on abortion, homosexuality, internet pornography, and public displays of religious symbols, while the Interfaith Center made a priority of bills relating to food stamps, child support, and minimum wage, housing and homelessness, capital punishment, and religious freedom. Catholic lobbyists found themselves supporting and opposing items on both agendas.

Religious conservatives had victories and defeats. The legislature made it a double felony to kill a pregnant woman, and removed from a bill all language that would have instructed school personnel to mention the availability of emergency contraception to students who had been raped. It defeated measures that would have mandated that emergency contraception be covered in health plans, but also defeated bills that would have required anesthetizing a fetus before an abortion, banned the dispensing of emergency contraception on college campus, or required parental consent before dispensing emergency contraception to minors. The legislature also memorialized the Congress to pass a federal marriage amendment, passed a law nullifying any domestic partnership arrangement made in another state between same-sex partners, did not allow businesses to voluntarily extend health insurance to same sex partners, refused to legalize homosexual relations despite a Supreme Court ruling invalidating the state law (and voted 97-1 in the Assembly to recriminalize such relations in defiance of the Court).

Religious liberals also saw victories in minimum wage legislation, food stamp outreach, and housing programs, but the legislature defeated efforts to abolish capital punishment, to impose a moratorium on capital punishment, to abolish the death penalty for minors, and to make it easier for convicted felons to prove their innocence.
Despite a plethora of bills of interest to religious constituencies, there were few religious lobbyists working the legislature’s halls. Virginia’s eight-week session combined with a burgeoning workload keeps legislators quite busy. Most religious groups that seek to influence state policy try to mobilize congregations and individuals to contact their representatives at the start of the session, before the workload becomes overwhelming. Yet even grassroots lobbying is less common in Virginia than in many other states.

Religious conservatives have focused most of their efforts on electoral politics in recent years. Chuck Cunningham, formerly of the Christian Coalition, argues that “the best way to change policy in Virginia is to change politicians.” Liberal groups do more direct lobbying, but these efforts are small compared to those in states with full time legislatures.¹

The Religious and Political Context

At first glance, Virginia might be expected to be home to significant religious lobbying. Clearly there is sufficient religious and cultural diversity to produce “culture wars” both between the political parties and within the GOP. Virginia’s religious composition is more diverse than in most southern states. Surveys show that roughly half of voters are affiliated with an evangelical denomination, and 10% identify themselves as fundamentalists in surveys. Evangelicals are especially numerous in the south and central parts of the state, where Southern Baptists (along with many other Baptists denominations) are strong (Rozell and Wilcox, 1996).

A significant portion of these evangelicals are African American. Overall one in five Virginians are African American, as are one in six of the electorate. The large black churches in Richmond and elsewhere are a key source of Democratic political mobilization, and nearly all Democratic candidates for statewide office make a tour of these churches in October. White evangelical churches in Virginia, like elsewhere, have moved strongly to the GOP camp, and often feature mobilization efforts by Christian conservatives.

A quarter of Virginia’s residents are mainline Protestants in Virginia as well, and they are especially common in the Northern Virginia suburbs and in the western part of the state. Particularly numerous are Methodist and Episcopal churches, which preach moderate mainline Christianity in the northern part of the state but a more evangelical doctrine in the south and west. The 2000 exit poll revealed that one in five of Virginia voters are Catholic. The Catholic Church divided between the Arlington diocese which is one of the most conservative in America, and the Richmond diocese that is far more liberal.

Finally, the northern Virginia suburbs are home to growing numbers of non-Christians, including Jews, Muslims, Hindu, and many other faiths. Although they comprise a small portion of the overall population, they constitute a significant number of citizens in these populous counties. Most non-Christian groups do not have lobbying strength in the state capital, but they are able to mount grass-roots campaigns aimed at local governments.

Overall, the 2000 exit poll showed that 43% of the electorate claimed to attend church weekly or more often, and 39% attended a few times a year or less. Slightly less
than one in five voters indicated that they considered themselves to be part of the “Religious Right.” Throughout most of the 1990s, however, an anti-fundamentalist coalition of moderate to liberal Christians and secular citizens mobilized against Christian Right-backed candidates (Rozell and Wilcox, 1996).

**A Culture War in Virginia?**

Virginia has traditionally been a culturally conservative state: Erikson, Wright, and McIver (1993) reported that Virginia voters and political elites were among the most conservative in the nation. Yet over time, exit polls have revealed a moderating trend in the electorate. In 1994, 40% of voters called themselves conservative and 15% were liberal, but by 2000 these numbers had changed to 30% conservative and 20% liberal. It is not clear whether Virginia’s electorate has become more liberal on concrete issues, or whether the extremely conservative positions of some Republican elected officials has changed the yardstick by which individuals measure their relatively ideology. What is clear is that there is also political diversity that might be expected to generate religious mobilization and lobbying.

The northern Virginia suburbs of Washington DC have become the home to a booming hi-tech industry that has attracted young, socially liberal voters. These populous and growing counties are among the best educated and most affluent in the nation. Many of the residents in the Northern Virginia area have immigrated to Virginia from Northeastern states with more liberal social policies, and coexist somewhat uneasily with the more conservative native Virginians. Surveys show substantial support for abortion rights and gay and lesbians rights in Northern Virginia, but voters there are also fiscally conservative and drawn to the Republican party on economics.

Virginia is also in a sense the birthplace of the Christian Right in American politics. Lynchburg was home to the Moral Majority, the most prominent Christian Right group of the 1980s, and remains the home of Rev. Jerry Falwell’s Liberty University and the huge Thomas Road Baptist Church. Chesapeake was home to the Christian Coalition, the premier Christian Right group of the 1990s, and remains home to Pat Robertson’s Regents University and his large Christian broadcasting company.

The Christian Right has not always thrived in Virginia, however, and it has only recently come to exert significant policymaking power. Falwell and Robertson became involved in state Republican politics in the late 1970s, and for the next decade evangelical activists played a key role in the nomination of GOP candidates. Virginia’s Republicans often choose their candidates in very large conventions with more than 10,000 delegates, making the party unusually permeable to social movements. In the 1980s, evangelicals attended these conventions in large numbers, and helped nominate the most conservative candidate in the field. They then pressured these candidates to adopt relatively extreme positions on social issues, and this led to a string of Democratic governors during this period.

In 1988, Pat Robertson lost his home state badly in the GOP presidential primary, coming in last among five candidates still in the race. But delegates to the GOP national convention are selected through a series of local, district, and finally a state convention, and Robertson’s supporters battled through each stage and ultimately won a majority of delegates. In the process they took control of the state GOP committee, nominated the state’s representatives to the RNC and elected their own state Republican chair.
In the early 1990s, moderate Republicans and conservative Christians fought pitched battles within the GOP. In 1993 home school advocate and Christian Right activist Mike Farris ran for Lieutenant Governor, easily capturing the nomination by flooding the convention with supporters. Farris’s backers were new to politics, and were involved in shoving matches, throwing ice and debris, and other confrontational tactics. Moderate GOP Senator John Warner refused to back Farris, who had been the lead attorney for Concerned Women for America in the “Scopes II” trial in Tennessee (Bates, 1993).

Democrats attacked Farris as too closely linked to Falwell and Robertson, and ran ads linking him to censorship and extreme positions. Farris’s combative writings over the years made him an easy target for charges of extremism. Ultimately he lost the election, despite strong victories by the GOP gubernatorial candidate and the attorney general. Farris’s backers took over many local and county GOP committees across the state, however, and the new governor George Allen established many links to Christian Right groups (Rozell and Wilcox, 1996).

In 1994, a slightly different set of Christian Right activists flooded the GOP convention to nominate Oliver North to challenge Democratic incumbent Chuck Robb for the U.S. Senate. North had spent many years cultivating Christian Right activists, and speaking in churches, but he was also famous for his testimony in the Iran-Contra hearings, which made him unpopular with many Republicans. Warner again refused to back the Christian Right candidate, and in fact recruited another candidate to run as an independent. Although Robb had been weakened by a sex scandal and there was a national Republican surge that swept in a new House and Senate majority, North lost the election.

By the end of 1994, the Republican party was deeply divided, with Christian Right activists furious with Senator Warner for not endorsing “their” candidates, and GOP moderates furious at these new Republican activists for taking over their party. A survey of party activists showed that moderates and Christian conservatives alike rated the rival faction more coolly than they rated the Democratic party’s candidates (Rozell and Wilcox, 1996).

The intra-party culture clash dissipated during the late 1990s and into the new century, however. As in national politics, Republican policymakers moved to the right, as conservative activists worked hard in party primaries, caucuses, and conventions. In 1999, Republicans gained a narrow majority in the Assembly, and then performed a masterful job of partisan gerrymandering to increase their margin from 52-47 to 64-35 in 2001. Christian conservatives who had been biding their time in local party committees took full advantage of the newly created seats, and the resulting GOP majority was large and very conservative. The 2001 convention again pitted a Christian conservative against a more secular conservative, but unlike previous years there was this time little rancor, and no real disagreement on issues such as abortion or gay rights. The eventual winner was a Christian Right candidate, who lost to a wealthy Democratic businessman (Rozell and Wilcox, 2000).

Thus by 2002, religious alignments in Virginia resembled those in the nation at large. Conservative white evangelicals were a key partner in the GOP coalition, along with the most conservative Catholics and mainline Protestants. More moderate Protestants and Catholics, black Protestants and Jews were aligned with the Democrats.
But the Republican party had firm control of one wing of the state legislature, a workable majority in the other, while the Democrats held the governorship (Rozell and Wilcox, 2002).

_Institutions Matter: Why Religious Lobbying is Uncommon in Virginia_

Although there are considerable religious and cultural differences in the Virginia electorate, and although the government considers a wide range of policies that interest religious elites and can be linked to religious values, there is relatively little religious lobbying in Virginia. The explanation seems to rest with political institutions.

Writing in 1949, V.O. Key Jr. noted that Virginia was a “political museum piece,” and that compared to “all the American states, Virginia can lay claim to the most thorough control by an oligarchy.” (Key, 1949). The Byrd Democratic political machine was organized through county courthouses, and maintained its control by restricting participation and by limiting the power of government officials. The poll tax, the literacy tests, and many other restrictions on voting are long gone, but Virginia remains one of only two states to elect its state officials in odd-numbered years, when there are no national elections to increase interest and draw citizens to the polls. Participation rates have increased dramatically from the 6% turnout in the Democratic primary of 1945 (then tantamount to general election victory), but they remain low in state elections.

More importantly, state legislative seats are extraordinarily safe. Republicans redistricted not only to dramatically increase their vote share, but also to decrease the number of competitive districts. In 2003, 53 of the 100 assembly races were uncontested, and another 20 were won with more than 61% of the vote. Virginia ranks as the third least competitive state legislative races in the country. These uncompetitive districts make grassroots lobbying less effective. When most incumbents do not fear electoral defeat, the mobilization of moderate numbers of religious constituents may not sway their legislative votes. Religious groups do mount grassroots campaigns -- in the 1990s the Christian Coalition and the Family Foundation had rapidly mobilized networks – but they are less visible and less effective than elsewhere.

The Virginia state legislature is in session for only 60 days in even numbered years, and only 45 days in odd numbered years. Over the years, the legislative workload has increased, so that the legislators are quite busy during their sessions. Former Christian Coalition political director Chuck Cunningham notes that “it is hard to contact legislators during the session because they are so busy, and hard to contact them out of session because they are back to their regular jobs.” The short session is one of the main reasons why religious groups do not retain full-time lobbyists in the state capital. There is little denominational lobbying outside of the Catholic Church – instead there are broader religious coalitions that represent religious liberals and conservatives in the process. Even these coalitions do less lobbying in Virginia than in other states.

Governors have more time to develop policy proposals, but Virginia is the only remaining state in the union with a single gubernatorial term. As soon as they assume office governors are immediately lame ducks, and by the time they have figured out how to be governor and begun to flesh out their agendas they are looking forward to their next job and candidates are already running to replace them. Governors do frequently incorporate members of religious coalitions in their administration. Perhaps the most striking of these was the administration of George Allen (now a US Senator from
Virginia). Allen’s top advisors in education (including the state secretary of education) were Christian conservatives who opposed sex education and favored prayer in schools. His secretary of health and human services was Kay Coles James, a prominent pro-life activist who had worked in the 1st Bush administration and had blocked an AIDS pamphlet aimed at teens because it advocated the use of condoms. The head of Virginia’s Family Foundation became the director of the governor’s personnel and training operation (Rozell and Wilcox, 1996). Yet after 4 years the Allen Administration had accomplished far less than Christian conservatives had hoped for, because Virginia’s political institutions are stacked against non-incremental policymaking.

Religious Right Lobbying
Virginia’s white protestant evangelicals were political mobilized through individual churches before the formation of broader Christian Right groups, and many individual congregations remain active in politics (Wilcox, 1999). In 1978, before he formed the Moral Majority, Baptist pastor Jerry Falwell successfully mobilized his huge church and other Bible Baptist Fellowship congregations to oppose a referendum that would have permitted paramutuel gambling. Church-based mobilization on moral issues continues to play a prominent role in Virginia. Members at Kempsville Presbyterian Church in Virginia Beach take some credit for bringing riverboat gambling legislation to a halt at the state Capitol in 2004. “We took a busload of people for riverboat gambling,” Majorie Powers said to Citizen Magazine, a publication of Focus on the Family. “In the end, it was not voted on. But it would have been had we not been there.” Powers and her husband, both in their late 70s, led a Faith, Freedom and Citizenship class at Kempsville Presbyterian that taught church members how to apply biblical teachings to public policy. The class and subsequent lobbying was organized through the help of the Family Foundation, the most visible and effective Christian conservative lobbying group in the state. More recently the Family Foundation’s latest endeavor is the Defending Faith, Family and Freedom Grassroots Workshop, which was held recently at Immanuel Bible Church in Springfield. The workshops are meant to inform Christians about public policy and equip participants with talking points when contacting their state legislator. Recent speakers include lobbyists from various conservative organizations as well as state legislators from the evangelical community such as Del. Dick Black and Del. Ken Cuccinelli.

Because the state legislature is so rarely in session, conservative religious lobbying groups in Virginia have made efficient use of the calendar year by working to organize evangelical congregations between legislative sessions, encouraging members to become more active. Christian conservative groups work separately to organize churches, but they cooperate to lobby the state legislature. A coalition called the Capitol Group – comprised primarily of Christian conservative and pro-life groups but also including anti-tax organizations -- meet three to four times a year to compare notes and prepare for the legislative season. They also meet at least three times while the legislature is in session. The Family Foundation facilitates the group. “We believe that all our efforts will be enhanced by a connected network,” says the Family Foundation’s legislative director, Victoria Cobb. “It’s an informal relationship. We come together to check where our energies are at and how we can assist each other.”
The Family Foundation claims to be Virginia’s oldest and largest pro-family organization, and claims to represent some 200,000 members with a budget of $500,000 per year. It is affiliated with both Focus on the Family in Colorado and the Family Research Council in Washington, D.C. The members of the Family Foundation are primarily white evangelicals and conservative Catholics, although the group is ecumenical and its rhetoric is generally secular and focused on “pro-family” policies. The Family Foundation’s lobbyists visit and educate state legislators, testify at committee hearings, and work to increase civic activism within the pro-family ranks through workshops at churches. They distribute report cards for each session, voter guides and email alerts regarding important legislation. The Foundation employs four full-time staff and a few part-timers when the legislature is in season.

The Concerned Women for America has a Virginia chapter and many local chapters as well. Concerned Women for America has long emphasized grassroots lobbying and electoral politics. The CWA of Virginia Citizen Action Guide is distributed in the organization’s quarterly newsletter and explains how members can be involved in public policy. The group hosts an annual lobby day while the legislature is in session for members to gather and speak to their representatives in groups. CWA of VA has regional Prayer/Action Chapters that meet monthly throughout the state. At a recent meeting in Arlington, VA, the president of the Eagle Forum, Helen Blackwell, was the guest speaker. CWA’s rhetoric is more Biblically centered than that of Family Foundation, but the preferred policies are almost identical.

Virginia also has a state chapter of Eagle Forum, which is more influential than in some other states because of the political ties and acumen of its director, Helen Blackwell. In 2004, in the midst of the state’s budget debate, Blackwell and the Eagle Forum sponsored Bread Day to oppose a tax increase. Homemade bread was delivered to each legislator with the following quote from Thomas Jefferson attached: “Government shall not take from the mouth of labor the bread it has earned. This is the sum of good government....” The CWA and the Family Foundation both assisted in the effort which was eventually unsuccessful. A tax increase was passed.

One denominational family has a full time lobbyist in Richmond. Virginia Assembly of Independent Baptists is directed by Jack Knapp, who is also its sole lobbyist. Representing 500 independent Baptist churches and supported by donations from the congregations, he talks with legislators and informs them of the churches positions on various issues. Similar positions held by the groups mentioned earlier.

*The Conservative Christian Agenda*

For Christian Right groups in Virginia, pro-life legislation is the top priority. In the 2004 session, the religious conservative groups successfully pushed the legislature to pass a prenatal protection law that makes the killing of a woman and her unborn child two distinct crimes. Numerous bills broadening the availability of emergency contraception were defeated. For example, a Family Life Education bill originally required that the Board of Education include a discussion of emergency contraception in its curriculum guidelines for sex education classes. After enormous work by the Family Foundation, the final version removed the reference to contraception and inserted in its place a discussion of “steps to take to avoid sexual assault” and “the importance of immediate medical attention and advice.”
“We are still not pleased,” says Cobb on behalf of the Family Foundation. “We’d prefer to have the entire thing killed. It still provides an opening for Planned Parenthood.” Cobb’s primary complaint was that supporters of emergency contraception were exploiting the rape issue to get contraception in schools. “To say a pill is the answer to rape is to overlook the whole person….In some cases, using emergency contraception at the school may be an alternative to taking them to the hospital where they can be cared for and rape can be reported.” Cobb said she spent time educating legislators about the abortive feature of the pill as they worked on the amendment. The Family Foundation even brought a child of a rape victim to speak in front of the committee to argue against mandating the teaching of emergency contraception in the schools. “It helps to put a face on the issue,” explains Cobb.

Christian conservative groups also made gay-rights issues a top priority. The legislature banned civil unions and the state’s recognition of any same-sex contracts that might provide marital benefits of any kind. The state also passed a Federal Marriage Amendment Resolution which tells Congress that Virginia will support an amendment to the U.S. Constitution defining marriage as between one man and one woman. Christian Rights groups moved successfully to defeat hate crime legislation, bills allowing benefits to same-sex partners, and to overturn a Fairfax County ordinance that banned discrimination in Fairfax County government employment. The Assembly also restated Virginia’s criminalization of sodomy, although a recent Supreme Court decision makes that law unenforceable.

Education remains a top priority of the Christian Right in Virginia, and one where they can at times find common ground with African American churches. A number of black churches in the capital city, Richmond, have started private inner-city schools. The Family Foundation has brought students at one such school, the Elijah House Academy, to testify before the legislature in regards to school choice. Currently, the students are privately funded, but the Christian Right (and other religious groups) seek the use of public funds through vouchers. In addition, Christian Right groups successfully pushed to allow home school parents to choose their own curriculum. Previously, parents had to pass a standardized test or else adopt a curriculum recommended by the state.

Christian Right groups faced off against religious liberal groups on a bill that would have required clergy to report suspected child abuse. “This would have been an intrusion, an interference with a pastor’s ability to counsel,” said Knapp who worked for the legislation’s defeat on behalf of the Independent Baptists. The bill was ultimately defeated despite support from Christian Left organizations. Also, conservative groups responded to the display of the Ten Commandment monument in an Alabama courthouse (that caused national controversy over the display of religious symbols) by successfully persuading the House of Delegates to pass a resolution that urged Congress to grant the states the freedom to decide religious liberty issues for themselves. Del. Robert Brink, D-Arlington, called the resolution "an embarrassment to the House, to the General Assembly and to the commonwealth" and accused Republicans of “throwing a little red meat to its political base.”

At the end of the session, it was discovered that the legislature had mistakenly repealed a portion of an old law, creating in the process the right of non-managerial employees to refuse to work on one weekend day. Business groups quickly mobilized to call for a special session to reinstate the old law, which would have fined a business $500
and required triple time pay for any employee required to work during their designated
day of rest. Christian Right groups were noticeably silent on the issue, despite the
obvious implications of the bill for religious freedom and families. “Nobody on our side
was prepared for it,” says Walt Barbee, the founder of the Family Foundation. “So I see it
as another brick chipped out of the constitutional wall protecting religious freedom, under
the category of right of religious persons.”

Caught in the Center: Catholic Religious Lobbying

Catholics in Virginia find themselves torn between the two large religious
cCoalitions, and between the two parties. Drawn to Christian conservative positions on
socio-moral issues such as abortion and gay rights, and to liberal religious positions on
aid to the poor and disadvantaged, Catholics in Virginia are also divided by geography.
There is no statewide Catholic Conference in Virginia. Instead, Virginia is home to two
Catholic dioceses, the Diocese of Arlington and the Diocese of Richmond, and the
Arlington diocese is one of the most conservative in the nation, but the Richmond diocese
is far more liberal.

The Richmond Diocese is one of the oldest in the country. Pope Pius VII
established the diocese in 1820, and at that time, it included all of Virginia and what is
now West Virginia. Because it is headquartered in the state capital, it employs a full-time
registered lobbyist, Steve Collecchi, who is at the Capitol nearly ever day the legislature
is in session. In comparison, the Arlington Diocese was started in 1974, and though
similar in population size to today’s Richmond Diocese, it does not have a registered
lobbyist. Instead, the Director of Family Life of the diocese, Bob Laird, serves as an
educator to the legislature. Laird visits the Capitol roughly once a week which the
legislature is in session.

In 2004 the two diocese jointly adopted a 2004 legislative agenda, but then
focused on different parts of that agenda that reflect perhaps the interests and priorities of
each Bishop. The jointly adopted agenda includes the following: the protection of human
life, the protection of family life, the promotion of international solidarity and the
promotion of social justice. According to Laird, the Arlington Diocese tends to focus on
abortion and the traditional family structure while the Richmond group focuses on issues
relating to poverty and injustice. The different foci are reflected in job titles: Laird is the
director of family life while Collecchi’s is the director of the Office of Justice and Peace.

Each diocese appears to participate in different religious coalitions as well. Laird
works closely with the Family Foundation on bills dealing with contraception and
homosexuality. He attends meetings of the Capitol Group with other conservative
lobbyists. Like the Family Foundation’s workshops, Laird spends time educating
congregants about public policy. He leaves letters to legislators at the back of Catholic
churches – upon leaving Mass congregants can sign their name to a particular letter
urging their representative to vote a certain way. Laird got 23,000 signatures on a letter in
defense of a bill dealing with parental notification for minors seeking an abortion.
Although the Richmond diocese also promotes conservative positions on socio-moral
issues, it does not emphasize them in its lobbying and does not work with the Family
Foundation.

While both dioceses have official representation on the Virginia Interfaith Center
for Public Policy board, Richmond is more active within this coalition. Collecchi has
worked with the VICPP to address poverty issues. Moreover, Collecchi started a branch of a national program called “Sowers of Justice” in the Richmond Diocese. The group is founded primarily on the biblical principle to act justly and love mercy – as stated in Micah 6:8. Sowers of Justice is a network of Catholic groups that organize with groups from other faiths to work for social justice by attending local or national demonstrations or writing to legislators about policy issues. Collecchi also instituted a Parish Legislative Advocacy Network (PLAN) within the Richmond Diocese to coordinate calls to legislators and trips to the Capitol. Many Sowers are active in PLAN, and PLAN members are urged to become members of the VICPP.

Christian Left Religious Lobbying

Religious liberals work primarily through the Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy. The Interfaith Center brings together Mainline Protestant denominations such as United Methodist churches and Episcopal dioceses, as well as Catholic dioceses, African-American churches and Jewish and Muslim organizations. Member organizations of the Interfaith Center unite around an agenda that is primarily concerned with supporting those in need, including children, the poor, the homeless, and the accused, as well as in opposition to the death penalty. The Interfaith Center does not address issues such as abortion or homosexuality, likely because there is not complete agreement on those issues amongst its members. Instead, the Interfaith Center focuses on issues where there is agreement. According to the Interfaith Center’s Executive Director, Rev. C. Douglas Smith, “In most every faith there is a clear call to be involved on behalf of the poor and marginalized.” Smith explains that the Interfaith Center’s agenda is “not liberal, but rather looks out for common people.”

The Interfaith Center is the primary advocacy arm for many of its members. The Interfaith Center has a $170,000 budget, two full-time staff and two interns. Advocacy activities include meetings with elected officials, publication of a scorecard and weekly legislative action alerts, as well as grassroots lobbying through nine regional chapters.

Individual denominations generally advocate on a much more limited basis, and these smaller-scale efforts are typically led by part-time volunteers or are sometimes hired out to professional lobbyists paid for to advocate for a specific cause for a limited time. For example, the United Methodist Church has an annual lobby day for their members as well as several volunteers who monitor select legislation and occasionally advocate. But overall, the Methodist’s efforts at lobbying are limited, and they usually coordinate those efforts with the Interfaith Center.

The Interfaith Center formed in 1982 largely out of the lobbying arm of the Virginia Council of Churches (VCC), an organization representing 18 different denominations including Catholic, Orthodox and Mainline Protestant churches – a membership which overlaps significantly with the Interfaith Center. The VCC focuses on building Christian unity and ecumenical cooperation as well as supporting social outreach efforts. The VCC has difficulty achieving consensus among its members on a legislative agenda, except in opposition to the death penalty, according to General Minister John Barton. Even before the Interfaith Center was created, politics was not a primary activity for the VCC, and now the VCC does only a very limited amount of advocacy itself.
In 2004, one of the Interfaith Center’s primary emphasis was to ensure funding in the budget was “fair and adequate” for social services. Given the strong opposition by Christian conservatives to any tax increases to fund such programs, the final budget was considered a modest success. The organization also blocked efforts to limit local minimum wage ordinances as well as successfully increased outreach for food stamp programs. However, the Interfaith Center made only very limited progress in their efforts against the death penalty. Efforts to impose a moratorium on capital punishment and to abolish the death penalty for minors failed. A small victory on the death penalty came when the Interfaith Center and its allies secured improvements in the ability of capital defendants to introduce new evidence after the existing 21-day window has closed.

Non-Christian groups, including Jewish organizations and the Virginia Muslim Coalition, joined with the Interfaith Center to defeat legislation that would have amended the Virginia Fair Housing Law to allow the display of religious symbols, such as crosses. These groups argued the change would have been discriminatory: the use of religious symbols creates a presumption even if the intent is not to discriminate. Preventing religious discrimination and ensuring the separation of church and state are the key issues for the Jewish community, according to Miriam Davidow, a lobbyist who has worked for years with several Jewish organizations in Virginia including the Jewish Community Federation. Jewish organizations tend to play defense on these issues in Virginia, and the short legislative session helps this effort. “Our presence makes it hard to pass laws through a very busy legislature,” Davidow notes.

The Black Church and Lobbying

While African-American churches are still a regular stop on the election circuit for many politicians, in Virginia they are not as engaged in advocacy efforts as they once were. “Other than 10 to 20 days before an election, most black churches now are not very politically involved,” says to Executive Director of the Virginia state conference of the NAACP, King Saliam Khalfani. Leaders for two of the largest statewide organizations of black churches agree that advocacy is down from historic levels. According to the Reverend Cessar L. Scott, Executive Minister of the Baptist General Convention: “We are choosing to be less involved because politics doesn’t produce that much for our needs, like increased economic opportunity, that are less obvious than segregation.” Virginia Baptist State Convention President, Robert J. N. Jones, Jr. argues that politics can still produce results for the black community but notes that, “the vast majority of churches don’t get involved between elections.”

Despite the reduction in advocacy from historic levels, the black church appears to still be involved in some advocacy efforts through their denomination or statewide affiliation. The Baptist General Convention, formed in 1899, represents 1,000 black churches in Virginia. The Baptist General Convention primarily lets the Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy take the lead on its advocacy efforts, according to Executive Minister Scott, though it does some limited work on its own on the issues of housing, jobs, education and in opposition to the death penalty.

The Virginia Baptist State Convention represents 700 black churches throughout the state, many of which are also members of the Baptist General Convention. While the Virginia Baptist State Convention works with the Interfaith Center, it is also active on its own primarily through its Social Justice Commission. “We need to be involved because
many times black issues are not the same as the issues for everyone else,” notes Virginia Baptist State Convention President Jones. The volunteer-led Social Justice Commission works on a range of issues and is involved with writing letters to government officials, meeting with elected officials and occasionally organizing broader member support for legislation. In recent years, efforts have been primarily focused on the issues of racial profiling and unequal prison sentencing. Because of the State Convention’s communications with Governor Warner, several of its members have been placed on police boards charged with addressing the issue of racial profiling.

Conclusion

Although there is some lobbying by individual churches and by denominations, most religious lobbying in Virginia is done through large organizations that represent many denominations and churches. Religious lobbying groups on the right and those on the left have successfully carved out their niche in Virginia state politics. Each side has their range of issues they are most concerned about and there is very little overlap. When asked if the Family Foundation worked with groups concerned with poverty, Cobb said, “the awareness is growing that we need to be concerned [with poverty]….We haven’t been as effective in that area because we have a different perspective on the government’s role.” Similarly, the Interfaith Center does not lobby on abortion. Catholics are caught between these two religious coalitions, with the Arlington diocese working with both coalitions and the Richmond diocese active primarily in the Interfaith Center.

Yet religious lobbying is not widespread in Virginia. Working with small staffs and limited funding, even the most sophisticated of these political-religious groups do only limited direct lobbying, and hope that their training of grassroots activists will generate additional political clout. The Family Foundation holds civic workshops within local congregations to help bolster their grassroots capacities, and Collecchi at the Richmond Diocese hopes that Sowers of Justice will evoke a concern for social welfare from its parishioners. Yet in a state with few contested elections and an overworked amateur legislature that does not attract quality challengers, there are real limits to grassroots pressure. Indeed, in recent years the Christian Right has focused as much on primary elections as on general elections, seeking to change the members who represent the many safe GOP districts. And one-term governors do not generally afford religious groups the opportunity to establish long-term relationships, nor to develop complex agendas.

Virginia is a case that reminds us that institutions matter. In a state with a culture divide sufficient to produce significant conflict around religiously motivated politics, the electoral and governing institutions combine to quiet that conflict, and to provide only limited opportunities for religious groups to exercise their prophetic voice. In the brief and busy sessions of the Virginia Assembly, the small number of religious lobbyists is usually talking about different issues, hurrying past one another to meet with different members. Although the state legislature is solidly in the hands of the GOP and is controlled by religious conservatives, there is little time for them to plan long-term policies. Instead, they battle over the budget and focus on symbolic issues.
Works Cited


---

1 For a general discussion of religious lobbying, see Hertzke, 1988, and Hofrenning 1995.