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Mixing sacred, secular in politics continues U.S. historical pattern

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Even as Democrats and Republicans butt heads during the 1994 election campaign, many pundits are watching the growing influence of what appears to be another major force in American politics.

The religious right, which consists primarily of fundamentalist Christians, seems intent on making the Lamb of God a political icon on par with the Democrat's donkey and the GOP's elephant, and in the process keep attention focused on such issues as abortion, sex education and school prayer.

Groups such as the Christian Coalition — founded by televangelist Pat Robertson following his failed presidential bid in 1988 — have been working at the grass-roots level to gain influence in state and local political organizations.

Indeed, the current issue of "Campaigns and Elections" magazine estimates that the religious right is dominant in state Republican organizations in 18 states, and has substantial influence in the party's organizations in 13 other states. Through such influence, observers contend, the religious right is

affecting party platforms and the selection of candidates.

These religious groups are also encouraging supporters to run for office — from local town boards to the Congress. And group members are flooding the campaigns of candidates they support with volunteers and cash, as can be seen in the U.S. Senate campaign of Oliver North in Virginia.

Barry A. Kosmin and Seymour P. Lachman, in their 1993 book, "One Nation Under God: Religion in Contemporary American Society," estimated that in the 1992 elections, "fundamentalist Christian candidates, either loosely or directly aligned with Pat Robertson and the Christian Coalition, won almost 40 percent of the local elections they had targeted in such diverse states as Iowa, Oregon, Texas, Kansas, Florida and California."

The Christian Coalition alone now claims chapters in all 50 states

and a computer bank containing the names of some 1.5 million supporters — 800,000 of whom have contributed to the organization within the last three months, according to Mike Russell, the organization's communications director.

The Christian Coalition and such organizations as Spencerport, N.Y.-based New Yorkers for Constitutional Freedoms, while not endorsing any one party or any specific candidates — which they are prohibited from doing if they wish to maintain their tax-exempt status — seek to educate voters and lobby politicians, political parties and governmental bodies on such issues as abortion, sex education, pornography, school prayer, exotic nightclubs and special rights for homosexuals. They do this through such means as publishing voters guides, or such newsletters as "Freedom's Alert," published in Spencerport by a group called the New Yorkers Family Research Foundation, which is affiliated with N.Y.C.F.

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•GRASS-ROOTS CAMPAIGN•
FERTILIZED WITH:
- PRO-LIFE
- SCHOOL PRAYER
- FAMILY VALUES