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Q & A: Robert Jones & Daniel Cox on CO-Senate

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

Last week, I attended -- and wrote about -- a panel discussion on the Catholic Vote in the upcoming midterms sponsored by Catholic University's Institute for Policy Research and Catholic Studies.

A video of the panel is now available here.

I have asked the presenters to do what I have been doing the past few weeks, pick a race and comment on it. Today, we hear from Robert Jones and Daniel Cox of the Public Religion Research Institute as they analyze the Colorado Senate race and the significance of the Tea Party in that race. Jones is the CEO and Cox is the Director of Research at the PRRI.

Jones & Cox: When Ken Buck defeated Jane Norton in the Republican primary in the Colorado senate race, much of the political commentary characterized the race as further evidence of the Tea Party's ability to channel the anti-Washington sentiment roiling the electorate. But there was little attention to the curious attempted merger between two seemingly incompatible ideological positions: the "don't tread on me" libertarian rhetoric of the Tea Party on the one hand, and the Christian Right's social conservatism on the other; the former seeks to minimize government intrusion into private lives, while the latter seeks to use government to restrict access to or outlaw abortion altogether.

Although the amalgam of libertarian and social conservative ideologies has been a prominent feature of virtually all the races where Tea Party candidates have been successful, the Colorado context brings this merger into sharp focus. On the one hand, Colorado is part of the Mountain West, with its culture of pioneering individualism. But Colorado Springs is also home to James Dobson's Focus on the Family, a sprawling campus with its own zip code that has served in many ways as central command for the Christian Right in the national culture wars.

In addition to the recent energy captured by the Tea Party movement in Colorado, the Colorado "pro-life" community is particularly active. In 2008, groups opposing abortion succeeded in getting Amendment 48 on the ballot, which sought to define personhood as beginning at conception. Despite being resoundingly defeated in 2008 (73% to 27%), the same measure will appear on the ballot this year, reincarnated as Amendment 62. And this time around, opposition to abortion has been rebranded in a way that would resonate with many Tea Party folks. In an Amendment 62 campaign video entitled "The Pro-life Tea Party Vote" which describes President Obama as "the angel of death" Colorado Right to Life links fears about American decline and conspiracy theories about President Obama to opposition to abortion, concluding: "A vote for amendment 62 is a vote for life, liberty, and traditional American values." Here is the video:

The power of the Christian Right and social conservatives in Colorado was evident during the Republican primary campaign. Both Buck and Norton sought to burnish their "pro-life" credentials. Norton received an endorsement from Americans United for Life Action and the Family Research Council PAC, an organization with close ties to Focus on the Family. Buck for his part, came out strongly against any legal right for abortion, even in cases of rape or incest, and has claimed that he would support the repeal of *Roe v. Wade*.

At first blush, it might seem strange that a Tea Party candidate would be working to stress the issue of abortion and to make it an important part of the campaign. The convention wisdom has been that the Tea Party does not care much about social issues.

But two findings from a major new poll conducted by our organization, Public Religion Research Institute, point to a simpler answer. PRRI's American Values Survey found that on social issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage, rank and file members of the Tea Party movement are not in fact libertarians but social conservatives. Nearly two-thirds of Americans who consider themselves part of the Tea Party say abortion should be illegal in all or most cases. Moreover, when we looked closer, we found something even more significant. Nearly half (47%) of those who identify with the Tea Party movement also identify with the Christian Right.

These findings—that Tea Party members are social conservatives largely drawn from the ranks of the Christian Right—simplifies the general election calculus considerably for both Republican and Democratic candidates. For Buck and other Republican candidates, it mitigates the presumed ideological tensions, although it doesn't eliminate them. As Buck has turned his campaign toward the general elections, he has now come out against Amendment 62 and says that he would not support "doing away with common forms of birth control." This shift has drawn immediate fire from abortion opponents such as Lolita Hanks, president of America Right to Life Action, who charged, "Ken Buck has already broken every pro-life campaign promise he made."

On the other side, for Democratic incumbent Senator Michael Bennett, the survey findings mean that this Republican challenger may not be so different from those in the past. Rather than running against an opponent who has a new Tea Party base in addition to a Christian Right base, he's more likely running against an opponent with the same traditional Republican coalitions re-organized under new labels.

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