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The pro-family movement

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We often think about our sexuality as very private and personal. However true this might be, sexuality is also social in a number of ways. One of the clearest examples of the social aspect of sexuality is the recent “culture war” in the United States, which is largely a struggle over what the social rules governing sexuality should be. Should comprehensive sex education be provided to students through public education? Should same-sex couples be allowed to marry under the law? Should pregnant women have the right to decide whether they get an abortion? What about girls who are under 18 years old? These issues about sexuality certainly have a profound impact on people’s personal lives. The policy battles over these issues, however, are taking place in the public sphere, fought by activists and politicians.

Much of this activism is in response to the many changes in the social norms governing sexuality in the United States over the last thirty years or so. The fight for women’s equality, the “sexual revolution,” and the growth of lesbian and gay communities are a few of these important changes, but they are not the only ones. For example, cultural changes marked by an expansion of the consumer sphere means that advertising for consumer products reaches every nook and cranny of our daily lives. The use of sexually suggestive images in advertising has provoked many to declare that we live in a “sex saturated” environment.

In response to these and other changes, a social movement has emerged to lobby for the return of stricter norms governing sexuality. This social movement has been known by a number of names, such as the Moral Majority, the Religious Right, the New Christian Right, and the Pro-Family Movement. Though the pro-family movement gained public notoriety in the 1990s, it actually began in the 1970s and has been active ever since. This social movement has been particularly successful at integrating its issues into the agenda of the Republican party, and so it has become a very powerful social movement in the United States today. This chapter will trace the history of this social movement and discuss the implications for a number of social policies governing sexuality.

What is the pro-family movement?

The pro-family movement is a group of social movement organizations that share both a wide-ranging conservative political agenda and a (primarily evangelical) Christian identity.

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For the pro-family movement, these two are closely tied together, in that their religious perspective informs their political goals, such as legalizing prayer in school and criminalizing abortion. Though the movement claims to be concerned with building strong families, their policy goals reach far beyond the institution of the family. For example, pro-family activists advocate ending medical research that uses stem cells, stopping legalized gambling, and eliminating some topics from being discussed in schools.

While the pro-family movement is a self-identified Christian movement, it is important to remember that not all Christians, nor all evangelical Christians, are pro-family activists. Many evangelical Christians have diverse opinions on each of the issues supported by the pro-family movement, and even people who join the movement might feel strongly about one of the movement's issues, but disagree with the movement's stance on other issues. In any social movement, there is much more diversity among members than we might see at first glance. Pro-family leaders add to the confusion by frequently making statements that imply that all Christians agree with their political goals. By making claims about "the Christian perspective" on one policy or another, pro-family activists try to make it sound like millions of Christian Americans agree with them, even though this is often not the case.

History of the pro-family movement

How did the pro-family movement come to be? Why is it so much stronger in the United States than in other, similar countries? The answer lies in the unique history of evangelical Christianity in the United States, out of which this movement was born. Ironically, the roots of what makes this social movement so powerful lie in evangelical Christians' historical belief that politics had no place in the life of good Christians. I will explain.

Through much of the middle of the twentieth century, Christian evangelicals were dedicated to withdrawal, not only from politics, but also from what they perceived to be immoral secular influences. From the 1930s through the 1960s, evangelical Christians were dedicated to building alternative social networks, religious and educational institutions as a shield from the cultural influences of the outside world. Many Christian evangelicals thought that popular music was a particularly evil influence on children, as was the sexual content of magazines, films, and television.

Public schools presented material which contradicted biblical literalism, evangelical Christians' faith that the bible is the true word of God rather than a metaphorical representation of God's message. Because of this particularly evangelical Christian understanding of the bible, parts of the curriculum were contentious, even before the days of sex education. For example, the teaching of evolution in science classes contradicts a literal reading of the bible, which says that God built the world in six days. In response, evangelical Christians retreated from the secular world, built private, independent schools, libraries, and other institutions that supported their own values and ideology.

They developed networks among churches, as well as bible institutes, summer camps and other religious retreats, television and radio networks, videos and a host of other Christian children's books, bible study pamphlets, and so on. These Christian institutions and media turned out to be very popular, and soon evangelical Christian organizations had amassed incredible financial resources and membership numbers, and had created wide informational networks and an ideological consistency among their members that would turn out to serve political ends very well. Of course, none of this was intentional during the era of retreat from secular politics, but all of that changed in the 1970s, when one group of evangelical

Christians decided to stop retreating and start changing the secular world through political activism. These evangelical Christian church networks, schools, radio stations, television shows, and publishing houses, and the distinctly Christian values and identity they created, became the backbone of the pro-family movement.

The development of the pro-family movement

Two important grassroots movements preceded the pro-family movement and influenced it greatly. The first was the fight against the Equal Rights Amendment of the early 1970s, led by Phyllis Schlafly, which was responsible for defeating the legislation that would have added this language to the US constitution: "Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex." Schlafly's multi-state crusade was among the first examples of grassroots activism for conservative social causes, and her organization, the Eagle Forum, is still one of the leading pro-family groups in the United States. The second important movement is Anita Bryant's fight against gay rights in the late 1970s. American sweetheart and former beauty queen Anita Bryant led a series of grassroots efforts across the country to repeal local legislation protecting gay men and lesbians from discrimination. In her 1977 autobiography, *The Anita Bryant Story*, Bryant says, "homosexuals cannot reproduce – so they must recruit. And to freshen their ranks, they must recruit the youth of America."

Both of these movements were successful in their legislative goals, and they set an example to some conservative Christian leaders that politics and evangelism can go together. Jerry Falwell was reluctant at first to enter politics, because he worried that his followers would reject his active participation in the secular world. But Bryant's work demonstrated that conservative Christian evangelicals supported secular activism, and he founded the Moral Majority in 1979, with a plan to integrate an evangelical Christian agenda into mainstream party politics. Falwell's success in building a national movement led to the emergence of other organizations that built coalitions with Republican party insiders to create what the media called the New Christian Right. This brand of Christian activism was quite successful in integrating conservative social policy concerns into the platform of the Republican party at both national and state levels over the course of the 1980s. The Moral Majority's voter registration drives signed up both unsatisfied Christian Democrats and nonvoters to the Republican party.

In the 1990s, the relationship between conservative Christian activists and the Republican party became even stronger, despite the objections of more moderate Republicans. Some pundits in the 1990s predicted that the Republican party's turn toward a socially conservative agenda would create a crisis in the party, which has a long history of opposition to the government intrusion into personal matters. This, however, did not come to be, as the pro-family movement's influence on the Republican party continued to grow throughout the 1990s and into the current century, culminating in the election of President George W. Bush, a born-again Christian who supports the platform of the pro-family movement.

What began in the 1970s as a group of conservative Christian political outsiders writing letters and carrying picket signs has turned into a powerful political force with great influence in the legislative and executive branches of the federal government, as well as many state and local governments across the nation. The various organizations in the movement took up multiple issues and packaged them into one "profamily" agenda. Critics complain that this pleasant-sounding tag hides an agenda to undermine the separation of church and

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state in the United States. In fact, many pro-family leaders have been quoted stating explicitly their desire to create a system of “Christian governance” for America. Today, they continue to exert great influence on many laws and policies governing sexuality.

Pro-family activism and sexuality

Many items on the pro-family agenda have to do with restricting sexuality and reversing some of the changes in sexual norms that have occurred over the past several decades. Pro-family activists fight for policies that limit the sexual freedoms of individuals and censor sexual information, especially from young people. Below, I outline a number of the pro-family movement’s priorities regarding sexuality.

Sexuality in television, music and film

Pro-family activists are concerned with the amount of sexually suggestive material in the media these days. They take a variety of paths to try to limit the sexuality published through television, music, and film. First, they advocate boycotts of particular shows and songs that they find offensive. They publish guides for parents to limit sexually suggestive materials their kids view and listen to. They also pressure businesses to refuse to sell music or DVDs that are offensive, and they encourage their supporters to patronize the stores that adopt such policies.

In addition to the sexually suggestive material available for general consumption through television, radio, and the film industry, the pro-family movement is also concerned with sexually explicit material, or pornography. Some pro-family activism has shut down local adult film stores, created local zoning laws that limit where these stores can be opened. These days, however, sexually explicit material is no longer relegated to the back rooms of video stores and the dark, seedy parts of town; it is easily accessed in people’s homes over the internet. The pro-family movement is working to censor internet pornography through federal legislation. These anti-pornography measures have broad public support that goes well beyond the pro-family movement itself.

Sex education in public schools

One of the biggest battles the pro-family movement continues to fight is for limits on information on sexuality in public schools. In the beginning of this fight, the pro-family movement made direct arguments for censorship of this information. As time went on, pro-family activists became more politically savvy, arguing *for* what they call “abstinence-only” sex education, rather than *against* sex education in general. However, abstinence-only sex education is more about keeping scientifically accurate information from students than providing them with sex education. For example, abstinence-only educators can only talk about pre-marital sex in terms of the problems it causes. Critics of abstinence-only curriculums contend that some programs even go so far as to include inaccurate information, such as the myth that condoms have holes in them bigger than the HIV virus, in order to scare young people away from having sex.

Abstinence-only sex education is one of the pro-family movement’s biggest policy victories. In 1996, special funding for abstinence-only education was established by the federal government, meaning that resource-starved public schools have an incentive to provide this

sort of sex education curriculum, rather than more comprehensive and accurate education. In 2001, this funding was extended, and continues to increase each year. There are no federal funds dedicated to comprehensive sex education at this time.

Civil rights for lesbians and gay men

The fight against civil rights for lesbians and gay men has been a longstanding plank in the pro-family movement's platform. Currently, this fight is taking the form of opposition to laws that recognize marriage between two people of the same sex. However, this is not the only anti-gay position of the pro-family movement. The movement also opposes extending anti-discrimination legislation to include lesbians and gay men, not to mention bisexuals and transgender people. That is, pro-family activists want the law to allow landlords to be able to refuse housing to people who are gay or lesbian, and to allow businesses to fire people just for being gay, and allow restaurants, hotels, and other service providers to have the legal right to refuse to serve lesbians and gay men.

The pro-family movement also has attempted to block kids from forming Gay–Straight Alliance groups in their high schools. These groups are extracurricular social clubs that provide a safe space for kids to talk about sexuality, and often have a diverse mix of straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, or “questioning” youth (those who are unsure of their sexual identities), as well as kids who don't follow traditional gender norms. Though a federal law dictates that public high schools cannot discriminate against extracurricular groups based on the content of their discussions, the pro-family movement has supported those high schools that have tried to shut these groups down.

Abortion

Abortion is a very contentious issue in America, with people holding very strong feelings for or against making this procedure available to pregnant women. The pro-family movement is squarely positioned on the “pro-life” side of this debate, and works diligently to restrict women's access to abortion. This battle occurs in a number of venues, including the “front lines” of medical clinics that provide abortions or abortion counseling. Picketers protests outside these clinics, and often try to convince women who enter the clinics to change their minds about getting an abortion.

Another front in this battle is legislative, and although the US Supreme Court has determined that women have a constitutional right to choose to terminate their pregnancies, the pro-life and pro-family movements have urged legislators to curtail that right whenever possible. They have successfully limited the number of women who have access to abortion by implementing parental consent and parental notification laws that require pregnant women under the age of 18 to obtain signatures from their parents before they can obtain an abortion.

The impact of the pro-family movement

The success of the pro-family movement on some issues, and their ongoing battles on other issues, have an impact upon different groups in different ways. Below, I look at the pro-family agenda through a few different lenses.

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Youth

From the pro-family perspective, keeping information about sex away from young people is tantamount to protecting children from harm. But there is little acknowledgement by pro-family activists that youth, those years between sexual maturity and legal adulthood, is an age category that is distinct from childhood. Thus, the pro-family agenda does not distinguish small children in grade school from high school seniors.

Many pro-family policies are targeted at youth. Some, like abstinence-only sex education, make it more difficult for young people to get accurate information about condoms and other birth control, rape crisis assistance, and options such as emergency contraception, or the “morning after pill,” which prevents pregnancy when taken soon after sexual intercourse. The pro-family movement has successfully lobbied five states to adopt policies that prevent teachers from discussing homosexuality in the classroom, and dozens of others to require parental permission before youth can participate in such a discussion.

Other policies have direct impact upon young people’s bodies and physical well-being. Parental consent requirements for abortion procedures put young women’s choices in the hands of their parents. And the pro-family movement’s opposition to anti-bullying laws mean that schools will be less safe for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender kids.

Women

Restricting access to abortion is one pro-family policy that directly impacts women’s lives. The pro-family agenda includes reversing the 1973 Supreme Court decision, *Roe v. Wade*, which determined that abortion is a constitutional right. Pro-family activists are hopeful that new judicial appointments to the Supreme Court will set the stage for a legal challenge to this historic ruling.

Other pro-family policies have a disproportionate impact on women, such as restrictions on the distribution of emergency contraception and legal protections for pharmacists who refuse to fill prescriptions for birth control pills. Other policies that restrict women’s sexuality include bans on the vibrators and other sex toys that many women use to achieve orgasm. The pro-family movement would also like to change marriage laws to make it more difficult to get a divorce, which will be the most harmful to women who are victims of domestic violence.

Women outside of the United States are also affected by pro-family policies. The pro-family movement’s successful implementation of the “Mexico City Policy” (commonly known as the “global gag rule”) in US foreign policy means that federal funds will not go to any foreign aid organization that provides abortions, refers women to abortion providers, or even discusses abortion as an option with pregnant women. Other pro-family-supported foreign aid policies, such as de-emphasizing condom use in HIV-prevention efforts in Africa, will cost both women and men their lives.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people are major targets of the pro-family movement, which claims that lesbian and gay people are a threat to the family. Pro-family activists actively oppose same-sex marriage, and they have succeeded in writing new laws to prevent lesbian and gay couples from marrying in thirty-eight states, even though same-sex marriage is only available in Massachusetts and same-sex civil unions are only recognized in Vermont.

Marriage is not the only anti-gay item on the pro-family agenda. As I have mentioned, the pro-family movement also opposes anti-discrimination protections for lesbian, gay, and transgender people. They also want to exclude sexual identity from states' hate crimes laws, and they work to prevent lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people from adopting children or becoming foster parents.

Sexual politics as social movement politics

Each social policy, whether it is at the level of the federal government or the local school board, has a direct impact on the way that individuals experience and can express their sexuality. Even though sex is very personal and intimate, it is also very social at the same time, because many different aspects of our sexual lives are governed by laws, policies, and more informal social norms. Even something as simple as how and where we can talk about sex is influenced greatly by social policies and norms.

The conservative pro-family movement has recently had a strong influence on this public debate about sexuality. By insisting that very restrictive policies govern sexuality and that the conservative social norms guide sexual behavior, they take a position directly opposite the liberal agenda set in the sexual revolution of the late 1960s, which calls for a "live and let live" approach to social norms, and argues for reductions in governmental restrictions on people's sexuality. In the United States, we have become increasingly polarized between two ends of the political spectrum when it comes to sexuality.

In other countries, which have less social movement activity on these issues, policy debates about sexuality tend toward compromise. As a result, more moderate policy outcomes are common, and we see a slow but steady liberalization of sexual policies in Canada, Australia, and much of Europe. In the United States, as a direct result of the pro-family movement, there is more controversy and less compromise on issues of sexual politics. So, the US is not following the same pattern as other nations. In fact, there is not much of a pattern at all, but more of a patchwork of court decisions, legislation, and executive orders that sometimes favor the pro-family movement, and at other times do not. The final outcome of the "culture war" in the United States remains to be seen, but the strength of both the pro-family movement and their political opponents seems to be increasing over time. This means that more Americans are taking up one side of these issues or the other, and as time goes on, the chances that we will reach a middle ground on sexual policy in the United States is shrinking.