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Why Conservatives are a Political Force in America

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As John McCain seeks the presidential nod in the general election, his vice presidential pick clearly emphasizes his need to reach the conservative voter, the powerful political voting block that emerged from a coalition of splinter groups pulled together in the 1950s by the writers of *National Review* magazine according to a recent study.

National Review is a political magazine that is known for its conservative perspective. In an article just released in the scholarly journal *Mass Communication and Society*, Susan Currie Sivek, assistant professor of mass communication and journalism at California State University, Fresno, credited *National Review* for its impeccable ability to strategically construct media frames that influenced Americans from three smaller subgroups to merge under the conservative banner.

William F. Buckley, Jr., the magazine's founder, brought together anti-Communists, Libertarians, and Christian conservatives. He gathered writers who saw the common threads across these groups, emphasized their common values, and de-emphasized more divisive leanings.

One tool that brought these groups together was the framing of "liberalism" as the common enemy, a strategy often employed later by President Ronald Reagan. In *National Review's* first issue, it employed the language often used by anti-Communists but applied it in attacking liberalism.

In addition to appealing to anti-Communists, the magazine reached out to Libertarians in its philosophical statement in the opening issue. It said "The growth of government . . . must be fought relentlessly. In this great social conflict of the era, we are, without reservations, on the libertarian side.

To appeal to Christian conservatives, Sivek notes that the magazine "frequently invoked the philosophical nature and history of 'Western Civilization' and . . . the existence of moral absolutes." *National Review* constructed a historical and religious foundation for conservatism and argued against the relativism of social engineers that "had taken over America."

Sivek further explains how *National Review* was more influential than other conservative magazine attempts of the time. By refusing to join in with anti-Semitic voices of the 1950s and employing Jewish writers, the magazine eschewed one fringe branch that tried to identify itself as conservative. It also avoided McCarthyism's vitriolic vocabulary of anti-Communism conspiracy that was later embraced by the John Birch Society. There is no question *National Review* still remained solidly anti-Communist.

The magazine influenced 1964 Presidential candidate Barry Goldwater who often used the language of the *National Review* to appeal to constituents. Presidents Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush acknowledged the impact it had on American political view points, an impact that seems to have been reincarnated in talk radio programs like The Rush Limbaugh Show. Sivek, however, notes Buckley's criticism of some Bush policies that have departed from the National Review's conservative principles.

Sivek's research was completed before knowing John McCain would be the Republican nominee for President. So she didn't indicate where he would fit in the spectrum of conservatives that were taken under the National Review umbrella.

But Stephen Perry, Editor of *Mass Communication and Society*, said, "Perhaps the conservatives that were recruited to 'take over the Republican Party' through National Review are no longer in control based on McCain's nomination. Still, the selection of Sarah Palin for his Vice Presidential running mate clearly indicates the conservatives still pull a lot of weight at the Republican table."

In the article, Sivek detailed how one magazine shaped and developed the political opinions of millions through applying various frames to political philosophy. Sivek also demonstrates how framing and editing of political movements can increase political engagement throughout the nation. To read more about how *National Review* framed issues that created the Conservative movement, read "Editing Conservatism: How National Review Magazine Framed and Mobilized a Political Movement" in *Mass Communication and Society*, Volume 11, Issue 3.

Susan Currie Sivek, "Editing Conservatism: How *National Review* Magazine Framed and Mobilized a Political Movement," *Mass Communication and Society*, Volume 11, Issue 3, 2008

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