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Manufacturing a Protestant Consensus: Religion and Regime Entrenchment in the Eisenhower Era

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Abstract

The party regime concept is central to the study of American political development. Yet many questions about the processes through which party regimes are created, maintained, and dismantled remain unanswered. This article argues that religious bodies have historically played an important role in these processes. Specifically, I demonstrate that “mainline” Protestant groups made three distinct contributions to the entrenchment of the post–New Deal Democratic regime. First, the National Council of Churches (NCC) credibly reframed Democratic policy commitments as embodying universal values (as opposed to the preferences of favored interest groups). Second, the NCC’s economic policy arm, which included representatives from business, labor, and the clergy, successfully created the impression of an overwhelming elite consensus in favor of center-left economic policies. Third, the NCC used its moral authority to empower the moderate Republican opposition while simultaneously marginalizing the party’s well-funded and potentially influential right wing. The NCC was one of many civil society groups that opposed the GOP right’s attempts to roll back the New Deal. But the professional diversity of its membership, its ability to frame its pronouncements in religious terms, and its links to the Protestant grassroots made it arguably the most effective.

How does an ascendant political party attain the status of a *party regime*? It is generally accepted that the Jacksonian Democrats, the post–Civil War Republicans, the New Deal–era Democrats, and (arguably) the Reagan-era Republicans each developed and entrenched a governing vision that shaped the political landscape for decades to come. But regime entrenchment, while obvious in retrospect, is not foreordained. In their early years, each of the abovementioned regimes faced vigorous opposition from actors who sought to undo their initial achievements. In each case, there were moments when a return to partisan parity, or even the collapse of the ascendant party’s coalition, was within the realm of possibility. Why did these ascendant parties succeed in entrenching a coherent policy vision, while others—for example, the Obama-era Democrats—did not?

Most existing studies of regime entrenchment focus on the internal dynamics of the ascendant party and the strategic decisions of its leaders. But there are reasons to doubt that these factors alone can account for the success or failure of regime-building projects. First, a single-minded focus on the ascendant party tends to obscure the fact that this party exists within a broader party *system*. The opposing party, in other words, also has a say in the fate of the nascent party regime. Although not in a position to dictate outcomes, its internal dynamics and decision-making will inevitably shape the landscape on which partisan conflict plays out. If a significant faction within the opposing party favors accommodation of the ascendant party’s agenda, for example, regime entrenchment will be more likely to occur. Conversely, entrenchment may be less likely, though by no means impossible, when the opposition party is monolithic in rejecting the ascendant party’s governing vision.

A second gap in the literature concerns the role of nonpartisan actors in legitimating regime principles. Existing studies of party regime formation—and of party ideology more broadly—tend to examine civil society groups such as unions, churches, and advocacy organizations only in their capacity as members or potential members of party coalitions. But such groups are arguably more useful for establishing the legitimacy of regime principles precisely when they are *not* members (or potential members) of the ascendant party coalition. Stated differently, when it comes to winning over doubters in the electorate (or in government), formally nonpartisan organizations with claims to expertise over particular issue areas may be more effective than groups with obvious ties to the dominant party. If the goal of the regime-building project is to elevate a party’s programmatic commitments above the fray of “ordinary” politics, organizations that can themselves credibly claim to be above the political fray are likely to be particularly helpful in this endeavor.

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These points might be illustrated with any number of examples from past regime-building projects. In what follows, I focus on a critical juncture in the development of the New Deal-era Democratic regime—namely, the period from the late 1940s to the mid-1950s when a resurgent Republican party briefly threatened the Democrats' bid for regime entrenchment. That the Democratic regime survived this challenge, I shall argue, was due less to the genius of its leaders or the cohesiveness of their coalition than to Republican moderates' successful discrediting of their conservative rivals. As we shall see, Republican moderates used their influence within influential civil society groups to frame the New Deal's legacy in positive terms—and hence to paint conservatives' attempts to eviscerate it as ideologically extreme and contrary to American values. Even as they worked to roll back programs they viewed as wasteful or ineffective, GOP moderates successfully defended the nascent social welfare state that was the New Deal's most important legacy, and in so doing, they effectively secured the Democratic regime's entrenchment.

The article focuses on two civil society groups in particular: the National Council of Churches (NCC) and its economic policy arm, the Department of the Church and Economic Life (DCEL). Representing Protestant denominations with a combined membership of about 35 million, the NCC was the nation's largest ecumenical body during the 1950s and 1960s. Although it did not endorse candidates for public office, its pronouncements on social and economic issues were widely covered in the media and its representatives testified frequently before Congress. Hence, both moderate and conservative Republicans viewed the NCC as a critical site of contestation in Eisenhower-era debates over economic policy. At a moment when the two factions were battling for control within the administration, each hoped that favorable pronouncements from the nation's largest ecumenical body would tip the scales in its favor. In the end, Republican moderates—several of whom were simultaneously serving in the Eisenhower administration—joined forces with left-leaning labor leaders, academics, and clergymen to gain effective control over the NCC's economic policy arm, which they used to issue pronouncements declaring the welfare state an authentic outgrowth of Protestant social teachings. The result was to discredit (for the time being) the laissez-faire economic philosophy of the Republican right while simultaneously creating the appearance, at least, of a broad-based Protestant consensus in favor of preserving the core of the New Deal.

1. Rethinking the Dynamics of Regime Entrenchment

Scholars have long found it useful to view American political development through the lens of party regimes. A reasonable synthesis of regime theories goes as follows: A party regime comes into being when a political party, typically powered by a novel governing coalition, establishes electoral dominance over its rival(s). Armed with control of the White House and substantial majorities in Congress, the ascendant party writes its favored policies into law. Moreover, assuming its governing vision is validated at the ballot box, the party will also establish effective control over the terms of political debate. Even critics must now formulate their arguments using the regime's ideas and terminology, lest they be seen as defying the will of the voters. And yet, periods of one-party dominance do not last forever. Over time, the coalition underpinning the regime begins to fracture, typically because of the introduction of novel or cross-cutting issues (e.g.,

slavery in the 1850s) or the arrival of a crisis that proves beyond the regime's ability to manage (e.g., the Great Depression). The splintering of the regime's governing coalition, combined with the apparent discrediting of its policy vision, creates an opportunity for the out-of-power party to augment its own coalition and to articulate an alternative set of principled commitments. In time, the voters validate the opposition party's critique, the old regime is driven from power, and the cycle repeats.¹

The party regime perspective undoubtedly provides a useful heuristic for thinking about the possibilities and limits of political action in specific historical periods. However, some of its core features remain undertheorized and poorly understood—for example, the process of *regime entrenchment*. By this, I mean the process through which the ascendant party consolidates effective control of both public policy and public discourse, so that its programmatic commitments come to be viewed as normatively binding by most actors within the political system.² To be clear, entrenchment does not mean the end of debates over policy or ideology. Rather, it means that the burden of proof shifts from the ascendant party to its critics, who must now explain why their objections to the ascendant party's program should not be dismissed out of hand.

To date, research on regime entrenchment has tended to focus on the electoral record and internal dynamics of the ascendant party. That is to say, the question of whether an ascendant party will succeed in establishing itself as a *regime* is usually said to depend on (1) the length of time in which the ascendant party enjoys an overwhelming advantage at the ballot box, (2) the overall cohesiveness of the ascendant party's coalition, and (3) the strategic choices made by the ascendant party's leaders.³ Given a decade or more of electoral dominance, a cohesive party coalition, and leaders who are skilled at exploiting the mistakes of the opposition, the ascendant party will on this view be well positioned to establish itself as a durable regime. Under these conditions, it can, for example, staff the judiciary and federal agencies with appointees who share the party's vision and who will reliably perpetuate

¹For an influential theoretical treatment of the party regime concept, see Andrew J. Polsky, "Partisan Regimes in American Politics," *Polity* 44 (2012): 51–80. Foundational works in the party regime literature include Stephen Skowronek, *The Politics Presidents Make: Leadership from John Adams to George Bush* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1993); Karen Orren and Stephen Skowronek, "Regimes and Regime Building in American Government: A Review of the Literature on the 1940s," *Political Science Quarterly* 113 (1999): 689–701; David Plotke, *Building a Democratic Political Order: Reshaping American Liberalism in the 1930s and 1940s* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

²To be clear, entrenchment does not mean the end of debates over policy or ideology; rather, it means that the burden of proof shifts from the dominant party to its critics, who must now explain why their objections to the dominant party's program should not be dismissed out of hand. Although Plotke does not use the word "entrenchment" in quite this way, my use of the term is consistent with his description of the post-New Deal political landscape. Critics of the Democratic regime, he writes, found that "they could influence Democratic practices [only] when they acknowledged the regime's premises—and thus restricted their capacity to gain more basic changes in the political situation" (Plotke, *Building a Democratic Political Order*, 225). See also Polsky, "Partisan Regimes in American Politics," 71.

³Polsky, "Partisan Regimes in American Politics"; Curt Nichols and Adam S. Myers, "Exploiting the Opportunity for Reconstructive Leadership: Presidential Responses to Eviscerated Political Regimes," *American Politics Research* 38 (2010): 806–41; Howard Gillman, "How Political Parties Can Use the Courts to Advance Their Agendas: Federal Courts in the United States, 1875–1891," *American Political Science Review* 96 (2002): 511–24; Howard Gillman, "Party Politics and Constitutional Change: The Political Origins of Liberal Judicial Activism," in *The Supreme Court and American Political Development*, ed. Ronald Kahn and Ken I. Kersch (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006), 138–68.

its ideological commitments for decades to come.⁴ Similarly, a series of convincing electoral victories, such as those enjoyed at the presidential level by Republicans between 1860 and 1880, or the Democrats between 1932 and 1948, may tend to elevate the ascendant party's ideology above the level of ordinary partisanship, making it more akin to a national creed.⁵

But while sustained electoral dominance and (relative) party cohesiveness are necessary conditions for regime entrenchment, they are not sufficient conditions. Stated otherwise, even relatively cohesive parties are unlikely to fully consolidate control of either public discourse or public policy during the (inevitably brief) period of electoral dominance. There are several reasons for this. First, because the reconstructive phase entails the formation of a novel governing coalition, this period will tend to be one in which the ascendant party's long-term program has yet to be fully articulated. Major objectives (e.g., halting the territorial expansion of slavery, constructing a social safety net) may be clear, but the details will remain to be fleshed out in debates between the party's constituent factions.⁶ For the same reason, the ideological commitments that will eventually undergird and synthesize the ascendant party's policy objectives may be inchoate during the reconstructive period.⁷ Much energy will also need to be directed toward remaking internal party institutions that were constructed prior to the emergence of the new governing coalition, and which may actively hinder the party's programmatic efforts until reformed.⁸ Entrenchment is unlikely to occur until these tasks of internal party governance have been completed.

Moreover, even if the ascendant party manages to quickly coalesce around a set of ideological and policy commitments, the window of time in which it can *unilaterally* implement these commitments is usually very short. The reconstructive phase is—again by definition—one in which the ascendant party enjoys overwhelming electoral success, typically resulting in effective one-party control of the federal government. But while this period of one-party rule may allow for the passage of transformative legislation, as well as transformative judicial and executive branch appointments, it will typically be too brief to ensure the entrenchment of the ascendant party's programmatic commitments. Assuming the opposition party returns to electoral competitiveness within a decade or so of its initial defeat, large portions of the judiciary and bureaucracy will continue to be staffed by holdovers from the old regime.⁹ The question, then, is not whether the ascendant party can reshape the policy agenda while the opposition party is at its weakest, but whether it can reinforce and expand upon its initial successes once the opposition party has regained its footing.

Taken together, these observations suggest that the critical moment when the question of regime consolidation hangs in the balance will tend to occur not during the reconstructive phase but during what might be termed the “first preemption”—that is, the moment when the opposition party begins once again to enjoy success at the ballot box, typically meaning it has recaptured control of Congress or the executive branch (or both). Scholarly work on this phase of the regime cycle is scant, however, and existing studies mostly focus on the narrow question of how “preemptive” presidents, such as Woodrow Wilson and Dwight D. Eisenhower, have dealt with the challenges of executive leadership at a time when the opposition party's program enjoys widespread approval.¹⁰ Such studies are important for what they reveal about the opportunities and limitations of presidential leadership in such periods. And yet, because the ideological dominance of the ascendant party is typically taken for granted, we learn little about the dynamics that shape ideological development in such periods. Without a better understanding of these dynamics, it is impossible to say why ascendant parties sometimes succeed in entrenching their programmatic commitments, and why, on the other hand, they sometimes fail in their attempts to remake the political landscape.

Three specific features of the preemptive political landscape deserve more attention than they have previously received. First, a glance at the historical record suggests that the opposition party's return from exile will tend to trigger a shift in public discourse, which the ascendant party and its supporters must successfully navigate in order to ensure regime consolidation. As the crisis (or crises) that brought down the old order fades from view, and as the ascendant party begins to confront (comparatively minor) crises and scandals of its own, discursive space is opened for a reconsideration of the new regime's most ambitious agenda items. In this changed environment, group-based, us-versus-them appeals, which are often effective in the reconstructive phase, may become a liability.¹¹ Indeed, the opposition party's return to electoral competitiveness will often be powered by allegations that the ascendant party, having seized the levers of power, is using its influence to enrich favored interest groups at the expense of the common good. (Examples include the Democrats' demonization of the Reconstruction agencies in the 1870s and the Republicans' focus on labor union corruption in the late 1940s and early 1950s.)¹² In the face of such allegations, regime supporters will often find it necessary to recast in universal

⁴Gillman, “How Political Parties Can Use the Courts”; Gillman, “Party Politics and Constitutional Change”; Polsky, “Partisan Regimes in American Politics,” 74–75; Plotke, *Building a Democratic Political Order*, 125–27.

⁵Polsky, “Partisan Regimes in American Politics,” 62; Mark A. Scully, “Principled Rhetoric as Coalition Management: Speech in the Reconstructive Presidencies of Franklin Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan,” *Polity* 50 (2018): 129–57.

⁶Polsky, “Partisan Regimes in American Politics,” 63; Jeffrey A. Jenkins and Justin Peck, *Congress and the First Civil Rights Era, 1861–1918* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 24, 65–66, 82–83; Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 314–16, 344–45.

⁷Kathleen Bawn, Martin Cohen, David Karol, Seth Masket, Hans Noel, and John Zaller, “A Theory of Parties,” *Perspectives on Politics* 10 (2012): 571–97, 590.

⁸Plotke, *Building a Democratic Political Order*, ch. 5.

⁹Another complication, as Howard Gillman points out, is that a regime's earliest judicial nominees are usually selected during a period when the regime's ideological commitments are still inchoate. Hence, it cannot be taken for granted that early nominees will accede to the party's mature program. See Gillman, “Party Politics and Constitutional Change,” 142.

¹⁰See, for example, Andrew J. Polsky, “Shifting Currents: Dwight Eisenhower and the Dynamic of Presidential Opportunity Structure,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 45 (2015): 90–109; Douglas B. Harris, “Dwight Eisenhower and the New Deal: The Politics of Preemption,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 27 (1997): 333–42.

¹¹Polsky notes that political rhetoric in the reconstructive phrase typically focuses on assigning blame and “naming culprits, who are usually associated with the old political order.” Ultimately, however, successful regime building must appeal to “familiar symbols” and “invoke and idealized version of the past.” Polsky, “Partisan Regimes in American Politics,” 62.

¹²On Democrats' use of the corruption issue against the Reconstruction-era Republican party, see Foner, *Reconstruction*, 389–90; Michael F. Holt, *By One Vote: The Disputed Presidential Election of 1876* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008), 36. For allegations against the post-WWII Democratic Party, see, for example, Eisenhower's acceptance speech at the 1952 GOP convention: “Our aims—the aims of this Republican crusade—are clear: to sweep from office an administration which has fastened on every one of us the wastefulness, the arrogance and corruption in high places, the heavy burdens and anxieties which are the bitter fruit of a party too long in power” (Dwight D. Eisenhower, “Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in Chicago,” *The American Presidency Project*, accessed December 7, 2022, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-accepting-the-presidential-nomination-the-republican-national-convention-chicago-0>).

terms policies that were initially conceived as providing group-specific benefits. The party's programmatic commitments, it will now be said, are not sops to coalition members but rather straightforward embodiments of broadly shared national values.¹³

Second, the success or failure of the ascendant party's efforts to entrench its ideas and policies will likely depend, to a greater extent than is usually recognized, on the intraparty dynamics of the opposition. Typically, the experience of spending several years in the electoral wilderness will fracture the opposing party into what might be termed cooperative and intransigent factions.¹⁴ The cooperative faction, recognizing the changed electoral environment, will be open to compromise with the ascendant party. The intransigent faction, whether motivated by principle or by a contrasting set of strategic calculations, will instead work to discredit the ascendant party's ideas and frustrate its policy objectives at every turn. The emergence of this divide represents a moment of contingency in the party regime cycle. If actors affiliated with the ascendant party can successfully intervene in the intraparty struggle of their opponents—whether by forming durable linkages with the cooperative faction or by ensuring the marginalization of the intransigent faction—they are likely to succeed in consolidating power. If they cannot, and if the intransigent faction seizes control of the opposition party machinery, then consolidation becomes less likely, as the opposition party will use the many veto points provided by the constitutional system to thwart the ascendant regime's bid for consolidation.

Finally, there are good reasons to believe that ostensibly non-partisan actors, including civil society organizations, play a larger role in the process of regime entrenchment—and in the shaping of party ideology more generally—than is usually recognized.¹⁵

¹³This is not to deny the important role played by appeals to purportedly universal national symbols and values during the reconstructive phase. As Skowronek points out, reconstructive presidents routinely frame their "commitments as the restoration of original values." Yet a glance at the rhetoric employed by reconstructive presidents makes clear that appeals to universality are frequently (and somewhat paradoxically) combined with us-versus-them appeals to group interest. Consider, for example, Andrew Jackson's support for the "farmers, mechanics, and laborers" against "rich and powerful" financial interests in his 1832 bank veto message or FDR's support for the "workers" and "wage earners" against their wealthy "employers and [conservative] politicians," whose "hatred" he famously "welcome[ed]" in his October 1936 speech at Madison Square Garden. Skowronek, *The Politics Presidents Make*, 38–39. Andrew Jackson, "July 10, 1832: Bank Veto [transcript]," accessed December 7, 2022, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/july-10-1832-bank-veto>. Franklin Roosevelt, "October 31, 1936: Speech at Madison Square Garden," accessed December 7, 2022, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/october-31-1936-speech-madison-square-garden>.

¹⁴See, for example, Geoffrey Kabaservice, *Rule and Ruin: The Downfall of Moderation and the Destruction of the Republican Party* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 1–31; Adam Hilton, *True Blues: The Contentious Transformation of the Democratic Party* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021).

¹⁵Many important studies of parties and ideological change focus almost exclusively on partisan actors while paying scant attention to civil society groups. See, for example, John Gerring, *Party Ideologies in America, 1828–1996* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Verlan Lewis, *Ideas of Power: The Politics of American Party Ideology Development* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019). There is, to be sure, a rapidly growing literature that examines the relationship between party coalition shifts and ideological evolution. Even here, however, the groups of interest—whether the NRA, the CIO, or the NAACP—tend to be core or potential members of a party coalition rather than (as in this article) ostensibly nonpartisan groups in which activists from both parties are represented. See David Karol, *Party Position Change in American Politics: Coalition Management* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson, *The Tea Party and the Remaking of American Conservatism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Hans Noel, *Political Ideologies and Political Parties in America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Daniel Schlozman, *When Movements Anchor Parties: Electoral Alignments in American History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015); Eric Schickler, *Realignment: The Transformation of American Liberalism, 1932–1965* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016); Christopher Baylor, *First to the Party: The Group Origins of*

Such groups may, for example, provide a backchannel for the creation of the informal cross-party alliances that are (or so I shall argue) a virtual precondition for successful entrenchment.¹⁶ Moreover, civil society organizations may be better positioned than explicitly partisan actors to vouch for the legitimacy and public-spiritedness of the ascendant party's program as it faces renewed attacks from the opposition. Core party constituency groups will, of course, argue that attempts to reverse the regime's early achievements are contrary to the public good. And yet the obviously self-interested nature of such claims will render them suspect in the eyes of the electorate. Nonpartisan civil society groups that lack obvious ties to the ascendant party are more likely to be successful in this regard. Favorable pronouncements from such groups can, at least in theory, elevate the regime's core policy commitments above the tumult of ordinary political debate, recasting them as authentic embodiments of broadly shared societal values.

Religious groups may be particularly well suited to the above-mentioned tasks. Although largely ignored in the existing party regime literature, religious elites—particularly those associated with the nation's large, "mainline" Protestant denominations—have historically ranked among the most important arbiters of social and political conflicts.¹⁷ In order to obtain an accurate picture of the processes through which regime formation has historically occurred, it is important to recover the role of religious groups in vouching for—and sometimes contesting—the programmatic aims of ascendant political parties.

2. Mainline Protestants, Economic Policy, and the Party System, 1932–1947

The nation's mainline Protestant churches are rarely mentioned in historical accounts of the Democratic Party regime that lasted from the New Deal through the 1970s, and for a seemingly good reason: Their members leaned Republican. Indeed, mainline denominations such as the Episcopalians and Presbyterians, with their comparatively wealthy memberships, were virtually synonymous with fiscally conservative, socially moderate "country club" Republicanism. (Hence, the popular description of the Episcopal Church as "the Republican party at prayer.")¹⁸ Geographically, the mainline denominations were concentrated

Party Transformations (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018); Sidney M. Milkis and Daniel J. Tichenor, *Rivalry and Reform: Presidents, Social Movements, and the Transformation of American Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019); Sidney Tarrow, *Movements and Parties: Critical Connections in American Political Development* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

¹⁶See, for example, the role of the Committee for Economic Development's (CED) in facilitating cooperation between moderate Republicans and policymakers affiliated with the New Deal-era Democratic regime. Kabaservice, *Rule and Ruin*, 22–23; Mark S. Mizruchi, *The Fracturing of the American Corporate Elite* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 5–6.

¹⁷I use the term "mainline" to refer to the large, comparatively liberal Protestant denominations that joined together in 1908 to form the Federal Council of Churches (FCC). These included the Congregationalists, Episcopalians, Methodists, Presbyterians, Northern Baptists, Disciples of Christ, and some branches of the Lutheran faith. For an example of the mainline churches' power as arbiters of social and political conflict, see Edward J. Blum, *Reforging the White Republic: Race, Religion, and American Nationalism, 1865–1898* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 106–10. Blum documents the role of mainline elites in discrediting Reconstruction and promoting postwar "reconciliation" between North and South—a development that, while arguably contrary to the Republican party's founding ideals, helped ensure its grip on national power.

¹⁸See, for example, Kevin Phillips, *American Theocracy: The Peril and Politics of Radical Religion, Oil, and Borrowed Money in the 21st Century* (New York: Viking, 2006), 371.

in the Northeast and Upper Midwest, both traditional Republican strongholds (though many states in these regions were competitive during the New Deal period).¹⁹ Moreover, the mainline was largely white and, more specifically, WASP-dominated. If the New Deal Democratic coalition in its early years is typically understood as an alliance of working-class Catholics, Jews, “white ethnics,” and white Southerners, then the mainline was its antithesis: middle and upper class, Protestant, and descended from the Puritans.

And yet, a single-minded focus on party registration risks obscuring the extent to which the New Deal regime’s programmatic commitments were rooted in the social teachings of the mainline Protestant churches. The mainline economic vision, which took shape in the years around 1910, was an outgrowth of the theological tradition known as the Social Gospel. Embodied in institutions like the Federal Council of Churches (FCC) and in documents like the “Social Creed of the Churches”—adopted in 1908 at the inaugural meeting of the FCC—the Social Gospel’s most important innovation was to link the saving of souls to the regeneration of society.²⁰ Middle- and upper-class Protestant churchgoers were no longer to content themselves with praying for the lower classes. Rather, God insisted that they prepare the way for his Kingdom by addressing the systemic roots of human suffering, which meant, among other things, enacting old-age pensions, unemployment insurance, and the living wage.²¹

To implement this vision, the FCC, an umbrella organization representing the nation’s largest non-Southern Protestant denominations, formed an industrial department whose leaders generally aligned themselves with organized labor in the struggle to advance state oversight of industry. At roughly the same time, several Protestant denominations, including Congregationalists, Disciples of Christ, Episcopalians, Methodists, and Presbyterians, formed social service agencies or committees and tasked them with formulating policy recommendations on economic matters.²² Although the denominational social service agencies did not always march in lock step with the FCC, the new groups shared a conviction that aggressive state action was needed to relieve the suffering of industrial workers, who might otherwise spurn organized religion altogether.²³

During the 1910s and early 1920s, the FCC and other mainline agencies joined forces with an array of progressive membership groups—from the National Child Labor Committee to the General Federation of Women’s Clubs—to press the case for protective labor legislation.²⁴ And like most of their secular allies,

mainline religious reformers enjoyed somewhat closer ties to the Republicans than the Democrats. (Teddy Roosevelt, who counted the Social Gospel theologians Washington Gladden and Walter Rauschenbusch as inspirations, was a particular favorite of church leaders.)²⁵ This changed during the Depression years, however, when President Herbert Hoover’s reluctance to support fundamental economic reforms pushed mainline leaders towards the Democratic camp. Although usually careful to avoid overt endorsements of the party or its candidates, most mainline agencies found ways to subtly signal their preference for Franklin Roosevelt in the 1932 election.²⁶ Roosevelt, an active Episcopalian, was grateful for the churches’ support, which he found particularly helpful in rebutting charges that his economic program was inspired by Bolshevism. On the campaign trail, he regularly quoted from the FCC’s economic pronouncements; and in 1933, after winning the presidency, he addressed the organization’s twenty-fifth anniversary gathering, where he delivered a speech steeped in the language of the Social Gospel.²⁷

As FDR set about implementing his transformative economic agenda, church leaders threw themselves into the task of mobilizing public support for the New Deal. James Myers, who headed the FCC’s industrial department, organized church-based letter-writing campaigns on behalf of the National Recovery Act (NRA), the Social Security Act, and the National Labor Relations Act.²⁸ Several FCC member denominations, including the Methodists, Northern Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and Disciples of Christ, publicly endorsed the creation of unemployment insurance programs and old-age and disability pensions.²⁹ Numerous Protestant churches throughout the Northeast and Midwest organized “NRA Sundays” to educate churchgoers on the president’s recovery program. And on the West Coast, hundreds of churches formed “Golden Rule Armies,” whose members

Empathy: Why White Protestants Stopped Loving Their Neighbors (New York: Oxford University, 2020), 27–36.

²⁵William R. Hutchison, *Religious Pluralism in America: The Contentious History of a Founding Ideal* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 107–108; Sidney M. Milkis, *Theodore Roosevelt, the Progressive Party, and the Transformation of American Democracy* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009), 112–13, 127, 153.

²⁶On mainline elites’ support for FDR, see Sidney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972), 921–22; William Finley McKee, “The Attitude of the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America to the New Deal: A Study in Social Christianity” (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin, 1954), 87–90. As Ahlstrom points out, the FCC revised its “Social Creed of the Churches” in 1932 to endorse centralized economic planning as a means of combating the Depression. For FDR’s relationship to the Social Gospel, see, for example, Ronald Isetti, “The Moneychangers of the Temple: FDR, American Civil Religion, and the New Deal,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 26 (1996): 678–93; Rogers M. Smith, “The Progressive Seedbed: Claims of American Political Community in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries,” in *The Progressives’ Century: Political Reform, Constitutional Government, and the Modern American State*, ed. Stephen Skowronek, Stephen M. Engel, and Bruce Ackerman (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), 264–88.

²⁷Address of Governor Franklin D. Roosevelt, Naval Armory, Belle Isle Bridge, Detroit Michigan, October 2, 1932,” Master Speech File, 1898–1945, series 1, box 11, FDR Presidential Library and Museum; “Roosevelt Pleads for Justice in Detroit Address,” *New York Times*, October 3, 1932, p. 1; “Roosevelt Rallies Churches to Defend Social Justice,” *Christian Science Monitor*, December 7, 1933, p. 2; “Roosevelt Address to Church Group,” *New York Times*, December 3, 1933, p. 2. Also see Gene Zubovich, *Before the Religious Right: Liberal Protestants, Human Rights, and the Polarization of the United States* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022), 32–33.

²⁸Compton, *The End of Empathy*, 63–76; Zubovich, *Before the Religious Right*, 43–45.

²⁹Raymond H. Hinkel, “Basic Social Pronouncements of Representative Protestant Churches, 1925–1935” (PhD Diss., University of Southern California, 1935), 83, 67, 89, 60; “Episcopalians Ask End of Child Labor,” *New York Times*, May 9, 1934, p. 21; “Episcopal Group Urges a Job Fund,” *New York Times*, October 13, 1934, p. 9; “Church Acts Against War,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 23, 1934, p. 5.

¹⁹Of the mainline denominations that the FCC comprised, only the Methodists, whose Northern and Southern factions had reunited in 1939, and the Presbyterian Church in the United States could claim a strong presence in the South.

²⁰Elias B. Sanford, ed., *Report of the First Meeting of the Federal Council* (New York: Revell Press, 1909), 238–39.

²¹Ibid. Also see Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (New York: Macmillan, 1907); Washington Gladden, *The Tools and the Man: Property and Industry Under Christian Law* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1893); Richard T. Ely, *Social Aspects of Christianity and Other Essays* (New York: Crowell, 1889).

²²Examples include the Congregationalist Department of Labor and Social Service (1910); the Social Service Committee of the Disciples of Christ (1911); the Methodist Federation for Social Service (1907); the Baptist Social Service Commission (1907); the Presbyterian Bureau of Social Service (1903); and the Joint Commission on Social Service of the Protestant Episcopal Church (1911).

²³The fear that the working class was abandoning organized religion was a constant theme in this period. See, for example, Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianizing the Social Order* (New York: Macmillan, 1912), 113–14.

²⁴Robert Moats Miller, *American Protestantism and Social Issues, 1919–1939* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1958), 217–19; John W. Compton, *The End of*

pledged to uphold the NRA's wage and price codes in their personal and professional lives.³⁰

The mainline churches' relationship to the party system evolved again in the immediate postwar years—this time due to the emergence of fissures in the New Deal coalition and the subsequent resurgence of the GOP's conservative wing. The first signs of weakness in the Democratic coalition appeared in the late 1930s when Southern Democrats, sensing that a resurgent labor movement posed a threat to racial segregation, began to defect on labor issues.³¹ New problems emerged in the mid-1940s, including the massive and generally unpopular strike wave of 1946, alarming shortages of meat and other foodstuffs, and credible accusations of corruption in the labor movement. These developments emboldened the GOP's staunchly anti-New Deal conservative wing, which had been marginalized during the World War II years due to its isolationist foreign policy leanings. When Republicans captured unified control of Congress in the 1946 midterms, the conservative wing, led by Ohio Senator Robert A. Taft and backed by a supporting cast of deep-pocketed business groups, including the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, immediately set to work rolling back labor-organizing protections. The result was the Taft-Hartley Act, which became law in 1947 after a Republican-controlled Congress overrode President Harry Truman's veto.³² Democrats could take some comfort in the fact that Truman was narrowly reelected in 1948, but even this positive development was marked by ill omens. Many white Southerners, outraged by the national party's adoption of a civil rights plank, defected to Strom Thurmond's "Dixiecrat" presidential bid, while a smaller leftist faction, disturbed by Truman's hardline stance towards the Soviet Union, backed former Vice President Henry Wallace's campaign.

Not coincidentally, the FCC and other mainline agencies faced increasing external pressures at the precise moment that the Democratic coalition seemed to be in danger of fracturing. During the 1940s, allegations of communist infiltration dogged both the FCC and the denominational social service agencies (and the labor unions with which they were closely aligned), leading to a catastrophic loss of funding and, in some cases, the severing of ties between agencies and their parent denominations.³³ The FCC suffered a further blow when a group of politically

and theologically conservative clergymen formed the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), an ecumenical group created to contest the FCC's claim to be the sole, or at least primary, voice of American Protestantism. Founded in 1942, the NAE did not immediately succeed in driving a wedge between the large Protestant denominations and the FCC, but its widely publicized attacks on the FCC—which frequently amplified the Red-baiting propaganda of the political right—caused further damage to its rival's reputation.³⁴

In response to these developments, mainline leaders launched a major restructuring initiative in the years around 1947. The effort, which was made possible by a sudden postwar uptick in church attendance and donations, proceeded on several fronts simultaneously, but its unifying goals were to (1) increase lay representation in the governing bodies of the major mainline agencies and (2) to improve the financial health of said agencies. In the case of the FCC, the entire organization was folded, along with a handful of formerly independent organizations, into a new umbrella group known as the National Council of Churches (NCC).³⁵ Formally launched at the end of 1950, the NCC represented twenty-nine Protestant denominations—essentially all of the nation's largest denominations, minus the Southern Baptists—and around 35 million church members.³⁶ In contrast to the FCC, whose leadership was dominated by clergymen, the NCC would be governed by a general board whose 250 seats were roughly equally divided between church officials and lay people. In addition, its officers, including its president, were elected at triennial general assemblies whose delegates were selected by the member denominations.

Also in contrast to the FCC, the NCC was immediately flush with cash. Its initial operating budget was approximately \$8 million (or \$86 million in 2022 dollars). Member denominations covered around half this amount, while donations from individuals, foundations, and corporations, as well as payments for services rendered (including royalties), made up the rest. Top executives from Armco Steel, Beech Aircraft, General Mills, General Foods, Firestone Tire and Rubber, Chrysler, Sun Oil, and Cummins Engine headed the organization's initial fundraising drive. The resulting contributions were channeled into one of eight program areas, including evangelistic programs (\$2 million), overseas relief work and refugee programs (\$1.9 million), and domestic economic relief work (\$1.4 million). Initially, only about \$330,000 was dedicated to programs that would "apply Christian principles" to politics and society, but this amount would soon be supplemented by major grants from the Rockefeller Foundation and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO).³⁷

In addition to the founding of the NCC, two other initiatives proved crucial to restoring the ecumenical movement's lost influence and prestige. First, mainline leaders in the late 1940s launched a major expansion of the local church council network.

³⁰Wilbur E. Saunders to James Myers, August 13, 1933, National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America Records, Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia, PA [hereinafter NCC], RG 18, box 52, folder 25; James Myers to John A. Vollenweider, October 26, 1933, NCC, RG 18, box 52, folder 25; John A. Vollenweider to James Myers, September 6, 1933, NCC, RG 18, box 52, folder 25; "Clergy Back N.R.A. Drive," *Los Angeles Times*, September 26, 1933, p. 1; "Drive Endorsed by Roosevelt," *Los Angeles Times*, September 27, 1933, p. 1; "Hair-Cut Price Fight Brewing," *Los Angeles Times*, September 30, 1933, p. 1.

³¹Ira B. Katznelson, *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time* (New York: Liveright, 2013), 389–91; Devin Caughy, *The Unsolid South: Mass Politics and National Representation in a One-Party Enclave* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 95–98; John B. Judis, *The Paradox of American Democracy: Elites, Special Interests, and the Betrayal of Public Trust* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 62–65.

³²On the revival of the conservative business lobby, see Robert Griffith, "Forging America's Postwar Order: Domestic Politics and Political Economy in the Age of Truman," in *The Truman Presidency*, ed. Michael J. Lacey (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 57–89, 65–66; Herman E. Krooss, *Executive Opinion: What Business Leaders Said and Thought, 1920s–1960s* (New York: Doubleday, 1970), 210–17.

³³See, for example, Andrew Preston, *Sword of the Spirit, Shield of Faith* (New York: Anchor Books, 2012), 473–74; David Nelson Duke, *In the Trenches with Jesus and Marx: Harry F. Ward and the Struggle for Social Justice* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2003), 170–72; "Church Council Branded Red by Clergyman," *Los Angeles Times*, May 7, 1947, p. 2.

³⁴On the founding of the NAE, see Daniel Williams, *God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 16–17; Joel A. Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Remaking of American Fundamentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 130–31, 147–50; Compton, *The End of Empathy*, 84–86.

³⁵The organization's rarely used official name was—and still is—the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

³⁶Martin E. Marty, *Modern American Religion*, vol. 3, *Under God, Indivisible, 1941–1960* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 263–266; Robert A. Schneider, "Voice of Many Waters: Church Federation in the Twentieth Century," in *Between the Times: The Travail of the Protestant Establishment in America, 1900–1960*, ed. William R. Hutchison (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 95–121.

³⁷"National Council of Churches, Fiscal Affairs," n.d., <https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph1058437/m1/3>.

The local church council—a professionally staffed organization representing (in theory) all the Protestant churches in a given state or city—performed a range of tasks, from coordinating evangelistic campaigns to advocating on behalf of legislation. In the prewar period, such councils existed only in a handful of large cities, but their numbers exploded in the immediate postwar period when the FCC (and later NCC) began providing logistical assistance to encourage their formation.³⁸ Between 1943 and 1953, the number of professionally staffed state and local church councils more than doubled, increasing from about eighty to more than two hundred. (See Figure 1 below.) The result was the birth of a critical communications network that allowed the NCC and other national Protestant agencies to disseminate policy-focused information in a timely fashion to even the most remote areas of the country (with the exception of the South, whose white religious leaders mostly spurned the church council movement).³⁹

Second, several of the largest Protestant denominations opened policy-focused Washington, DC, offices—as did the NCC. Although most denominations had created “social service” committees or departments in the 1910s, few of these were directly represented in the nation’s capital. Between 1943 and 1948, however, at least six large Protestant denominations launched professionally staffed DC offices. (The NCC opened its Washington office at the time of its founding in 1950.) Typically led by clergymen who were also registered lobbyists, the denominational offices tracked the progress of legislation, advocated on behalf of denomination-supported policies, and dispatched representatives to testify before congressional committees. Although policy stances varied somewhat across denominations, the emergent “church lobby” was generally supportive of the postwar Democratic regime’s programmatic commitments, including boosting funding for foreign aid, social welfare programs, and public education.⁴⁰

3. The Founding of the Department of the Church and Economic Life (DCEL)

During the waning years of the Truman administration, the question of what, if anything, the newly formed NCC should say about economic matters was particularly pressing. Unsurprisingly, some of the NCC’s founding donors, including the arch-conservative Sun Oil heir, J. Howard Pew, hoped to create an ecumenical body that would advocate for libertarian economic policies and adopt a hard line on communism—or, failing that, an organization that would focus on evangelistic efforts and avoid politics altogether.⁴¹ That this did not come to pass was due to the efforts of two men: Charles P. Taft and Cameron Hall. Taft, the brother of Senate Republican Leader Robert Taft, was a card-carrying member of the Republican party’s moderate wing—a fact that

frequently caused tensions between the siblings.⁴² In 1947, during the early stages of the FCC’s rebranding effort, he accepted the presidency of the ecumenical organization, becoming the first lay person to hold this position. Shortly thereafter he joined forces with Hall, a Presbyterian minister who had succeeded James Myers as head of the FCC’s industrial department, to transform the organization’s economic policy arm.

Although the two men were not always of one mind—Hall was an ardent New Dealer with close ties to organized labor, while Taft was sympathetic to complaints that the FCC’s pro-labor activism had robbed it of credibility—they agreed that the group’s economic department was ill-served by the preponderance of theologians and clergymen in its ranks. If the goal was to influence policymakers, then the FCC should staff the department with lay people who were active in economic affairs.⁴³ If a group of genuinely influential business and labor leaders could be brought together under the council’s auspices, Taft and Hall believed, the group might come to be seen as the unofficial “voice of Protestantism on economic life issues,” performing a function akin to that of papal encyclicals for Roman Catholics.⁴⁴

Remarkably, events unfolded almost exactly as Taft and Hall predicted. Working closely with Rockefeller Foundation president Chester I. Barnard and Studebaker CEO (and later Ford Foundation president) Paul G. Hoffman, the pair fashioned a 125-person organization called the Department of the Church and Economic Life (DCEL). At the official launch of the NCC in late 1950, the DCEL was designated to serve as the NCC’s economic policy arm, with Taft as chairman and Hall as executive director. The DCEL’s members were equally divided between representatives of business, labor, agriculture, government, the ministry, and the academy. All were nominally Protestant, and each denomination was represented roughly in proportion to its share of the NCC’s total membership. More to the point, the group’s members were among the most important players in their respective spheres. They were executives from General Electric, General Foods, Goodrich, Standard Oil, Cummins Engine, and other corporations; labor leaders including CIO president Walter Reuther and AFL research director Boris Shishkin; and academics such as the economist Kenneth Boulding and the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. Members from the world of politics included Taft (the 1952 GOP nominee for governor of Ohio), Senator Paul Douglas (D-IL), Roy Blough of the White House Council of Economic Advisors, and Charles T. Douds of the National Labor Relations Board. In addition, Arthur Flemming, who filled several high-level posts in the Truman and Eisenhower administrations, worked closely with the DCEL while serving as the NCC’s vice president with responsibility for social and economic programs. (Table 1 displays a partial list of the DCEL’s members.)

From January 1951 through the early 1960s, the DCEL’s members met in New York three times a year for the purpose of formulating policy statements; commissioning academic studies; and planning educational programs for businesses, unions, and local congregations. The group was afforded a surprising degree of autonomy. NCC leaders allowed it to publish books, pamphlets, and other “study materials” with little oversight from the NCC’s

³⁸Henry J. Pratt, *The Liberalization of American Protestantism: A Case Study in Complex Organizations* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1972), 125–26.

³⁹The church council network played a particularly critical role in mobilizing white religious support for the 1964 Civil Rights Act. See, for example, James F. Findlay, *Church People in the Struggle: The National Council of Churches and the Black Freedom Movement, 1950–1970* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 56–60; Compton, *The End of Empathy*, 169–98.

⁴⁰Luke Eugene Ebersole, *Church Lobbying in the Nation’s Capital* (New York: Macmillan, 1951), 24–43; Kenneth Dole, “Capital is Becoming Religious Hub,” *Washington Post*, January 3, 1954, p. M11.

⁴¹Elizabeth A. Fones-Wolf, *Selling Free Enterprise: The Business Assault on Labor and Liberalism, 1945–1960* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 238–39; Pratt, *The Liberalization of American Protestantism*, 88–89.

⁴²See, for example, Henry C. Segal, “The Taft Brothers of Ohio: A Study in Contrasts,” *New York Times*, November 18, 1951, p. E9.

⁴³Richard P. Proethig, “Cameron Hall, Economic Life, and the Ministry of the Laity,” *American Presbyterians* 72 (1994): 33–47, 39–40; Zubovich, *Before the Religious Right*, 261–62.

⁴⁴Proethig, “Cameron Hall,” 36–37, 38.



Figure 1. Growth of Protestant Church Council Network, 1943–1953.

Sources: Data on council locations compiled from Benson Y. Landis, ed., *Yearbook of American Churches* (Lebanon, PA: Sowers Printing, 1943); *Yearbook of American Churches* (New York: National Council of Churches, 1953).

board or executive officers. Formal policy pronouncements were another matter, however. Once approved by the DCEL, they were forwarded to the NCC's general board, which possessed ultimate authority to speak for the NCC. Although board approval was usually a formality, it was necessary for pronouncements to become part of the NCC's official platform—and thus to validate the DCEL's claim to be the economic “voice” of Protestantism writ large.⁴⁵

For the first year and a half of its existence, the DCEL generated few headlines. It debated draft statements on inflation and work stoppages in the defense industry, but negotiations over the precise wording of these pronouncements dragged on for months with little progress.⁴⁶ That the DCEL was relatively

quiet in 1951 and early 1952 was likely because the group's business members, who were mostly moderate Republicans, were reluctant to sign onto left-leaning policy statements at a time when the incumbent Democratic president's approval ratings were in freefall. Although many DCEL members, including Taft, Walter Williams, and Paul G. Hoffman, privately supported many aspects of the New Deal and Fair Deal, they were also deeply invested in the success of Eisenhower's presidential campaign. Williams and Hoffman, in fact, led the Citizens for

⁴⁵Cameron P. Hall to Members of the General Committee, May 14, 1952, Irwin-Sweeney-Miller Family Collection, Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis, IN [hereinafter ISM], box 308, folder 1.

⁴⁶William Adams Brown, Jr. to Charles P. Taft, December 12, 1951, ISM, box 307, folder 10; “Corrections and Additions to Statement on Inflation and the Christian Ethic,” March 3, 1951, ISM, box 307, folder 9; Cameron P. Hall to Members of the General Committee, April 26, 1951, ISM, box 307, folder 9; Minutes of the General Committee Meeting of the Department of the Church and Economic Life, April 23–24, 1954, p. 2, ISM, box 308, folder 4; Minutes of the General Committee Meeting of the Department of the Church and Economic Life, October 3–4, 1952, ISM, box 308, folder 1.

Table 1. Selected Members of the Department of the Church and Economic Life (DCEL)
 () = Number of meetings attended between January 1951 and April 1953 (out of eight total meetings)

Members	Employment	Denomination
Business Members		
Chester I. Barnard (0)	NJ Bell; Rockefeller Foundation	Congregational
W. Howard Chase (4)	General Foods	Reformed
John N. Hart (4)	Goodrich Rubber	Congregational
S. Guernsey Jones (1)	Banker	Congregational
J. Irwin Miller (0)	Cummins Engine Co.	Disciples of Christ
J. Howard Pew (0)	Sun Oil	Presbyterian
Frank W. Pierce (5)	Standard Oil (NJ)	Congregational
Wesley F. Rennie (1)	Comm. for Econ. Dev.	Methodist
Noel Sargent (3)	NAM	Episcopalian
John A. Stephens (2)	U.S. Steel	Presbyterian USA
J. Stanford Smith (3)	General Electric	Methodist
W. Walter Williams (1)*	Continental Mortgage	Congregational
Robert E. Wilson (0)	Standard Oil (IN)	Presbyterian USA
Labor Members		
John P. Busarello (0)	United Mine Workers	Presbyterian USA
Nelson Cruikshank (1)	AFL	Methodist
Tilford Dudley (5)	CIO-PAC	Congregational
Jesse L. Gallagher (0)	AFL	Methodist
George T. Guernsey (2)	CIO	Methodist
Chan Harbour (4)	Nat. Fed. of Post Office Clerks	Methodist
George M. Harrison (0)	Brotherhood of Railway Clerks	American Baptist
Forrest V. Heckman (2)	Garment Workers; AFL	Congregational
John Ramsay (5)	CIO	Presbyterian USA
Victor Reuther (0)	CIO	Methodist
Walter Reuther (0)	CIO	Lutheran-Missouri Synod
Boris Shishkin (3)	AFL	Greek Orthodox
Ellis Van Riper (0)	Transport Workers' Union	Episcopalian
Al Whitehouse (5)	USW; AFL	Disciples of Christ
Government Members		
Roy Blough (1)	W.H. Council of Econ. Advisors	Brethren
John H. Davis (1)	Asst. Ag. Secretary	Disciples of Christ
Charles T. Douds (6)	Nat. Labor Relations Board	Methodist
Paul Douglas (0)	U.S. Senator	Society of Friends
Clifford R. Hope (0)	U.S. Congressman	Presbyterian USA
Lois B. Hunter (4)	Dep. Ins. Commissioner, N.Y.	Presbyterian USA
Charles P. Taft (5)	Attorney, GOP Sen. candidate	Episcopalian
Jerry Voorhis (7)	Former U.S. Congressman	Episcopalian
Academic Members		
Kenneth Boulding (3)	Economics professor	Society of Friends
John C. Bennett (6)	Theology professor	Congregational
Walter G. Muelder (1)	Dean, Boston U. School of Theology	Methodist

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued.)

Members	Employment	Denomination
Reinhold Niebuhr (3)	Professor of Applied Christianity	Evangelical and Reformed
Irwin Trotter (3)	Theology professor	Methodist
Kenneth Underwood (4)	Professor of Social Ethics	Disciples of Christ
Clergy/Religious Org. Members		
Sadie T.M. Alexander (1)	Attorney; civil rights advocate	A.M.E.
G. Bromley Oxnam (0)	Bishop	Methodist
Florence Partridge (1)	Director of Women's Work	Evangelical and Reformed
Henry Knox Sherrill (0)	Presiding bishop	Episcopalian
Esther Stamats (5)	United Church Women	Episcopalian

Source: Department of the Church and Economic Life, "Study of Attendance at Eight Meetings," National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America Records, Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia, PA, RG4, box 1, folder 21.

Eisenhower organization, and they had little incentive to push back against attacks on the post–New Deal welfare state when such arguments seemed to be resonating with the public.⁴⁷

In the fall of 1952, however, two developments altered the strategic incentives facing the DCEL's moderate business representatives. First, the GOP takeover of Congress and the presidency initiated an intraparty struggle between the Robert Taft–led conservative wing of the Republican Party, which was committed to weakening the welfare state and labor-organizing rights, and the party's moderate wing, which viewed the welfare state and (a modicum of) labor-organizing protections as essential to continued economic prosperity.⁴⁸ With conservatives in the administration and Congress now in a position to act on their policy priorities, the question of whether the welfare state was consistent with "Christian" or "American" values was no longer rhetorical; to remain silent was now to aid conservatives and their interest group allies in their bid to roll back the New Deal.

Second, and relatedly, a group of conservative Republican businessmen led by J. Howard Pew launched a campaign to curtail the DCEL's influence within the bureaucratic structure of the NCC. Specifically, Pew won approval from the NCC leadership to form a National Lay Committee whose ostensible purpose was to serve as a link between the NCC bureaucracy and rank-and-file Protestant churchgoers. He then staffed the new organization with a group of right-leaning executives and labor leaders and began using it as a bludgeon against the DCEL.⁴⁹ What lay people most wanted, according to Pew and his allies on the Lay Committee, was for left-leaning religious bodies to stop issuing policy pronouncements on economic questions. If the NCC did not heed this advice, he warned, then the Lay Committee's members would cease their financial support of the NCC.⁵⁰

⁴⁷See Robert M. Collins, *The Business Response to Keynes, 1929–1964* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 152; Daniel J. Galvin, *Presidential Party Building: Dwight D. Eisenhower to George W. Bush* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 52.

⁴⁸See, for example, Robert Griffith, "Dwight D. Eisenhower and the Corporate Commonwealth," *American Historical Review* 87 (1982): 87–122, 98–103; M. Stephen Weatherford, "Presidential Leadership and Ideological Consistency: Were There 'Two Eisenhowers' in Economic Policy?" *Studies in American Political Development* 16 (2002): 111–37.

⁴⁹NCC leaders did insist on placing a handful of moderate DCEL members, including Charles Taft and J. Irwin Miller, on Pew's Lay Committee. However, it does not appear that Taft, Miller, or other moderates played an active role in that committee's activities.

The combined effect of the Republican sweep and Pew's bullying behavior was to drive the DCEL's moderates into a fragile alliance with its left-leaning academics, ministers, and labor leaders. Although none of the parties fully trusted the motives of the others, each agreed that cooperation was necessary to prevent Pew from hijacking the NCC bureaucracy for his own purposes—and also to prevent a conservative victory in the wider struggle for control of the Eisenhower administration's economic agenda. The group's October 1952 meeting thus marked the beginning of a two-year period of intense activity during which the DCEL emerged as a major voice in opposition to the GOP's conservative wing and its efforts to roll back core components of the New Deal and Fair Deal.

4. Reframing the Welfare State: The DCEL's Major Initiatives, 1953–1954

During the early years of the Eisenhower presidency, the DCEL's members channeled their energies into three separate initiatives. The first, which culminated in late summer 1954, centered on drafting a formal statement of economic principles that would put the NCC on record as opposing cuts to the welfare state and attempts to further weaken labor-organizing rights. The second was a series of popular books, published between the spring of 1953 and the summer of 1954, that laid out moral, religious, and social scientific arguments for a strong welfare state and robust but "responsible" unions. The third was the annual Labor Sunday message, released annually in early September, which distilled the group's theological arguments and policy recommendations down to their essence with the aim of disseminating them to the widest possible audience.

In each case, the major challenge was to develop a compelling rebuttal to the increasingly popular claim that the policy achievements of the New Deal and Fair Deal years were way stations on the road to communism. The allegation was as at least old as the 1932 campaign, but it gained new purchase in the postwar years thanks to the increased salience of the communist threat, both at home and abroad. As early as 1943, Friedrich Hayek had scored a runaway bestseller with *The Road to Serfdom*, which posited a slippery slope from liberal social welfare programs to

⁵⁰Pratt, *The Liberalization of American Protestantism*, 88–89; Fones-Wolf, *Selling Free Enterprise*, 239; Compton, *The End of Empathy*, 118–19.

Soviet-style totalitarianism. Hayek's postwar admirers pushed his argument to its logical conclusion, claiming that Truman's Fair Deal, with its promises of universal health insurance and other expanded social welfare programs, marked the point of no return for American capitalism. As former President Hoover put the point in a much-publicized 1949 speech, Democrats were "blissfully driving [the nation] down the back road" to collectivism by way of "the welfare state"—a label that was merely "a disguise for the totalitarian state by the route of [government] spending."⁵¹ Hoover's message was amplified by NAM and other conservative interest groups, who undertook a major investment in book and magazine publishing for the purpose of convincing Americans that social welfare programs were, by definition, incompatible with individual initiative and freedom.⁵²

In response to this line of attack, many liberal supporters of the New Deal ceased defending the welfare state in terms of class interests—a framing that seemed to confirm the charge of creeping communism—and began instead to describe it as a guarantor of social stability and a bulwark *against* totalitarianism. The book usually credited with initiating this shift is Arthur Schlesinger Jr.'s 1949 bestseller, *The Vital Center*.⁵³ But Schlesinger's argument was not original. Rather, it was inspired by the insights of his friend—and DCEL member—Reinhold Niebuhr, who had earlier built a pragmatic but theologically grounded case for the liberal democratic welfare state in *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (1944). Niebuhr's central claim was that the ideologies of the left (communism) and right (laissez-faire capitalism) both rested on a flawed conception of human nature. Human beings were driven by selfish desires, including a desire to exert power over others. But they were not rational utility maximizers. Rather, blinded by pride, they often pursued their aims in fundamentally irrational ways that defied the expectations of communist theorists and libertarian economists alike. In the long run, only governments that took the selfish and irrational aspects of human nature (what Niebuhr called "original sin") into account were likely to endure. In practice, this meant that democratic nations should minimize human suffering via the creation of robust welfare states while simultaneously placing constitutional limits on the powers of officials who might otherwise ensconce themselves as an unaccountable ruling class (as Niebuhr believed had occurred in the Soviet Union).⁵⁴

Niebuhr's "neo-orthodox" defense of the liberal democratic welfare state, which was equally attractive to labor leaders and moderate Republican executives, provided the theological foundation for nearly all the DCEL's major pronouncements on economic affairs. Most obviously, it underpinned the group's effort to draft a formal statement of economic principles, which began in earnest in October 1952. At that month's meeting, the group

debated a draft statement, mostly written by Niebuhr's friend and colleague John C. Bennett, entitled "Basic Principles and Assumptions of Economic Life."⁵⁵ The document implored the nation's Protestants to advocate for "a minimum standard of living ... sufficient for the health of all and for the protection of the weaker members of society ... against disadvantages beyond their control"; for reasonable "standards of living, hours of labor, stability of employment, [and] provision of housing"; for a reduction of "inequalities in the distribution of wealth and income"; and for programs to combat "racial discrimination" in employment. It also praised the labor movement as "an instrument for the securing of greater economic justice and ... a source of dignity ... for workers." These positions were justified not only because they were consistent with Protestant social teachings but also because they were well calculated to preserve democratic institutions and social stability. Indeed, the major lesson of the Depression and World War II years was that "there can be no Christian sanction for one-sided support of either economic individualism or economic collectivism." Rather, "Christians should ... seek the economic institutions which will in a given set of circumstances serve most fully ... the positive values of justice and order and freedom."⁵⁶

The "Basic Principles" statement became an immediate flash-point in the battle to control the economic message of the nation's largest ecumenical group. In February 1953, shortly after Eisenhower's swearing-in, the DCEL formally approved it with the recommendation that it be adopted as a formal pronouncement of the NCC. Hopes of quick action by the NCC's general board were thwarted, however, when J. Howard Pew implicitly threatened to withdraw his financial support for the organization.⁵⁷ In response, the NCC's general secretary, Samuel McCrea Cavert, asked Hall and Taft to sand down passages that explicitly endorsed the welfare state.⁵⁸ But while the DCEL's leaders agreed to consider revisions, they refused to back down entirely. Instead, they formed a committee to revise the document, which was led by Wesley Rennie, the executive director of the Committee for Economic Development (CED) and a part-time economic advisor to the president.⁵⁹ In the end, Rennie and the other committee members agreed to incorporate new language on the communist threat and capitalism's role in raising living standards. However, they also retained most of the passages that had offended Pew and even added new language denouncing the view "held by some sincere Christians that a maximum of individual economic freedom will by itself create the economic conditions that contribute to a good society."⁶⁰

The debate over the proposed statement came to a head in the spring and summer of 1954, just as congressional Republicans were locked in a bitter feud over the future of Social Security. In his 1954 State of the Union Address, Eisenhower had

⁵¹"On 'Last Mile to Collectivism,' Hoover, at 75, Warns Country," *Washington Post*, August 11, 1949, p. 1.

⁵²As the political scientist Sigmund Neumann observed in 1950, the entire panoply of conservative arguments against the New Deal seemed to have collapsed into a single claim: that the "welfare state" was "a steppingstone toward" totalitarianism. Sigmund Neumann, "Trends Towards Statism in Europe," *Proceedings of the American Academy of Political Science* 24 (1950): 13–23, 15.

⁵³Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *The Vital Center* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1949).

⁵⁴Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of Its Traditional Defense* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1944). Schlesinger openly acknowledged Niebuhr's influence. See, for example, the introduction to the 1998 reissue of *The Vital Center*. Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1998), xii–xiii.

⁵⁵Minutes of the General Committee Meeting of the Department of the Church and Economic Life, October 3–4, 1952. For Bennett's authorship of the statement, see Fones-Wolf, *Selling Free Enterprise*, 241.

⁵⁶The National Council of Churches, Department of the Church and Economic Life, "Basic Christian Principles and Assumptions for Economic Life," J. Howard Pew Papers, Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, DE [hereinafter JHP], box 146.

⁵⁷J. Howard Pew to Samuel McCrea Cavert, April 2, 1953, NCC, RG 4, box 1, folder 21.

⁵⁸Samuel McCrea Cavert to Cameron P. Hall, April 8, 1953, NCC, RG 4, box 1, folder 21.

⁵⁹Minutes of the General Committee Meeting of the Department of the Church and Economic Life, October 2–3, 1953, ISM, box 308, folder 3.

⁶⁰Minutes of the General Committee Meeting of the Department of the Church and Economic Life, April 23–24, 1954.

disappointed conservatives by confirming his support for a significant expansion of the program.⁶¹ Legislation to this effect was soon working its way through Republican-controlled committees, but conservative lawmakers, backed by NAM and the U.S. Chamber, were simultaneously pushing legislation designed to undercut the program's funding mechanism.⁶² For the handful of NCC officials who held posts in the Eisenhower administration—a group that included Flemming (director of Defense Mobilization), Harold Stassen (director of the Foreign Operations Administration), W. Howard Chase (assistant secretary of Commerce), and W. Walter Williams (undersecretary of Commerce)—the stakes of the “Basic Principles” debate could not have been clearer. Failure to secure a strong pro-welfare-state statement would almost certainly embolden the GOP's conservative wing. Conversely, a statement declaring support for Social Security and other domestic social welfare programs seemed likely to reinforce Ike's moderate tendencies while also sanctifying his centrist economic agenda as consistent with the social teachings of the nation's largest Protestant denominations. Hence, in April 1954, the DCEL voted to again forward the “Basic Principles” to the NCC's general board and to send notice that there would be no further revisions.⁶³ Although it was initially unclear whether NCC executives would risk further alienating the Pew forces by scheduling a vote, the retirement that spring of Cavert, the NCC's general secretary, created an opening.⁶⁴ By June, Flemming had successfully placed the statement on the agenda for the general board's September 1954 meeting—a move that all but ensured its adoption.⁶⁵

Final approval of the “Basic Principles” statement came in mid-September 1954, a few days *after* Eisenhower signed that year's major expansion of Social Security into law.⁶⁶ Because the statement had been in wide circulation since late spring, however, the near-certainty of its adoption by the NCC's left-leaning general board may have given administration moderates ammunition in the closing weeks of the Social Security debate.⁶⁷ Perhaps more importantly, the statement's adoption generated a flood of press coverage, nearly all of which cast a beatific glow over Eisenhower's domestic agenda. The *New York Times* and *Washington Post* featured front-page accounts, and the *Times* reprinted the 4,000-word document in its entirety.⁶⁸ These stories

⁶¹Weatherford, “Presidential Leadership,” 127.

⁶²*Ibid.*, 126–27; Robert C. Lieberman, “Political Time and Policy Coalitions: Structure and Agency in Presidential Power,” in *Presidential Power: Forging the Presidency for the Twentieth Century*, ed. Robert Y. Shapiro, Martha Joyn Kumar, and Lawrence R. Jacobs (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 274–310, 283–85.

⁶³Minutes of the General Committee Meeting of the Department of the Church and Economic Life, April 23–24, 1954.

⁶⁴Harold Edward Fey, “Cavert Honored on Retirement,” *Christian Century* 71 (1954): 407.

⁶⁵Cameron P. Hall to Members of the Department of the Church and Economic Life, June 24, 1954, ISM, box 308, folder 4.

⁶⁶The document's final title was “Christian Principles and Assumptions for Economic Life.” Compton, *The End of Empathy*, 123–25; George Dugan, “Church Council Sets Social Code,” *New York Times*, September 16, 1954, p. 1; Joseph A. Loftus, “President Signs Law Extending Social Security to 10,000,000,” *New York Times*, September 2, 1954, p. 1.

⁶⁷As early as June 1954, the NCC's General Board had approved a Labor Sunday message—to be released to the public on Labor Day weekend—that summarized virtually all the key points of the “Basic Principles” statement. This likely erased any remaining doubts that the statement was destined for approval. Cameron P. Hall to Members of the Department of the Church and Economic Life, June 24, 1954, ISM, box 308, folder 4; *Labor Sunday Message, 1954*, [pamphlet] ISM, box 308, folder 4.

⁶⁸Dugan, “Church Council Sets Social Code”; “Norms Adopted to Guide Christians,” *New York Times*, September 16, 1954, p. 26; “Church Code of Economic Ethics Voted,” *Washington Post and Times Herald*, September 16, 1954, p. 1. Also see, “An Enlightened

lauded the NCC—and, by implication, the president—for charting “a sensible middle course between economic anarchy ... and collectivism” and for promoting “a responsible free enterprise system” as the Christian alternative to the totalizing ideologies of left and right.⁶⁹ In policy terms, the major takeaway was that the NCC had endorsed the principle of “a minimum standard of living” for “the weaker members of society” as well as the right of “the able-bodied” to protection “against hazards beyond their control.”⁷⁰ Coming so soon after the president had signed legislation extending Social Security benefits to ten million new workers—and raising benefits for millions already covered—such language could only have been interpreted as bestowing the churches' blessing on what the *Times* called “the most significant achievement of the Administration in the 1954 session of Congress.”⁷¹

Securing the adoption of the “Basic Principles” statement was arguably the DCEL's greatest achievement during the early years of the Eisenhower administration. But the group also advanced the neo-orthodox case for protecting the welfare state in other venues, including a series of popular books. Funded by a \$225,000 grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, the Church and Economic Life book series consisted of several titles authored or coauthored by prominent academics and journalists.⁷² The first volume, entitled *Goals of Economic Life*, arrived in bookstores in March 1953, shortly after Eisenhower's swearing-in. Featuring contributions from a long list of prominent academics—including Niebuhr, Bennett, and economists such as Frank Knight, Kenneth Boulding, and John Maurice Clark—each chapter addressed a specific empirical or ethical question concerning the contemporary economy. The authors were free to develop their own arguments, but drafts were submitted to the DCEL's members, who offered suggestions for revision.⁷³ Summarizing the book's major theme, Niebuhr's concluding chapter declared that “the healthiest democracies of the Western world have preserved or regained their social and economic health by using political power to redress the most obvious imbalances in economic society, to protect social values to which the market is indifferent, and to prevent or to mitigate the periodic crises to which a free economy seems subject.”⁷⁴

Goals of Economic Life received wide press coverage; it was the subject of a *Times* article and a national NBC Radio Roundtable discussion, for example.⁷⁵ Yet the book's influence paled in comparison to that of a subsequent volume in the series. Authored by the journalists Marquis Childs and Douglass Cater, *Ethics in a Business Society* appeared in March 1954, just as the congressional debate over Social Security expansion was nearing its climax. Deviating from their assigned task, which was to synthesize the

Try,” *Christian Science Monitor*, September 17, 1954, p. 22; “Church Group Adopts Code on Economics,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 16, 1954, p. 14; “Seeking the Good Life,” *Washington Post and Times Herald*, September 19, 1954, p. B4.

⁶⁹“Seeking the Good Life”; Dugan, “Church Council Sets Social Code.”

⁷⁰“Church Code of Economic Ethics Voted.”

⁷¹Loftus, “President Signs Law Extending Social Security.”

⁷²“A Report by the Staff of the Study Program under the First Rockefeller Grant,” p. 2, ISM, box 308, folder 2.

⁷³*Ibid.*

⁷⁴Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Christian Faith and the Economic Life of Liberal Society,” in *Goals of Economic Life*, ed. A. Dudley Ward (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1953), 433–60, 436, 441.

⁷⁵George Dugan, “Church Study Due on Economic Life,” *New York Times*, February 24, 1952, p. 66; “The Goals of Economic Life: An NBC Radio Discussion by John Bennett, Kermit Eby, Noel G. Sargent, and Charles P. Taft,” *University of Chicago Roundtable* 778 (1953): 1–11.

previous volumes in the series, Childs and Cater penned a hard-hitting critique of the GOP right's economic philosophy. They attacked several of Eisenhower's advisors by name, alleging that Treasury Secretary George M. Humphrey, Commerce Secretary Sinclair Weeks, and other administration conservatives had failed to grasp the fundamental policy lesson of the past two decades, which was that only a "mixed economy in which the tradition of freedom and the tradition of social responsibility are kept in healthy balance" could deliver lasting prosperity.⁷⁶ Following an initial print run of 100,000 copies, *Ethics in Business Society* went through five additional printings between 1954 and 1962.⁷⁷ Like other books in the Church and Economic Life series, it was widely and positively covered in the press. In some cases, favorable coverage was engineered by the DCEL itself, as when one of its members, Illinois Senator Paul Douglas, secured the job of reviewing the book for the *New York Times*.⁷⁸

A final vehicle through which the DCEL articulated its Niebuhrian defense of the welfare state was the annual Labor Sunday message. The Labor Sunday tradition dated to the early twentieth century, when representatives of the Federal Council of Churches (FCC) had designated the Sunday before Labor Day as a day for addressing the concerns of working-class people (who, it was feared, were beginning to abandon organized religion).⁷⁹ The task of authoring and distributing the Labor Sunday message fell to the DCEL at the time of the NCC's launch in 1951. Every summer a subcommittee would draft—or recruit a well-known religious figure to draft—a brief message offering a condensed version of the group's recent pronouncements, complete with supporting biblical references. After review by the DCEL's members, the message was distributed in pamphlet form to Protestant congregations throughout the country, who were encouraged to incorporate it into Sunday services. It was also broadcast over the radio in most media markets and frequently reprinted in major newspapers.⁸⁰

During Eisenhower's first term, Labor Sunday messages typically stressed two themes. First, social welfare programs were not steppingstones on the path to communism but genuine embodiments of longstanding Protestant social teachings. Second, the welfare state offered the surest defense against anarchy and disorder, which were the true handmaidens of totalitarianism. The 1953 message—penned when there was still some uncertainty about Ike's position on Social Security—declared that "Social security is no luxury in a highly industrialized society. It is both Christian and practical to assist the sick, the crippled, the aged, and the young. Neglect of large groups of people who cannot help themselves invites the breakdown of society and violates a principle from which [our nation] draws its substance."⁸¹ The following year's message, released the same month as the "Basic Principles" statement and Eisenhower's signing of the 1954 Social Security expansion, merged Niebuhr's theological

perspective with language drawn from FDR's "four freedoms" address, declaring that "freedom from want, whether want is caused by sickness, old age, or unemployment, is important both for the well-being of its members and the stability of society," and that "wide contrast in the security of different groups" of Americans was incompatible with the development of "Christian humanistic relationships."⁸² In not so many words: It was the opponents of the New Deal order, not its supporters, who were flirting with godless social theories and threatening to disrupt an era of relative peace and prosperity.

Did the DCEL's publications and pronouncements exert a measurable influence on politicians, policymakers, or the wider public? The group's materials were sometimes cited on the campaign trail. In 1956, for example, numerous pro-labor candidates used DCEL study materials to attack proposed "right-to-work" laws, which were a pivotal issue in several of that fall's races.⁸³ Explicit references were less common in 1954 and 1955, but the extent to which Ike's speechwriters—some of whom had connections to the NCC—drew on the arguments of NCC tracts is nonetheless noteworthy.⁸⁴ In his 1955 State of the Union Address, for example, Eisenhower listed Social Security expansion first in a list of domestic accomplishments, noting that while he would prefer to allow citizens to fulfill their "aspirations ... without government interference," state intervention in the economy was sometimes necessary to provide citizens with "recognition and respect" and to help them "give full expression to [their] God-given talents and abilities." Four months earlier, the NCC had warned of the dangers of a "thoroughgoing collectivism" while also stressing that "some use of government in relation to economic activities" was necessary to protect the "dignity and possibilities of all persons" and to "provide the environment in which human freedom can flourish." In the same speech, Eisenhower stressed that his economic program aimed to raise Americans' "material standard of living," not so they could "accumulate possessions" but to create "an environment in which families may live meaningful and happy lives." Or as the NCC had earlier put it, nations blessed with "a rising standard of living" should not direct their energies toward "the acquisition and enjoyment of material things" but should instead ensure that economic policies "serve[d] human need" and exerted a positive "impact on the family."⁸⁵

Over the course of 1953 and 1954, Eisenhower apparently came to view the NCC's leaders as ideological allies whose implicit support for his domestic agenda promised to insulate his administration from critics on both the left (labor leaders) and right (conservative Republicans). He may also have been grateful for the NCC's public campaign against Joseph McCarthy and red-baiting congressional investigators, an effort that culminated in late 1953 and early 1954 just as investigators were turning their fire on the administration.⁸⁶ Whatever the

⁷⁶*Labor Sunday Message, 1954* [pamphlet], ISM, box 308, folder 4.

⁷⁷James V. Pratt to Eugene Carson Blake, October 24, 1956, NCC, RG 4, box 16, folder 22; Roy G. Ross to James V. Pratt, October 30, 1956, NCC, RG 4, box 16, folder 22; Compton, *The End of Empathy*, 140–42.

⁷⁸See Gary Scott Smith, *Faith and the Presidency: From George Washington to George W. Bush* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 239–40; Merlin Gustafson, "The Religious Role of the President," *Midwest Journal of Political Science* 14 (1970): 708–22, 717–19.

⁷⁹Dwight D. Eisenhower, "Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union," January 6, 1955, The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/annual-message-the-congress-the-state-the-union-12>; "Norms Adopted to Guide Christians."

⁸⁰See, for example, Minutes of the Committee on American Freedom, December 9, 1953, NCC RG 4, box 3, folder 33; "Statement on Behalf of the National Council of

⁷⁶Marquis W. Childs and Douglass Cater, *Ethics in a Business Society* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1953), 134.

⁷⁷For the size of the initial printing, see "A Report by the Staff of the Study Program under the First Rockefeller Grant," p. 2.

⁷⁸Paul H. Douglas, "Bread Is Not Enough," *New York Times Book Review*, April 11, 1954, p. BR 16. Douglas's membership in the DCEL was not mentioned in the paper.

⁷⁹The origins of Labor Sunday are discussed in Compton, *The End of Empathy*, 34–35.

⁸⁰See, for example, "Labor Sunday Message," *New York Times*, August 29, 1953, p. 18; "Church Council Lauds Gains in Labor Relations," *Washington Post*, August 29, 1953, p. 13; "Minutes of the Committee on the Annual Labor Sunday Message," ISM, box 308, folder 3.

⁸¹Revised Draft of 1953 Labor Sunday Message," ISM, box 308, folder 2.

reason, Eisenhower began to cultivate a close relationship with the NCC at the precise moment when Arthur Flemming, Harold Stassen, and other administration moderates were working through the organization to build support for their preferred policies. In addition to holding regular meetings with NCC executives at the White House—presumably at the behest of Flemming and Stassen—the president began to circulate NCC position papers to his staff.⁸⁷ He also increasingly sought out opportunities to appear with NCC officials in public. In August 1953, he addressed a convention of the United Church Women, an NCC subsidiary, in Atlantic City.⁸⁸ Three months later, accompanied by several cabinet members, he spoke to a luncheon meeting of the NCC's general board.⁸⁹ Then, in August 1954, he joined numerous NCC officials at the second assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Evanston, Illinois.⁹⁰ Finally, in May 1955 a delegation from the United Church Men—another NCC subsidiary—traveled to the White House, where they presented the president with a special “Layman of the Year” citation.⁹¹

Congressional conservatives, predictably, were less than pleased by Ike's sudden affinity for religious organizations with left-of-center reputations. Some went so far as to complain that the president had turned his domestic agenda over to the NCC and other “social equality groups.”⁹² Politically conservative religious leaders were equally unhappy. Carl McIntire, the radio preacher and NCC critic who headed the fundamentalist American Council of Churches, lamented that Ike had joined forces with liberal ecumenical groups like the NCC and WCC “to the harm and discredit” of conservative believers everywhere.⁹³

5. The DCEL and the Protestant Grassroots

Each of the DCEL's three major initiatives during the 1953–54 period served to reframe the policy achievements of the New Deal and Fair Deal years not as victories in an ongoing class struggle but as essential components of an ethical society. This argument gained added force whenever its parent organization, the NCC, partnered with Jewish and Catholic organizations to issue policy-oriented pronouncements, as it sometimes did.⁹⁴ But religious groups were not alone in making the case against the libertarian economic vision of the GOP's resurgent right wing. Indeed, as right-wing critics of the NCC frequently pointed out, the organization was but a single node in a larger, mostly secular network of center-left organizations—including the

Committee for Economic Development (CED), Americans for Democratic Action (ADA), and the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations—whose leaders' shared economic ideals included support for the welfare state, powerful but “responsible” labor unions, Keynesian approaches to monetary and fiscal policy, firm opposition to communism, and robust foreign aid programs.⁹⁵ The overlap in membership between the DCEL and its secular allies was extensive. DCEL members in the early 1950s included the president (W. Walter Williams), past president (Paul G. Hoffman), and executive director (Wesley Rennie) of the CED; the presidents of the Ford (Hoffman) and Rockefeller (Chester I. Barnard) Foundations; numerous board members of these organizations, including Charles Taft and J. Irwin Miller; and several founding members of the ADA, including Reinhold Niebuhr, Marquis Childs, and Walter Reuther.⁹⁶

To point out the DCEL's position within this constellation of groups is to raise a pair of larger questions: What, if anything, distinguished the DCEL from the other postwar organizations that were simultaneously working to prevent the dismantling of the New Deal's legacy? And why did White House advisors like Stassen and Flemming—to say nothing of the president—choose to devote time and energy to a modestly funded religious group when other, seemingly more powerful organizational vehicles for promoting administration priorities were readily available?

The short answer is that the DCEL, owing to its status as a subordinate unit of the NCC, possessed several advantageous characteristics that its better-known counterparts lacked. First, and most obviously, it was the only center-left economic advocacy group whose pronouncements were grounded in holy writ. Where groups like the CED and Ford Foundation gained credibility from the academic qualifications of the social scientists who authored their policy reports, the DCEL—while often employing the very same academics—buttressed its recommendations with copious citations to the Bible and the social teachings of the Protestant denominations.⁹⁷ This framing—which, as we have seen, appealed to White House speechwriters—was especially crucial at a moment when NAM and other conservative groups were spending lavishly on church-based “educational” campaigns that traced a direct line from the Gospels to the insights of the Austrian School economists.⁹⁸

A second factor that added gravitas to the DCEL's policy pronouncements was the diversity of the group's membership. The presence of names like Walter Reuther, Boris Shishkin, and Nelson Cruikshank on its letterhead meant that neither policymakers nor the public could dismiss the DCEL's policy recommendations as providing religious cover for big business. Of the DCEL's organizational allies, only the ADA claimed a similarly

Churches ... Before the Subcommittee on Rules of the Senate,” July 6, 1954, NCC, RG 4, box 8, folder 12; Russell Porter, “Church Council for Reform in Congress' Red Inquiries,” *New York Times*, March 18, 1954, p. 1.

⁸⁷Smith, *Faith and the Presidency*, 240; Gustafson, “The Religious Role of the President,” 717–19. That Stassen and/or Flemming arranged these meetings seems likely, given that the two men were both highly active in NCC affairs and close to Eisenhower in this period.

⁸⁸“The Text of Eisenhower's Address Before the United Church Women,” *New York Times*, October 7, 1953, p. 3.

⁸⁹“Eisenhower Urges Amity of Religions,” *New York Times*, November 19, 1953, p. 32.

⁹⁰“50,000 Cheer President on His Brief Visit,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 20, 1954, p. 1.

⁹¹“Scroll for Eisenhower,” *New York Times*, May 21, 1955, p. 18.

⁹²“Eastland Says Ike Is Tool of ‘Social Equality’ Groups,” *Cleveland Call and Post*, February 11, 1956, p. 1D.

⁹³Smith, *Faith and the Presidency*, 232.

⁹⁴See, for example, “Church Unit Denies War is Inevitable,” *New York Times*, January 18, 1951, p. 8; “Three Faiths Praying for U.N.,” *New York Times*, December 15, 1956, p. 22.

⁹⁵See, for example, Judis, *The Paradox of American Democracy*, 66–74; Robert M. Collins, *More: The Politics of Economic Growth in Postwar America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 44–48; Mizruchi, *The Fracturing of the American Corporate Elite*, 37–64.

⁹⁶On the founding of the ADA, see Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *A Life in the Twentieth Century: Innocent Beginnings, 1917–1950* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 412.

⁹⁷For example, the economic Kenneth Boulding, who contributed a chapter to the NCC's *Goals of Economic Life Volume*, was simultaneously working with the Ford Foundation to establish the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University. See Debora Hammond, “Perspectives from the Boulding Files,” *Systems Research* 12 (1995): 281–90.

⁹⁸Fones-Wolf, *Selling Free Enterprise*, 220–24; Kevin M. Kruse, *One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), 4–34; Kim Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Businessmen's Crusade Against the New Deal* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2009), 70–77; Compton, *The End of Empathy*, 104–10.

impressive slate of labor leaders. However, the ADA’s influence on policymakers and public opinion was limited by its close links to the Democratic Party and by an unwieldy decision-making process that often resulted in erratic position changes.⁹⁹ The DCEL, in contrast, was both thoroughly bipartisan—nearly all its business representatives were moderate Republicans—and small enough to permit decision-making procedures that were both efficient and genuinely deliberative.

A third characteristic that likely made the DCEL attractive as a vehicle for center-left policy advocacy was the group’s relative immunity from the red-baiting attacks that dogged many of its organizational allies. At a time when the ADA, the Ford Foundation, and other liberal groups were caught in the crosshairs of congressional investigators, the NCC and its subordinate units remained mostly above the fray—in part because the NCC’s founders had designed it to withstand such attacks.¹⁰⁰ To be sure, hardline anticommunist religious leaders like Carl McIntire alleged that the NCC bureaucracy was riddled with communists and fellow travelers.¹⁰¹ But such attacks, which had devastated the now-defunct FCC, were relatively easy to deflect when aimed at an organization whose general board included the heads of General Electric, Armco Steel, and other major corporations, and whose newly created Lay Committee included some of the nation’s most fanatical anticommunists, including McIntire’s friend and patron J. Howard Pew.¹⁰²

And yet the DCEL’s single greatest attribute, from the perspective of those hoping to preserve the core of New Deal, was its connection to the larger universe of mainline Protestant churchgoers. In one sense, the group’s claim to be the “voice” of American Protestantism on economic matters was unpersuasive, since leaders made little effort to discern the views of rank-and-file churchgoers before issuing policy pronouncements. But the carefully scripted democratic procedures through which the NCC and its subordinate units were constituted meant that these entities were in some sense representative of Protestantism writ large. For example, the bylaws of the NCC and DCEL stipulated that their governing bodies were to be staffed primarily by lay people and that seats on these bodies were to be apportioned in accordance with the relative size of the NCC’s member denominations (see Table 2).¹⁰³ In addition, the NCC—though not the DCEL—required that representatives to its general board be selected by the denominations themselves, usually through some sort of democratic conclave such as a national convention. Taken together, these procedures allowed the NCC to credibly “speak for” white Protestant churchgoers in the same sense that, say, the

Table 2. Denominational Representation in the DCEL

Denomination	Percentage of DCEL Members	Percentage of NCC Membership
African Methodist Episcopal	0.9	5.5
American Baptist	6.5	4.4
Brethren	4.6	0.1
Congregational	15.7	3.6
Disciples of Christ	4.6	5.1
Episcopal	13	7
Evangelical and Reformed	2.8	2.1
Greek Orthodox	0.9	2.8
Methodist	20.3	25.9
Nat. Baptist Conv. of Am.	—	7.4
Nat. Baptist Conv., USA	—	12.6
Presbyterian	19.4	9.5
Quaker	2.8	0.1
Reformed	0.9	0.6
United Lutheran	3.7	5.5
Unknown/other	2.8	—

Source: Department of the Church and Economic Life, “Study of Attendance at Eight Meetings,” National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America Records, Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia, PA, RG4, box 1, folder 21; Benson Y. Landis, ed., *Yearbook of American Churches* (New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., 1953).

AFL-CIO “spoke for” for an unwieldy group of labor unions whose views were not easily harmonized.¹⁰⁴

It would be a mistake, however, to dismiss either the DCEL or NCC as organizations that merely created the appearance of connections to the grassroots. In fact, as we have seen, the NCC sat atop a well-funded and rapidly expanding system of state and local Protestant church councils. Under the leadership of education committee chair (and part-time White House advisor) Wesley Rennie, and with funding provided by the Methodist Council on World Service and a grant from the Philip Murray Memorial Foundation (in effect, the CIO), the DCEL used the church council network to take its message directly to average churchgoers.¹⁰⁵ The councils provided a speaking circuit for DCEL members including Cameron Hall, Charles Taft, and Marquis Childs, who regularly traveled to address events organized by local councils.¹⁰⁶ State and local councils also assisted with disseminating DCEL-sponsored books, “study materials,”

⁹⁹See, for example, Harvard Sitkoff, “Harry Truman and the Election of 1948: The Coming of Age of Civil Rights in American Politics,” *Journal of Southern History* 37 (1971): 597–616, 609; W. H. Lawrence, “Presidency Choice Deferred by A.D.A.,” *New York Times*, May 19, 1952, p. 10.

¹⁰⁰On congressional investigations into alleged subversive elements in the Ford Foundation, see Leonard Silk and Mark Silk, *The American Establishment* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), 127–28; Francis X. Sutton, “The Ford Foundation: The Early Years,” *Daedalus* 116 (1987): 41–91, 83–84.

¹⁰¹Markku Ruotsila, *Fighting Fundamentalism: Carl McIntire and the Politicization of American Fundamentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 114–116 and *passim*.

¹⁰²For Pew’s financial support of McIntire, see, *ibid.*, 69–70.

¹⁰³“By-Laws of the Division of Christian Life and Work,” H. Jerry Voorhis Papers, Claremont Colleges Library Special Collections, Claremont, CA, box 39, folder AA-16. As Table 2 makes clear, this requirement was not observed to the letter in the case of the DCEL. High-status denominations, including the Congregationalists and Presbyterians, were somewhat overrepresented in the Committee’s membership, while some predominately Black denominations, including the National Baptists, seem not to have been represented at all.

¹⁰⁴This, apparently, was the perspective adopted by the nation’s religion reporters, who routinely described the NCC’s general board as “the policy-making group for the 35,000,000-member National Council.” “Religious Group Votes to Be Heard in Disputes,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 15, 1954, p. 19.

¹⁰⁵Minutes of the General Committee Meeting of the Department of the Church and Economic Life, April 23–24, 1954, p. 2.

¹⁰⁶“Taft Is Speaker,” *The Churchman* [Church Federation of Greater Chicago], October–November 1954, p. 2, City Council of Churches Records, William Adams Brown Ecumenical Library Archives, Burke Library, Union Theological Seminary, New York, NY [hereinafter CCC], box 1, folder 20; “Ethics in Society,” *The Federation News* [Cleveland Federation of Churches], June 1955, CCC, box 2, folder 1; “Speakers

filmstrips, and other educational publications.¹⁰⁷ Finally, because broadcast regulations granted them control over significant blocs of free airtime, local councils provided the DCEL with unmatched access to radio and television audiences, which it used to air roundtable discussions focused on its own study materials and pronouncements.¹⁰⁸

The DCEL's annual "Church and Economic Life Week" provides a vivid illustration of the church councils' importance as venues for reaching average churchgoers. In 1948, two years before the founding of the NCC, the FCC asked local congregations to set aside a week in late January for events dedicated to investigating "Christian" solutions to current economic problems. The tradition continued under the NCC, with the reconstituted DCEL taking responsibility for program materials, and state and local church councils planning events in local communities. The highlight of a local Economic Life Week was typically an evening or weekend program featuring addresses from prominent labor and business leaders, followed by small group discussions organized around study materials provided by the DCEL.¹⁰⁹ In addition, in even-numbered years, attendees elected a slate of delegates to attend a national Church and Economic Life conference.¹¹⁰ The national conference was similar to the local meetings, except that attendees were expected to approve a conference report that offered policymakers guidance on current economic challenges. The sheer size of the national gatherings—which often featured 400 or more delegates, including representatives of labor, business, government, academia, agriculture, and the clergy—ensured wide press coverage.¹¹¹ More to the point, the DCEL's control of the agenda reliably produced conference reports that reflected its own center-left vision. Prime speaking slots were reserved for DCEL members, including Walter Reuther and Charles Taft, and a draft conference report was usually prepared in advance (although conservative delegates sometimes succeeded in watering down its provisions.)¹¹² The final

product typically declared "the Protestant laity's" support for a strong welfare state, basic labor-organizing protections, generous foreign aid programs, and federal action on civil rights.¹¹³

Hence, while the DCEL was far from the only civil society group that defended the welfare state against the GOP conservative wing's attacks, it was arguably the only such group that could claim broad representation from across the partisan and economic spectrum and viable connections to the Protestant grassroots. Its pronouncements almost certainly carried greater weight with policymakers and the public than those issued by groups that were clearly aligned with the Democratic Party (e.g., organized labor, the ADA) or that lacked meaningful connections to rank-and-file voters (e.g., the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations and the CED). Moreover, as we shall see in the next section, the DCEL's successful effort to establish itself as the unofficial voice of American Protestantism on economic affairs had the added—but largely unanticipated—benefit of exacerbating latent fissures in the Protestant right.

6. The Fracturing of the Protestant Right

In 1951, as we have seen, J. Howard Pew and a group of conservative allies launched the National Lay Committee for the purpose of blunting the DCEL's influence within the NCC. But this effort ultimately failed. In September 1954, when the NCC's general board adopted a statement of economic principles that clashed with Pew's libertarian convictions, the retired oil executive dissolved the Lay Committee and severed all ties with the NCC.¹¹⁴

With the benefit of hindsight, a more effective strategy for Pew and other conservative Protestants would have been to attack the NCC from the outside rather than attempting to co-opt it from within. But in 1951 there were reasons to believe that a conservative takeover of the council might succeed. Recognizing that the NCC's organizers were deeply concerned about the group's finances, Pew filled his Lay Committee with conservative businessmen who promised to back the NCC financially.¹¹⁵ His goal, as he acknowledged in correspondence with various Lay Committee members, was to make the NCC financially dependent on the Lay Committee. If this could be achieved, he reasoned, then the NCC would have little choice but to ensure that its policy pronouncements met with the approval of the Lay Committee's overwhelmingly conservative membership.¹¹⁶

So why did the plan fail? First, the Pew forces made the critical mistake of aligning themselves with the NCC—and thus boosting the new organization's credibility—without first securing a place for themselves within the organization's formal governing structures. Apparently believing that financial contributions alone would grant them effective control over the NCC's ideological direction, they established the Lay Committee as a purely advisory body. But the "stick" of reduced financial contributions proved too blunt an instrument for Pew's aims. Within a year or two

Assert Christian Ethic Is Being Applied," *Federation News Bulletin* [Cleveland Federation of Churches], February 1954, CCC, box 2, folder 1.

¹⁰⁷"Ethics in Society"; "New Books in Council Library," *Newsletter* [Council of Churches of Buffalo and Erie County], June 1954, p. 2, CCC, box 1, folder 16; "The Public Affairs Institute," *Newsletter* [Council of Churches of Buffalo and Erie County], December 1954, CCC, box 1, folder 16.

¹⁰⁸Local observances of Labor Sunday, for example, often featured televised discussion panels in which labor and business leaders responded to the major themes of the NCC's annual Labor Sunday message. "Labor Sunday 1954," *Newsletter* [Council of Churches of Buffalo and Erie County], September 1954, p. 1, CCC, box 1, folder 16; Memorandum, Harlan M. Frost to the Department of Church and Economic Life, "What Do Councils of Churches Need ...," October 3, 1952, ISM, box 308; Cameron P. Hall to J. Irwin Miller, August 9, 1954, ISM, box 308, folder 4; "Murray Memorial Aids Church Group," *New York Times*, September 15, 1954, p. 29.

¹⁰⁹"Speakers Assert Christian Ethic Is Being Applied"; Council of Churches of Buffalo and Erie County, *Annual Report, February 1951 to January 1952*, CCC, box 1, folder 15.

¹¹⁰"Social Action," *The Federation News Bulletin* [Cleveland Federation of Churches], May 1954, p. 2, CCC, box 2, folder 1; Council of Churches of Buffalo and Erie County, *Annual Report, February 1951 to January 1952*.

¹¹¹See, for example, Walter R. Ruch, "Restraint Asked in Economic Rule," *New York Times*, February 20, 1950, p. 2; Preston King Sheldon, "Churches to Mark Day of Fellowship," *New York Times*, February 11, 1950, p. 13; Walter R. Ruch, "Protestant Group Hits Class Strife," *New York Times*, February 19, 1950, p. 60; George Dugan, "Churchmen Urged to Combat Apathy," *New York Times*, February 22, 1952, p. 19; George Dugan, "Protestant Laity Pledge Aid to Man," *New York Times*, February 25, 1952, p. 24; "Hoffman Urges Expansion of Aid," *New York Times*, April 13, 1956, p. 5; George Dugan, "Business Ethics of Church Sifted," *New York Times*, April 15, 1956, p. 82; George Dugan, "Hoffman Favors New Look at Aid," *New York Times*, April 13, 1956, p. 11; "Sharing Goods in U.S. Urged," *Los Angeles Times*, April 16, 1956, p. 31.

¹¹²See, for example, Fones-Wolf, *Selling Free Enterprise*, 235–36. Conservatives sometimes complained to the press about drafting procedures they viewed as unfair. See, for example, Ruch, "Restraint Asked in Economic Rule."

¹¹³"Sharing Goods in U.S. Urged"; Ruch, "Restraint Asked in Economic Rule."

¹¹⁴Fones-Wolf, *Selling Free Enterprise*, 243.

¹¹⁵As Darren Dochuk has observed, Pew's circle of conservative businessmen consisted mostly of "new money" types who were outsiders to the Northeastern establishment. Having made their money in petroleum or mining or as heads of regional, family-owned companies, they had little in common with the New York-based corporate heads and "old money" types who favored accommodation with the New Deal. Darren Dochuk, *Anointed with Oil: How Christianity and Crude Made Modern America* (New York: Basic Books, 2019), 260–66, 329–36.

¹¹⁶See correspondence quoted in Fones-Wolf, *Selling Free Enterprise*, 239. Also see Pratt, *The Liberalization of American Protestantism*, 88–89.

of the NCC's founding, a surge in church attendance and giving had allowed the mainline denominations to fill its coffers. And with funding pouring in from a variety of secular sources, including the Rockefeller Foundation and the CIO, the NCC leaders' early concerns about their organization's financial viability faded.¹¹⁷ Although NCC officials were willing to placate the Pew forces up to a point, financial considerations did not prevent them from siding with the moderates in the DCEL when the escalating conflict between the two groups forced their hand. (Nor did it hurt that many DCEL members were themselves generous donors to the NCC.) Their bluff called, the conservatives discovered that, as one of Pew's correspondents put it, they lacked an intra-organizational foothold from which to veto the economic pronouncements of "left-wing church officialdom."¹¹⁸

To be sure, Pew did manage to secure the appointment of a handful of allies to the NCC's general board. He also managed to have some close associates named as vice presidents of the NCC, including Ruth Stafford Peale (wife of the minister and popular self-help author Norman Vincent Peale), Olive Ann Beech (president of Beech Aircraft), and Jasper Crane (retired DuPont executive and prominent funder of conservative organizations). But these appointments were, in the end, counterproductive. Control of a half-dozen seats on the 250-person general board was hardly sufficient to influence the outcome of important votes.¹¹⁹ Meanwhile, the presence of prominent conservative names such as Peale, Beech, and Crane on the NCC's letterhead helped seal the council's reputation as a middle-of-the-road organization in which both conservatives and liberals were amply represented.

What transpired between summer 1952 and late 1954, then, was that the Pew forces inadvertently lent credence to the NCC's initially tendentious claim to be the "voice" of American Protestantism on economic affairs. Because its lay leadership was both bipartisan and ideologically diverse—including both well-known liberals and pillars of the far right—the NCC soon became a popular venue for politicians who hoped to position themselves above the partisan fray. And every time a political leader heaped praise on the NCC, the organization's claims to leadership of "Protestant America" grew more plausible.

As we have seen, Ike himself attended the NCC's general board meeting in the fall of 1953, where he lauded the council for advancing "the principle of the equality of man, the dignity of man."¹²⁰ The president's remarks were particularly noteworthy, as they came shortly after the NCC's president, the Episcopal Bishop Henry Knox Sherrill, in an obvious rebuke to the Pew forces, had urged the same audience not to shrink from "apply [ing] the Gospel" to even the most controversial fields, including "the international and the economic."¹²¹ Eisenhower would continue to shower praise on the NCC over the course of his presidency, even going so far as to lay the ceremonial cornerstone of the organization's New York City headquarters.¹²² Moreover, several of his top advisors—including Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, UN Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., and Director of

Foreign Operations Harold Stassen—headlined NCC events where they, too, waxed eloquent about the organization's contributions to the religious life of the nation and the moral improvement of humanity.¹²³

By the fall of 1954, when Pew finally cut ties with the NCC, efforts to paint the council as a tool of organized labor—let alone as a hotbed of communist influence—stood little chance of success. And indeed, Pew's attempts to turn public opinion against the council by airing his grievances in the press backfired badly. With few exceptions, stories on the pivotal September 1954 general board meeting stressed the lopsided nature of the vote in support of the "Basic Principles" statement, noting that the document won "overwhelming approval" despite protests from a "small" and "highly vocal" minority whose ultimate aim was to veto all pronouncements "in the field of social, political, and economic activity."¹²⁴ Pew's subsequent decision to disband the Lay Committee and publish a trove of documents purporting to document his unfair treatment by the NCC's leadership yielded equally poor results. Far from vindicating Pew and his allies, the documents seemed to confirm, in the words of one critic, that the Pew forces had aimed to become a "House of Lords, with veto power of those actions of the officially appointed representatives of the churches which did not suit them."¹²⁵

Pew's acrimonious separation from the NCC created a dilemma for the dozens of conservative executives who were serving on his Lay Committee (see Table 3). Many of them did not share Pew's view that continued involvement with the NCC was pointless. Indeed, some believed that the Lay Committee's efforts to shift the NCC's economic orientation rightward had been at least partially successful. After all, the final version of the "Basic Principles" statement included passages condemning communism and extolling the virtues of capitalism that were directly attributable to the Lay Committee's influence. Others reasoned that a conservative exodus from the NCC would be a strategic disaster, since it would leave the liberals with a free hand in formulating the NCC's economic policy.¹²⁶

Perhaps sensing the emerging split in the conservative ranks, incoming NCC president Eugene Carson Blake wisely offered the Lay Committee's members the chance to remain involved with NCC activities by accepting membership in the DCEL or any other subunit of the NCC. Whether or not the offer was strategically motivated, the result was to fracture the NCC's conservative faction. A handful of close allies followed Pew out of the organization, but many conservatives chose to sign on with (or retain their memberships in) the DCEL or other NCC agencies. Robert E. Wilson, a Standard Oil executive who was a member of both the Lay Committee and the DCEL, retained his seat on the latter body and even agreed to spearhead a December 1954

¹¹⁷Harold Edward Fey, "N.C.C. Ends Year in the Black," *Christian Century* 71 (1954): 136–37.

¹¹⁸Jasper Crane to J. Howard Pew, July 2, 1954, JHP, Box 168.

¹¹⁹Pratt, *The Liberalization of American Protestantism*, 88–89; Fones-Wolf, *Selling Free Enterprise*, 242–43.

¹²⁰"Eisenhower Urges Amity of Religions," 32.

¹²¹Ibid.

¹²²Peter Kihiss, "President Participates in Church Rites Here," *New York Times*, October 13, 1958, p. 18.

¹²³"Excerpts from Dulles Message to Council of Churches of Christ," *New York Times*, December 12, 1952, p. 18; George Dugan, "Lodge Asserts U.N. is Curb on Soviet," *New York Times*, December 11, 1952, p. 6; "Churchmen Seek an Unbiased City," *New York Times*, September 21, 1951, p. 25; Preston King Sheldon, "President to Talk to Church Session," *New York Times*, November 14, 1953, p. 20.

¹²⁴"An Enlightened Try," 22; "Church Code of Economic Ethics Voted," 1; "Religious Group Votes to Be Heard in Disputes," 19.

¹²⁵"Mr. Pew and the Clergy," *Christian Century*, February 22, 1956, JHP, box 160. Some reliably conservative publications did take Pew's side in the dispute. See, for example, "Laymen and Clergy at Odds on Role of Church in Politics," *U.S. News and World Report*, February 3, 1956, pp. 43–48; "Churches in Politics," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, February 7, 1956, p. 16; "Layman's Letter Fans Church Row," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, February 1, 1956, p. A5.

¹²⁶Fones-Wolf, *Selling Free Enterprise*, 243–44.

Table 3. Selected Members of the Lay Committee of the National Council of Churches

Name	Employment
Olive Ann Beech*	Beech Aircraft
Jasper E. Crane	DuPont Corp. (ret.)
Harry Bullis	General Mills
John Foster Dulles*	Secretary of State
Arthur Flemming*	Office of Defense Mobilization
Harvey S. Firestone	Firestone Tire and Rubber
James D. Francis	Island Creek Coal Company
Charles R. Hook*	Armco Steel
Clifford R. Hope	Member of Congress
B.E. Hutchinson*	Chrysler Corp. (ret.)
Lem T. Jones	Russell-Stover Candies
Walter H. Judd	Member of Congress
J. Howard Pew	Sun Oil (ret.)
Henning W. Prentiss, Jr.	Armstrong Cork Company
Noel Sargent	NAM
Charles F. Seabrook	Seabrook Farms
Charles E. Wilson*	General Electric (ret.)
Robert E. Wilson*	Standard Oil of Indiana ¹

Note: * = Remained active in NCC activities following the dissolution of the Lay Committee.
¹National Laymen and Laywomen's Committee," ISM, Box 341, Folder 4.

fundraising drive on its behalf.¹²⁷ Charles "Electric Charlie" Wilson, the staunchly anti-union former CEO of General Electric, likewise chose to remain in his position as NCC treasurer following the departure of the Pew forces.¹²⁸ B. E. Hutchinson, a retired Chrysler executive and frequent correspondent of Pew, spoke for many of his fellow conservatives when he laid out his reasons for remaining on the NCC's general board following the Lay Committee's dissolution:

When the Council ... by disbanding the Lay Committee effectually precluded further organized lay participation in its top-level deliberations, many of my erstwhile lay associates withdrew. My own decision was to continue, for a while at least, conscientiously keeping before the council what I believe to be the viewpoint of a very substantial segment of both clerical and lay people who are largely inarticulate through regularly organized council channels.¹²⁹

For men like Robert Wilson, Charles Wilson, and Hutchinson, retaining a seat at the proverbial table seemed a wiser move than withdrawing from NCC activities altogether. And indeed, many of them would continue to support the council financially into the early 1960s, even as they grumbled (usually in private) about the organization's left-leaning economic pronouncements. As late as 1960, U.S. Steel CEO Roger Blough mailed a donation to the NCC's incoming president, together with a letter complaining

that a recent NCC report calling for labor-friendly revisions to the Taft-Hartley Act had been "less than objective and constructive." In the same letter, Blough announced that, despite his dislike of the NCC's recent steel industry report, he would continue to support the organization financially because, on the whole, "it does a useful job."¹³⁰ It may be that Blough was personally invested in the success of the NCC's evangelistic and humanitarian programs. A more plausible interpretation of his actions, however, is that he, like Hutchinson, was reluctant to cut ties with the nation's largest ecumenical body at a time when its policy pronouncements still garnered front-page coverage in major newspapers.

7. Conclusion

In a justly famous November 1954 letter to his brother Newton, a testy President Eisenhower explained his refusal to dismantle the New Deal regime's major policy achievements as follows:

Should any political party attempt to abolish social security, unemployment insurance, and eliminate labor laws and farm programs, you would not hear of that party again in our political history. There is a tiny splinter group, of course, that believes you can do these things. Among them are H. L. Hunt, ... a few other Texas oil millionaires, and an occasional politician or business man from other areas. Their number is negligible and they are stupid.¹³¹

By the time these words were written, Ike's blunt dismissal of the Republican right as a small and "stupid" faction reflected conventional wisdom. But there was nothing foreordained about the right's fall from grace. Just two years earlier, the apparent strength and ideological cohesion of the GOP's conservative faction (and its supporting cast of interest groups), together with the popular mandate implied by the party's 1952 electoral sweep, had made a frontal assault on the New Deal seem within the realm of possibility. That this did not occur—that it was not even seriously attempted—cannot be explained by the intrinsic force of inherited policy commitments alone. Nor should it be attributed solely to the idiosyncratic convictions of the man who happened to occupy the White House for most of the 1950s.¹³² Rather, it was at least in part the result of an intense campaign, conducted largely outside the halls of government, in which Republican moderates successfully discredited the economic ideas of their conservative opponents.

Few organizations were more central to this effort than the NCC. In the widely publicized "Basic Principles" statement, hammered out at the very moment when congressional Republicans were engaged in a fierce intraparty struggle over the future of Social Security and other social welfare programs, the NCC sanctified the New Deal-era welfare state as an authentic outgrowth of Protestant social teachings. As we have seen, the group's books, pamphlets, "study materials," conference reports, Labor Sunday messages, and other publications were widely covered in the press, and their arguments found their way into politicians' stump speeches. Crucially, they provided Eisenhower and other moderate Republicans with a powerful ideological justification for maintaining and in some cases expanding social welfare

¹²⁷Roger Blough to J. Irwin Miller, December 2, 1960, ISM, series 2, box 306, folder 6.

¹³¹Dwight D. Eisenhower to Edgar Newton Eisenhower, November 8, 1954, Teaching American History, accessed December 7, 2022, <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/letter-to-edgar-newton-eisenhower/>.

¹³²For the argument that Eisenhower's beliefs on domestic policy were not as idiosyncratic as they have sometimes been portrayed, see Griffith, "Dwight D. Eisenhower and the Corporate Commonwealth," 102.

¹²⁷Cameron Hall to J. Irwin Miller, December 6, 1954, ISM, box 308, folder 4.

¹²⁸"The National Council of Churches: What Is It? What Does It Do?" [pamphlet, 1956], NCC, RG 4, box 15, folder 27. Charles E. Wilson is listed as NCC treasurer.

¹²⁹B. E. Hutchinson to Members of the General Board, September 20, 1957, NCC, RG 4, box 18, folder 27.

programs—a justification that replaced New Deal-era references to class struggle and the perfidy of the rich with appeals to law and order, human dignity, and equal opportunity. They helped Republican moderates take the offensive by making the case that efforts to roll back social programs were not only misguided as a matter of policy but positively immoral and, indeed, un-Christian.

This episode contains several lessons for students of American political development, particularly those focused on party regimes and party ideology. First, it suggests that we view the preemptive phase of the party regime cycle—and especially *initial* preemptions—as moments of genuine contingency when a range of policy and ideological outcomes are possible. In the case of the Eisenhower years, it is noteworthy that, for all Ike's well-known complaints about the New Deal regime, the regime arguably ended the 1950s in better shape than it began that decade. There is little reason to believe that the force of inherited ideas alone prevented Eisenhower or other Republican leaders from pursuing a more aggressive course with respect to (for example) Social Security or labor regulation. Rather, the GOP's failure to pursue this course reflected the outcome of an intraparty battle to define the party's economic philosophy—a battle in which, to use the terms employed above, the party's accommodationist faction triumphed over its intransigent faction. A glance at previous preemptive periods and parties—whether the Whigs in the 1840s or the Democrats in the 1990s—will show that these eras, too, witnessed significant intraparty strife between accommodationist and intransigent factions. These intraparty conflicts, moreover, will likely be seen to have had as much or more impact on the fate of inherited regime commitments than contemporaneous events within the dominant party.

Second, and relatedly, it sheds new light on the process of ideological change within political parties. We are used to thinking of ideological change as something that happens when party coalitions undergo major reconfigurations. Moreover, such change is typically said to be driven by committed party activists and/or elected officials acting through entities—whether movements, organizations, or publications—that are firmly aligned with, or else seeking an alliance with, the party in question.¹³³ The Eisenhower years, however, did not witness a major realignment of the Republican coalition. Nor did the party's most powerful and ideologically driven organizational members—that is to say, conservative business groups like NAM and the U.S. Chamber—succeed in defining the party's economic philosophy.

Rather, the ideological commitments of the GOP were shaped to a significant extent by presidential advisors acting through nonpartisan civil society groups, such as the NCC, in which Democrats and Democrat-aligned groups were amply represented. Uncertain about the president's thinking on economic matters, moderates like Arthur Flemming, Harold Stassen, and Wesley Rennie “went public” (to repurpose a phrase), bringing pressure to bear on policymakers in the White House and Congress *indirectly*, via widely publicized statements from respected civic and religious organizations like the NCC.¹³⁴ After Eisenhower was won over to their way of thinking—if, in fact, he had ever disagreed—the president himself began to view the NCC and its subordinate units as potential allies in skirmishes with his own party's right wing.

Finally, this article draws attention to possible connections between the changing structure of American religious life and the development of party regimes. Recent work has begun to examine how changes in the structure of civil society have altered the dynamics of the American party system.¹³⁵ Although this literature deals only tangentially with religious organizations, such groups have historically been central to the process of party regime legitimation (and de-legitimation) due to (1) the power of religious symbols as legitimating devices and (2) religious organizations' historical role as arbiters of social morality. That the New Deal regime's entrenchment occurred during a period of unprecedented ecumenical cooperation—both across Protestant denominational lines and between Catholics, Protestants, and Jews (at the height of what one scholar has dubbed “tri-faith America”)—is likely no accident.¹³⁶ Moreover, we might consider the possibility that the rapid decline of religious authority in the post-1960s period—both within specific faith traditions and in society more broadly—contributed significantly to the New Deal regime's unraveling.¹³⁷ There is no shortage of religion or religious appeals in present-day political discourse, to be sure. Yet it is noteworthy that the apparent waning of the party regime cycle¹³⁸—that is, the apparent inability of today's parties to establish their governing visions as binding on the wider society—has coincided with the disappearance of the type of authoritative ecumenical organizations that were in earlier periods capable of elevating a favored party's ideological commitments above the fray of ordinary politics.

Competing interests. The author declares none.

¹³³See the sources in note 15, namely, Gerrig, *Party Ideologies in America, 1828–1996*; Lewis, *Ideas of Power: The Politics of American Party Ideology Development*; Karol, *Party Position Change in American Politics*; Skocpol and Williamson, *The Tea Party and the Remaking of American Conservatism*; Noel, *Political Ideologies and Political Parties in America*; Schlozman, *When Movements Anchor Parties*; Schickler, *Realignment: The Transformation of American Liberalism*; Baylor, *First to the Party: The Group Origins of Party Transformations*; Milkis and Tichenor, *Rivalry and Reform: Tarrow, Movements and Parties*.

¹³⁴Samuel Kernell, *Going Public: New Strategies of Presidential Leadership* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 1986).

¹³⁵Elisabeth S. Clemens, *The People's Lobby: Organizational Innovation and the Rise of Interest Group Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); *Civic Gifts: Voluntarism and the Making of the American Nation-State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020); Theda Skocpol, *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003), ch. 6.

¹³⁶Kevin M. Schultz, *Tri-Faith America: How Catholics and Jews Held Postwar America to Its Protestant Promise* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

¹³⁷That the growth of decline of religious authority may be an important driver of political development is an idea that has been explored more often in sociology than in political science. See, for example, Mark Chaves, “Secularization as Declining Religious Authority,” *Social Forces* 72 (1994): 749–74. For a recent attempt to refine the concept of religious authority for use in public opinion research, see Ryan P. Burge and Paul A. Djupe, “Religious Authority in a Democratic Society: Clergy and Citizen Evidence from a New Measure,” *Politics and Religion* 15 (2022): 169–96.

¹³⁸See, for example, Julia R. Azari, “The Scrambled Cycle: Realignment, Political Time, and the Trump Presidency,” in *American Political Development and the Trump Presidency*, ed. Zachary Callen and Philip Rocco (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020), 13–27.