



Southern Baptist Politics (Library and Information Science)

Arthur E. Farnsley II

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A study showing how one of America's leading Protestant denominations has been shaped by the philosophical and political presuppositions of its secular environment.

"Farnsley offers us an engaging analysis of how the SBC moved dramatically to the right in the 1980s. By exploring the interplay of authority and power, he reveals how Fundamentalists subverted the Convention and institutionalized their control of it. Farnsley's general approach could be applied to other contemporary religious denominations and private-sector institutions."—John F. Wilson, Princeton University

Unlike other recent studies of the Southern Baptists, *Southern Baptist Politics* was written after the culmination of the "Baptist battles" of the 1980s, when Fundamentalists had effectively taken control of the denomination. It also considers the SBC not simply as a denomination but as an organization with characteristics similar to other voluntary associations in American society—an approach that promises to be useful for the study of other religious groups in America. Arthur Farnsley concludes that the SBC, as an American denomination, had within itself the seeds of pragmatism and individualism that characterize most American voluntary organizations.

Of primary interest to Farnsley are the crucial issues of authority and power. Taking his cue from Paul Harrison's classic study, *Authority and Power in the Free Church Tradition*, Farnsley considers how authority has traditionally been exercised within the SBC, and how Fundamentalists maneuvered within this existing authority structure to seize power. According to Farnsley, disgruntled Fundamentalists soon discovered that they could exploit the democratic elements within the SBC polity to their advantage. So successful were they in their efforts that by 1990 all significant leadership positions within the denomination were filled by Fundamentalists, thus enabling them to take, and hold, institutional power.

The lessons of *Southern Baptist Politics* extend beyond this one denomination. By using the Southern Baptists as a case study, Farnsley asks what the SBC controversy can tell us about religious organizations in America, about dealing with cultural pluralism, and about institutional means for creating change.

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