*Chapter 2: A Profile of School Board Candidates Analysis*

In chapter two, Deckman first discusses the methodology she uses to study and dissect the impact of the Christian Right in school board elections. The majority of the chapter is focused on the question of who falls under the category of the Christian Right and who is omitted. Deckman covers several subsections in search of doing a fully comprehensive analysis of who is in the Christian Right movement including an overview of those who have been generally a part of the Christian Right, Christian Right group status, a religious profile of the candidates, a comparison of religious beliefs to both support for educational issues and candidate behavior, and finally a comparison of socioeconomic status.

Deckman conducted both a School Board Candidate Survey and School Board Case Studies. In her candidate survey, the use of the entire United States as a sampling frame allowed a more general data sample because of the large array of participants. Additionally, Deckman used an equal breakdown of school district sizes between small being less than 2,000 students, medium being between 2,000 and 9,999 students and large a being 10,000 or greater student population (Location 544). Deckman was explicit in stating that she ensured the sampling of all sizes of school districts, which seemingly increased the validity and reliability of the experiment.

As far as the conscious decision to study Fairfax County in Virginia and Garrett County in Maryland, there are both strengths and weaknesses in this decision. Strengths include the stark juxtaposition of the economic and educational conditions between the two locations. However, despite drastically different geography, meaning the fact that Fairfax County is a suburb of Washington D.C. and Garrett County is in the western mountains of Maryland, the two locations are both on the eastern coast of the United States. The reliability of the case study would have increased had the case study locations taken place in different regions of the United States. It is unclear without further experimentation whether or not the same results would be produced in two drastically geographically separated locations.

To begin her profiling of Christian Right candidates, Deckman first had to examine who is and who is not a Christian Right candidate. Taking first the criteria typically associated with Christian Right candidates by earlier studies, Deckman investigated the flaws of each argument to decide whether or not the criteria was strict enough for experimenting. Individuals traditionally classified within the movement of the Christian Right are more likely to agree “with the political attitudes of the Christian Right: religious tradition or denominational affiliation, biblical interpretation, and ‘born-again’ experience” (Locations 568-569).

Deckman argues that these indicators are but a starting point for further examining who is included in the Christian Right movement. She disputes each of the three criteria. However, in her conclusion that more detailed research would have to be done in order to fully understand those who are classified within the Christian Right, she has several missteps. Deckman states, “Those individuals in the survey who are members of Christian Right organizations are automatically considered part of the movement (Locations 599-600).” It should be considered an inaccurate assumption as to whether or not individuals are considered part of the Christian Right movement based on the fact that they are a part of a Christian Right organization. For example, one person in a marriage could be a strong member of a Christian Right organization, which could hypothetically force the other member to also be a part of the same organization, giving an alternative explanation to why the candidate is a part of such organization. This does not mean they automatically agree with all stances of the Christian Right movement, and therefore they should not automatically be considered part of the movement.

On the same note, Deckman digs deeper into how Christian Right groups, and how an individual identifies himself or herself with a group, affects who is considered a member of the Christian Right movement. While it should still be considered incorrect to assume that because a member is a part of a Christian Right group, Deckman expands by saying that Christian Right candidates can be coded in an additional way. If an individual both supports a Christian Right group as well as holds a majority on similar positions of the Christian Right, they are considered a part of the movement. This holds more strength to whether or not an individual is a part of the movement due to the fact that the person both supports what the Christian Right group is doing and identifies with the same aspirations. To strengthen the validity of the focus groups, those who were a part of a Christian Right group should have also had to hold a majority of positions similar to those of the movement.

Deckman’s decision to not only focus on those who identify as Christian increased the validity of the study due to the simple reason that although the movement is called the Christian Right, it does not only include those who label themselves as such religion. The automatic elimination of individuals who do not identify as Christians would be exclusive, unethical and bias. However, this does not go to say that there were not flaws in the religious profile argument. Table 2.3, entitled *Religious Identities of School Board Candidates (Survey)*, displays the breakdown of candidates’ religious identities in percentages (Location 652). The use of percentages in this survey could have been substituted with another method of measurement. The footnote of the table read, “Column does not total 100 percent because individuals could select more than one category to describe their religious beliefs.” While an individual can identify with multiple religious identities, the column total comes to 124%, which makes it more difficult for the research to be broken down correctly.

For example, Deckman stated that “born-again and evangelical Christian are similar categories,” however she included both on the survey due to the fact that some individuals may not be familiar with the term “evangelical.” She implies that the terms are nearly identical. However, if an individual was familiar with the term “evangelical,” it is possible that they knew the two terms were nearly identical and circled both options. This could have double the numbers for born-again and evangelical and caused a statistical imbalance, lowering the reliability of the study if individuals were only given the choice to pick which religious identity they identify with the most. In addition, Deckman states that if multiple responses were removed, there would be more individuals who aligned with the liberal religious groups. While simply removing multiples could still accurately measure conservative versus liberal, one could not definitely say the percentage of each group due to the fact that there is no entirely accurate way to determine which of the multiple groups one would identify with.

Deckman additionally studies the link between educational issues and religious beliefs. Table 2.4, entitled *Mean Level of Support by Religious Identities*, displayed the categorization of stances of education-based issues by three religious groupings: “religious conservatives, religious liberals, and those who make up a separate ‘other’ religious category” (Location 695-705). The question is, where do those who do not automatically filter to the liberal or conservative side fall? Such strict guidelines for conservative versus liberal creates a loose, less accurate and reliable data collection because subjects would be pressured to assign themselves into one category or another.

When discussing the link between religious behaviors and the behavior of Christian Right candidates, Deckman shows strength in argument when she clearly states that although there is a correlation between religious identity and Christian Right status, it cannot be used as criteria of being a part of the movement because it is clearly more complicated. While this argument showed strength, there were several weaknesses in Deckman’s comparison of socioeconomic status.

Deckman refers to data from *The American School Board Journal* about economic status, which they measure by household income. However, it is unclear to readers in her own study whether or not income is measured by individual or by household. Additionally, it is important to discern between the two because although there is a household income of so much, it does not mean that the candidate running makes any portion of that income. Furthermore, the validity of what Deckman refers to from table 2.7, entitled *Socioeconomic Status Characteristics of School Board Candidates*, is questionable. Deckman states, “Christian Right candidates are significantly more likely to come from rural *or* urban, as opposed to suburban communities, as are non-Christian Right candidates (Locations 807-808),” which is seemingly inconsistent or misleading with the findings in the table. In both Christian Right and non-Christian Right candidates, there was a higher percentage of people from suburban than urban as shown in the chart. Either the data is being incorrectly displayed, or the wording of Deckman’s argument is misleading.

Deckman’s analysis of the profiles of school board candidates has both strengths and weaknesses throughout. Her search to find who qualifies to be categorized with the Christian Right movement was detailed and compelling. Additionally, the subsections showed concentrated coverage and left little room for unstructured arguments. While there were pieces of the argument that could have be restructured or reimagined, the overall argument was well thought out and clear.