

The Culture War Issue that Never Was: Why the Right and Left Have Overlooked Gambling

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It may seem obvious to use the term “culture war” to characterize passionate debates over abortion, affirmative action, and gay rights. But there is nothing inevitable about why some issues become “culture war” issues and others do not. In particular, gambling is interesting because it is the culture war issue that got left behind; neither the right nor the left have made it central to the way they understand the relationship between morality and politics.

Perhaps the right’s avoidance of gambling is the more unusual, since so much of the right’s recent interest in moral issues has been fueled by religious conviction and because gambling has, for so long, been considered sinful by the very strains of conservative Protestantism that have formed the basis of the Christian right. My paper will address some reasons why this might be the case: (1) the Christian right’s moral views have been to some degree allied with libertarian economic views, an uneasy alliance but one that may have led some Christian right organizations to downplay gambling as a moral issue; (2) gambling is not the only culture war issue that never was, as the Christian right has also not made torture or economic injustice central to its outlook on the world; moral issues, for many conservative Christians, involve matters of sexuality, for which gambling does not easily fit; (3) an early defeat by conservative Christians on the issue of prohibition of alcohol may have fueled a sense that taking up gambling would lead to public ridicule.

On the left, gambling ought to be of concern because so many who participate in the enterprise are poor. Still, the left has also tended to avoid the issue, even if taking it up would give the left a certain ammunition against the right. Why? (1) gambling itself is popular among inner-city residents, no matter how much theoretical harm it may cause them; (2) states such as Nevada that have strong gambling industries also have strong labor movements; and (3) taking on any moral issue, for some on the left, would be wrong because it would increase the left’s perceived political vulnerability on other moral issues.

The paper will conclude with some reflections on whether gambling will assume greater importance in American political culture – or whether the fact that neither the left nor the right have made it central will continue to render it the culture war issue that never really happened.