



# Local Baptists Local Politics: Churches Communities

*Clifford A. Jr. Grammich*

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“This meticulously researched study reveals how the localism inherent among Baptists carries over into political attitudes and involvement. Grammich's 'bible-based' Baptist sectarians also show how diverse Baptists really are and how strong and enduring a social ethic many smaller Baptist groups have cultivated.”—Charles H. Lippy, University of Tennessee, Chattanooga

This provocative book explores the political views and actions of religious adherents who claim to base their faith on a literal interpretation of the Bible. Focusing on several small Baptist sects scattered throughout the middle and uplands South, Clifford Grammich finds that these groups are often highly engaged politically at the local level. He thus challenges the traditional view of these Baptists as politically aloof, concerned only with matters of faith and personal conduct.

Grammich shows that the politics arising from these groups' religious beliefs are not those of any consistent, pervasive ideology. Rather, he argues, such politics more often reflect a series of adaptations to local circumstances. Among the sects that he studies, there is a strong emphasis on the local authority to interpret the Bible and, thus, to shape religious commands to very specific conditions. Beyond the broad concerns of preserving the traditional family and curbing excessive worldliness, these Baptists are free to adapt their theology to meet their particular needs—and can often do so more readily than those belonging to more hierarchical churches. Since these people are typically more rural, more southern, less educated, and less affluent than most Americans, the author notes, they can face special problems in dealing with modernity—problems that their religion helps them address.

The book includes two case studies that show in depth both the possibilities and limitations of politics within these groups. In a local labor struggle in Tennessee, Baptist sectarians were able to generate more religious support for a United Mine Workers local than was offered by the usual supporters of organized labor in other churches. On the other hand, in an environmental conflict in Kentucky, these Baptists' traditional community concerns inhibited their participation in a broader reform movement.

Relating the beliefs and actions of the “local Baptists” to various larger themes—including those of cultural traditionalism, economic populism, and increasing affluence—Grammich offers a valuable study of the complex ways in which religious faith can affect political involvement. His book will effect a new understanding of American fundamentalism itself.

The Author: Clifford A. Grammich Jr. is director of research at Heartland Center, a social research institute in Hammond, Indiana.

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