

Robertson a key player in local politics

The religious broadcaster can influence races through his following and his financial clout.

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VIRGINIA BEACH — Pat Robertson, who this evening will bring the president of the United States to his front parlor, is a national leader in religion, politics and business.

But he also is a focal point in local political affairs, a role sometimes overlooked as Robertson performs on bigger stages than Hampton Roads.

He is a respected and feared player in the local Republican Party, and in local political campaigns from Congress to city hall. He also is a controversial figure who usually becomes a campaign issue merely by his presence.

Nationally, the Clinton for President campaign hopes to use Pat Robertson as a heavy stone to drag down George Bush, who speaks tonight to Robertson's Christian Coalition. But as local Democrats can testify, such a strategy has risks.

How much power Robertson has locally is difficult to tell. At times, he and his Christian Coalition seem able to steer thousands of voters and millions of dollars with stunning efficiency. At other times, his profile shrinks.

For example, in the 1988 presidential primary in Virginia, Robertson finished third, behind both George Bush and Kansas Sen. Robert Dole, neither of whom campaigned in the state.

In local politics, Robertson has been more visible since his failed presidential bid. For example:

■ Robertson's son, Gordon P. Robertson, became GOP chairman for the 2nd Congressional District in 1990. The job is the top party post in Virginia Beach and Norfolk, and it allows the younger Robertson to direct local campaigns. He often confers with his father on strategy and financing.

■ David M. Hummel, an executive at Pat Robertson's Christian Broadcasting Network, has held many GOP leadership positions.

■ In August, Pat and Gordon Robertson and Hummel were the 2nd District's delegates to the Republican National Convention.

■ The Family Channel, the for-profit cable company Robertson founded and controls, has contributed money to candidates in local legislative and city council races. Robertson also backed a Republican candidate for Congress last spring. The question "Who is Pat Robertson supporting?" is now fre-

quently heard during campaigns in Virginia Beach.

Still, he is not all-powerful.

Last spring, Robertson backed Ewin A. Ottinger, a Norfolk businessman, for the Republican nomination for Congress. With the Christian Coalition urging its members to turn out, hundreds registered as delegates for Ottinger. Party leaders predicted an Ottinger victory.

But at the convention, the other candidate, Jim Chapman, won by a healthy margin. Many Ottinger delegates who had initially registered failed to show up.

Robertson's high point in local politics probably came during last November's legislative campaign.

In the final weeks of an already loud campaign, Democratic state Sen. Moody E. "Sonny" Stallings Jr. slammed Robertson — and the candidate he supported, Republican Ken Stolle — in television ads. Stallings even passed out fliers with pictures of Stolle in Robertson's back pocket.

Stolle beat Stallings comfortably. The conventional wisdom among activists in both parties is that Stallings' attacks did nothing but rouse Robertson supporters, whom the Christian Coalition helped mobilize through phone banks.

Gordon Robertson predicts similar results for Clinton's attacks.

"Frankly, I love their effort at doing this, Clinton's campaign trying to tie Bush in with my father," he said. "He's essentially repeating the same mistakes that Sonny Stallings made."

Stallings, still an avid Robertson critic and Clinton's campaign leader in Hampton Roads, contends that the dynamics of national politics are different. The Christian Coalition is powerful only because its supporters are proportionally so numerous in local races, where voter turnout is low, Stallings said.

"Fortunately for the country, this is an election outside the 8th senatorial district in Virginia Beach and outside Pat Robertson's back yard," Stallings said.

Whoever is right, the Clinton campaign is continuing to criticize Bush's appearance here.

"It's further confirmation that the Republican Party is firmly in the grips of the Religious Right," said a Clinton spokeswoman in Little Rock. "This is a party that is now controlled by the likes of Pat Robertson, Phyllis Schlafly and Jerry Falwell. They are not even attempting to mask it anymore."



Pat Robertson and his Christian Coalition can help steer voters and millions of dollars toward a campaign. He can also become a campaign issue merely by his presence.