

***“The Co-Evolution of the Republican Party and the Christian Conservative Movement:
A Challenge to Social Movement Theory”***

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Over the past 25 years, the Christian Right has worked hard to convince white evangelicals to turn out and vote for Republican candidates for national, state, and local office. Social movement organizations such as the Moral Majority of the 1980s and the Christian Coalition of the 1990s sought to register evangelical voters, to distribute voter guides that made it clear that GOP candidates were closer to evangelical policy preferences. Some social movement activists ran for office and mobilized an army of volunteers, others worked behind the scenes to help influence Republican nominations. Pat Robertson announced a goal for the Christian Coalition in the early 1990s of electing a Republican congress and president by 2000.

The election of George W. Bush seemed to fulfill Robertson’s dream, and the dreams of many white evangelical voters. Bush’s open embrace of evangelical faith, his easy use of evangelical language, and his symbolic gestures to the community seemed to promise great things to come.

But five years later movement activists were complaining openly that they had gotten far less from national government than they felt that they had been promised. The National Association of Evangelicals was promoting a broader and less electoral political mobilization, around an issue agenda that was far broader than that of the Christian Right.

The close relationship between Christian Right leaders and Republican party officials suggests the need to revise traditional accounts of social movement mobilization. Many Christian Right groups were organized by political activists with an explicit goal of electing more Republicans, and much of the funding for the groups came from GOP donors seeking to find a way to channel resources more effectively into voter mobilization.

This chapter will explore the complex and changing relationship between the Christian Right, white evangelicals, and the Republican party. Using data from surveys that span more than two decades, in-depth interviews with Christian Right and Republican leaders, and historical documents, it will examine the complicated dance between movement and party. The GOP has been changed by the evangelical embrace, but evangelical churches have been affected as well, and the evangelical political agenda has been shaped to fit GOP voter mobilization needs.