

Of Movements and Metaphors: The Co-Evolution of the Christian Right and the GOP

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In 1984, I gave a job talk at the American University in Washington, DC. One of the faculty members asked why I had chosen to study an ephemeral movement like the Christian Right, which would barely be a footnote in history. Republican moderates would soon banish these politically unsophisticated fundamentalist preachers, he insisted.

In 2005, I gave a talk at the Heinrich Boll Institute in Berlin, where I described the role of the Christian Right in American politics. A scholar in the audience asked me how the Christian Right had come to fully dominate the Republican Party, and the country. He insisted that American politics were controlled by the Christian Right, from policies in the Middle East, social issues, economics, and the environment.

History has clearly shown that the first set of questions were naïve: at the very least the Christian Right has not been trounced by Republican Party moderates. Some would argue that the Christian Right now dominates the GOP, but arguably the movement has been the least successful faction in the Republican Party today. The relationship between evangelicals, the Christian Right, and the GOP is a complex one, one in which metaphors often stand in for theories and understandings.

In this paper, I will explore two common metaphors that are commonly evoked to describe the relationship, and which are connected to existing theories of social movements and political mobilization. In each case, I will lay out how the metaphor fits with existing theories, how it fits various key facts, and what insights it helps to generate.

Next, I will explore a somewhat different metaphor – that the Christian Right and the Republican party have evolved together over time, to see whether this gives us any purchase in understanding the relationships between the movement and the party.¹

Bohemond I of Antioch meets Lacey Davenport: The Christian Right as Social Movement

The Christian Right has often been depicted as a social movement that sought to gain influence in and even “take over” the Republican Party. Christian conservatives were portrayed as an invading army seeking to conquer the GOP in the name of God. Books and articles about “God’s Warriors”, “Christian Soldiers,” “An Army that Meets on Sunday,” and “Invisible Army” became so common that many have been recycled (Buell and Sigelman 1985; Green 1996; Guth et al. 1996; Wilcox 1992; Wilcox and Larson 2006; Wilcox et al. 1991).² Many Christian conservatives used similar language, drawing from Biblical sources that speak of putting on the armor of God.³ Moderate Republican activists talked about invasions, of Nazi’s in jackboots, and of fanatical activists marching to divine orders.

Building the Movement Army

The metaphor of Christian Right as invading army is linked to conventional theories of social movement mobilization, and to theories of porous parties whose rules make it easier for external movements to penetrate and use the party for their own goals. The Christian Right is seen as a spontaneous, decentralized movement sparked by events that disturbed social equilibria, including the rise of the the Roe v. Wade decision, the rise of the feminist movement, and a series of local protests on issues relating to school textbooks, gay rights, and other issues (Moen 1989; Reed 1996). Explanations for the movement’s mobilization generally hinge on grievance, elites who provide interpretive frames, and the mobilization of resources within the evangelical community.

The grievances that sparked the mobilization of the Christian Right came from the rising power of secular elites in media and schools, social changes that altered gender roles, and specific policies in the area of abortion and education, which devalued evangelical culture and values (Wald et al. 1989). Evangelicals perceived that their lifestyle was under attack (Lorentzen 1980; Wilcox 1992), and that it was increasingly difficult to raise their children to share their values (Bates 1993). Some evangelicals felt that social changes endangered America's special covenant with God (Lienesch 1993; Reed 1996).

Movement entrepreneurs helped to build interpretive frames and social identities to unite evangelicals (Salisbury 1969; Snow et al. 1986; Wald et al. 2005). Early movement leaders such as Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell had proven successful in building religious and business empires. They mobilized existing resources to subsidize collective action costs. Falwell's status within the Baptist Bible Fellowship, and the resources of his television ministry allowed him to quickly assemble a national organization for the Moral Majority, at least on paper (Guth 1983; Liebman 1983). Robertson's television ministry and business empire were helpful to Christian Voice initially, and then later to his presidential campaign and the launching of the Christian Coalition (Brown et al. 1995).

Thus the Christian Right as invading army fits well with an amalgam of social movement theories. And once the army was assembled, it was seen as invading the GOP.

The Movement Army Invades the Party

The notion that the Christian Right invaded the Republican party in the 1980s and 1990s is common lore among old-time GOP moderates, and reinforced by documents and

statements by Christian Right leaders. The Christian Coalition's training manuals – especially the one distributed at the first “Road to Victory” conference, provided detailed instructions on party rules, and how to exploit them. When asked by a reporter about a *Campaigns & Elections* article from 1994 that suggested that the Christian Right was the dominant force in GOP politics in 18 states and a substantial force in 13 others, Robertson replied We must complete the job in all 50 states. I'm glad to see all this that they say about 31, but that leaves, my goodness, a lot more. We've got more work to do. Because I like 100 percent, not 60 or 70.”⁴

Political scientists have focused significant attention to the way that party rules create opportunity structures for external movements. American political parties are porous, and open to outside influence (Rozell and Wilcox 1996; Schwartz 1990; Schwartz 2006), but the rules vary from state to state. Open nomination rules in some states made it easier for movement activists to control the nomination process, and to win control of party committees (Green et al. 1998; Green et al. 2001). In one county in Virginia, Christian Right took over a county GOP committee in a single evening, with plaques prepared in advance thanking the surprised party officers for their years of service (Rozell and Wilcox 1996).

What Does the Metaphor of Christian Right as Invader Help Us Understand?

The metaphor of Christian Right as invading army allows us to appreciate the grievances that motivate activists, and the real religious resources that were mobilized in the effort to build the movement. It allows us to take seriously theological divisions among evangelicals, which were eventually supplanted by more inclusive interpretive frames by movement leaders.

It also reminds us of the very real conflict between Christian conservatives and party moderates in the 1980s and 1990s, which persist (Danforth 2005). In most surveys of this period, Christian conservatives form a readily identifiable party faction, with distinctive religious characteristics, and distinctive positions on issues. And although party moderates charged that the Christian conservatives were instrumental partisans, the surveys also showed that they were instead the most loyal partisans.

But the image of the Christian Right as conquering army ignores the help that the Christian Right received from various Republican activists. The resources mobilized by the Christian Right in the 1980s and especially in the 1990s were not all internal to evangelicalism. When the evangelicals were at the gate, there were GOP collaborators who helped their army. Indeed, there were some who opened the gate.

A Nice Christian Girl Gets Involved with Wall Street, or the Christian Right as Partisan Mobilization

The Christian Right can also be seen not as an invading army, but as a set of organizations that were created to help the GOP woo evangelical voters. Despite Biblical warnings, the Christian Right has been unevenly yoked to other party factions, and used by those factions to help win elections.⁵ Christian conservatives have generally settled for symbolic promises rather than concrete policy, and thus are perhaps paradoxically one of the most successful social movements of the last century in influencing elections, but the least successful in enacting public policy.

Nancy Rosenblum has referred to the “associational nexus” that surrounds religious parties and secular parties with religious factions – the network of civil society

organizations that are bound to the party and aid in its mobilization (Rosenblum 2003). The Christian Right can be conceived as part of the nexus of organizations that are created by party elites to help it raise money, win votes, and develop its ideas. In other political systems, parties sometimes create social movements to help them organize their supporters (Mohseni and Wilcox 2007).

This account of the Christian Right and the GOP stresses party involvement in the original formation and mobilization of the movement. Recognizing a potential cleavage that could divide Democrats and win votes for Republicans, GOP strategists invested resources in evangelical entrepreneurs, and tried to train the evangelical rank and file to be good partisans (Leege et al. 2002; Wald et al. 2002). The Christian Right is therefore an example of the larger partisan efforts to exploit cultural cleavages, first exemplified by the “Southern strategy.” Longtime Republican activist Morton Blackwell termed evangelicals “the greatest tract of virgin timber on the political landscape... We set about quite systematically to identify leaders, to teach them how to become effective, how to organize, how to communicate, how to raise funds, how to use direct-mail technology – skills to make them more effective” (Martin 1996).

Social movements generally try to build inclusive identities, but voter mobilization can proceed with microtargeted communications. The Moral Majority was established to mobilize independent fundamentalists, Religious Roundtable was set up to appeal to the Southern Baptists, Christian Voice was focused on mobilizing Pentecostals. Although many scholars have seen this as a concession to the real religious cleavages among evangelicals, it also fits well a short-term voter contacting strategy.

The role of partisan activists in mobilizing the Christian Coalition is even more substantial. The Republican National Senatorial Committee provided seed money to form the Christian Coalition, which hired longtime Republican operative Ralph Reed to direct its operations. President Bush in 1992 helped mount fundraising events for the Coalition, which had pledged to use the money to identify and mobilize voters on his behalf.

From the start, the Christian Coalition focused its energy on voter identification and mobilization in districts where Republican candidates were in close races. Its direct mail fundraising letters boasted of their successful efforts on behalf of GOP candidates. Its voter guides were tailored to highlight (or even create) policy difference between Republican and Democratic candidates in elections. The distribution of the guides was targeted to swing districts. The critical efforts of the mobilization were governed by the electoral needs of the GOP.

Robertson publicly proclaimed the Coalition's goal of defeating influential Democrats, and of helping the Republicans gain control of Congress by 1994 and the Presidency by 2000. Although he sometimes remembered to couch his language to fit the non-partisan requirements for a tax-exempt charity, he frequently forgot these niceties in his enthusiasm for his cause. Robertson told Miles O'Brien in a CNN interview on August 15, 1996: "so far, we have been more or less non-partisan, but I think, rather clearly - Republican."

When the Christian Coalition disintegrated in the late 1990s, the Republican Party decided to simply move the voter mobilization efforts "in house." In 2004, the Bush administration sought to replicate the voter mobilizations of the Christian Coalition in

house, by acquiring the membership lists of conservative congregations and mailing carefully targeted communications (Wilcox and Robinson 2007a; Wilcox and Robinson 2007c). The Republican National Committee mailed pieces to select voters in West Virginia that were essentially plagiarized earlier mailings by Concerned Women for America. Republican activists created ad-hoc groups such as *Let Freedom Ring*, which distributed videos to churches in Ohio, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia touting Bush's personal faith, along with promises that any pastor who showed the video in church but who followed the guidelines would be defended in court from any IRS challenge.

To paraphrase Voltaire, when the Christian Coalition ceased to exist, it was necessary for the Republican Party to reinvent it. Nearly all of the activities that the Christian Coalition conducted on behalf of George H.W. Bush in 1992 occurred again in 2004, but they were done by the party, and not by a group created by the party. The party policy cut back on its outsourcing of evangelical mobilization in 2004.

Whose Date was the Christian Right?

If the Christian Right was wooed by the GOP, which of the factions did it choose to date? The initial invitation was clearly issued by movement Republicans, who expected the Christian Right to be an ally in internal party battle. Yet ultimately, it may well be the business wing of the party who has benefited the most from the Christian Right mobilization. In this way, the Christian Right might be seen as the ultimate "cheap date" for the business community. Some theorists have suggested that business interests seek to build relatively "cheap" coalitions that do not threaten their ability to win particularistic benefits (Bailey 2004). In this regard, the Christian Right is an unusually

attractive coalition partner, since the policies that it seeks would seldom influence the lives of business elites who would have access to private education, private medical care, and gated communities where tolerance is at a premium.

Movement activists who were initially eager to help form the Moral Majority did not perhaps expect how easily a group like the Christian Coalition might be formed, which would place opposition to gasoline taxes and national health care at the top of its agenda. They did not anticipate how easily evangelicals could be convinced that any Republican candidate was better than a Democrat, in the process lending support to party moderates. They did not expect that movement to settle so quickly for symbolic assurances, rather than concrete victories.

Indeed, by many standards the courtship of evangelicals by the GOP has been nearly costless, for there have been few occasions where the party has been forced to deliver substantial policy concessions in exchange for votes. Consider the key issues raised by John Danforth's New York Times op-ed. The special bill for Terry Schiavo allowed her parents access to federal courts but gave them no legal basis to win an appeal, and did not apply to any similar case. Meanwhile the GOP-controlled Congress was cutting funds to the national health care program that kept Schiavo alive. Christian conservatives have limited the use of national funds for stem-cell research, but this has created opportunities for states and private industry to jump to the forefront of such research. Even in Danforth's home state, voters approved a measure to allow state funding of stem cell research, and elected a Democrat who favored that policy over an incumbent Republican who opposed it. And the national constitutional amendment to bar same-sex marriages is stalled, with no serious effort by George Bush or Congressional

Republicans to push it through, even when they had the majority in both chambers from 2005-2006.

Meanwhile, other elements of the GOP coalition enjoyed considerable success over the past several years. Businesses have repeatedly enjoyed both broad and narrow reductions in taxes and regulation. They have benefited from an explosion in earmarked contracts as well. Neoconservatives have directed key elements of foreign policy. The Christian Right has had far less influence on party priorities.

What Does the Metaphor of the Christian Right as Cheap Date Buy Us?

The metaphor of Christian Right as cheap date allows us to focus on the role of GOP operatives in the formation of the movement. It helps us to understand why the movement has focused so exclusively on electoral politics in a heavily partisan manner, and supported moderate Republicans who did not deliver policies they preferred.

It also invites us to consider the loss or prophetic voice that evangelicals encountered when they were represented by partisan social movement organizations. Two examples stand in for countless others. First, when the GOP leadership drafted legislation to enact welfare reform, they required poor women with young children to get a job or lose their benefits. Concerned Women for America had long espoused the core principle that women with young children should stay home as full time mothers. The lobbyist for CWA told me that she was powerless to criticize the GOP on this issue, however. Second, in 2004 the Virginia legislature repealed a law which accidentally reestablished a mandate that all businesses would allow workers one day for their families over the weekend. Christian Right groups that had long argued that secular law

should match Biblical principles were silent while the state GOP repealed the law, despite the 4th Commandment. Pro-family groups that had long pushed for more family time were silent as well, because they did not want to anger their Republican allies.⁶

The image of Christian Right as partisan movement does not fit well with the internal party clashes that were very real across the country in the early 1990s, many party strategists saw this as a small price to pay for new voters that could make them a majority party. And other party activists welcomed the new allies in internal party disputes. It also does not fit well with the spontaneous mobilizations that occurred in 2004 around the same-sex marriage issue, many of which do not appear to have been orchestrated by the GOP. Yet spontaneous movement protests do not mean that the critical organizations of the Christian Right have not been at the very least captured by the GOP.

Yet the engagement between Christian conservatives and Republican regulars has changed both groups. The Christian Right of the 1990s was partially designed by Republican operatives, but the GOP was different in 1990 than it had been in 1978 because of the incursion of evangelicals. And the Christian Right of the 1990s was very different than the movement had been a decade earlier. The interaction between the Christian Right and the GOP changed both over the course of the past 25 years, and neither of the dominant metaphors for understanding the relationship help us understand those changes.

Co-Evolution of the Christian Right and the GOP, or Charles Darwin meets John Roach Straton

The metaphor of social movements and parties evolving together is less grounded in theories of social movements or partisan mobilization. Some studies have used evolutionary concepts to describe social movements, and some have referred even referred to this body of research as a “paradigm” (Young 1988). But in fact there have been very few efforts to formalize and test theoretical predictions (Hannan et al. 2003). Thus far, ecological models of social movements are probably best thought of as metaphors (Gaziano 1996). Yet metaphors can be helpful in reconceptualizing problems.

How might the biological theory of natural selection help us understand the interactions between the Christian Right and the GOP? There are several ways that evolutionary metaphors could apply. One of the basic evolutionary units is the gene; its cultural equivalent is the meme. Certain memes gain reproductive advantages from the interaction between the GOP and the Christian Right –for example, the idea of a total ban on all abortions has more play in politics than its popular support would normally merit.

There has been some research that has conceived as social movement organizations and interest groups as competing for scarce resources in a broader ecology, and that those that find their best “niche” are better able to survive and prosper (Baum and Singh 1994; Gray and Lowery 1996; Stern 1999; Young 1988). This can be helpful, although it is worth remembering that many species in ecosystems ignore one another, and others cooperate.

In biology, species co-evolve when they exert mutual influence on the reproductive success of the members of the paired species. This sometimes manifests as an “arms races” between predator and prey, such as the evolution of thorns on acacia

trees and the evolution of long tongues to circumvent those thorns by giraffes, or various appendages on predatory insects that lead other insect species to develop armor. But co-evolution can be cooperative as well, as when species of flowers evolve particular enticements that affect the reproductive success of various moth species that might help to fertilize them.

It is probably most useful to depict the Republican Party and the Christian Right as overlapping subspecies with diverse population characteristics, in which some members are advantaged and disadvantaged by the evolutionary interaction with the other subspecies. Subspecies remain distinctive based on geographic concentrations and mating patterns: subspecies of birds may build their nests at slightly different heights, and differ slightly in their mating songs, or even in the time of day that those songs grace the air (Wilson 1992).⁷

In this case, we are interested in the way that subspecies interactions alter the ability of various members of the populations reproduce themselves culturally. The incursion of evangelicals into the Republican Party makes it easier for some kinds of partisans to win elections and to put their preferences in party platforms. And the active collaboration of Republican activists gave advantages to some Christian conservative leaders, groups, and ideologies in the competition with others.

Evolutionary models are generally not predictive, and scientists only rarely ponder how evolution might have proceeded under different circumstances (Gould 1989). But it is politically interesting to imagine a Republican party without the interaction with the Christian Right, and evangelical politics without the interaction with the Republican party.⁸

There is a certain irony in the use of an evolutionary metaphor to describe changes in a social movement that throughout the 20th century has consistently opposed the teaching of evolution in the public schools. Those within the movement would willingly talk of changes in the movement in terms of “maturation,” however, and argue that today’s Christian Right is more sophisticated than that of the 1970s. And scholars have written of this maturation, using at times even the language of evolution (Moen 1989; Moen 1994; Rozell and Wilcox 1996).

The Christian Right and the Evolution of the Republican Party

Within the Republican Party, factions compete for funds and votes, and also to determine the candidates who will represent the parties and the platforms those candidates will run on. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the natural ecology of the Republican Party was altered by the influx of first fundamentalist Christians, then by Pentecostal Christians and neo-evangelicals in the early 1990s. In some places, there were multiple and sometimes overlapping waves of mobilization, as in Virginia when Michael Farris mobilized home-school advocates in 1993 and then Oliver North mobilized charismatic Christians in 1994.

Evolution is generally believed to happen most quickly in isolated, small populations. The Christian Right quickly became the dominant force in many state and local parties, especially where the party was not initially strong (Layman 2006). Christian conservative activists seized control of party committees in the early 1990s in many states, and continue to exert influence (Hertzke 1993). They now represent

significant portions of delegates in state party conventions, and among primary election voters (Green et al. 2001). Thus the influx of evangelicals has changed the balance within the Republican party in part by displacing existing elites.

The influx of evangelicals is clear in national GOP politics as well. Studies of delegates to national party conventions show that the percentage who are evangelical Protestants has increased from 10% from 1972-1980 to nearly 30% in 2004. The portion of delegates who attend church almost weekly has also increased, from just over 40% to well over 60% (Layman 2006).

The Christian Right made available to GOP candidates and factions a new resource stream of dedicated evangelical activists and voters. In a nation with closely divided elections, the turnout of evangelicals became critical to the success of the party in general elections. But the evolutionary impact was greater in internal party contests. Candidates who took conservative positions on issues that were likely to mobilize evangelical voters, such as abortion, same-sex marriage, and sex education in the schools were advantaged in many states' primary elections, and some candidates changed their rhetoric on these issues to adapt to the changing environment.

Candidates who were more comfortable using religious language openly, and in sending subtle religious signals were advantaged as well. George W. Bush had great advantages over his father in this regard, speaking publicly of his faith and also sending more narrow-cast signals in phrases such as the "wonder working power" of private charity, which had more religious resonance than his father's "a thousand points of light" (Wilcox and Robinson 2007a).

But where the movement succeeded in winning the nomination for movement candidates, they were usually defeated in the general elections. Candidates who were bilingual -- able to speak to both moderate voters and Christian conservatives -- were far more successful (Green et al. 2003). In presidential nominations, the movement frequently lost, but in congressional elections, the gradual replacement of moderates with more socially conservative members has changed the character of the party, especially in the House.

The incursion of evangelical activists and voters had an obvious impact on party platforms. The movement surged into the GOP in the 1980 nominating process, and ended the long-time support in the platform for the ERA while inserting a pro-life plank. In 1996, the movement triumphed over more moderate elements in resisting a plank that would have called for tolerance of Republicans with divergent views on abortion. But the impact of the movement is probably even more significant on state party platforms in states such as Texas, where the platform devotes considerable space to movement agenda items (Wilcox and Robinson 2007b).

Over time, the impact of evangelicals on intra-party nominations moved the overall position of the party to the right on issues such as abortion (Adams 1997). As Christian conservatives came to constitute an increasing share of party activists, potential candidates made strategic decisions in positioning themselves on the issue (Carmines and Woods 2002; Layman and Carsey 1998). Pro-choice activists flooded into the Democratic Party, moving the party's average position to the left. Voters eventually responded to this new issue cleavage by adjusting their attitudes to fit those of party

elites, or by adjusting their partisanship to fit their abortion positions (Carsey and Layman 2006; Killian and Wilcox 2006).

Yet a more critical analysis might suggest that the new resource stream of evangelical voters did not change GOP policy so much as its rhetoric. In the 12 years that the GOP mostly controlled Congress from 1994 through 2006, only limited symbolic legislation on abortion made it through Congress. The attempt to amend the national Constitution to bar same-sex marriage was given less attention than tax cuts and deregulation.

Perhaps the most important impact of the evangelical influx into the GOP was to transform it in Congress and many state legislatures from a perpetual opposition party to a ruling party. Perversely, this may have served to strengthen the business wing of the party, as congressional leaders rushed to build strong connections between business lobbyists and committee chairs (Berry and Wilcox 2007). Thus the social movement eventually helped Republicans who worked with business lobbies to cement more secure sources of resources.

The Republican Party and the Evolution of the Christian Right

Most of the literature on social movements and evolution has viewed movement organizations as rival species competing for scarce resources. In that view, originally organizations such as Christian Voice, Religious Roundtable, Moral Majority, and Concerned Women for America were designed to fill theological and denominational. The Moral Majority flourished because it drew on distinctive resources available to

Falwell, and because fundamentalism provides theological resources that are easier to politicize than does evangelicalism and Pentecostalism (Jelen 1991).

But the secular New Right leaders who helped to organize these organizations created a dependency on direct mail fundraising, and when the mid 1980s ushered in a drought in direct mail fundraising, even leading organizations such as the Moral Majority died. Christian Voice found alternative and unusual funding sources, and CWA survived because it had low overhead and a diverse financial base.

By 1990, a new cohort of organizations was in place. The Christian Coalition was the largest and most visible organization, and most clearly linked to the GOP and to partisan goals. Its leadership staked generally moderate positions on social issues. Focus on the Family was the Coalition's main competition, but it built on pre-existing networks of state organizations and specialized tactically in lobbying state legislatures.⁹ Focus was less pragmatic than the Coalition, and more prone to stake extreme positions on issues. Its one-time affiliate, Family Research Council, found its niche in producing research reports that became the staple of the movement. Concerned Women for American continued along, distinctive in the crusading themes in its rhetoric and in its focus on appealing to women. In addition, several organizations found smaller niches on particular issues, or pairs of issues. Citizens for Excellence in Education specialized in ideologically extreme appeals based on issues affecting schools. Traditional Values Coalition centered on sexuality in the media. As new issues arose, various groups sought to carve out financial support on these issues.

The organizations of the 1990s depended on more than direct mail contributions to survive. Many received large grants from wealthy individuals and in some cases

companies and foundations, because they were organized as tax-exempt charities. The reliance on large donations was ultimately part of the downfall of the Christian Coalition, however, for the IRS eventually decided that its voter guides violated tax law.¹⁰

Most interesting in the Christian Right is the continued success of CWA, which was far eclipsed by first the Moral Majority and then Christian Coalition and Focus on the Family in the media spotlight, but which has survived and prospered throughout the era. The organizational base of CWA in local prayer groups kept its costs low, and its more diverse financial base kept it out of direct competition with other organizations. Although CWA has worked at times with other organizations, it is primarily steered its own path within the movement.

But how might the influence of the Republican Party have affected the evolution of the Christian Right? Conservative activists in the party recruited fundamentalist leaders in the first wave of mobilization, and although they were able to quickly mobilize religious resources to build an organization, these resources came at a price. The religious divisions within the movement in the 1980s were real hindrances to effective action, and the extreme rhetoric of the leadership alienated moderate voters. Jerry Falwell mobilized fundamentalist voters in Virginia, but his face appeared most often in Democratic ads that sought to link him to GOP candidates.

So in many ways the form of the Christian Right in the late 1970s and early 1980s reflected the short-term electoral needs of the GOP. The fastest way to use religious resources in elections was to build through denominations and informal pastoral networks, and so large denominations and well-known pastors were advantaged over

other more ecumenical voices. But these particularistic organizations would not be ideal to build a lasting social movement.

The effort to build the Christian Coalition was in many ways a studied reaction to the failures of the Moral Majority. Controversial televangelist Pat Robertson was pushed to the background, signing fundraising letters and giving occasional speeches but leaving the practical political work to seasoned professionals. GOP activists from other organizations were hired instead of local pastors, and the organization's message was centrally controlled. Ralph Reed made a soothing alternative to Jerry Falwell (and to Robertson).

Republican resources helped to elevate the Christian Coalition to the forefront of the Christian Right of the 1990s. Without large contributions by GOP activists, it would have probably attracted less attention than Focus on the Family, with its more combative leader James Dobson. With Focus at its head, the Christian Right might have demanded greater policy concessions in exchange for voter mobilization than did the Christian Coalition. It might have focused its energies in internal party battles instead of rallying behind moderate Republicans in battleground states. And it might have focused its energies on somewhat different issues than the Christian Coalition.

Thus the "maturation" of the Christian Right can be seen as a result of Republican resources designed to influence the evolution of the movement – almost a selective breeding program to turn a tiger into a lap cat. If the movement changed from one of amateur purists into pragmatic professionals, this was at least partially because GOP activists wanted to mold the movement into something that was easier to negotiate with

and less threatening to moderate voters. GOP activists sought to create in the Christian Coalition a domesticated and ecumenical version of the Moral Majority.

The greater religious ecumenical coalition in the Christian Right of the 1990s was also aided and partially directed by Republican strategists, who sought to build a more powerful movement that would unite “people of faith” rather than merely Bible Baptist Fellowship members. This dialogue within conservative evangelicalism was helped along by the growth of non-denominational mega-churches, but in the 1990s GOP resources clearly aided ecumenical groups, whereas in the late 1970s they had flown to more particularistic organizations.

Stronger claims are sometimes made – that involvement in Republican politics has increased the democratic virtues of Christian conservatives, leading them to be more tolerant and accommodating toward their political opponents. Christian Right training sessions frequently emphasized the role of mutual respect in the political process, and especially the norms of civility. Moreover, operating in the Republican ecology may have exposed Christian conservatives to differing viewpoints, which may have led them to greater understanding of diverse viewpoints through intra-group deliberation (Shields 2007). Although survey research does not consistently show that political involvement leads social movement activists toward greater tolerance (Dodson 1990; Wilcox 2003), it may well be true that Republican involvement with the movement helped those who were more pragmatic to have greater voice

The Evolution of Evangelical Politics

The Christian Right represents only one element of evangelical politics, which are complex and multi-faceted. Liberal white evangelical groups supported George McGovern and are evident in organizations such as the Soujourners (Wallis 1996). African American evangelicals share a general moral conservatism with their white counterparts, but have distinctive views on economic issues and civil rights (Emerson and Smith 2000; Harris 1999). In many parts of the country, evangelicals once worked closely with mainline Protestants, who have a greater focus on social justice issues (Djupe and Gilbert 2003). It is therefore useful to step back one step, and consider how the Republican Party has influenced the evolution of the broader evangelical political voice.

Although evangelicals have always been focused on personal piety and greatly concerned with sexual sins, the religious community is broad, diverse, and energetic, and includes activists with issue concerns beyond abortion and gay marriage. The community draws its inspiration from the Bible, which is a very large and complex book with myriad teachings. In recent years, evangelicals have pressed for international policies to oppose genocide and the spread of AIDS, and to combat international poverty (Hertzke 2004). Evangelical groups have opposed global warming, and the torture of suspected terrorists. These issues have divided the community, but evangelicals are not unanimous on any issues, not even abortion or even same-sex marriage. In evolutionary terms, the population of evangelicals has great ideological diversity with a conservative bent.

Republican support for the Christian Right, and for the Christian Coalition and similar electoral groups primarily, gave reproductive advantage to one set of voices in the

evangelical community. Evangelical political priorities were shaped in ways to help elect Republican candidates. Absent political resources to one set of groups in the community, evangelicalism might have years ago developed the richer and more diverse voice that it is now beginning to sound.

Moreover, the partisan edge to the political mobilization of evangelicals has centered on fear and even hatred of political enemies, because Republicans have sought primarily to drive them to the polls. Robertson's direct mail warned of the evils of liberals, feminists, and environmentalists, and the appeals from Focus on the Family soon followed suit. Fundraising appeals warned that liberals would soon ban Christians from wearing the cross as a pin on their ties or dresses, and would ban the Bible as hate speech. Movement groups pronounced with some considerable alliteration that the gay rights movement sought to "promote pedophiles as prophets of the New World Order."

This type of polarized message is ideal for partisan mobilization, but it is less useful for religious goals. Moral Majority leader Cal Thomas warned that the movement had been "blinded by might," drawn to the dichotomous worldview of Democratic evil instead of the inclusive message of the gospel (Thomas and Dobson 2000). The Christian Right in earlier times also used divisive rhetoric, but the additional resources of the Republican party enabled the Christian Right of the 1970s to triumph over other, more moderate voices in the community.¹¹

Thus the partisan nature of the GOP involvement with evangelicals has advantaged those in the community who see the world as more deeply divided, who see their political enemies as more dangerous, and who fear liberals.¹² Had the GOP not created and help to finance Christian Right organizations, it is possible to imagine a

broader environmental movement where more moderate voices were more clearly heard, where divisive rhetoric more isolated, and where complex alliances with other groups might have been more common. That is, Republican intervention gave the Christian Right a reproductive advantage over other, potentially more interesting evangelical voices.

One interesting development in evangelical politics has grown out of Republican efforts to create a broader activist and electoral coalition, as well as the opportunities that partisan politics create for cross-cutting conversations. Young and well-educated evangelicals are now engaged in serious theological conversations with Catholics – something that would have been unheard of before the Christian Right was mobilized. The membership and leadership of the Moral Majority was hostile to Catholics (Wilcox 1989), but the Christian Coalition and Republican leaders encouraged Catholics and evangelicals to cooperate politically (Bendyna et al. 2001; Bendyna et al. 2000). Today there is an interesting dialogue about theology and politics taking place among younger evangelicals and Catholics that may well alter the way that these groups interact in the future (Robinson 2008).

In these conversations, Catholics are acknowledging the importance of biblical sources in understanding God's will, while evangelicals are finding great depth in the long theological tradition of the Catholic Church. Evangelicals are finding their positions challenged on issues such as social welfare, immigration, and the death penalty, and refer to themselves as “in the listening boat” on issues where they are under conviction.

In evolutionary theory, sometimes catastrophic events open up broad ecological niches. Extra-terrestrial impacts and terrestrial eruptions can wipe out ecosystems,

allowing for new species to quickly evolve. At other times, more secular changes can occur in an environment, such as the glacier that divided the flycatchers in the U.S. into two separate avian subspecies.

Today much of the leadership of the Christian Right is aging and less active. Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and James Dobson all have health problems, and are all less active politically. Moreover, their divisive rhetoric makes them less viable as political leaders. And Democratic leaders are beginning to compete with Republicans in “God talk” and other manifestations of values politics.

Meanwhile, a new generation of evangelical leaders is taking the stage, one that was heralded by scholars decades ago as having a new vision (Hunter 1987; Penning and Smidt 2002; Quebedeaux 1974; Quebedeaux 1983). And the religious organization of evangelicalism is changing, with the relative power of fundamentalist denominations giving way to non-denominational and theologically eclectic mega-churches. Many young evangelical leaders see the U.S. not as a battleground, but as a mission ground, and are more willing to enter into conversations with those with whom they disagree.

It is possible to imagine, therefore, that a more complex and nuanced evangelical voice will arise in the next decade, despite GOP efforts to advantage certain voices in the community. It will probably be a conservative voice, especially on certain issues, but it is likely that different members of the evangelical population will be able to draw on different sets of resources, and at least compete with the Christian Right.

What does the Evolutionary Metaphor Buy Us?

The evolutionary metaphor frees us from needing to decide if the Christian Right is an external force seeking to influence the party, or a partisan mobilization aimed to helping the party win elections. By thinking of the Republican Party and Christian conservatives as related subspecies, we can focus on how the two have influenced each other over more than a quarter century of interaction.

Evolution occurs when a particular set of genes confers reproductive advantages on certain elements of the population. The Republican Party has conferred certain advantages on some Christian Right groups, and in the process helped produce a movement that has been specially bred to help the party in elections. Similarly, the Christian Right has helped certain types of candidates and platform planks to defeat other types of candidates and ideas within the Republican party.

The Republican Party's cultivation of the Christian Right has also altered the ecology of evangelical politics, giving additional resources to one set of voices while seeking to quiet others. Groups closest to the GOP have sought to quiet the National Association of Evangelicals on issues such as global warming and torture, for example, and have sought to keep evangelicals focused on issues that help the GOP in elections. Meanwhile, voices that have sought to reach compromise on these issues by adopting policies that might reduce the number of abortions without outlawing the procedure have subsisted on many fewer resources.

It is also worth noting that the co-evolution of the Christian Right and the Republican Party has influenced the evolution of the Democratic Party as well. The visible presence of Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson made it attractive for the Democratic Party to run advertisements in many parts of the country linking them to GOP candidates.

This inevitably attracted more secular activists to the Democratic Party, which in turned pushed more observant Christians to the Republicans. In the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections, Democratic candidates found it difficult to speak authentically about their faith, although both Bush and Kerry were personally religious men.

In the past few years, however, Democratic groups have spent much time, effort, and money on efforts to reframe some of their key agenda as based in moral and religious values in an effort to win votes of religiously motivated moderates. Indeed, issues such as support for health care for the poor, for laws protecting the environment, for progressive taxation, and other key Democratic issues were originally motivated by faith concerns among progressive Catholics and mainline Protestants; the party's incoherent message on those values is a more recent result of the co-evolution of the Christian Right and the GOP. Today candidates in both parties are anxious to establish their religious credentials early in the campaign, and to decide on an approach to discussing issues of faith.

Perhaps the most substantial impact of the co-evolution of the Christian Right and the GOP has been an escalation of faith-based language and symbols in electoral campaigns. Yet the elevation of religious talk in national elections has not been accompanied with a richer dialogue on moral issues, because it is advantageous for parties to simplify issues and to build resentment. It may well be that the co-evolution of the Republican party and the Christian Right has served to hinder the kind of cultural deliberative conversation that evangelicals must engage in to convince the culture on any of the issues in their agenda.

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² Thanks to John Green for his suggestions on titles for my work over the years.

³ Ephesians, 6: 11.

⁴ Quoted in The Washington Post, 9/10/95, A1.

⁵ 2 Corinthians 6:14.

⁶ This lack of voice is not unique to the Christian Right, of course. Feminist leaders were silent as stories of Clinton's womanizing circulated, because of their ties with the Democratic party.

⁷ For some possible analogies, see Holly Lebowitz Rossi, 2007. Beliefwatch: God's Gift. Newsweek Magazine. <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/14966265/site/newsweek/> accessed 4/10/07.

⁸ In this spirit, scientists sometimes whimsically predict what might have happened to dinosaurs in the absence of catastrophic events.

⁹ Focus on the Family is a larger radio and publication ministry, which became more politically active in the 1990s. It began to affiliate with state chapters during this period, often jointly with Family Research Council.

¹⁰ The group's voter guides were thinly disguised partisan instruments, but they would have been fully legal as independent expenditures by a PAC. But PACs must raise their funds through small contributions from many people, and the Christian Coalition chose to ignore internal advice that they organize a PAC because it was easier to line up a few big donors. Once the legal problems of the organization became evident, direct mail and telemarketing revenues began to plummet.

¹¹ Secular and liberal opponents of the Christian Right frequently use similarly scary images to raise money from those who oppose the Christian Right.

¹² This greater message of fear and intolerance in fundraising coexisted with elite efforts to train activists in the language of pragmatism and compromise.