

Politics as the Construction of Relations: Conservative Christian Religious Identity and Political Expression

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The political sphere has been particularly amenable for the advance of contemporary American evangelicalism because it is a realm where symbolic boundaries rooted in deeply-held beliefs and populist forms of civic engagement can generate success. Through appropriately capitalizing on these, evangelicals have helped elect particular candidates and bring selective issues to the national agenda for policy consideration. Through semi-structured, in-person interviews with 360 evangelical leaders in six domains of American public life, I found elastic orthodoxy to be a particularly advantageous resource for evangelicals, one they have put to use over the last thirty years in the political domain. Attending to the expressive and institutional elements of conservative Christianity's rise in national politics, I argue that boundaries constructed—such as those between allies and opponents—and various strategies that tapped populist sentiments helped evangelicals achieve prominence within a relatively short time frame. These developments, however, also revealed important differences between two kinds of evangelicals, which I distinguish as populist evangelicalism and cosmopolitan evangelicalism. Significant fractures within the movement can also be discerned between the Evangelical Left and the Evangelical Right as well as among those who are wary of the political activism advocated by some movement leaders on either pragmatic or religious reasons, or both.

Historically, American evangelicalism has been a protesting movement, one committed to reform on selective moral issues (Marsden 2006; Young 2002). As such, the evangelical movement has often been more defined by political issues than theological concerns. Indeed, Almond, Appleby, and Sivan (2003) have suggested that the evangelical movement's theological diversity is held together by political coalitions. As a social movement that includes diverse perspectives, evangelicals' "public theology"—that is, theological reflection that is focused on public concerns—has existed mainly to birth and buttress particular political and social positions.

No doubt, this springs from the movement's lineage as part of the larger family of Protestant Christianity. The curious development involves the relatively recent alliance of this reforming movement with conservative politics.¹ This was certainly not the case in previous generations.

In the hundred years following the Civil War, the American South and the working class of the North—large segments of the evangelical constituency—cast their ballots consistently for Democratic candidates. Franklin Roosevelt's patrician background and New Deal policies expanded the Democratic reach to include many within the intellectual elite and those "limousine liberals" who favored state-sponsored support for the poor, even as they received no personal benefit from such initiatives. Kennedy's Camelot solidified the marriage between the nation's intellectual elite and the Democratic Party; representative of this union was the commission Robert Frost received for a poem to be read at Kennedy's inauguration. During his campaign for the White House, Kennedy went to great lengths to assure voters that his religious convictions would not determine his position on various issues, going so far as to tell the Greater Houston Ministerial Association, "I want a chief executive whose public acts are responsible to all and obligated to none...whose fulfillment of his presidential office is not limited or conditioned by any religious oath, ritual, or obligation."² President Kennedy offered these words with the hope of expunging anti-Catholic bias from the voting booth. The result was the election of America's first Catholic president and an additional brick added to the wall separating church and state. The unintended consequences of Kennedy's assurances, however, drove a deep wedge between the sacred and secular realms within the Democratic Party—a reality that has both pleased and haunted Democrats ever since. Gradually, the social conservatism of many Southerners and the working class unraveled from the fabric of the Democratic Party, and with the civil rights

¹ Indeed, in other contexts, such as Great Britain, evangelicals are often at the other end of the political spectrum, advocating liberal and sometimes socialist political positions.

² Remarks by Senator John F. Kennedy, June 12, 1960, Greater Houston Ministerial Association (Houston, TX).

legislation of the 1960s, many Whites fled the Party as quickly as African Americans rallied around Democratic candidates.

At the same time, supporters for conservative Republican Barry Goldwater, who lost in a landslide to President Johnson in 1964, began to marshal forces in establishing broad-based conservative coalitions. In 1965 they founded the American Conservative Union, and particular individuals became strategically important to the resurgence of conservatism. Phyllis Schlafly, a Harvard graduate and Goldwater supporter, founded her own political newsletter, *The Phyllis Schlafly Report*, and by 1972 she had established a formidable organization that is now called the Eagle Forum, a women's group originally formed to oppose the Equal Rights Amendment. Another Goldwater supporter, Paul Weyrich, witnessed the coordination of strategy and communication among disparate liberal groups in the 1960s, and with the financial sponsorship of Joseph Coors, head of the Colorado brewing family, pushed conservatives to do the same. Two entities birthed by Weyrich's leadership, the Heritage Foundation and the Committee for the Survival of a Free Congress,³ would become major players in uniting evangelicals to conservative politics. Ironically, neither Weyrich nor Schlafly came from the evangelical world; both grew up Roman Catholic. But conservative politicians courted evangelicals quite well. Documents from the archives of President Nixon show that he and Billy Graham were very close, and Nixon's political team actively worked to build relations with the evangelist.⁴ Nixon

³ The phrase "Free Congress" originated from the desire of conservatives like Weyrich to "free" or rid Congress of increasing liberal influence. This mission no longer applies to the Foundation, but the group still exists, and the name has not changed.

⁴ Charles Colson, one of the president's closest advisors, was asked to develop a list of "rich people with strong religious interest to be invited to the White House for church services" (Martin 1996: 98).

also created a position within the White House Office of Public Liaison to the religious community, a post that has remained in place with every administration since.⁵

Just as Republicans were reaching out to evangelical constituents, the Democratic Party appeared to be leaving them behind. In 1972, the Democrats nominated George McGovern, and with his nomination a dominant force emerged at the Democratic convention, that of secular progressives. As others have shown, the 1972 convention in Miami gave a group of delegates, the “secularists,” those who seldom or never attend religious services along with those who self-identify as either atheist or religiously agnostic, control of the party (Bolce and De Maio 2002; Layman 2001). In years since, these so-called “secularists” have become increasingly identified with the Democratic Party and its leadership. Data from the American National Election Study shows the increasing divide between secular progressives and religious traditionalists. Whereas about 5 percent of first-time, White delegates to the Republican Convention in 1992 would be classified as “secularist” according to these categories (a figure similar to the 1972 Republican Convention), 60 percent of first-time, White delegates to the Democratic Convention would be classified this way—up from 33 percent in 1972. What began as a divide within Democratic delegates at the 1972 convention became a divide between parties as the secularist progressive camp became increasingly prominent within the Democratic Party elite and religious traditionalists became more visible within the ranks of Republican leadership.⁶

If the seeds were sown in the 1960s and 1970s for the alliance between evangelicals and conservative politics, their labor bore fruit starting in the 1980s and have continued ever since.

⁵ Curiously, many who have occupied this position since the Reagan administration have been particularly focused on the evangelical community; notable liaisons include Mariam Bell (Reagan), Douglas Wead (Bush 41), Flo McAfee, with help from Linda Lader (Clinton), and Timothy Goeglein (Bush 43).

⁶ The intriguing element, say Bolce and De Maio, is the dearth of media attention paid to secularism’s rise within the ranks of Democrats compared to the ongoing media interest in the ascendancy of evangelicalism within the Republican Party. They find, for example, that *The New York Times* devoted nearly twice the number of stories about evangelicals within the GOP in 1992 than both *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* did on secularist Democrats *combined* between 1990 and 2000.

To learn more about these developments, I conducted semi-structured, in-person interviews with 360 evangelical leaders. These leaders were selected because they either self-identify as evangelical or affirm three characteristics that distinguish evangelicals. These include believing in the Bible as authoritative for all of their lives, having a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ (which typically entails a born-again experience), and endorsing an activist approach to faith—one that motivates the adherent to various forms of religious outreach. The leaders I interviewed represented elites from six arenas: 1) government/politics; 2) arts/entertainment/media; 3) religion; 4) the non-profit/social sector; 5) higher education; and 6) business/corporate life. Elsewhere, I have detailed the methodology employed and the social and religious profile of informants in the study (Lindsay 2007), but the number of high-ranking informants within the political realm is noteworthy. Interviews with two former Presidents of the United States as well as four dozen Cabinet secretaries and senior White House staffers from the last five administrations (1976-2006) provide useful data for examining the ways that elites have drawn upon religious elements of the evangelical movement for political expression. In what follows, I argue that relations formed with allies and opponents have been key to evangelicalism's political ascendancy. The contemporary evangelical movement—as a branch of what has been called “strong religion” (Almond, Appleby, and Sivan 2003)—has two elements that make it particularly well suited for political mobilization. These include convictions and sensibilities that give rise to boundaries that are constructed for political gain and populist strategies of action.⁷ With some exceptions that we will later discuss, leaders within the movement have forged ties with political conservatives since the 1960s. I conclude with a discussion of how this development has produced some important differences of opinion within

⁷ I employ the term “convictions” to include norms, reasoning and ideology—matters of belief. I use the term “sensibilities” to refer to matters of religious practice—routines, demeanor, perceptions, and way of life.

the movement and how these differences signal the possibility of significant fractures within evangelicalism's future.

Constructing Boundaries

Politics entails the construction of relations, and that typically involves forming alliances and identifying opponents. Douglas (1970) has shown how symbolic lines and boundaries can bring order into experience, and especially in the political sphere, boundaries can make action efficient by adjudicating among competing demands. I found that evangelicalism's *elastic orthodoxy* makes it particularly well suited to construct and maintain symbolic and social boundaries.⁸ The elastic orthodoxy of evangelicalism entails adherents' holding a core set of shared religious convictions without those convictions being so firm that they are unable to form alliances with people who do not share them. As Smith (1998) has shown, the strength of evangelicals' religious convictions actually enables them to interact with people outside that tradition. He argued a subcultural theory of religious vitality explains how rising religious pluralism in the United States has actually strengthened, not weakened, the evangelical movement. I found this tension between deeply-held belief and engagement with wider society has provided strategic political advantage for evangelicals. It enabled them to establish boundaries that built alliances around shared opponents, both real and ideological. Evangelical commitment to orthodoxy—a set of fundamental beliefs—keeps the movement cohesive; the elasticity of that orthodoxy, however, enables them to build bridges with other groups. This, in essence, is what differentiates evangelicals from fundamentalists. Whereas evangelicals and

⁸ Here I am using Lamont and Molnar's (2002) definitions: symbolic boundaries as "conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space;" which is distinct from social boundaries, defined as "objectified forms of social differences manifested in unequal access to and unequal distribution of resources (material and nonmaterial) and social opportunities."

fundamentalists share many of the same beliefs, the two differ in how they act upon these shared convictions: fundamentalists separate from pluralistic society while evangelicals engage it.

Opponents. Eric Hoffer ([1951] 2002) has argued that social movements may not need a “god,” but they must have a “devil.” Successful movements galvanize around joint opposition to some force or individual; if only for rhetorical purposes, social movements require a nemesis as a rallying point. According to several observers from within the movement, American evangelicalism has a history of opposing particular devils.⁹ From the 1930s to the 1960s, communism was the object of evangelical opposition; to the extent that evangelicals discussed political issues from the pulpit, they expressed grave concern about the spread of communism around the world and its occasional appearance within this country. In similar fashion, evangelical forebears in the 1920s opposed Darwinian evolution, just as many of them, especially in the North, had opposed slavery in the nineteenth century. As these social issues bedeviled evangelicals, patriotic sentiment percolated throughout the movement (Martin 1996). Evangelicals rallied around the American flag and a sense of American uniqueness as a distinctively “Christian” nation;¹⁰ this was particularly the case among the Youth for Christ leadership cohort of the 1940s.¹¹ Such nationalistic sentiment is important to remember, for many of these same leaders would later take the helm of large evangelical entities. And indeed, today, the nationalistic proclivities of American evangelicalism can be found among many

⁹ Interview with Tony Campolo, March 3, 2006 (Cherry Hill, NJ). In this interview, Campolo related a story of evangelical historian Mark Noll making a similar argument to President Bill Clinton when the president asked Campolo to arrange a meeting so he could learn why American evangelicals were opposing him and other Democrats in the 1990s.

¹⁰ Of course, it should be noted that not all evangelicals shared these sentiments then, and certainly do not today. Black evangelicals, for example, do not long for a return to colonial or antebellum America and few of them think of this era of American history as particularly “Christian.” See Emerson and Smith (2000).

¹¹ This patriotism is part of why William Randolph Hearst liked the group and eventually telegraphed the editors at his newspapers to “puff Graham,” an act that catapulted Billy Graham to celebrity status in mid-century America.

evangelical initiatives including Patrick Henry College, Regent University, and the Legacy group.¹²

Groups like the Moral Majority thrived because they were able to articulate a discourse of opposition that resonated with many social conservatives (Harding 2001; Martin 1996). Just as opposition to “godless communism” rallied evangelicals in the 1950s and 1960s, “secular humanism” became the movement’s common enemy of the 1970s. The term, popularized by an American pastor who established a retreat center in the Swiss Alps, was a catch-all phrase for ideological impulses that evangelicals believed were contributing to the creep of secularization in American society. In an ironic twist, the first U.S. President to be charged by evangelical leaders with endorsing “secular humanism” was one of their own, Jimmy Carter.

Carter, a lifelong Southern Baptist, was minimally involved with some of the denomination’s politics that occurred while he was in office. As Ammerman (1990) details, two camps within the Southern Baptist Convention struggled for control in the late 1970s. The conservatives succeeded in 1979 by electing Memphis Pastor Adrian Rogers to the denomination’s presidency. And using a political strategy of issues-based campaigning around the concept of biblical inerrancy,¹³ the conservative faction won the presidency of the SBC every year thereafter. In turn, they succeeded in placing like-minded pastors and lay leaders on various governing and nominating committees, gradually securing control of every SBC seminary and agency. Although Carter was not supportive of the conservatives’ position, he agreed to meet

¹² Legacy is a political group that joins evangelical faith to conservative politics by seeking to sustain the “legacy” of a compassionate conservative agenda and, in the words of one participant, “building [that into] the DNA of the political culture” (Interview with Mark Berner, July 14, 2004, New York, NY). Like the Council for National Policy, Legacy meetings include briefings on political, economic, and social issues of interest to conservative Christians, and meetings are also by-invitation-only. The difference, however, is that Legacy is populated with leaders much younger than CNP’s demographic; Legacy members, who pay annual dues like those of CNP, are mostly in their 30s and 40s. Still early in its organizational history, however, Legacy does not exhibit the same degree of secrecy or exclusivity as CNP.

¹³ Biblical inerrancy holds the conviction that the Bible is literally true, without error in any way.

with Rogers and his wife at the White House as a symbolic gesture of goodwill, despite their theological differences. The meeting is one Carter has never forgotten.

We had a very pleasant discussion about different aspects of life, not unpleasant at all. And then as he was leaving the Oval Office, I remember exactly where I was standing. He said, “Mr. President I hope that you will abandon your commitment as a secular humanist”....

I was taken aback. I had no idea what he was talking about. I didn’t know what a secular humanist was...so when I... got back to eat lunch with Rosalyn, I asked her if she ever heard of the phrase, “secular humanist.” And she said, “No, I don’t know what it means”...I didn’t know either.¹⁴

President Carter was shocked by the charge because early on, evangelical leaders were among his biggest supporters. Pat Robertson, for one, strongly supported Carter’s candidacy: “Carter was the one who activated me and a lot of others. We had great hopes....[He was] like our champion.”¹⁵ Robertson, whose father had been a Democratic Congressman from Virginia, and several other leaders of the evangelical movement saw in Carter the answer to their political prayers. Carter spoke in evangelical tones: “I believe God wants me to be the best politician I can be,”¹⁶ and his promise never to lie to the American people resonated with evangelicals’ desire for morality in politics in the post-Watergate era. His interview in *Playboy*¹⁷ and the furor it created almost cost Carter the election. In the end, Carter won by a slim, three-point margin.

Shortly, however, some leaders of the evangelical movement became uneasy with aspects of the Carter administration. As one Cabinet secretary from the Reagan administration related,

¹⁴ Interview with President Jimmy Carter, November 16, 2004 (Atlanta, GA).

¹⁵ Interview with Pat Robertson, October 24, 2003 (Virginia Beach, VA).

¹⁶ Transcript from “Jimmy Carter” documentary in the *American Experience* series, Public Broadcasting System. See <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/carter/filmmore/fd.html> for complete transcript.

¹⁷ Toward the end of the campaign, Carter’s younger staffers persuaded him to grant a three-part interview to *Playboy* magazine. After the interview was complete, Carter responded to the reporter’s off-the-record question about mistakes he had made, even as a moral, upstanding evangelical. Carter’s response, for which the reporter restarted the tape recorder in his pocket, acknowledged that he had “lusted in his heart” for women other than his wife, committing a form of adultery according to Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. Having the nation’s first born again presidential candidate use the word “lust” in *Playboy* magazine was too salacious for some of Carter’s fellow evangelicals. W.A. Criswell, the venerable pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas, ended up endorsing Gerald Ford, who admitted that he, too, was born again a few weeks after reporters began referring to Carter this way during the general election campaign.

“He brought people with him who had a humanist worldview” who “went out of their way to undercut Jimmy Carter anytime he came up with an initiative that didn’t suit them.”¹⁸

Conservative evangelical leaders charged Carter’s secular humanism with permitting the spread of communism in far-flung places like Angola and Mozambique and allowing the rise of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua during his time in office. Two events in the Carter administration were particularly disconcerting to conservative evangelicals. The first involved a threat by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) to strip Christian schools of their tax-exempt status because of the *de facto* racial segregation at these schools. By this action, evangelicals felt, the government was not merely advocating a liberal agenda with which they disagreed (such as gay rights), but it was actually infringing on their own institutions and ideals. They perceived this proactive stance on the part of the federal government as a hostile act against their entire faith. The matter eventually resulted in the IRS abandoning its plan (through an arrangement negotiated by members of Congress), but evangelical leaders were outraged that President Carter had not intervened on their behalf. If a fellow evangelical in the White House would not stand up for their faith, who would? Two years later, the president convened a White House Conference on Families, fulfilling a campaign pledge to hold high-level discussions on the state of the American family. When inviting various participants to participate in the conference, the president refused to exclude homosexuals from participating—an act that garnered additional evangelical scorn.¹⁹ In the end, the conference was unable to issue a statement on a definition of the “family,” and many believed the event merely increased the stature of the gay and lesbian movement—against which evangelicals sought to draw sharp boundaries. In sum, many in the evangelical world did

¹⁸ Interview with Don Hodel, October 4, 2004 (Colorado Springs, CO).

¹⁹ Also, President Carter was the first American president to issue public statements in support of gay rights. His White House hosted the first official visit by a gay rights organization, and his administration allowed a group of gay veterans to participate in an official ceremony at the Vietnam War Memorial. Actions like these outraged conservative evangelicals.

not feel President Carter stood with them enough, and they were particularly troubled as they battled secularizing elements that were taking place at the behest of his administration. Indeed, evangelicals' early support for the folksy Southern Baptist from Georgia was really anomaly; for most of the last fifty years, evangelicals have opposed liberal politics.

As people who hold the Bible in special regard, evangelicals often cite Scripture as justification for their opposition to certain groups or ideas. The Bible is replete with allusions to enemies or opposing forces. Indeed, the figure of a serpent or Satan can be found throughout the biblical text, including several episodes that appear in the accounts of Jesus' life. Some of the evangelicals I interviewed acknowledged the conflicting admonitions about enemies that appear in the Bible. At one point, Jesus instructs his disciples to love their enemies, but elsewhere, he declares harsh judgment on those who oppose his disciples. The epistle to the Ephesians speaks of a flight "not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil."

Such warring rhetoric buttresses the evangelical tendency to draw sharp boundaries between allies and adversaries. This emerged across many interviews. Larry Norman, the professional golfer, described the filmmaker Michael Moore as "Satan incarnate."²⁰ Others referenced what has been called the "Culture Wars" (Hunter 1991) that pits conservatives against liberals, not just in politics, but on myriad social issues.²¹ Not surprisingly, most conservative evangelical leaders agreed with the sentiment expressed by Don Hodel, a Cabinet secretary under Reagan, "At the national level, there are almost no Democrats who are people of faith in a born-again sense....If you are an evangelical Christian and want to live your faith, I don't think there's

²⁰ Interview with Larry Nelson, July 6, 2004 (Detroit, MI).

²¹ Not all informants felt this way, especially those who lived on the West coast. Guy Anthony, a technology executive in Silicon Valley, captured the sentiment of several dozen leaders I met: "I think evangelicalism is becoming militant to the point of losing its effectiveness....The whole 'culture wars' deal...it's not even clear to me who the enemy is." (Interview with Guy Anthony, Mary 19, 2004, San Francisco, CA).

room for you in the Democratic Party. It's unfortunate...Not all Republicans are conservative Christians, not by a long shot, but...I don't know [how] Christian politicians can be Democrats."²² The boundaries in the Culture Wars, for most conservative evangelicals I studied, are drawn along party lines. However, informants see their faith as one part of a wider matrix of opposing forces. As one governmental leader put it, "It isn't just the Christian piece; it's also...the Black and conservative piece....It's also the pro-life piece amongst a constellation of pro-choice people. There's a lot in that stew."²³ Dozens referred to the public square as a battle for "hostile territory," but the struggle with political adversaries does not intimidate the evangelicals I interviewed. As one leader said, "Big deal! So what? That's what we're here for."²⁴

Conservative evangelicals have also learned not to acknowledge mistakes to their political adversaries. They learned this lesson from Jimmy Carter's presidency. Multiple leaders spoke disapprovingly of the image of President Carter sitting on the floor of the Oval Office listening to complaints of Congressional leaders over his administration before the national address that came to be known as his "malaise" speech in July 1979. For Carter, being willing to admit mistakes embodies the Christian ideal of humility, but for other evangelicals, it is a sign of weakness that can be exploited by political adversaries. The day following President George W. Bush's second inauguration, I asked Karen Hughes, the president's close advisor, to name the biggest mistake they had made during his first term. She responded:

Biggest mistake, oh gosh, I'm sure we made a lot of mistakes....It's hard to talk about that because it has policy ramifications for the president....He struggles with this

²² Interview with Donald Hodel, October 4, 2004 (Colorado Springs, CO).

²³ Interview with Kay James, September 14, 2004 (Washington, DC).

²⁴ Interview with Don Eberly, July 15, 2004 (McLean, VA).

question, too, because...right now if he says them, it has ramifications [in Washington and] around the world.²⁵

The construction and maintenance of boundaries by evangelicals in the political realm reflect larger trends whereby evangelicals differentiate between “us” and “them.” For decades, evangelical movement leaders have produced and disseminated a narrative that presents the group as being somewhat persecuted as a religious minority. The irony of course, is that evangelicals have founded groups like the Moral *Majority* even as they promulgate a discourse that says their opinions are not valued by society. It is this perception of being marginalized by the cultural elite that causes movement leaders to employ this rhetorical distancing mechanism. This language within the movement creates a perception among evangelicals that they are an embattled group, yet, as Smith (1998) points out, they are not so counter-cultural so as to be removed from the respective layers of community—local, national, and global—of which they are a part. In the aggregate, this “embattled” rhetoric contributes to a sense of exclusion felt by many evangelicals.

This is one area, though, where the opinions of movement leaders like Jerry Falwell and James Dobson differ from the political and cultural elites they work to support. Indeed, most evangelical public leaders I interviewed—those evangelicals who head mainstream political, business, and cultural institutions—say their secular peers are “not antagonistic toward Christianity. They’re apathetic toward Christianity...they just don’t want to deal with it...They don’t care.”²⁶ In fact, one informant referred to this notion of feeling embattled as a “manufactured thing” that is felt more often by evangelicals in “middle America” than by evangelicals working directly in centers of elite cultural production.²⁷ Nevertheless, the rhetoric

²⁵ Interview with Karen Hughes, January 21, 2005 (Washington, DC).

²⁶ Interview with David McFadzean, September 27, 2004 (Pasadena, CA).

²⁷ Interview with Don Holt, October 7, 2004 (Wheaton, IL).

of embattlement has provided a rallying cry for many evangelicals in drawing sharp boundaries against their political opponents.

Allies. At the same time evangelicals have identified political adversaries, they have built significant bridges with important allies. Chief among these are fellow religious conservatives who actively practice their faith, including Roman Catholics, Jews, and Muslims. The pro-life movement began with Roman Catholics in the early 1970s, but prominent evangelical physician, C. Everett Koop was an early ally. Koop met Dr. Harold O.J. Brown, an evangelical theologian and ethicist, at a Christian men's conference in 1975. Later that year, they joined Billy Graham and Francis Schaeffer in forming the Christian Action Council, a group focused on lobbying Congress for legislation that would remove some of the allowances permitted by *Roe v. Wade*. In 1977, Koop, Schaeffer, and Schaeffer's son, Franky, produced a five-segment film series and companion book entitled *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?* Koop and Schaeffer traveled the nation, promoting their film and spurring the faithful to action. Soon thereafter, what began as a Roman Catholic concern became a passionate issue for evangelicals as well. When the Moral Majority was formed in 1979, it provided an avenue through which evangelicals could campaign about issues they cared about: outlawing abortion, suppressing the homosexual movement, and advancing their vision for family life. It is on these pillars that evangelicals built strong alliances with other religious conservatives in the early 1980s. Schaeffer argued that there were many groups who shared evangelicals' convictions regarding human sexuality and the family; working together, he suggested these different groups would be more successful politically than working alone. Building on this notion, which he called "co-belligerency," the Moral Majority reached out to Jews, Catholics, Mormons, and even

secularists to participate in the political aims they sought.²⁸ While maintaining their theological differences, these co-belligerents worked together to fight the encroachment of secularism in the public sphere through activism on matters like abortion, prayer in schools, and homosexuality. In subsequent years, these groups would work together for other issues, including the successful passage of the *International Religious Freedom Act* of 1998 and the *Victims of Trafficking and Protection Act* of 2000 (Hertzke 2004).

These political alliances have been supported by evangelical institutions and initiatives, mostly through evangelical “parachurch” organizations.²⁹ Since the 1970s, evangelicals have founded and donated funds to support a number of politically-oriented initiatives including the Council for National Policy, the Arlington Group, the Christian Coalition, and Family Research Council. Also, groups like Focus on the Family have established political action committees (Focus on the Family Action) while Christian media such as talk radio and magazines have expanded the reach of evangelicals and their political allies. A few initiatives have supported the agenda of evangelical progressives such as a journal called *The Post-American*, which eventually was renamed *Sojourners*. Figures like Ron Sider and Jim Wallis began to call upon their fellow evangelicals to mobilize for social action through documents like the *Chicago Declaration of Evangelical Social Concern*, which was first distributed in 1973. In it, they stated, “We must attack the materialism of our cultureBefore God and a billion hungry neighbors, we must rethink our values regarding our present standard of living and promote a more just acquisition and distribution of the world's resources.” Most evangelicals did not share the sentiments of

²⁸ Of course, some fundamentalist leaders, such as the Rev. Bob Jones, completely disagreed with welcoming these co-belligerents to the evangelical-dominated coalition.

²⁹ From the Greek *para*, parachurch organizations work “alongside” existing church structures to provide specialized services such as evangelistic outreach, international relief and development, or social justice. One of the oldest Protestant examples is a group formed out of the Anglican tradition, the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, which was founded in 1698 by Thomas Bray to encourage Christian education.

Wallis and Sider, but groups such as Evangelicals for Social Action (founded in 1978) and Call to Renewal (1995) provided institutional bases for evangelicals who disagreed with the Republicans agenda.

Some political leaders admitted to me, usually off-the-record, that they curried favor with leaders of the evangelical movement for political gain. These politicians admitted that they attended evangelical gatherings in order to tap into the wide network of informal alliances evangelicals have built over the years. Congressman Tony Hall (D-OH) told me that he first attended the National Prayer Breakfast “because I was a politician; I would be seen. [He thought to himself,] ‘Maybe this would be a good thing for my career if I were to be seen with godly people.’”³⁰ Over time, he says, the political advantages of attending receded in his decision to be part of the annual event as his personal faith became more important to him. However, he admits that many politicians in Washington, himself included, fellowship with people of faith at times for political purposes.

The process of building political alliances has been done mostly by governmental leaders and who lead large evangelical institutions. Rarely are megachurch pastors involved in this process. It is not uncommon for notable ministers like Bill Hybels or Rick Warren to meet with politicians or to speak at various political gatherings organized by evangelicals. But these pastors devote little time to maintaining the informal networks that have served as the skeleton by which evangelicals have flexed their political muscle. I identified three dozen organizations that have been fundamental to evangelicals’ political alliances,³¹ and only two of them—Rick

³⁰ Interview with Tony Hall, February 4, 2005 (Washington, DC).

³¹ These organizations include groups such as the Christian Coalition, Moral Majority, Religious Roundtable, Institute for Global Engagement, Common Good Strategies, Wilberforce Forum, Family Research Council, American Family Association, Evangelicals for Social Action, Focus on the Family Action, Christian Embassy, Legacy, the Heritage Foundation, and many others.

Warren's PEACE Plan and D. James Kennedy's Center for Christian Statesmanship—are headed by a pastor.

J.P. Nettl (1967) has pointed out that grassroots and elite mobilization are two forms of the same phenomenon, just as stalagmite and stalactite mineral formations converge toward a common end. In examining American political life, several scholars have documented the grassroots alliances built by evangelicals (Harding 2001; Smith 2000), yet few of them have attended to the task of exploring the interaction between evangelical movement leaders (like Jerry Falwell and James Dobson) and those who actually occupied positions of political power. How does grassroots mobilization relate to elite activism?

Pat Robertson's 1988 bid for the White House was a seminal event in evangelicals' alliance-building at both the grassroots and elite levels. Although Robertson's candidacy failed, his involvement mobilized evangelicals in new, important ways. His campaign focused on local caucuses that occurred early in the primary season in places such as Iowa and Michigan. After his campaign ended, Robertson recruited his evangelical supporters to become the backbone of a new entity called the Christian Coalition. Through this vehicle, grassroots evangelicals became the core of local Republican political life in communities around the nation. Through this, evangelicals became politically mobilized like never before, and shortly thereafter, Robertson told me, "They found themselves in positions of authority in these party structures."³² Although the group's activities have scaled back considerably in recent years—its annual revenue in 2004 was one-twentieth what it was at its peak in 1996—it has served as an effective conduit for incorporating evangelicals into the Republican Party elite.

Today, conservative evangelicals use their political alliances as a way of maintaining close relations with politicians they support. For several years, they have convened weekly

³² Interview with Pat Robertson, October 24, 2003 (Virginia Beach, VA).

meetings with Congressional leaders and Republican officials to discuss public policy and specific strategies. These strictly closed-door meetings include the Values Action Team³³ and the Arlington Group,³⁴ both of which are attended by prominent Senators and representatives from the White House. Groups like these have existed for quite some time, but the prominence of conservative evangelicals in Washington has pushed these strategy-shaping meetings into the public limelight (Tumulty and Cooper 2005; Cooperman 2003).

However, I found that additional strategy sessions are not the principal source of cohesion behind evangelicals' alliance building. Instead, their political power resides in the informal relational substructure that constitutes the webs of personal friendship and mutual involvement outside the political sphere. Serving on the boards of evangelical nonprofit organizations and personal ties with leaders and their families have generated bonds of loyalty and mutual commitment that have been fundamental to evangelicals' political expression in contemporary American politics. Movement leaders like Charles Colson have mentored senior governmental leaders such as Michael Gerson, one of George W. Bush's chief lieutenants during his first term. Colson gave Gerson his first job out of college and later helped him move into politics working for then-U.S. Senator Daniel Coats. These kinds of long-term relationships between evangelical and Republican leaders have amplified the evangelical movement's influence in politics. As Padgett and Ansell (1993) demonstrated, deep relational ties among powerful actors can be critical to achieving certain objectives, and I found the interpersonal networks among evangelicals that honeycomb Washington today have been fundamental to

³³ The Values Action Team includes representatives from Focus on the Family, the Family Research Council, the Eagle Forum, the Traditional Values Coalition, and Concerned Women for America, among others. Insiders report these Thursday gatherings, which began in 1998, discuss issues like Supreme Court nominees, policies on the family, and the execution of a pro-life agenda.

³⁴ Named for its original meeting spot in northern Virginia, the Arlington Group is composed of roughly 75 members who meet regularly for off-the-record brainstorming sessions on conservative policies and media messages. With Paul Weyrich as the main convener of the Arlington Group, breakfasts that the Arlington Group sponsors for lawmakers are often called "Weyrich breakfasts" inside the Washington Beltway.

evangelicalism's advance. These networks point to the various boundaries that evangelicals have drawn between allies and opponents and the mechanisms that have maintained those forms of social differentiation.

Evangelical Populism

Two religious streams that have flowed into contemporary American evangelicalism—the Pentecostal-Holiness and Methodist traditions—celebrate populist sensibilities. The Holiness-Pentecostal tradition began in New York City in 1836 out of a gathering called the “Tuesday Meeting for the Promotion of Holiness,” which was led by Phoebe Palmer. Women have enjoyed leadership positions within this tradition from its beginning, and true to other forms of popular Christianity, an emphasis on charismatic manifestations of spirituality supersedes theological sophistication among the tradition's leadership (Wigger 1998). Revivalists D.L. Moody and Charles Finney stoked the fires of evangelical populism as they traveled the country during the nineteenth century, which furthered the political populism of that era (Williams and Alexander 1994). And William Jennings Bryan, the three-time Democratic candidate for the Oval Office, embodied the ideals of evangelical populism in the 1890s. In similar fashion, Methodism in this country pioneered several strategies for church growth and mastered the use of emotional appeals to elicit mass conversions. Methodism is a more organized tradition—*theologically and institutionally*—than the Holiness-Pentecostal tradition, yet they both emerged out of contexts that wanted a faith that could address the needs of ordinary folks.

Historian Nathan Hatch (1989) explores the ways that common people took religion into their own hands during the early American republic as Jeffersonian and Jacksonian democracy took root. Five elements of Hatch's “democratization of American Christianity” characterize the

populism of contemporary American evangelicalism. First, evangelicalism prefers large-scale forms of religious expression, yet elicits that by individual appeals. In belief and practice, evangelicals focus on the individual's soul and in the necessity of personal conversion. However, they often rely upon mass rallies and revival meetings as the context in which appeals for conversion are made. Second, evangelicals value the incorporation of popular ditties and indigenous folk music in their services; this practice requires them to stay current on popular culture and seek out creative ways to mimic mainstream cultural goods and trends. Third, iconoclastic individuals often provide leadership for the movement. These outspoken—sometimes reactionary—leaders effectively capture media attention and build coalitions of followers because of their opposition to the establishment. Related to this is the anti-elitism of American evangelicalism. The evangelical movement's populism depends, in part, on the impression that evangelicals are not part of the establishment. This wasn't always the case: Evangelicals in 1900 were influential in every sphere of American public life, but in the decades following, they lost that power (Marsden 2006). This sense of loss and the desire to regain it animates contemporary evangelicalism. As one CEO told me, "We lost the universities. We lost the cities and thought centers. We lost the media."³⁵ To the extent that evangelicals have sought to "take over America," as some critics charge, it has largely involved a hope to enact significant social change through mobilized political action. As part of that, movement leaders engage rhetorical dichotomies that distinguish between traditional believers (who are "good") and secular activists (who are "bad"). Finally, evangelicalism's populism, like that which Hatch describes, favors simplicity and pragmatism instead of doctrinal complexity or rhetorical flourish. This is the domain of the PowerPoint sermon and the affect-oriented praise chorus.

³⁵ Interview with Paul Klaassen, July 15, 2004 (McLean, VA).

Evangelicalism's populism contributes greatly to its significant size and expanding reach. As others have noted (Jenkins 2002; Martin 1990), these populist sensibilities have enabled evangelicalism to become the fastest growing religious movement in the world. These five attributes—individualistic, contemporary, iconoclastic, anti-elitist, and pragmatic—have given the movement and its adherents energy and a sense of urgency. In religious terms, this translates into a drive to talk to others about faith, using all resources at their disposal and making use of whatever time they have. Hundreds of times this theme emerged as I interviewed various leaders. One representative example was the name plaque that sat on the desk of Clayton Brown, a successful executive in Chicago. On the back side of the name plate was inscribed the phrase “Perhaps Today.” When I questioned Brown why he would have that statement facing him as he sat at his desk, he replied, “That reminds me the Lord might come any minute, especially today.”³⁶ The statement kept the imperative to act on his faith at the forefront of Brown's mind throughout the day. In political terms, this sense of urgency translates into a desire to get something done, which is more easily accomplished in a democratic society like ours where mobilized constituents can vote candidates into office.

Political Mobilization. Connected to evangelicalism's focus on individual salvation is a push for moral reform. Moral activism motivates adherents to become involved in the political process. Others have shown that the enclave mentality of American evangelicals from the 1930s until the 1970s was an anomaly (Marsden 2006; Young 2002; Smith 2000). As Tocqueville ([1834] 2000) noted, organized religion provided the institutional means through which active citizenship was cultivated during Jacksonian democracy, and evangelical churches and voluntary associations led the way. A convinced religious viewpoint can give rise to political fervor. In recent decades, evangelicals have drawn upon their faith in mobilizing for political action. Peter

³⁶ Interview with Clayton Brown, October 8, 2004 (Wheaton, IL).

Wehner, a senior White House official, elaborated on the nexus between evangelicalism and political mobilization:

As Christians, we are called to advance certain principles—justice and mercy, goodness and righteousness, human dignity, human decency....And politics is one of the realms in which you can do that....People have legitimate moral concerns, and politics is a way to express them...a way to make a difference, to help improve human lives.³⁷

Of course, not all observers think that justice and mercy is what evangelicals have advanced. Indeed, the invocation of one's personal faith in crafting public policy is disconcerting to many (Linker 2006; Kaplan 2004). To these detractors, evangelicals' activism threatens the social order that sustains liberal democracy. For them, living in a free, pluralistic society demands that religion remain in the personal sphere; it is what ensures the flourishing of liberal society. The evangelical leaders I interviewed claim not to impose religion on others, but neither do they deny that religion plays a role in their objectives and strategies. Michael Gerson told me that for believers like him, the evangelical faith is where "you get your moral passion furnished, your depth of commitment because you think it's true and right."³⁸ For Gerson and others, the idea of divorcing one's religious identity from civic participation is not a requirement of liberal democracy; it is, instead, a denial of "what it means for me to be who I am." Faith plays such a salient role in these leaders' lives that cannot conceive of active citizenship apart from their moral convictions, which are shaped by their evangelical commitments.

Leaders within the evangelical movement have tapped their tradition's populism to produce energy and momentum around political issues and particular candidates. One of the most important but often overlooked examples from recent history is a massive rally that was held in the run-up to the 1980s presidential campaign. In April of that year, several evangelical leaders sponsored an event called "Washington for Jesus." This was a turning point for the

³⁷ Interview with Peter Wehner, August 4, 2004 (Washington, DC).

³⁸ Interview with Michael Gerson, March 17, 2005 (Washington, DC).

evangelical movement and its political ascendancy. Five hundred thousand adherents assembled on the National Mall. Through media initiatives, mailing lists, and personal outreach, movement leaders gathered the crowd on April 29, the anniversary of the date when settlers first landed at Jamestown in 1607. The event linked evangelical fervor with patriotic sentiment, and it showed that evangelicals' political muscle was more organized than it had ever been (Wilcox 1996). The event also solidified the political importance of certain movement leaders like Pat Robertson within conservative politics, and organizers were convinced of the event's significance. Bill Bright, founder of Campus Crusade for Christ, and another rally organizer called the event "the single most important day in the history of the United States since the Declaration of Independence." More than one movement leader told me that they believed this precipitated Ronald Reagan's election. Of course, subsequent research has shown that evangelical leaders vigorously supported Reagan's candidacy, but more rank-and-file adherents cast their ballots for Carter (Woodberry and Smith 1998; Manza and Brooks 1997; Woodberry et al 1996). The tide would turn by 1984, at which time rank-and-file members followed movement leaders in backing Reagan and moving squarely inside the Republican fold. But the Washington for Jesus rally was a signal event.

Robert Michels (1962) argues that organization necessitates oligarchic governance; a small group must lead all organized bodies, even those advancing populist or democratic ideals. This principle, which Michels calls the "iron law of oligarchy," means that power inevitably will be held in the hands of relatively few people. Even as the evangelical movement has drawn upon its populist attributes for political expression, an elite of conservative evangelicals—funders like Richard De Vos and spokespersons like Richard Land—have served as nodes of information and introduction between networks of important evangelicals and powerful Republicans. Indeed,

Michels predicts that populist-oriented groups, such as large crowds or mass rallies, are easier to dominate than smaller gatherings. Crowds are less cohesive, so it is easier for a small group to gain control. Perhaps this has been to evangelicals' political advantage; their proclivities toward populism may make them easier to organize for political action.³⁹ As movement leaders encouraged evangelicals to become more involved in the political process, a rising number of evangelical millionaires were entering the public stage and seeking to deploy their financial resources for the kinds of social change they favored (Lindsay 2007; O'Connor 2001). The collaboration among like-minded political, business, and cultural elites and leaders within the evangelical movement precipitated an *organizing moment*—the point at which well-resourced actors began to work together intentionally for conservative political objectives. As we have seen, conservative leanings have been part of modern American evangelicalism for decades, but the constitution of overlapping networks of resourced leaders who were organized behind a particular political agenda occurred in the latter years of Jimmy Carter's presidency. The "Washington for Jesus" rally was the first sign of their ability to mobilize for political action. Reagan's sweep of the evangelical vote in 1984 and the loyalty these voters gave to George H.W. Bush in 1988 and during his term in office cemented the alliance for many within the evangelical fold.⁴⁰

³⁹ In no way do I mean to imply that evangelicals are "rubes" or "dupes" and are, therefore, easier to control. In fact, my research has shown quite the opposite, as evangelicals have demonstrated intelligence and cosmopolitan sensibilities in multiple domains (Lindsay 2007). However, I am persuaded that the movement's populist roots in American history and democratic impulses today have made it particularly well suited to be organized for political action. Rising levels of wealth, education, and access to media enabled a cadre of evangelical leaders in the late 1970s and 1980s to capitalize upon their resources for strategic advantage. The dynamic between their overall theological and social conservatism matched well with the political and economic conservatism of Ronald Reagan and other Republican leaders.

⁴⁰ White evangelicals were Bush's strongest supporters going into the 1988 election. As economic struggles plagued the waning months of his campaign, Bush's candidacy appealed to evangelicals on social issues. Mainline Protestants, a tradition that included Bush himself, were growing increasingly critical of the sagging economy; evangelicals, on the other hand, were more approving. Even through the spring of 1992, evangelicals stood with Bush. Data from National Survey of Religion and Politics conducted at the University of Akron that year showed

Triumphalistic Majoritarianism. Evangelicalism's populism causes some movement leaders to claim that they represent majority view on selective issues. This is the rhetorical flourish that gave rise to Jerry Falwell's justification in founding of the Moral Majority in 1979. Movement leaders like Tim and Beverly LaHaye, Ralph Reed, Jay Sekulow, Donald Wildmon, Janet Parshall, John Hagee, and Adrian Rogers joined Falwell's campaign, and as Harding (2001) shows, their mastery of a discourse that resonated with followers contributed greatly to evangelicalism's rising influence within conservative U.S. politics.

Voting, like all cultural phenomena, has a distinctly expressive dimension within a pluralistic democracy (Peterson 1979; Fiorina 1976). People enact certain cultural rituals as a way of expressing norms and beliefs that they hold dear. Casting a ballot for a particular candidate can become an expressive symbol, a way of affirming individual-level values in the larger public square. By identifying with the candidate in a fundamental way—as might happen if religious identity is salient for both a candidate and a voter—voting for the candidate can become an implicit vote for oneself. This expressive component of presidential politics is how voters' evangelical faith has been brought to bear on U.S. political life between 1976 and 2006.⁴¹ As one leading Republican told me, “getting our people into power is something that we [evangelicals] like....It's sort of like, well now the world can see that we're equal with them.” Indeed, evangelicals' rising influence in politics is a source of great pride among most of the conservative evangelical leaders I interviewed.⁴² Part of this is because they feel far less influential in fields like higher education, the arts, and media. And a cohort of evangelical

that 43 percent of evangelicals gave a high evaluation of Bush's job in office, compared to only 38 percent of mainline Protestants and only 35 percent of Roman Catholics.

⁴¹ That, in my estimation, is why so many evangelicals voted for George W. Bush. According to the Pew Research Center, Bush received 72 percent of the votes from evangelicals in 2000; in 2004, he received 78 percent of their votes. Evangelicals voted for this president as a way of validating their own faith perspective and as a way of legitimating their opinion.

⁴² Some expressed concern, as will be explored in the next section.

leaders—whom I call *cosmopolitan evangelicals*—are bothered by their fellow believers who relish in political triumph at the expense of intellectual and artistic respectability. Robert Seiple, who once headed the evangelical organization World Vision and later served as the first Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, referred to this majoritarian-inspired rhetoric of political activism as a “triumphal expression of the sunburst of American evangelicalism.”⁴³ Evangelical historian Mark Noll wrote about the same subject in the conservative journal *First Things*. Here he warned against confusing the “dignity bestowed by popularity with the status earned by insight” (2001).

The distaste some informants expressed over the rhetoric espoused by Falwell and company points to a larger division within the leadership of American evangelicalism. Evangelical populism dominates the movement’s subculture; here, leaders can mobilize millions for collective action. But the movement’s cosmopolitan figures—like many in this study—convey a more nuanced approach to achieving their goals, goals that they share with their more populist brothers and sisters. They are less interested in running the country by the triumph of a majority and instead present their faith as advocating Christian civility in a healthy, pluralistic public square—one voice among many (Skillen 2004; Mouw 1992). Cosmopolitan evangelicals lead mainstream social institutions—they are artists and professors, business executives and governmental leaders. They are less oriented toward the internal community of evangelicals and instead are oriented toward wider society. As Collins (1975) has shown, cosmopolitanism is often correlated with social power because it essentially entails “the capacity to keep up relations with a fairly large number of persons in such a way as to draw others to back one up against whoever he happens to be with at the moment.” Merton’s category of “cosmopolitan” (1957, 1946) like that of Appiah (2006) relies on ongoing interaction and persuasive influence on

⁴³ Interview with Robert Seiple, November 2, 2004 (St. David’s, PA).

constituents outside one's local circle of influence. The cosmopolitan evangelicals that I interviewed resist the bombast and rhetorical hype of populist evangelicalism. Personal taste and disposition are surely factors that condition the extent to which these cosmopolitan evangelicals sought to differentiate themselves (Bourdieu 1984, 1977). Yet the more important factor involves the range of social networks of which they are a part and the access they have to powerful institutions. The social worlds they inhabit are populated with key leaders of our society; as one informant described it, this is "move-the-dial Christianity."⁴⁴ Political leaders George W. Bush and Jimmy Carter may benefit from the support of populist evangelicals, but they are not one of them. Neither attended Christian colleges, and neither have spent much time working within the evangelical subculture. In fact, both come from well-to-do families; Carter, though portrayed as a "peanut farmer," came from a local elite family.⁴⁵ Their personal backgrounds, educational and professional experiences, and orientations to public life are shaped by cosmopolitan sensibilities.

It is a mistake, therefore, to conflate evangelical influence with evangelical populism. Some—I would argue most—prominent evangelicals in American politics are of this cosmopolitan ilk. Of course, populist leaders are among those leaders most identified with the evangelical movement. That is not surprising, for whatever influence they wield and attention they enjoy comes from their position within the subculture. Without their respective institutional bases within evangelicalism, they would have little clout. Individuals like Jerry Falwell, Franklin Graham, and Joel Osteen are prominent media figures that represent, at least in part, evangelicalism to wider society, yet they are only part of the movement's leadership structure in American politics. Sometimes tensions flare between these two groups, and populist leaders

⁴⁴ Interview with Al Sikes, July 14, 2004 (New York, NY).

⁴⁵ I thank G. William Domhoff for drawing this connection for me.

clash with their cosmopolitan co-religionists. Adrian Rogers, for instance, rebuked Jimmy Carter as a “secular humanist.” In a particularly charged meeting, then-House Majority Leader Dick Arney clashed with James Dobson, resulting in a campaign by Dobson to oust Arney from his leadership post. Arney later told me, “That was simply, in my estimation, because I failed to kiss his ring.”⁴⁶ Over the years, there have been sustained internal conflicts between populist and cosmopolitan evangelicals in Washington, but on the most part they have worked together to secure greater political influence for the evangelical movement and its priorities. Some, however, question the wisdom in identifying evangelicalism with conservative politics, and even more raise suspicious about the propriety of pursuing evangelical goals through political means.

Differences of Opinion

The alliance between American evangelicalism and the Republican Party is surprising in some ways. For example, Smith (2000) shows that 68 percent of theologically conservative Protestants do not identify with the Religious Right, and nearly one-third of that population think critiques of the Religious Right are legitimate. While there are historical, theological, and social reasons why evangelicals have joined in common cause with political conservatives, a surprising number of countervailing forces can be found within the evangelical movement. In 1999 as many were leading the charge for President Clinton’s impeachment, for example, several influential evangelical leaders—Tony Campolo, Gordon McDonald and Bill Hybels, to name a few—huddled with the president in spiritual solidarity. Today, Jim Wallis regularly advises leaders of the Democratic Party on how to connect with evangelical voters, and Tony Campolo spoke to a meeting of every Democrat in the U.S. Senate at the request of Hilary Rodham

⁴⁶ Interview with Richard Arney, February 3, 2005 (Washington, DC).

Clinton. Rick Warren has befriended Senator Barack Obama, and invited him and Senator Sam Brownback to speak last year at the World AIDS Day conference his church hosted in southern California. Richard Cizik, chief lobbyist of the National Association of Evangelicals, persuaded 86 evangelical leaders in early 2006 to sign the Evangelical Climate Initiative, a statement about the urgency of fighting global warming. And since losing the 2004 presidential race, Democrats have founded strategy groups, support networks, and mobilization campaigns to connect better with the evangelical public. Common Good Strategies and the Democratic Faith Working Group on Capitol Hill are among these. A number of observers, however, say Democrats' initiatives are "making the same mistakes that the folks on the Right made."⁴⁷ Namely, they are attaching religious labels to partisan activities in ways that strike some as disingenuous.

Beyond differences between the Evangelical Left and the Evangelical Right, I found two kinds of arguments against evangelical involvement in politics altogether. The first deals with pragmatic concerns. Leaders who raised these kinds of objections have either become disenchanted with politics for one reason or another, or they believe politics and religion largely should not mix. The second set of objections deal with theological concerns; informants who raise these issues worry that active political engagement is inimical to faithful Christian practice. Curiously, every leader who raised latter point was active in politics at the time. Such objections, therefore, do not fully dissuade even those who raise them.

Pragmatic Objections. Several of the architects of the nascent Religious Right have abjured in recent years. In fact, as early as 1985, leaders within the Moral Majority were increasingly uneasy about the alliance between religion and conservative politics. Cal Thomas resigned from his position as vice president of the organization to pursue a new career as a columnist. In his opinion, the marriage between evangelical faith and the Republican agenda is

⁴⁷ Interview with Robert Seiple, November 2, 2004 (Philadelphia, PA).

“doomed to futility.”⁴⁸ Thomas and evangelical pastor Ed Dobson wrote *Blinded by Might: Why the Religious Right Can't Save America* (1996) around this theme. In it, they asked, “How can you [evangelicals] impose a morality on people that you can't impose on yourself?” Citing rampant materialism, sexual promiscuity, and evangelical hubris, Thomas and Dobson (not to be confused with Focus on the Family's James Dobson) renounced their involvement with conservative politics. Charles Colson, an official in the Nixon administration who served prison time because of his Watergate involvement, has since become a significant leader within the evangelical movement, founding Prison Fellowship Ministries and the Wilberforce Forum. He reflected on his experience in the White House and offered the following warning to fellow evangelicals:

When I served under President Nixon, one of my jobs was to work special-interest groups, including religious leaders. We would invite them to the White House, wine and dine them, take them on cruises about the presidential yacht....Ironically, few were more easily impressed than religious leaders. The very people who should have been immune to the worldly pomp seemed most vulnerable (Colson 1994).

David Kuo was active in conservative politics for quite some time, and when I interviewed him in 2003, he was serving as deputy director of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. He spoke at length about various evangelical leaders and ministries that sought to curry favor with politicians and their staffs. “They genuflect to the title, not the person, and you have to remember that or else your feelings will be hurt,” he told me. “They'll be inviting you to lunch one day, and then you change jobs and they won't return your phone calls.”⁴⁹ Speaking off-the-record, he alluded to some disappointment with the ways in which lower-ranking officials in the Bush administration sometimes mocked evangelical leaders who came to visit the White House. Kuo subsequently wrote about this (2006), acknowledging that

⁴⁸ Interview with Cal Thomas, June 23, 2005 (New York, NY).

⁴⁹ Interview with David Kuo, October 28, 2003 (Washington, DC).

some of his former colleagues called evangelicals “nuts” and “crazies.” Kuo’s book, *Tempting Faith: An Inside Story of Political Seduction*, was released shortly before the November elections in 2006, and in it, he admonished fellow evangelicals to “fast” from political action for at least two years and redirect the energies toward the poor and toward “loving our neighbors.” Kuo did not advocate evangelicals completely abandon politics, but he does believe, as a practical matter, that politics can have a corrupting influence.

Several leaders also feel that politics and religion should remain separate spheres. Don Eberly has served in several senior posts under recent Republican administrations as well as in the Congress. Endorsing a viewpoint that can be traced back to Augustine, Eberly said, “We should do a far better job of separating out redemptive functions, which are functions of the church, and other functions, which are mostly social or governmental. I don’t think the state serves a redemptive function.”⁵⁰ Similar sentiments were expressed by other evangelicals who have been active in politics, many of whom referred to the separation of church and state. President Carter told me, “I was very careful not to mix church and state....President Nixon had regular religious services in the White House. I thought that was outside my purview as an elected public official....My father inculcated my belief in the strict separation of church and state, of politics and religion.”⁵¹ This did not mean that Carter kept his faith entirely private while serving in office. In fact, he is the most evangelistic—that is, one who speaks openly about his faith—president of the modern era. On multiple occasions, Carter shared his evangelical faith with foreign heads of state. However, he did it while away from Washington—distance which, in his mind, loosened some of the strictures surrounding church-state separation—and only at the invitation of the other person. He spoke candidly about his beliefs

⁵⁰ Interview with Don Eberly, July 15, 2004 (McLean, VA).

⁵¹ Interview with Jimmy Carter, November 16, 2004 (Atlanta, GA).

with European and Asian heads of state, and as Smith (2006) notes, it is usually in foreign affairs that a president shows his true philosophical commitments. Domestically, the presidency is more encumbered by political considerations, but abroad the president has much greater latitude to act.⁵² With regards to expressing his own faith, Carter felt much more at ease while traveling than at home. Carter and other leaders I interviewed sought ways to engage their faith in politics while remaining wary of linking the two spheres too closely.

Religious Objections. A number of evangelicals in government also raised concerns about identifying their faith with partisan activities on theological grounds. These fall into three categories. The first addresses the impossibility of politics achieving spiritual outcomes. According to this line of thought, it is inappropriate—some even said “sinful”—to use politics for religious aims. Brady Anderson, the former USAID Administrator, said, “Too many Christians believe that somehow God’s kingdom is going to be imposed in a political way.”⁵³ The implication is that fellow evangelicals in their political zeal may be trying to do just that. Michael Cromartie, a long-time Washington insider who heads the Evangelical Studies Project at the Ethics and Public Policy Center, asked, “What do these people think they are doing? They’re missing the very point of the gospel—why Jesus came and what he calls us to do. The Kingdom of God is not going to arrive on Air Force One.”⁵⁴

Others spoke about the incommensurability of Christian virtues and political success. They implied that an evangelical could advance one or the other, but rarely both. When Karen Hughes, an active member of her Presbyterian church, was considering the offer to join George W. Bush in Washington, she deliberated at length. She told me:

⁵² Smith (2006) makes this point by noting the salience of human rights in Carter’s foreign policy and the ways in which faith compelled him to act in the Panama Canal treaties and the Camp David Accords, among other diplomatic efforts while in office.

⁵³ Interview with Brady Anderson, March 27, 2004 (Austin, TX).

⁵⁴ Interview with Michael Cromartie, July 22, 2003 (Washington, DC).

I think all Christians struggle about involvement in the political process because on the one hand Christ said, “My kingdom is not of this world,” and on the other, it’s clear that he believes that it’s important for those in authority to be people of faith...I think there’s always that tension there, and I worried about what getting involved in the political process at the national level would mean [for my faith]. I remember praying a lot for a clear signal...and I don’t know that I ever felt like...this is what I definitely need to do.”⁵⁵

Along these same lines, former Congressman and Under Secretary for Homeland Security Asa Hutchinson related, “I’ve often thought that the Christian faith is almost inconsistent with politics because the essence of politics is promotion, getting ahead, advancement. How can you be a politician if you don’t talk about your successes in life?...But that’s really not consistent with the scriptural [admonition for] humility and modesty.”⁵⁶ Finally, evangelical leaders raised concerns that politics can “overtake” a person’s faith. Political success can cause one to lose, in one person’s words, “the sense that history is driven by God, that you do the best you can, but at the end you hold lightly to the things of the world.”

The rub for evangelicals who espouse these theological concerns is that theirs is a faith that makes claims on all areas of one’s life. According to evangelical ideals, faith is not just *a part of* their life; it is constitutive of every aspect of their lives—their families, their jobs, their avocations. The comprehensive nature of the evangelical faith compels evangelicals in government to bring their faith to bear on policy positions and political activities. Multiple times these leaders acknowledged that they fall short of their ideals, and a few discussed how their actions betrayed their faith. But for most, compartmentalizing their faith would be a mistake. Glenn Hubbard once chaired the White House Council of Economic Advisors. On this issue, he

⁵⁵ Interview with Karen Hughes, January 21, 2005 (Washington, DC).

⁵⁶ Interview with Asa Hutchinson, December 10, 2004 (Washington, DC).

said, “If you believe that faith is important in your own life, how could you then say it’s not related to the other things that I do? I can’t imagine how you could do that.”⁵⁷

Conclusion

American evangelicalism has succeeded in the political realm because the movement’s rhetoric and beliefs encourage adherents to construct boundaries and to employ populist strategies for wider influence. Through various alliances over the last fifty years, evangelicals—for the most part—have joined in common cause with theological, social, and political conservatives. The movement’s elastic orthodoxy and historic connection with populist religious traditions have furthered evangelicals’ political expression. Movement leaders have mobilized large crowds and have harnessed their resources in support of particular candidates and policies. This has produced a discourse within the movement that celebrates the triumph of the majority, which is surprising because even by the most generous counts, evangelicals do not constitute a majority in this country (Hackett and Lindsay 2004).

Evangelicals’ political success and the strategies they have employed reveal significant fractures within the movement, several of which I have surveyed here. These include the differences between populist evangelicalism, with its popularity and bombast, and cosmopolitan evangelicalism, with its alternative sources of power and differential degree of influence. Not all evangelical leaders support Republican candidates, and today the Evangelical Left is following some of the tactics pioneered by the Evangelical Right nearly thirty years ago. Some evangelicals in government are bothered by contemporary developments, expressing disbelief that politics can achieve religious objectives or disillusionment with how little their political

⁵⁷ Interview with Glenn Hubbard, August 23, 2004 (New York, NY).

gains have accomplished. Others raise more fundamental concerns about the propriety of faith in the political process.

It remains to be seen what will be the legacy of evangelicals' political gains from the last thirty years. Tocqueville observed nearly two centuries ago that Americans can channel their religious commitments in service to the common good. Such could be the case again as engaged citizens tap additional resources to meet collective challenges and opportunities. By the same token, recent developments could mark the triumph of just another group and its narrow interests. History will be the judge. The rise of evangelicalism, however, can teach us much about the ways that entrepreneurial leaders can draw on the internal strengths of a movement to secure legitimacy and wider influence. Politics, as a realm where relations are constructed for mobilization, in a democratic society—where popular support can secure success—is an arena particularly well suited to enable a religious group once located on the social periphery to make significant advancements in a relatively short span of time. Through this, evangelicals have capitalized upon the advantages afforded them by such an environment and have become a central firmament within the constellation of American political power.

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