A Movement Comes Into Its Own: Evangelicals, Political Engagement, and the Election of George W. Bush to the Presidency

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Introduction

Religion has always played a powerful role in America. With a country founded by believers, yet who wanted religious freedom and the ability to separate government from the passions of religion, America was bound to be a country where God held a strong hold over many of its citizens. Evangelical Christians, according to *Time* magazine, make up 34% of those who say they believe in God, which they list as 85% of the population[1]. That number is pretty big for a group that is often still seen as out of touch with mainstream America, even though they encompasses dozens of Protestant denominations and now are considered a large voting block. But who are these people? Evangelicals have been cited as being a large part of why George W. Bush was elected and reelected to the presidency, but to secularists, this connection seems mystifying, as much as the growth of the movement.

The evangelical movement in America is primarily a social moment, at a grassroots amateur level that has only recently begun to become professionalized. Christian right groups were always tied to a web of clergy, neighborhood churches and religious media, who continue to support them. Only within the last 35 years have evangelicals and religious conservative Christians become politically engaged, reacting to a culture that feels largely amoral.

History always runs in cycles, and the current conservative climate has been building for decades, as result of backlash against what is seen as a liberal America. With divorce rising and pornography, violence and promiscuity seen throughout American culture, many conservatives feared that the country was on a downward slide and wanted to preserve traditional values for the children, to preserve a lasting legacy of morality and goodness, and they felt God was the way to do it. Over time, evangelicals have renewed their spirit and passion, and their leaders have

[1] "America By the Numbers: What We Believe," *Time* October 30, 2006. 50-51.

created organizations and action committees to present their faith to the masses and to convert others. Much of conservatism is a reaction to modernism, the idea that technology and culture of the time is more important than spirituality, and what to many offers a life of moral relativism, that one's morals are dictated by personal experience or cultural, social, or historical contexts; there are no moral absolutes, no rules or guidelines to follow.

Although evangelical Christians have always had a presence in America, for a long time they were hidden from view. This was because political involvement was not part of their heritage, and they were largely self-contained and insular, so only those who were involved with that particular culture generally knew about it.

While evangelicals are nothing new, their grip on American politics is. Religious groups have always had a strong hold on politics; it has been said that Americans would never elect an atheist to the presidency, for they wanted someone who had a belief in God and could evoke the necessary faith when guiding the country. In the past, religious groups were central to the voting behavior of constituents, for these community blocks would dictate votes, in much the same way that political machines did in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. People voted straight on party lines then; nowadays people are much more likely to split tickets. But evangelicalism has only begun to use their sheer numbers as clout, and it took many years for them to understand that. Now that they have the power, they are using it to try to turn the morality and depravity of the United States around, hoping to bring back family values.

Evangelical Christians: Who They Are, What They Believe In

There are over 70 million evangelicals in the United States, out of 300 million people. These 70 million attend over 200,000 churches of various denominations. Conservative denominations have grown more rapidly than memberships in liberal or moderate churches, and

this trend has been consistent since the 1960s.[2] This might seem mystifying on the surface, but evangelicalism has become so palatable to many because it speaks directly to individual experience and to a person's power to change themselves through their own doing, but with guidance from God. Popular religion today relies on a combination of self-help, pop psychology often with religious underpinnings to uplift those who need it, and sounds remarkably similar to many secular self-help and positive thinking manuals, just with Jesus mixed in. This is "the same language that Oprah and Dr. Phil speak"[3], which even manages to draw nonreligious folk in. The idea that God can guide can guide a person to do his or her best while leaving the choices up to that person is very powerful and many people today believe a version of that idea. It still allows people to believe they have free will and can make a change in their own lives absent someone else forcing them or preordaining their future, enabling them to be independent and self-sufficient, important American values at the beginning of the twenty-first century and for much of the country's history. Christianity for some people is nothing more than a "motivational message of positive" thought and suggests that people are only limited by their own thoughts and attitudes.[4] It's a version of therapy, especially as many converts are those who have led hard lives, and are poor, often a type that churches seek out for salvation. Evangelical Christianity is immediate and personal, a relationship that is supposed to be constantly strengthened and supported by doing good works and living a god-infused life.

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[2] Ruth Murray Brown, *For a "Christian America": A History of the Religious Right* (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 2002), 163.
[3] Monique El-Faizy, *God and Country: How Evangelicals Have Become America's New Mainstream* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2006): 34.
[4] Ibid.

At heart, evangelicalism "presumes that individuals will have some deep, inner, often very personal experience of Jesus Christ"[5]. Since evangelicalism relies so much on individual experience, and is based upon personal conversion to the teachings of Jesus Christ (evangelism), it attracts lots of individually-minded, independently-oriented people. Belief in the Bible and applying Christian beliefs to modern life, particularly cultural issues, is another hallmark of evangelicalism. Generally, conservative Christians (conservative politically, spiritually, and culturally, although there are variations) are conservative Protestants and overlap with those who are evangelicals and fundamentalists, who are those who interpret the Bible literally. Terms are often used interchangeably, although there are plenty of people who identify as one but not the other terms. Fundamentalists have traditionally also been very separatist; that is, they separate and withdraw themselves from modern society, no matter the age, and create their own niches, whereas evangelicals work within modern society to create change and to make a difference.[6] As Karen Armstrong words it in *The Battle for God*, "Fundamentalists belonged to the past; they were the enemies of science and intellectual liberty, and could take no legitimate part in the modern world,"[7] since they often do seem backwards, believing in a world that no longer exists. Fundamentalists "insist on doctrinal conformity as well as personal experience to authenticate true faith".[8] However, Monique El-Faizy in her *God and Country: How Evangelicals Have Become America's New Mainstream*, writes that the difference between evangelicals and fundamentalists "is more one of attitude and terminology than of belief"[9].

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[5] Robert H. Krapohl and Charles H. Lippy, *The Evangelicals: A Historical, Thematic, and Biographical Guide* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1999): 96.
[6] El-Faizy 63.
[7] Karen Armstrong, *The Battle For God* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000): 177.
[8] Krapohl and Lippy 96.
[9] El-Faizy, 8.

According to Goldberg, the majority of evangelicals are premillenialists, meaning that when Christ returns to Earth the true believers will automatically go to heaven, while unbelievers will have to fight their way into heaven.[10] Because of this, many evangelicals are moved to try to convince others of their faith, and as conversion is an important aspect of their faith, with conversion stories prominent in their culture, they are often viewed as militant and earnest, wanting as many people as possible to share their love of God. Being "saved" is "to have a personal relationship with Christ, to accept the truth of the Bible, and to live one's life in accordance with biblical prescriptions about behavior".[11] Those that are not saved are doomed to eternal damnation,[12] and that when Christ returns, the world will end.[13] Fundamentalists also believe in the truth of the creation story, Jesus' virgin birth, his miracles, as well as his death and resurrection. This is considered the literal truth, and one is not considered fundamentalists if beliefs waver from these core truths.[14]

Evangelicals often fight for "family values", which are interchanged with "traditional values." Both of these rely on the ideas that the family, followed by community, is the most important thing in life, and that Christian values of tolerance and helping others are also cornerstones of civic engagement and a lifetime of purpose. However, an increasingly secular, materialistic and sexualized culture has caused many conservative Christians to fear that the world is in a crisis, and they lament the downfall of traditional Christian values, the ones that they grew up on. For evangelicals, the fight between traditional values and secular life is

[10] Michelle Goldberg, *Kingdom Coming: The Rise of Christian Nationalism* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006): 38.
[11] Brown 71.
[12] El-Faizy 9.
[13] Brown 84.
[14] Ibid 72.

described "as a contest between the Christian worldview and the materialist one." [15] For them, commercialism and modernism—technological change—threatens family values. This moral decline is something that evangelicals are very worried about, and they try as much as possible, in both religious and secular contexts, to eradicate these worldviews that trump their own. Modernist changes include migration, cultural liberalization and economic modernization,[16] often putting places like the South, with its farming and factory work and reliance on old-fashioned community strongholds, at an impasse, since they challenge traditional values. Also, red states, among some of the poorest and most religious in the country, tend to be the ones who have the highest divorce and teen pregnancy rates[17], adding another dimension to those who work so hard for conservative Christians to have a voice.

The enemy to religion, rooted in the 1960s and 1970s, was "secular humanism", which "became a portmanteau term into which fundamentalists threw any value or belief that they did not like."[18] For conservative Christians, secular humanism was a religion for the masses, a belief in materialism, godlessness, premarital sex, homosexuality, promiscuity, and abortion. They defined it "as giving higher priority to human wants and needs than to God's word as revealed in the Bible"[19]. Many saw humanism as "an anti-God atheistic philosophy"[20], an "antireligious and corrupting dogma"[21] that "substituted man's reason or ecclesiastical authority" for the Bible[22]. Humanism developed in the sixteenth century as a movement to revive study of classic texts, and later stood for the belief that art, science, philosophy and occasionally theology "should be

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[15] Ibid 38.
[16] John C. Green, Mark J. Rozell, and Clyde Wilcox, eds. *The Christian Right in American Politics: Marching to the Millennium* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2003): 14.
[17] Neil Munro "The Faithful," *National Journal* December 4, 2004, 3598.
[18] Armstrong 270.
[19] Brown 21.
[20] Ibid 123.
[21] Ibid 222.
[22] Ibid.

judged primarily in terms of their effect on the welfare of humanity"[23], a far cry from how it is perceived today. Humanism today, usually always prefaced with a "secular", is a version of moral relativism, the idea that there is no fixed behavior, moral standards or absolutes, that everything depends on the society and context where someone grew up. As such, with the cultural climate of America getting more lurid, seedy, grim and violent, with divorce rising and promiscuity and evidence of premarital sex everywhere, many conservatives were deeply worried about those growing up in this environment, wondering what would happen to the future, that traditional values and morals were eroding.

In the past, conservative Christians would be very confrontational in their approach to conversion. While many people outside of this world still feel that evangelicals are confrontational in their quest to convert outsiders to Jesus, nowadays they are more likely to use other techniques to embrace the secular world, including making their religion palatable to the masses by making it a version of self-help, and having a community that has all the trappings of secular life. Fifty years ago, an aggressive approach to religion seemed necessary and worked, since the country was much more homogenous, and the assumption that everyone was a Christian and believed in God was generally true.[24] Now, however, "churches have realized that becoming a Christian is a monumental decision that is unlikely to be made quickly,"[25] likening it to a long-term, serious relationship with a partner, one that requires trust and commitment, and they want to foster those feelings. Many evangelical churches are huge, forming their own culture. They have gyms, spas, classes, daycare, coffee bars, and serve as the center of community for large, sprawling areas.

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[23] Ibid 221.
[24] El-Faizy 85.
[25] Ibid.

One of the biggest trends in religion today are these megachurches. They are also huge, attracting at least 10,000 people to weekend services.[26] They are often nondenominational, meaning they are not affiliated with any type of traditional denomination and are not modernist or fundamentalist by the standard definitions. They also reject church culture, the type most exemplified by Catholic churches: medieval architecture, symbolism, traditional hymns, formally trained clergy, and church hierarchy. While they still strongly espouse family values and the inerrancy of the Bible as well as a personal relationship with Jesus from conversion, they dress much more casually and are generally casual places compared to the older version of dress-up Sunday best for service.[27] This conservatism in belief but not in manner fits in step with modern culture, which has begun to reject the pomp and circumstance, the formality, of religion in the past, as if that prevented people from really opening their hearts and accepting Jesus. As a result, young people are drawn to these churches, which often have vibrant youth groups as a way of strengthening the community around the church.

History of the Evangelical Movement

Although religion has always had roots in America and was prominent all over the country, certain regions became rooted in specific religious strains. The Northeast, particularly New England, was always known for the Puritans, and the strict Protestantism of the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with Catholicism eventually growing into a sizeable portion of the population. However, the South, with its rural geography, still is and has always been where a majority of conservative Christians call their home.

The early twentieth century saw the discovery of modernism as an appealing ideology. Although modernism is usually used in the context of explaining trends in literature and art, it

[26] Krapohl and Lippy 81.
[27] Brown 195-196.

had an effect on religion at the time as well. Modernism is very proactive, optimistic and progressive, since it is the belief that humans themselves can shape their environment using scientific knowledge and technology; it meshed perfectly with a time of discovery and invention, a time of positive thinking and a belief that the world was changing for the better. However, modernism's core belief of change and constant reevaluating of the status quo does not work for religion, with its basis in the traditional and the constant. Some churches, especially in the North, began to incorporate a "modernist" theology, which shifted emphasis from the meaning of the words themselves to context of when they were written, choosing reason over biblical literalness.[28] This caused a split between those who favored this new interpretation and those who rejected it, who became known as fundamentalists.[29] Modernist branches tended to be in the North, fundamentalist in the South; modernist ideas took root in urban centers, which were concentrated in the North, and as such, the South began to be perceived as "less modern", since they were considerably less industrialized and therefore less sophisticated than their northern counterparts, and were more rural, uneducated and poorer as well. The Scopes trial in 1925 cemented that view, since the great court case pitted the fundamentalist viewpoints of William Jennings Bryan as simplistic and backward, while the modernist, progressive scientific reasoning and thought won out in public perception. The conservative viewpoints espoused by fundamentalists then were a reaction to the excesses of the aftermath of World War One and the failures of modernism (although that did not become apparent until the 1930s), as well as to the swinging morals and decay of the roaring Twenties.[30]

[28] El-Faizy 68.
[29] Brown 19.
[30] El-Faizy 63.

The conflict between traditionalists and modernists was not limited to the early twentieth century; as late as the 1970s, these divisions were still apparent.[31] Today, however, those modernist churches are considered "mainline",[32] which compose 22% of Americans.[33]

In the 1950s, communism so threatened the American way of life because so many saw it as a "war against God".[34] While this threat was certainly exaggerated in the 1950s, communism was seen as a large state that controlled all the power, that individuals weren't important, since everyone lived for the state. Americans were taught the opposite, that individuals made a difference in the world, and that their individual contributions mattered. Evangelicalism was alive, though not particularly strong or powerful; most of the movement was wrapped up in anti-communistic organizations, many of which disbanded or regrouped as the threat dissipated and eventually became evangelical or conservative Christian organizations with a new purpose.[35]

The current wave of evangelicalism started in the late 1970s, where many adults, fed up with the narcissism and the social revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, began to get political. The Christian Right movement was several different smaller political causes, each with a vocal base, lumped together that eventually began to overlap and work together. They were all generally conservative and had religious roots, but were generally small and formed on the grassroots level. The two biggest and the first to have an impact politically were the pro-family movement, embodied by Focus on the Family, an organization led by James Dobson, one of the most influential evangelicals, that promotes family values, and the pro-life movement.[36] Both of these causes still exist within the conservative Christian base. Jerry Falwell created the Moral Majority

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[31] Brown 83.
[32] Ibid 19-20.
[33] "America By the Numbers."
[34] *With God On Our Side: George W. Bush and the Rise of the Religious Right in America,* 2004.
[35] Brown 50.
[36] Ibid 136.

in 1979, which started as a response to frustration with the Republican party. Although Ronald Reagan, running for president in 1980, was seen as a conservative to many, many evangelicals found him too liberal. Reagan was conservative on issues like defense and preferred limited government interference in the economy, but on social issues he was too liberal for evangelicals. With the legalization of abortion in the Roe v. Wade case in 1973, many conservatives were fired up, and to this day abortion rights are still a top priority for evangelicals.[37]

Roe v. Wade, along with other court decisions that limited prayer in public schools, as well as others that restricted religion in public life, angered many evangelicals who feared that religion and traditional, conservative values were eroding. They felt that feminism and homosexuality were encroaching on their way of life, and that the government was aiding in the destruction of America's morals.

Although the Moral Majority, led by Falwell, was ostensibly a conservative Christian organization, even with his large constituency, given that he founded Liberty College in Lynchburg, Virginia, and had a huge congregation and television audience, the organization knew they needed to expand their base to have any real political impact. The idea behind it was that Catholics could agree with their views on abortion, for example, while other religious groups would find other issues to agree on, even if it was not the entire package. Writes Karen Armstrong in her *The Battle for God*, "The message of the Moral Majority was not new. It was declaring war on the liberal establishment and fighting a battle for the future of America. Members were convinced that the civilization of the United States must be religious, and its policy dictated the Bible."[38] The Moral Majority, like much of what conservative Christians fight for, stand for "traditional values", which center on family. Thanks to politicians like Ronald

[37] Armstrong 309-314.
[38] Ibid 310.

Reagan and both George Bushes, traditional values has become a political term, used against secularists to describe their ideal version of America, and to show how the country has fallen into disrepair.

Political Action

American Evangelicals did not become political until the late 1970s, as a response to the cultural and political transformations of a decade earlier, the cultural revolution so popularized as freewheeling, anything-goes, hippy lifestyle. After the embarrassment of the Scopes Trial in 1925, evangelicals and other fundamentalist groups retreated from public life, and were largely absent from cultural consciousness for the next several decades. Although many Christians, as part of their faith, joined Christian or service groups throughout the twentieth century, like Temperance movements in the 1920s, they were generally not political, and stayed rooted to local involvement, which is why they did not have a national profile until the latter half of the twentieth century.

The 1970s, spearheaded by young conservatives as a reaction to the "radical" 60s, saw the formation of many conservative and religious policy institutes and political action committees. Young evangelical Christians just beginning their political activism were able to forge alliances with those on the right politically, although there was not always an alignment on issues. However, Christian right groups were always tied to a web of clergy, neighborhood churches and the religious media, who continue to support them. Conservatives themselves did not hold much political clout until the 1964 nomination of Barry Goldwater for the presidency. It was the first time that the right wing of the Republican party had nominated someone of their

own.[39] What differs between then and the early 2000s is that Goldwater's campaign was fiscally conservative, not socially conservative, unlike many conservative politicians at this time, who are the opposite.

When Jimmy Carter was elected President in 1976, he was considered to be the first evangelical president, since he was a born-again Christian from Georgia. His religion was well-known to the public, and many of his supporters were evangelicals, and had high hopes for what he could accomplish. Unfortunately, he was considered too liberal for many evangelicals, and the final line was drawn when the IRS rescinded the tax-exempt status of many Christian schools[40], allowing for the separation of church and state. In 1980, he refused to back a constitutional ban on abortion[41], which, combined with some of his other politics, confused and angered many of his supporters, and as such, many drew away.

The 1980 presidential election had a large evangelical turnout[42], which was one of the first times that that constituency had any real power or public profile. Although the religious right was welcomed by both Reagan and Clinton, they had varying degrees of power, especially under the Clinton administration. Despite the fact that Clinton was a Southern Baptist, his sexual misconduct did not mesh with the religious right and he seemed far too secular to be of much use, although organizations, through cultural battles, kept certain conservative issues on the forefront of America's mind.

The Moral Majority and other conservative activist groups slowly became to be known as the "New Christian Right" throughout the 1970s and 1980s. The biggest success the Religious

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[39] Sara Diamond, *Not By Politics Alone: The Enduring Influence of the Christian Right (*New York: The Guilford Press, 1998): 58.
[40] El-Faizy 70.
[41] Diamond 62.
[42] Brown 159.

Right ever had was the defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment in 1972.[43] It was this mobilization that caused many to realize that the Religious Right was a political entity in itself, and that with the right tactics and causes, they could be a huge voting block and could cause real change in society. The Equal Rights Amendment would allow equal rights under the law regardless of sex. Many of those who opposed the ERA found it against biblical teachings, for it would require equal treatment for homosexuals and homosexuality, and would not protect women, requiring them to register for the draft, for example. Other objections were that women would be forced to ordain in churches, and that women would be pressured to work outside the home instead of staying home to raise a family, a big issue for many deeply religiously conservative families; they saw it as a way for the government to interfere in the personal lives of American citizens.[44] The Christian right's agenda was clearly in opposition to the separation of church and state,[45] since they clearly did not like government control in many aspects of life, especially regarding the church, and the ERA and the abortion battles of the 1970s exemplified that.

The religious right, used to being small and out of the limelight, excelled at grassroots efforts; with their highly passionate network, they were able to mobilize effectively to gain political traction and to spread their efforts at changing minds. Starting in the 1970s, connections between the Republican party and the Christian Right began to mail directly to constituents, using heated rhetorical techniques to get voters to see how their values were being corrupted.

Although they were successful at the time with many of their direct mailings, "the success of their efforts should be measured by the long-term impact of their fund-raising, think-

[43] Ibid 74.
[44] Ibid 71, 201.
[45] Ibid 271.

tank products, and candidate training,"[46] all of which had a heavy impact on governmental practices within America, and whose legislative actions have affected a large amount of Americans. Nowadays, it is through other networks, including megachurches and similarly connected organizations, which mobilize voting and dispense relevant information regarding evangelical priorities.

Megachurches, often found in rural areas or places of extreme exurban sprawl, are not only where people gather together and socialize but also where political consciousness is raised. They often operate in nonecclesiastical buildings[47], and in many places these "churches" are converted old businesses or new buildings built near a Wal-Mart or other major shopping center, and look like them too; "they have large congregations but build a sense of community through small prayer groups,".[48] Those that join often are people who are turned off by traditional churches but crave spiritual fulfillment.[49] Here is where people register to vote, where they are given information about candidates. However, as these are churches, many of those given out political information pressure constituents to "vote for the candidate that fits your values"[50], and they campaign for candidates who espouse traditional values, or ones aligned with the church. Megachurches do not just offer spiritual guidance, but an entire lifestyle, a community that is as valued as an integral part of one's life as PTA involvement is in others. Here people do not just go to church; they hang out and become politically, socially, and spiritually motivated.

Conservative religious groups have actually been on the forefront of many charity efforts, including human rights violations in the Sudan, AIDS in Africa, and human trafficking[51], but

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[46] Ibid 135.
[47] Edward Lewine, "Making New Christians," *The New York Times,* January 25, 1998.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid.
[50] *Friends of God: A Road Trip with Alexandra Pelosi*, HBO, January 25, 2007.
[51] Neil Munro 3595.

they have not gotten the coverage that traditional hot button conservative issues have, partly because these are international issues and as such are under the radar for many Americans. These issues are not defined solely to political organizations, but are lobbied by various Christians of all political faiths; it is only within the last few decades that conservative Christians have so followed one party line.

Since the 1970s, evangelical Protestants have increasingly identified themselves as Republican.[52] This is because Republicans have championed religious and conservative viewpoints and have mobilized a grassroots effort since then to court them as voters. A higher proportion of Republican votes have come from evangelicals, while the proportion of mainline Protestants has declined, which is chalked up to the adoption of conservative policy ideas by the Republican party and their implementation.[53]

Voter contact by interest groups involves encouraging people to vote and providing them with information that guides them who to vote for. The Christian Coalition, a Christian political advocacy group that encompasses all Christian faiths and sects founded by Pat Robertson, places voter guides in churches, where they are especially prominent the Sunday before Election Day. Many Christian organizations, especially ones that have a political bent, espouse voting as a religious and civic duty, and that, coupled with strong voter mobilization efforts connected to churches and other religious organizations and affiliations, is why Republican candidates tend to have such a stronghold on evangelicals.[54] Republicans generally court this base, and if they promote traditional values as part of their campaign, then they are rewarded by this voting block. In fact, "high levels of religious participation are associated with disproportionally higher levels

[52] Clem Brooks and Jeff Manza, "A Great Divide? Religion and Political Change in U.S. National Election, 1972-2000," *The Sociological Quarterly* 45 (2004): 442.
[53] Brooks and Manza 443.
[54] Clyde Wilcox and Lee Sigelman, "Political Mobilization in the Pews: Religious Contatcting and Electoral Turnout," *Social Science Quarterly* 82 (September 2001): 525.

of support for Republican candidates"[55] found a survey done of voting behavior of religious groups. This is because those who are generally involved in their church also believe in voting as a civic and a Christian duty, and are also generally involved in their community as a whole. Republican candidates not only campaign in and around church organizations, but often reflect "heartland" attitudes and beliefs, which causes them to have a base in conservative organizations.

Case Study: George W. Bush, an Evangelical who Won Election on the Support of Evangelicals

George W. Bush is a man of order and discipline, and many of his evangelical followers believe he embodies the religious tenets of order, tradition, and discipline.[56] He fits the classic American story of someone who is saved and found religion later on in his life, after a bout of alcoholism. In his youth, he was known as a hard drinker, and he himself quotes a period of his life in the 1970s as "nomadic" where he partied hard. In 1976 he was arrested in Kennebunkport, Maine, near his parents' summer home for driving under the influence, which surfaced days before the 2000 election.[57] He stopped drinking for good when he turned 40, seeing the havoc his alcohol problem was having on his family; at the same time, he met the Reverend Billy Graham and began going to Bible study.[58] This type of conversion, of putting one's faith entirely in God and changing one's life, is the cornerstone of many evangelical faiths, as being born-again is about having a religious experience and turning one's life around because of it. George W. Bush's personal story is seen as an inspiration to many of his evangelical followers, because they see him as one of them; indeed, many accounts point to him as being the real deal, "one of

[55] Brooks and Manza 434.
[56] *With God On Our Side: George W. Bush and the Rise of the Religious Right in America,* 2004.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Ibid.

them"[59]. It is this type of shared experience, as well as the language Bush speaks, his "central themes of individual compassion and faith-based strength," [60] that draw him such passionate devotees. An Annenberg survey taken right before the Democratic convention in 2004 states that 51% of self-identified born-again Christians identified themselves as Republican; in 2000 that number was 43%. Another poll states that 90% of evangelicals planned to vote for Bush while 54% of born-again Christians said the same.[61]

September 11 was framed by Bush in biblical terms, as a conflict between right vs. wrong, good vs. evil, the moral, just vs. the immoral, the godless. It was defined as a spiritual calling for Bush; he was meant to lead the United States in a new battle, to eradicate Islamic fundamentalism and bring peace, stability and democracy to the Middle East. He continues to outline many of his views on foreign policy and the Middle East along these lines, practically calling the motions of war and of democratizing the region as a spiritual duty he—and by extension the country—must undertake.

Bush has always been an earnest Christian, and throughout the 1980s made friends with high-profile religious conservatives like Tim LaHaye, a minister and author of the "Left Behind" series of apocalyptic books. His speeches have always been peppered by religious phrases. When he launched his candidacy for president, he said he felt "called to run and serve", and one of his speechwriters is a graduate of Wheaton College in Illinois, an evangelical college.[62] Bush believes that he should "lead through good Christian example,"[63] which often translates to an aggressive foreign policy, like his conviction to turn the Middle East into a bastion of democracy. Yet he continues, and always has emphasized the role religion has played in his life,

[59] El-Faizy 203.
[60] Howard Fineman, "Apocalyptic Politics," *Newsweek,* May 24, 2004, 55.
[61] "The Passion of the Christians," *The Economist* October 2, 2004, 34.
[62] Fineman 55.
[63] Munro 3595.

which continues to draw in conservative religious voters, since they see him as reflecting a part of their life that matters a lot and usually does not get proper credit, which he gives.

However, as much as many conservative Christians like Bush, many did not vote at all in his first run for the presidency. After Bush lost the popular vote in 2000, his chief campaign strategist Karl Rove went after evangelicals with zeal, estimating that four million of them did not vote in 2000, and he planned to rectify that, which he did; evangelicals, energized by media coverage of gay marriage and partial-birth abortion, took to the polls.[64] This was "the most significant effort to motivate religious voters to date".[65] About 20 million born-again Christians voted for Bush in the 2004 election;[66] that was about 40% of Bush's raw vote. [67] Poll after poll after poll cites high percentages of evangelicals and religious voters voting for him; churchgoers certainly did. Among this group are many conservative white evangelicals, which make up a good section of the Republican constituency, who voted in high numbers for Bush. His base is considered cultural conservatives in red states, moral traditionalists like himself.

Much of the 2004 election, and Bush's win, was said to be decided by "moral values", key cultural concepts, amorphous as a rule, which he seemed to exemplify. However, those in exit polls that responded that it was their most important reason for voting for Bush only did so if it was offered as a choice, and there was no definition of the phrase. Many more voters were concerned with the economy or the war in Iraq. [68] However, despite Bush's slipping poll numbers in those who believe he is doing a good job as president, he is still strongly supported by those with a religious background, who have faith that he can weather crises of Hurricane

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[64] Bret Schulte, "The Morals and Values Crowd," *U.S. News & World Report* November 15, 2004, 42.
[65] Robert E. Denton, Jr., "Religion and the 2004 Presidential Campaign," *The American Behavioral Scientist* 49 (September 2005):12.
[66] Munro 3588.
[67] Denton 20.
[68] Edward Ashbee, "The 2004 Presidential Election, 'Moral Values', and the Democrats' Dilemma, *Political Quarterly* 76 (April-June 2005): 213.

Katrina, the war in Afghanistan and in Iraq, as well as other tribulations that have plagued his presidency. He has God on his side, as he and many of his supporters believe, and they will continue to support him because he is one of them.

Conclusion

Evangelicals have become such a powerhouse in America today largely because they have worked to have this power. They are growing steadily, both in influence and in number, and continue to utilize the facilities offered to them to change culture and politics, mobilize and enforce change, and to convert people to believing that Jesus is the way. Evangelical Christianity is one of the largest religious groups in the country, and conservative religious viewpoints are spreading more rapidly than any mainstream version of Christianity; that is because these denominations are working harder and are more enticing than other forms of religion. Thanks to megachurches, which are more like large community centers, church has become a place to hang out and socialize, but also a place to mobilize community and political action. Evangelical Christianity, unlike other forms of Christianity, is not based around traditional and rituals. They care more about salvation and sinners, and speak a culture of self-help infused with spirituality, so they attract many who are looking for guidance but will let them still believe in self-sufficiency and be independent, important American traits.

Evangelicals, now a huge portion of American culture, do not feel the need to hide, and with several prominent figures supporting them, including the president, they feel they have a duty to become politically engaged. Undertaking a crusade against the corrupt secular culture of the United States, they spread their religious convictions through multiple channels, including amassing an electorate that will vote for issues important to many conservative Christians.

Evangelicals have become political thanks in part to a huge grassroots effort, in place for years based upon what can appear to be an invisible network of broadcasters, publications, organizations and churches that work with each other to spread their message. As a reaction to secular beliefs of violence, materialism, pornography, promiscuity and sexuality, many evangelicals have fought back with their own notions of morality, spirituality, and traditional values, which tend to focus on the family, something they say is sorely lacking in modern America.

Many Republicans have taken that notion to heart, and have used traditional or moral values as a political tool to wield support for anti-abortion groups, prayer in schools, free speech and other social and cultural issues. Republicans have spent the past few decades, often at megachurches, garnering huge numbers of supporters. George W. Bush is a case study in how an evangelical man running for president was able to harness a large constituency based upon his religious beliefs because he not only spoke the language of a believer but because the framework was in place to get him to the presidency with evangelicals finally having the power to vote in an organized manner for an organized candidate.

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