

The New Christian Right: Religion and Politics in the United States

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Abstract

The Republican Party of the United States of America has become increasingly linked to strong sentiments regarding religion's place in government, education, and even the home. In recent years, the party, its policies, and its leaders have slanted heavily towards Christian Fundamentalist values. This shift, though more prominent today, has been evolving over decades. The Christian Right and its successor, the New Christian Right, have long been key influencers in American politics. From more localized grassroots movements to large national organizations, the New Christian Right immensely influences conservative policies and politicians. This brings into question the supposed secular nature of American politics. This paper will first explore the history of the Christian Right as a movement. Next, an analysis of the New Christian Right's recent impact on the rhetoric surrounding the 2022 US Midterm and 2024 US Presidential elections. This paper seeks to answer what this could mean for future Republican politics and its consequences for the American people and democracy.

Keywords: Fundamentalism, Christian Right, religious traditionalism, politics, United States of America, Republican

I. Introduction

Since the inception of the American identity, religion has been part of the United States. The first British settlers who arrived were Puritans seeking to practice their religion freely without the influence of the British crown. The term 'Manifest Destiny' was coined during the US's expansion to the West, inspired by the notion that it was America's God-given right to these unsettled lands. The Pledge of Allegiance, which most American schoolchildren were made to say every day before school, ends with "...one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all." Despite this, the United States of America is considered a primarily secular democracy. In the American

democratic tradition, religion is considered a private matter, safeguarded by the First Amendment.¹ The American forefathers had experienced life under a ruler who was both Church and State and established this fundamental element of the separation of the two with their lived experiences. In recent years, religion, or more specifically, Christian Fundamentalism increasingly defines the Republican Party's policy agenda and public identity. This growing alignment with the New Christian Right may alienate secular and moderate voters, even as it

¹ U.S. Constitution, amend. I. "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof..."

solidifies support among a more radical and ideologically committed faction.

II. The First Wave

To best understand how the New Christian Right's growing influence on mainstream right-wing US politics affects said politics' prospects, it is best to look first at the history of the Christian Right itself.

The Christian Right of the 1970s and 1980s began like most grassroots social movements: disorganized and decentralized.² Grassroots movements are characterized by mass mobilization from local efforts alongside narrow communication methods. Such methods include emailing, newsletters, and door-to-door campaigning rather than large media movements.³ Moral Majority was one of the most prominent Christian Right associations in the 1980s. Founded in the 1970s by Reverend Jerry Falwell, they were key lobbyists for the time. The name itself is a strong statement, as it reflected their beliefs that they represented the morals held by the majority of US citizens. While those associated with the first wave of the Christian Right often held traditionally conservative beliefs, the early groups did not attach themselves to a specific political party. In this sense, though many were quite partisan individually, they presented themselves as a moderate collective. This was done to spread their word to any and all who would listen, especially because Christian voters were not all just

Republicans or Democrats. Despite their initial efforts to remain nonpartisan, the Christian Right as a movement would play a considerable role post-Watergate. At the time, the Christian Right primarily consisted of evangelicals. When considered as a larger voting bloc, this meant that decisions like the 1973 Supreme Court verdict from *Roe vs. Wade* (which legalized abortion as a medical procedure on a federal level) faced much of the Christian Right's ire. Evangelical fundamentalists were particularly vocal, citing the Bible's fifth commandment, "Thou shalt not kill", as evidence that human law dared to violate "divine law".⁴ Following this, many in the Christian Right would create groups to influence U.S. law, such as Operation Rescue, an association that took its name from a verse within the book of Proverbs. Members of Operation Rescue would picket at abortion clinics and hospitals, often refusing to leave to the extent that police intervention was required.⁵ In the subsequent years, the Christian Right would continue to advocate for religion-based moral policies, not solely through the Republican party, but also by supporting Democrats like Jimmy Carter, the Democratic nominee for the 1976 US Presidential election. They saw him as a candidate who supported "moral regeneration," something many felt was lacking following the Nixon Watergate scandal.⁶ Later, those who supported Carter prior would switch largely to supporting his opposing nominee in 1980, Ronald Reagan, a Republican. The switch was

² Rozell, Mark J., and Clyde Wilcox. "Second Coming: The Strategies of the New Christian Right." *Political Science Quarterly* 111, no. 2 (1996): 271-294.

³ Bergan, D. E.. "grassroots." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, November 17, 2024.

⁴ Kepel, Gilles. 1994. *The Revenge of God : The Resurgence of Islam, Christianity and Judaism in the Modern World*. Cambridge: Polity.

⁵ *Ibid.* 118-119.

⁶ *Ibid.* 118.

largely due to Reagan's personal views, which appealed to Evangelical politico-religious movements. During his campaign, Reagan pandered heavily to the religious fundamentalists, openly questioning Darwin's theory of evolution and voicing his support for a Creationist theory to be added to every school's curriculum.⁷ This marked a turning point for the Christian Right, as instead of trying to bring any sense of God into politics, they focused on changing the secular political order into one explicitly based on Christian values.⁸ Moral Majority's disbandment in 1989 effectively concluded the first wave of the Christian Right movement.

This "first wave" failed for numerous reasons, such as a lack of individual chapters, coalitions limited to specific branches of Christianity, and a narrow scope of audience that had their groups, figuratively and literally, preaching to the choir.⁹ The Moral Majority itself suffered from its notoriety. Its tendency towards the political extreme alongside aggressive stances on abortion, religion's role in education, and homosexuals proved divisive, as only the most diehard Evangelicals were attracted to it.¹⁰

III. The Second Wave

By the 1990s, the second wave of the Christian Right began to swell, a "New" Christian Right. A clear distinction between this new movement and that of years past was their shift from a moral-based movement to one centered on specifically conservative, religion-based

political change. In a research paper co-written by Mark J. Rozell and Clyde Wilcox, they attribute this transformation to the "political learning" the New Christian Right went through following their collapse at the end of the 80s. This "learning" meant a more moderate approach, where the fundamentalist elements took a backseat to the more traditionally conservative values like male and female gender roles, pro-life sentiments, and state rights.¹¹ Leaders in the New Christian Right recognized the pitfalls of their predecessors. They made this change to attract a range of people, from the most devoted evangelists to the moderate Republicans.

A variety of New Christian Right groups gained prominence during this decade. One example is the Christian Coalition of Virginia, created by Reverend Pat Robinson. Despite its name, this organization had chapters and lobbies in multiple states. Its motto was "Think like Jesus... Fight like David... Lead like Moses... Run like Lincoln."¹² This tagline perfectly encapsulated the blending of religious ideals and political campaigns, now a trademark of New Christian Right groups. It tied biblical legends to real-life political figures, encouraging a spiritual commitment to Christian ideals and a physical commitment to push them through political action.

Another prominent group in this decade is The Family Foundation. The group was just one out of thirty-five state branches of a larger organization, Focus on the Family. This group was successful because of its growth strategy: do not create new chapters but instead focus on

⁷ Ibid. 119.

⁸ Ibid. 117.

⁹ Rozell and Wilcox, "Second Coming", 272.

¹⁰ Kepel, *The Revenge of God*, 129.

¹¹ Rozell and Wilcox, "Second Coming", 273.

¹² Ibid. 274.

collaborating with existing groups. Through this, The Family Foundation was able to amass quite a lot of political power, running mailing campaigns against sex education in schools and against abortion. They even had hotlines that people could use to tune in to the latest issues members could be concerned with.¹³ The Family Foundation is an excellent example of the evolution of New Christian Right organizations, as by targeting more widespread conservative issues, they were able to gain support not only from Christian fundamentalists but from the wider right wing as a whole.

By the early 2000s, the New Christian Right had established itself as a critical voting bloc, heading into the new millennium more politically powerful than ever. In the 2000 Presidential Election, Christian fundamentalists played a pivotal role in George W. Bush Jr's victory over then-incumbent Vice President Al Gore.¹⁴ The US Presidential election is determined not by the popular vote but rather via an "electoral vote," in which each state is represented by a certain number of electoral representatives determined by the gross population of the state and elected by the citizens of said state. Bush, though outwardly he maintained a moderately conservative stance, made sure to maintain his relationships with the further-right leaning fundamentalists throughout his campaign via emails and calls. Upon realizing this may not be enough to sway them, Bush visited the staunchly fundamentalist Bob Jones

University in South Carolina.¹⁵ This public show of support was enough for fundamentalists to go to the polls and vote for Bush, giving him the upper hand in crucial states, especially in the South (often referred to as the "Bible Belt"). In fact, throughout Bush's entire time in office, Christian Fundamentalists were the ones to "...form the core of the Republican party, which controls all of the capital for the first time in half a century."¹⁶ The Christian Right began as a grassroots movement, and just 25 years later, it established itself as a formidable ally of the Republican party. This shift was not immediate, but it was thanks to the Christian Right's ability to reform itself, adapting to the times without compromising its core beliefs.

IV. NCR and Modern Media

Starting from the 1990s and onward, New Christian Right groups exponentially increased their presence by quickly embracing a rapidly developing form of communication: the media. Aside from telephone and email communication, New Christian Right groups also began leaning into the entertainment sphere, producing events that helped expose the movement to new faces nationwide. The initial rise of the Christian Right movement was primarily thanks to its grassroots and individualistic approach. For example, "...an antifeminist spokesperson, Phyllis Schlafly, fought against gender equity by mobilizing women fearful that they would be drafted into the military or that men would relinquish economic

¹³ Ibid. 275-276.

¹⁴ Zakaullah, Muhammas Arif, "The Rise of Christian Fundamentalism in the United States and the Challenge to Understand the New America," *Islamic Studies* 42, no. 3 (2003): 437-86.

¹⁵ Howard Fineman, "Bush And God." *Newsweek*, September 3, 2003.

¹⁶ Ibid.

responsibility for their families.”¹⁷ While this may have been effective then, times have changed. Following the explosion of the internet, modern Christian Right organizations recognized a budding opportunity; they could attract more attention by fostering media coverage of their significant events. Thus, many began hosting large rallies and gatherings. Concerned Women for America was one such organization, headed by Kimberly LaHaye, the wife of Tim LaHaye, the former Moral Majority leader. Concerned Women for America established itself as one of the largest organizations tailored to evangelical women, partly thanks to their conventions. An observer once said the events were “...bigger, more media savvy, more stage-produced, more fun, and more explicitly Christian”¹⁸ than most other events. Thanks to their extravagance, these events would often be covered on local news, so even people who did not attend could hear about them. Though many of these events had highly-religious undertones, many also preached self-empowerment and unity, attracting those outside the highly-religious sphere. Events served as a way to introduce these new faces to the ideals and beliefs of the New Christian Right, whether through concerts, rallies, or even local meetings about gun safety, education, and more.

Aside from the physical aspect of hosting events, New Christian Right movements also turned directly to media sources to spread the good word. Groups would use any and all forms of online communication, including

“...Web sites, blogs, social networking sites, chat rooms, and online discussion boards.”¹⁹ This was done to create virtual communities, similar to the grassroots ones of the past, but this time, they were without the limit of where they lived. Additionally, the Internet introduced anonymity; people could pretend to be whomever they wanted while saying whatever they wanted. This platformed many of the more racist and offensive groups of the New Christian Right, who previously may not have said anything outside of their circles because their name would be attached to it.²⁰ The internet gave New Christian Right associations direct access to followers nationwide.

Finally, the New Christian Right movements benefitted from media trends. According to a study done by the Pew Research Center in 2020, “More than eight-in-ten U.S. adults (86%) say they get news from a smartphone, computer or tablet “often” or “sometimes,” including 60% who say they do so often.”²¹ Additionally, “roughly half (52%) of Americans say they prefer a digital platform – whether it is a news website (26%), search (12%), social media (11%) or podcasts (3%). About a third say they prefer television (35%), and just 7% and 5% say they prefer to get their news on the radio or via print.”²² Since 2000, the New Christian Right has gotten increasing media attention. This attention has come both indirectly, where New Christian Right values are regurgitated by conservative media figures, and directly, when New

¹⁷ Blee, Kathleen M., and Kimberly A. Creasap, “Conservative and Right-Wing Movements,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 36 (2010): 272.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 275.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 277.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Shearer, Elisa, “More than eight-in-ten Americans get news from digital devices,” *Pew Research Center*, January 12, 2021.

²² *Ibid.*

Christian Right leaders themselves get on the news via rally coverage or event coverage, or even just for saying something controversial. By embracing the media in all forms, New Christian Right associations have continued to boost their presence politically.

V. NCR and 2020 US Midterms

On November 8th, 2022, a divisive midterm election was held in the US. Thirty-five seats in the Senate were up for election, along with all 435 seats in the House. In the days prior, conservative media and politicians alike prophesied a “red wave,” one that would give Republicans an overwhelming majority in both the House and Senate. While Republicans did gain control over the House (a slim majority of 221 seats to 213 as of December 8th, 2022), the Senate remained in Democratic Control (a majority of 51 to 49).²³ This massive “red wave” was not the considerable upset that many scholars predicted. To understand this, the role of the New Christian Right leading up to the election must be considered. In recent years, the New Christian Right and its influence on the Republican party as a whole have become increasingly more aggressive, reminiscent of the original religiously moral first wave of Christian Fundamentalism. Now, this aggressiveness seems to have hurt US conservatives, as it has promoted polarization within the Republican party itself. Many of the Republican candidates on the ballot in November 2022 were considered extremist, highly religious options by voters. In Pennsylvania, the Republican nominee for

²³ Burnett, Sara, Jill Colvin, and Will Weissert, “Dems show surprising strength; control of Congress unclear” Associated Press News, November 9, 2022.

governor Doug Mastriano declared frequently that God was on his side in this “fight against evil”²⁴ and that the “separation of church and state is a myth.”²⁵ In Georgia, Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene declared, “We need to be the party of nationalism and I’m a Christian, and I say it proudly, we should be Christian Nationalists.”²⁶ In Colorado, Representative Lauren Boebert firmly stated, “The church is supposed to direct the government... The government is not supposed to direct the church. That is not how our founding fathers intended it. And I am tired of this separation of church and state junk. It’s not in the Constitution.”²⁷ While Mastriano lost to Democrat Josh Shapiro, Green and Boebert are currently in office. By embracing candidates who staunchly preached Christian Fundamentalist values, the GOP and its associated media pushed away many more moderate conservatives who may not align themselves with a Christian religion or religion at all. Aside from the candidates themselves, New Christian Right groups were aggressive in the months leading up to the midterm election. One of the traditional campaign methods for politicians in the US is hosting rallies. However, many recent Republican rallies have become seemingly less of a political event and more of a spectacle. In an article for the Guardian, journalist Ed Pilkington

²⁴ Boornstein, Michelle, “In existential midterm races, Christian prophets become GOP surrogates,” *The Washington Post*, November 5, 2022.

²⁵ Rouse, Stella and Shibley Telhami, “Most Republicans Support Declaring the United States a Christian Nation,” *Politico*, September 21, 2022.

²⁶ Rouse and Telhami, “Most Republicans Support Declaring the United States a Christian Nation”

²⁷ Lopez, Ashley, “The Christian Right is winning in court while losing in public opinion,” *NPR*, July 1, 2022.

describes the ReAwaken America tour as “Part Trump rally, part religious service, and much conspiracy theory thrown in...”²⁸ He describes one comical scene with three thousand people fervently praying with arms in the air, listening to a recording of Kim Clement, a late South African preacher, prophesying the “first coming of Donald Trump.”²⁹ This roadshow included speeches from many Republican figures from former national security adviser Michael Flynn to Donald Trump’s son Eric Trump, a “spiritual and political” baptism in the name of the Lord held in a swimming pool, and a large vendors’ tent with several stalls “devoted to the peddling of snake oil” as a Covid-prevention cure.³⁰ As supporters of Christian supremacy became louder and louder in the Republican party, the party itself began being associated with religion. It’s important to note a distinction between New Christian Right beliefs and traditionally Republican beliefs; all New Christian Right followers believe in conservative values like Republicans, but not all Republicans are inherently religious. Thanks to the New Christian Right’s presence in the Republican Party, it’s now a party often associated with Christianity and a desire to “bring God back to the country.”

VI. NCR and 2024 US Election

In November 2024, Donald Trump achieved a feat only done by one other US president: winning two

²⁸ Pilkington, Ed, “‘He was chosen’: the rightwing Christian roadshow spreading the gospel of Trump,” *The Guardian*, November 6, 2022.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

non-consecutive terms. The Trump Campaign was rife with religious rhetoric, particularly spurned by the July 2024 assassination attempt that took place in Butler, Pennsylvania at a rally. The bullet missed Trump’s head by mere millimeters. Trump’s luck was so great that Reverend Franklin Graham, son of famous Evangelical preacher Billy Graham, preached “...that God turned his head and saved his life.”³¹ This sentiment was echoed by Senator Tim Scott (R-SC) who at the 2024 Republican National Convention exalted: “Thank God Almighty that we live in a country that still believes in the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords, the Alpha and the Omega. Our God still saves. He still delivers and he still sets free. Because on Saturday, the devil came to Pennsylvania holding a rifle. But an American lion got back up on his feet.”³² Polls post-election showed shifts in almost every voter demographic towards the right, securing Trump his second “prophesied” term.³³ The Christian Right was by far the most outspoken celebrant of this win. People like Sean Feucht, an evangelical worship leader and singer-songwriter gave the credit for the win to prayer on his X profile, hailing “prayer warriors” for their dedication (The Guardian 2).³⁴

³¹ Maqbool, Aleem, “‘Anointed by God’: The Christians who see Trump as their saviour,” *BBC*, November 17th, 2024.

³² DeRose, Jason, “Trump assassination attempt lays bare deep religious divisions in the U.S.” *NPR*, July 18th, 2024.

³³ Bekiempis, Victoria and Dharna Noor, “‘Red’ US states pass progressive laws while ‘blue’ states vote for conservative measures,” *The Guardian*, November 6th, 2024.

³⁴ Herman, Alice, “US Christian right celebrates after prophecy of Trump win comes to pass,” *The Guardian*, November 7th, 2024

Despite Trump's convincing win, clear signs of division were evident in red states. States like Michigan, despite giving their 16 electoral votes to the Republican candidate, voted to overturn the existing abortion near-ban and protect reproductive rights within the state. Similar measures passed in other red states like Arizona and Montana, which both protected the right to abortion for up to 24 weeks.³⁵ Pro-choice sentiments, as stated earlier, are not associated with Republicans nor the New Christian Right. This paradox of voters electing a staunchly anti-abortion President and administration while enshrining said reproductive rights into their state legislations is further evidence of a polarized electoral bloc.

VII. Conclusion

The New Christian Right has long been involved with US politics, and now it is one of the key elements for the Republican party. Thanks to a focus on "God first" instead of "Christianity first" in more recent years, the Republican party and Donald Trump have been able to move non-Christian voting blocs further towards the right (as seen in exit polls post-November 5th, 2024). In terms of the makeup of the New Christian Right itself; it is a new "third wave" of Christian Fundamentalism. The first wave saw some success but ultimately failed due to its aggressive stances. The second wave was more successful, with the New Christian Right taking a more moderate stance politically to slowly work on more fundamental changes. Now, the New Christian Right is a movement that has

³⁵ Bekiempis, Victoria and Dharna Noor, "'Red' US states pass progressive laws while 'blue' states vote for conservative measures"

retained the political prowess of the second wave, but reverted to the first wave, in the sense that they have become less moderate and more contingent on religious and moral issues. If anything, the new third wave is the most staunchly religious of them all.

Thanks to the New Christian Right's influence on the Republican party and its leaders, Republicans have become increasingly associated with Christianity. This threatens the secularism, separation of church and state, that the US was built upon to defend everyone's religious rights. Robert Jones, CEO of the nonpartisan group Public Religion Research, worries that this could spell the downfall of democracy in the United States. To a journalist from NPR, Jones states "I think if we can protect our democratic institutions and we can weather these attacks on it, then I think there is light at the other end of the tunnel, but I do think we are in for some dark days."³⁶ The New Christian Right often not only challenges existing democratic norms, but straight up discredits them. This can be seen best with the rise of election deniers, led by Donald Trump himself. These Christian conservatives support voting restrictions and support Trump's lies, declaring the 2020 Presidential election "stolen."³⁷ If religious groups like the New Christian Right continue to support drastic reforms that remove democratic elements like secularism and voting rights, then it does suggest turbulent times to come. The US is possibly best known for its "freedom of religion," guaranteed by the

³⁶ Lopez, "The Christian Right is winning in court while losing in public opinion"

³⁷ Lopez, "The Christian Right is winning in court while losing in public opinion"

Constitution and unchanged since its inception. The New Christian Right believes in a US where God is the word of law, not Congress. What this means for the future of secular politics in the United States is unclear, as legislation is currently being nominated for Trump's docket regarding the inclusion of the Bible into schools in certain states. What is clear is that US elections have become a moral battleground in ways not seen before.

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