

# Journey to Pragmatism: The History of the American Religious Right in the Nineties

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**Abstract** The article analyses the political history of the American Religious Right in the nineties. It will be argued that conservative Christian political organizations achieved greater influence on partisan and national agenda by undergoing a pragmatic turn in structure, rhetoric and strategies. The uncompromising behavior of the eighties gave way to a gradual approach with a give-and-take logic. The article will pay attention to abortion as perhaps the most pressing issue at the time among conservative Christians. For its analysis the article relies on contributions published on *Christianity Today*, the flagship magazine of American Evangelicalism.

**Keywords** Politics. Religious Right. USA. Evangelicals. Abortion. Nineties. Conservatism. Conservative Christians.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Previous Forms of Political Engagement. – 3 A Changing Decade. – 4 Conclusions.



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## 1 Introduction

Evangelical Christians are considered a stable presence on the American political scene nowadays.<sup>1</sup> Their religious and political positions are well known, characterized first and foremost by the advancement of a social conservative agenda concerned with a pro-life position and the defense of the traditional family. As a constituency, they have overwhelmingly voted Republican in all elections since the Reagan era, to the point that Evangelicals have moved to form the core electorate of the party. Recent electoral results have confirmed the strong association between the Evangelical and social conservative Republican identities.<sup>2</sup> The political prominence of Evangelical groups is the result of a long and difficult history that brought what had once been a movement largely unconcerned with politics to the forefront of the American scene. Furthermore, the so-called Religious Right has matured from a simple electorate to an active force steering the Republican and national agenda towards the achievement of its goals.<sup>3</sup>

The aim of this article is to explore this process as a *Journey to Pragmatism* that the Religious Right underwent by changing its nature to better suit the realm of politics, without losing sight of its major social and political ambitions. Those changes in structure and strategy that allowed conservative Christian groups to transition from an electoral constituency into a more effective political bloc will be described.<sup>4</sup> It will be argued that conservative Christians signifi-

<sup>1</sup> On the rise of Evangelicals, see Carpenter, “Fundamentalist Institutions”; Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism*; On Evangelical theology, Harris, *Fundamentalism and Evangelicals*; Collins, *The Evangelical Moment*; On the Evangelical phenomenon and its outreach, Stanley, *The Global Diffusion of Evangelicalism*.

<sup>2</sup> At the time of writing, the most recent U.S. election was the Presidential election of 2020. In this election, white Evangelicals voted between 76% and 81% for the Republican party, depending on the definition of Evangelical implemented. Newport, “Religious Group Voting and the 2020 Election”.

<sup>3</sup> The Religious Right is the comprehensive label given to all the conservative Christian groups that actively work and lobby to influence the political process in order to push an agenda marked by conservative Christian values, principles and policies. Formed by a core of Evangelical Protestants and Catholics alongside a smaller cohort of mainline Protestants and Mormons, these groups are characterized by their differing views on confession and do not necessarily collaborate one with the other. Despite these discrepancies, they do share a homogeneous political position strongly anchored in common social conservative agreements. For the purpose of this article, the terms Religious Right, conservative Christians, and Evangelicals will be used interchangeably to indicate these groups as a coherent conservative political constituency. For a detailed study on the politicization of Evangelicals and the Religious Right, see Harp, *Protestants and American Conservatism*; Martin, *With God on Our Side*; Fitzgerald, *The Evangelicals: The Struggle to Shape America*; Durham, *The Christian Right*.

<sup>4</sup> While this article focuses exclusively on the evolution of the Religious Right in the nineties, a wider and more comprehensive history can be found in Williams, *God’s Own Party*.

cantly changed their behavior by adopting a new approach to politics built on give-and-take logic and acceptance of gradualism as a legitimate strategy, which follows from the idea that gradual but steady victories yield more results than landmark decisions.

The nineties, in particular, represent a pivotal point in this process. As twelve years of Republican administration came to an end with the election of Bill Clinton (born 1946), the political fate of the Religious Right was uncertain, hovering between retreat, continuity and change.<sup>5</sup> The forces pushing for change eventually prevailed and brought novelties that would persist even under the sympathetic administration of George W. Bush (born 1946). To understand the political evolution of the Religious Right, this article will take into consideration perhaps its most emotional policy issue at the time, namely abortion. Evangelicals found it necessary to rethink the nature and strategy of their political organizations in order to achieve considerable legislative goals, especially regarding abortion, as the uncompromising attitude of the eighties had largely failed.

This research mainly relies on contributions published in *Christianity Today*, the flagship magazine of American Evangelicalism.<sup>6</sup> *Christianity Today* aims to be a comprehensive forum for the entire Evangelical world, offering a space for contributions from the Religious Right to the Religious Left. Furthermore, it has not been affiliated with any political organization during these years, but rather avoided direct political activism and identification. Still, contextualized in the broader world of American Evangelicalism of the nineties and early two-thousands, it can be assumed that *Christianity Today* held a moderately conservative point of view, and thus supported the arguments for social conservatism without adhering wholeheartedly to the projects and statements made by influential conservative Christian leaders.

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<sup>5</sup> I am referring to the Reagan-Bush (Sr.) Era, which started with the election of Ronald Reagan in 1981 and ended with the first term of George H.W. Bush in 1993.

<sup>6</sup> All media products of *Christianity Today*, spanning from the printed magazine to digital articles, from sponsored literature to podcasts, reach about 2.5 million readers monthly. Information on magazine circulation was found in Moyler, "Christianity Today Subscriptions Rose"; and on the websites of the Evangelical Press Association and Christianity Today, respectively <https://www.evangelicalpress.com/cti/> and <https://www.Christianitytoday.org/what-we-do/>. It should be noted that the numbers displayed by the sources are vastly different, as some take into account the circulation of the printed magazine alone, while others consider the total number of media products aimed at ministry in its widest definition. Hence, they might range from a monthly print circulation of 120.000 to 2.5 million for media resources and 4.5 million Christian leaders reached through media ministries.

## 2 Previous Forms of Political Engagement

At the time of the Supreme Court decision in *Roe vs. Wade*, Evangelical opinions on abortion had been mixed, if not lenient.<sup>7</sup> As the Catholic Church was the strongest voice in the early pro-life camp,<sup>8</sup> Evangelicals largely refrained from joining the debate due to anti-Catholic biases inherited from their Fundamentalist past. Furthermore, many Evangelicals actually agreed with the ruling because it aligned with their stance against government interference on individual decisions. Even the Southern Baptist Convention, the largest Evangelical tradition among Americans and a later major player in the pro-life camp, initially endorsed abortion under certain circumstances.<sup>9</sup> Only in the seventies would the Evangelical position drastically change, following and in part contributing to a period of unprecedented political activism.

The historical roots of the Religious Right are still the subject of academic debate, and the thesis of a conservative reaction against progressive policies still enjoys widespread consensus.<sup>10</sup> Timid collaborations between social conservative Catholic and Protestant leaders can already be found in the mid-sixties as a response to the sexual revolution.<sup>11</sup> These first experiences would not blossom into a more comprehensive and organized effort until the late seventies. Evangelical leaders felt compelled to act due to the perceived threat to the American family posed by progressive movements and policies concerning feminism, abortion and homosexual rights.<sup>12</sup> However, recent studies have put forth a different interpretation, whereby

<sup>7</sup> On January 22, 1973, the Supreme Court ruled (7-2) that unduly restrictive state regulations on abortion were unconstitutional, since they violated the woman's constitutional right to privacy granted by the fourteenth amendment. Konway, Butler, "State Abortion Legislation".

<sup>8</sup> The US Catholic Church had actively engaged in the abortion debate since the sixties. The National Right to Life Committee, the first national anti-abortion organization in the US, was created by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops in 1968. After *Roe v. Wade*, the organization was incorporated in order to campaign more effectively against abortion policies. Lay Catholics tend to be divided on the issue of abortion, the Church and its advocacy bodies unanimously oppose the practice according to the natural law paradigm. A compendium of the most relevant developments regarding the US Catholic Church as an actor in the pro-life camp can be found in Karrer, "The National Right to Life Committee"; Greenhouse, Siegel, *Before Roe v. Wade*. On the position of US Catholics on abortion: Fahmy, "8 key findings about Catholics and abortion".

<sup>9</sup> Griffith, *Moral Combat*, 202-3; Balmer, *Evangelicalism in America*, 110.

<sup>10</sup> Gifford, Williams (eds), *The Right Side of the Sixties*; Williams, *God's Own Party*, 105-86; Durham, *The Christian Right*, 10-11.

<sup>11</sup> Gifford, Williams (eds), *The Right Side of the Sixties*. The authors highlight the experiences of influential leaders at the time, such as Timothy LaHaye (1926-2016) and Billy James Hargis (1925-2004).

<sup>12</sup> Williams, *God's Own Party*; Dowland, "Family Values".

the defense of racial segregation within Evangelical educational institutions, as well as their tax-exempt status, served as the motivating factors behind the involvement of Evangelical leadership.<sup>13</sup> Social conservatism in general, and opposition to abortion in particular, became politically prominent only in a secondary movement, with the aim of providing a more popular and righteous cause for an alliance of conservative Christians. While the debate is still ongoing, it is undisputed that by the end of the seventies, Evangelicals had assumed a clear position on several social issues, led by organizations more active than ever in the political process. Focus on the Family (1977), Concerned Women for America (1978) and the Moral Majority (1979) were founded by conservative ministers loudly protesting the changes progressive groups were advocating in the American social tissue.<sup>14</sup> Opposition to abortion was framed within a larger narrative of uncompromising defense of the traditional American family and Christian sexual morality, placing the issue alongside pornography, homosexuality and the broader changes in gender and familial relations progressive groups were pushing for.<sup>15</sup>

The eve of the 1980 presidential election was the first major political confrontation for the newly formed Religious Right. Conservative Christians sought a leader who would uphold a strong pro-life and pro-family national agenda, and they found their champion in republican candidate Ronald Reagan (1911-2004). In what has been described as one of the great paradoxes of American politics,<sup>16</sup> Evangelicals largely flocked under the Republican banner due to a combination of widespread dissatisfaction with the Carter presidency and Reagan's repeated sympathetic remarks on social conservative proposals,<sup>17</sup> resulting in a major electoral realignment. Throughout

**13** The thesis has recently been brought forward in Balmer, *Bad Faith*. Rather than focusing on *Roe v. Wade*, the author suggests to look at *Green v. Connally* (1971). This court case paved the way for the Internal Revenue Service to revoke the tax-exempt status of several Evangelical educational institutions on the grounds of active racial segregation.

**14** One of the objectives of the Moral Majority was to champion "pro-life, pro-family, pro-moral, pro-America" values. Cf. Dowland, "Family Values", 614.

**15** Dowland, "Family Values", 616-17; Balmer, *Evangelicalism in America*, 119.

**16** The paradox stems from the strong contrast between the personal and spiritual statures of incumbent president Jimmy Carter (born 1924) and Ronald Reagan. A devout Southern Baptist and the first 'born-again' president, Jimmy Carter increased the role of religion in the actions of the US presidency. In contrast, Ronald Reagan had never displayed significant inclinations towards religiosity prior to his candidacy, and his status as divorcee should have made him an unsuitable candidate for conservative Christians. Cf. Balmer, *Evangelicalism in America*, 130.

**17** Occasionally re-evaluated, the Carter presidency had been notoriously unpopular at its time. As far as the Religious Right is concerned, Carter had initially received the support of his fellow Evangelicals on the grounds of shared religiosity. However, the Evangelical constituency was soon alienated by the presidency's accommodating position on social issues and its support for feminist and homosexual rights groups.

the entire Regan-Bush era, the Religious Right maintained a strategy centered on the idea that the election of a sympathetic president would result in the appointment of pro-life Supreme Court judges, the swift reversal of *Roe* and the passage of a Human Life Amendment, making abortion illegal on a federal level. These ideas were strongly echoed by the Republican party, whose attitude began to change to accommodate its new social conservative constituency. While internal disagreements on abortion were still recognized in 1976, these had weakened by 1980, and disappeared completely by 1984. From that point, the party was advocating for a constitutional amendment and the appointment of conservative judges.<sup>18</sup>

During these twelve years of Republican administration, Evangelicals' expectation of a decisive social conservative victory remained high,<sup>19</sup> but they were instead confronted with the fallacy of their own methods. During the Reagan presidency, social conservative proposals were consistently sidelined in favor of economic ones. The president himself often demonstrated a lack of support for those initiatives most important to Evangelicals, such as the human life and school prayer reinstatement amendments.<sup>20</sup> The George H.W. Bush (1924-2018) presidency did not deliver more satisfactory results, and Evangelicals found themselves baffled when the president they had strongly supported considered the possibility of an in-party compromise between the pro-life and pro-choice movements.<sup>21</sup> The Supreme Court also refrained from issuing drastic rulings on any of the abortion-related cases brought forward.<sup>22</sup> The election of pro-choice democratic candidate Bill Clinton in 1992 marked the end of the conservative Christians' first unsuccessful approach to politics.

The nineties thus came as a period of self-reflection, with old and new organizations correcting those shortcomings that had made their previous involvement so underwhelming. An examination of the experience of the Moral Majority, the biggest and most politically involved organization of the eighties, reveals that conservative Christians ultimately held little influence in party and national agenda set-

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Williams, *God's Own Party*. On the complex reasons behind the Evangelical dissatisfaction with the Carter presidency, see Dowland, "Family Values".

**18** Durham, *The Christian Right*, 89.

**19** On the eve of George H.W. Bush's election, Christianity Today reported that "[the election] makes it more likely that *Roe v. Wade* will be overturned, or at least substantially curtailed" (Barnes, "Issues for 1989", 47).

**20** Banwart, "Jerry Falwell", 150, 152; Martin, "How Ronald Reagan Wowed Evangelicals", 49.

**21** Cryderman, "Am-Bushed?".

**22** Instances in which a case on abortion was referred to the Supreme Court can be found at Lawton, "Could This Be the Year?", 36; Muck, "What If We Win?", 13; "Chipping Away at *Roe v. Wade*", 37; "Opposing Views", 48.

ting. Despite their mobilization as a large electorate, they were consistently outplayed by more experienced interest groups.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, the end goals and especially the means were recognized as too unrealistic and sectarian, and therefore unfit for the world of politics.

### 3 A Changing Decade

The first change the Religious Right pursued aimed to enhance their leverage *vis-à-vis* their Republican allies. Quite early, influential groups such as Concerned Women for America and the newly founded Christian Coalition (1989) moved towards decentralizing their presence and creating a strong grass-roots base.<sup>24</sup> Without sacrificing their presence in Washington, these organizations created a nation-wide network of stable chapters and partnered with local conservative organizations in electoral battles all across the political pyramid, from school boards all the way up to state legislature.<sup>25</sup> The explicit aim of this strategy was not to support the Republican party *in se* but rather “[...] a particular kind of Republican party: pro-life, pro-family [supporting] religious conservative themes and values”.<sup>26</sup> Accordingly, many of the early battles of this new Religious Right were fought to elect social conservative candidates over moderate Republican candidates. This approach culminated in the election of 53 pro-life Congressional representatives and 8 pro-life governors.<sup>27</sup> The increased influence of Evangelicals within the Republican electorate and of social conservatives among the party ranks allowed the Religious Right to push further for stronger commitments to the pro-life cause. Indeed, the GOP was forced to adopt a clear pro-life position after influential groups such as Focus on the Family made severe threats of electoral boycott in response to serious attempts from the Republican party in 1996 to compromise on the issue of abortion.<sup>28</sup> From there on, Republican presidential candidates swiftly moved to voice their pro-life positions, even when they had previously taken

<sup>23</sup> Marley perfectly conveys the legacy of the Reagan era when stating that “[...] the Christian Right was not nearly as important to Ronald Reagan as he was to them” (Marley, “Ronald Reagan”, 866), framing the Presidency as crucial for conservative Christian political engagement but overall indifferent to their agenda.

<sup>24</sup> Lawton, “Whatever Happened to the Religious Right?”, 44; “Robertson Regroups”.

<sup>25</sup> In 1992, the Christian Coalition had developed 350 chapters across 42 States. By 1994, the organization had 860 chapters across all states, and it had forged alliances with dominant local political entities in 12 states. Cf. “Robertson Regroups”; “Bringing in the Votes”, 42; Frame, “High Stakes for the Religious Right”, 63.

<sup>26</sup> Ralph Reed cit. in Frame, “Quick Change Artists”, 50.

<sup>27</sup> Frame, “Quick Change Artists”, 50.

<sup>28</sup> Kennedy, “Candidates Court Family Values Vote”, 78.

an opposing stance. This is evidenced by John McCain's (1936-2018) affirmation of his new pro-life beliefs in 2007, despite having once supported the 1996 pro-choice overture.<sup>29</sup>

The creation of a strong grass-roots base went hand in hand with the acquisition of increased political expertise. While the Moral Majority adapted forms and methods from the Civil Rights era, such as roundtables of conservative pastors and distribution of voting material,<sup>30</sup> the new organizations directly recruited politically involved individuals from within the congregations and supported their involvement in local politics.<sup>31</sup> The growth in political expertise is also evident at the leadership level. Despite Pat Robertson (born 1930) occupying the role of president, the *de facto* leadership of the coalition was left to Ralph Reed (born 1961), an experienced Republican strategist whose approach more closely resembled that of a politician rather than a preacher.<sup>32</sup> In the 2000s, a politically-experienced leadership also emerged in those groups not directly involved with political lobbying. In 2003, both Focus on the Family and the Family Research Council appointed political experts as their leaders, respectively appointing the former Secretary of Interior under the Reagan administration Donald Hodel (born 1935) and the Republican representative in the Louisiana House of Representatives Tony Perkins (born 1963). As conservative Christians became more accustomed to the world of politics, their numbers in the corridors of power notably increased. This was strongly evidenced under the George W. Bush presidency, as the President appointed many Evangelicals to key institutional positions.<sup>33</sup> Interpreting these appointments as unilateral strategic moves from the Republican party to solidify a conservative alliance would strongly downplay the evolution that the Religious Right had actively undergone in the previous decades. Rather, considering the influence that appointees held in policy making, the high number of Evangelical presidential appointments is indicative of the clout the Religious Right had garnered, as much as the level of political maturity its associates had reached.<sup>34</sup>

The second substantial change saw a redefinition of the overarching objectives and means into forms and modalities more fit for the complex world of politics. The strong Christian values on which the Religious Right had been founded led Evangelicals to approach pol-

<sup>29</sup> Carnes, "Talking the Walk", 35.

<sup>30</sup> Banwart, "Jerry Falwell", 138.

<sup>31</sup> "Robertson Regroups"; Lawton, "The New Face(s) of the Religious Right", 44.

<sup>32</sup> A detailed study on the Christian Coalition history can be found in Watson, *The Christian Coalition*.

<sup>33</sup> Lindsay, "Ties that Bind", 886.

<sup>34</sup> Lindsay, "Ties that Bind", 902.



itics with religious fervor, maintaining a strong belief in irrefutable truths that must be defended at all costs.<sup>35</sup> Accepting compromises on such truths did not come easily, even when these concerned the means rather than the ends, as Evangelicals felt their own moral and religious integrity at stake.<sup>36</sup> In the early nineties, it became increasingly clear to certain politically-involved Evangelicals that a change in rhetoric and approach was necessary to appeal to those allies who did not share their same religious convictions. Reflecting on the prominence of religion in the 1992 Republican Convention, respected figures such as Don Eberly (born 1953)<sup>37</sup> and Richard Cizik<sup>38</sup> criticized the overly sectarian rhetoric as too polarizing and accessible only to the Religious Right, which ran the risk of Evangelicals being perceived as “just another power bloc to be pandered to”.<sup>39</sup> Yet, not all of the Religious Right would attempt to correct this perceived weakness, as Concerned Women for America and especially the Christian Coalition would again pioneer new forms of political engagement. Both organizations maintained a strongly pro-life end goal and consistently supported pro-life candidates through various elections with their lobby efforts, hoping to one day see *Roe* reversed. At the same time, they also acted towards making the agenda of the Religious Right less sectarian and more welcoming to a wider array of public policy issues not previously covered.

Similar to how the Moral Majority had framed being pro-family as an umbrella label to rally together a wide and divided conservative Christian electorate,<sup>40</sup> the organizations of the nineties took a broader and more welcoming approach to appeal to their non-wholly social conservative allies.<sup>41</sup> When finance and economy had previously appeared among the concerns of the Religious Right, they were limited to the allocation of federal funds to religious organizations and the

**35** On the importance of faith and the theological justification behind Evangelical political activism, see Collins, *The Evangelical Moment*, 107-30; Balmer, *Evangelicalism in America*; Durham, *The Christian Right*, 105.

**36** As an extreme example, the fact that Clinton was both a devout Southern Baptist and a strong pro-choicer confused many Evangelicals to the point of questioning the sincerity of his faith. Yancey, “The Riddle of Bill Clinton’s Faith”, 24-9.

**37** Former White House aide for President Reagan, who would later work under President George W. Bush as deputy director of the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives.

**38** Vice President for Governmental Affairs of the National Association of Evangelicals, responsible for lobbying Congress on behalf of the organization.

**39** Don Eberly cit. in Lawton, “A Republican God?”, 52.

**40** Dowland, “Family Values”, 609.

**41** Reed, *Politically Incorrect*. This is a manifesto of the ideas and agendas of the Christian Coalition during those years. Setting the ideological biases aside, it represents a viable historical document on the shift that was occurring in the Religious Right.

tax-exempt status of religious institutions in their broadest sense.<sup>42</sup> The initiatives pushed forward during the Regan-Bush era as financial measures against abortion were welcomed, but also interpreted as meager concessions from presidencies overall reluctant to seriously deliver on the social conservative agenda.

The programs of many Religious Right organizations of the nineties instead explicitly and systematically included the pursuit of financial alongside social conservatism, setting the two on the same path. The Christian Coalition led this push for the pro-family and pro-life labels to include principles that could resound with a moderate and economic conservative audience, such as tax relief for families with children, welfare reforms and the promotion of states' authority in the allocation of public funds.<sup>43</sup> The efforts to legitimize this broader agenda and the provision of economic answers to social, if not moral, questions peaked in the mid-nineties. For the 1994 mid-term elections, which resulted in Republicans gaining control of both congressional chambers, the party had produced a legislative blueprint known as the *Contract with America*.<sup>44</sup> The Christian Coalition lent its support and expertise to push the *Contract* forward, although it mainly focused on fiscal issues, and expected the party to eventually deliver some social conservative legislation in exchange. Despite this gesture of goodwill, the GOP largely ignored its Evangelical wing, leading the Coalition to force its hand with a social conservative *Contract with the American Family*, which they had publicly endorsed by the party leadership.<sup>45</sup> The disputes surrounding the contracts were more of a symptom of the underlying struggle between social and economic conservatives in the GOP rather than a shortcoming of the new approach, as a similar initiative will achieve more success 1996. By presenting the issue of abortion within the framework of small government and states' rights in the allocation of public funds, the Coalition and Concerned Women for America successfully lobbied for the Welfare Reform of 1996 to exclude state benefits for unwed minor mothers, instead allocating these resources to pro-life programs as opposed to abortion.<sup>46</sup> By the end of the decade, those initiatives that aimed to align social and economic concerns were

<sup>42</sup> Balmer, *Evangelicalism in America*; Banwart, "Jerry Falwell", 141.

<sup>43</sup> Loconte, "Will The Religious Right gain Momentum in 1994?"; Curtis, "Putting Out A Contract"; Frame, "Payback Time?", 43-4.

<sup>44</sup> Newt Gingrich (1943), republican representative (1979-1999) and Speaker of the United States House of Representatives (1995-1999) played a key role in defining the Republican strategy and its relationship with the Religious Right during this period. Riley, Party Government and the Contract with America. Gillion, The Pact.

<sup>45</sup> Curtis, "Putting Out A Contract", 54.

<sup>46</sup> In the end, after much controversies and negotiations between the different components of the party and between Republicans and Democrats, the bill passed retaining

no longer perceived as weak compromises, but rather emphasized as success stories. One such case is the *Faith in Action* program promoted by Texas Governor George W. Bush for the 1997 state legislative session, which aimed at reducing welfare spending by easing regulation and oversight of faith-based charities.<sup>47</sup> The initiative garnered sympathy from conservative Christians and remained a point of interest and praise during the 2000 elections.<sup>48</sup>

While the scope of the pro-life label was broadened to include fiscal and economic concerns, its persistent end goal was being redefined with winnability in mind. As the criminalization of abortion on a federal level was more out of reach than ever at that time, pro-life campaigns moved to tackle smaller and more achievable objectives without abandoning the final goal of overturning *Roe*.<sup>49</sup> Rather than focusing on abortion in general, emphasis was placed on the abolition of a particular practice of late pregnancy termination known as partial birth abortion. The practice was a particularly controversial: it was already under scrutiny by the American Medical Association and unpopular among moderates and conservatives alike,<sup>50</sup> characteristics that made it ideal for a winnable battle. A proposal to ban the practice was supported twice in 1995 and 1997 by two-thirds of the House and a majority of the Senate, but resulted in a presidential veto both times due to a perceived lack of protection for the mother consistent with *Roe*. By the time of the second veto, States had already moved to place their own limitations or bans, resulting in a flurry of legislative and judicial confrontations that captured public opinion once more.<sup>51</sup> The possibility of a ban remained a central point during the 2000 election, with Republican candidate George W. Bush affirming his support in case of victory,<sup>52</sup> which led to the signing of the Partial Birth Abortion Ban Act in 2003.

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“the use of incentive for states to discourage out-of-wedlock births, [...] [provided that] the abortion rate must not rise”. Durham, *The Christian Right*, 94-6.

**47** Turek argues that the appeal of the initiative among conservative Christians lay in the fact that it “expanded Bush’s commitment to conservative political principles [...] into a comprehensive vision for enacting broader cultural change” (*Religious Rethoric*, 987).

**48** It is perhaps relevant to note that Ralph Reed, former executive director of the Christian Coalition, is among the advisers hired by George W. Bush. “Bush Faith-Based Plan”; Carnes, “A Presidential Hopeful”, 63.

**49** On the increased prevalence of attention paid to partial-birth abortion and its wider implications on the abortion debate of the time, see Armitage, *Political Language*.

**50** Ferranti, “‘D and X’ Abortion Ban Faces Presidential Veto”, 74.

**51** From 1997 to 1999, 25 States had pushed forward some form of ban on the practice. Moore, “Partial-Birth Bans Make Little Headway in States”, 18; Armitage, *Political Language*.

**52** Carnes, “Republican Candidates Court Conservative Early”, 17.

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Finally, this trend of changes aimed at appealing to a wider audience also manifested in initiatives pursued outside the realm of politics. In parallel to lobbying, Religious Right organizations had long been producing literature, radio programs and ministries, as well as offering counselling and therapy services characterized by a strong pro-life position.<sup>53</sup> Throughout the nineties and early two-thousands, these efforts intensified through their partnership with Crisis Pregnancy Centers to oppose abortion clinics by establishing their own network of service providers.<sup>54</sup> Groups such as Focus on the Family and the Southern Baptist Convention purchased sonogram machines to enhance the counselling efficiency of several Centers they partnered with, an initiative that it is still ongoing to this day. Despite having been a reality since the late sixties, the Crisis Pregnancy Centers would receive much more attention beginning in the nineties, as they solved two main issues the pro-life movement was dealing with at the time. After the violent turn taken by the most extreme wing of the pro-life movement,<sup>55</sup> many voices called for a warmer and more compassionate approach.<sup>56</sup> Similarly, Evangelicals might have been compelled to look for other non-political areas of engagement in response to the difficulties encountered in obtaining federal limits on certain abortive practices.

Through these changing strategies for both political and non-political involvement, it is possible to see the broader evolution the Religious Right was undergoing. These initiatives all relied upon appealing to a broader audience beyond conservative Christians and pursued this objective accordingly. The expansion of the pro-life and pro-family agenda to systematically comprehend fiscal and economic concerns sought to reconcile the differences between the social and economic conservative wings of the Republican party, employing a give-and-take logic that applied financial solutions to social issues. The pursuit of a partial-birth abortion ban helped keep the abortion debate not only highly relevant, but also strongly anchored in a wide consensus for what was a pro-life initiative. The support given to

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**53** Zoba, “Daring to Disciple America”.

**54** Crisis Pregnancy Centers are local non-profit organizations staffed by volunteers who offer a series of services to pregnant women, with the explicit aim of persuading them to carry the pregnancy to term. They represent a highly decentralized operation, as each center is a reflection of its local volunteers. This said, their services have spanned from counselling and direct economic support to violent sensibilization. Stafford, “Inside Crisis Pregnancy Centers”, 20; Matthews-Green, “Wanted: A New Pro-life Strategy”, 27; “Refocusing the Prolife Agenda”, 29.

**55** On the violent turn of organizations such as Operation Rescue and other fringe groups, see Durham, *The Christian Right*, 97.

**56** Matthews-Green, “Wanted: A New Prolife Strategy”, 27; “Refocusing the Prolife Agenda”, 29.

Crisis Pregnancy Centers also sought to gather public sympathy by engaging in the debate with a more lenient and less confrontational style, while at the same time enhancing its relevancy thanks to the highly decentralized and grass-roots nature of the Centers.

## 4 Conclusions

The Religious Right's journey since its debut has been one characterized by persistence and change. At the end of Reagan's presidency, the Evangelical-Republican alliance and Evangelical political engagement at large were not solidified, as observers both within and outside the Evangelical world still wondered what the future might hold for this constituency.<sup>57</sup> Realizing the opportunities offered by politics and recognizing their past shortcomings, new forces within the Religious Right pushed for a redefinition of what had until that point been an electoral bloc into a stronger, more prominent political voice.

The nineties have been highlighted as a period of fundamental changes, as organizations reshaped their structures and approaches to enhance their strength *vis-à-vis* their political rivals as much as their political allies. The development of a nationwide grass-roots presence has played a central role in giving conservative Christians the edge to leverage their position within the Republican party. At the same time, the level of political expertise available in these organizations increased through the promotion of their members for different degrees of institutional engagement and the appointment of political experts rather than preachers as leaders. The establishment of a strong association between financial and social conservatism has helped to advance the legislature process and to actually achieve important results. The Religious Right pursued smaller and achievable objectives, legitimizing a gradual strategy for its social conservative agenda that entailed patiently waiting for better circumstances without losing sight of the final objectives.

This interpretation should not be universally applied to all conservative Christian organizations, as the Religious Right is not a monolith and even its leading groups felt differently about the need to change the nature of their political engagement.<sup>58</sup> Nevertheless, a precise trend has been observed whereby the nature and strategies of these organizations changed profoundly, though at different speeds

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<sup>57</sup> Lawton, "Republican or Reaganites?", 39. Lawton, "Democrats Gain Momentum", 38.

<sup>58</sup> Focus on the Family and the Family Research Council alternated between skepticism and outright opposition towards these approaches. Frame, "Payback Time?"; Curtis, "Putting Out a Contract"; Gardner, "Wild Card Election", 83.

and with varying levels of commitment. By the time of Bush Jr.'s presidency, this evolution had run its course and the Religious Right had matured into a new and more well-versed political force. More importantly, the shift towards pragmatism persisted under this sympathetic presidency. If the Religious Right had reverted to its practices from the eighties after a particularly unfavorable conjunction, the experience of the nineties could have reasonably been considered a small political parenthesis, a coping strategy to survive a hostile political environment. Instead, when the Republican president was sworn into office, the once customary promises of a swift and decisive criminalization of abortion were notably absent and attention was given to those proposals at the time pending in Congress.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, during these eight years of Republican administration, formulations such as “managing the expectations”, “incremental approach” and “undermining without overruling” started to become more popular among politically involved Evangelicals.<sup>60</sup>

By the end of the nineties, the Religious Right had emerged as a very different political force from what it had been at the height of the Moral Majority. Coming to terms with the reality of politics meant acknowledging that the uncompromising approach of the Moral Majority model was flawed from the beginning. Restoring the social and moral tissue of the U.S. remained the final goal of this political coalition, but the pursuit of this goal drastically changed. Space was left for a more pragmatic approach to policy making, anchored in gradualism as a principle and compromise as a means.

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**59** These were the ban of partial-birth abortion and the Born Alive Infant Protection Act. “Changing Hearts and Laws”, 38

**60** “Undermining without overruling” appeared in a 2006 editorial of Christianity Today as the new key tactic regarding *Roe v. Wade*; “incremental approach” and “managing expectations” were the terms used in 2003 by Richard Cizik and Ken Connor (at the time President of the Family Research Council) to describe the attitude towards the legislative process. Respectively in “The Art of Abortion Politics”, 73; Stricherz, “New Congress, New Agenda”.

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