

# Legacy of the Religious Right and the U.S. Presidential Election of 1980

By Meredith O'Neill

## Author Biography

My name is Meredith O'Neill, a senior at Notre Dame Preparatory School in Towson, Maryland. I have a love for history, in particular the development and influence of political parties throughout the history of the United States. I am currently taking AP Government and Economics and frequently look for any opportunity to further my understanding of our government and its history. I aspire to become a lawyer but intend to major in American Studies in college. I believe having a holistic understanding of government, history, and economics will allow me to become a more capable lawyer. My goal is to be able to help people through law and that starts with understanding the system and those who have built it.

## Abstract

Political parties have evolved throughout the history of the United States, yet we have never seen such a polarizing state of politics as we see in 2024. Through the use of academic journals and speeches, this paper explains the turbulent state of U.S. politics by exploring the increased involvement of the Religious Right in politics. Starting with the history of the Religious Right and focusing on the U.S. presidential election in 1980, this paper outlines how the increased activity of the Religious Right has caused a divide in American politics. It will discuss how the presidential election of 1980 solidified a religious voting bloc. The paper also reviews the increased use of religious rhetoric especially during George W. Bush's presidency (2001-2009). This paper finds that the inclusion of religion in secular matters has proven to be provocative. Yet, the Religious Right strives to protect the "traditional family" by encouraging participation in politics, especially on topics such as abortion, women's rights, and gay rights.

*Keywords: Christian Right, Religious Right, voting bloc, religious rhetoric, Ronald Reagan, Jimmy Carter, Abortion, Women's rights, Gay rights, 1980's election*

## Introduction

Politics and political parties have evolved significantly in the United States since its birth, but the current state of politics is tumultuous. This environment has been growing for some time, in part due to the increasing involvement of religion in politics. Religion has always played a role in politics, but never was the primary force. During the mid to late twentieth century, there was a significant cultural shift in civil rights, women's rights, and gay rights. These topics became the hot button issues at the forefront of American politics. The changes were accepted by some and repudiated by others. The Christian Right emerged from fear of the moral decay of society and began to take action to preserve what it considered to be good morals. Its members felt that traditional family values were being abandoned (Wilcox, 1987). The Christian Right strove to protect religious morality and the traditional family through the formation of political groups. This movement started to increase in number and influence as the twentieth century progressed.

This paper will explore how the Republican presidential candidate, Ronald Reagan, and the Democratic candidate, Jimmy Carter, relied on religious campaign strategies to attract voters in the Presidential Election of 1980. It will also examine the influence of the rhetoric used in the 1980 election on other campaigns such as George W. Bush's campaign in 2000. Relying on primary sources such as speeches and interviews, this paper explores the influence of the Religious Right on US political campaigns from 1980-2000. First focusing on the history of the Religious Right, then on the election of 1980 and its influence on other Republican campaigns, this paper aims to demonstrate how the Religious Right has shaped our nation's politics in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries and extending into present day.

The roots of the Christian Right formed during the early twentieth century. The Christian Right started to emerge in 1925 during the Scopes trial in which a group of fundamentalist Protestants called the Bible Crusaders lobbied against the teaching of evolution (Wilcox, 1987). Evolution did not align with the Christian belief in how humans were created, and the Christian Right did not want it to be taught in schools. Another prominent benchmark was the conservative coalition which came together in 1937. This was later followed by the formation of the National Council of Churches (NCC) eleven years later. The NCC joined religious values with free market economics, creating colleges and broadcast networks to spread their political agenda (Payne, 2016). Groups such as these served as the foundation for the Christian Right.

It wasn't until the 1960s that the Christian Right focused on broader political topics. American society experienced profound shifts in the 1960s due to the civil rights movement and the Supreme Court's *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision desegregating schools. The change only continued with the Religious Right disliking the civil rights movement and the idea of secular matters (e.g. de-segregation) affecting the church (Dowland, 2009). Other court case rulings such as *Engel v. Vitale* (1962) and *Abington v. Schempp* (1963) banned prayer in schools and bible readings. This caused an uproar among the Christian Right and led to a wildfire of religious political activity as evangelicals sought to incorporate Christian instruction back into schools (Payne, 2016).

Not only was the Christian Right concerned with instituting religious teachings in public schools, but also with the threat of communism. Amid the Red Scare, many were concerned with the rise of domestic communism, especially the Christian Right. They saw communism as a threat to traditional religious families and to the United States. Religion is not allowed in communist societies which completely

contradicts the goals of the Christian Right: to have a religious and moral nation. In response to this perceived threat, religious organizations assembled. One such group that formed during the 1960s to combat the rise of domestic communism was Fred Schwartz and Billy Hargis Christian Anti-Communist Crusade (CACC) (Wilcox, 1987). The CACC mainly spoke out against communism but also expressed concern on the deteriorating morals of the modern world. This extension into other topics would become more prominent in the seventies and eighties, but the idea of preserving traditional values remained.

The next wave of Christian Right activity was during 1972 and 1973 with the Equal Rights Amendment and *Roe v. Wade*. The pushback against the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) was led by Phyllis Schlafly. Schlafly was a Roman Catholic and was notoriously known for her conservative views and fervent opposition to the ERA (Britannica School, 2024c). She garnered support by claiming the amendment would ruin the traditional family's values that were so important to Christian life (Dowland, 2009). She also asserted that the ERA degrades women's worth by requiring them to provide for themselves, which she saw as the job of the man. She said, "[Men have] the duty of financial support under our laws and customs. Why should we abandon these mandatory wife-support and child-support laws so that a wife would have an 'equal' obligation to take a job?" (Britannica School, 2024c). Her concern about women being granted more independence was shared by the Christian Right and they were successful in stopping the ratification.

However, they were not able to stop the *Roe v. Wade* decision. Christians also believed that abortion threatened traditional family values by killing innocent babies. To Christians, life starts at conception, so the concept of aborting a fetus at any point in the pregnancy seemed appalling. The campaign against abortion was initially

led by Catholics but gained support after evangelist Francis Schaeffer published his 1979 book *Whatever Happened to the Human Race* (Dowland, 2009). This book compared abortion to subjects such as slavery and immigration, which caught people's attention. Abortion served as the push that took Christians who previously stressed the importance of separating politics from religion to Christians who now incorporated religion into secular matters. This issue persists in politics today and was a very significant concern for the Christian Right following the decision in 1973 and something they have not stopped fighting against. *Roe v. Wade* has been overturned, but abortion remains an important topic in politics today. Candidates today know that if they support the overturning of the *Roe v. Wade* they will have the support of most Evangelical Christians.

Another religious group focused on abortion was the Moral Majority (Dowland, 2009). Founded by Jerry Falwell in 1979, the Moral Majority solidified the Religious Right's influence. This group was concerned about the declining morality of society; Falwell claimed to be pro-family, pro-tradition, and pro-America (Britannica School, 2024b). The Moral Majority was mostly made up of fundamentalists who were against gay rights, the ERA, the civil rights movement, abortion, and anything that appeared to threaten the moral integrity of the nation. What made the Moral Majority so influential was the fact they were not comprised of only evangelicals, but their membership extended further to Catholics on issues like abortion (Dowland, 2009). This coalition of Christians was pivotal in the election and re-election of Reagan. This group was very active in the political arena and showed up to vote, so Reagan was sure to garner their support (Weber & Thornton, 2012).

The importance of preserving religious morality and the traditional family caused religion to pervade people's political views, especially in the Christian Right

(Dowland, 2009). The Christian Right will support candidates who share the same beliefs and they turn out to vote, making them a considerable voting bloc that some candidates would want to use (Weber & Thornton, 2012). Religion influences topics such as education, personal autonomy, women's rights, and gay rights; it has become intertwined with politics as they seek to protect and project their religious values onto the nation. In the late twentieth century, politicians started to take notice of this and the increasing influence of religious voting blocs (Weber & Thornton, 2012). This can be most notably seen in the 1980 presidential campaign as both Reagan and Carter used religious rhetoric to gain support from the Religious Right, with Reagan becoming their preferred candidate.

The relationship between Jimmy Carter and the Christian Right is a complicated one. Jimmy Carter attempted to appeal to religious voters, but these voters ultimately felt misled by him. Carter's political career started in Georgia's state senate as a Democrat, and he became governor in 1971 (Weber & Thornton, 2012). Throughout his career he spoke very openly about his religion, especially during his presidential campaign, saying he was a Christian before all else (Britannica School, 2024). Carter's stance on many issues was multi-layered, he would say one thing and then amend it in order to appeal to liberals, moderates, and conservatives alike (Hahn, 1984). This combination allowed Carter to appeal to the Religious Right for votes during his first run for the presidency. Carter went as far as to promise a committee of evangelicals to be appointed to protect and support the American family (Hahn, 1984). Carter ended up not appointing any committee to protect the "American family" and did nothing to stop bills that protected abortion, gay rights, or equality for women. These topics were fiercely fought against by the Religious Right and solidified their distaste for Carter. He had effectively fallen out of the graces of the Christian Right and would not have their support for the 1980

election.

The fall of Carter paved the way for the rise of Reagan who was beloved by the Religious Right. Reagan was another self-proclaimed Born Again Christian, however, unlike Carter, Reagan was a conservative. Reagan had the public's favor because he portrayed himself as a normal person participating in politics because he wanted to see change (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2024d). After his time as governor of California, Reagan was a favorite of the Republican party. Knowing this, Reagan focused on earning support from the Religious Right by attending the Religious Roundtable, and befriending Jerry Falwell. Reagan made his relationship with the Religious Right very public. When visiting the Religious Roundtable, Reagan went as far as to say, "I know that you can't endorse me, but I only brought that up because I want you to know that I endorse you and what you're doing." (Marley, 2006). Reagan won their favor by showing how their morals align. His endorsement of the Roundtable showed good faith to their cause. Since Carter had failed them, Reagan was seen as the president to further their agenda. However, this was not the case, as Reagan put most of their issues like outlawing abortion and gay marriage on the back burner and focused on economics.

Much like Carter, Reagan did not fulfill his promises to the Religious Right, but unlike Carter he did not lose their support (Marley, 2006). This was in most part due to the fact that Reagan had worked so hard to build that relationship and that he had kept leaders of the Religious Right like Jerry Falwell close. The Religious Right also felt that they had some influence over Reagan, which was not true, and Falwell greatly exaggerated his role in Reagan's life enforcing that belief. Reagan allowed that notion to persist because it kept him in their good graces (Marley, 2006). Reagan was already favored by conservatives long before his presidency, but his efforts to appeal to the Religious Right paid off as

two-thirds of his winning margin were Evangelical Christians (Brudney & Copeland, 1984). Reagan set the precedent to appeal to the religious audience and demonstrated how winning their support could benefit politicians.

In the 1980 presidential election, religion played such a critical role that had not yet been seen before. Both candidates were Born Again Christians and both candidates used religious rhetoric to try and gain support. Carter, who had previously succeeded in achieving the Christian Right's support, was now shunned and they focused their attention on Reagan (Wilcox, 1987). Reagan understood their voting power and ensured he had their support. Reagan solidified the relationship between the Christian Right and conservatives, a legacy that future candidates will use and have been using (Brudney & Copeland, 1984). This election marked the emergence of the Religious Right as an influential political force.

Religious groups have become an important voting bloc in presidential campaigns. It's not because they have large numbers, but rather that the members of the Religious Right are active voters and will show up to vote (Weber & Thornton, 2012). One of these presidential candidates that successfully used the religious voting bloc was George W. Bush. As a conservative governor from Texas, Bush was not always open about his religion, which is a very stark difference to his presidency in which religion played a very important role. As governor he still refrained from explicitly talking about religion, but he supported traditional values which got the attention of the Christian Right (Turek, 2014). When nominated for the Republican candidacy for the 2000 election, Bush's rhetoric shifted toward faith-based initiatives. Now he was explicitly open with his religion and wanted to focus on upholding Christians values (Turek, 2014). This earned him the Religious Right voting bloc which would stay with him during his next election.

Bush is known for being one of the most religious presidents in US history and incorporated his faith in many of his speeches. After the attack on September 11, 2001, Bush prayed for the American people (Turek, 2014). This religious rhetoric and anti-terrorism stance became his new platform and won him his next term (Turek, 2014). However, this association between the Christian faith and anti-terrorism led to bad prejudice being formed against Muslims. The attitude of America shifted, and political rhetoric increasingly relied on tropes of us versus them, us being America the country of Christianity and them being the Muslims in Afghanistan. Afghanistan was under the rule of the Taliban and not all Muslims supported them, but this was lost in translation. Thus began the demonization of Islam that is still seen today.

Bush's inclusion of religion caused politics to become more impassioned, but that is to be expected when religion is involved. Abortion, for example, causes such controversy because people are so passionate about it. Due to their religion, they feel the need to go to great lengths to stop it. Extremism can be felt both on the left and right, but with the right, religion tends to play a greater role. There has been a tendency of fundamentalist Christians towards the right and it has only been amplified by the rise of the Religious Right that was solidified with Reagan (Brudney & Copeland, 1984).

This relationship has continued to grow, and Republican candidates now know that the voting bloc is something that can be relied upon (Weber & Thornton, 2012). People with more traditional values tend to gravitate towards the Republican party because of this relationship and people with liberal views lean towards the Democratic party, effectively moving the parties farther and farther apart. Now the days of bi-partisan bills and votes have largely become a thing of the past.

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