

## INTRODUCTION

[S]omewhere along the way, faith stopped being used to bring us together. . . . Faith started being used to drive us apart. Faith got hijacked.

—Presidential candidate Barack Obama,  
quoted in the *New York Times*

On the 2008 campaign trail, candidate Barack Obama accused Christian Right pastors and television pundits of hijacking the evangelical Christian movement for partisan gain. Has evangelical Christianity been hijacked? This top-down explanation makes sense to Christians who feel marginalized by the Christian Right. Randall Balmer, Episcopal priest and historian, protests that the evangelical faith “has been hijacked by right-wing zealots who have distorted the gospel of Jesus Christ, defaulted on the noble legacy of nineteenth-century evangelical activism, and failed to appreciate the genius of the First Amendment.”<sup>1</sup> Progressive evangelical Jim Wallis argues that “God is not a Republican or a Democrat.”<sup>2</sup> These politically liberal and moderate Christians insist that evangelical beliefs do not naturally support a conservative agenda. Rather, a small minority of partisan activists have co-opted the language of faith to manipulate people in the pews. Since the 2004 election, Democrats have courted evangelical voters by framing their progressive agenda in moral and religious language.<sup>3</sup> A more diverse set of evangelical leaders and interest groups has emerged, attempting to mobilize evangelicals around other “moral issues” like poverty and care for the environment.<sup>4</sup>

But white American evangelicals remain remarkable in their political homogeneity. In 2004, 77.5 percent supported the Republican candidate for president,<sup>5</sup> and their support for the Republican Party was largely unchanged in 2008, 2010, and 2012.<sup>6</sup> Progressive faith outreach may have borne some fruit among under-thirty evangelicals, who voted for Obama 8 percent more than their elders in 2008. Even so, 70 percent of younger evangelicals voted for Senator John McCain in 2008 and a majority still identify as politically conservative.<sup>7</sup> For white evangelicals, it has not been enough for Democrats and progressive activists to make

top-down appeals to religious faith. The coalition between evangelicals and the Republican Party is not just constructed from the top down, by political elites who frame conservative issues in religious language. In *The Politics of Evangelical Identity*, I show how this relationship is anchored from the bottom up within the worlds of local congregations. Setting American evangelicals in cross-national perspective, I show how political conservatives have reshaped what it means to be an evangelical Christian within everyday religious practice.

The hijacking metaphor paints a fundamentally distorted picture of *how* local evangelical churches have become politicized. Guided by this metaphor, scholars and pundits have looked for evidence that evangelical churches have been co-opted in top-down, heavy-handed ways. We imagine that politicized religion looks something like this: A corpulent, balding minister gets up in the pulpit and rails against the sins of Sodom, beads of sweat pouring down his brow. He shakes his finger at the faithful, framing his opposition to gay marriage in terms of the core values of the faith. The congregation listens obediently from the pews, nodding their heads in humorless disgust. Then all rise to sing the closing hymn: “Onward Christian Soldiers.” The ushers distribute a Christian Right voter guide that identifies which candidates support a “Christian agenda.” The self-satisfied flock pours out of the church doors and into the polls, commissioned to wage a culture war on gays, abortionists, and secularists.

But this image does not capture how most rank-and-file evangelicals experience the political climate of their local churches. Local congregations have a particular organizational logic that is different from the worlds of politicians and interest groups.<sup>8</sup> While Christian Right elites promote a coherent culture war ideology, evangelical congregations favor pragmatism, self-help, and local concern. Sermons on political topics and “moral issues” are rare in evangelical churches. According to the National Congregations Study, only 10 percent of evangelical congregations report distributing Christian Right voter guides.<sup>9</sup> For more than twenty years, a majority of evangelicals have distanced themselves from the “Christian Right” as a political movement, expressing negative attitudes toward Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and the Moral Majority.<sup>10</sup> There is a large divide between the worlds of evangelical congregations and the conservative power brokers who speak for them.

Ironically, white evangelicals report that they engage in fewer political discussions at church than mainline Protestants Catholics, and Black Protestants.<sup>11</sup> Using the 1998 National Congregations Study, Kraig Beyerlein and Mark Chaves found that evangelical churches engaged in a fairly limited set of political practices, compared to mainline, Catholic, and Black Protestant churches. Mainline congregations tend to organize

discussion groups around political issues and host political candidates. Catholic congregations organize demonstrations and marches and lobby elected officials. Black Protestant congregations register voters, open their doors to candidates, and distribute voter guides from sources other than the Christian Right. Evangelical congregations rarely engage in collective demonstrations and marches like Catholic parishes, sponsor discussions on political issues like mainline churches, or open their doors to candidates like Black Protestant churches.<sup>12</sup> In reality, the worlds of local evangelical congregations are far less overtly political than the worlds of Christian Right elites.

Yet the Christian Right is still winning the framing game. How do evangelical churches reinforce such a high level of political homogeneity? I find that evangelical churches have become politicized in more subtle ways that reflect the influence of the Christian Right. Even though evangelicalism is not defined by a shared, coherent political worldview, evangelical congregations still foster thin coherence between religious identity and partisanship.<sup>13</sup> Political influence does not work through explicit persuasion or deliberation about political subjects, but by defining evangelical identity in ways that are implicitly linked to partisanship. Ironically, these partisan cues have greater moral power because they are distanced from the dirty business of “politics.”<sup>14</sup> Political conservatism takes on a sacred quality because it is woven into the fabric of everyday religious life.

### EVANGELICALS AND THE CULTURE WARS

This book offers a new perspective on how white evangelical Christians have become an important constituency for the Republican Party in the United States. Robert Wuthnow has described this shift as part of a larger restructuring of American religion that took place within local congregations, denominations, and public life.<sup>15</sup> Before the 1960s, voters were socialized from birth into ethnoreligious communities—Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish—that instilled certain assumptions about party loyalty.<sup>16</sup> Protestants identified with the Republicans and Catholics with the Democrats. But since the 1960s, religious identity has become more voluntary and disconnected from tight-knit ethnic communities.<sup>17</sup> Americans are now divided by the values and lifestyles that they have chosen for themselves, rather than by inherited ethnoreligious loyalties. The important divides are no longer between Protestants, Catholics, and Jews, but between “modernist” and “orthodox” people within each religious group.

According to Wuthnow’s account, this restructuring of American religion contributed to ideological polarization between liberals and conservatives in electoral politics. It also transformed the relationship between

religious identity and partisanship, forcing political scholars to rethink traditional models of political socialization. In the older “ethnoreligious” world, people were socialized into an ascribed religious identity, which might then inform their political attitudes and party identification. The causal relationships were easier to model, because people were “assigned” to their religious group in childhood and then chose their political party later in life. We knew which came first. The restructuring of American religion complicates that picture, because people can choose the religious subculture that will socialize them politically, based in part on preexisting political commitments.<sup>18</sup>

Even as mainline Protestants and Catholics became divided between liberal and conservative camps, white evangelical Protestants became *more* united in their political vision. Evangelicalism is a Protestant movement that affirms the authority of the Bible, Christ’s atoning sacrifice on the cross, the need for a personal commitment to Christ, and the need for all believers to participate actively in religious mission.<sup>19</sup> Throughout this book, I use the term “evangelical” to refer to a broad coalition of theologically conservative Protestants in North America, which includes groups like Southern Baptists, Pentecostals, charismatics, independent Bible churches, and Fundamentalists. Social scientists commonly refer to these groups together as “conservative Protestants.” But to avoid confusion between the theological and political meanings of conservatism, I use the more popular term “evangelical” to describe the broad coalition of Protestants who have resisted theological modernism.<sup>20</sup>

At the start of the twenty-first century, white evangelicals stand out among traditionalists in all observant Christian groups as the most politically conservative.<sup>21</sup> Frequent attendance at evangelical churches is consistently identified as an important predictor of voting Republican in the United States.<sup>22</sup> The so-called God Gap is not just between more and less devout voters, compared in terms of a generic religious traditionalism or “orthodoxy.” To predict political attitudes, it matters if voters belong to an *evangelical* church, ascribe to characteristic *evangelical* beliefs, and identify as an *evangelical* or born-again Christian.<sup>23</sup>

Previous scholarship has offered two competing explanations for this strong relationship between evangelicals and the Republican Party. James Hunter has argued that evangelicals’ political behavior is primarily driven by a coherent moral worldview, which follows naturally from their shared theological beliefs. By contrast, Hunter’s critics reject this notion that there is a thick coherence between evangelical religion and political conservatism.<sup>24</sup> That is, evangelicals are not inevitably attracted to conservative politics by the internal logic of a coherent religious worldview. Instead, critics claim that this sense of coherence was manufactured from

the top down by political elites and advocacy groups. But both of these frameworks ignore a critical piece of the puzzle: how the Christian Right was able to exercise moral power within the evangelical movement, to invest conservative politics with authentic spiritual meaning for people in the pews.<sup>25</sup> By comparing evangelicals in the United States and Canada, I show how political forces have actually reshaped the content of American evangelical identity at the level of everyday religious practice, not just at the level of top-down political mobilization.

### A COHERENT “ORTHODOX” WORLDVIEW

James Hunter has famously argued that American politics has become locked in a culture war between “orthodox” and “progressive” visions of moral authority. In this account, evangelicals increasingly support the Republican Party because they subscribe to an “orthodox” worldview that privileges transcendent truth, while Democrats subscribe to a “progressive” worldview that privileges the individual as the arbiter of truth.<sup>26</sup> These different views of morality authority are expressed in two very different narratives of American national identity.

Within the orthodox narrative, America was founded as a Christian nation—or at least founded on generally Judeo-Christian principles—with a divine mission to spread freedom and justice. But American “freedom” is primarily imagined socially, as a society living free from external tyranny, enjoying the benefits of free-market capitalism. “Justice” is imagined individually, so that administering justice means punishing the wicked and rewarding individual righteousness. Accordingly, America’s founding documents take on a quasi-sacred quality for orthodox activists, since these texts lay out God’s unchanging plan for America’s past, present, and future. Social change is only desirable if it allows America to more faithfully realize these founding principles. Likewise, gender roles and family relationships are held to a timeless standard of objective truth, and so feminism promotes deviation from God’s ideal.

By contrast, the progressive narrative casts America as an ongoing experiment, founded as a mixture of religious values and humanist, Enlightenment ideas. “Freedom” is imagined individually, as a collection of individuals enjoying freedom of conscience, guided by their diverse notions of the good. “Justice” is imagined socially, as a collective struggle to foster inclusion and equality. For progressives, America’s founding documents are works-in-progress, not sacred texts, and so collective understanding of national values should naturally evolve as part of this historical struggle for justice. Likewise, gender roles and family forms are not fixed by timeless truths, but change naturally over time, to allow for greater indi-

vidual freedom and self-realization. Since America does not have a uniquely God-given destiny, progressives do not value national loyalty, but rather identify as citizens of the world.<sup>27</sup>

According to Hunter, these competing narratives resonate with different groups of Americans based on different patterns of moral perception and judgment, not based on class or social status. Hunter describes these patterns of moral judgment as *prepolitical*, or shaped by an individual's primary socialization in families and group subcultures.<sup>28</sup> In his account, the orthodox narrative resonates with evangelicals because they hold a high view of moral authority, apart from human reason and desire. Evangelicals judge sexual norms and gender roles by reference to an authoritative reading of scripture, a timeless source of truth that is not subordinate to reason or experience. By contrast, the progressive narrative resonates with people from secular and theologically liberal backgrounds, who locate moral authority within the individual and reconsider truth in the light of reason, science, and new cultural trends.

But the culture wars framework has also been extensively criticized. Within cultural sociology, Hunter's argument has largely been rejected on theoretical grounds. Hunter assumes that cultural systems can be treated as internally coherent, consensually shared within groups, and deeply internalized as values that motivate behavior.<sup>29</sup> But cultural sociology has increasingly rejected the notion that culture shapes the *ends* that people pursue. Following Ann Swidler, the field has re-conceptualized culture as a "toolkit" or "repertoire," which provides the *means* that people use within action and interaction.<sup>30</sup> This new paradigm explains why rank-and-file evangelicals are far more diverse, nuanced, and pragmatic than the political elites who claim to speak for them.<sup>31</sup> For example, evangelical couples often express symbolic support for the idea that women should "submit" to their husbands, but in practice, they draw on the notion of submission to justify quite egalitarian relationships.<sup>32</sup>

If any rank-and-file evangelicals ascribe to Hunter's coherent orthodoxy, we would expect to fit it among grassroots pro-life activists. But social movement scholars find this internal complexity even when they study the most the most highly mobilized, pro-life activists from evangelical backgrounds.<sup>33</sup> For example, Rhys Williams and Jeffrey Neal Blackburn found that evangelical Christian participants in Operation Rescue described their motivations in quite diverse terms despite their similar religious backgrounds.<sup>34</sup> Pro-life and pro-choice activists do not inhabit parallel moral universes; both groups value motherhood and the nurturant values associated with it, even as they clash over the meaning of women's lives.<sup>35</sup> It is also incomplete to describe the contemporary pro-life movement as a traditionalist backlash against the changing role of

women, as Kristin Luker argued in her classic 1984 study of abortion politics.<sup>36</sup> Pro-life activists appeal to many of the same principles as pro-choice and secular political activists, but apply these concerns to consider the rights and dignity of the fetus within a constitutional framework of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”<sup>37</sup> Jon Shields concludes that the abortion conflict is not a war between clashing worldviews, but rather a disagreement about how to apply a *shared* repertoire of democratic discourse to evaluate this medical procedure.<sup>38</sup>

This basic critique is confirmed by a large body of political science and public opinion research, which finds that the U.S. general public does not appear to be polarized around two rival worldviews or systems of moral understanding.<sup>39</sup> When asked about abstract values, American evangelicals seem to share a broad set of national ideals with other Americans, valuing a balance of equality and freedom, moral standards and respect for diversity.<sup>40</sup> While political elites may think in terms of internally coherent moral worldviews, most people combine “orthodox” and “progressive” positions on different issues.<sup>41</sup>

Finally, comparative research shows that traditional moral beliefs do not always inform political behavior. For example, Black Protestants share theologically orthodox beliefs with white evangelicals, yet black Christians vote overwhelmingly Democratic.<sup>42</sup> Religious participation is associated with morally conservative attitudes on abortion, marriage, and homosexuality in all regions of the United States, Canada, and Britain; however, these attitudes are only associated with distinct voting patterns in the United States.<sup>43</sup> Cultural divides can remain differences of private opinion unless strategic political actors mobilize voters around them. Hence, we need to explain the circumstances under which white American evangelicals make these particular “moral issues” of abortion and homosexuality central to their political decision-making.<sup>44</sup>

### CONSTRUCTING COHERENCE FROM ABOVE

In reaction to Hunter, scholars have argued that the U.S. culture wars are primarily driven by top-down political mobilization, rather than an inherent clash between orthodox and progressive worldviews. Candidates, political parties, interest groups, and social movements have played a critical role in linking religious belief and identity to political behavior.<sup>45</sup> This body of research has extensively documented how politicians, religious activists, and advocacy groups have strategically mobilized the general public around alleged cultural threats and moral conflict.<sup>46</sup> Political scientists Geoffrey Layman and John Green argue that there are three conditions under which religious divides become relevant to mass politi-

cal behavior: (1) when religious perspectives are logically related to policy issues; (2) when communal experiences encourage these connections; and (3) when electoral actors emphasize and differentiate themselves on such matters.<sup>47</sup>

All three of these conditions have operated to make evangelicals the base of the Republican Party since the 1980s. Interest groups and networks of Christian activists have worked within evangelical churches to distribute voter guides and emphasize the differences between the two parties on the “moral issues” of abortion and same-sex marriage.<sup>48</sup> Evangelical pastors have embraced the mandate of a new “civic gospel” to influence public life by giving their congregation political cues.<sup>49</sup> And, as the Christian Right seized power within the Republican Party, they were able to nominate candidates that appealed to evangelicals using religious rhetoric.<sup>50</sup> The political mobilization framework calls our attention to how much strategic framing was required to organize evangelicals around moral issues like abortion and homosexuality.

At first glance, much of this work actually extends rather than discredits James Hunter’s basic framework. Hunter has consistently stressed that “without doubt, public discourse is more polarized than the American public itself.” The culture wars are primarily fought between two rival elites, opposing clans of knowledge workers who pursue greater ideological consistency than the general public.<sup>51</sup> But Hunter’s central claim is that these new political alignments are primarily driven by underlying moral commitments, rooted in different religious or quasi-religious worldviews. By contrast, this work raises the possibility that not only does religious morality inform political conflict; political conflict can also shape the content of religious morality.<sup>52</sup> A particular formulation of evangelical orthodoxy may be the outcome of power struggles, driven by the exigencies of partisan coalition-building rather than theological deliberation.

Historical research provides some support for this view. For example, evangelicals hadn’t always been uniformly pro-life. When the Supreme Court first ruled on *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, the Southern Baptist Convention praised the decision as a wise compromise. At the time, evangelicals saw the pro-life position as a distinctively Catholic one, and generally avoided taking a position on the procedure. Hence, it wasn’t inevitable that evangelicals took on the abortion issue because of their commitments to a high view of biblical authority, as James Hunter claims. Rather, a small set of political activists articulated a new narrative of evangelical identity that made abortion newly central to the worldview.

Some scholars have argued that this shift was entirely manufactured by cynical Christian Right operatives, who took over the evangelical subculture to advance their political agenda.<sup>53</sup> There is some evidence for the view that right-wing activists co-opted key evangelical institutions.

During the 1980s, Christian Right activists took over the Southern Baptist Convention and forced out theological moderates who disagreed with their political agenda.<sup>54</sup> But there was more going on here than pure power politics. The problem with this hijacking metaphor is that evangelicalism had no central cockpit that could be stormed.

Evangelicalism has always been a decentralized, trans-denominational movement based in self-governing local churches.<sup>55</sup> Even the Southern Baptist Convention, the nation's largest Protestant denomination, was largely organized within autonomous local churches. Christian Right activists could gain some leverage by taking over the Southern Baptist Convention, but individual congregations could decide for themselves whether or not to recognize denominational dictates or even to pay their dues to the denomination. This religious movement had no central control room, no lever that political activists could pull to make all evangelicals think a certain way.

This leaves us with an important puzzle: how did the culture war narrative take root among rank-and-file evangelicals, who were entrenched in local congregations rather than the halls of power? For most evangelicals, religious identity is not primarily constructed during election seasons, nor in the context of direct political activism. Rather, their primary reference point is the mundane settings of lived religion: local congregations, family life, religious media, parachurch networks, denominational polities, and personal networks.<sup>56</sup> These local settings play a critical role in religious conversion and commitment, by providing social support for the plausibility of religious beliefs.<sup>57</sup> To explain the politics of evangelicals, we need to understand how this particular “moral values” agenda comes to be experienced as a natural—even sacred—expression of their faith.

To answer that question, I spent a year observing how evangelicals talk about politics in ordinary congregational settings. Using ethnographic methods, I asked how this political configuration becomes accepted as common sense within the everyday lives of rank-and-file evangelicals.<sup>58</sup> It is wrong to assume that evangelicals are “cultural dopes” who accept whatever political agenda elites foist upon them.<sup>59</sup> At the same time, a majority of white evangelicals feel that their faith compels them to support the Republican Party, on the basis of non-negotiable “moral issues” like abortion.<sup>60</sup>

According to James Hunter, evangelicals feel bound to political conservatism because of the internal logic of a coherent “orthodox” cultural system. But as a cultural system, evangelicalism has only thin coherence, potentially open to multiple political interpretations and applications.<sup>61</sup> As William Sewell argues, “when a given symbol system is taken by its users to be unambiguous and highly constraining, these qualities cannot be accounted for by their semiotic qualities alone.” When stable patterns

of interpretation emerge, it is because symbolic systems have become interlocked with practices and social structures.<sup>62</sup> Rank-and-file evangelicals are not free to relate their faith to politics in any way that seems logically coherent to them. There are limits to how individuals can legitimately interpret their tradition, if they want to be accepted within local congregations. This book reveals the social mechanisms that keep cross-cutting political concerns and political identities from being voiced within the evangelical subculture.

The evangelical tradition has always favored voluntary, populist forms of organization. It lacks formal ecclesiastical authorities that can hand down official doctrinal statements or excommunicate those who disagree. But local congregations still constrain how rank-and-file evangelicals interpret their tradition. In multi-level analysis, congregations have important contextual effects on political attitudes, controlling for individual characteristics. For example, the theological conservatism of a person's congregation is a better predictor of their moral conservatism and attitudes toward cultural out-groups than their own theological conservatism.<sup>63</sup>

Evangelical churches create self-enclosed social worlds, which fill people's leisure time with church activities and concentrate their relationships within the church.<sup>64</sup> A large body of work finds that dense, bounded networks contribute to cultural and political homophily.<sup>65</sup> But quantitative research has not explained how conservative politics become sacred and authentic for evangelicals—how the *content* of local church life creates these effects.<sup>66</sup> This book uses qualitative methods to look inside the black box of congregations, to reveal the mechanisms within local group interaction that produce contextual effects.

I spent a year observing in four evangelical congregations, listening to how faith was linked to political conservatism in religious practice and group interaction. To understand how this tradition has become politicized, I compared American evangelicals to a meaningful counterfactual: Canadian evangelicals, who share their theological beliefs but not always their conservative politics.

#### A NEW APPROACH: COMPARING EVANGELICALS IN THE UNITED STATES AND CANADA

In *The Politics of Evangelical Identity*, I compare how evangelicals talk about politics in everyday congregational settings in the United States and in Canada, a country where religion is less politicized. Since the 1960s, Canada experienced the same dramatic cultural shifts as the United States, but morality politics have never gained the same traction. Canadian evangelicals provide a theoretically interesting comparison, be-

cause they have the same theology and conservative moral attitudes as American evangelicals. Yet they have historically remained more centrist in their political ideology and partisanship than American evangelicals.<sup>67</sup> I spent 2006–2007 observing in two Baptist and two Pentecostal churches, matched on either side of the border in Hamilton, Ontario and Buffalo, New York.

Seymour Martin Lipset famously stated, “Knowledge of Canada or the United States is the best way to gain insight into the other North American country. Nations can be understood only in the comparative perspective.”<sup>68</sup> Scholars often compare the United States to Europe, to note how religion and morality plays a much stronger role in U.S. politics than in more secular European democracies.<sup>69</sup> But Canada is a far better comparison, since this country has a substantial evangelical minority with a long history of political engagement. For example, Alberta’s Social Credit party was founded by the Fundamentalist radio preacher “Bible Bill” Aberhart,<sup>70</sup> while the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation was founded by the Baptist minister Tommy Douglas, also known as the father of Medicare.<sup>71</sup> Since the 1960s, Canada experienced cultural changes similar to the United States, but without experiencing party polarization around culture war issues.

Canada is a particularly interesting case because it took a middle path of secularization and cultural change, falling between the United States and Europe. In the 1950s, Canada and the United States had similar rates of church attendance, but Canada’s rates of religious participation have plummeted much faster since the 1960s.<sup>72</sup> Yet, as in the United States, Canadian evangelicalism continued to grow demographically during this period, even as mainline Protestantism and Catholicism declined.<sup>73</sup> In both the United States and Canada, secularization and evangelical religious vitality have both proceeded simultaneously.<sup>74</sup> Evangelical Protestants have always been a smaller minority in Canada: 10–12 percent of the population, as compared with 25–33 percent in the United States.<sup>75</sup> At the same time, Canada’s evangelical subculture has continued to offer a much larger potential constituency for Christian Right politics than are present in most Western Europe countries.<sup>76</sup>

Canadian evangelicals are particularly relevant to the culture war debates, because this religious subculture shares the patterns of moral judgment and perception that Hunter identifies with an orthodox worldview. Like their American counterparts, this substantial religious minority has remained vital even as Canada has grown more secular and culturally diverse.<sup>77</sup> In a multi-method comparison of evangelicalism in the United States and Canada, Sam Reimer found that evangelicals in both countries maintain strong subcultural boundaries based on a shared set of theological beliefs and “strict” moral standards. Like their American counter-

parts, Canadian evangelicals practice what Christian Smith calls an “engaged orthodoxy”: sustaining a dynamic tension with their sociocultural environment, while avoiding separatism.<sup>78</sup>

In both countries, the evangelical subculture is also associated with particular attitudes on political issues related to sexuality and the family. American and Canadian evangelicals are significantly more opposed to abortion and gay rights than comparable non-evangelicals in each country. Indeed, evangelicals in both countries are similar in the strength of their opposition on these moral issues.<sup>79</sup> But their “orthodoxy” does not extend to other political issues. For example, Canadian evangelicals are more concerned about economic inequality and more supportive of government’s role in addressing it than are their American counterparts.<sup>80</sup>

Canada provides a particularly useful case to understand the relationship between partisan mobilization and the local construction of religious belief and identity. Even as Canada has grown more secular and religiously diverse since the 1960s, evangelicals have continued to play an important role in Canadian politics, a role that pundits have alternately ignored, underestimated, and misunderstood. This paradox is embodied by Canada’s current prime minister, Stephen Harper, who identifies as an evangelical Christian but avoids talking about faith in public.

In recent years, political observers have expressed concern that Canada could see the rise of an American-style Christian Right, particularly since 2005, when the federal government legalized same-sex marriage.<sup>81</sup> The Conservative Party has been hesitant to use overt religious language, but there are signs that the political Right is using “dog-whistle politics” to appeal to evangelicals in ways that are invisible or incomprehensible to more secular voters.<sup>82</sup> The same-sex marriage debate brought sudden visibility to socially conservative interest groups in Canada who spoke for conservative Christians—some of them new, some of them well-established. My fieldwork took place during 2006–2007, a period when evangelical churches were making sense of same-sex marriage. Hence, I entered the field during a dynamic period in Canadian politics, which offered particular insight into the relationship between partisan mobilization and the local construction of religious identity.

Comparing across the border, I found that all four evangelical churches defined their subcultural boundaries through opposition to abortion and same-sex marriage. Furthermore, both U.S. and Canadian churches emphasized their responsibility to promote a shared sense of moral truth in the wider society by drawing on narratives of religious nationalism.<sup>83</sup> These uses of Christian nationalism were not *authoritarian*, since all four churches encouraged members to respect democratic norms and transform their nation through individual conversion and personal influence. It is more accurate to describe these churches as *authority-minded*, be-

cause they refused to privatize their moral beliefs and defended objective moral truths that applied to the nation as a whole.<sup>84</sup> Hence, both U.S. and Canadian churches emphasized distinctive patterns of moral judgment and perception that Hunter has associated with an orthodox worldview.

Yet this distinctive moral traditionalism does not, by itself, explain how white American evangelicals have become so tightly bound to the Republican Party. Comparing churches across the border, I also found important differences that help us understand how evangelicalism has become so tightly tied to conservative politics in the United States. Both American evangelical churches did more than foster a shared moral perspective and religious identity: they also linked them to *partisanship* in local church life, in ways that Canadian churches did not.

#### CROSS-NATIONAL DIFFERENCES: HOW RELIGIOUS IDENTITY WAS LINKED TO PARTISANSHIP

Previous scholarship suggests that partisanship and religious identity have become mutually constitutive identities in American public life, so that voting Republican is part of what it means to be a good evangelical Christian.<sup>85</sup> As the United States has become more polarized around a few culture war issues, there is a stronger correlation between political conservatism and religiously conservatism, and a stronger likelihood that political liberals will claim no religious identity.<sup>86</sup> In this book, I use cross-national comparison in order to understand how American evangelical identity has taken on a partisan meaning.

I found that both American churches did more than just signal the “right” positions for Christians to hold on the moral issues. They also signaled the “right” party identification: which party “we” support, and which party “we” oppose.<sup>87</sup> In this way, both churches signaled that voting Republican on these two issues was an important part of being a Christian. Religious identity became symbolically and socially inseparable from affiliation with the Republican Party and conservative ideology.<sup>88</sup> By contrast, both Canadian churches defined their subcultural identity in different terms, which were more easily separated from the cultural meanings of partisanship. In the United States, this strong linkage between morality, religious identity, and partisanship strengthened political conformity and silenced cross-cutting political identities.<sup>89</sup>

Here, I define partisanship as a group identity defined by reference to a cultural map of electoral politics.<sup>90</sup> In their classic study *The American Voter*, David Campbell and his collaborators argued that voters do not support candidates on the basis of a rational consideration of facts and policy goals. Rather, “[i]n casting a vote the individual acts towards a

world of politics in which he perceives the personalities, issues, and the parties and other groupings.”<sup>91</sup> Voters think about politics in terms of their “cognitive and affective map of politics,” a sense of how *people like them* relate to particular parties and candidates. Political parties become objects of group identification in their own right, and these loyalties systematically bias how voters make sense of political information.<sup>92</sup> Even when voters cannot articulate a coherent political ideology, they can often describe a cultural map of what groups and issues go with what parties—and locate themselves on this map.<sup>93</sup> In the field of political science, Kathy Cramer Walsh has observed that partisanship is a broader concept than party identification, since the cultural meaning of partisan loyalties may change over a person’s lifetime, even if their identification with a particular party remains stable.<sup>94</sup>

In both Canada and the United States, partisanship is a valuable lens through which to understand how voters make sense of politics in terms of in-groups and out-groups, not just in terms of a rational consideration of past performance, self-interest, or policy goals.<sup>95</sup> In the United States, an individual’s map of partisanship may include party identification, or a psychological attachment to Democrats or Republicans as a group.<sup>96</sup> Partisanship also includes a related concept of ideological identity, or an affiliation with “conservatives” or “liberals” as a social group.<sup>97</sup> In Canada, voters choose among three major parties, and since parties may form coalitions, voters may also see one rival party as an adversarial out-group and another party as an acceptable coalition partner.<sup>98</sup> Throughout this book, I use this sensitizing concept of partisanship to ask how rank-and-file evangelicals locate themselves and “people like them” on a map of electoral politics.

Comparing evangelical churches in the United States and Canada, I found that political influence primarily worked by defining a shared map of political conflict, in ways that linked religious identity to partisanship. These partisan cues were not seen as political, because they were woven into everyday religious practice, rather than explicit electoral mobilization. Using participant observation, I identified three practices that linked religious identity and partisanship more strongly in American churches than Canadian churches.<sup>99</sup>

First, religion and partisanship became fused in the *narratives of Christian nationalism* that church members used to make sense of their responsibilities to a broader society. In both countries, evangelicals engaged in similar practices of public narrative: telling stories to motivate one another to engage with the outside world.<sup>100</sup> In the United States, evangelicals mourned the loss of America as a “Christian nation.” In Canada, evangelicals mourned the loss of their country as “God’s Dominion.” In

all four churches, these public narratives were not used for explicitly political goals, but to build a sense of urgency to engage in evangelism and community service outside of their local church.<sup>101</sup> But in both American churches, these narratives of Christian nationalism defined liberals as the villains of the story, as a political and cultural out-group responsible for America's "moral decline."<sup>102</sup> In both Canadian churches, I heard a rather different narrative, which blamed the loss of a "Christian Canada" squarely on the church itself.

Second, partisanship became linked to religious identity within everyday practices of *identity-mapping*. In all four churches, leaders and members spent a great deal of time drawing symbolic boundaries between "us" and "them," to strengthen a clear sense of subcultural distinction with diverse out-groups in their larger sociocultural environment.<sup>103</sup> In both countries, churches avoided "political talk," understood as explicit persuasion or deliberation about political subjects. Instead, politics was only addressed obliquely, through a practice that political ethnographer Paul Lichterman has called *mapping*. The most explicit partisan cues emerged in small group interaction, as members used words and gestures to draw a shared map of their national context, to define how "we Christians" should relate to other groups within this broader civic arena.<sup>104</sup> In both American churches, liberal politicians and political groups were frequently mapped as salient adversaries to "our" influence in society as Christians.

Third, I found that the most explicit partisan cues did not come from ordained clergy, but rather from a broad base of volunteer *lay leaders*. Within both American churches, I found that a broader set of key laypeople were "captains" for culture war politics within their congregation, who modeled a strong conservative or Republican political identity. These lay leaders did not identify as political activists or members of a Christian Right, yet they were still engaged in leadership projects that bridged religious and political fields.<sup>105</sup> In their capacity as church leaders, these respected laity also served as political opinion leaders, who helped less politically engaged peers to link evangelical identity to conservative politics.<sup>106</sup>

Throughout the book, I show how these local religious practices of *public narrative*, *identity-mapping*, and *local leadership* helped to strengthen political conformity in both American churches. Political conservatism took on a sacred quality because it was woven into the fabric of everyday religious life. This strong link between religious identity and partisanship worked to limit political diversity within American evangelical churches. By contrast, local religious practices did not conflate partisanship and religious identity in the two Canadian churches.

## OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

In the next chapter, I introduce two Baptist churches and two Pentecostal churches, matched on either side of the U.S.-Canada border. From August 2006 to 2007, I conducted participant observation in two evangelical churches located in Buffalo, New York—one Baptist and one Pentecostal. During the same period, I also observed in two Canadian churches located in Hamilton, Ontario, matched by denominational tradition, theology, and behavioral strictness. I describe the similarities across all four churches which reflect a shared, transnational evangelical subculture. But I also highlight differences between these two U.S. and two Canadian churches, which reflect the enduring role of national identity and national borders in the production of evangelical identity.

In the following chapters, I draw on ethnographic fieldwork to analyze how religion became linked to conservative politics within these four churches. I present my analysis in two parts. In chapters 3 through 5, I compare how U.S. and Canadian churches talked about politics in public church settings: worship, small groups, Sunday school, and informal conversations.

In chapter 3, I show that “political” talk was considered unspiritual and inappropriate in both American congregations, Northtown Baptist and Lifeway Assembly of God. But even though both churches avoided politics, they enforced an informal understanding that good Christians voted Republican. I describe how religion and partisanship became fused, as members mapped their subcultural identity and drew on narratives of religious nationalism.

In chapter 4, I contrast the two American churches with two similar congregations just across the border in Canada, which I call Highpoint Baptist and Grace Assembly of God. Both Canadian churches constructed their subcultural identity in ways that sounded similar to the two American churches. Like their American counterparts, Canadian evangelicals identified themselves as defenders of their nation’s embattled Christian heritage and emphasized shared moral stances on abortion and sexuality. But Canadian evangelicals used Christian nationalism in more broadly civic and nonpartisan ways: to draw strong subcultural boundaries, but also to express solidarity with Canadians across cultural, religious, and partisan divides. Because Canadian evangelicals drew on different narratives of Christian nationalism, they also talked differently about poverty and the welfare state in church contexts.

In chapter 5, I evaluate the claim that evangelical Christians are predisposed toward economic conservatism because of their individualistic theology. In the United States, white evangelicals are more economically conservative than other Americans. Yet Canadian evangelicals are just as

supportive of redistributive social policy as other Canadians, even though they share the same tools of conservative Protestant theology. To solve this puzzle, I compare how U.S. and Canadian evangelical congregations talked about poverty and the role of government. In both countries, evangelicals made sense of their religious responsibilities to “the poor” by reference to national identity. Evangelicals used their theological tools differently in the United States and Canada, because different visions of national solidarity served as cultural anchors for religious discourse about poverty.<sup>107</sup> To understand the political and civic effects of religion, scholars need to consider the varied ways that religious groups imagine national community within religious practice.

In chapters 6 through 8, I examine how religion and politics were linked at the individual level, by describing the personal meanings and biographical narratives that emerged in private interviews. Like other scholars, I highlight significant diversity within each church at the individual level, showing that the illusion of public consensus often concealed unvoiced private opinions. But this diversity was not equally distributed in social space. By comparing private interviews with public church interaction, I show how some political attitudes and identities were silenced or unsupported within an individual’s congregational context.

In chapter 6, I find that in both U.S. churches, political influence operated through a broad set of opinion leaders, not just through ordained pastors or media elites. Previous research has identified local pastors as key opinion leaders who help bridge the gap between political elites and the general public, by preaching on political topics, sending partisan cues, or proclaiming official church stances on issues like abortion and gay marriage.<sup>108</sup> Other scholars argue that Christian Right elites increasingly reach individual directly, through targeted mailings, Fox News, and Christian radio, without the need to work through their personal networks and congregations. But previous work has largely ignored the political influence of volunteer, non-ordained religious leaders.

I find that a broad set of laypeople serve as opinion leaders, helping their less politically engaged peers to link evangelical identity to conservative politics. Local opinion leaders help define evangelical identity in partisan terms, such that voting Democratic is incompatible with being a Christian.<sup>109</sup> In chapter 7, I argue that these opinion leaders contribute to “thin coherence” between religious identity and partisanship, even for individuals in their church who subscribe to moderate, progressive, or ambivalent political attitudes.

In chapter 8, I compare the role of opinion leaders in the two Canadian churches. As in both American churches, Canadian lay leaders were expected to model orthodox positions on theology and moral issues, as part of their leadership role. But, unlike in the American churches, this

moral conformity was combined with an acceptance of political diversity within the church. Both Canadian churches contained networks of conservative Christian activists who wished to mobilize the congregation around abortion and homosexuality. But politically conservative activists were unable to set the tone for the church's public life, since other prominent members held other political views. As a result, less politically engaged members did not receive clear cues about partisanship from the opinion leaders around them. In both Canadian churches, members picked up a sense of consensus around moral conservatism, but elaborated diverse perspectives about how these concerns related to electoral politics.

*The Politics of Evangelical Identity* offers a new perspective on Robert Bellah's concept of civil religion: generically religious constructions of national identity that provide consensual symbols of solidarity and moral guidance.<sup>110</sup> Bellah's critics have pointed out that civil religion is often a site of conflict, a means by which a particular religious group defends its dominant status in public life, rather than a unifying set of symbols. Indeed, Robert Wuthnow argued the culture wars have fractured America's civil religion into two competing liberal and conservative narratives.<sup>111</sup> Within American evangelicalism, civil religion often takes on an ideological, partisan meaning, which excludes liberals and other cultural out-groups from the nation.

Ironically, Canadian evangelicals have made the opposite shift. While the country's tradition of Christian civil religion has been pushed out of public life, Canadian evangelicals continue to draw on religious nationalism in more civic and nonpartisan ways: to draw strong subcultural boundaries, but also to express solidarity with Canadians across cultural, religious, and partisan divides. Their banal uses of nationalism were closer to Robert Bellah's consensual formulation of civil religion.<sup>112</sup> I found that both formulations of civil religion were correct, even within the same religious tradition—and even within the same church.

By comparing evangelicals in the United States and Canada, I find that American evangelicals are not bound to political conservatism by the content of their distinctive theology or moral worldview. Rather, the U.S. Christian Right has successfully defined evangelical identity in ways that delegitimize political diversity within the subculture.

#### BROADER IMPLICATIONS

In conclusion, the United States is not polarized because the two sides of the culture wars' lack shared values or moral concerns. Rather, America is polarized because these overlapping concerns and identities are systematically silenced as a basis for public action.<sup>113</sup> Other scholars have shown

how these cross-cutting projects are pushed aside in the world of electoral politics and national discourse, by a polarized media climate, power dynamics within both political parties, and rival teams of interest groups, parachurch organizations, and think tanks.<sup>114</sup> This book shows how polarization has become entrenched within the American evangelical subculture, within the local worlds of lived religion.

These findings have clear implications for political strategy. Since 2004, pundits have asked what other political movements can learn from the evangelical voting bloc. The most common answer has been that parties and interest groups should frame their issues in the language of moral values. This book provides a different answer. If other movements want to replicate the strength of the Christian Right, it will not be enough to engage in top-down messaging about “moral values.” They also need to find substitutes for the powerful identity-work that goes on every week in evangelical congregations. The Christian Right has not succeeded just because they framed the conservative agenda in the language of faith. When these frames resonate, it is because local congregations have woven them into everyday religious practices, reinforcing a powerful connection between religious identity and partisanship.

It will be critical to keep this insight in mind, as evangelical public discourse grows more pluralized in years to come. Political commentators have been too quick to proclaim that the United States has entered a post-Christian Right era. It is true that the Christian Right is no longer the only public voice speaking for evangelicals. Alternative leaders, ministries, and advocacy groups are stepping forward to broaden the Christian agenda beyond abortion and sexuality, to consider poverty, creation care, and racial reconciliation as equally important “moral issues.” But this broadened political agenda will only gain traction with rank-and-file evangelicals if it informs the daily religious practices of local congregations. The challenge for young, dissenting evangelicals is not just to establish a public face for their political vision. They face a much greater challenge: to connect these new moral issues to the sacred within local religious practice. Disentangling evangelicalism from the Republican Party will take as much time, ingenuity, and internal conflict as it took to build this relationship in the first place.