Introduction

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What is a crackup? Dictionaries offer a range of meanings. Oxford Living Dictionaries reports “crack up” as a phrasal verb meaning to “suffer an emotional breakdown under pressure” or to “burst into laughter.”¹ Merriam-Webster adds “to damage.”² It is safe to say that the state of the relationship between the Republican Party and white evangelicals is no laughing matter and that our meaning tracks best with “strain.”³ As 2016 ticked along, we wondered whether the Republican Party was on a path that would strain, damage, or destroy the coalition with evangelicals. The election results, however, saw evangelicals double-down on Republican loyalty. When we began to write this book, we were confronted with a rather unexpected fact pattern. The unusual events of 2016 shined new light on the political priorities of evangelicals and what they expect from the Republican Party. Whether there was a crackup or not, 2016 was a gift to those who study religion and politics.

The unprecedented candidates and events of the presidential election let us see seams that had not been exposed for decades. Put differently, when evangelicals do things that are consistent with Republican priorities and Republicans do things that are consistent with evangelical priorities, it is almost impossible to study what causes what. The 2016 election was different. It presented evangelical elites advocating against Republicans, Republican infighting, a Republican nominee far from evangelical orthodoxy, and candidates other than the eventual winner with far better conservative Christian bona fides.
If we were quickly disabused of the idea that evangelicals might break with the Republican Party, we were equally quickly enlightened with a new set of possibilities about what makes that connection endure. This book does not focus solely on 2016 but takes in varying sweeps of recent history to make sense of where evangelicals and the Republican Party are now and will likely head.

It is important to remember that not long ago, George W. Bush’s electoral success appeared to be evidence that the Christian Right movement that began in the 1960s had come of age. Of course, this had been said before about the movement, when then-candidate Ronald Reagan told the Religious Roundtable, “I know you can’t endorse me. But I want you to know that I endorse you and what you’re doing” (quoted in Lamb 2015). George H. W. Bush rebranded himself a chimerical born-again Episcopalian in honor of the Christian Right’s influence. And groups like the Christian Coalition had galvanized a large, mostly evangelical voting bloc to help sweep the Republican Party into Congress in 1994. But not long after President George W. Bush began his terms, the Christian Coalition was on the brink of financial ruin, Ralph Reed (its former leader) had been exiled under a cloud of scandal, and David D. Kirkpatrick (2007) was writing the article “The Evangelical Crackup.” Ten years later, this article inspires our book’s title.

Evidence of the crackup came in the form of disagreement among evangelical leaders over which candidate to anoint and party nominations that seemed to repudiate evangelical influence. For example, on November 7, 2007, televangelist Pat Robertson endorsed former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani for the Republican nomination for president. While Giuliani promised to make judicial nominations Robertson’s followers would find congenial, the two men shared few policy views in common, especially on such stalwarts as abortion (Kirkpatrick and Cooper 2007). Just a month earlier, a prominent group of evangelicals did the very opposite—threatening to leave the party if Giuliani became the nominee (Djupe and Calfano 2013).

In the end, the GOP nominee in 2008 was John McCain, a candidate some saw as symbolizing a Republican Party rejection of evangelical influence. After all, it was John McCain in 2000 who labeled the Reverend Jerry Falwell (founder of Liberty University) one of the “agents of intolerance” and decried the influence of the Christian Right in the Republican Party. And in 2012, the Republican nominee, Mitt Romney, was no hard-core social conservative either—he was once a supporter of abortion rights as Massachusetts governor. Furthermore, Romney belonged to a religious group with whom evangelicals had long been at odds—Mormons (Campbell, Green, and Monson 2014). Paradoxically, despite apparent discord at the elite level, ordinary evangelicals in the electorate maintained a consistent voting record, with solid majorities supporting the Republican throughout this period. Therefore, continued evangelical support begs the question of the basis for the connection to the Republican Party and just what, if anything, and who, if anyone, is directing the ship.
Perhaps the most perplexing connection of evangelicals to the Republican Party was their support for Donald Trump’s candidacy in 2016. Witness the now-famous photo at a Trump rally where a sign read, “Thank you Lord Jesus for President Trump.” To be sure, evangelical preferences were spread across a range of candidates in the primaries, but a high proportion of Trump supporters were “Trumpvangelicals.” Maggie Haberman and Thomas Kaplin (2016) wrote, “Brash, thrice-married, cosseted in a gilded tower high above Fifth Avenue and fond of swearing from the stage at his rallies, Mr. Trump, who has spent his career in pursuit, and praise, of wealth, would seem an odd fit for voters who place greater value on faith, hope and charity.”

High levels of evangelical support for Trump were all the more baffling in a field with several very religious contenders, such as Ted Cruz. The first words of Ted Cruz’s first campaign ad proclaimed, “Were it not for the transformative love of Jesus Christ, I would have been raised by a single mom without my father in the house.” Nevertheless, Trump attracted mass support in the absence of much elite evangelical support and with nontrivial elite-level antipathy. According to Russell Moore, head of the Southern Baptist Convention’s Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, “He’s someone who has spoken in vulgar and harsh terms about women, as well as in ugly and hateful ways about immigrants and other minorities. I don’t think this is someone who represents the values that evangelicals in this country aspire to” (Taylor 2015). Trump would go on to claim 81 percent of white evangelicals’ votes in the 2016 presidential election.

This, then, is the puzzle that we engage in this book. If we are honest, almost none of us expected to conduct research under a Trump administration. There are very few who thought he would win. Accordingly, at least the tone of the following chapters has changed, but the content has not. Our intent is to pull apart the strands that mark the relationship between evangelicals and the Republican Party. Much conventional wisdom received a hostile reception in 2016.

We lay out the various arguments that have been posed for why evangelicals attached and remain attached to the Republican Party. Naturally, this serves as an overview of and introduction to the book. We distinguish between macrohistorical forces, organizational intermediaries, and micro-social and psychological forces that operate on religious communities. Of course, these three interrelate and demonstrate a great deal of continuity over time, which makes assessing causal relationships particularly difficult.

**Macrohistorical Roots of Scholarly Interest in Evangelicals**

Mid-twentieth-century Republicans visiting twenty-first-century America would be surprised to learn that evangelical groups now dominate the Republican Party and that a crackup may be in the works. At that time, mainline
Protestantism and Republican identity were nearly synonymous. Barry Goldwater, Republican nominee for president in 1964, quipped, “Mark my word, if and when these preachers get control of the party, and they’re sure trying to do so, it’s going to be a terrible damn problem” (quoted in Rymel 2016). The decline of mainline influence and the rise of evangelical groups in the Republican coalition surely rank among the most notable political transformations of the past half century (Claassen 2015; Green 2007; Green et al. 1996; Jelen 1991; Kohut et al. 2000; Layman 2001, 2010; Putnam and Campbell 2010; Smidt et al. 2010).

In the early 1960s, 64 percent of Republican activists were from mainline traditions, but in 2008 that number had fallen to just 21 percent (Claassen 2015, 20–21). Political scientists often devote substantial attention to single-digit shifts in the political coalitions, so the more than 40 percent decline in the presence of mainline activists in the Republican Party is notable, to say the least. Much of the void left by their decline was filled by evangelical activists. In the early 1960s, only about 20 percent of Republican activists were from evangelical traditions, but by 2008 that number had risen to 47 percent—a strong plurality (Claassen 2015, 20–21). These percentages reflect the religious affiliations of partisan activists, using the survey responses of ordinary Americans captured in the American National Election Studies, but the shifts are similarly evident in studies of national convention delegates (Layman 2001, 2010); analogous shifts are also evident in the party’s voting coalitions (Brooks and Manza 2004; Claassen 2015; Layman 2001, 2010; Green 2007; Smidt et al. 2010). In Chapter 2 of this book, Geoffrey Layman and Mark Brockway provide updated figures through 2016 along with analyses of the different ways in which evangelical activists shape Republican policy positions and norms about intraparty and interparty compromise. For those who have been following evangelical ascendency in the Republican Party, this chapter is the new state of the art. Similarly, Kimberly Conger provides updated figures for Christian Right organizational strength and activity at the state level in Chapter 6, along with an assessment of the ways organizational strength structured the Trump vote. In Chapter 13 Tobin Grant and Joshua Mitchell detail how the movement, in its search for political opportunities, helps diffuse policy initiatives throughout American counties.

Many attribute the decline of mainline dominance and the rise of evangelical Protestants within the Republican Party to fundamental changes in religious divisions within the United States (Wuthnow 1988, 1989) that gave rise to a culture war (Hunter 1991). Geoffrey Layman put it this way, “The culture war theorists argue that, just as past cultural clashes affected party politics in important ways, the current conflict should reshape contemporary party politics making the Republican Party into a coalition of religious and cultural traditionalists” (2001, 12). For much of American history, evangelicalism dominated religious thought and practice—even in religious tra-
ditions now designated as mainline (Marsden 1990). However, as American society experienced the benefits and problems associated with the Industrial Revolution, a rift emerged among religious people in their orientations toward modernity (Green 2007; Putnam and Campbell 2010; Wald and Calhoun-Brown 2014; Wuthnow 1988, 1989). Many within the denominations we now think of as mainline (e.g., Presbyterian, Episcopalian, Methodist) gravitated toward a more progressive theology that was less at odds with scientific discoveries and modern life, and many others abandoned organized religion altogether. Modern-day evangelicals come from denominations that resisted challenges to religious orthodoxy (e.g., Southern Baptists, Pentecostals, Seventh-Day Adventists).

The culture wars pit religious and secular progressives against the defenders of religious traditionalism. Over time the Democratic Party adopted political positions that were more congenial to religious and secular progressives, and the Republican Party adopted political positions that were more congenial to traditionalists. Accordingly, the religious orientations that distinguished modern-day evangelicals from other religious people became politically salient. And the rising political salience of evangelical identity coincided with a demographic boom in their numbers. Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell note, “The rise of evangelicals at the most conservative end of the religious spectrum, followed after 1990 by the rise of the nones at the most liberal end of the spectrum, has in effect polarized the spectrum as a whole” (2010, 105–106).

If evangelicals were once propelled out of politics by embarrassing defeats in their efforts to oppose Darwin’s theory of evolution and their efforts to defend racially segregated schools (e.g., Rev. Jerry Falwell’s Lynchburg Christian Academy), the set of Christian Right organizations generally credited with bringing evangelicals into the Republican fold coalesced in the late 1970s around abortion and sexual politics more generally. These issues were framed as legal and constitutional battles in which evangelicals’ Christian moral duties were aligned with their civic duties. Political wins in the Congress and White House were highlighted as essential in the legal fight, insofar as political opponents were accused of having staffed the federal courts with activist judges. Christian Right organizations mobilized so-called values voters by identifying stalwart opponents of abortion as candidates for elected office and calling on evangelicals to support these candidates as a matter of Christian duty. While the organizations appear weakened and the recent Supreme Court decision regarding gay marriage seems like another embarrassing defeat, abortion rights are much more limited now than in the immediate aftermath of Roe v. Wade (Phillips 2016), and some worry the Democratic Party has permanently lost its congressional majority.

While this account of events represents the conventional wisdom about the forces behind the rise of evangelicals within the Republican Party,
significant questions remain about whether moral issues represent a Trojan horse for long-standing divisions in American politics over issues of racial equality. Is the conventional wisdom correct in attributing evangelical migration from the Democratic Party to the Republican Party to their conservative positions on the issue of abortion? Or, alternatively, is opposition to federal efforts to reduce racial inequality an important part of understanding increasing evangelical support for the Republican Party? In Chapter 3, Ryan Claassen brings a wealth of survey data to bear on these questions and finds that conventional wisdom underplays the importance of racial attitudes in regard to understanding evangelical political behavior but also finds evidence that abortion and other moral issues matter.

Organizational Intermediaries

The connection between evangelicals and the Republican Party could once upon a time be characterized by a go-to set of active organizations with prominent leaders and media profiles. The rise of secularism in the 1960s inspired increasing political involvement of organizations, such as the Moral Majority, the Religious Roundtable, and the Christian Voice, beginning in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Founded in the wake of conservative televangelist Pat Robertson’s failed 1988 presidential bid, the Christian Coalition is “dedicated to defending America’s Godly heritage by getting Christians involved in their government again,” according to Roberta Combs (quoted in Sala 2005, 103). Consistent with its mission, the organization devoted enormous resources in the 1990s to mobilizing its membership (see, e.g., Rozell and Wilcox 1995).

By the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, that was no longer true. While some Christian Right political organizations are still in operation, many have ceased to exist and the set of notables has become more diffuse. For instance, the Christian Coalition in the 2000s was a skeleton of its former glory under Ralph Reed in the early 1990s. The Family Research Council continues to operate but has had a much reduced and more controversial profile since Rev. James Dobson cut ties with the organization in 2003. Meanwhile, liberal-leaning evangelical organizations, such as Sojourners, continue to chug along, and the Obama campaigns were exceptional, by all accounts, in their deliberate courtship of liberal-leaning evangelicals (Smidt et al. 2010).

As early as the late 1990s after the Clinton impeachment trial, evangelicalism appeared to show signs of changing political course. For example, conservative Christian Rod Dreher (2013) wrote about the “Benedict Option,” which is modeled on Saint Benedict, the founder of modern monasticism. The Benedict Option encourages conservative Christians to withdraw from politics. Additionally, some megachurch clergy are now pushing a dif-
different set of issues that could appeal more broadly than the traditional culture-wars and sexual-politics issues. These “new evangelicals,” such as Rick Warren of Saddleback Church in California, are not stepping into the shoes of the late Reverend Jerry Falwell, who launched the Moral Majority in the late 1970s. Instead, they are creating new movements within evangelicalism, including the emergent church movement (see Chapter 10), partly in reaction to the divisive politics of the Christian Right.

Also notable, the demographic trends that paved the way for greater evangelical influence—mainline decline and evangelical growth—in the late twentieth century are no longer uniformly positive for evangelical denominations. In the early 2000s evangelicalism appears to have succumbed to the more general malaise that emptied pews in other religious traditions in the United States several decades earlier. For the first time, some denominations at the heart of evangelicalism are not growing. The Southern Baptist Convention is on the decline after more than two hundred years of growth, only propped up by growth in its Hispanic membership (see Chapter 9). Other evangelical religious bodies, including nondenominational churches, continue to buck the trend (Stetzer 2015), but the new members are increasingly nonwhite and less likely to support the Republican Party. A May 7, 2014, report from the Pew Research Center on Religion and Public Life indicated that growth in the percentage of Hispanic evangelicals is partly fueled by a decline in the percentage of Hispanics who are Catholic, from 67 percent in 2010 to 55 percent in 2013.

Demographic changes among evangelicals are clearly linked to changes in the orientation of evangelicals toward issues that once fell outside a narrow set of sexual-politics issues, such as the radical shift in the stances of evangelical organizations on immigration beginning in 2009, when the National Association of Evangelicals passed a resolution calling for comprehensive immigration reform. Is there a growing generational divide among young and old evangelicals? In Chapter 8, Jeremy Castle explores the politics of young evangelical liberals and the extent to which they differ from other liberals. From a different perspective, in Chapter 12 Juhem Navarro-Rivera, Daniel A. Cox, Robert P. Jones, and Paul A. Djupe explore the social networks of young and older evangelicals and how their pattern of contacts helps connect them with, and divides them from, the rest of the evangelical community.

In Chapter 4, Kevin den Dulk examines the rhetoric of Republican and evangelical elites to investigate related questions about what the Republican Party did to attract evangelicals and what evangelicals brought to the Republican Party. Here Republicans continue to build on prior successes by redoubling their support for religious traditionalism in the culture wars—the rhetoric lining up more closely with the conventional wisdom. Likewise, in Chapter 5, Andrew R. Lewis examines the dramatic shift among evangelicals
to adopt a politics of rights as a way to bolster claims amid shrinking levels of support.

**Microsocial and Psychological Connections**

Documenting the macromovements of religious groups among the parties hinges on accurate measurements that document where people can be exposed to identity, values, and policy cues that would help link their religion with political choices. We continue to debate just what an evangelical is (see Chapter 7), in part, because religion and religious connections continue to evolve with society. Terms like “born again” or even “evangelical” come in and out of fashion, leaving scholars grappling with ways of connecting with individual voters.

Group membership merely scratches the surface of how religion is present in people’s lives. Indeed, scholars have different definitions for “religious group,” which then points toward the individual-level attribute that matters in connecting to political groups. In general, the more aggregated the religious group, the more psychological the measurement. Those who are concerned with the evangelical religious tradition are more concerned with religious identities and religious belief markers that place them in that movement. Ronald J. McGauvran and Elizabeth Oldmixon present a good example in Chapter 15.

This is not to say that we can assume religious traditions are unified in their theologies, politics, social status, or anything else. Consider the emergent church—a protest movement rejecting the authoritarian religion and politics of modern evangelicalism, which Ryan P. Burge documents in Chapter 10. Given the attention to the role of authority in post–World War II social science, it is important to consider the religious roots of this orientation, which Burge does with a new measure that disentangles authority from orthodoxy.

However, religion is also experienced in congregations, a fact that points toward a decidedly more social experience that may be quite varied across congregations. That is, the degree of vertical integration of religion is a function of social ties and political information flow through them. One of the purported strengths of evangelicalism flows from the social insularity of evangelicals, which Jacob R. Neiheisel, Paul A. Djupe, and Anand E. Sokhey discuss in Chapter 11. Just how insularity promotes integration into the evangelical or Christian Right movements is not obvious, however, and depends on generational relations (see Chapter 12). For example, in Chapter 1, Paul A. Djupe and Brian R. Calfano explain that evangelical support for Trump continued apace despite vocal opposition by several evangelical elites because few evangelicals knew about opposition to Trump by evangelical leaders, and even when exposed to such opposition, they ignored it when embedded in pro-Trump religious communities.
Political Opportunity Structure

As our introduction intimates, the set of political opportunities factors heavily into the viability of Christian Right politics. Earlier in the twentieth century, the legacy of slavery and the one-party South undercut the potential for a mass conservative Christian movement. The nationalization of politics from the New Deal, but especially in the regulatory revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, created the raw materials for the Christian Right but also meant that the movement would be subject to its vagaries. That is, winners suffer from having little to mobilize against, and the Christian Right has been declared dead at regular intervals since “the preachers gave it to Reagan” in 1980 (Martin 1996, 220).

One way to keep that critical tension is to create it through lawsuits. The legal wing of the Christian Right has only gotten stronger through time, its place cemented by the opening of Christian law schools. Daniel Bennett highlights the close ties of legal advocacy and the movement in Chapter 14.

Conclusion

All of this underscores the political importance of evangelicals in contemporary America. Investigating changes within American religion and the ways in which those changes affect politics has long been of interest to scholars of religion and politics. But interest in religion became mainstream within political science because of the sense of urgency associated with a simmering culture war fueled by conflict between evangelicals devoted to political protection of traditionalism and religious progressives and unaffiliated Americans with very different political goals. Indeed, this conflict lies at the heart of much of the research into political polarization, and the literature on polarization is burgeoning (witness the 1,610 citations Google Scholar currently credits to Culture War? by Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 1991). Evangelicals achieved a place of prominence within religion and politics research, and political science research more generally, because they are viewed as a key group of culture-war combatants.

Accordingly, even the slightest whiff of a crackup in the alliance between white evangelicals and the Republican Party merits significant attention. At the elite level, the Christian Right organizations widely credited with cementing the alliance recently appear in disarray and disrepair. Republican nomination politics have seen the candidates most congenial to evangelical concerns go down in defeat. Yet there is little indication that elite-level discord is affecting rank-and-file voting. Against the benchmark of the George W. Bush elections—a candidate whom evangelicals embraced as one of their own (he spoke the language of a born-again Christian even if he hailed from a mainline denomination)—white evangelical support for the Republican
nominee continued apace in the elections of 2008 (Smidt et al. 2010) and 2012 (Guth and Bradberry 2013). If anything, Trump appears to have fared slightly better in 2016 than George W. Bush did in his elections (Smith and Martinez 2016). This seeming paradox raises a host of fascinating questions about the forces behind evangelical voting behavior and what the future holds.

To provide some critical perspective about what the future holds, we invited two luminaries in the field of religion and politics to reflect on evangelicalism in the 2016 election and what the election means for evangelical politics going forward. Robert Wuthnow and John Green, who wrap things up in Chapters 16 and 17, provide insightful perspectives and serve as our oracles concerning future possibilities. Finally, in Chapter 18, we review the themes of this book through the lens of the counterfactual. As mentioned earlier, 2016 created opportunities to observe evangelical voting behavior in new circumstances—thus providing answers to several interesting “what-if” questions. For example, what if evangelical elites offered vocal opposition to the Republican nominee? We both review the lessons of 2016 and reflect on important counterfactuals that have not yet come to pass, as we offer our concluding thoughts about the present state of evangelical politics in the United States.

NOTES


3. This book focuses almost exclusively on white evangelicals; for ease of communication, we generally use “evangelicals” and “white evangelicals” interchangeably.

REFERENCES


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