God’s Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right is a comprehensive historical study of the American Religious Right. It offers a sweeping history of the Christian Right’s development from the early twentieth century to the early twenty-first, with a particular focus on conservative evangelicals’ alliance with the Republican Party.

When conservative evangelicals mobilized in support of Ronald Reagan in 1980, it was not the first time that evangelicals had engaged in political activism, but it did represent an unprecedented commitment to a particular political party. Indeed, the key to the Christian Right’s endurance as a political force since the election of 1980 is the strength of evangelicals’ alliance with the GOP. God’s Own Party explains why that alliance developed and why it has endured. Its origins could be traced to an evangelical political vision that was formed in the fundamentalist controversies of the 1920s, brought to fruition in the early years of the Cold War, and then solidified in the culture wars of the 1970s.

By drawing on a rich variety of archival sources—including many obscure conservative Christian periodicals—God’s Own Party traces evangelicals’ growing concerns about moral disorder throughout the twentieth century, and explains why evangelicals turned to politics (and to the Republican Party in particular) to impose a moral regulatory order on a nation that they believed was drifting away from God. Although many pundits have underestimated the strength of the alliance between conservative evangelicals and the GOP, and have mistakenly predicted the imminent demise of the Christian Right, God’s Own Party demonstrates why the alliance has been an enduring force.
God’s Own Party has been assigned in classes on postwar American history, American politics, and the history of American religion. The book works well for any of these courses, because it analyzes questions that cross disciplinary boundaries.

If you are teaching a course on American politics, you may want to use this book as a case study in American political realignment or interest group mobilization. Several earlier studies of late-twentieth-century realignment emphasized race as a central factor in realignment, but this book introduces religion as another possible factor in partisan realignment. If you assign this book in a class on American politics, you may want to focus on the question of why evangelicals became committed to the Republican Party and why the Republican Party allowed them to exercise a controlling influence in the GOP. You may want to discuss what brought evangelicals into politics and why their political causes became partisan campaigns. You could also discuss how the themes emphasized in this book—religion and the culture wars—operated alongside other factors, such as race and economics, that also contributed to a national partisan realignment.

For a course on postwar America, you might want to assign this book in a unit on the 1970s or the rise of conservatism in the 1980s. A lot of scholarship has portrayed the 1970s as a decade of cultural conflict, so for a discussion of the 1970s, you could use this book to give students insight into why broader cultural trends, such as feminism, the sexual revolution, and the gay rights movement, were disconcerting to social conservatives, and why the social conservatives’ objections to these cultural developments led to a shift in the nation’s politics. In other words, you could use this book to connect a discussion of the rights-based movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s with a unit on the election of Ronald Reagan and the conservative political turn of the 1980s.

If you are assigning this book in a course on American religion, you could use this book as a case study of religion in politics, and use it to discuss the impact that a political movement had on American evangelicalism. For a course on American religion, the book’s exploration of shifts in the political and religious concerns of American evangelicals and fundamentalists during the past half-century will be of particular interest. The question of why American white evangelicals became Republican partisans and what happened to American evangelicalism as a result of that partisan commitment will be especially relevant for a course on the history of American religion.
Chapter 1 explains how evangelicals moved from a politically marginalized position in the early twentieth century to a position of national influence during the early years of the Cold War. In the 1920s, conservative Protestants (who were then known as “fundamentalists”) embarked on political campaigns to preserve the nation’s Protestant identity. They campaigned against the Catholic presidential candidate Al Smith and the teaching of evolution in public schools, but despite the publicity that they earned for their causes, they were unable to win the support of a major political party, and as a result, they remained politically divided and ineffective.

In the early 1940s, some of these fundamentalists formed the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) in order to promote their political interests in Washington. The NAE was more politically effective than earlier fundamentalist organizations had been, partly because it succeeded in shedding the negative images associated with fundamentalism, but also because the political context of the Cold War furthered conservative evangelicals’ political influence. Because of evangelicals’ strong antipathy to communism, they were able to position themselves as defenders of the nation’s interest and forge alliances with politicians on the right.

The most successful practitioner of a new brand of evangelical politics in the 1950s was Billy Graham, who forged a close alliance with the Eisenhower White House because of his support for Eisenhower’s anticommunist foreign policy and because of his centrist position on civil rights. The Cold War facilitated Graham’s national political influence and, by extension, helped some evangelicals move out of their political isolation and form at least a limited alliance with Republican politicians.
Some students may express confusion about the meaning of the terms “fundamentalist” and “evangelical.” There is a brief discussion of these terms on pp. 2-5, but if students are still confused about the meaning of the terms after reading this section, perhaps they will find the following explanation helpful:

“Evangelical” is a centuries-old term in Protestantism. In some parts of Europe, such as Germany, the term is still used as a synonym for “Protestant.” In the contemporary United States, the term “evangelical” is usually reserved for a sizeable faction among Protestants who have had a born-again conversion experience, have a high respect for the Bible as the ultimate religious authority (with many believing in biblical inerrancy), believe in salvation through Jesus Christ alone, and acknowledge the importance of evangelism to convert others to the faith. By that definition, the vast majority of Southern Baptists and members of similar denominations are evangelical; the vast majority of contemporary Episcopalians and members of similar liberal Protestant denominations are not. Today, most sociological surveys of American religious beliefs show that approximately 20-25 percent of American adults are evangelicals.

Most historians of religion would say that evangelicalism in the sense that it is described here began with the religious revivals of the First Great Awakening of the eighteenth century, and that in the early nineteenth century, the overwhelming majority of American churchgoers were evangelical. By the early twentieth century, however, some of the formerly evangelical denominations were adopting liberal Protestant beliefs that minimized the importance of a born-again evangelical conversion and that questioned biblical inerrancy. In opposition, a group of self-described “fundamentalists” challenged the liberal Protestants for control of the nation’s major Protestant denominations and insisted that all ministers adhere to belief in biblical inerrancy.

Today, we would probably call the “fundamentalists” of the 1920s conservative evangelicals, because most of their religious beliefs were very similar to those of modern conservative evangelicals such as Southern Baptists, but at the time, they used the term “fundamentalist” to describe themselves.

The term “fundamentalist” quickly acquired a pejorative connotation. In the early 1940s, some fundamentalists who wanted to distance themselves from the negative associations of this term reclaimed the term “evangelical” for themselves. Until the 1940s, many liberal Protestants had called themselves “evangelical” (as had the fundamentalists), but the theological conservatives who created the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) succeeded in identifying this word with a particular conservative theological movement—a meaning that the word still retains today.

However, a small minority of self-identified fundamentalists separated themselves from the NAE and from evangelical leaders such as Billy Graham, because they viewed them as too theologically liberal. To many outsiders, the doctrinal beliefs of fundamentalists and evangelicals appeared to be almost identical; both groups believed in biblical inerrancy, the necessity of a born-again conversion, and salvation through Jesus alone. But the fundamentalists—many of whom were independent Baptists who considered the Southern Baptist Convention too liberal—insisted on a greater degree of separation from theological liberals and the larger culture than more moderate evangelicals were willing to accept. God’s Own Party traces the history of the conflict between self-described fundamentalists and evangelicals during the 1950s and 1960s, and discusses how their political reconciliation in the 1970s and 1980s facilitated the development of the Christian Right.
Questions for Discussion

1. *God’s Own Party* argues that conservative Protestants of the 1920s and 1930s were politically engaged and concerned about the moral and political direction of their country, but that they lacked political influence. If that was indeed the case, what prevented conservative Protestants from exercising more political influence and winning political victories? [*God’s Own Party* argues that because fundamentalists did not ally themselves with a political party, the effectiveness of their political campaigns was reduced (p. 14)].

2. What similarities and differences do you see between the political concerns of conservative Protestants in the 1920s and the political concerns of conservative Protestants today? Do you think that the Christian Right’s origins can be traced back to the culture wars of the 1920s or do you think that there was no connection between the conservative evangelical political mobilization of that era and the mobilization of the Christian Right in the late twentieth century?

3. What effect did the Cold War have on conservative evangelical politics?

4. Why did Billy Graham ally with the Eisenhower administration?

5. How would you characterize Graham’s position on civil rights for African Americans? What was the relationship between his position on civil rights and his support of the Eisenhower administration?
CHAPTER 2: THE EMERGENCE OF A FUNDAMENTALIST RIGHT

SUMMARY

At the same time that Billy Graham was forging a relationship with the Eisenhower White House and acquiring greater political influence for evangelicals based on a new brand of centrist Cold War politics, self-identified fundamentalists were repudiating this strategy and embracing a more extreme version of anticommunism. Chapter 2 traces the political activities of several key fundamentalist leaders (including John R. Rice, Carl McIntire, Billy James Hargis, Bob Jones, Jr., and Jerry Falwell), and shows that during the 1950s, their concerns about communism prompted them to become much more involved in politics than they had been earlier. In contrast to moderate evangelicals such as Billy Graham, the politicians with whom fundamentalists allied were on the far right (not the center of the Republican Party), and their strong endorsement of segregation made them anathema to most national politicians outside the South and alienated them from many evangelicals. Their political influence during the late 1950s and early 1960s was therefore limited, but their sermons and radio broadcasts helped to create a political culture among strongly conservative Protestants in the South that would eventually facilitate the formation of the Christian Right.

Questions for Discussion

1. What were some of the political and religious differences (and similarities) between the “fundamentalists” and “evangelicals” of the late 1950s and 1960s? On what did they agree, and on what did they disagree?

2. What effect did the Cold War and demographic changes of the postwar era have on the growth of fundamentalist churches and fundamentalist radio broadcasting empires?

3. What political transformations did fundamentalism experience in the 1950s?

4. What effect did the Cold War have on fundamentalists’ position on civil rights for African Americans?

5. What were the main political concerns of fundamentalists in the 1950s and early 1960s?

6. How similar was Jerry Falwell to Billy Graham in the late 1950s and 1960s? On what did they agree, and on what did they disagree?

7. How would you characterize Falwell’s stance on civil rights issues as compared to Graham’s?

8. Who had more political influence in the late 1950s – centrist Republican evangelicals (such as Billy Graham, Christianity Today, and the NAE) or fundamentalists such as Jerry Falwell, Billy James Hargis, and Bob Jones? What reasons would you give for answering the question in the way that you did?
Chapter 3: God and Country During the Kennedy Presidency

Pages 49-67

Summary

The election of President John F. Kennedy in 1960 reduced evangelicals’ political influence and gave them a sense that the country was moving away from Protestant Christian values. Fundamentalists and evangelicals considered Kennedy’s Catholicism such a threat that they temporarily forgot their political and religious differences and united in opposition to Kennedy when he ran for president in 1960. They were devastated when their campaign failed to prevent Kennedy’s election.

Fundamentalists reacted to Kennedy’s election by strengthening their alliance with right-wing politicians. They became more vociferous advocates of racial segregation. Evangelicals were more cautious about identifying with the far right, but they, too, became increasingly involved in anticommmunist organizations, such as Fred Schwarz’s Christian Anticommunism Crusade.

The Supreme Court’s decisions on school prayer and Bible reading in 1962-63 divided conservative Protestants. On the one hand, most of them were opposed to the type of state-composed prayers that the Court declared unconstitutional in *Engel v. Vitale*, but on the other hand, some of them feared that the Court rulings against school prayer and, especially, devotional Bible reading in public schools, were a harbinger of a larger secular trend. In the end, fundamentalists and evangelicals were divided in their response to these decisions – a division that reflected their lack of a unified political strategy in the early 1960s.

Questions for Discussion

1. Why did both evangelicals and fundamentalists oppose the election of a Catholic president? What did they expect a Catholic president to do?

2. Why did Billy Graham give strong support to Richard Nixon during his presidential campaign of 1960?

3. What effect did Kennedy’s election have on evangelical and fundamentalist political activity? What was new about fundamentalist political activity in the early 1960s, during the two or three years following Kennedy’s election victory?

4. Were you surprised by evangelicals’ reaction to the Supreme Court’s school prayer and Bible reading decisions? How did they react to those decisions – and why? Why did the Southern Baptist Convention oppose attempts to overturn the Court’s decisions through a constitutional amendment, while some leading fundamentalists supported such efforts?

5. Why were fundamentalists and evangelicals politically divided in the early 1960s?
CHAPTER 4: THE CHRISTIAN SILENT MAJORITY

PAGES 69-88

SUMMARY

Fundamentalists and evangelicals were at odds with each other in the election of 1964, but by the late 1960s, they had begun to unite in opposition to the perceived moral disorder in American society. In 1964, the race issue divided fundamentalists from more moderate evangelicals. The nation’s most prominent fundamentalist leaders were unapologetic segregationists, and they enthusiastically supported Barry Goldwater, who had voted against the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Many evangelicals, by contrast, favored a centrist path on civil rights (as Billy Graham and Christianity Today did), and the evidence seems to suggest that a majority may have voted for Lyndon Johnson.

During the next four years, the sexual revolution prompted both evangelicals and fundamentalists to become more alarmed about the moral direction of their country, and the urban race riots reduced evangelicals’ enthusiasm for civil rights. Evangelicals’ strong support for the Vietnam War – which, by 1968, a majority of Americans opposed – also pushed them into an alliance with the political right. Evangelicals were thus much more interested in conservative politics in 1968 than they had been in 1964. At the same time, fundamentalists’ abandonment of overtly segregationist rhetoric allowed them to move closer to the political center. Both groups were ready to unite in 1968 around a Republican presidential candidate who promised a restoration of moral order. That candidate was Richard Nixon.
Questions for Discussion

1. Why did racial issues divide evangelicals and fundamentalists in the 1960s?

2. Did fundamentalists’ stance on racial issues help or hinder their political influence in the 1960s?

3. Why did fundamentalists give strong support to Barry Goldwater in 1964? Why did liberal clergy, by contrast, believe that voting for Goldwater was “un-Christian and immoral” (p. 75)? Would you characterize the position of Billy Graham and his centrist evangelical allies during the election of 1964 as closer to the position of fundamentalists such as Billy James Hargis or to the position of religious liberals such as Reinhold Niebuhr?

4. If many evangelicals (possibly even including Billy Graham) voted for Lyndon Johnson in 1964, what prompted them to move to the right and support Richard Nixon in 1968? What brought evangelicals and fundamentalists into a common coalition in support of conservative Republicans by the late 1960s?

5. Why did evangelicals and fundamentalists support the Vietnam War? Many religious liberals opposed the war and some argued that the war was immoral and that Jesus, the “Prince of Peace,” would never have supported it. Why do you think that these arguments never gained much currency among most conservative evangelicals and fundamentalists?

6. How did the cultural changes of the 1960s affect evangelical political activity? Why did evangelicals and fundamentalists believe that American society was headed in the wrong direction in the late 1960s? Why did they think that politics would offer an answer to the problems that they thought America faced?

7. In what way did both evangelicals and fundamentalists change their position on racial issues in the late 1960s? Do you agree that the evidence presented in this book supports this statement: “After 1964, the difference between fundamentalists and evangelicals on racial issues began to narrow” (p. 87)? If so, what effect did this have on the possibility for a united political coalition of fundamentalists and evangelicals?
CHAPTER 5: NIXON’S EVANGELICAL STRATEGY

PAGES 89-103

SUMMARY

Richard Nixon capitalized on evangelicals’ anxieties about the nation’s moral decay and positioned himself as a moral leader who would restore Christian values in the nation. By using Billy Graham as his primary liaison with evangelicals, he won the votes of an overwhelming majority of Christian conservatives. This chapter explores why Nixon was successful in creating a coalition of evangelical and fundamentalist supporters, and why this coalition formed the prototype for a new evangelical alliance with the Republican Party, this time based not on anxieties about Catholicism (as it had been in 1960), but on concerns about the nation’s moral decline. In the view of evangelicals, Nixon represented opposition to international communism, a defense of moral order in the face of the sexual revolution and urban riots, and a return to Christian values. They were dismayed when Nixon’s scandals discredited his claim to be a moral leader, but Nixon’s fall did not deter them from their quest to restore Christian values in the nation through politics.

Questions for Discussion

1. Why did Billy Graham give Nixon strong support in the elections of 1968 and 1972? Did he do so for the same reasons that he had supported Nixon in 1960, or did his rationale for supporting Nixon change?

2. Why did many evangelicals view Nixon as a moral leader?

3. Why did some evangelicals and fundamentalists expect God’s judgment on the nation if their favored candidate did not win in 1968 (p. 91)? This expectation repeatedly resurfaced in the twentieth century; conservative evangelicals made similar statements when mobilizing voters for Ronald Reagan in the 1980s. What effect did this expectation of the possibility of apocalyptic judgment on the United States have on conservative evangelical political mobilization?

4. George McGovern attempted to reach out to evangelical voters during his presidential campaign of 1972, and a few younger evangelicals supported him. But the vast majority of evangelicals did not. Why did most evangelical voters reject McGovern’s overtures? Why did they find Nixon more appealing than McGovern? What might evangelicals’ political choices in 1972 tell us about evangelical politics in the late twentieth century? What can we learn from these choices that might help us explain the rise of the Christian Right?

5. What effect did Richard Nixon’s presidency have on the creation of the Christian Right? What role (if any) did Nixon play in its formation?

6. Nixon was not personally very religious, yet he decided to position himself as a religious and moral leader in order to win election (and reelection) to the White House. Why did he feel that he needed to do this? To what extent was he comfortable (or uncomfortable) in this role?

7. What did conservative evangelicals learn after their relationship with Nixon ended in embarrassment and a feeling of betrayal? Did Nixon’s demise have any effect on the nascent Christian Right?
CHAPTER 6: THE GRASSROOTS CAMPAIGN TO SAVE THE FAMILY

PAGES 105-132

SUMMARY

In the mid-1970s, evangelicals’ concerns about perceived threats to the American family prompted many of them to enlist in grassroots, single-issue political campaigns that eventually acquired a partisan dimension. In particular, evangelicals were concerned about the threats that the feminist movement and the sexual revolution allegedly posed to the family, and they fought against these threats by campaigning against the Equal Rights Amendment and abortion. Both campaigns had been started by Catholics—the STOP-ERA campaign by the conservative Catholic Republican Phyllis Schlafly and the anti-abortion campaign by Catholic clergy and laypeople. When evangelicals signed on to these campaigns, it signaled a new willingness to ally with Catholics on moral issues of common concern. The campaign against the ERA also gave new political power to evangelical women, because women took a leading role in speaking out against the ERA. Both campaigns also brought evangelicals into closer alliance with the Republican Party, because even though many Republican politicians supported both the ERA and abortion legalization, evangelicals and conservative Catholics found the Republican Party more amenable than the Democrats to their concerns.

Culture war issues influenced evangelicals’ political choices in the presidential election of 1976. At first, many evangelicals supported Jimmy Carter, a Southern Baptist Sunday school teacher who was the first presidential candidate to declare himself “born again.” But when Carter granted an interview to Playboy magazine, and when he took stances on abortion and the ERA with which they disagreed, some evangelicals—and, to an even greater degree, fundamentalists—repudiated his campaign. Many conservative evangelicals and fundamentalists were especially excited by Ronald Reagan’s candidacy, but when Reagan lost his bid for the Republican presidential nomination, they threw their support to Gerald Ford—especially when the Republican Party and the Ford campaign moved to the right on abortion and made an effort to solicit the votes of social conservatives, including evangelicals.
Questions for Discussion

1. Why did many socially conservative Christian women oppose the feminist movement and the Equal Rights Amendment?

2. What role do you think that conservative Christian women played in the mobilization of the Christian Right? God’s Own Party gives only limited attention to the role of the anti-ERA campaign in conservative evangelical political mobilization, but some other historians have given it greater emphasis. What do you think the anti-ERA campaign contributed to the development of the Christian Right or to the alliance between conservative evangelicals and the Republican Party?

3. Why was it significant that the anti-ERA campaign was led by a northern Catholic woman (Phyllis Schlafly), yet much of its strength came from conservative evangelical women in the South? What effect do you think this might have had on the relationship between Catholics and evangelicals?

4. How would you describe evangelicals’ view of abortion at the beginning of the 1970s? What was their view of abortion at the end of the decade? What caused this shift in view?

5. Why were Southern Baptists slower than northern evangelicals or fundamentalists to mobilize against abortion? What prompted them to become more staunchly opposed to abortion? What was the relationship between their view of abortion and their view of the feminist movement and other cultural issues?

6. What effect did Roe v. Wade have on the nation’s debate over abortion and on evangelicals’ interest in the issue?

7. This chapter argue that evangelicals became increasingly politically active in the 1970s because they were concerned about the breakdown of the family. Why did they think that the American family was in crisis in the 1970s, and why did they think that they could save the family through politics? Did conservative evangelicals’ political campaigns have any effect on American families or on the crises that evangelicals believed the family faced? If they were worried about the rising divorce rate, why did they decide to focus on feminism, abortion, and (later) gay rights rather than campaign against divorce?

8. What role did conservative evangelicals play in the 1976 presidential election? Why did social conservatives succeed in pushing the Republican Party to the right on abortion in that election?

9. Jimmy Carter was a “born-again” Southern Baptist, but his presidential candidacy received a mixed reception among many conservative white Baptists and other evangelicals. What explained evangelicals’ reactions to his campaign?

10. In what way was evangelicals’ political activity in 1976 similar to the involvement of religious conservatives in later presidential elections and in what way was it different? To what extent were evangelicals in 1976 already allied with the Republican Party – and to what extent were they not?
CHAPTER 7: CULTURE WARS IN THE CARTER YEARS

PAGES 133-158

SUMMARY

During Jimmy Carter’s presidency, conservative evangelicals’ concerns about the sexual revolution, the feminist movement, and the moral direction of the nation developed into a comprehensive campaign against “secular humanism.” Francis Schaeffer, an American Presbyterian missionary in Switzerland and popular evangelical writer, played a central role in mobilizing evangelicals against “secular humanism,” and chapter 7 traces the history of his political activism. Although Schaeffer had been sympathetic to some aspects of the political left at the beginning of the 1970s, his concerns about abortion and the loss of Christian influence in the West pushed him toward the political right. The American evangelicals that he influenced were even more willing to identify with conservative political causes.

Chapter 7 traces the further development of evangelical campaigns against feminism, gay rights, and abortion between 1977 and 1980, and shows how each of these campaigns alienated evangelicals from the Carter administration. The campaigns also contributed to conservative anxiety within the Southern Baptist Convention and led to a conservative “takeover” of the denomination’s leadership in 1979. By 1980, the leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention, Carter’s own denomination, were firmly opposed to him, as were most of the country’s conservative evangelicals and fundamentalists. Most of this opposition was due to Carter’s unwillingness to endorse evangelicals’ campaigns against feminism and the sexual revolution.
Questions for Discussion

1. What cultural changes were taking place in the 1970s that alarmed many conservative evangelicals? Why did they find these cultural changes alarming?

2. What was “secular humanism”? Was it something that conservative evangelicals simply imagined or was “secular humanism” a real phenomenon? Why did conservative evangelicals become so concerned about “secular humanism” in the mid-1970s?

3. What did Francis Schaeffer contribute to the Christian Right? Why did Schaeffer, despite his culturally progressive image, become an advocate of culturally conservative politics?

4. Why did conservative evangelicals become so strongly opposed to Jimmy Carter’s administration?

5. Why did conservative evangelicals make opposition to gay rights a major part of their political agenda in the late 1970s?

6. Why did Anita Bryant oppose gay rights? What were her fears and concerns? What did her anti-gay-rights campaign contribute to the development of the Christian Right?

7. How did the conservative takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention change SBC politics and position the denomination for a different political trajectory? What were the concerns of the Southern Baptist conservatives, and why did they decide that they needed to change the direction of their denomination?

8. How did the major “culture war” issues of the late 1970s, such as feminism, gay rights, and abortion, become partisan issues? To what extent were they already partisan issues in the late 1970s?

9. To what extent do you think the conservative evangelical political mobilization of the late 1970s was the product of televangelists or megachurch pastors who rallied their congregants to their cause, and to what extent was it the creation of lay evangelicals who became upset by the nation’s cultural trends? In other words, did the impetus for the Christian Right come from the top or from the bottom?
CHAPTER 8: MORAL MAJORITY

PAGES 159-185

SUMMARY

By 1979, evangelicals thought of themselves as a “moral majority,” because they had an unprecedented degree of economic and cultural power. They were outraged that the government, in their view, was endorsing the principles of feminism and the sexual revolution and was promoting policies that they considered anti-Christian and anti-family. They therefore resolved to take back the nation through politics, because they were confident that they had the votes to win.

Chapter 8 traces the formation of new Christian Right political lobbying organizations such as Christian Voice and Moral Majority, which conservative evangelicals founded in 1979 in order to elect presidential and congressional candidates who shared their values. The new Christian Right organizations capitalized on the evangelical grassroots campaigns against the ERA, gay rights, and abortion, and attempted to translate those widespread evangelical concerns into partisan campaigns for specific political candidates, almost all of whom were conservative Republicans. The Christian Right organizations appealed to both fundamentalists and conservative evangelicals, bringing both groups into a common conservative coalition. Belatedly, the Carter administration attempted to stop the development of the Christian Right by reaching out to evangelical leaders, but the effort was unsuccessful; by 1980, conservative evangelicals had already decided that Carter was an enemy to their cause, and they were looking for a candidate who would support their interests in the culture wars.
Questions for Discussion

1. What gave evangelicals newfound political power and influence in the late 1970s?

2. Why were evangelical megachurches growing rapidly in size in the 1970s? What made these churches different from other churches of earlier decades?

3. Do you think that conservative evangelicals overestimated their own political influence in the late 1970s? (If so, what might have caused them to overestimate it?) Or, were their claims of having enough political influence to “take over” the country really correct?

4. Why did conservative evangelical pastors become more antipathetic toward the federal government as their religious enterprises continued to grow?

5. Some historians have argued that the IRS mandate was the central reason for the creation of the Christian Right. The Christian Right, these historians argue, had its genesis in conservative evangelicals’ desire to protect their own segregated schools. What do you think? How central was the fight against the IRS mandate in the formation of the Christian Right?

6. What did Christian Voice (and, by extension, the “New Christian Right”) do that was new?

7. What was the New Right? Why did New Right activists such as Paul Weyrich view conservative evangelicals as likely converts to their cause?

8. Why did Jerry Falwell become a national political activist? What personal scruples did he have to overcome to launch the Moral Majority? Why did he become convinced that he needed to abandon some of his traditional fundamentalist anxieties and launch a national political movement? To what extent did his political involvement erode some of the traditional divisions between self-proclaimed fundamentalists and evangelicals?

9. Why did Pat Robertson become involved in national politics? How did his religious views, personal background, and political interests differ from those of Jerry Falwell or James Robison?

10. Why was the Carter administration unable to win the support of conservative evangelicals? What prompted a religiously diverse coalition of conservative evangelicals who had once refused to cooperate with each other to unite in a coalition against Carter?
CHAPTER 9: REAGAN

SUMMARY

Christian Right activists enthusiastically supported Ronald Reagan in the election of 1980 and throughout his time in office, but Reagan’s election did not give them much help in achieving their legislative goals. They did not get constitutional amendments to restore prayer in public schools or ban abortion—even though Reagan endorsed both ideas. Conservative evangelicals did not control enough votes in Congress or have enough support among the general population to secure the legislation that they wanted.

Yet even if Reagan’s presidency did not give evangelicals substantive policy gains, it strengthened evangelicals’ alliance with the Republican Party. Conservative evangelicals such as Jerry Falwell became regular visitors to the White House and supported Reagan on a broad range of policy initiatives, including military spending proposals. Southern Baptists and other evangelicals also became more involved in antiabortion campaigns and more strongly committed to Christian Right politics. By the end of Reagan’s presidency, they were disappointed that Reagan’s election had not given them the policy victories that they had wanted, but they were more committed to the Republican Party than ever and they were even more determined to regain control of the nation through politics.

Questions for Discussion

1. Why did conservative evangelicals support Ronald Reagan in 1980?
2. Why did Reagan make a deliberate attempt to reach out to evangelical voters?
3. To what extent did the Christian Right’s involvement in Reagan’s presidential campaign of 1980 reshape the direction of the Republican Party?
4. Did Reagan or Republican strategists manipulate their evangelical supporters in the Christian Right and “sweet-talk” them, as Paul Weyrich claimed? Did the Christian Right manipulate Republican politicians and push Republicans further to the cultural right than they wanted? In what way did the alliance between Republicans and evangelicals change both American evangelicalism and the Republican Party?
5. How much did the Christian Right gain (or not gain) from Reagan’s presidency?
6. Why did the Southern Baptist Convention change its official position on school prayer in 1982? Why did a denomination that had opposed school prayer amendments in the 1960s and 1970s decide to support one in 1982?
7. Why did evangelicals become more strongly opposed to abortion in the 1980s than they had been before? What effect did this new political priority have on their partisan leanings?
8. Why did Jerry Falwell support Reagan’s military buildup and economic agenda?
9. How successful was Falwell as a political strategist and lobbyist?
10. The Christian Right failed to get either a school prayer amendment or an antiabortion amendment during Reagan’s time in office. Why did the Christian Right fail to secure its major agenda items? What did the Christian Right succeed in getting?
CHAPTER 10: CRASHING THE PARTY

PAGES 213-244

SUMMARY

This chapter describes conservative evangelicals’ successful attempt to take over the Republican Party in the 1990s.

Having failed to secure substantive policy gains during Reagan’s presidency, conservative evangelicals were determined to exercise greater control over the GOP, but they faced repeated setbacks in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Pat Robertson’s campaign to win the Republican presidential nomination in 1988 failed to gain much support even from many of his fellow evangelicals, especially from non-charismatics. Evangelicals’ strong support for George Bush resulted only in frustration, because Bush mostly ignored the Christian Right once he was in office. In frustration, a few Christian Right activists turned to a more extreme brand of politics, such as Christian Reconstructionism (which favored the imposition of Old Testament law on the contemporary United States) or Operation Rescue (a direct-action antiabortion organization that engaged in nonviolent civil obedience in order to shut down abortion clinics).

In the end, the Christian Coalition, under Ralph Reed’s leadership, gave conservative evangelicals the influence in the Republican Party that they sought. In contrast to the Moral Majority, which had gained a lot of national publicity but had made only limited political gains, Reed’s Christian Coalition succeeded in winning elections at all levels through the use of far more sophisticated voter mobilization efforts than the Moral Majority had employed. But Reed’s willingness to compromise on the Christian Right’s agenda in order to increase his organization’s influence in the party angered some of the purists in the movement, such as James Dobson. In the late 1990s, Dobson engaged in his own political lobbying, often with success.

Because of the Christian Right’s success in electing social conservatives, congressional Republicans of the late 1990s were far more committed to the Christian Right’s agenda than congressional Republicans of the 1980s had been. Yet because the Christian Right did not control the White House in the 1990s, conservative evangelicals experienced few policy victories. They had captured control of a party, but they did not yet have complete control of the national government.
Questions for Discussion

1. Why did Pat Robertson run for president? Why did many Christian Right leaders refuse to support him?

2. How significant was Robertson’s campaign for president? Did it have any effect on the direction of the Republican Party or the future of the Christian Right?

3. Why did Robertson fail to win much support even among most evangelicals? Why did charismatic evangelicals support him?

4. *God’s Own Party* argues that even though conservative evangelicals failed to win legislative victories or reverse the direction of national cultural trends to which they objected, they still managed to acquire a controlling interest in the Republican Party – despite the attempts of some mainstream Republicans to marginalize them. How did they manage to do this?

5. Why did many conservative evangelicals move from viewing themselves as a “moral majority” in the early 1980s to thinking of themselves as a persecuted minority at the beginning of the 1990s?

6. *God’s Own Party* describes Operation Rescue and Christian Reconstructionism as “fringe movements” in the Christian Right (p. 226). Do you agree with that characterization? Do you think that these groups were extremist wings of a movement that was otherwise more mainstream, or would you describe them differently?

7. What did Ralph Reed contribute to the Christian Right? In what way did the Christian Coalition differ from the Moral Majority? Why was it more politically influential? What were the keys to Reed’s success?

8. Why did some conservative evangelicals disagree with Reed and object to his political choices?

9. What were the keys to James Dobson’s political influence? How did his political style differ from Reed’s?

10. What enabled the Christian Right to increase its influence in Congress in the late 1990s? Why did this influence have only a limited effect on national policy?
CHAPTER 11: CAPTURING THE WHITE HOUSE

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SUMMARY

Conservative evangelicals enjoyed more influence in President George W. Bush’s White House than they had had in any previous presidential administration, and they succeeded in pushing Bush to make their policy agenda a central priority. They succeeded in making their campaign against same-sex marriage an issue in the 2004 presidential election, and the mobilization of Christian conservatives in Ohio on this issue may have been the key to Bush’s reelection. Yet in Bush’s second term, he failed to deliver on his promises to the Christian Right, and many evangelicals became disillusioned.

The chapter concludes with an analysis of the Christian Right’s dilemma. The movement has acquired a controlling interest in the Republican Party, but its influence in the party has not enabled it to achieve any of its major policy goals. Christian conservatives have lost their campaign against gay rights and same-sex marriage, and they have not succeeded in banning abortion or enacting a school prayer amendment. They have found that it is easier to win control of a party than it is to win control of a nation. At times, they have found their alliance with the Republican Party frustrating, because they have repeatedly been disappointed in their failure to secure policy goals after electing socially conservative Republican politicians. Yet in the end, Christian conservatives have not left the GOP, despite their periodic threats to do so. They remain committed to restoring the nation’s moral order through politics, and they continue to believe that the Republican Party will offer them the opportunity to do that.
Questions for Discussion

1. Why were Democrats unable to win back the white evangelical vote, despite the efforts of Al Gore and Barack Obama to do so during their presidential campaigns?

2. Why did the nation’s major Christian Right organizations, such as the Christian Coalition, founder during George W. Bush’s presidency? Why did the Christian Right continue to increase in political strength even as some of its organizations became moribund?

3. In what way was George W. Bush’s presidency overtly evangelical? What did Bush do to reach out to evangelicals that neither his father nor Ronald Reagan had done? Was Bush’s outreach to evangelicals based primarily on his willingness to promote the policies they favored or on something else?

4. Why did same-sex marriage become a major issue of concern for the Christian Right? What effect did the national debate over same-sex marriage have on the Christian Right and the Republican Party? Why did same-sex marriage become a partisan issue?

5. Why were conservative evangelicals more supportive of the Iraq War and War on Terror than other Americans were?

6. Why did many Christian Right activists become frustrated with President George W. Bush during his second term? Why did they remain loyal to the Republican Party in spite of their frustration?

7. What are the differences between the political concerns of younger evangelicals and those of older evangelicals? What political concerns do they have in common? Do you expect that younger evangelicals will remain loyal to the Republican Party or the Christian Right?

8. This chapter briefly mentions left-leaning evangelicals such as Jim Wallis. How do the politics of evangelicals such as Wallis differ from those of the Christian Right? Why do you think that the evangelical left has never been able to win the support of more than about one-quarter of white evangelical voters?

9. What is the state of the Christian Right today? What are its primary issues of concern? Are Christian conservatives winning political victories? How much influence does the Christian Right currently have in the Republican Party?
CONCLUSION

God’s Own Party tells the story of a decades-long evangelical quest to restore moral order in the nation through partisan politics. The quest largely failed to deliver either the cultural or legislative victories that evangelicals sought, but it did result in a sweeping change in national politics. Today more than one-third of Republican voters are conservative evangelicals, and they are one of the most important interest groups in the Republican Party. No Republican presidential candidate can afford to ignore conservative evangelicals’ concerns. Culture war issues have played a key role in every presidential election since the 1970s.

In asking students to reflect on the main themes of this book, you may want to ask why the Christian Right mobilized when it did. What developments in American society, the Republican Party, and American evangelicalism triggered the creation of a politically powerful alliance between conservative evangelicals and the GOP?

You may also want to discuss why conservative evangelicals linked their ideal of a Christian nation with a strong defense against international communism (and later, radical Islamic terrorism) and a defense of the family against the alleged threats of feminism and the sexual revolution. What developments in American society in the late twentieth century (especially the 1970s) made evangelicals nervous about the state of the American family? Why did evangelicals make their battle against the sexual revolution a major priority, and why did they largely lose their campaign to stop the sexual revolution through politics?

God’s Own Party can be used to facilitate discussion about the conservative reaction to some of the major cultural and social developments of the late 1960s and 1970s, but it can also be used as a guide to understanding contemporary American politics and American religion today. As you lead students in a discussion of this book, you may want to ask them about their views of contemporary American culture wars and political debates, and find out whether they think that the concerns that prompted conservative evangelicals to ally with the GOP are still a force in current American politics.
Questions for Discussion

1. How has the Christian Right changed national politics? How has it changed conservative evangelicalism?

2. Has this book changed your perspective on the Christian Right, American political realignment, the Republican Party, or recent American political history? What does this study of the Christian Right contribute to our understanding of larger American political developments?

3. *God's Own Party* concludes by saying that the culture wars are not over and that the Christian Right’s alliance with the Republican Party will continue, even though conservative evangelicals have not succeeded in their quest to reverse cultural liberalism through politics. Have political developments since 2010 corresponded to this assessment? If so, why do you think that this is the case? What explains the enduring power of the Christian Right and its alliance with the Republican Party?

4. This book was written before the “Tea Party” became a major force in the Republican Party. How might a concluding chapter that discusses the rise of the Tea Party and other related developments that have occurred since the 2008 presidential election affect this book’s argument or our understanding of the history of the Christian Right?

5. Do you agree that conservative evangelicals will “find it impossible to reverse the country’s cultural direction through politics” (p. 9)? If so, why is that the case?

6. Why might conservative evangelicals have expected in the late twentieth century that they could use their alliance with the Republican Party to change the nation’s cultural direction and restore moral order in the nation? Do you think conservative evangelicals who vote Republican today have the same expectation?

7. By focusing on politics, this book has necessarily ignored a lot of evangelical activity that did not have a partisan dimension. Has the political focus in this book given a distorted picture of American evangelicalism? What picture of American evangelicalism might emerge in a study that focuses on other issues?

8. What issues related to the Religious Right or the socially conservative turn in the Republican Party have been left out of this study? [For example, the book says little about conservative Catholic political activity, even though Catholics played an important role in socially conservative political movements in the late twentieth century]. How might a study that includes some of those issues of concern be different from this book or present a different picture of the Christian Right? Why do you think that these subjects were left out of this book?
SUPPLEMENTAL ASSIGNMENTS

1. Research conservative evangelical political mobilization of the early twentieth century (especially, the 1920s and 1930s). What similarities or differences do you notice between the “Old Christian Right” of the early twentieth century and the “New Christian Right” of the 1970s and 1980s?

2. Read a monograph that uses racial issues to explain the partisan realignment of the late twentieth century, and then try to situate the narrative presented in God’s Own Party in the larger context of southern realignment and the conversion of the South to the GOP. How would you harmonize the information presented in God’s Own Party with the traditional narrative that suggests that the conversion of the South to the GOP was mostly due to concerns about race?

3. Choose a rights-based movement or cultural development of the 1970s that is discussed in this book (e.g., gay rights, feminism, reproductive rights, etc.), and then research this topic by reading a book that discusses this issue from the viewpoint of the opponents of the Christian Right. Use the information from God’s Own Party to write a paper that discusses this rights-based movement or cultural development from the viewpoint of both sides in the political debate surrounding it. (E.g., write a paper that discusses gay rights activism in the late 1970s from the contrasting viewpoints of both Anita Bryant and Harvey Milk, or the debate over the Equal Rights Amendment from the contrasting viewpoints of both Betty Friedan and Phyllis Schlafly).

4. Find a recent news story about Christian Right political activity or an issue of concern to the Christian Right (e.g., abortion, same-sex marriage, religious liberty, etc.), and then write a paper interpreting the story in the context of the historical developments presented in God’s Own Party. In what way does knowledge of this larger historical context change or enrich your understanding of this contemporary news story?

5. If this is an election year, choose a group of Republican political candidates (e.g., Republican presidential aspirants or local candidates for Congress or governor) and examine their responses to conservative evangelicals and issues of Christian Right concerns. Perhaps members of your class can work together to create a website tracking the ways in which various Republican candidates (e.g., the Republican presidential contenders or Republican candidates in a gubernatorial primary) have responded to the Christian Right or have altered their positions to appeal to conservative evangelicals in a Republican primary.