

This article was published by Tortoise Media on 30th October 2020, under the title

Bargain of the century: the ‘grand bargain’ that bound the Republican Party to Evangelical Christians may be the most consequential political deal of modern times

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BARGAIN OF THE CENTURY

‘How did a libertine who lacks even the most basic knowledge of the Christian faith win 81% of the white evangelical vote in 2016?’¹

‘Why did so many Evangelicals ... vote for ... a serial philanderer with questionable conservative credentials?’²

So go the blurbs for some recent books. Here’s a force that has given us Presidents Ronald Reagan, George W Bush and Donald Trump. The latter two were elected (in 2000 and 2016) on a minority of the popular vote, thanks to locally concentrated evangelical presence. Arguably this formation bears responsibility for such disasters as the Iraq War and the failure to tackle climate change. Yet its roots are understood neither in its American homeland nor elsewhere, though its consequences are felt around the world. What *is* this movement? How did the ‘grand bargain’ between evangelicalism and the Right come about? And what happens next?

First, some background. A quarter of Americans self-identify as ‘evangelical’. Of these, three-quarters are white (not black or Latino). Up to the middle of the last century, this block’s vote split regionally – the North went Republican, to the party of Lincoln, anti-slavery and ‘small state’ liberalism; the South Democrat, the big-state party that brought Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal and enforced segregation to subjugate the descendants of slaves. After the ‘Jim Crow’ system was outlawed by federal courts and legislation, the southern white vote drifted to the Republicans – a trend arrested in 1976 with the election of the Southern Baptist Democrat, Jimmy Carter. Then it turned decisively to Reagan in 1980 and stayed Republican. Among white evangelicals, 81% voted Trump in 2016 and something near that will certainly have done so come Wednesday – slightly over the 78% who voted Republican in 2004 (for Bush II) and 2012 (for Romney)³.

The engineers of the turn to Reagan came (like the UK’s Thatcherites) out of the intellectual conservative movement of the 1950s – aiming to revive free market economics and reverse the rise of state welfare⁴. They read their Hayek and von Mises in school, became backroom researchers and fundraisers in Republican circles, and built a network of journals, thinktanks and societies. Their first fruit was Barry Goldwater, the Presidential candidate thrashed by Lyndon Johnson in 1964. After Nixon’s disgrace, Gerald Ford took the White House in 1974 – and chose as Vice President Nelson Rockefeller, the standard-bearer of left-liberal Republicanism. Then came Carter – one disaster after another for the conservatives. They decided to distance (though not separate) themselves from the Party, and seek new allies beyond the well-heeled, mild-mannered small business folk who formed the core of their mailing lists. Richard Viguerie raised cash from 15 million subscribers and ploughed much of it into the coffers of George Wallace, the racist, big-welfare ex-Democrat Governor of

¹ Publishers’ blurb for Kristin Kobes du Mez *Jesus and John Wayne: How white evangelicals corrupted a faith and fractured a nation* (NY, Liveright, 2020)

² Publishers’ blurb for Sarah Posner *Unholy: Why white evangelicals worship at the altar of Donald Trump* (NY, Random House, 2020)

³ Statistics for US voting by race and religious identity come from Pew www.pewforum.org based on surveys and exit polls. For the historical relationship between race, slavery and party affiliation, see Mark A. Noll *God and Race in American Politics: A short history* (Princeton UP, 2008)

⁴ This account is based on Jerome L. Himmelstein *To the Right: the transformation of American conservatism* (University of California Press, 1989). For more on this and other texts on the Religious Right, see my [Booklist](#).

Alabama and Independent candidate for the Presidency in 1968. Phyllis Schlafly (portrayed by Cate Blanchett in *Mrs America*) campaigned against feminism and the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) to the constitution, a long-running liberal initiative. The guiding genius of the 'grand bargain' was Paul Weyrich, an ultra-conservative Catholic and master organiser. Funded by the Coors brewing family, Weyrich established the influential Heritage Foundation. For years, he toiled for a great prize – bringing the ex-Democrat southern white evangelicals over not just to the Republicans but to the conservative side, giving the 'New Right' leverage over the Party's direction. He made common cause with Jerry Falwell Sr, a leading Southern Baptist pastor, televangelist and educationalist in Lynchburg, Virginia. They branded their movement the 'Moral Majority'.

Looking for a cause, their gaze fell not on abortion (a 'Catholic' issue on which Baptists still took a liberal position) nor the ERA, but desegregation. The Internal Revenue Service was going after the tax-exempt status of segregated private schools and colleges. Falwell and Weyrich depicted this as an issue of 'religious freedom' and managed to pin the blame on Carter (though the action had started under Nixon). The mid-term races of 1978 proved the viability of a strategy to attract both Catholics and Evangelicals to this banner. Reagan was sold. The deal was done. The Religious Right took over the grassroots of the Republican Party. Now, to navigate to the Presidential nomination, any Republican must deal with the evangelical Right in primary elections.

The Religious Right's success is not just doing a 'deal' over Christian ambitions. It's a cultural movement guiding family life, sex, and civic and military duty. It's underpinned by a profound, if crackpot, political philosophy, crafted in the 1970s by two Calvinist intellectuals - Roussas Rushdoony and Frances Schaeffer⁵. All law is religious in origin. The state cannot be neutral – if not Christian, then it is inevitably anti-Christian. The modern decline in Christian attachment has led to the courts and the state being captive to 'secular humanism' which persecutes Christians and, unchallenged, will seek to destroy the church. Thus 'cultural war' and political activism become a Christian duty. Christians who defend a pluralistic society are 'polytheists'. It is a Christian duty to support the poor and to educate children; the state oversteps its boundaries if it interferes.

Whatever happens next month, the Religious Right is not about to go away. It will ready itself to fight the political battles which it expects to follow when the Supreme Court stops overruling state-level decisions – perhaps even (in its dreams) overturning past findings on health, abortion, and equality law. It is a movement that needs allies, and could well fall further into the arms of the far Right, which finds points of contact in nationalism and anti-liberalism.

What have the two sides gained in their 'great bargain'? A Catholic-evangelical alliance has made inroads into the judiciary: whether this will make much difference remains to be seen. New Right governments have been friendly to the interests of business and capital. The new hybrid rejects key elements of 'conservative' political and religious thought as traditionally understood – including sound money and the separation of church and state. Its politicised 'Christianity' appears, to many believers, blasphemous idolatry. It seems to have lost focus on a brown man who taught love for enemies⁶, and of a church with 'neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female'⁷. The challenge now is to renew liberalism as a system with responsible government which does not seek to impose a common religious order. Many Christians (including evangelicals) will be ready to join in that task.

Paul Lusk: 29th October 2020

⁵ For references to Rushdoony and Schaeffer, and to the wider cultural context for modern Religious Right politics, see my [Booklist](#).

⁶ Matthew 5.44

⁷ Galatians 3.28