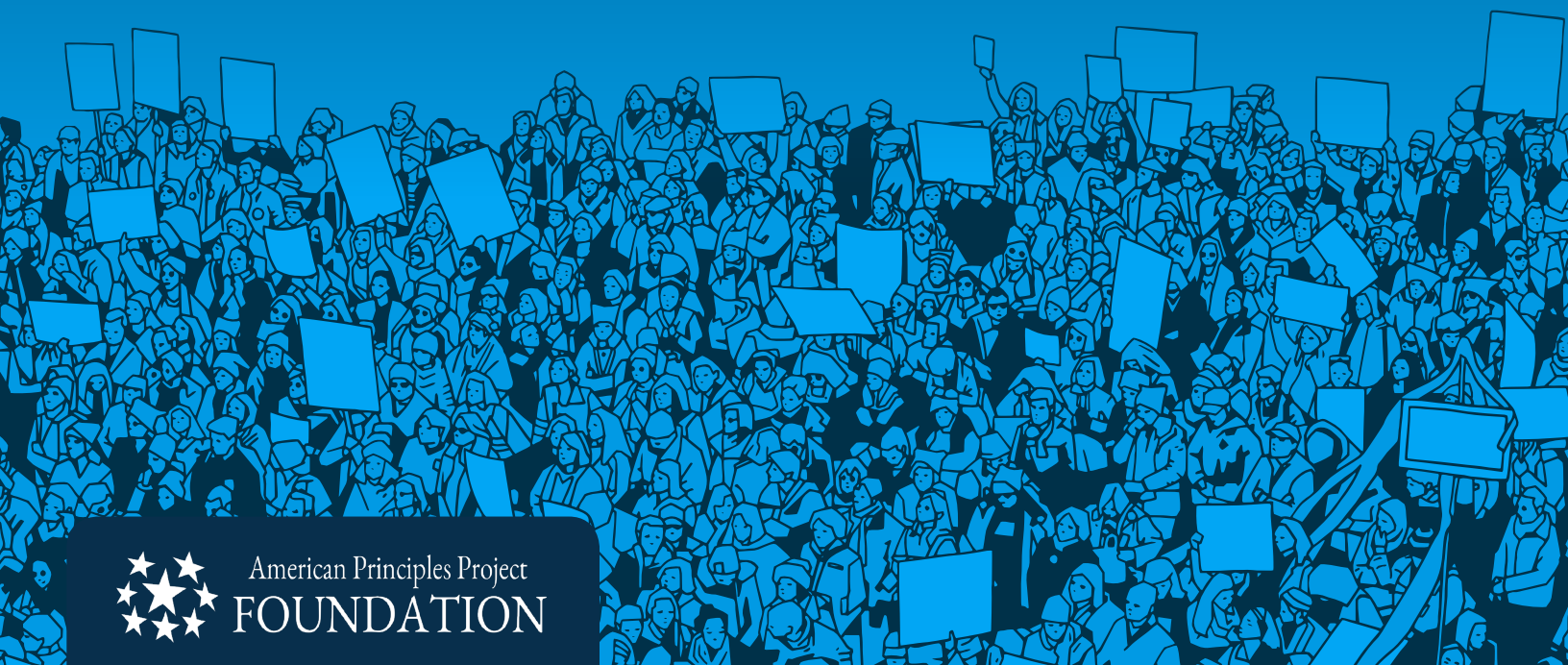




The Case for Politics

Why Social
Conservatives Must
Invest Seriously
in Politics



American Principles Project
FOUNDATION

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Executive Summary

Why is social conservatives' political influence declining as our need for legislative protection is increasing? Many voices argue that the reason is simple: "Politics is downstream of culture." We agree with these and other Benedict Option advocates on three big things: First, the threats to traditional faith communities in America are grave and multiplying. Second, Christian families, churches, and schools must develop better ways to transmit our faith to the next generation. And third, politics as usual has failed us.

Where we disagree strongly is on what these three things tell us about what social conservatives should do next in politics. Yes, politics as usual has failed Christian conservatives. But this report argues that it is because we are not really doing politics very much, and that little not very well.

In this report, we looked carefully at social-conservative and pro-life organizations that have a major public-policy focus (excluding, therefore, ordinary Christian philanthropy). We sifted the data on the amount of money these organizations spent on political versus nonpolitical strategies to change law or public policy between 2008 and 2014, a span of seven years and four election cycles.

The data show that over seven years, between 2008 and 2014, social conservatives invested just under \$74 million in direct political investments, compared with over \$2.6 billion in nonpolitical strategies to change public policy, *a ratio of 35 to 1*.

The social Left has no similar hole in the center of its movement. In 2016 just three large socially liberal organizations-- Emily's List, Planned Parenthood and Human Rights Campaign--outspent the entire PAC and super PAC spending by social conservatives *by 7 to 1*.

Our case for politics is based on three simple, but deeply contrarian, ideas:

1. Politics is not downstream of culture; it is part of culture.
2. Christian conservatives invest far too little in direct politics and that little in relatively ineffective strategies.
3. Christian conservatives must go on offense, politically. Persuading even 3 percent of soft Democrats to turn against the Left in close purple-state elections will have far greater impact, politically and culturally, than any base strategy.

As religious liberty threats intensify, it is time to *do something new*.

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The Case for Politics



Why Social Conservatives Must Invest Seriously in Politics

There's a hole in the center of social conservatism as a movement: With the partial exception of the pro-life movement, Christian conservatives have few organizations that invest directly in electoral politics.

How big is the hole?

In this report, we looked carefully at social-conservative and pro-life organizations that have a major public-policy focus (so as to exclude the vast world of Christian philanthropy). We sifted the data on the amount of money these organizations spent on political versus nonpolitical (or quasi-political) strategies to change law or public policy between 2008 and 2014, a span of seven years and four election cycles. We also looked at the incomplete data currently available on the last election cycle, 2015 and 2016, to see if any new trends were emerging. (We will add completed data for this election cycle to our website CaseForPolitics.com, as IRS 990s are completed and made public.)

We defined political spending as PAC, super PAC, and 501(c)(4) independent or other political

expenditures (see the Appendix for details about our methodology and data).

The data show that over seven years, between 2008 and 2014, social conservatives invested just under \$74 million in direct political investments, compared with over \$2.6 billion in nonpolitical strategies to change public policy, *a ratio of 35 to 1*.

The relative lack of investment in political versus nonpolitical strategies in the pro-life community is also large, but not as large. Between 2008 and 2014, pro-life groups invested almost \$440 million in nonpolitical strategies to protect life, compared with just over \$40 million in political strategies, a ratio of about 11 to 1.

The social Left has no similar hole in the center of its movement. Human Rights Campaign, for example, just pledged to **spend \$26 million** in the 2018 campaign.¹ Emily's List, one of the largest pro-abortion PACs, will not say how much they plan to spend in 2018 but, when asked, pointed out that **they spent \$36 million** in 2016.² In other words, these two single orga-

Elect or Educate?

For each dollar social conservative groups spend



↑ 2.7¢
Elections

↑ 97.3¢
Research, education
and legal defense

Source: 2008-2014 Form 990s and FEC election reports (spending is from all social conservative organizations, including pro-life groups and public interest law firms).

nizations spend politically in one year almost as much as all social-conservative organizations combined spent between 2008 and 2014. Comprehensive data for 2015 and 2016 are not yet available. But FEC filings for PAC and super PAC spending for the 2016 election cycle suggest a ballot blowout: Together, Emily's List, Planned Parenthood, and the Human Rights Campaign invested \$71 million, while all social-conservative groups devoted to life, marriage, or religious liberty spent just \$9.6 million. Just these "Big Three" socially liberal organizations outspent every single social-conservative organization by a ratio of 7 to 1.

The Pro-Life Edge

Non-Political vs. Political Spending

11:1



Pro-Life Groups

65:1



Other Social Conservatives

*Source: 2008-14 Form 990s and FEC election reports. Other social conservative groups include public interest law firms.

Most of these social-conservative nonprofit public-policy organizations that do not get directly involved in elections are run by fine people and serve important functions. They are good and worthy of support. But they cannot substitute for the hole in the center of our movement, as a political movement. If we want to understand social conservatives' relative lack of political power, given the relatively large group of voters we represent, this is the place to start.

It has been about forty years—two generations—since Jerry Falwell declared a Moral Majority and America elected its first "family values" President.

Ballot Blowout?

2016 Election Spending

\$71 million



EMILY'S List, Planned Parenthood & Human Rights Campaign

\$9.6 million



All social conservative groups

*Includes PAC spending only via 2016 FEC election reports.

Over that time, social conservatism has spawned pundits and public-policy organizations, pastor organizers and public spokesmen, voter-registration drives and referendum campaigns. Politicians have paid lip service to our ideals. Yet just as the need for new legal protections from the Left's hatred of traditional believers becomes clearer, social conservatism as a political force is losing ground.

Even in red states dominated by Republicans, religious-liberty protections aren't passed. The Left's aggression goes unchecked.

Why is our political influence declining as our need for political protection is increasing? Many voices argue that the reason is simple: “Politics is downstream of culture.” That framing suggests that the solution to our lack of political influence is to redouble our cultural efforts and to disengage from the politics that has failed us. Rod Dreher’s *Benedict Option* was interpreted by many (sometimes to its author’s frustration) as a call to invest less in politics and more in Christian community.

We agree with Rod Dreher and the *Benedict Option* advocates on three big things: First, the threats to traditional faith communities in America are grave and multiplying. Second, Christians families, churches, and schools must develop better ways to transmit our faith to the next generation. And third, politics as usual has failed us.

Where we disagree strongly is on what these three things tell Christian conservatives about what we should do next in the realm of politics.

Yes, the politics as usual of social conservatives has failed us. Politics as usual has failed Christian conservatives because we are not really doing much of anything in politics, and the little we happen to do, we’re not doing very well. After forty years of going on television and talking as if we are in politics, social conservatives have failed to invest in effective direct political institutions and strategies. Instead we fund primarily indirect and quasi-political strategies that fail to achieve the ends we desire.

The answer is not to retreat but to recognize that we need to redouble our political investments in new and better political strategies.

This is the hole in the center of our movement that we must fill: substantial new resources invested in directly political institutions that use effective political strategies.

Our *Case for Politics* argues three controversial and contrarian things:

1. **Politics is not downstream of culture; it is part of culture.** Cultural strategies alone without politics will fail for two reasons: (1) because our religious and cultural institutions need new legislative religious-liberty protections and (2) when conservative Christian ideas and values drop outside of politics, they become far less culturally visible; the anti-religious Left dominates most other communication channels.
2. **Christian conservatives invest far too little in direct politics and that little in relatively ineffective strategies.** Why is our influence declining? A prime reason is that we invest far more in nonpolitical and quasi-political strategies than in direct electoral politics. There is a hole in the center of our movement. Christian conservatives also urgently need new, more effective political strategies in which to invest.
3. **Christian conservatives must go on offense politically.** The best defense of our religious liberty is a good offense. We must quit relying almost entirely on a “rouse the base” defensive political strategy with its tiresome threats that our people will stay home. Instead, we need to invest resources in using the Left’s religious-liberty threats and transgender extremism directly in elections to flip soft Democrats and independents. Persuading even 3 percent of soft Democrats to turn against the Left in close purple-state elections will have a far greater impact, politically and culturally, than any base-oriented strategy.

Communication, voter registration, and other quasi-political strategies are necessary and help-

ful adjuncts in a political fight for our religious liberty. But without filling in the hole around which these tactics circle, we will fail.

By contrast, when Republicans become convinced that our issues help them win elections, they will not betray us. When Democrats become convinced that their legislative stances cause them to lose elections, they will moderate their

rhetoric at least. This combination will substantially change not only the political but also the cultural context in which traditional believers seek to protect and promote our people, our institutions, our values, and the common good.

As religious-liberty threats intensify, it is time to acknowledge an important source of our declining political influence and *do something new*.

» The Gathering Storm and the GOP Failure to Respond

The Left is on a warlike mission to redefine Christian teaching on sex and marriage as the moral and legal equivalent of racism.

Mainstream conservative Christian groups such as the Family Research Council and the Alliance Defending Freedom are dubbed “hate groups” by the once bipartisan and still powerful Southern Poverty Law Center.³ Florists, photographers, bakers, and wedding-venue hosts are told by the government: Serve gay weddings or go out of the wedding business. The Ohio Supreme Court warned state judges in a nonbinding opin-

ion that state judges would violate judicial ethics if they refused to perform gay weddings.⁴ The Wyoming Supreme Court censured a judge for violating judicial ethics for the same new thought crime. Another judge in Washington was formally reprimanded for violating judicial ethics when, in response to a question, he privately told his clerks in chambers that he would not perform same-sex weddings.⁵ Catholic schools in Georgia⁶ and Massachusetts⁷ have been punished by courts for firing school employees who enter gay marriages. In 2012, the Equal Employment



Jack Phillips (left) owner of Masterpiece Cakeshop was sued after refusing to make a cake for a gay wedding. He has a pending case at the Supreme Court in *Masterpiece Cakeshop v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission*. Barronelle Stutzman (right) owner of Arlene's Flowers was sued by a couple for refusing to supply flowers for a gay wedding.

Opportunity Commission ruled that federal laws banning gender discrimination should be interpreted to include banning gender-identity and sexual-orientation discrimination.⁸ In 2016, an Obama administration guidance letter threatened every public school in America with the loss of federal funding if it did not open its gym showers, bathrooms, and sports teams to biological males who identify as female.⁹

The Obama administration even turned meat inspectors into the new gay-morality police force, threatening to withhold regulatory approval of a Michigan meat-packing business if a single article explaining the Biblical reasons for marriage was not removed from a breakroom table.¹⁰ The latter case reveals our vulnerability to the regulatory state: In the absence of new legal protections, the next time the Democrats hold the White House, they will continue to exert behind-the-scenes legal pressures on traditional believers.

As the storm visibly gathers, Republicans are AWOL on responding with critically needed new legal protections.

Congress has no plans even to vote on the First Amendment Defense Act or on any piece of conscience legislation protecting gay-marriage opponents. Even red-state legislatures controlled by Republicans, with Republican governors, are failing to act to protect our schools, charities, and businesses from the Left's campaign to use

Even in red states dominated by Republicans, religious-liberty protections aren't passed. The Left's aggression goes unchecked.

both law and culture to redefine classic Christian views on sex and marriage as bigotry. The Chamber of Commerce respects religious conservatives' power so little that it has emerged as the primary spokesman in red states opposing new conscience protections for traditional believers.¹¹ "The Georgia Chamber Draws a Line in the Sand on Religious Liberty Bills," proclaims the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* headline: "Practices that open the door to discrimination or create the perception that Georgia supports a discriminatory business environment would threaten our competitiveness," Chamber spokeswoman Joselyn Baker said.¹² Texas just disappointed social conservatives by failing to pass any of their protective legislation on conscience issues in the special session.

» A Brief History of the Republican Retreat: Four Recent Turning Points

2014: Arizona Religious Liberty Bill

In 2014, the GOP-controlled legislature passed a relatively minor amendment clarifying the state's existing Religious Freedom Restoration Act. The Left decided to make this a test case of their

power to force a GOP retreat on religious liberty. While GOP Gov. Jan Brewer pondered whether she would sign the bill, the Left launched a shock-and-awe media firestorm alleging that a parade of horrors would ensue for gay people if the bill

became law. Tellingly, within forty-eight hours, the Left had persuaded two major GOP figures, 2008 GOP Presidential nominee Sen. John McCain and 2012 GOP Presidential nominee Mitt Romney, to urge Brewer to veto the law, validating the Left's framing of the law as divisive and anti-gay.¹³ When Gov. Brewer vetoed the bill, both McCain and Romney tweeted their approval.¹⁴

The bill itself was not that significant. But in political terms, February 2014 marked a political watershed: Liberals demonstrated their capacity to use their soft power in media framing to persuade conservative Republicans in deep-red states to retreat on a core concern of social conservatives.

2015: Indiana Religious Freedom Restoration Act

In 2015 deep-red Indiana became the twentieth state to pass a Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA). It was a generic religious-liberty bill; whether it would provide any additional legal protection to Christian schools, ministries, or wedding businesses was deeply uncertain and depended on how the courts interpreted the act. The GOP-controlled legislature thought such a standard state RFRA would satisfy social conservatives' concerns with relatively little risk of blow-back, since these laws exist in many other states and have not produced horrible consequences for LGBT people. But the Left once again swung into action to redefine religious liberty as a "license to discriminate." The mainstream media once again defined the legislation as "anti-gay"; Hollywood celebrities piled on, and so did major corporations: NASCAR, Levi, the Gap, Subaru, Marriott, and Walmart all spoke out against religious-liberty bills.¹⁵ Watching Indiana unfold, Arkansas's Gov. Asa Hutchinson said he would refuse to sign a similar bill, "leaving [Indiana Gov.

Mike] Pence alone on discrimination island," as *Bustle* gloatingly put it.

Within a few days Gov. Mike Pence folded, taking the law back to the legislature and amending it to guarantee that equality concerns would trump religious liberty. Sikhs in prison needing accommodations would win new protections. Christian wedding businesses were out of luck.¹⁶

2016: North Carolina HB2 Debacle

For years, passing an Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA) that bans discrimination based on orientation and gender identity was a top political goal of the Left. Recognizing that they were unlikely to achieve this aim democratically,¹⁷ in 2014 and 2015, the Obama administration laid the groundwork for the legal end run around democracy. Via executive orders and guidance letters from the Justice Department and the Department of Education, the Obama administration redefined gender discrimination in law to include sexual-orientation and gender-identity discrimination.¹⁸ In 2015, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (filled with Obama appointees) ruled that sexual-orientation discrimination was gender discrimination.¹⁹

As the executive order and guidance letters percolated through the legal system, the consequences were dramatic: Public schools were told by the federal government they would lose federal funding if they did not open their girls' showers, bathrooms, and sports teams to biological males who identify as female (not even a doctor's note was required). Although local parents were outraged in many cases, they blamed the local school board, not the federal government or the Obama administration for exerting the legal pressure.²⁰ Cases where school boards resisted are now threading through state and federal courts.²¹ In 2016, the federal government

The Left understands that they merely have to show that they can cut down any social-conservative leader who stands up for us.

informed federally subsidized battered women's shelters and other homeless shelters that they too must let biological males into women's spaces.²² In March 2017, *Inside Higher Ed* ran a story asserting that Liberty University and Bob Jones University were likely violating Title IX's gender-discrimination provisions because their Code of Conduct limits sexual relations to marriage of a man and a woman.²³

Very few Republican politicians pushed back against this radical executive edict. One who did was North Carolina's Gov. Pat McCrory. He signed and defended legislation passed by the Republican-controlled legislature that ensured that public shower facilities in schools, public pools, and public bathrooms would remain gender-segregated based on biology, not on identity.

With great political savvy, the Left recognized that Pat McCrory's reelection would be viewed by Republican political elites as a referendum on whether passing such legislation helps or hurts the GOP politically. Many economic conservatives came to Gov. McCrory's aid with substantial resources. But very little, if any, publicly identifiable social-conservative resources flowed. Polls showed that North Carolinians supported what HB2 actually did.²⁴ But the facts were lost under the flood of public condemnation orchestrated by the Left in the mainstream media, culminating



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in the NCAA's banning North Carolina from hosting its championship tournament.

In November 2016, Gov. McCrory lost his reelection by just 10,281 votes, and no Republican politician in the country doubts that his support for HB2 was the reason. HB2 was repealed. The great North Carolina Lt. Gov. Dan Forest makes the case that voting for HB2 is not what defeated Pat McCrory. He notes that eighty-seven of eighty-nine legislators who voted for HB2 were reelected.²⁵ But the Left understands that not all elections are equal. They do not have to defeat everybody who voted for HB2. They merely have to show that they can cut down any social-conservative leader who stands up for us. Republican elected officials don't want to be in former Gov. Pat McCrory's shoes. Democrats see no problem in being in newly elected Gov. Roy Cooper's shoes.



Transgender Democrat Danica Roem won a seat in the Virginia House of Delegates after outspending incumbent Bob Marshall \$600,000 to \$150,000.

As one CEO told Lt. Gov. Dan Forest, “We just don’t want the Human Rights Campaign coming against us.”²⁶ Ditto Republican politicians.

This outcome was not inevitable. In 2016, the Campaign for American Principles (American Principles Project’s PAC) spent \$75,000 to test whether soft Democrats in North Carolina could be persuaded to vote for Pat McCrory on the transgender issue. The test results suggested a spectacular missed opportunity for Christian conservatives.

Big data now allows us to identify and narrow-cast directly to persuadable voters. APP’s PAC identified more than 483,000 persuadable soft Democrat voters. Under test conditions, these voters moved twenty-eight percentage points toward McCrory when exposed to the extremeness of Gov. Cooper’s transgender position.

It would have taken about \$2 million to message these voters directly and thoroughly (or even just \$1 million to reach them adequately). If our test results held, social conservatives could have flipped 135,240 North Carolina soft Democrat votes, and McCrory would have won

Social conservatives may not really invest in direct politics, but the gay rights community does.

a resounding victory. Even if social-conservative donors were able to flip just 10 percent of these persuadable Democrats, McCrory still would have managed to win.

The return on investment in terms of policy and culture would have been immense. Both Republicans and Democrats would today have a very different set of political incentives. Policy changes would be easier to achieve. Democrats would start being wary of the Left’s social issues. More Republicans would be willing to speak up. The public conversation would be less one-sided.

Instead, the lesson of Pat McCrory’s 2016 loss is this: Stay away from anything the Left defines as anti-gay. It’s a loser. That’s the dynamic we must change to stem the decline or collapse of our political influence and the emerging open season on Christian orthodoxy among cultural elites.

2017: Twenty-Four Republicans joined with Democrats to vote down a ban on funding transgender surgeries in the military

Family Research Council (FRC) championed a bill that would prevent taxpayer dollars from funding transgender surgery in the military. Pay attention first to what this bill did not do: It did not reverse the Obama administration’s promise to recruit, train, and retain transgender soldiers. It did not provide any protections to Christian schools, businesses, or charities. With due respect for

our limited influence, FRC cut back its goals to something it saw as simple and achievable. The House leadership permitted a vote perhaps because they recognized what would happen next: Twenty-four Republicans joined with every single Democrat to vote down the ban.²⁷ What will happen now? Will any of the Democrats who voted against the ban lose their seat or face a sharp new challenge? Will any of the Republicans who voted with the Democrats face political trouble? The vote is a clear indication that, in the bipartisan judgment of the political class, the answer is no. Given the history of social-conservative political involvement, this is a reasonable judgment of current political reality.

Having discovered that their tactics work, and seeing no effective pushback from Christian conservatives, the Left continues to take these tactics and push them downstream into state legislatures. Among their 2017 prime targets: Manassas-based Virginia Delegate Bob Marshall, who led the fight for the marriage amendment in that state. He faced Danica Roem, a transgender Democrat. The *Washington Post* reported on June 14, 2017:

Aisha C. Moodie-Mills, president of the [LGBT] Victory Fund political action committee, said her organization plans to coordinate a massive fundraising effort on Roem's behalf in

hopes of opening the door for other lesbian gay, bisexual and transgender candidates across the country. ...“And this is an opportunity for us in the LGBTQ community to push back and say, ‘No, we’re going to stand up against bad actors; we’re going to make sure that we get rid of people who do our community harm.’ And so Danica is really our first swing of the bat.”²⁸

By the end of June, the *Washington Post* was boasting that Roem had raised almost twenty times more than Marshall during the monthly reporting period,²⁹ and that Roem outraised Marshall *by a margin of 3 to 1*, “much of it coming from LGBT advocates and other supporters across the country.”³⁰ Months later, Bob Marshall lost his seat to Danica Roem after being outspent \$600,000 to \$150,000.

Social conservatives may not really invest in direct politics, but the gay rights community certainly does. If we fail to develop an effective pushback strategy, the gay Left's takeover of the GOP on religious liberty and related issues will continue apace.

How should we respond? In the next section, we explain why retreating from politics to invest in nonpolitical strategies will fail—not only politically but culturally.

» Politics Is a Part of Culture

Walk into any room full of Christian conservative donors, and some leader will say, “Politics is downstream of culture.” Every head in the room will nod. Nothing is more entrenched as conventional wisdom among Christian conservatives than this.

We respectfully but firmly disagree.

Yes, it is true that as people's beliefs and values about what true and good change, politics changes as well. But defining politics and culture as opposites misleads us.

Politics is part of culture because it is one key way for the American people to decide what

is true, good, and important; it is also the main way for Americans to decide which conservative views are “within the pale” and which are “outside the mainstream.” The Left dominates most of the other mountains of culture: the mainstream media, the academy, the arts, Hollywood, and Madison Avenue. When a conservative idea or an issue falls outside of politics, therefore, the Left can far more easily stigmatize it as outside the mainstream, extremist, and intolerable.

Politics is full of cultural content: When a politician articulates our proposals and wins, people learn that what they believe is shared by many others. Politics tells Americans what views their fellow citizens hold and care about. It tells traditional believers that they are not alone, isolated, or fringe.

Some examples:

- » When Ronald Reagan swept the White House, the *New York Times* could no longer define conservatives as “outside the mainstream.”
- » Harvard Law School recently appointed an Antonin Scalia chair. Why? Because Harvard has been persuaded that the Federalist Society’s ideas about the Constitution are good? Probably not. Harvard Law School is publicly affirming Federalist Society ideas as part of the legal mainstream only because, thanks to politics, Federalist Society elites often decide who gets on the Supreme Court.
- » Why did Bill Clinton in the 1990s decide to adopt the maxim of “maximum reasonable accommodation”? Why did he sign the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, making religious liberty for at least a decade a bipartisan cultural norm? Bill Clinton did so because he was tired of watching Democrats lose elections.

» The Cultural Consequences of GOP Silence and Truce

Conversely, when the Left can use its media power and political investments to persuade the Republicans to be silent on an issue, one predictable cultural consequence is that public-opinion polls will shift in the Left’s favor. It is virtually an ironclad rule of politics and culture that when only one side is willing to speak enthusiastically, people will begin to believe there really is only one side to the issue. If there is only one team visible on the field, that team will win not only its policy goals, but the hearts and minds of the mushy middle.

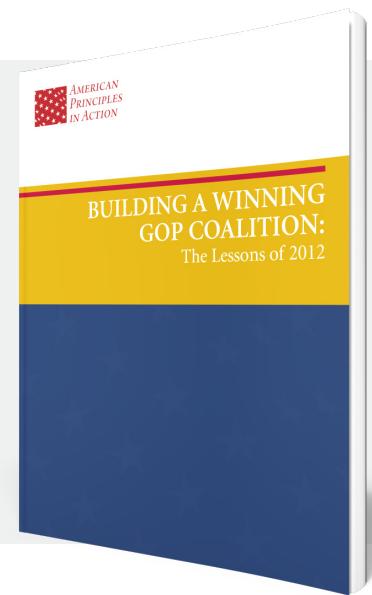
This is one reason why “truce strategies” are so damaging to our cause, as we demonstrated in *Building a Winning GOP Coalition: Lessons*

from 2012: “The strategy of retreat, rather than counterpunch, abjectly fails because it leaves the GOP’s political enemies free to define the meaning of the GOP’s position in voters’ minds.”³¹

As scholars Edward G. Carmines and James A. Stimson have pointed out, issues that change partisan alignment—that is, reorient the electorate’s views, have three characteristics:³²

1. **“The issue must be deeply felt.”** Intensity counts. We do not need a majority to feel intensely. An intensely passionate minority can move mountains in elections. Indeed, the reliance on activating a moral majority is one of the weak points in Christian conservatives’ political model,

As we demonstrated in *Building a Winning GOP Coalition: Lessons from 2012*: “The strategy of retreat, rather than counterpunch, abjectly fails because it leaves the GOP’s political enemies free to define the meaning of the GOP’s position in voters’ minds.”



one that is now leading to unwarranted despair as polls shift. Consider the polling on a ban on “assault-style weapons”: 80 percent of Democrat/lean Democrat voters favor such a ban, and so do 54 percent of Republican/lean Republican voters. The NRA is influential, regardless of what the polls say, because they have a minority of voters who feel strongly—and are also politically organized.

One of the core defects of the Christian conservative movement is that we have relied without much thought on a sort of “mass uprising model”: a hidden moral majority that feels so strongly about an issue that, even absent organization, being on our side wins elections. The variant in later years, as that moral majority failed to show up at the polls, is to threaten that if the GOP doesn’t act, our people will stay home (the mass-defection model). Neither of these strategies is really a plan—certainly not a plan for our times, as the broader culture disintegrates on sexual morals and as the LGBT community tightens its hold on cultural commu-

nication channels and intensifies political and cultural aggression against traditional believers.

2. **“Parties must take up visibly different positions on the issue.”** These scholars point out that the visibility of different positions is highest when both parties take high-profile opposing public stands. But cultural consequences may also ensue when “one of the parties chooses to ignore the issue while the other party takes a strong stand,” as we saw in the 2012 election cycle. Either way, “the degree of objective party differentiation on major issues” is “very critical in the shaping of public opinion.” A truce strategy has not only profound political consequences but cultural consequences as well. To move the electorate and keep our values in the mainstream, we need high-profile commitments to protect religious believers from the ongoing efforts to brand us as haters and bigots.
3. **“The issue must be long on the political agenda.”** To retain the cultural impact of political involvement, Christian conserva-

The Left recognized that they need only to demonstrate that they can defeat one of our leaders to send other Republicans scurrying for political cover.

tives must understand how to keep an issue on the political agenda over time. The pro-life community learned to move from the Human Life Amendment to smaller legislative issues (such as late-term abortions and taxpayer funding), which has kept the life issue in politics over many years. This is one of the under-appreciated reasons the pro-life movement is in much better shape than the religious-liberty movement.

The cultural consequences of this ongoing political engagement for the pro-life community have been profound. Political scientists in the 1970s predicted that public opposition to abortion would collapse as older generations died off. Abortion polling looked about as dismal in the early 1970s as gay marriage polling does now, particularly the huge generation gap in support for liberal abortion policies. In 1972, 66 percent of those under age thirty felt that there should be no restriction on abortion at all.³³ Instead pro-lifers have continued to win a large share of succeeding generations, in part by keeping the issue alive and in politics.

Today, just a few short years after Mitch Daniels tried to persuade the GOP to adopt a truce strategy on abortion and other social issues, even the Democrats are acknowledging that their abortion extremism is costing them votes. Both Bernie Sanders and DNC Chair Tom Perez publicly supported a self-described pro-life Democrat named Heath Mello for mayor of Omaha. Perez acknowledged that abortion extremism was hurting the Democrats politically: "In order to execute a 50-state strategy, we need to understand what's going on in all 50 states, and attract candidates who are consistent with their messages but perhaps not on 100 percent of the issues." Blowback from pro-abortion groups caused Perez to walk back his support, and Mello promised to vote for only pro-choice legislation.³⁴ But a few months later, Rep. Ben Ray Lujan, chairman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, announced that abortion would not be a litmus test any longer. "There is not a litmus test for Democratic candidates," he said, adding, "You need to make sure you have candidates that fit the district."

Moreover, if cultural messaging strategies alone are the reason the pro-life movement is thriving, why don't other English-speaking countries have a similar pro-life boom? They have access to the same messages, after all. Americans are nearly twice as likely as Canadians to say that abortion should not be permitted at all.³⁵ Americans are three times more likely than the British to say that abortion should be illegal in all or most cases.³⁶ In Great Britain, according to another poll, support for a ban on abortion fell between 2005 and 2013 from 12 percent to 7 percent. Religious people in Great Britain were about as likely to support legal abortion as other citizens.³⁷

As the GOP Retreated on Marriage, Polls Collapsed

By contrast, we watched the cultural consequences of Republican political disengagement play out in polling on the gay-marriage issue.

The gay Left invested heavily in innovative direct political strategies that, combined with its media influence, helped them defeat major social-conservative leaders who spoke out against gay marriage, most prominently Sen. Rick Santorum.³⁸

The case of Colorado Congresswoman Marilyn Musgrave (the lead sponsor of the Federal Marriage Amendment in the House) is particularly illustrative of how the Left shut down Republicans on an issue that a majority of Americans then supported. The gay Left's campaign against Musgrave began in 2006, when Tim Gill and his donors poured \$2 million into negative ads against her. These ads never mentioned gay marriage. Instead, they criticized Rep. Musgrave for voting against a pay raise for Iraq War veterans.³⁹ She hung on with 51 percent of the vote in 2006, but with the template for action laid down, the gay mega-donors returned in 2008 with a similar strategy. The reason they opposed her was her opposition to gay marriage, but that was invisible to the voting

public, who saw only ads driving up her negatives on every conceivable issue. "Musgrave took over \$183,000 from Big Oil and gave them billions in tax breaks," one ad said.⁴⁰ The *Washington Free Beacon* reported on another:

"A citizen watchdog group named Musgrave one of the most corrupt members of congress," a voiceover concludes, citing a report from Citizens for Responsibility & Ethics in Washington, a liberal research organization that received millions from Democracy Alliance members, including nearly \$1.2 million from [Pat] Stryker's Bohemian Foundation between 2005 and 2011.⁴¹

According to Musgrave, "They even started fake pro-life organizations to claim I'm not pro-life enough."⁴²

Pro-family Christian conservative organizations, by contrast, continued to do politics as usual, investing most of our resources in pastor organizing, voter guides, voter-registration efforts, referendum efforts, policy papers, and earned media appearances. This is not because these organizations are bad or wrong: It is be-



The gay Left's campaign against Musgrave began in 2006, when Colorado millionaire Tim Gill and his donors poured \$2 million into negative ads against her. These ads never mentioned gay marriage, but drove up her negatives on every other conceivable issue.

They Won't Know What Hit Them

The software mogul Tim Gill has a mission: Stop the Rick Santorums of tomorrow before they get started. How a network of gay political donors is stealthily fighting sexual discrimination and reshaping American politics

JOSHUA GREEN | MARCH 2007 ISSUE | POLITICS

The Atlantic online details how Tim Gill and other gay political donors target social conservatives. Gill pledged to spend his entire \$500 million fortune to “punish the wicked” — wicked being those who hold Christian beliefs on marriage.

cause electoral politics is not really what most of them are designed and organized to do. This is the hole.

Republicans elites concluded that visibly opposing gay marriage would hurt them, in part because social conservatives did not appear to have political resources to invest in helping them win. We talk with many intelligent evangelicals who see candidate recruitment as the key to electing politicians who will not betray us. But electing faithful Christians such as Marilyn Musgrave is not going to be helpful if we do not have the political resources to defend and protect them.

Pat McCrory, the lone high-profile Republican who stood up in 2016 against the Obama transgender edict requiring public schools to let biological males in girls’ bathrooms, locker rooms, and sports teams, went down to defeat because of the same hole. The Left recognized that they do not have to defeat everyone who voted for HB2. They need only to demonstrate that they

can defeat one of our leaders to send other Republicans scurrying for political cover.

Republicans silenced themselves on marriage *not after they lost the support* of the American people *but before*. By the end of 2008, when social conservatives were celebrating the Proposition 8 victory in California, few major GOP politicians weighed in on the victory. Fox News barely covered the story, though the Prop 8 election returns received extensive coverage on CNN and MSNBC.

In 2009, Americans opposed gay marriage 54 percent to 37 percent, according to Pew Research. By 2011, when Mitch Daniels publicly announced the truce strategy (i.e., the

next President “would have to call a truce on the so-called social issues”),⁴³ Americans were still evenly divided on the issue.⁴⁴

By 2012 the Democrats and the Left were all-in for gay marriage and for the proposition that Christian conservatives were haters and bigots. The Republicans, by contrast, were all-in for the truce strategy on marriage.⁴⁵

Today, more than three-fifths of the American people support gay marriage, including 40 percent of Republicans.⁴⁶

So, the Left has now moved on to redefining religious liberty as a “license to discriminate,” using the same successful tactics. There remains a substantial reservoir of support for religious liberty. As recently as a July 2015 AP poll, a third of Democrats and 59 percent of independents said that religious liberty should trump gay rights where they conflict. But if we continue to respond by repeating our own failed tactics, religious liberty will lose.

Nonpolitical cultural strategies without a new, better, deeper, and more effective investment in direct politics will fail. At a minimum, even to exercise a Benedict Option,” we will need an effective political arm to win legislative protections for our schools, charities, and businesses.

Moreover, if social conservatives retreat from politics, we will permit our values to fade from public view, because the Left controls most other communication channels. The inevitable result is a more rapid decline in public support for the

reasonableness of Christian views and values. This, in turn, creates less tolerance toward the institutions that transmit these newly stigmatized views. The next generation will be less likely to hear our arguments and adopt them. People will be less aware that they are not alone in holding these beliefs.

There are many reasons politics as usual has failed social conservatives, and the biggest reason is that we have not yet invested in electoral politics.

» Social-Conservative Political Spending: Insufficient and Ineffective

Follow the money. The most important reason social-conservative political influence is declining is, apart from the pro-life movement, we are not really involved in politics.

Many people, including donors, would be surprised to hear this. What? What about (in the old days) the Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition? What about the millions of dollars raised by the National Organization for Marriage and other organizations to fight gay marriage by passing state referendums?

There are many good organizations that do good things. A political movement needs many good things: messaging shops, coalition builders, policy reports, candidate recruitment, attractive spokespeople, and voter-registration drives. But these good things exist to support, not replace, the central act of politics: the election. At the center of any political movement is the one big thing social conservatives lack: the capacity to act directly in elections to elect our friends and defeat our opponents.

The only organizational structures that can do direct politics are PACs, super PACs, and 501(c)

(4) non-profits, and 527s. The most influential political organizations tie this direct political activity to concrete legislation.

Public education, research, talking points, voter guides, and pastor organizing are radically insufficient. Referendum campaigns are insufficient because they let politicians fall silent and evade responsibility. Candidate recruitment, while important, will not lead to political influence, if our heroes (e.g. Pat McCrory, Rick Santorum, and Marilyn Musgrave) lose elections. Even voter-registration drives, while helpful, are insufficient. They may help elect Republicans but demonstrably not Republicans willing to vote for religious liberty.

Why Generic Christian-Values Organizations Are Insufficient

The organizations that are most successful at passing legislation tie their money and grassroots to specific legislation, not to broad, generic values.

Generic “values talk” is where politicians hide and our legislation dies. Our repeated resort to these insufficient models is one reason we are

so easy to betray. Specific legislation is also important culturally: it keeps our proposals in politics over the long haul, which means our values remain part of the mainstream discussion. If an elected official has to vote, he has to defend his vote in public; Americans actually hear someone defending our values as true and our policies as good. By contrast, when we organize around generic values untied to specific legislation, it is easy for politicians to mislead or confuse voters.

Christian conservatives must recognize political facts: **Using generic Christian values as our main organizing tool permits and encourages values talk with no concrete action.**

Why Voter-Registration Drives Are Insufficient

A number of prominent donors are investing in new efforts to register Christian voters. Such efforts can affect election outcomes. But it appears from experience that these models are insufficient to elect politicians who will protect religious liberty: Voter-registration drives that are generically Christian do not send a clear message to the political elites about what they must do to retain voters' support. They are helpful adjuncts to a political movement for conscience protection but not a substitute for direct political investments.

Why Referendum Efforts Cannot Replace Direct Politics

As the difficulties of getting Republicans to act on family and religious-liberty issues became clearer, Christian conservative leaders and donors moved money into state referendum campaigns, especially on marriage.⁴⁷ Direct votes can pass laws, yes. But referendum campaigns cannot replace the power and influence that come from sustained direct political involvement.

Why not? Referendum campaigns bring public attention to an issue. That's culturally important for the reasons we've explained: When we win, the people understand that they are not alone, and this produces brief cultural effects.

But referendum campaigns suffer from two essential defects as a political strategy:

1. **They are one-shots.** The money spent doesn't build durable political institutions that can continue the fight over the long haul.
2. **They take our issues out of politics.** Referendum campaigns let politicians off the hook. The people are deciding directly, so politicians can sidestep an issue. As one party falls silent, while the other fights loudly, people get the message: There's only one side on this issue.

We are not arguing that referendums never do any good. We are saying that they cannot substitute for the hole in the center of our movement: directly political institutions that can affect who wins elections.

There were excellent reasons for social-conservative organizations to take a strong leadership role in referendum fights. This fight was in itself a good thing. What is not a good thing is that neither these organizations nor any *other* organizations took the lead in organizing politically to defeat our opponents and to protect our heroes at election time.

The 2012 election was a crucial turning point. Romney was nominally against gay marriage, although he spoke little on it and ran no ads on the issue. Obama and the Democrats were all-in for gay marriage. What happened? Did any national social-conservative organization go into Ohio or North Carolina and spend even \$2 million to demonstrate that the issue could deprive the Democrats of the White House? No. If Christian

The 2012 election was a crucial turning point. If Christian conservatives could have demonstrated some political muscle, President Obama may have lost his second term.

conservatives could have demonstrated some political muscle, Pres. Obama may have lost his second term. Republicans would be less likely to retreat. But unlike referendum campaigns, even if the effort had failed, we would have emerged from the campaign with political infrastructure for the next battle on religious liberty.

The question is no longer whether our values will prevail over the social Left: It is whether Christian schools, charities, and businesses will survive in America. Christians know that the Church will survive until the end of time, because God promised us that. But He did not promise that it



In 2012, Gov. Mitt Romney was nominally against gay marriage; Pres. Obama and the Democrats were all-in for gay marriage.

would survive, or thrive, in the United States of America. Using our God-given intellect and talents to confront the crisis of our times is our job. With God's grace, we will meet it.

» A New Political Strategy: Go on Offense

The best defense of our religious liberty is a good offense. We must quit relying almost entirely on a “rouse the base” defensive political strategy, with its tiresome threats that our people will stay home. Instead we need to invest resources in using the Left’s religious-liberty threats and transgender extremism directly in elections to turn soft Democrats and independents. Persuading even 3 percent of soft Democrats to turn against

the Left in close purple-state elections will have far greater impact, politically and culturally, than any base strategy.

We have already discussed the missed opportunity in North Carolina in 2016. We see the next opportunity in Pennsylvania in 2018.

The *Keystone Report* recently published a poll commissioned by the American Principles Project. When likely voters were asked whether they



Pennsylvania Governor Tom Wolf pictured with his Pennsylvania Physician General Rachel Levine — the first ever transgender Physician General.

“support individuals using the facility that corresponds with their sex at birth or the facility with which they individually identify,” 56 percent chose “birth sex” and just 31 percent “personal identification.” Only 7 percent of Pennsylvania voters support using puberty-blocking drugs in children with gender-identity issues. Some 59 percent opposed it. Seventy-one percent said they were less likely to vote for Gov. Tom Wolf once they learned about his transgender extremism.

That’s the good news. Here’s the great news: Once they hear of his transgender policies, *51 percent of Democrats say they are less likely to support Wolf.*⁴⁸

This is a huge political opportunity for social conservatives. Big-data techniques allow us to test which soft Democrats and independents are most likely to switch their votes when they learn of a candidate’s left-wing extremism on social issues. The same techniques then let us message directly to these persuadable soft Democrats at a reasonable cost.

Once they hear of Gov. Tom Wolf’s transgender policies, *51 percent of Democrats say they are less likely to support him.*

The Democratic Party pushes deeply unpopular policies—not because they’re popular but because they can count on Republicans to avoid the issue. They can count on social conservatives to keep on bringing a knife to the gunfight.

Here’s the bottom line: Don’t rely on “turn out the base” strategies. In any close-fought election, everyone is messaging to the base. It becomes challenging to demonstrate which of the messages moved voters. By contrast, a loss of support among soft Democrats is easier to document and much more visible to the political class.

Don’t just threaten that our base will stay home. Don’t just whisper to hardcore GOP conservatives. Hardcore Republican voters tend to turn out. They tend to be messaged on multiple issues by multiple groups. That makes the effectiveness of any one social issue hard to demonstrate. Democrats are not afraid of our base; they know they will lose it.

Instead, persuade even 3 percent of Democrats to vote Republican in a close election, the way Donald Trump did. Doing so would make social conservatives far more politically influential—and far more culturally influential as well.

Will social conservatives seize the initiative to build a more effective political strategy in Pennsylvania in 2018? Having failed to seize the North Carolina opportunity, social conservatives start from a political hole of declining influence. But it

doesn't have to stay this way. We dug this hole, and we can climb out.

We must begin somewhere to do something new. We must abandon our pessimism and take

our case to soft Democrats and independents. To defend ourselves and America, social conservatives need a political offense.

Conclusion

Social conservatives are politically weak because we have not invested in direct political institutions tied to concrete legislative goals. And we have adopted defensive “rouse the base” strategies instead of winning over soft Democrats in tight elections. If we continue to invest primarily in indirect politics, we can expect the same failing outcome. Nor can we afford to sit by and watch the Left redefine Christian teachings as hate. We can't stand idly by when our heroes go down to electoral defeat, our emboldened opponents become more intransigent and aggressive, and traditional believers are cast as bigots and haters.

It is past time we learned from experience what works in politics, and get to work.

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Appendix

Documenting the Hole: Methodology

To document the hole at the center of our movement, we first went to the Open Secrets website, run by the Center for Responsive Politics, and searched for groups with names or mission statements that include “family,” “life,” “religious liberty,” or “values.” We supplemented this list by looking to news coverage of groups involved in “pro-life,” “pro-family,” or “religious liberty” efforts and added the state organizations listed as allies of Focus on the Family. We also personally contacted major social-conservative leaders and activists to review the list and add any additional organizations they knew about.

We obtained data on nonpolitical spending from social-conservative organizations’ Internal Revenue Service 990 forms, generally available online from Guidestar. In a few cases, we followed up with phone calls to individual organizations to supply missing data.

We defined direct political investments either from FEC documents that organizations are legally required to file when they engage in attempting to influence elections, or (in the case of 501(c)(4) spending) spending that the organization itself classifies as “political” in filing 990s with the Internal Revenue Service.

We accessed data about PAC and super PAC spending from the FEC, and 501(c)(4) independent expenditures or other political spending from the 990s organization file at the IRS (see above).

The decision about which 501(c)(3)s to include is necessarily a judgment call. We are looking not at the vast world of Christian charities and ministries but solely at nonprofit organizations that attempt to influence politics or public policy from a social-conservative perspective.

We have no illusions that this captures every dollar that social conservatives spend in direct politics. Money, especially pro-life money, is bundled in ways that are not legally required to be reported, but which make the money visible to candidates. Major donors who are social conservatives give money directly to candidates. They may even mention concern about some social-conservative issue or piece of legislation. But it is rarely their only concern in speaking to a candidate.

After investing considerable resources in this research, we are confident that the hole in social-conservative political investments is very large and probably growing.

For access to the full data, including the list of organizations included, visit CaseForPolitics.com.

About American Principles Project Foundation



We believe that when the Founding Fathers declared all men to be created equal, they meant that we are equal in our dignity as human beings. As such, we recognize that human flourishing requires public policy with human dignity at its heart.

Our goal is to transform this concept into the concrete. This means that our focus is on public policy solutions that affirm the family as the most basic unit of society. The family is the best vehicle for the rearing of new life and the respect and provision for elderly life. We recognize that in some areas, the government needs to stand back and let families care for each other and their communities. In other areas, the government should be implementing policies that help families do this better.

In light of this vision, APP Foundation seeks to advance:

- » An education system that is controlled by parents, teachers, and local communities. We emphasize local control over federal control, and rich, authentic curriculum over a one-size-fits-all approach.
- » The role of religion in public life, and promote the good that religious people do for society through family life, business, charity work, education, health care, and all other institutions that make up a free and generous civil society.
- » The role of the states in creating good public policy through education on the principles of practical American Federalism
- » Sound monetary policy which protects the dignity of workers. We approach economic reform from the point of view of families, rather than a bird's eye view that doesn't see how bad policy makes families suffer.

We are dedicated to promoting these principles in the public square through rigorous debate, scholarship, awareness, and education. We welcome collaboration with all who embrace these principles.

To find out more information about APP Foundation, including how to further support our work, please visit our website at APPFDC.org

Public policy
with
human dignity
at its heart



American Principles Project
FOUNDATION

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