

**Race, Religion, and Reproductive Rights:
Understanding the Conservative Anti-Abortion Movement in America**

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RACE, RELIGION, AND REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS: UNDERSTANDING THE CONSERVATIVE ANTI-ABORTION MOVEMENT IN AMERICA

Following the recent re-election of controversial figure Donald Trump, the divide between political ideologies in the United States has become increasingly prevalent. His recent win has reinforced the conservative policies he highlighted during his campaign, giving the country a clearer glimpse of the ideas he aims to uphold in his second term. To formalize said conservative opinions, *Mandate for Leadership the Conservative Promise*, published in April 2023, helps solidify right-wing ideas. (I would like to note that I'll be equating "conservative ideals" with "right-wing ideas" for the sake of terminology.) *Mandate for Leadership* was supported and published by a think tank, the Heritage Foundation, to promote the Presidential Transition Project (Project 2025), a group intent on reshaping the government in its entirety with conservative and right-wing policies. Although it covers many aspects of the government, a term remains prevalent throughout this 900-page book: abortion. This term was repeated sixty times, showing itself as one of the driving forces right-wing conservatives vigorously and passionately fight against.

Such strong opinions about a medical procedure concerning women's reproductive rights beg the one central question: What do conservatives gain from prioritizing abortion, even in contexts where it seems unrelated? The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) and the consider abortion to be part of the spectrum of reproductive health care (ACOG 2023). ACOG acknowledges that some people might have complex feelings regarding abortion care; however, medical professionals from ACOG and AMA still recognize it as a right and a personal choice concerning an individual's health and life (ACOG 2023). The debate is mainly

about framing: the left wing focuses on the rights of the mother, meanwhile the right wing emphasizes the rights of the unborn. This framing depends on whether the fetus is considered human and, if so, at what stage. For example, conservatives don't simply call abortion controversial—they call it murder.

Although multiple factors could lead someone to be against abortion—religion, moral dilemmas, fetal personhood beliefs, etc.—according to a 2022 World Values Survey, “due to religiosity, America is far more socially conservative towards abortion than similar nations” (Norris 2022:5). The history of increasing anti-abortion stances is vital to understanding how such an opinion could belong so heavily to one political party and not be seen as a universal human right. In this paper, I will argue that *Project 2025* represents the culmination of a long-term strategy developed by the religious, right-wing party of the 1970s to promote the discourse of abortion. More specifically, *Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise* represents the most sustained effort, to date, to translate that agenda into legal and policy recommendations that will transform the country into an explicitly Christian nation-state.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The modern anti-abortion movement in the United States is deeply intertwined with religious and political history, particularly following the *Roe v. Wade* (1973) decision that legalized abortion. Initially, many religious leaders, including evangelicals, were either indifferent or supportive of abortion rights. For example, W. A. Criswell, a former president of the Southern Baptist Convention, expressed approval of the ruling, believing personhood began at birth rather than conception (Criswell 1973). In the years following that decision, however, conservative figures like Paul Weyrich and Jerry Falwell saw abortion as an opportunity to unite

evangelicals under a political cause. They formed the Moral Majority, a religious-political movement that framed abortion as an attack on traditional Christian values and a symbol of moral decline (Balmer 2021:51). By the 1980 presidential election, opposition to abortion had become a defining issue for religious conservatives, contributing to Ronald Reagan's landslide victory. Reagan's win marked the beginning of a lasting alliance between religious groups and the right-wing Republican Party, with abortion serving as a central rallying point.

Despite being framed as a moral and religious issue, the anti-abortion movement was also shaped by racial politics. Before focusing on abortion, white evangelicals rallied against desegregation in Christian schools. In 1971, after the IRS revoked tax-exempt status for racially segregated schools, leaders like Weyrich and Falwell initially fought against what they saw as government overreach (Balmer 2014:7). However, as segregation became politically unacceptable, they shifted toward abortion, recasting their struggle as a fight for religious freedom rather than racial exclusion. Influential figures like Francis A. Schaeffer further cemented this shift by spreading fear of secular humanism, arguing that legalized abortion would lead to societal collapse (Balmer 2014:10). Schaeffer's graphic film series *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?* played a key role in instilling fear and urgency among evangelicals (Balmer 2014:51), solidifying abortion as the central battleground of the religious right, a term that describes the lasting alliance of the religious groups and the right-wing Republican party. Today, the legacy of this movement persists in conservative policies, like *Mandate for Leadership* the *Conservative Promise*, that seek to expand anti-abortion laws, restrict reproductive rights, and increase government oversight of pregnancy, demonstrating how the movement's political influence remains strong.

LITERATURE REVIEW

American Religious Right Movement

The connection between religion and politics has played a significant role in American history, with religious movements often driving political and social change. Scholars have explored the religious right, a political group that emerged in the late twentieth century and used revivalist traditions to influence national policy and public debate. David L. Chappell's *Religious Revivalism in the Civil Rights Movement* (2002) argues that "religious revivals, which have no explicit political and social messages, often had far-reaching political and social effects" (p. 581). With charismatic leaders, large gatherings, and moral messaging, the religious right could mobilize politically right-wing Christians. Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson harnessed religious enthusiasm to shape policy debates on abortion, LGBTQIA+ rights, and school prayer. Their research suggests that the religious right's political influence follows historical revivalist patterns, particularly in its focus on shared moral values (Chappell 2002:591). A key intellectual force in shaping the Religious Right's stance on abortion was theologian Francis A. Schaeffer, who framed the issue as part of a broader moral decline caused by secular humanism. Schaeffer (1978) argued that a society without Christian ethics would ultimately embrace infanticide and euthanasia, making opposition to abortion a religious imperative. Partnering with pediatric surgeon C. Everett Koop in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Schaeffer produced *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?*, a film series that presented abortion in stark, graphic visuals—most notably, a scene of plastic baby dolls scattered along the Dead Sea. The influence of this rhetoric was evident in the Moral Majority's efforts, as Falwell stated in a 1980 episode of *The MacNeil/Lehrer Report*. In the interview, he denounced the Supreme Court's ruling on abortion as having "resulted in seven to eight million murders of defenseless little babies" and

condemned it as a direct attack on pro-traditional and pro-American values (WNET 1980). This messaging reinforced the religious right's belief that fighting abortion was not only a political issue but that it was also essential to preserving Christian civilization. The movement's ability to blend religious concepts with conservative ideology has helped secure key elections (such as Ronald Reagan's victory in the 1980s) and has continued to shape debates on religious freedom, education, and social policies. Like past religious revivals, the influence of the religious right extends beyond theology, embedding itself deeply in American politics and society.

Abortion and the Role of Religion in the Anti-Abortion Movement

The intersection of religion and the anti-abortion movement in Louisiana has been a defining factor in shaping abortion policy and activism in the state. Caroline Hymel's "Louisiana's Abortion Wars: Periodizing the Anti-Abortion Movement's Assault on Women's Reproductive Rights, 1973–2016" explores how religious organizations played a crucial role in mobilizing opposition to abortion, mainly through the efforts of the religious right. The rise of evangelical and Catholic alliances in the late twentieth century coincided with the state's shift from taking a largely pro-choice stance in the 1970s to becoming one of the most restrictive states on abortion rights. Hymel (2018) notes that Louisiana's religious demographics—its combination of Catholicism, evangelicalism, and other Christian populations—created an ideal environment for anti-abortion activism (p. 69). The movement framed abortion as a moral and theological issue, emphasizing the fetus's "right to life" and viewing abortion as a consequence of secular humanism's erosion of Christian values.

Beyond legislative efforts, the anti-abortion movement in Louisiana has employed direct action tactics, many of which have been influenced by religious rhetoric. Hymel (2018) highlights how organizations such as Operation Rescue and Louisiana Right to Life staged

large-scale protests, often backed by local churches, to disrupt abortion clinics and pressure lawmakers (p.82–3). The movement's shift from protests to targeted legislative strategies in the 1990s and 2000s demonstrates its adaptability in response to legal setbacks; for example the document proposes eliminating the Department of Education to shift control over education policies to the state (Dan et al., 325). By framing abortion as both a religious and political issue, Louisiana's anti-abortion activists have successfully influenced policy at both the state and federal levels. As Hymel (2018) argues, Louisiana has become a representative for the national anti-abortion movement, with religious advocacy continuing to drive restrictions on reproductive rights nationwide (p. 104).

Mandate for Leadership the Conservative Process

The Heritage Foundation's *Mandate for Leadership the Conservative Process* outlines a conservative policy agenda that seeks to drastically eliminate abortion rights at the federal level. The initiative builds upon the momentum of the *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* (2022) ruling, which overturned *Roe v. Wade* (1973) and allowed states to impose severe abortion restrictions (Lavietes 2022). "*Mandate for Leadership The Conservative Promise* goes further by advocating for federal legislation that would establish fetal personhood, effectively banning abortion nationwide and criminalizing the procedure in all states. This move would override protections in states where abortion remains legal, worsening the existing disparities between access to reproductive healthcare and non-legal states (Dans and Groves 2023). Additionally, their plan promotes limits on federal funding for reproductive healthcare services, including Planned Parenthood, by equating certain forms of contraception—such as emergency contraception and IUDs—with abortion (Thoreson 2023:471). These policy proposals indicate a broader effort to eliminate reproductive freedoms under the guise of religious conservatism.

A key aspect of *Mandate for Leadership the Conservative Promise* is its attack on abortion-by-medication, particularly mifepristone—a widely used abortion pill that accounts for over half of all abortions in the United States. Despite the Supreme Court’s recent procedural ruling that preserved access to mifepristone, legal challenges remain a serious threat. *Mandate for Leadership the Conservative Promise* proposes reversing the FDA’s approval of the medication mifepristone and reinstating in-person dispensing requirements, which makes access significantly more difficult, particularly for those in rural or restrictive states (Dans and Groves 2023). Such policies align with a broader conservative strategy to restrict abortion through regulatory and judicial channels, even in the absence of a direct legislative ban. Furthermore, these restrictions disproportionately impact marginalized communities, particularly low-income individuals and people of color, who already face systemic barriers to healthcare access.

Beyond effects on policy, *Project 2025* has significant political implications, because abortion remains a decisive issue in American elections. While some conservative leaders have softened their stance on abortion in response to public backlash, *Mandate for Leadership the Conservative Promise* represents an uncompromising vision for restricting reproductive rights (Rubin 2024:259). The agenda’s long-term strategy suggests continued efforts to institutionalize anti-abortion policies by reshaping judiciary and federal agencies. If implemented, *Project 2025* could provoke renewed legal battles, ensuring that the fight over reproductive rights remains central to American politics.

METHODS

Content Analysis

As previously mentioned, *Mandate for Leadership the Conservative Promise* consists of a comprehensive pro-life stance, emphasizing the protection of life from conception to natural death. The document proposes several policy recommendations to restrict abortion access and promote alternatives like adoption.

Mandate for Leadership the Conservative Promise suggests that the Department of Health and Human Services should “explicitly reject the notion that abortion is health care” and restore its mission to include “furthering the health and well-being of all Americans ‘from conception to natural death,’” (Dans and Groves 2023:489). This reflects a commitment to changing policies so that they align with the pro-life stance.

Regarding the Department of Labor (DOL), the authors suggest that the U.S. Congress and DOL should clarify that the Employee Retirement Income Security Act of 1974 (ERISA) does not preempt a state’s power to restrict abortion-related benefits. *Mandate for Leadership the Conservative Promise* argues that ERISA should not override states’ abilities to protect unborn life, suggesting that federal policies should support state-level abortion restrictions (Dans and Groves 2023:585)

Even in international contexts, the book also has suggestions on how to tackle abortion. The text recommends that the U.S. use its influence to promote authentic human rights and respect for sovereignty in international obligations. This includes withholding funds from international organizations that promote abortion, population control, or other activities contrary to pro-life values (Dans and Groves 2023:191). With a range of policies that spans across various federal departments, it is clear that within *Project 2025* there is a strategy to implement pro-life policies with the ultimate goal of restricting abortion and promoting right-wing-based alternatives in both domestic and international arenas.

FINDINGS

This analysis of *Mandate for Leadership the Conservative Promise* reveals a strategic attempt by religious, right-wing policymakers to reshape lawmaking as part of a broader cultural and political transformation. By incorporating anti-abortion rhetoric within various government agencies, the document extends beyond pro-life opinions and into actual policy implementation. The explicit rejection of abortion as healthcare within the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) promotes a redefinition of reproductive rights that clearly prioritizes fetal personhood over female autonomy. Furthermore, the involvement of the Department of Labor suggests that the federal government should empower states to restrict abortion-related benefits, reinforcing state-level control over reproductive rights. These findings highlight how *Project 2025* seeks to institutionalize anti-abortion policies, solidifying its framework within the government.

In addition to the domestic policy changes, the document's approach to international reproductive rights emphasizes the global influence of the religious right agenda. The proposal to withhold federal funding from organizations that support abortion or reproductive health services further proves a broader strategy to export conservative to religious-right ideas to other foreign countries. This aligns with the historical patterns of American religious conservatism, where moral concepts are used as tools of political leverage. Such measures demonstrate that abortion is not a mere issue within *Project 2025* but an important concept to be tackled outside of U.S. borders as well.

Furthermore, the document reinforces the longstanding conservative narrative that abortion is a symptom of societal decline, a message that is embedded to create religious and

cultural anxieties. The rhetoric used throughout *Mandate for Leadership the Conservative Promise* mirrors past efforts by the religious right to frame abortion as part of a more significant moral crisis that threatens traditional family values. The explicit erasure of terms like “gender identity” and “reproductive health” from the general federal discourse demonstrates a deliberate effort to dismantle progressive policies that have expanded reproductive and gender rights. By characterizing abortion as a distraction from economic and security concerns, the religious right attempts to invalidate reproductive rights as a political issue, further marginalizing those who are affected by a lack of bodily rights.

Ultimately, the findings suggest that *Mandate for Leadership the Conservative Promise* is not simply a policy document but a comprehensive blueprint for incorporating anti-abortion ideology into the government. The emphasis on abortion as a central concern—despite its minimal political relevance to the country—reflects a deep-rooted strategy aimed at reinforcing traditional ideologies. This initiative represents the culmination of more than a decade of conservatism, seeking not only to overturn abortion rights but to reshape the political and cultural aspects of the country to align with a specific religious and ideological framework.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this paper contribute to a broader understanding of how the religious right has successfully embedded its agenda within the government. The anti-abortion movement, which initially lacked a strong religious foundation, evolved into a dominant political force by the late twentieth century. This shift demonstrates how moral and religious issues can be mobilized strategically to achieve political power. *Project 2025* is a good example of this transformation, revealing how abortion has become more than simply a policy debate: it is a

symbolic battleground for broader ideological conflicts. The movement's ability to pivot from defending segregated Christian schools in the 1970s to leading the fight against abortion and reproductive rights today speaks to its adaptability. This shift was not accidental but a calculated strategy to unify conservatives under a single, emotionally-charged issue. Understanding this route provides valuable insights into how social movements can evolve and manipulate widespread anxieties—whether about racial integration, secularism, or gender roles—to advance their agendas.

These findings also illustrate the institutionalization of conservative ideology within government structures. The explicit anti-abortion language in *Mandate for Leadership the Conservative Promise*, which seeks to influence multiple federal agencies—including the Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Labor, and even international policy—shows how anti-abortion rhetoric is actively embedded into the government itself. *Project 2025* suggests a shift toward a structural change of government, where federal institutions are reshaped to align with Christian nationalist ideals. This attempted move aligns with past conservative strategies, such as those detailed by David Chappell, in which religious-revivalist traditions were leveraged for political gain. However, what makes *Mandate for Leadership the Conservative Promise* different is its comprehensive and aggressive policy blueprint that not only seeks to ban abortion nationwide but also aims to eliminate gender-inclusive language, restrict reproductive healthcare funding, and impose religious-centered morality onto the public. This structured approach suggests a long-term vision in which reproductive rights are not simply silenced but rather fundamentally erased from the country.

The findings have significant effects in how we understand the intersection of religion, politics, and government in the country. The framing of abortion as a moral crisis reflects a long-standing strategy used by the religious right to create a sense of urgency and moral panic. This tactic has been highly effective, as demonstrated by Francis A. Schaeffer's film series and the Moral Majority's early activism, both of which persuaded the evangelical community through fear-based messaging about societal decay. Similarly, *Project 2025* positions abortion as a defining threat to American values, reinforcing the narrative that progressive policies on gender and reproductive rights are ruining the moral state of the nation. This type of messaging is crucial in maintaining conservative political mobilization, because it ensures that voters remain emotionally invested in the movement's goal. The continued emphasis on abortion, despite the radicals' pushback in multiple states, suggests that the religious right are not merely responding to what right-wing voters want but are actively working to reshape the political discourse in favor of the conservatives.

Finally, these findings are essential for understanding the future of American politics and how we are being governed. The legal and political strategies employed in *Mandate for Leadership the Conservative Promise* indicate that the fight over abortion is far from over. Even though the *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* (2022) ruling overturned *Roe v. Wade* (1973), conservative leaders are not stopping at state-level restrictions. Instead, they are seeking to nationalize abortion bans, redefine healthcare, and reframe government institutions to align with their agenda. This supports Caroline Hymel's analysis of Louisiana's anti-abortion movement, which demonstrated how religious-based activism could systematically affect reproductive rights over time. The same strategy used to achieve state-level restrictions is now expanding to a national scale, signaling a broader attempt to institutionalize conservative

Christian values as the legal foundation of the U.S. federal government. Given these trends, scholars, policymakers, and activists must recognize that abortion restrictions are not isolated policies but rather part of a much larger ideological project aimed at reshaping American society. Understanding this context is crucial in developing strategies to counteract these efforts and protect reproductive rights in the face of an increasingly organized conservative movement.

LIMITATIONS

While this paper argues that the religious right's focus on abortion is rooted in strategies to preserve racial and social hierarchies, there are limitations to directly linking historical motives with events that are happening. The shift from defending segregation to opposing abortion was not often explicitly confirmed, making it challenging to prove a straightforward narrative. Additionally, modern anti-abortion supporters may genuinely believe in the moral or religious arguments for their stance, disconnecting them from the movement's racialized origins. Acknowledging these complexities calls for deeper research into historical materials and key figures to fully grasp the evolution of the conservative anti-abortion agenda.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this paper reveal that *Mandate for Leadership the Conservative Promise* is the culmination of a long-term strategy by the religious right to add conservative Christian ideology into the U.S. government, using abortion as a primary political tool. Initially, the religious right mobilized around segregated Christian schools, but, when explicit support for segregation became politically unacceptable, it shifted its focus to abortion, unifying evangelicals by framing the issue as a moral and religious crisis. Over time, this strategy

successfully embedded anti-abortion rhetoric into right-wing politics, leading to policies aimed at restricting reproductive rights. *Project 2025* extends this agenda even further, targeting not only abortion but also gender identity, healthcare access, and international relations, with the ultimate goal of reshaping federal institutions to align with Christian nationalist ideals. By integrating anti-abortion stances into multiple government agencies, the initiative ensures that these policies become deeply ingrained in the U.S. government, making them difficult to reverse even with temporary changes in political power and policy.

Future research should explore the long-term implications of *Project 2025*'s proposed policies, particularly their effects on reproductive rights, gender politics, and the separation of church and state. Given *Project 2025*'s impact on conservative strategies, scholars should study how religion in politics and public activism shape future political conflicts. As abortion remains a central issue in American elections and judicial decisions, understanding its role within broader social and political movements is crucial for predicting and responding to future shifts in the U.S. government.

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