From the Pew to the Ballot Box: the mobilization of white Evangelicals in Alabama
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On a late summer Tuesday in 1980, when talk about the upcoming college football season dominated the sports pages and airwaves, Republicans in the sixth district of Alabama went to the polls for the U.S. congressional primary. Eight-time incumbent John Buchanan had defeated his opponent Albert Lee Smith two years earlier, and he expected to win again. But when the polls closed, Smith, an insurance salesman, had stolen the nomination.

The news hit the nation—and Alabama especially—like a shockwave. What force impelled the conservative voters of Alabama’s sixth district (which included Birmingham and surrounding counties) to dump their long-standing and well-respected incumbent? Attention centered on the fourteen month-old political action group Moral Majority, which counted Smith among its members.

This essay examines the appeal of Moral Majority to conservative Christians by looking at that 1980 campaign in Alabama. Dozens of political scientists and historians have examined the group’s leaders and the sociological makeup of its followers, but few scholars have sought to understand the New Christian Right of 1980 through its constituency. We can not simply assume that conservative Christians just parroted the party line. And scholars have obscured regional differences and local political battles by focusing on macro-level politics. By focusing my study at the grassroots level, I uncover the debates that took place “on the ground” among laypeople.

My examination of the political situation in Alabama uncovers some persistent themes. First, few white conservatives spent much time on any secular political issue. Virtually no letters in the Alabama Baptist or The Birmingham News addressed the current political battles in Washington with any degree of specificity. White churches and their periodicals were not the hotbeds of
political activity liberals suspected. For most Alabama evangelicals concerned about such issues, broad generalizations about “preachers in politics” sufficed to make their points.

But these men and women did get specific about political battles in the Southern Baptist Convention. The SBC claimed well over half of white Alabamians as members, and in 1980 the “fundamentalist takeover” over the convention had just begun. The new activist conservatives displayed considerable political acumen in mobilizing the fundamentalist vote.

Moral Majority did not overwhelm a bloc of apolitical yokels in 1980—it refocused a highly politicized group of white evangelicals on national concerns. While internecine battles would continue (and dominate the pages of Baptist periodicals for years to come), Moral Majority helped conservatives to see the importance of defeating liberals in Washington as well. Only with good, God-fearing politicians in charge could conservative Christians fix America. Moral Majority convinced conservatives to wage their battle on two fronts: at the convention and at the polls.

Conservative voters in Alabama charged their opponents with sullying the golden past of America. Moral Majority supporters spotlighted the founding fathers as exemplars of Godly government. They accused current politicians of kowtowing to liberal interests and forsaking their American heritage. Opponents of the group decried Moral Majority’s heavy-handed campaigns and its self-righteous statements. But their effort did not save Buchanan.

Moral Majority influenced the 1980 elections because the group’s leaders knew the concerns of its constituency—especially in the conservative south. The group convinced the bloc of white evangelicals who supported Smith that Democrats (and in this case, a moderate Republican) had failed them. But voters did not take this message lying down. Alabama evangelicals were anything but passive. They possessed an acute sensitivity to political issues. The New Christian Right brought new issues to the table and new voters to the polls, but it did so by tapping into a constituency that knew politics long before Smith swept Buchanan out of Congress.