The Christian Right: Engaged Citizens or Theocratic Crusaders?

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Abstract: This article offers a normative evaluation of the Christian Right’s impact on American democracy. It argues that our response to the question of whether this movement enhances or diminishes democracy turns on our understanding of the ideal of democracy. When viewed as a participatory ideal, the Christian Right’s mobilizing practices enhance democracy. When viewed as a deliberative ideal, the Christian Right’s practices diminish the deliberative virtues of toleration and free and open debate. These conflicting assessments point to an important democratic paradox. They show that the very same practices that inspire the participatory virtues of active political engagement also incite the deliberative vices of intolerance and polarization. To address this paradox, I argue that we ought to strive for a balance between pure participation and pure deliberation. The primary problem with Christian Right organizations like Focus on the Family, I will argue, is that they tend to disrupt this balance. They inspire active participation at the expense of deliberation.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last 30 years, the Christian Right\(^1\) has become one of the most powerful political and social movements in American politics. Groups like Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority, Pat Robertson’s Christian Coalition, and James Dobson’s Focus on the Family have brought the pro-family agenda to the forefront of political debate.

One of the most pressing debates in the scholarly literature on the Christian Right is to what extent this influence has enhanced and to what extent it has diminished democracy. Some critics argue that the Christian Right’s influence has been purely destructive (Diamond 1998;
Hardisty 1995, 1999; Hedges 2007; Herman 1997). They argue that Christian Right organizations have eroded the wall of separation between Church and state and legitimated subtle and even more overt forms of oppression against women and gays and lesbians. Christian Right activists, by contrast, claim that they have simply exercised their civic duty to participate actively in politics. As Glenn Stanton, Focus on the Family’s point man on same-sex marriage, told me, “Let’s analyze exactly what we are doing here. We are doing nothing other than participating in the public process. Maybe a little bit too vigorously. But I think if you read the Constitution, there’s no crime in participating vigorously in the political process” (Klemp 2005).

In recent years, a number of Christian Right scholars have sought to illuminate the democratic virtues of this movement (Conger & McGraw 2008; Shields 2009). In his The Democratic Virtues of the Christian Right, for instance, Jon Shields argues that Christian Right organizations ought to be applauded for their participatory virtues. He shows that groups like the Christian Coalition, Concerned Women for American, and Stand to Reason inspire members to engage passionately in politics. More controversially, he also provides evidence that the Christian Right displays a number of key deliberative virtues, such as civility and appeals to publicly accessible reasons. As he declares, “the vast majority of Christian Right leaders have long labored to inculcate deliberative norms in their rank-and-file activists” (Shields 2009, 3).

Using a case study of Focus on the Family, a group that has become the most powerful voice in the contemporary Christian Right, this article offers a more ambivalent assessment (Hertzke 1988; Larson and Wilcox 2006; Moen 1992; Penning 1994; Shields 2007). I argue that if democracy is viewed as a participatory ideal — based on active political engagement — then the Christian Right’s contributions to democratic life have been unquestionably beneficial. If, however, democracy is viewed as a deliberative ideal — based on the open and respectful exchange of reasons — we are left with a more mixed assessment of the Christian Right’s contributions to democracy. To be sure, Shields and others rightly emphasize the deliberative virtues that arise from the Christian Right’s efforts to offer more publicly accessible reasons and train its members in civility. Yet I shall argue that these accounts too quickly overlook the Christian Right’s deliberative vices. In the case of Focus on the Family, I suggest that the actions of its members often diminish the deliberative character of democracy by cultivating an ethos of intolerance and creating barriers to free and open debate.
I also argue that this mixed assessment of the Christian Right raises an important democratic paradox. On my account, the very same practices that inspire the participatory virtues of active political engagement also appear to incite these deliberative vices. To address this paradox, I argue that we ought to strive for a balance between pure participation and pure deliberation. The primary problem with Christian Right organizations like Focus on the Family, I will argue, is that they tend to disrupt this balance. They inspire active participation at the expense of deliberation.

I begin by outlining the conceptual qualities of participatory and deliberative ideals of democracy. I will then use a case study of Focus on the Family to juxtapose these ideals of democracy against the social practices of conservative Christian activists. I will argue that, while the practices of such activists promote the participatory ideal, they tend to diminish the deliberative ideal of democracy. In the final section, I aim to reconcile these conflicting assessments of the moral nature of the Christian Right’s influence on American democracy.

TWO IDEALS OF DEMOCRACY

The word “democracy” has many meanings. Of these, I will outline two understandings of democracy to assess the Christian Right’s political practices. The first conception is the participatory ideal of democracy. According to this ideal, the essence of democracy arises from the active engagement of citizens in the political process. Voting on Election Day, joining political associations, contacting lawmakers, and donating to candidates — these are the social practices that typify the participatory ideal and underlie our widespread concern when voters fail to turn out on Election Day.

Active participation offers two primary benefits to democracy. First, as de Tocqueville (2004) pointed out, engaged political action helps safeguard democracy from conditions of despotism and political domination. To counter the looming threat of a democratic tyranny based on “regulated, mild, peaceful servitude,” de Tocqueville turns to the participatory practices of groups and associations. As he put it:

Ordinary citizens, by associating, can constitute very opulent, very influential, and very powerful entities . . . A political, industrial, commercial, or
even scientific or literary association is an enlightened and powerful citizen that cannot be made to bow down at will or subjected to oppression in the shadows, and by defending its rights against the exigencies of power it saves common liberties (824).

De Tocqueville suggests that participation in a variety of associations, not just political ones can prevent the emergence of despotism. Second, in certain contexts, participation strengthens community bonds and cultivates “social capital.” This is the normative suggestion implicit within Robert Putnam’s *Bowling Alone* and *Making Democracy Work*. On his view, the active participation of citizens in community organizations, bowling leagues and other groups can cultivate democracy-reinforcing forms of social capital. It maximizes “mutual support, cooperation, trust, [and] institutional effectiveness,” while minimizing the dangers of “sectarianism, ethnocentrism, [and] corruption” (Putnam 2000, 22).

Over the last 40 years, democratic theorists have become captivated by a slightly different ideal: the *deliberative ideal of democracy*. On this view, the essence of democracy arises not simply from active participation but from the open and respectful exchange of reasons in the public political forum.

Such accounts of deliberation emphasize four primary commitments. The first — *the procedural requirement* — argues that a free and open process of reason-giving ought to play a central role in collective decision-making. Gutmann and Thompson (2004, 3) call this the “reason-giving requirement,” which calls upon citizens and lawmakers to confront conditions of disagreement by offering one another reasons. This deliberative procedure of reason-giving falls under any number of labels, from Jürgen Habermas’ (1984) “communicative action” to John Dryzek’s (2002) “discourse” to Iris Marion Young’s (1996) “democratic communication.” While the substantive details of these accounts differ, all deliberative theorists, to a greater or lesser degree, argue that the procedure of deliberation ought to be free and open to all. To be free, it must respect the individual’s capacity to choose; it must be free from attempts to influence through coercion, manipulation, or other forms of force. To be open to all, this exchange of arguments must welcome a wide array of diverse perspectives and avoid privileging powerful groups or individuals. In Joshua Cohen’s account, for instance, he argues that parties ought to be “formally equal in that the rules regulating the procedure do not single out
individuals and are substantively equal in that the existing distribution of power and resources does not shape their chances to contribute to deliberation” (Cohen 2002, 93).

Yet, on most accounts, ideal deliberation is not just about procedure. The second deliberative commitment — the mutual respect requirement — demands that citizens and lawmakers engage in this exchange of reasons with attitudes of respect and toleration. Gutmann and Thompson (1996), for instance, argue that the antithesis of deliberation — what they call “non-deliberative disagreement” — arises when “citizens do not have any obligations of mutual respect toward their opponents” (Gutmann and Thompson 1996, 3). John Rawls’ (1993) “criterion of reciprocity” places a similar emphasis on mutual respect and civility. In his words, this criterion specifies “the nature of the political relation in a constitutional democratic regime as one of civic friendship” (Rawls 1999, 137). Thus, deliberation demands something more than a fair and equal procedure. It also demands that citizens display mutual respect and toleration toward their political opponents.

A third feature of deliberation — the openness to revision requirement — calls for speakers to engage in reason-giving with a willingness to alter their preexisting beliefs and preferences. The word “deliberation” itself embodies this spirit of openness. On Hobbes’ definition, “Deliberation is nothing else but a weighing, as it were in scales, the conveniences, and inconveniencies of the fact we are attempting.”2 Hobbes reminds us that, while deliberation occurs externally, when parties exchange reasons, it also occurs internally, when individuals balance reasons for and against their own beliefs and plans of action. This openness to revising internal beliefs and commitments means that through the confrontation of reasons and arguments, participants may, as Bernard Manin (1987, 351) puts it, “modify their initial objectives, should that prove necessary.”

The final and most tenuous deliberative commitment — the public reason requirement — concerns the substantive content of reasons. This commitment arises from John Rawls’ (1993) conception of “public reason,” which stipulates that political power is legitimate only when justified by reasons “that others can reasonably be expected to endorse” (226). This means that, when engaging in the public political forum, candidates, government officials, and judges ought to avoid reasons based on religious doctrines or even comprehensive secular conceptions of the good. Instead, they should aspire toward the use of reasons that all citizens, religious, or nonreligious, could accept.
While many deliberative democrats appeal to some version of “public reason,” I call this a “tenuous” deliberative commitment because it has inspired a wide range of criticism and has been rejected by many theorists (Greenawalt 1995; Stout 2004; Wolterstorff 1997). Jeffrey Stout (2004), for example, worries that such limits on public discussions will erode the honesty, passion, and zeal of democratic life. Stout argues against “public reason” and for a more unconstrained public political forum — one that brings “into reflective expression commitments that would otherwise remain implicit in the lives of the religious communities” (112).

A full discussion of participatory and deliberative ideals of democracy is beyond the scope of this essay. This brief account, however, offers an analytic baseline that enables us to juxtapose the practices of the Christian Right against these normative ideals of democracy.

THE CASE: FOCUS ON THE FAMILY

To evaluate the Christian Right against these two ideals of democracy, this article relies on a case study of the political practices of Focus on the Family (Focus) leaders and activists. James Dobson, founder of Focus, has quietly become one of the most powerful figures in conservative Christian politics. In recent years, as the Christian Coalition’s annual budget numbers have plummeted, Focus has consistently generated around $146 million in annual revenue (Schulte and Gilgoff, 2005, 62).

My case research examines the political practices of Focus using two primary data sources. The first consists of a mixture of my own semi-structured interviews and the interviews of other researchers with Christian Right activists. My own interviews were conducted with six Christian Right leaders, three Colorado Springs lawmakers, and 16 liberal opponents of the Christian Right. I sought to diminish the numerical imbalance in favor of liberal activists by soliciting interviews with a wide-range of activists and policy analysts at Focus on the Family, the Family Research Council, and other Christian Right organizations. I found, however, that, while liberal opponents of the Christian Right were eager to grant interviews, Christian Right activists were much more hesitant. More often than not, they turned down interview requests or simply never responded. Despite this imbalance, I have structured this essay’s analysis to ensure that the reflections of Christian Right leaders are considered equally alongside the reflections of liberal opponents.
The second data source consists of Focus’ public and private rhetoric. As I define these, public rhetoric consists of messages aimed at broad, pluralistic audiences. Such rhetoric arises in the form of public speeches, media appearances, and debates with political opponents. Private rhetoric, by contrast, consists of messages aimed at like-minded Christians. Such communications generally arise in the form of training memos, newsletters, direct-mailings, and Internet Action-Alerts. I also include within this category the private communications between activists and individual members of the opposition. In my discussion of Focus’s practice of “info-blasting,” for instance, I examine the emails sent at the prompting of Dobson by Focus members to individual leaders of an oppositional group.

Given the small size of my sample and my emphasis on a single Christian Right organization, my findings should be viewed as suggestive rather than conclusive. Nevertheless, this case helps illuminate both the democratic virtues and, more importantly, the often-overlooked democratic vices of the contemporary Christian Right.

A PARTICIPATORY ASSESSMENT OF CHRISTIAN RIGHT MOBILIZATION

Viewed from the democratic ideal of participation, the capacity of Christian Right organizations such as Focus on the Family to mobilize members into political action has enhanced democracy. One of the most powerful structural explanations for these participatory successes is the emergence of what radio-host Michael Medved calls the “conservative religious counterculture” — a culture that he deems “far more powerful and more significant than anything in the stupid counter culture of the 1960s” (Piore 2005). At the institutional level, Medved is undoubtedly correct. Lacking the 1960s generation’s flashy public displays of civil disobedience, rebellion, and free love, the conservative Christian political movement has evolved in a more subtle fashion. Yet it now consists of an astounding network of media, political, and religious institutions, which not only guarantee influence in the present but also assure a longer lasting cultural presence.

Christian radio has been central to the movement. In 1972, America had 399 Christian radio stations (Diamond 1998, 21). Over the last 35 years, that number has increased by a factor of five to nearly 2,000 Christian radio stations throughout America (Blake 2005). While
Christian radio personalities abound, James Dobson has become the primary voice of conservative religious broadcasting. By its own estimates, which are often prone to hyperbole, Focus on the Family’s broadcast goes out to 2,000 stations throughout America and reaches an estimated 200 million people worldwide through its international broadcasts in 98 countries. In addition to Dobson’s daily radio show, Focus also produces *Family News in Focus*, a shorter, family values oriented, news show that airs daily on 700 radio stations, reaching nearly one million listeners.

Focus on the Family also publishes hundreds of books, produces DVDs and videos, and distributes 12 magazines with a nationwide paid circulation of 3.5 million people (Buss 2002). Its magazines reach all sectors of the conservative Christian market. *Clubhouse* and *Clubhouse Jr.* cater to small children, *Brio* and *Breakaway* meet the needs of Christian teens, and *LifeWise* addresses the over 50 crowd. Focus also publishes magazines directed at pastors and doctors, providing professional advice from a conservative family values perspective.

As Kurt Bruner, vice president of Focus’s publishing and film production, explains, these magazines seek to inform members in a way that reinforces conservative Christian values: “This organization is largely build on counter-culture,” says Bruner, “the trend and the message of the culture has always been permissive parenting, and Dr. Dobson said, ‘No: Dare to discipline.’ Then feminist ideology was on the rise, and he was affirming motherhood. It’s the backlash supporting those ideas that has caused the growth and impact of this organization, because there’s a large segment of the population that says, ‘I don’t want my family going in the direction of the culture at large’” (Buss 2002).

Focus’s radio programs, film productions, and publications have helped to create a powerful *enclave infrastructure* within the conservative Christian community. They have, in other words, created a network of media resources that provide an insulated cultural space. *Breakaway*, Focus’ magazine for teens, for instance, was founded to encourage Christian teens to rebel against the mainstream by establishing a relationship with Jesus. As its mission statement declares: “Since 1990, *Breakaway* magazine has been encouraging teen guys to break away from the pressures of the world around them and to get real in a relationship with Jesus. As our theme verse says, ‘Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will
is — his good, pleasing and perfect will’ (Romans 12:2)” (Focus on the Family 2006).

The cultural space created by this infrastructure offers group members a refuge from what leaders like Dobson deem the permissive ethos of the American mainstream. It also offers members an opportunity to construct and reinforce counter-narratives that emphasize the importance of traditional family values.

In the language of Robert Putnam (1993), such enclave conditions lay the groundwork for social networks based primarily on the practice of “bonding.” By discouraging active engagement with a diversity of ideas and perspectives, they create cultural enclaves that are, “inward looking and tend to reinforce exclusive identities and homogeneous groups.” As a result, such groups tend to cultivate “in-group loyalty” and “out-group animosity” (22–23). The opposite of bonding, what Putnam calls “bridging,” arises within more “cross-cutting groups” — groups that have a greater diversity of ambitions and membership. In contrast to groups that bond, such groups encourage an attitude of openness to diverse members and ideas, which enables group members to “bridge” — to achieve solidarity, tolerance, and mutual understanding by reaching across social cleavages.

As we will see, excessive bonding poses a number of dangers to deliberative ideals of democracy. Yet a growing literature on the political implications of social networks shows that it may also promote the democratic ideal of participation. In voter surveys, citizens who have greater crosscutting ties — who are exposed to oppositional views and inhabit more diverse information spaces — are less likely to vote in presidential and congressional elections (Mutz 2006, 111). Members of more insular groups such as Focus, who have more homogenous social networks, by contrast, are far more likely to show up on Election Day. One important reason for this difference is, as Diana Mutz (2006) observes, that “political activists are likely to inhabit an informational environment full of like-minded others who spur them on to additional political activity” (113). The social practice of bonding helps to sustain high levels of political participation by activists on the right, at organizations like Focus, and activists on the left, at organizations like MoveOn, the Sierra Club, or PETA.

Two primary features of group behavior help to explain the participatory benefits of the bonding activities of homogeneous groups. The first is informational. As Cass Sunstein observes in his work on “group polarization,” discussion within homogeneous groups tends to
involve “limited argument pools” (Sunstein 2000, 2006). As a result, group members have minimal engagement with alternative views, which cultivates a stronger sense of confidence in their existing beliefs and preferences.

The second is reputational. When interacting in groups, individuals have significant incentives to maintain their reputation with group members. In crosscutting groups, this means that individuals tend to be less likely to express extreme views that might offend others. As Mutz suggests, within such settings, “one feels uncomfortable taking sides in the face of multiple constituencies,” which helps to explain why crosscutting ties tend to diminish one’s likelihood of political participation (Mutz 2006, 107).

Within more homogeneous groups, however, such reputational pressures appear to have the opposite effect. Rather than creating incentives to abstain from active participation or the expression of extreme views, such environments reward these qualities and sanction those who fail to tow the party line. As Jane Mansbridge observes in Why We Lost the ERA: “Among proponents [of the ERA], the pressure to conform was probably strongest in the radical women’s movement, where ‘betraying the women’s movement’ by not taking the correct ideological line could be ‘as terrifying as betrayal of your family, your closest friends’” (Mansbridge 1986, 181). Such reflections illuminate the nature of reputational incentives that encourage like-minded group members to engage passionately in political activities that promote the group’s agenda (Mutz 2006; Sunstein 2000).

The enclave space created by Focus’s media infrastructure appears to support this connection between in-group bonding and active participation. While we lack data on homogeneity among Focus activists, its efforts to construct a counter-cultural Christian media infrastructure appear to encourage bonding, not bridging. As we have seen, the organization’s mission of encouraging members to “break away from the pressures of the word” and turn to Jesus shapes its radio, film, and print productions. As Christian Right critic Sara Diamond puts it, “the media outlets [of the Christian Right] feed adherents a steady diet of information, entertainment, and spiritual uplift — just the right mix to keep people tuned in, loyal, and ready to act on what they hear” (Diamond 1998, 20).

In addition to these bonding practices, Focus’s membership displays an impressive passion for political engagement. As a result of engagement in voter drives, phone campaigns, and fundraising efforts, Focus’s
members have had a powerful influence on everything from media coverage to state and federal lawmakers to the Republican Party’s Agenda (Gilgoff 2007). As Jen Caltrider, executive producer at ProgressNow, a left-leaning Colorado group that counters Focus, told me: “They have enormous influence because they have so many followers and James Dobson has such a huge personality and such far reach with his radio show and his ministries and his books and his websites. It’s one thing to have five million people in a database. It’s another to know that you have five million people ten percent of whom you know will be active when you make a call. They don’t just have names in a database, they have people who will be active when they call for it” (Klemp 2005).

Thus, the Christian Right’s enclave infrastructure promotes the participatory ideal of democracy. Its emphasis on “breaking away” from the outside world and creating a robustly conservative Christian counter-narrative helps to mobilize passionate political engagement. Even Dobson’s liberal opponents, such as Pat Steadman, a leading Colorado lobbyist for gay and lesbian issues, admit that these practices have positive participatory effects on democracy: “Having people care is important,” Steadman told me, “Apathy is one of our biggest problems in policy decisions today. And so the fact that they [Focus] do make people engaged is a good thing, even if they are all misguided and on the wrong side of the issue in my opinion” (Klemp 2005).

A DELIBERATIVE ASSESSMENT OF CHRISTIAN RIGHT MOBILIZATION

When juxtaposed against the participatory ideal of democracy, Focus’s mobilization practices appear to represent an unqualified democratic good. Yet, when we shift the normative criteria of evaluation from participatory to deliberative ideals of democracy, many of these practices threaten democracy. As we have seen, deliberative ideals of democracy call for something more than simple engagement in politics. Instead, they call for a particular kind of engagement — one in which citizens confront political disagreement through the respectful exchange of reasons. Viewed from this perspective, the mobilizing practices of groups like Focus often appear to diminish rather than enhance democracy.
The Deliberative Virtues of Christian Right Mobilization

Before outlining these deliberative vices, however, it should be noted that Focus’ practices are not wholly antithetical to the deliberative ideal. Like Shields’ (2009) research on Concerned Women for America and the Christian Coalition, I find that Focus trains its members to use a publicly accessible rhetoric and to engage respectfully. In addition, Focus’s enclave infrastructure offers important opportunities for conservative Christian citizens to ensure that their voices receive a fair hearing in the public political forum.

First, in its public rhetoric, Focus often appears to at least partially embody the deliberative virtues of “public reason” and mutual respect. When engaging diverse citizens in the public political forum, Focus appeals to reasons that, as Rawls might say, all citizens “can reasonably be expected to endorse” (Rawls 1993, 226). On same-sex marriage, for instance, Focus’s activists translate the religious claims of Sunday-morning-sermons into claims that all citizens could accept. In a 2003 document entitled, “Talking Points: Same-Sex Marriage,” for example, Focus’s Glenn Stanton encourages fellow Christians to rely on arguments like the following: “(1) Same-sex families always deny children either their mother or [their] father; (2) Same-sex family is a vast, untested social experiment with children; (3) Where does it stop? How do we say “no” to group marriage? (4) Schools will be forced to teach that the homosexual family is normal” (Stanton 2004).

Underlying Stanton’s talking points is the notion that same-sex marriage is wrong because it undermines the institution of marriage and hurts kids, not because of scripture or religious convictions. In one of my interviews with Stanton, he explained that Focus seeks to train members to avoid overtly religious reasons and appeal to reasons all could accept. As he put it, “It is our desire to bring people up to a different level and argue more intelligently and more persuasively. You’ve got to do reeducation. You’ve got to retrain people in that way. It’s not so much what you do say but what you don’t say” (Klemp 2005).

This effort to train members in the norms of public reasons is not unique to Focus. In Shields’ interviews with activists in the Christian Coalition and Concerned Women for America, he reaches a similar conclusion that Christian leaders “argue that appeals to theology should be scrupulously avoided in public forums” (Shields 2007, 104). Shields observes that Christian Right leaders not only aspire to train members in the use of publicly accessible reasons but also attempt to cultivate an ethos of civility toward opponents. He notes that organizations like...
Stand to Reason, which trains 40,000 Christian activists each year to engage in the public square, encourage trainees to become “Christian Ambassadors.” Similarly, he notes that Tom Minnery, Focus’ vice President of Public Policy, has encouraged group members to “bless those who persecute you” (Shields 2007, 100).

From the vantage point of this deliberative commitment to public reason and mutual respect, the Christian Right’s public rhetoric represents an important deliberative virtue. It displays a seemingly sincere attempt on the part of Christian Right activists to respectfully engage fellow citizens using reasons that all can accept. Yet, in the next section, I will argue that Focus’s commitment to the deliberative virtue of mutual respect is only partial — that many of its other mobilizing practices cultivate anti-deliberative attitudes of intolerance and polarization.

Some of Focus’s mobilizing practices also appear to satisfy aspects of the deliberative ideal’s procedural requirement for a free and open exchange of reasons. Groups like Focus, which rely on partially insulated enclaves, ensure that the perspectives of their membership receive a fair hearing in public debates. As theorists of difference point out, such enclave communities provide individuals of shared ethnicity, religion, or political persuasion with a means of resistance against conditions of domination. Nancy Fraser, for example, calls such groups “subaltern counter-publics,” which she defines as “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (Fraser 1992, 123). Fraser’s claim is that enclaves provide excluded groups with a private space for constructing a distinctive set of tactics, interests, and discourses.

Such enclaves create a space for what Mansbridge (1996) calls “deliberative enclaves of resistance.” In her description of what she calls the “enclave theory of change,” for instance, she remarks:

In a larger culture permeated by a hegemonic ideology, counter-hegemonic ideas are most likely to appear when subordinates in a system of domination can engage in interactions of high intensity, in settings with barriers that keep the outside out and inside in, with incentives for experimentation and change, and with a lowered fear of punishment. Such ‘safe spaces’ usually produce both creativity and commitment (Mansbridge 2005).

While such theorists focus primarily on enclaves formed by left-leaning gender groups and ethnic minorities, such enclaves may also emerge on the right. Many conservative Christians share the feeling that they have
been dominated by a similarly hegemonic ideology — that their Christian values and the traditional family structure have come under attack from liberal elites in the media, in academia, and on the courts.

In these enclaves of resistance both on the right and on the left, bonding activities enable like-minded citizens to ensure that their voice is heard in the broader deliberative forum. The shared sense of purpose, passion, and encouragement enhances the cohesion and power of such groups, thereby ensuring that their ideas and values reach the broader culture. So, one of the key virtues of such enclave structures is that they, at least partially, support the procedural commitments to a free and open deliberative process that includes a wide array of voices.

For activists and members of Focus, this desire to voice the conservative Christian perspective in public debates is a pivotal political ambition. Motivated by the perception that Christians have been excluded from politics and culture by “liberal elites,” groups like Focus seek to fight back by injecting the message of family values into the cultural mainstream. In “defending” its ideal of family values, Focus has been remarkably successful at disseminating its message to the broader culture. Restrictions on abortion, prohibitions on same-sex marriage, and limits on stem cell research — all of these issues have become inescapable topics in the American political conversation. As opponents of Focus, such as Michael Brewer, the Public Policy Director at the GLBT (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender) Community Center of Colorado, observe: “they [Focus] do fuel the flame of debate. Some evidence for that is their pushing of the same-sex marriage ban in Colorado. They are pushing that. I tell people, there is no gay couple in Colorado asking the legislature, or the courts, or the people to grant full-fledged marriage. It’s their side saying, ‘we’re going to debate that and we’re going to win’” (Klemp 2005).

As we will see, Focus’ mobilizing practices only partially satisfy the procedural ideal of deliberative democrats. Like many Christian Right critics, I shall argue that groups like Focus often seek more than mere representation in public debates. In some instances, their mobilizing practices seek not merely to voice the concerns of conservative Christians but to intimidate opponents and non-partisan entities from entering debates over issues like same-sex marriage.

The Deliberative Vices of Christian Right Mobilization

Despite these virtues, the deliberative practices of groups like Focus also have a destructive side — a side that is often underemphasized by those
who praise the Christian Right for its deliberative virtues. First, the Christian Right’s commitment to mutual respect rests upon a deep internal contradiction. While leaders encourage respect in their public rhetoric, their private rhetoric often demonizes opponents and cultivates anti-deliberative attitudes of intolerance and polarization. Second, I argue that, when asymmetries of power exist that favor Focus, one of its primary participatory tactics — what I call “info-blasting” — diminishes the deliberative virtue of free and open conditions of debate.

The first worry is that the enclave conditions of groups like Focus often correspond to what I call an *ethos of intolerance*. They appear to cultivate an atmosphere in which group members become increasingly intolerant toward political opponents. Within such insulated and homogenous groups, discussion tends not to moderate, but to push group members toward ever more extreme positions. Rather than cultivating solidarity and understanding, such enclave conditions tend to cultivate what Sunstein calls “group polarization” — conditions in which “groups of like-minded people, engaged in discussion with one another . . . end up thinking the same thing they thought before — but in a more extreme form” (Sunstein 2001, 65).

While more research is needed on attitudes of toleration among Christian Right activists, the few surveys that have been conducted confirm that such activists display heightened levels of intolerance. For instance, a 1990–1991 survey of members of Beverly LaHaye’s Concerned Women for America and Focus on the Family found that 2 percent of Concerned Women for America members and 6 percent of Focus on the Family members agreed with the statement, “A diversity of moral views is healthy” (Hardisty 1999, 20). Another of the largest studies conducted on the attitudes of Christian Right activists found further evidence of widespread intolerance. When asked about members of liberal groups such as the National Organization for Women, American Civil Liberties Union, and People for the American Way, Larson and Wilcox (2006) note that “only 61 percent of Christian Right activists would allow them to speak in their communities, 57 percent would allow them to demonstrate, and a disconcerting 14 percent would allow them to teach in public schools” (183). And while liberal groups often attack the Christian Right with equal animosity, this study found that left-leaning activists are more likely to grant their opponents these basic political rights. Of course, such studies do not show causality. They do not prove that the Christian Right’s emerging media infrastructure has heightened attitudes of polarization and
intolerance. They do, however, illustrate the pervasiveness of such attitudes within groups like Focus that have established a powerful enclave infrastructure.

Evidence of such attitudes of intolerance also arises from interviews with Christian Right activists and left-wing opponents. In my interview with Focus on the Family’s Glenn Stanton, for instance, he worried that intolerance both on the left and on the right now poses problems for democracy. In his words,

I think the problem is that we don’t talk. And the fact that we don’t talk is the atmosphere in which the stereotypes and the misunderstanding exist. For camps that we don’t understand, we assume that everyone is the same. For our camp [Focus members] it is that all homosexuals are looking to have as much sex as they possibly can with as many people that they can. Well, you get in there and you realize that that’s true for some, but it’s not true for all. You come here [to Focus on the Family] and you think: ‘all these people believe X.’ No, they don’t. They all believe in God. They pretty much all have warm feelings about Jesus, but they have different views of it (Klemp 2005).

Stanton’s words reinforce the notion that misunderstandings and stereotypes arise both on the left and on the right, at least in part, because of the kind of isolation that enclave conditions promote. His remarks suggest that, as citizens become more detached from direct engagement with others and stop talking to one another, they become increasingly intolerant.

Opponents of Focus on the Family also observe such attitudes of intolerance. Jen Caltrider of ProgressNow attributes the intolerance of Focus activists to the authoritarian structure of Dobson’s message: “Anybody who says, ‘I’m right, nobody else is, listen to what I have to say,’ is damaging because it’s taking away peoples’ ability to think for themselves, and it creates these kinds of cult-like leaders that people can’t question . . . Anytime you encourage people to cease thinking for themselves and follow blindly, it’s a bad thing. And I think that Focus on the Family does that with the oldest trick in the book, which is, ‘the Bible says, God says’” (Klemp 2005).

Mary Lou Makepeace, former mayor of Colorado Springs, also attributes these attitudes to the authoritarian and over-simplified messages that Focus uses to inspire members: “Dobson represents a kind of authority of the church, and I think that many people don’t want to think about complex issues. They don’t want to think about the complexities
of faith and so it’s much easier if you have this trust in someone. If they say black is black, it’s black. Because life is complicated and I think there are a lot of people who would like that kind of father figure to tell them what is right and what is wrong” (Klemp 2005).

While the authoritarian structure of his message may cultivate these attitudes, a much deeper problem is that Christian Right leaders like Dobson often explicitly promote the kinds of stereotypes that reinforce polarization and intolerance. In many of Focus’s radio productions and publications, opponents of the organization are portrayed as cynical, manipulative, and completely misguided. Gay and lesbian rights groups tend bear the brunt of Focus’ polarizing messages. Consider, for instance, Dobson’s portrayal of same-sex marriage activists in a 2003 newsletter to members:

The history of the gay and lesbian movement is that its adherents quickly move to the goal line as soon as one has been breached, revealing even more shocking and outrageous objectives. In the present instance, homosexual activists, heady with power and exhilaration, feel the political climate is right to tell us what they have wanted all along. This is the real deal: most gays and lesbians do not want to marry each other. That would entangle them in all sorts of legal constraints. Who needs a lifetime commitment to one person? The intention here is to destroy marriage altogether (Dobson 2003).

The image of “gay activists” that emerges from Dobson’s rhetoric demeans the gay community. It suggests that gays and lesbians are inherently promiscuous and completely uninterested in marriage. Instead, Dobson claims that such activists are engaged in a kind of conspiracy to destroy marriage for heterosexuals.

To be sure, my argument here is not that Focus is unique in presenting its members with political messages that encourage polarization and intolerance. MoveOn, PETA, the AFL-CIO, and other left-leaning groups construct their internal rhetoric around similar oversimplifications and stereotypes. As James While, former minister of one of Colorado Spring’s more liberal denominations, told me: “Someone said to me that right-wing and left-wing operatives are gathering people together and just enforcing their points of view and entrenching folks more and more. And I thought well, God, I’m doing the same damn thing here. I’m just reinforcing all these liberals and their anti-Bush views. So I think polarization is going on pretty big” (Klemp 2005).
All of this is to say that, while Dobson’s language often promotes polar-
ization and intolerance, this practice is by no means unique to the
Christian Right or Focus on the Family.

The attitudes of intolerance and polarization that emerge within groups
like Focus on the Family stand in stark contrast to the kinds of citizen
virtues promoted by deliberative ideals of democracy. The kind of out-
group antagonism that arises in such enclave structures, for instance, con-
tradicts the idea that citizens ought to engage with one another in what
Rawls calls the spirit of “civic friendship” (Rawls 1993). Such attitudes
also cultivate the very antithesis of what Gutmann and Thompson regard
as one deliberation’s primary purposes: “to promote mutually respectful
processes of decision making” (11). Rather than helping “participants
recognize the moral merit in their opponents’ claims when those
claims have merit” (Gutmann and Thompson 2004, 11), the enclave infra-
structure of groups like Focus promotes the idea that opponents’ claims
are baseless and motivated by sinister intentions.

A second potential threat to the deliberative ideal of democracy arises
from one of the Christian Right’s primary participatory practices: its use
of a tactic that I call “info-blasting.” This tactic involves mobilizing acti-
vists to deluge oppositional groups or lawmakers with emails, faxes, and
phone calls to register their outrage. Info-blasting enables groups like
Focus, with large grassroots followings, to launch thousands of emails,
letters, and phone calls at the opposition in a matter of minutes. As
Colorado Springs City Councilman Jerry Heimlicher explained, “They
[Focus] go to what I would call a phone bank or an email bank and
then we are bombarded with hundreds of phone calls and hundreds of
emails, especially on the issue of benefits for gays and lesbians. And
that is no small bit of influence because the emails come from all
around the world, not just Colorado Springs” (Klemp 2005).

There is, of course, nothing particularly new or unique about info-
blasting. Encouraging group members to contact legislators and political
opponents has long been a trusted tool of political organizing. Such
tactics are also not unique to the conservative movement. Liberal activists
rely on similar tactics to influence lawmakers, media outlets, and opposi-
tional groups. Info-blasting can also serve a useful purpose. It can incite
debate, inform citizens, and can be used to ensure that lawmakers are
aware of the grievances of their constituents.

Yet, in some contexts, info-blasting erodes free and open conditions of
debate. When it arises in the context of asymmetrical power relationships,
this tactic can silence debate. When, for instance, powerful groups like
Focus on the Family with vast resources and membership use this tactic at local levels, it often creates an intangible atmosphere of intimidation. The knowledge that speaking out against the family values agenda might result in an info-blasting campaign with worldwide reach can discourage relatively powerless local groups and lawmakers from speaking out on these issues.

To illuminate the potential deliberative dangers of info-blasting, consider one instance in which Focus employed this tactic. On March 8, 2006, a group called DefCon (The Campaign to Defend the Constitution) ran a full-page ad in *The New York Times*, implicating three prominent Christian Right leaders in the lobbying scandal involving Jack Abramoff. Lou Sheldon, Ralph Reed, and James Dobson, they claimed, were complicit in Abramoff’s attempt to finance family values oriented anti-gambling campaigns that would force his Indian casino clients to pay for additional lobbying services. As DefCon put it:

“Gambling — all types of gambling — is driven by greed and subsists on greed.” (Dobson 2006).

This is the same James Dobson whose voice you could have heard on radio commercials paid for by Jack Abramoff’s Indian casino clients. These casinos gave millions to Jack Abramoff to limit competition (DefCon 2006).

News of the DefCon attack spread quickly. Soon, a whole host of other groups jumped on the anti-Dobson bandwagon. ProgressNow, for example, a leading progressive Colorado media organization, picked up the story and helped spread it throughout the liberal blogosphere. “When they were having hearings in Congress,” Jen Caltrider, an executive producer at ProgressNow, told me, “we called for them to call Dobson in to make him talk about the gambling ads. He did the gambling ads for one of the Indian tribes. Dobson provided anti-gambling ads that were basically paid for with gambling money” (Klemp 2005).

Two days later, Dobson responded to the attacks of DefCon and ProgressNow by devoting an entire radio broadcast to the subject. Dobson was insistent: “We have a serious gambling problem. I have been fighting the gambling industry for at least 15 or 20 years because I know what it does to families. The notion that somehow I am linked to gambling is just breathtaking ... I’ve never heard of Jack Abramoff and I’ve never taken a cent from him” (Dobson 2006).

Following the DefCon attack, Focus on the Family sent out an “Action Alert” to its members, asking them to call, write, and email DefCon and...
ProgressNow. In a matter of moments, the deluge of phone calls, faxes, and emails had begun. “When we called for Congress to bring Dobson in,” Caltrider told me. “They sent out a letter to the Focus members and said they were being attacked by ProgressNow questioning Dobson’s character. We got inundated with emails and phone calls and comments on our blogs attacking us — thousands of them” (Klemp 2005).

Offering a look behind the scenes of Focus’ political practices, ProgressNow gave me a sample of the over 1,000 emails they received. These emails express a wide-range of concerns. Some members voice outrage, others laud Dobson and his organization, and still others threaten ProgressNow to rethink its attacks. All staunchly supported Dobson and Focus on the Family.

In most emails, Dobson is praised as a great man — often as a man of God — who has spent years helping American families. One female emailer writes: “I have never known such a wonderful man (except for my husband) as Dr. Dobson . . . Thank you, Dr. Dobson, for your hard work. I stand with you in all you do!” Other members emphasize Dobson’s integrity: “We, my wife and I, know that Dr. Dobson is a man of integrity and he is above reproach,” remarked one man.

Then there are those that go with the more hard-hitting approach: “YOU ARE SICK,” exclaimed one member, “DR. DOBSON IS A GOOD MAN.” Another called into question the ethics of ProgressNow: “The only unethical behavior is coming from your organization!!! It’s too bad you spend so much time trying to destroy decent people!!!”

Finally, some emails go beyond critique, promising payback. As one emailer warned: “Be aware when it comes to being held accountable, because there is a God who is just and He was there when the Constitution was being made and He WILL judge rightly.” Another comes dangerously close to an outright threat: “When a man’s ways please the Lord, He causes adverse circumstances and even the sins of others to work together for good for His believing child. Dr. Dobson is precious to God. Be careful in your campaign to destroy him; you may get more than you bargained for.”

In fact, a small percentage of these emails went even further, directly threatening the organization and its employees. As Caltrider told me, “We actually got a couple emails that were so threatening that my boss sent them to the FBI. But we never had physical attacks” (Klemp 2005).

When Focus on the Family uses this tactic to mobilize its worldwide network against local-level political actors, info-blasting creates an intangible atmosphere of intimidation that stymies public debate. This tactic...
creates implicit disincentives that discourage lawmakers, oppositional groups, non-partisan organizations, and corporations from challenging the family values agenda.

Ryan Acker, a leader in the Colorado Springs gay and lesbian community, for example, described Dobson’s influence in the community of Colorado Springs as “implicit — it’s almost like a looming sense” (Klemp 2005). Mary Lou Makepeace, the former mayor of Colorado Springs, agreed: “In Colorado Springs there’s kind of an intimidation factor on the part of elected officials, where it seems to me — and I’m not the only person who feels this way — that elected officials are a little bit afraid of the [Christian] Right. And they don’t want that backlash that occurs if you do something” (Klemp 2005).

This influence arises from two primary effects of info-blasting. First, by disrupting day-to-day operations, these campaigns impose significant resource costs. The flood of emails must be sorted; the thousands of phone calls must be answered. This is most disruptive at local levels, where individuals and organizations tend to be understaffed and unprepared for such deluges of information.

Yet the costs of info-blasting are not just material. As the campaign against ProgressNow illustrates, the small percentage of threatening calls and emails also impose more intangible psychological costs. To be sure, most of these threats are indirect, but some are more explicit. As Mel White, director of Soulforce.org, told me: “When I was on a seven day fast for understanding in front of his [Dobson’s] headquarters in Colorado Springs, he took out a full page ad condemning me, calling me a liar. He used his broadcast to stir up hatred against me. We finally had to move into a hotel because of the death threats — literally — on local radio. One person calling in saying, ‘Somebody ought to go up there and take him out,’ referring to me” (Klemp 2005).

It is important to emphasize that the leadership at Focus does not encourage these threats. In fact, the organization ends email alerts with a plea for members to articulate their concerns respectfully. As one Focus Action Alert recommends, “Please take a moment to respectfully let DeGette; Abraham Foxman, national director of the ADL; and Michael Huttner, executive director of ProgressNow.org, know what you think of their politically motivated attempts to smear Dr. Dobson” (Focus on the Family 2005). With such a large network of members and with such a polarizing political message, however, it is not all that surprising that some members express themselves in a tone that threatens rather than informs.
As a result, most local-level political opponents are not afraid of Focus on the Family itself. They are afraid of its more fanatical members. As Makepeace, who now heads the Gay and Lesbian Fund for Colorado, put it, “If I were going to be afraid of something, I wouldn’t be afraid of Focus, I would be afraid of some unstable person who might hear the Focus talk and see this organization [The Gay and Lesbian Fund] as something that should be attacked” (Klep 2005).

Viewed from the deliberative ideal of democracy, the ‘info-blasting’ practices of powerful groups at local levels impede free and open deliberation over important issues. Yet it is important to emphasize that not all info-blasting campaigns undermine deliberation. The effects of this practice depend largely on the context within which it is used. When used in the context of national level politics, such tactics are less likely to create an atmosphere of intimidation that silences debate. On the broad stage of federal politics, equally powerful groups like People for the American Way and the Human Rights Campaign counter groups like Focus. In conditions of localism, however, info-blasting runs a much greater risk of silencing debate. When a group like Focus mobilizes its vast network to deluge relatively powerless Colorado Springs political associations and lawmakers with phone calls and emails, it can create an anti-deliberative atmosphere of intimidation.

When this kind of atmosphere of intimidation arises, the deliberative commitment to both mutual respect and free and open debate is undermined. As we have seen, the content of Focus’ “info-blasting” campaigns often expresses deep animosity, not mutual respect. This tactic also diminishes conditions of free and open debate by discouraging less powerful groups and lawmakers from entering into the conversation over same-sex marriage. In the discursive environment of Colorado Springs, issues like same-sex marriage cannot be discussed freely and openly without fear of retribution.

RECONCILING PARTICIPATION AND DELIBERATION

The Christian Right’s political practices help highlight an important tension between participatory ideals, which emphasize active political engagement, and deliberative ideals of democracy, which emphasize the respectful exchange of reasons. When juxtaposed against the participatory ideal, Focus’s mobilization strategies enhance democracy. Yet, when juxtaposed against the deliberative ideal, many of Focus’s practices
appear to cultivate discursive conditions and citizen virtues that undermine the realization of a deliberative democracy.

The tension between these two ideals is often noted in studies of group interaction and social networks. As we have seen, these studies suggest that while heterogeneous social networks display deliberative virtues, such as cultivating tolerance and knowledge of the other side’s position, they may diminish political engagement (Mutz 2006). Meanwhile, they suggest that homogeneous social networks do just the opposite. Groups of like-minded citizens encourage the participatory virtue of political engagement, while cultivating such deliberative vices as intolerance and polarization (Brown 2001; Mutz 2006; Sunstein 2000, 2006). As Diane Mutz (2006) observes: “Although diverse political networks foster a better understanding of multiple perspectives on issues and encourage political tolerance, they discourage political participation, particularly among those who are averse to conflict” (3).

How are we to address this potential trade-off between participation and deliberation? Put differently, should we encourage the kinds of homogeneous group conditions that cultivate participation or should we encourage the kinds of cross-cutting interactions that cultivate deliberative virtues? On Shields’ view, the answer to this trade-off as it applies to the Christian Right appears to be that we should favor participation and accept the limits of the deliberative ideal. As he puts it:

[P]roponents of deliberative democracy need to accept the limits to the deliberative ideal if they also value participation. If deliberative democrats want a more participatory democracy, then they should be tolerant of the moral passions that are so important to mobilization efforts (Shields 2009, 159).

In such passages, Shields suggests that in choosing between participation and deliberation, the virtues of participation ought to win out. If we want social movements like the Christian Right to remain active in politics, he argues, we ought to also accept the deliberative vices that emerge from the “moral passions” of mobilization.

I argue for a slightly different view. Rather than privileging participation, I argue that we ought to strive for a balance between these two ideals. We ought to aspire toward structural conditions that promote the virtues of both active participation and respectful deliberation. As we have seen, the practices of Focus on the Family activists often appear to disrupt this balance, favoring participation at the expense of
deliberation. While its enclave infrastructure effectively inspires political action, its counter-cultural ethos is often so strong that it cultivates anti-deliberative attitudes of intolerance and polarization. These mobilizing practices may also motivate the small percentage of the emails, phone calls, and faxes that cause Focus’s practice of info-blasting to intimidate opponents from voicing concerns about the family values agenda. So, rather than striking a healthy balance between participation and deliberation, Focus’s practices appear to promote the virtues of participation while cultivating a number of deliberative vices.

There is no easy solution for counteracting such imbalances, and this article cannot specify policy solutions in detail. Yet the best response to such participatory imbalances would appear to be less insulation and greater cross-cutting engagement. As Sunstein puts it, we should address such situations by ensuring:

[T]hat any such enclaves are not walled off from competing views, and that at certain points, there is an exchange of views between enclave members and those who disagree with them. It is total or near-total self-insulation, rather than group deliberation as such, that carries with it the most serious dangers, often in the highly unfortunate (and sometimes deadly) combination of extremism and marginality (Sunstein 2000, 114).

This is not to say to say that we should discourage all enclaves and try to stop like-minded citizens forming close associations with each other. It simply means that we should be wary of the dangers of such overly insular cultural spaces and think of institutional and structural conditions that might encourage citizens in such groups to directly engage a broad cross-section of citizens. So rather than accepting the deliberative vices of the Christian Right as inevitable, we ought to explore ways to correct for its participatory imbalances — to promote cross-cutting social ties that cultivate tolerance, solidarity, and the free and open exchange of reasons.

Of course, in the case of groups like the Focus on the Family, such efforts to balance participation and deliberation might result in declines in political engagement. By discouraging attitudes of intolerance and polarization, we may also discourage the kind of impassioned political action that has become the hallmark of the contemporary Christian Right. Yet, as Diana Mutz suggests, the dangers of excessive deliberation pale in comparison to the dangers of excessive participation. The participatory activities of “homogeneous political networks,” Mutz argues, “can
be a force for positive change or a source of intolerance and extremism” (Mutz 2006, 148). The deliberative activities of “heterogeneous political networks,” by contrast, “convey many potential benefits, with lowered levels of participation the sole negative outcome” (Mutz 2006, 148). This suggests that, while diminished participation might be an unfortunate end result of promoting a balance between participation and deliberation in groups like Focus, such declines in participation are far less troublesome than the kinds of intolerance, extremism, and social fragmentation that arise from excessive participation.

My aim in this article has been one of outlining an alternative normative framework for assessing the Christian Right’s impact on American democracy. On this view, the answer to the question of whether the Christian Right has diminished or enhanced democracy rests upon our underlying ideal of democracy. Viewed on the participatory ideal, the Christian Right’s mobilizing practices clearly enhance democracy. Viewed on the deliberative ideal, the Christian Right’s practices pose several important challenges to the realization of ideal forms of deliberative democracy. My response to this tension has been to argue that, when in conflict, we ought to aspire toward a balance between these two ideals. In the case of the Christian Right, this means that we ought to encourage activists and members of organizations like Focus on the Family to engage more directly with a broader array of citizens. The implications of this claim also extend well beyond the case of the Christian Right. This argument implies that we ought to encourage members of all such insular enclaves — left, right, and center — to engage with those situated beyond their own insulated cultural spaces.

NOTES

1. I define the Christian Right along the lines proposed by Larson and Wilcox. As they define it: “The Christian Right is a social movement that attempts to mobilize evangelical Protestants and other orthodox Christians into conservative political action” (Larson and Wilcox 2006, 6). It is a movement that consists of a wide array of actors: everyone from movement leaders to activists to ordinary group members and those sympathetic to its political and religious agenda.

2. I am grateful to Bernard Manin’s (2005) paper on debate as a form of deliberation for this definition. For the original citation in Hobbes, see, De Cive, XIII, 16.

3. This commitment to public reason is shared by a number of other deliberative democrats. See, for example, Thompson, Gutmann and Dennis’s (1996) principle of “reciprocity.” For slightly different versions of public reason see, Larmore (1987), Audi (2001), and Habermas (2006).

4. For an empirical account of the rise in conservative Christian political engagement over the last 40 years, see, Shields (2009).

5. When I interviewed Alan Wisdom, vice-president of the conservative Christian Institute on Religion and Democracy, he also emphasized the necessity of publicly accessible arguments. As he told me, “For democratic decisions to be legitimate, there must be a perception of principles
higher than self-interest. This means that Christians will have to use arguments in the public square that go beyond what we alone recognize. You have to appeal to things that people who don’t accept your view of scriptural authority accept.”

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