

# **EMBATTLED AND RADICALIZING: HOW PERCEIVED REPRESSION SHAPES WHITE EVANGELICALISM**

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*“If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.”*  
~ John 15:18

## **THE CHRISTIAN PERSECUTION COMPLEX**

For more than a century, white evangelicals in the United States have cultivated a myth that Christians are under siege by a hostile secular culture. As the conservative Christian political commentator David French wrote in a 2020 essay at *The Dispatch* called “Why Do They Hate Us?”: “There is no question that many millions of theologically conservative Christians feel like they’re increasingly under cultural siege, loathed and despised by the broader secular culture.” These fears have been stoked for decades by a combination of white evangelical leaders, conspiracy theorists, and most recently Donald Trump, who repeatedly told his white evangelical flock that without his protection the secular left would destroy them.

Tension with the broader secular culture has generated a sense of “embattlement” since white evangelicals recommitted themselves to the course of “engaged orthodoxy” in the mid-twentieth century (Smith 1998). During this period the perception that there was a “war on Christians” escalated “when a series of federal and Supreme court decisions declared certain public institutions off-limits for sectarian religious activity (e.g., prayer and Bible reading in public schools)” (Castelli 2007:156). Concerns ramped up again after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, which was framed in terms of a civilizational battle between Islamism and Christianity (Brubaker 2016), and set off a wave of political organizing in defense of Christians’ “religious freedom” (Castelli 2007:156).

Perceptions of Christian persecution have arguably reached new heights during the Trump era. According to PRRI’s 2020 American Values Survey, 66 percent of white evangelicals say that Christians face a lot of discrimination in the United States today, up from 57 percent in 2017 (Cox and Jones 2017a; PRRI 2020a).<sup>1</sup> At both points, however, white evangelicals were significant outliers from the general population in their perception that discrimination against Christians was more widespread than discrimination against Muslims,

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<sup>1</sup> In addition, PRRI’s 2021 Religious Liberty Survey found 57 percent of white evangelical Protestants think there is a lot of discrimination against Christians (PRRI Staff 2021a).

Black people, and Hispanic people (Green 2017). This perception is longstanding: in a 1998 study of American evangelicalism based on interviews and surveys, Smith reports a “perception of a double-standard in American public discourse that discriminates against Christians. Time and again we heard evangelicals observe that every racial, ethnic, religious, political, and ideological perspective existing is given fair time and a fair hearing, *except* the Christian perspective” (140). This high level of “perceived and anticipated persecution” does not appear to be based on personal experiences of persecution, but rather by elite messages that lead white evangelicals to anticipate persecution and then interpret any pushback or disagreement through this lens (Djupe 2020; on how evangelical elites “construct” embattlement, see Smith 1998: Ch 5; on this process among conservatives more generally, see Braunstein 2015 and Polletta and Callahan 2017).

The political rhetoric surrounding Christian persecution likely resonates so deeply, even in the absence of personal experiences, because it is often justified by reference to a “*theological* discourse of Christian persecution” (Castelli 2007:161). As Castelli (2007:161) observes:

Christianity itself is founded upon an archetype of religio-political persecution, the execution of Jesus by the Romans. Certainly, the earliest Christians routinely equated Christian identity with suffering persecution, as the gospels and letters in the New Testament amply attest: “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake,” Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account” (Matthew 5:10–11).

This theological discourse remains operative today. In the essay referenced earlier, French (2020) notes that when theologically conservative Christians learn of individual Christians actually facing intolerance or persecution, this knowledge is “both alarming and comforting.” It is alarming because:

no one wants to face threats to their liberty and livelihoods because of the free exercise of their faith. Yet the attacks were comforting because these are exactly the kinds of secular attacks Christians are taught to expect. After all, in John 15, Jesus told his disciples: “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.”

Translating scripture into contemporary political terms, he paraphrases: “We reject the world’s libertine sexual ethics and commitment to abortion, and thus the world rejects us.”

This “Christian persecution complex” (Castelli 2007) has persisted in the face of widespread evidence to the contrary, including the fact that white Christians until very recently constituted a demographic majority of Americans (Jones 2016); and American society, culture, and law have always privileged white Christian values, norms and practices (Joshi 2020). Of course, over this same period American society has also grown significantly more religiously diverse, and rising numbers of Americans no longer affiliate with any religion, contributing to a landscape in which white Christian hegemony has increasingly been questioned (Jones 2016; Wuthnow 2005). White evangelicals have generally interpreted these challenges to their power and privilege as challenges to their religious *freedom*.

Despite this transformation of the American religious landscape, however, concerns about a mounting secular attack on religious freedom do not appear founded. A 2018 study found that “anti-Christian hostility” has remained relatively stable over the past few decades, although those who express this hostility have grown wealthier (Yancey 2018). Even so, there is little evidence that this negative sentiment affects conservative Christians in any material way. To the contrary, Djupe (2019) finds that atheists and Democrats are actually quite tolerant of Christian fundamentalists, measured by whether they believe they “should be allowed to give speeches in the community, teach in public schools, run for public office and other liberties.” In fact, atheists are significantly *more* tolerant of evangelical Christians than evangelical Christians are of atheists, leading Djupe (2019) to conclude that “Their fear comes from an inverted golden rule: Expect from others what you would do unto them.”

There is some evidence that white evangelicals have become *culturally* stigmatized, and have even been partly responsible for an emerging stigma surrounding organized religion itself. Indeed, a prominent explanation for the dramatic rise of the religiously unaffiliated (aka, the “Nones”) in recent years is that many liberal and moderate Americans would rather leave organized religion altogether than be associated with the “intolerant” and “extreme” politics of the Religious Right (Hout and Fischer 2002, 2014; Braunstein 2021). As Baker and Smith (2005) put it, “The sentiment of many former nominally and liberally religious individuals was effectively, “If that’s what it means to be religious, then I’m not religious.” But evidence of group stigma is actually mixed, and Burge (2021) argues that even as the numbers of people *affiliated* with white evangelical churches declines, the number of people who *self-identify* as “evangelical” or “born again” has remained stable, suggesting that “evangelicalism is not toxic” (see also Sokhey, Neiheisel and Djupe 2018).

In sum, whether or not Christian persecution is *real*, white evangelicals perceive it to be. The question I thus turn to is how these perceptions of persecution influence white evangelicals’ religious and/or political strength. The precise relationship between perceived persecution and group strength bears greater scrutiny, particularly in light of significant changes in the size, composition, and character of the white evangelical community in recent decades. To this end, this chapter draws theoretical insights from the sociology of religion and social movement scholarship on the “repression-mobilization nexus” in order to develop a series of hypotheses about how perceptions of persecution – conceptualized as a kind of perceived repression – influence the strength of the white evangelical community and the Religious Right. Finally, the chapter reviews existing research, writing, and available data on white evangelicals during the Trump era to adjudicate between different theoretically plausible outcomes and point to areas for future research.

The analysis reveals a complex relationship between perceived embattlement, religious strength and political strength. Previous research on this relationship found that the evangelical subculture thrived on perceptions of embattlement with the broader American culture, even as these same perceptions limited their capacity for social change (Smith 1998; Perry 2017). Yet a review of more recent data suggests that as perceptions of embattlement have increased – and been weaponized by national political leaders and via new technologies – the white evangelical community has grown smaller, more political, and more radical, and by some accounts, has lost public legitimacy. Overall, these findings suggest that embattlement can encourage subcultural strength, but only up to a point. Once this tipping point is crossed, perceptions of embattlement can set processes into motion that lead to subcultural decline.

## THEORIZING THE EFFECTS OF PERCEIVED PERSECUTION

### *SUBCULTURAL IDENTITY THEORY*

In 1998, Smith outlined a new theory of the relationship between perceived persecution and religious strength. Smith's findings from a multi-method study of evangelical Christians challenged the prevailing expectation guided by secularization and modernization theories that modern evangelicalism was "disintegrating under the pressures of the modern world around it" (Smith 1998:16). Instead, he found modern evangelicalism was "thriving," according to "six distinct dimensions of religious strength: adherence to beliefs, salience of faith, robustness of faith, group participation, commitment to mission, and retention and recruitment of members" (21). In order to account for this surprising finding, he advanced his *subcultural identity theory*, which asserts that American evangelicalism

is strong not because it is shielded against, but because it is – or at least perceives itself to be – embattled with forces that seem to oppose or threaten it. Indeed, evangelicalism, we suggest, *thrives* on distinction, engagement, tension, conflict, and threat. Without these, evangelicalism would lose its identity and purpose and grow languid and aimless (Smith 1998: 89).

After demonstrating the extent to which perceptions of embattlement have strengthened American evangelicalism, however, Smith also outlines an important caveat. Namely, "the subcultural factors that build evangelical strength also appear ironically to undermine evangelical strategic efforts at social change" (Smith 1998:19). In particular, Smith found that evangelicals were drawn to the "idea that if everyone were converted to Christ, social ills would disappear" (Smith 1998: 190, quoting Woodbridge, Noll and Hatch 1979). This idea – central to what made their community distinctive from and in tension with the broader society – led them to approach social change as a matter of aggregated individual change. Yet like the owner of Maslow's hammer, who errs in thinking everything is a nail, evangelicals repeatedly found their "personal influence strategy" was ill-suited to the challenges of transforming complex political and cultural systems. As such, perceptions of embattlement appeared to increase religious strength while undermining political strength.

Subcultural identity theory remains a powerful lens through which sociologists of religion understand the distinctiveness of the white evangelical subculture (Bean 2014), as well as the limits of evangelical social change efforts (Perry 2017). Attuned as it is to dynamics of identity and group boundary making, and the effects of elite messaging on perceptions of embattlement, it is an essential starting point for our current inquiry. Yet it seems appropriate to revisit this "embattled and thriving" thesis in light of two confounding developments: first, white evangelicals in the Trump era perceive themselves as more embattled than ever, but it is not clear they are thriving *religiously*. Indeed, by some measures the white evangelical community has actually been shrinking, with especially significant losses among young people (Jones and Cox 2017a; Pew Research 2019) and an increasingly visible community of "exvangelicals" (Brobst 2021). And although Trump claims he has spurred a religious "revival" within evangelical churches, the public consensus is that white evangelicals' alliance with Trump has further tarnished their already troubled brand.<sup>2</sup> Second, and also contrary to the expectations of the

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<sup>2</sup> Burge (2021) summarizes these claims.

subcultural identity theory, their *political* strength appears to be outpacing their religious strength. Indeed, despite public infighting, white evangelicals appear to be extremely unified and mobilized, and at the center of conservative power structures (Stewart 2020; though cf. Castle and Stepp in this volume).

Moreover, each of these outcomes – religious and political strength – can be measured in various ways that result in a more complex picture. So too can the actual outcome of interest: meaning whether one is interested in white evangelical Christians or the Religious Right. There is of course significant overlap between these two categories, but conceptual slippage between them can obscure measurement. For all of these reasons, it makes sense to revisit and refine our theoretical expectations about the relationship between perceived embattlement and subcultural strength. I build on the subcultural identity theory by turning to another area of research and theorizing that deals with very similar questions: scholarship on the relationship between social movement repression and mobilization. While social movement scholars do not tend to focus on cases of *perceived* (rather than real) repression, they do explore how social movement participants and the communities from which they draw make sense of various forms of repression, and how this sense-making process shapes the impact of repression on the size and character of a movement.

#### THE REPRESSION-MOBILIZATION PARADOX

In order to bridge the divide between subcultural identity theory and scholarship on movement repression, we must first agree that white evangelicals' perception of persecution is akin to a kind of perceived repression. In particular, from white evangelicals' perspective, it resembles what scholars call "soft repression." Originally conceptualized by Myra Marx Ferree (2004) to describe the combination of *ridicule*, *stigma*, and *silencing* that the women's movement faced from non-state actors, the concept is widely applicable to a range of social movements who face (or perceive) collective pushback or backlash by the public and other non-state actors. "Whereas hard repression involves the mobilization of force to control or crush oppositional action through the use or threat of violence," Ferree argues, "soft repression involves the mobilization of non-violent means to silence or eradicate oppositional ideas" (88). While the Christian persecution complex often points to evidence of state-sponsored Christian persecution abroad, in the United States the persecution that white evangelicals perceive primarily comes in the form of this kind of public ridicule, stigma and silencing. Moreover, soft repression against social movements often looks similar to other "processes of social control that are directed at non-organized members of disempowered groups" (89). This concept thus helps us to see continuities in perceived repression against both the Religious Right (an organized movement) and white evangelicals (one of this movement's main constituent communities).

Once we conceptualize white evangelicals' perceptions as akin to those of other groups who are faced with (real or perceived) repression, we can draw on a large literature that attempts to theorize the relationship between repression and social movement strength. As it turns out, repression can have complex and varied effects on social movements, ranging from demobilization (as people become unwilling to bear the higher risks of involvement) to heightened mobilization (as anger about repression itself heightens protesters' resolve and raises awareness of their cause) (Davenport, Johnston and Mueller 2005; Earl 2006; Opp and Roehl 1990; Nepstad 2017). Others find a curvilinear relationship between repression and mobilization,

in which low levels of initial repression fuel mobilization, but as repression ramps up participation declines (Brockett 2005). Beyond changes in the *size* of a movement or level of protest activity, repression can also alter the *character* of the repressed group. For example, repression can both channel groups toward more moderate forms of political involvement (Earl 2006) or deepen a group's radicalism and/or militancy (della Porta 2008; Koopmans 1997). This variation has led scholars to refer to a "repression-mobilization paradox" or "paradox of repression."

While much of this research explains variation by reference to objective differences in the form and strength of repression, some scholars emphasize the need for "a close examination of how activists talk about and interpret the meaning of repressive experiences" (Nepstad 2017: 249). It is precisely this kind of subjective approach that offers the most insight into the white evangelical experience of *perceived* repression. In particular, attention to "a movement's cultural norms, beliefs, and practices can determine whether activists view repression as a punishment to avoid or an empowering event" (249). The interpretations can depend, for example, on the role of religion within a group, as when participants in the US Plowshares movement drew on their collective identity as radical Catholics in order to frame their repression as evidence of "Christian fidelity." As Nepstad (2017: 253) writes, "U.S. Plowshares activists view their stigmatization and incarceration as an indication that they are faithfully following in Christ's steps." A similar dynamic has been found among the creationist movement, which is led by conservative Christians. As Binder (2007) notes, "vigorous repression of challenger demands often leads to a growing sense of solidarity and moral obligation among challenging groups like creationists." Interpretations can also depend on whether repression is perceived as illegitimate, as in cases of attempts to curtail legally protected political activity (Opp and Roehl 1990), or to limit Christian privilege if this is interpreted as a threat to religious freedom itself (Joshi 2020). When this is the case, it can trigger "micromobilization processes" that further radicalize and/or strengthen commitment to the repressed group.

Elsewhere, I have shown that groups associated with the Religious Right have responded to the experience of being the object of public backlash in precisely this manner, by engaging in a "counter-backlash" against those who disapprove of them (Braunstein 2021). Yet more analysis is needed of the precise manifestations and effects of this counter-backlash. To that end, we can combine the insights outlined above to generate a series of hypotheses about how perceptions of repression may influence the size and character of the white evangelical community. Since research on the Christian persecution complex suggests that white evangelicals view most forms of pushback or disagreement as illegitimate silencing, the assumption that repression is illegitimate is held constant in all of the proposed hypotheses:

H1: Perceptions of illegitimate repression are likely to lead to **heightened mobilization** by white evangelicals.

Social movement scholars measure heightened mobilization in multiple ways, including an increase in protest activity or an increase in membership or support for a movement. Translating these measures into terms that are relevant to our inquiry, I propose the following specifications to this hypothesis:

H1: Perceptions of illegitimate repression are likely to lead:

- a. more people to **affiliate and/or identify** with the white evangelical community.

- b. to **greater political mobilization** by white evangelicals.
- c. to **more organized political activism** by groups associated with the Religious Right.
- d. to **more public support** for the political causes championed by the Religious Right.

In addition to these outcomes, this literature would lead us to propose the following hypotheses regarding the effects of perceived repression on the character or culture of this group.

H2: Perceptions of illegitimate repression are likely to lead to **greater in-group commitment** among white evangelicals.

H3: Perceptions of illegitimate repression are likely to lead white evangelicals to become **more radical in their views and/or style**.

## ASSESSING EVIDENCE FROM EXISTING RESEARCH

This section reviews existing research, writing, and available data on white evangelicals mostly during the Trump era to assess support for these hypotheses. First, do perceptions of illegitimate repression lead to heightened mobilization by white evangelicals (**H1**)? The longstanding assumption is that perceived repression strengthens this group, particularly in terms of membership and “commitment to mission.” As discussed earlier, this is the basis of Smith’s (1998) “embattled and thriving” thesis. Castelli (2007: 156), too, argues that “the portrayal of Christians as an embattled community in the United States [is] performing important political and ideological work,” particularly through this rhetoric’s “capacity to mobilize the faithful while rendering critique largely ineffective.” She notes that Christians have long credited experiences of persecution with the “expansion of the church,” citing “what has over the centuries become a near-slogan of the Christian movement: ‘The blood of Christians is the seed [of the church]’ (*semen est sanguis Christianorum*)” (161). Leaders appear to be tapping into this understanding of their own history when they strategically “ramp[ed] up perceived and anticipated persecution” “to keep conservative Christians unified in the 2020 election season” (Djupe 2020).

The problem is that while these perceptions of repression are arguably at a high-point – encouraged by organized efforts to defend Christian’s “religious liberty,” stoked by Trump and white evangelical leaders, and amplified by the right-wing media echo chamber – the available evidence no longer appears to unambiguously support the conclusion that these perceptions of repression are correlated with “thriving.” In addition to the mixed effects of embattlement on the community’s *size and strength* (depending on how this is measured (**H1a-d**)), high levels of perceived repression also appear to be changing the *character* of this community, shifting the locus of commitment from a religious in-group to a political one (**H2**) and heightening political radicalism (**H3**).

## RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION

Smith declared in 1998 that “evangelicalism is one of the strongest religious traditions in America today,” and indeed, as Cox and Jones (2017a) note, “White evangelicals managed to avoid the first wave of white Christian decline in the 1990s and into the early years of the 21st century.” But if we measure group strength today by the number of Americans who affiliate

and/or identify with the white evangelical community (**H1a**), the story is less rosy. Indeed, by 2019, the Pew Research Center’s headline finding in their update to their religious landscape survey was “Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace.” This decline was documented among Catholics and Protestants who do not identify as born-again – groups whose declines had previously received attention – but *also* born-again/evangelical Protestants. Notably, white born-again/evangelical Protestants declined from 19% of the population in 2009 to 16% in 2018/19. PRRI’s data mirror Pew’s, showing that white evangelical Protestants declined from 23% of the population in 2006 to only 17% in 2017. Moreover, white evangelical Protestants – like other Christian groups – are aging. In 2017, only 11% of white evangelical Protestants were under 30, suggesting these declines may continue and be a longstanding reality unless young people re-engage in large numbers (Cox and Jones 2017a).

Not only are white Americans abandoning evangelical Protestantism, but many are disaffiliating from organized religion altogether. The irony is that social scientists point to white evangelicals themselves as one of the *drivers* of America’s growing nonreligious population. The basic argument is as follows: rising numbers of liberal and moderate Americans started disaffiliating from religion during the early 1990s, around the same time that the Religious Right “became a political factor,” measured in press attention, a “religiously tinged political atmosphere,” and the growing symbolic association between religious and conservative political identities (Hout and Fischer 2002: 179). Noting that large numbers of these religiously disaffiliated people continued to identify as spiritual, to pray, and to seek “God’s help in times of trouble,” Hout and Fischer (2002) conclude, “Their quarrel was not with God but with people running organized religion” (178).<sup>3</sup> In short, many Americans’ abandonment of organized religion has been influenced, at least in part, by distaste for the politics of the Religious Right and the tendency to associate *all* organized religion with this radical brand of conservative politicized religion (Hout and Fischer 2014; Pew 2018; Margolis 2018; Djupe, Neiheisel, and Conger 2018; Djupe, Neiheisel, and Sokhey 2018; Vargas 2012; Campbell et al. 2021; Braunstein 2021).

The combination of declining numbers of white evangelicals and the rising numbers of “Nones” could also have longer term consequences. In the war white evangelicals perceive between themselves and the rest of country, the “Nones” represent a growing supply of foot soldiers in the ranks of the opposing force. In the arena of electoral politics, the influence of this growing number of religiously unaffiliated Americans is already being felt, and is providing a counterbalance to the white evangelical vote (Baker and Marti 2020; Campbell et al. 2021).

### *POLITICAL MOBILIZATION*

That said, a focus on changes in affiliation alone misses part of the story. If we look at the extent to which perceptions of illegitimate repression lead to greater political mobilization by white evangelical voters (**H1b**), evidence suggests a clearer positive effect. For example, PRRI found that despite shrinking as a proportion of the population, “white evangelical Protestants remain the dominant religious force in the GOP,” with “more than one-third (35%) of all Republicans identify[ing] as white evangelical Protestant, a proportion that has remained roughly

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<sup>3</sup> This “quarrel” likely dates at least to the “cultural turmoil of the 1960s” (Hout and Fischer 2022:189), if not farther back. See also Putnam and Campbell 2010 on the “earthquake” of the 1960s and “two aftershocks”; and Baker and Smith 2015 on “the great abdication.”

stable over the past decade” (Cox and Jones 2017). Moreover, white evangelicals have been among Trump’s most stalwart and unified supporters at the ballot box, with around 80 percent of white evangelical voters supporting him in *both* 2016 and 2020.<sup>4</sup> But their political power is not only linked to their unity and loyalty to Trump and the Republican Party; it is also due to the fact that even as their group shrinks as a percentage of the *population* they continue to make up about a quarter of the *electorate*. Jones (2019) describes this phenomenon as an “electoral time machine”:

Although white evangelical Protestants composed only 17 percent of the public in 2016, they were 26 percent of voters. In other words, in the electorate,... white evangelical Protestants were nine percentage points overrepresented. When white *Christians* stepped into the voting booth in 2016, their electoral power was comparable to their share of the population back in 2008. The Republican time machine took white *evangelicals* on an even longer journey. They jumped back to the middle of the George W. Bush era, the last time they made up nearly a quarter of the population (*emphasis added*).

Of course, it will be impossible to sustain this “time machine” effect forever, and if white evangelicals’ numbers continue to decline, eventually their share of the vote will also take a hit. In the meantime, however, their high turnout and loyalty in the voting booth earned them four years in the inner circle of political power with Trump, yielding political and policy wins that will likely influence American society for years to come (Stewart 2020).

### ORGANIZED POLITICAL ACTIVISM

Beyond their power as a unified voting bloc, white evangelicals are also crucial foot soldiers in a wide variety of conservative religious political organizations and issue campaigns: including those focused on restricting abortion, limiting the rights of LGBTQ+ people, promoting religion in public schools and support for religious schools, promoting “religious freedom,” and others (Wilcox and Robinson 2018). Research has previously shown that Christian Right political activism is driven in part by perceptions of “threat” (Conger 2009, 2010). The question is whether this kind of organized political activism has increased during the current period in which perceptions of repression are heightened (**H1c**). This could be measured in a wide variety of ways, including rising numbers of protest events; an increase in organizational membership or fundraising; the size and reach of social media campaigns; and others. While existing scholarship on this point is relatively thin, the available data points to a decline. For example, Burge (2020a) finds that even as evangelicals “punch way above their weight” in the voting booth, when we look at political activities beyond voting, Christians were far less active in 2018 than they were in 2010. Data from the National Congregation Study tells a similar story. Specifically, between 1998 and 2019 attendees of white conservative congregations reported declining rates of participation in a march or demonstration (14.8% to 7.1%), lobbying an elected official (5.4% to 1.9%), and distributing a voter guide to one’s congregation (33% to 23.6%).<sup>5</sup> Together, this points to the possibility that as white evangelicals

<sup>4</sup> Trump received 81% of the white evangelical vote in 2016. Exit polls showed “between 76 and 81% of white evangelical and ‘born again’ voters supporting Trump” in 2020 (Gjeltén 2020).

<sup>5</sup> See <https://sites.duke.edu/ncsweb/explore-the-data/>.

decline as a share of the population, they are shifting more of their political energy and resources toward maintaining their dominance in the voting booth.

Of course, it is also possible that these specific forms of decline coincide with increases in other unobserved forms of activism, including online activities. Moreover, a focus on the quantity of activism alone misses a broadening of the package of issues around which white evangelicals are active. Indeed, during the Trump era white evangelicals have remained committed to bread-and-butter issues like abortion, but also been central to campaigns related to white Christian nationalism (Whitehead and Perry 2020); Trump's efforts to remain in power after his 2020 loss (McCammon 2021); resistance to COVID-19 vaccines (Gerson 2021; Jenkins 2021); and the banning of "critical race theory" in schools (Smietana 2022).

### *PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR ISSUES*

Finally, we can assess whether perceptions of illegitimate repression have led to more public support for the political causes championed by the Religious Right (**H1d**). Many of the arguments white evangelicals make about threats to their religious freedom, minority rights, and ability to freely voice their opinions are framed in a manner that is intended to resonate with the general public (Lewis 2018). If the public views their concerns as reasonable and their "repression" as illegitimate, this could perhaps lead outsiders to listen more closely to their arguments and even view their positions as more appealing. Yet available evidence suggests that this has not happened.

First, white evangelicals' claims to be the most repressed group in the country are generally not taken seriously by any other group of Americans besides white evangelicals. When asked which groups face a lot of discrimination, more white evangelicals pointed to Christians (66 percent) than Black people (55 percent), White people (52 percent), Hispanic people (46 percent) and Asian people (35 percent). With the exception of Republicans, however, all other groups of Americans rank Christians either last or second to last (ahead of White people), and only 37 percent of Americans overall view Christians as a group facing a lot of repression (PRRI 2020a).

Second, public support for issues that white evangelicals champion has generally declined over time. For example, Americans have grown increasingly supportive of LGBTQ rights, including same-sex marriage and nondiscrimination protections, despite decades of resistance from white evangelicals. As of 2021, 67 percent of all Americans support same-sex marriage, up from 47 percent in 2011, and 76 percent of Americans support nondiscrimination protections. Even white evangelicals, who lag behind other religious groups in their support for these rights, have grown more supportive of both nondiscrimination protections and same-sex marriage in recent years (PRRI 2021b). Their demands have subsequently grown narrower and more focused on retaining the right of "small businesses to refuse products or services to gay or lesbian people if doing so violates their religious beliefs." Between 2016 and 2019, it appeared public opposition to these demands was weakening – perhaps a sign of white evangelical success on this front – but in 2021 attitudes bounced back to 2016 levels, with 61 percent of Americans opposing such "religious liberty" protections (PRRI 2021b). This pattern can be found more broadly as well—from racial injustice to COVID-19 to nostalgia about the 1950s, white evangelicals' attitudes are increasingly out of step with the rest of society (PRRI 2020a).

Finally, the issues that evangelicals prioritize are not as important to other groups of Americans. For example, although Americans remain divided over abortion legality and morality, there are significant differences in the salience of this issue for different religious groups. Today, white evangelicals are the only religious group in which a majority (63 percent) identify abortion as a critical issue, and it is also their most critical issue.

### *IN-GROUP COMMITMENT*

Beyond measures of the size and strength of white evangelicalism and the Religious Right, it is useful to consider changes to the character of this community. First, have perceptions of illegitimate repression led to greater in-group commitment among white evangelicals (**H2**)? The evidence on this point is mixed, and is largely shaped by how we define the “group” to which they are committed.

The Trump era precipitated high-profile dissension and division within the white evangelical community. While reports of a mass exodus from white evangelical churches have been greatly exaggerated, there has nonetheless been a steady drumbeat of critique and even some high-profile protests by “exit” (Hirschman 1970). In 2019, then editor of *Christianity Today* Mark Galli penned a stunning op-ed addressed to “the many evangelicals who continue to support Mr. Trump in spite of his blackened moral record.” He reminded them:

Remember who you are and whom you serve. Consider how your justification of Mr. Trump influences your witness to your Lord and Savior. Consider what an unbelieving world will say if you continue to brush off Mr. Trump’s immoral words and behavior in the cause of political expediency. If we don’t reverse course now, will anyone take anything we say about justice and righteousness with any seriousness for decades to come?

Although the op-ed did not produce the repudiation of Trump that Galli may have hoped, in the two years since, observers have anecdotally tracked a growing “exvangelical movement” (Brobst 2021). Yet “the majority of those leaving evangelical churches and organizations have done so quietly,” making their exits less visible to others and less disruptive to the organizations they left behind (Du Mez 2021). Du Mez thus calls upon white evangelicals to follow the lead of Jemar Tisby and other Black Christians who are opting to #LeaveLOUD:

#LeavingLOUD plays a vital role in revealing dynamics that often remain hidden—dynamics that must be brought into the light. Depending on the circumstances, #StayingLOUD can do the same thing. But silence in leaving or remaining will only allow these patterns to persist. It is long past time for white evangelicals to call out injustice, bigotry, violent rhetoric, disparaging language, racism, misogyny, abuse of power, and the idolatry of Christian nationalism in their own communities, even if doing so comes at a cost.

This is precisely the strategy that the prominent leaders Beth Moore and Russell Moore (no relation) adopted when they publicly announced their breaks with the Southern Baptist Convention, with the former citing concerns about “the nationalism, sexism and racial divides that seem to define its public witness” (Banks 2021; Smietana 2021).

A review of available evidence suggests that such exits are the result of a purification process that has transformed the character of the remaining community. Those who remain are

not only the most intensely committed members, but the locus of their commitment has undergone a shift from a shared *religious* project to a shared *political* agenda. For example, research finds that as moderate and weakly attached participants are leaving churches, “the most ardently and dogmatically religious persist and now make up a larger share of those who are religious” (Schnabel and Bock 2017: 697; Patrikios 2008; Putnam and Campbell 2010). But this purification process is not only about religious intensity; it is also about political loyalty. Even among conservative religionists, disagreement about the Religious Right appears to be driving conflicted and marginally-involved evangelical Republicans from the pews (Djupe, Neiheisel and Sokhey 2018), such that those who remain are likely to be even more deeply committed to the agenda of the Religious Right.

This process becomes even clearer when we examine research on white evangelicals’ support for Donald Trump. Not only did more than 80 percent of white evangelicals vote for Trump in both 2016 and 2020 (Gjelten 2020), but they have arguably grown even more loyal in the intervening years, despite repeated revelations of his extreme views and inappropriate behavior. According to the 2019 PRRI American Values Survey, three quarters of white evangelicals continued to hold a favorable view of Trump, and 31 percent of them said there was almost nothing he could do to lose their approval (PRRI Staff 2019). The latter figure was up from 25 percent just ahead of the 2018 midterm elections, suggesting deepening intensity of commitment (Vandermaas-Peeler et al. 2018). This intense commitment can be attributed to multiple factors, according to Posner (2020), among them the widespread belief among white evangelicals that Trump was anointed by God to lead the country and the fact that Trump has encouraged them to distrust any source of information that would lead them to question him. Put simply, Trump has successfully weaponized embattlement, while transforming the battle in which evangelicals imagine themselves into one defined by partisan politics rather than faith.

An analysis of those who self-identify with the labels “evangelical” or “born-again” today offers additional support to this conclusion. Although the number of people who “identify as evangelical by religious tradition” is falling (as discussed earlier), those who self-identify with these *labels* “has not changed in any meaningful way over the past decade. In fact, larger shares of Americans have said that they have had a born-again experience in 2018 than at any point since 1972, according to the General Social Survey” (Burge 2021). But this growth appears to be driven less by religious sentiment than political loyalty. Burge finds, for example, that compared to those who have historically identified as born-again or evangelical, those who do so today are less likely to be frequent churchgoers (and more likely to attend seldom or never) and less likely to describe religion as very important to them. Moreover, based on a panel study collected from a single group of respondents in both 2016 and 2020, Pew found that 16% of “white respondents who did not identify as evangelicals in 2016 and who expressed a warm view of Trump at some point during the timespan of this study... began describing themselves as born-again or evangelical Protestants by 2020” (Smith 2021). Together, this data suggests that the evangelical label has become a marker of political conservatism and Republican identity more than any particular set of religious beliefs or practices.

### *RADICALISM*

Before assessing the final hypothesis – whether perceptions of illegitimate repression have led white evangelicals to become more radical in their views and/or style (**H3**) – it is

important to recognize that religious conservatives in the US have long been viewed as more radical than religious liberals (Braunstein 2021), in both the “intensity” of their affiliation and practice (Schnabel and Bock 2017), and in the uncompromising and anti-pluralist nature of their public religious expression (Gorski 2017; Stewart 2020; Wilcox and Robinson 2018; Whitehead and Perry 2020). Some scholars have resisted applying the label “radical” to the Christian Right (Wilcox and Robinson 2018), due to its pejorative connotations and the fact that it perhaps erroneously frames this movement as promoting “ideas that thoroughly challenge those of mainstream society” (Diamond 1995:5). But regardless of which terms we use, it is important to recognize that this “baseline” level of relative radicalism has been linked to the perception of embattlement. Indeed, it is precisely because evangelicals see themselves as the victims of a “war on Christians” that they are able to justify relatively extreme measures. As Castelli (2007:166) observes,

the necessary response to “the culture,” then, must be a biblical response: putting on the armor of God and going fearlessly into battle against secularism, media, feminism, homosexuality, and the government itself. There are different institutional and organizational manifestations of this project, some seeking to stake out a more centrist terrain while others clearly embrace their place on the extreme edge of this movement.

The question for us, then, is whether *heightened* perceptions of repression have led more white evangelicals to take this latter route: becoming *more* extreme and radical in their views or style.

While research on these transformations is continuing to develop, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that this community is increasing in their radicalism, and that perceptions of repression are driving this process (Braunstein 2021). Previous research on political radicalization has found that repression can lead to radicalization under a variety of circumstances, including: when intense in-group commitment leads to the severing of ties with and trust in outsiders, creating “echo chambers” that foster the formation and reinforcement of radical ideas (della Porta 2018); and when a group comes to believe that less radical means will be ineffective at bringing about the change they seek (Nepstad 2017:248). White evangelicals today are exhibiting both of these tendencies.

First, the purification process described earlier has corresponded with the rise of social media and a partisan news ecosystem that has deepened the echo-chamber in which white evangelicals (and other Trump supporters) exist. Within this right-wing media echo-chamber, white evangelicals are not only exposed to a slanted version of the news and outright disinformation (Braun 2021), but also the recurring theme that there is a “war on Christians” (Jenkins 2020). As Castelli (2007:173) warns,

The effects of the discursive production of the “war on Christians” are multiple: on one level, they become self-generating, caught in a repetitive circuit that amplifies and legitimates the claims of religious persecution through each successive level of iteration, regardless of any counterinterpretation or presentation of empirically grounded counter-evidence. Working at the level of sloganeering, the language of the “war on Christians” creates an interpretive frame through which any number of political and cultural moments come to be viewed. But the “war on Christians” discourse is also a productive discourse, with

the capacity to contribute to the transformation of social policy at the highest levels.

These developments exacerbate existing pressures within white evangelical communities themselves, which increasingly demand partisan loyalty and in which people uncomfortable with this are leaving (Bean 2014; Djupe, Neiheisel, and Sokhey 2018). Together, these dynamics shape which authorities and information white evangelicals trust, and the extent to which outsiders can correct false perceptions and misinformation.

This has never been more visible than in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, where white evangelicals quickly came to frame government policies intended to limit the spread of the deadly virus as primarily efforts to restrict their “religious freedom.” Once they interpreted the public sector’s response through this persecution frame, it was not surprising that they placed greater trust in Trump (whom they viewed as distinct from the government he led) than in those of the media and public health experts (Burge 2020b); and are among the groups most likely to report “vaccine hesitancy” (Gerson 2021). Their isolation from mainstream information sources has also made them vulnerable to a wide range of conspiracy theories, like QAnon, in part by bringing them into closer contact with far-right groups who traffic in the same pro-Trump media worlds they frequent (Djupe and Burge 2020; Posner 2020; Rogers 2021; Wolfe 2018, Ch 4). The conservative Christian commentator David French attributes white evangelicals’ vulnerability to conspiracy theories directly to their persecution complex (Illing 2021):

And, again, the religious right has already been conditioned by decades of conservative media telling them that the godless left wants to destroy their way of life. They’ve been told for 20 years that the left hates them and wants them dead. They’ve been told the Democratic Party wants to kill the church. And all these big lies have been supported by countless smaller, enabling lies. So it’s not hard to see why conspiracy theories take root in these communities.

Second, with fewer internal checks on radical ideas, white evangelicals appear to be moving toward even more radical beliefs and uncompromising political tactics, driven not only by the echo-chamber effect described above, but also reportedly by a growing sense that desperate times call for desperate measures and that the ends justify the means. In particular, the white evangelical alliance with Donald Trump (which has required a 180-degree reversal on their previous stance on whether an “elected official who commits an immoral act in their personal life can still behave ethically and fulfill their duties in their public and professional life” (PRRI 2020a)) has been interpreted as a desperate bid for power at all costs, including at the expense of their public witness (Galli 2019; Stewart 2020).

The Religious Right has also grown even more intertwined with the so-called “racist Right” (Diamond 1995), in part through their shared affection for Trump and common right-wing media sources (Posner 2020). Given this cross-pollination between the “religious” and “racist” factions of the right, it does not seem coincidental that Trump’s followers, following his lead, have now “abandoned the niceties of Judeo-Christian rhetoric” (Gaston 2019: 5) that the Religious Right relied on for decades in order to present their policy program as compatible with pluralistic democracy (Braunstein and Lawton 2019), and have instead turned to explicitly championing the causes of “white Christian nationalism” (Whitehead and Perry 2020) and white supremacy (Butler 2021; Jones 2020). These ideas have long festered beneath the surface of

American politics and white evangelical culture, but have come much more prominently into public view in the Trump era.

Moreover, the turn toward more radical ideas has corresponded with an embrace of more radical political tactics, including violence. When Trump supporters armed with both weapons and “Christian rituals, symbols and language” (Dias and Graham 2021) attacked the United States Capitol in an attempt to overturn the results of the 2021 election, this made it impossible to deny the fusion between (at least part of) today’s evangelical community and “white supremacist terrorism” (Devega 2021). While the precise religious composition of the insurrectionists is not known, analyses of Trump’s “most ardent supporters”—the group most likely to have participated—find that evangelicals comprise around half of this group, double the share of evangelicals in the general population (Burge 2021). Moreover, subsequent research by PRRI finds that 26% of white evangelicals and 27% of those who believe “God has granted America a special role in human history” “agree that true American patriots might have to resort to violence in order to save our country.” These levels of agreement are higher than any other religious group (PRRI 2022).

The movement’s deepening radicalization has not been lost on scholars, who have drawn comparisons between Trump’s supporters and a range of radical movements from the country’s history, from white nationalist movements like the 1920s Ku Klux Klan (McVeigh and Estep 2019) to midcentury “radical right” anticommunist movements (Wolfe 2018: 4). Even many white Christians have voiced concern about the movement’s radicalization, and its implications for “the reputation of evangelical religion and on the world’s understanding of the gospel” (Galli 2019).

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

This chapter revisits existing research and theorizing on the relationship between the “Christian persecution complex” and the strength and character of the white evangelical community in the United States. For several decades, scholars and observers alike have marveled at the fact that white evangelicals appeared to be avoiding the fate of other Christian groups in the United States, which were declining as religious “nones” increased in number. Their relative religious strength has been attributed, at least in part, to evangelicals’ perceptions of their “embattlement” with the broader secular culture (Smith 1998). Yet it is time to revisit this influential “embattled and thriving” thesis in light of several factors, including the fact that white evangelical Protestant affiliation numbers have begun to decline alongside those of mainline Protestants and Catholics, despite the fact that perceptions of a “war on Christians” appear to have reached new heights in the Trump era.

In order to develop a finer grained understanding of the effects of embattlement on white evangelicals, I turn to a related but largely untapped literature on the relationship between repression and social movement mobilization. Conceptualizing embattlement as akin to perceived “soft repression” (Ferree 2004), I developed a series of hypothesis about the relationship between perceived repression, religious and political strength, and group character. I then reviewed available research to assess each of the hypotheses. Below, I summarize the findings of this analysis.

Table 1 – Summary of Results	
Have recent increases in perceived repression among white evangelicals...	Summary of existing evidence
H1: increased mobilization?	Mixed
H1a: increased religious affiliation?	No
H1b: increased political mobilization?	Yes
H1c: increased organized political activity?	No
H1d: increased public support for issues?	No
H2: increased in-group commitment?	Mixed
H3: increased radicalism?	Yes

On the specific question of whether perceived repression has led to greater religious strength, the answer appears to be no, based on the continued decline in white evangelical affiliation numbers and growing divisions within evangelical communities. That said, those who remain involved are highly politically unified, loyal, and mobilized as an electoral bloc. Moreover, they are increasingly radical in their political views and style of political engagement, including acceptance of political violence. Interestingly, this outcome is nearly the inverse of what Smith (1998) found, in that perceived repression appears to be eroding religious strength (by some measures) while fueling greater political strength (by some measures, and perhaps only in the short term). Together, this analysis supports the conclusion that white evangelicals today are *embattled and radicalizing*.

I do not suggest that Smith (1998) and others were wrong in their assessments that white evangelicals were embattled and thriving during an earlier historical moment, but rather that the relationship between embattlement and religious strength may be curvilinear. In this way, it mirrors the pattern found in studies of social movement repression, in which initial repression can encourage activist commitment but that continued and heightened repression can eventually lead to demobilization. This suggests that there is an optimal level of embattlement: just enough to motivate commitment and brighten boundaries around a group, but not so much that it drives a group to crush all internal dissent, isolate themselves from mainstream information sources, and become vulnerable to leaders that seek to manipulate them for political gain. It appears that white evangelicals have crossed over this tipping point, and that too much talk of persecution has become self-destructive, prompting a spiral of purification and radicalization.

Achieving an optimal level of embattlement requires a delicate balancing act, which is best achieved by internal leaders attuned to the effects of their rhetoric on the religious strength of the community. What the current analysis reveals, however, is that some of the most prominent promoters of the “war on Christians” narrative today are political and media elites who are not themselves part of the white evangelical community, and whose primary goal is not religious thriving but securing white evangelical support for their partisan political projects.

These agents of embattlement have no incentive to carefully calibrate their rhetoric, and are thus more likely to push a community past the embattlement tipping point and initiate processes of subcultural decline.

Still, more research is needed to confirm the conclusions of this initial review of research and effort to theorize the effects of perceived repression. Better efforts could be made to measure both perceptions of repression *and* each of these outcomes within individual studies, so the relationship between them can be assessed more clearly. Related to this, future research should attempt to tease out whether this relationship is causal, and if so, the direction(s) of influence. Although it is common for researchers and observers to frame perceived repression as a *cause* of the various outcomes observed, in many cases we are only able to observe a correlation between these factors. Future research is thus needed to evaluate whether and how perceptions of repression operate as a causal force, and whether there is unrecognized variation in its effects; and additionally, whether there is a feedback effect between these various outcomes and a deepening sense of embattlement (Braunstein 2021). Finally, what can be learned through a deeper study of those white evangelicals who have protested against the purification and radicalizing processes they are witnessing within their community (Brooks 2022)? What is the relative effect of their choices to remain in their communities and use their “voice” to press for change within, or to express their dissatisfaction by “exiting” either quietly or loudly (Hirschman 1970)? The transformations that this chapter reviews are still in process, and the ultimate fate of this faith community and political movement depends at least as much on these critics as it does on the true believers.

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