

# White Evangelicals and American Right-wing Populism: The Evolutions of an Ethics

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ABSTRACT: This article explores current right-wing populism as an ethical position from the perspective of many, though not all, White American evangelicals. The relevant ethics concern not only abortion or gay marriage (which, research finds, are not top vote-motivators) but views of society (who's in, who's not) and government (size and role). Building on ideational approaches to studying populism and incorporating historical and religio-cultural material, this article asks: What in White evangelical religious and political history and in present circumstances makes right-wing populism look to be the most ethical stance? In answer, the article explores populism as proposed solutions to the complex intersectionality of economic, way-of-life, and status-loss duress. It investigates how evangelicals, drawing in mediated ways from their religio-political history and beliefs, understand right-populist views of society and government as an ethical solution to these duresses.

## INTRODUCTION

WHITE EVANGELICAL SUPPORT for right-wing populist candidate Donald Trump increased to 84 percent in 2020 up from 81 percent in 2016. White evangelicals were prominent in the January 6, 2021, Capitol Building riot in support of Trump's (false) claims that he had won the 2020 election.<sup>1</sup> An early 2023 study reports 63 percent of White evangelicals continuing to hold favorable views of him.<sup>2</sup> What accounts for such strong embrace, given that

<sup>1</sup>Marcia Pally, *White Evangelicals and Right-wing Populism: How Did We Get Here?* (Abingdon-on-Thames, England: Routledge, 2022), 86–87.

<sup>2</sup>Robert Jones, "Why a Trump Indictment Will Matter So Little to Most of His Christian Supporters," Religion News Service, March 24, 2023, <https://religionnews.com>.

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Trump's tax fraud, failure to pay workers, manhandling of women, and his political policies would seem to violate Christian ethics? In Trump's 2017 tax cut, the business journal *Forbes* wrote, "The biggest winners" were "corporations and the households that get income from corporate profits"—not the "least of these" but the very wealthiest Americans.<sup>3</sup> Anthea Butler and others find that today "evangelical is more a political label than a religious one."<sup>4</sup> Indeed, just 45 percent of self-identified evangelicals firmly agree with core evangelical tenets while 31 percent of those who hold evangelical beliefs reject the identifier "evangelical."<sup>5</sup>

Yet those who support right-wing populism *from* evangelical ethics raise the question of how the two are squared. Looking at the ideational and experiential resources that bear on White evangelical ethics formation, we may ask: What in White evangelical religious and political history and in present circumstances makes right-wing populism look to be the ethical stance?

We begin with a minimal definition of populism (Takis Pappas<sup>6</sup>) and sketch the development of White evangelical populism through each step of that definition. The first step looks at current conditions of duress; the next explores responses to that duress as they draw in mediated ways from history and religious belief. We conclude with how those responses are expressed in evangelical politics and populism today.

This sketch is meant as a guide to the motivations and political ethics undergirding White evangelical populism. It does not aspire to comprehensive coverage of evangelical political activity, which can be found in more journalistic sources (see, for instance, the fine reporting by Jack Jenkins, Yonat Shimron, and Bob Smietana at *Religion News Service*). Owing to this article's short form, the political ethics of White evangelicals not in the ranks of the right<sup>7</sup> and of evangelicals of color require separate studies.

[com/2023/03/24/why-a-trump-indictment-will-matter-so-little-to-most-of-his-christian-supporters/](https://www.com/2023/03/24/why-a-trump-indictment-will-matter-so-little-to-most-of-his-christian-supporters/).

<sup>3</sup>Teresa Ghilarducci, "Five Good Reasons It Doesn't Feel Like The Trump Tax Cut Benefited You," *Forbes*, April 9, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/teresaghilarducci/2019/04/09/five-good-reasons-it-doesnt-feel-like-the-trump-tax-cut-benefited-you/?sh=62cbad3713e0>.

<sup>4</sup>Anthea Butler, "Trump, Republicans and White Evangelicals Are Forming a Powerful Trifecta," *MSNBC*, September 19, 2021, <https://www.msnbc.com/opinion/trump-republicans-white-evangelicals-are-forming-powerful-trifecta-n1279504>.

<sup>5</sup>Bob Smietana, "Many Who Call Themselves Evangelical Don't Actually Hold Evangelical Beliefs," *Lifeway Research*, December 6, 2017, <https://lifewayresearch.com/2017/12/06/many-evangelicals-dont-hold-evangelical-beliefs/>; Thomas Kidd, *Who is an Evangelical? The History of a Movement in Crisis* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019).

<sup>6</sup>Takis S. Pappas, "Modern Populism: Research Advances, Conceptual and Methodological Pitfalls, and the Minimal Definition," *Politics: Oxford Research Encyclopedias*, March 3, 2016, <https://oxfordre.com/politics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-17>.

<sup>7</sup>Pally, *White Evangelicals and Right-wing Populism*, ch. 8.

## TERMS

(1) “*Evangelical by belief*” is here defined by the Bebbington Quadrilateral of biblicism, crucicentrism, conversionism and activism.<sup>8</sup> The Gallup poll has developed similar criteria for identifying those holding to evangelical belief.<sup>9</sup>

(2) *The political “left” and “right”* need a bit more discussion as current political identification no longer follows classic left/right positions.<sup>10</sup> As used here: populist “right” marks the belief that society is changing in unwanted ways but can be saved by protectionist trade and immigration policies and by limiting the access of domestic minorities to resources and opportunities. In the US, right-wing populism is often accompanied, for reasons we shall see, by “small government-ism,” reducing government’s role in society through market deregulation, tax cuts, and the reduction of social services. The populist “left” marks the belief that society is also changing unproductively but can be improved by civil society *and* government efforts to broaden access to resources and opportunity.

(3) The “*minimal definition*” of populism<sup>11</sup> specifies those patterns necessary to identify a phenomenon as populist while allowing historico-cultural specifics to follow as second order features of individual cases. In a minimal definition, populism may be understood as

a way of understanding and responding to economic, status loss, and way-of-life duresses (present or anticipated) that finds solution in us-them binaries (strong or soft) that draw in mediated ways from specific historico-cultural notions of society (who’s “us,” who’s “them”) and government (its proper size and role)—for instance, a “them” of Mexican migrants in the U.S. and of the Roma in central Europe.

Populist binaries may propose a “them” of government/elites (often called political populism) or of suspect groups (civilizational populism). They may draw from the political right (“we, the real people” against an outsider “them”) or from the left (“we, the real workers” against the corrupt rich).<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup>David W. Bebbington, *The Dominance of Evangelicalism: The Age of Spurgeon and Moody*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005).

<sup>9</sup>Albert J. Menendez, “Who Are the Evangelicals?” *Christianity Today* 22, no. 8, January 27, 1978, 42.

<sup>10</sup>“Beyond Red vs. Blue: The Political Typology,” Pew Research Center, November 9, 2021, file:///C:/Users/OWNER/Downloads/PP\_2021.11.09\_political-typology\_REPORT.pdf.

<sup>11</sup>Pappas, “Modern Populism.”

<sup>12</sup>For a sketch of left-wing populism, see Marcia Pally, “Why is Populism Persuasive?,” *Political Theology* 21, no. 5 (2020): 393–414, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1462317X.2020.1740145>.

This minimal definition builds on ideational approaches, which identify groups as populist owing to the ideas they advocate and that their adherents hold.<sup>13</sup> It then incorporates cultural, historical, and social-psychological understandings of populism, following Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry,<sup>14</sup> in hopes that the intersectionality illuminates populism more fully than any approach alone would. The intersectional approach enables us to identify a wide range of populisms, including those where populism is a productive response to societal problems, prodding difficult but productive debates in democratic societies, as discussed by Chantal Mouffe, Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Kaltwasser, and Laura Grattan.<sup>15</sup>

(4) *Populism as a response to duress: Us-Them Shift*. Karyn Amira, Jennifer Cole Wright, and Daniela Goya-Tocchetto explain the significant effects of duress on worldview. “While the tendency to help the in-group appears to be primary,” they write, “under situations of symbolic threat to partisan identity, respondents shift gears and opt for harming the out-group.”<sup>16</sup> Under distress, the usual focus on one’s own group shifts self-protectively to constraining an “other” believed to be the source of duress—that is, to forms of us-them thinking. “Large groups,” Vamik Volkan notes, “like individuals, regress under shared duress. . . . The more stressful the situation, the more neighbor groups become preoccupied with each other.”<sup>17</sup> Analyzing eight hundred elections in twenty advanced democracies from the 1870s to 2014, Manuel Funke, Moritz Schularick, and Christopher Trebesch found that when “financial crises put a strain on democracies. . . . far-right parties see strong political gains.”<sup>18</sup> Left-populism also gains, as Adam Tooze notes, “the

<sup>13</sup>Kirk A. Hawkins and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, “The Ideational Approach to Populism,” *Latin American Research Review* 52, no. 4 (2017): 513–528, <http://doi.org/10.25222/larr.85>.

<sup>14</sup>Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

<sup>15</sup>Chantal Mouffe, “In Defence of Left-Wing Populism,” *The Conversation*, April 29, 2016, <https://theconversation.com/in-defence-of-left-wing-populism-55869>; Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); Laura Grattan, “Populism,” in *The Encyclopedia of Political Thought*, ed. Michael Gibbons (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2014), <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/action/doSearch?AllField=Laura+Grattan+Populism&Content-GroupKey=10.1002%2F9781118474396>.

<sup>16</sup>Karyn Amira, Jennifer Cole Wright, and Daniela Goya-Tocchetto, “In-Group Love Versus Out-Group Hate: Which Is More Important to Partisans and When?,” *Political Behavior* 43, no. 2 (2019): 1–22, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11109-019-09557-6>.

<sup>17</sup>Vamik Volkan, *Bloodlines: From Ethnic Pride to Ethnic Terrorism* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1997), 27, 111.

<sup>18</sup>Manuel Funke, Moritz Schularick, and Christopher Trebesch, “Going to Extremes: Politics After Financial Crises, 1870–2014,” *European Economic Review* 88 (2016): 227–260.

financial and economic crisis of 2007–2012 morphed between 2013 and 2017 into a comprehensive political and geopolitical crisis . . . a dramatic mobilization of both Left and Right.”<sup>19</sup>

(5) “*Dominant group victimhood.*” The sense of duress may be sharpest for higher status groups whose position in society has become less secure. It is not status, Stephen Reicher and Yasemin Ulusahin find, but status *loss* that provokes exclusionary activism to restore “the rightful order of things,”<sup>20</sup> often through non-mainstream politics, Frances Lee notes, as the mainstream feels ineffective.<sup>21</sup> Importantly, Jeanne Knutson has found, feelings of loss are wounds that persist, maintaining a focus on “them” long after the duress is alleviated.<sup>22</sup>

(6) *The “Cultural Imagination.”* In identifying “us,” “them,” and solutions to duress, populist proposals must be understandable. While new ideas are not precluded from understandability, the most easily grasped solutions are often familiar, drawn in mediated ways from a society’s historico-cultural background and from the ways that background may turn to us-them frameworks. As described in Thijl Sunier’s illuminating study of French and Dutch populisms, this background—including political, socio-economic, and religious traditions and symbols—is among the things populism builds upon in developing worldviews and proposals.<sup>23</sup> In Graham Ward’s description, it contributes to the cultural imagination, “the subconscious within which we move and from out of which we try to make sense, even cope, with all of our collective experience.”<sup>24</sup> Traditional notions of “them” have not only the ring of familiarity but, as Judith Butler teaches, of authority born of repetition.<sup>25</sup> They feel both “natural” and ethically “right.” Historico-cultural ideas about society (who’s in, who’s out) form a background reservoir from which populist notions of *non-elite* “them” may be drawn (the civilizational account). Ideas about the role of government/

<sup>19</sup>Adam Tooze, *Crashed: How a Decade of Financial Crises Changed the World* (London: Penguin, 2018).

<sup>20</sup>Stephen Reicher and Yasemin Ulusahin, “Resentment and Redemption: On the Mobilisation of Dominant Group Victimhood,” in *The Social Psychology of Collective Victimhood*, ed. Johanna Ray Vollhardt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 275–296, quote at 290–291.

<sup>21</sup>Frances E. Lee, “Populism and the American Party System: Opportunities and Constraints,” *Perspectives on Politics*, 18, no. 2 (2020): 370–388, quote at 378, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592719002664>.

<sup>22</sup>Cited in Volkan, *Bloodlines*, 160–161.

<sup>23</sup>Thijl Sunier, “The National ‘Domestication’ of Religion in Europe,” in *Religious Newcomers and the Nation State: Political Culture and Organized Religion in France and the Netherlands*, ed. Erik Sengers and Thijl Sunier (Delft, Netherlands: Eburon, 2010), 1–24.

<sup>24</sup>Graham Ward, *Unimaginable: What We Imagine and What We Can’t* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 10.

<sup>25</sup>Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech* (Abingdon, England: Routledge, 1997), 51.

elites may form a reservoir from which populist notions of an elite “them” may be drawn (the political account).

The next sections, moving along the steps of our minimal definition, sketch the following: duress from the White evangelical perspective and experience; the historico-cultural resources White evangelicals may draw upon in seeking solutions to that duress; and how these resources, under duress, re-form into us-them frameworks that feel ethical *as* they draw from the historico-cultural familiar. Duress is explored from the White evangelical experience as that, and not outside assessments, serves as motive for political behavior.

#### AMERICAN AND EVANGELICAL DURESSES

American evangelicals, subject to the vicissitudes of American life, face the range of pressures that other Americans face. Their political positions emerge from these as well as from religious concerns. Like all political positions, White evangelical politics is a composite. Non-religious stressors may include economic, status-loss, and rapid way-of-life shifts. As these have been much studied, the sections below may serve as a brief summary.

Economic duress includes unemployment and underemployment, especially in “old-industry” regions, prodded somewhat by globalized trade<sup>26</sup> and substantially by automation and productivity gains,<sup>27</sup> accounting for 88 percent of job loss<sup>28</sup> and disproportionately burdening those without college degrees.<sup>29</sup> Status loss entails loss or fear of losing one’s respectable place in society and falling “below” those one is currently “above.” “Young adults who expect to do worse than their parents in the future,” Elena Mitrea, Monika Mühlböck, and Julia Warmuth write, “are indeed more likely to locate themselves at the extreme ends of the ideological scale.”<sup>30</sup> Those most attracted to the Republican party between 2010 and 2018 were Whites without college degrees but with middle class incomes who were concerned that in a “knowledge based” economy their

<sup>26</sup>David Autor et al., “Importing Political Polarization? The Electoral Consequences of Rising Trade Exposure,” *American Economic Review* 110, no. 10 (2020): 3139–3183. <https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.20170011> 3139.

<sup>27</sup>Douglas A. Irwin, “The Truth About Trade: What Critics Get Wrong About the Global Economy,” *Foreign Affairs* 95 (2016): 84–95.

<sup>28</sup>Michael J. Hicks and Skrikant Devaraj, “The Myth and Reality of Manufacturing in America,” Conexus: Center for Business and Economic Research, Ball State University, June 2015, <https://projects.cberdata.org/reports/MfgReality.pdf>.

<sup>29</sup>Alina K. Bartscher, Moritz Kuhn, and Moritz Schularick, “The College Wealth Divide: Education and Inequality in America, 1956–2016,” *CESifo Working Paper No. 7726* (2019): 7726, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3421153>.

<sup>30</sup>Elena Mitrea, Monika Mühlböck, and Julia Warmuth, “Extreme Pessimists? Expected Socioeconomic Downward Mobility and the Political Attitudes of Young Adults,” *Political Behavior* 43 (2020): 785–811, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-020-09593-7>.

horizons were dimming and their “respectable” status was under threat.<sup>31</sup> Our third sector of duress, way-of-life shifts, entails changes in gender roles, technology, demographics, etc. The increase in the US population between 2010 and 2020 resulted from increases in the Hispanic, Black, Asian, and multi-racial populations while the non-Hispanic White population declined.<sup>32</sup> Non-Hispanic Whites will comprise less than 50 percent of the population by 2044.

Echoing Reicher and Ulusahin’s work on “dominant group victimhood,” Diane Mutz writes, the wounds to well-being, dignity, and authority among “traditionally high-status Americans (i.e., whites, Christians, and men) as well as by those who perceive America’s global dominance as threatened combined to increase support for the candidate [Donald Trump] who emphasized reestablishing status hierarchies of the past.”<sup>33</sup>

In addition to these duresses, pressures bearing specifically on White evangelicals include membership attrition, a growing sense of cultural and political marginalization, and status loss in an increasingly secular, multicultural, and socially liberal country. While few Americans identified as religiously “unaffiliated” in 2000, in 2021, 29 percent of Americans did, and 36 percent of those between ages eighteen and twenty-nine.<sup>34</sup> White evangelicals have decreased as a share of the population, from 23 percent in 2006 to 14.5 percent in 2020. More than two million have left the Southern Baptist Convention since 2006.<sup>35</sup> As Robert Jones of the Public Religion Research Institute notes, “A real visceral sense of loss of cultural dominance’ has set in.”<sup>36</sup> Importantly, this loss may be experienced as discrimination, a powerful psychological and political motivator. In 2022, 61 percent of White evangelicals held that discrimination against Whites is as big

<sup>31</sup>Herbert P. Kitschelt and Philipp Rehm, “Secular Partisan Realignment in the United States: The Socioeconomic Reconfiguration of White Partisan Support since the New Deal Era,” *Politics & Society* 47, no. 3 (2019): 425–479.

<sup>32</sup>United States Census Bureau, “2020 Census Results,” August 12, 2021, <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial-census/decade/2020/2020-census-results.html>.

<sup>33</sup>Diana Mutz, “Status Threat, Not Economic Hardship, Explains the 2016 Presidential Vote,” *PNAS* 115, no. 19 (2018), [www.pnas.org/cgi/doi/10.1073/pnas.1718155115](http://www.pnas.org/cgi/doi/10.1073/pnas.1718155115).

<sup>34</sup>Yonat Shimron, “Poll: America Growing More Secular by the Year,” *Religion News Service*, December 14, 2021, <https://religionnews.com/2021/12/14/poll-america-growing-more-secular-by-the-year/>.

<sup>35</sup>Bob Smietana, “Can anyone lead the Southern Baptist Convention forward?” *Religion News Service*, October 19, 2021, <https://religionnews.com/2021/10/19/can-anyone-lead-the-southern-baptist-convention-forward-ronnie-floyd-patterson-crt/>.

<sup>36</sup>See Michelle Goldberg, “The Christian Right Is in Decline, and It’s Taking America With It,” *The New York Times*, July 9, 2021, [https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/09/opinion/religious-right-america.html?campaign\\_id=39&emc=edit\\_ty\\_20210709&instance\\_id=34917&nl=opinion-today&regi\\_id=64605949&segment\\_id=63017&te=1&user\\_id=b91069a8e5ba335e6bad377cf86308ab](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/09/opinion/religious-right-america.html?campaign_id=39&emc=edit_ty_20210709&instance_id=34917&nl=opinion-today&regi_id=64605949&segment_id=63017&te=1&user_id=b91069a8e5ba335e6bad377cf86308ab).

a problem as discrimination against racial minorities; 57 percent of Americans overall *disagreed*.<sup>37</sup>

The present sense of marginalization comes on top of a gradual decrease in “cultural dominance” since the late nineteenth century, spurred by industrialization, urbanization, Darwinism, and by new German Historical-Critical exegetical methods. These approaches to the Bible, requiring knowledge of philology, archeology, and literary theory, threatened to unseat America’s grassroots, democratic if untutored understanding of sacred texts. Part of the evangelical response to these challenges was the emergence of apocalyptic forms of the faith, including Pre-millenarianism, Dispensationalism, and the Keswick and Pentecostal movements. These forms of worship were accessible to all, not only to educated elites. The apocalypticism reflected evangelical anxieties about the future even as it further separated evangelicals from the American mainstream and reinforced the sense of being sidelined.

In short, evangelicalism, which had been at the forefront of much American settlement and culture through the nineteenth century, found itself in a rear-guard action of conserving the past—and more so in the twentieth century. The sense of evangelical dethronement followed several Supreme Court rulings including the 1925 *Scopes* trial on teaching evolution in public schools and the 1962 decision prohibiting school-sponsored prayer (*Vitale v. Engel*). The Sixties youth counterculture, Lyndon Johnson’s Civil Rights and Great Society anti-poverty programs, the worry that Democrats were “soft on communism,” and the feminist and gay rights movements furthered White evangelical sense of “loss of cultural dominance.” Through the 1970s, evangelicals became increasingly concerned about the legalization of abortion, and Washington threatened to end the tax-exempt status of racially segregated religious schools, a potentially crippling financial loss.

In the twenty-first century, continuing cultural shifts as well as state action seen as hostile to religion further aggravated evangelical concern that their way of life would be trounced by a secular society and government. The 2010 Affordable Care Act (ACA) mandated that employers offer birth control in employee health insurance plans. Evangelicals and Catholics objected though the ACA provides an exception for religious employers by which the government (not the employer) pays for employees’ birth control (*Burwell v. Hobby Lobby Stores*, 2014). In 2015, the Supreme Court ruled same-sex marriage constitutional. By 2021, 70 percent of Americans and 55 percent of Republicans supported the legality of same-sex marriage.<sup>38</sup> From the White evangelical perspective, the “sense of loss of cultural dominance” seemed a growing reality.

<sup>37</sup>Public Religion Research Institute, “Challenges in Moving Toward a More Inclusive Democracy.”

<sup>38</sup>Mark Wingfield, “American Support for Same-Sex Marriage Continues to Increase, Even as Religious Conservatives Battle LGBTQ Community on Other



## HISTORICO-CULTURAL BACKGROUND: AMERICAN AND EVANGELICAL

While opposition to abortion, gay marriage, and birth control and support for school prayer are understandable as evangelical ethics, opposition to civil rights and anti-poverty programs would seem inconsistent. Understanding White evangelical opposition requires the next step in our minimal definition: a look into historico-cultural resources from which White evangelical populism, in mediated ways, draws—most importantly, from cultural notions of society and government.

### *American Resources*

We may begin with the resources to which both evangelical and non-evangelical Americans are heirs. While this short section is not meant as a full account of America's political history, it explores those aspects most relied upon by current right-wing populism, including community-minded localism and wariness of government/elites<sup>39</sup> and other "outsiders."

The earliest contribution came from Reformed Covenantal Political Theory, brought to the colonies by the Puritans and other dissenters. Building on the Hebrew Bible, it imagined the polity as a reciprocal covenant among persons and with God, where sovereignty lay in the covenanted community, and all contribute to the common good. A ruler who violates covenant with the governed may be removed from office.<sup>40</sup> Puritan settlers were equally wary of non-governmental "outsiders" who might destabilize the covenanted community. These ideas, while robust in Europe, proved easier to implement in unformed America.<sup>41</sup> The Mayflower Compact (1620) aimed at both setting political principles for early Massachusetts and constraining non-Puritan "outsiders" from interfering with covenanted life. It declared, "We . . . covenant and combine ourselves together into a *civil* Body Politick." To ensure that no power overtakes it, Massachusetts enacted the Body of Liberties (1641) to protect the common good against outsiders, the rich, and politically ambitious. America's "union was based,"

Fronts," *Baptist News Global*, July 21, 2021, <https://baptistnews.com/article/american-support-for-same-sex-marriage-continues-to-increase-even-as-religious-conservatives-battle-lgbtq-community-on-other-fronts/#.YPmzLehKiuW>.

<sup>39</sup>Joseph S. Nye, Jr., Philip Zelikow, and David Kind., eds., *Why People Don't Trust Government* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

<sup>40</sup>Johannes Althusius, *Politica Methodice Digesta*, trans. Frederick S. Carney (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1995).

<sup>41</sup>Justin M. Scott-Coe, *Covenant Nation: The Politics of Grace in Early American Literature* (PhD diss., Claremont Graduate University, 2012), 8, [http://scholarship.claremont.edu/cgu\\_etd/45](http://scholarship.claremont.edu/cgu_etd/45).

Anthony Smith writes, “on national ideologies with significant covenantal and civic components.”<sup>42</sup>

The second and third sources for notions about society and government are standard in tellings of American history. Aristotelian republicanism too sees humanity as social, living in families and communities amid republics. Persons achieve their fullest development through participation in the *polis*, freedom is the privilege of contributing to it, and the democratic *polis* depends on the virtue and participation of the citizenry. By the mid-eighteenth century, a meld of covenantal and republican thought was robust. Samuel Langdon, president of Harvard, held in 1775 that “the [ancient covenantal] Jewish government” was “divinely established” as a “perfect *republic*.”<sup>43</sup> The third component, liberalism, sees the individual not so much embedded in covenant or in a republic but as free to leave them to pursue opportunity. Alexander Hamilton represented this position, defining liberty as “natural rights” and a means to private ambition that must be shielded from interference, especially by government.<sup>44</sup>

The idea of the separable person free from government oversight was persuasive in America owing to the flight of many immigrants from oppressive political, religious, and economic systems. “The settlers departed England,” T.H. Breen writes, “determined to maintain their local attachments against outside interference.”<sup>45</sup> Once in America, the harsh frontier further advised self-reliance, trust in one’s local community, and wariness of distant authorities. Even amid industrialization, Henry Bellows in 1872 described the “thousands of American towns, with an independent life of their own.”<sup>46</sup>

Together, the experience of immigration and the effort of settlement along with covenantal, republican, and liberal mores fostered an anti-Federalist ethos of self-responsibility and localism along with government and “outsider” wariness. The widespread antipathy to the Constitution, which gave far greater powers to Washington than did the earlier Articles of Confederation, was but one expression of anti-authoritarian, localist, and government wariness. The Shays (1786–1787) and Whiskey (1791–1794) rebellions against government regulation and taxation

<sup>42</sup>Anthony D. Smith, “Hierarchy and Covenant in the Formation of Nations,” in *Holy Nations and Global Identities: Civil Religion, Nationalism, and Globalization*, ed. Annika Hvithamar, Margit Warburg, and Brian Arly Jacobsen (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2009), 21–46, quote at 36.

<sup>43</sup>Samuel Langdon, *Government Corrupted by Vice, and Recovered by Righteousness* (Watertown, MA: Benjamin Edes, 1775), 11, emphasis mine.

<sup>44</sup>Alexander Hamilton, “Speech in Convention,” in *Writings: Vol. 129 of Writings of Alexander Hamilton*, ed. Joanne B. Freeman (New York: Library of America, 2001), 30, 100.

<sup>45</sup>Timothy H. Breen, “Persistent Localism: English Social Change and the Shaping of New England Institutions,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 32, no. 1 (1975): 3–28, quote at 4.

<sup>46</sup>Henry Bellows, “The Downward Tendency,” *The City: An Illustrated Magazine* 1, no. 1 (1872): quote at 38.

were two others, erupting almost as soon as the country began. So too, the “outsider”-wary Naturalization Act (1790), limiting citizenship to White immigrants, followed by the anti-immigrant Alien and Sedition Acts (1798). The anti-immigrant Know Nothing Party won 22 percent of a five-party race for the House of Representatives in 1854/5. Restrictive immigration laws were enacted in 1873 and 1882 (in response to economic recession and immigration from southern and eastern Europe) and in 1924 (during the post-Bolshevik Revolution “Red Scare”). Continuing in the twentieth century, this lineage included the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II and both discrimination and voting restrictions targeted at African-Americans and at immigrants from Asia, Mexico, and southern and eastern Europe. Ironically titled “covenants” barred Blacks and Jews from purchasing property in White Christian areas. When the Supreme Court in 1948 ruled the practice unconstitutional (*Shelley v. Kraemer*), the decision brought together America’s two “them”s. To those holding such covenants, the Court decision was an act of interference by national *government* in local agreements to protect “us” from “outsiders.”

Localism’s most tragic fruition came with the Civil War, fought over both slavery and Washington’s role in state and local governance. But the South’s response to defeat was itself grounded in localism and anti-Washington animus, giving some evidence of their deep-rootedness. Post-Reconstruction, the Confederacy was imagined into a “lost cause” of noble resistance to interloper “Yankee vandals”<sup>47</sup> in which a Christianized White supremacy and suspicion of Washington *together* formed White pride and identity, again animating wariness of America’s foundational “them”s, government and “outsiders” (new immigrants and Blacks, conceptualized as radically “other”).<sup>48</sup>

Though the federal government grew along with the nation, localism along with wariness of Washington and “outsiders” retain a vaunted place in American identity and practice, fostering suspicion of government programs and “outsiders” but also democratic critique of authority and robust civil society—both strong and weak local environmental protections, for instance, and both lax and tighter state gun control.

### *Evangelical Resources*

The forebears of today’s evangelicals were informed by this history and contributed to it. As covenantal thinkers, they left Europe with the heritage of community responsibility. As Europe’s persecuted minorities (Anabaptists, Moravians, “free thinkers,” etc.), they arrived with the dissenter’s wariness of government and outsiders. And they held to two additional doctrinal principles: the fallenness

<sup>47</sup>Caroline E. Janney, *Remembering the Civil War Reunion and the Limits of Reconciliation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 147.

<sup>48</sup>Heather C. Richardson, *How the South Won the Civil War: Oligarchy, Democracy, and the Continuing Fight for the Soul of America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

of human government and personal responsibility to come to truth (rather than adhering to priestly authority). As all human governments are imperfect and may not be confused with the Kingdom of God, each individual must work out how to witness God's vision, a belief that encouraged personal moral reckoning and, again, wariness of authorities and outsiders.

Evangelicals, one might say, had not only a political grounding in government and outsider wariness, as many Americans had, but also a doctrinal one. With this double caution woven into evangelical worldview and ethics, they became prime builders of America's government-wary, self-reliant republic.<sup>49</sup> Evangelicals were central in the First Great Awakening (1730s–1740s), a festival of iconoclastic religious ideas preached by self-appointed men (and some women) calling for radical “self-examination” that relied not even on one's own church. Evangelicals supported the revolution against Britain. Arminianism, Methodism's forerunner, re-imagined the Calvinist emphasis on God's grace to accent each person's agency in her salvation—and then gradually in all life arenas. America's most influential denomination of the nineteenth-century, Methodism spurred on evangelical anti-authoritarianism, localist anti-Federalism, and Jeffersonian and Jacksonian politics, with ministers becoming central figures in local agrarian and anti-landlord unrest.<sup>50</sup> Northern evangelicals, often vocal abolitionists, and southerners, defenders of the slave system in Christian voice, were both strong advocates for their local communities.

While postbellum southern evangelicals fueled the White supremacist and government-wary “lost cause,” many other evangelicals supported William Jennings Bryan's three-time run for the presidency on an anti-elite, pro-worker, and pro-farmer platform (1896, 1900, 1908). In his 1887 utopic novel *Looking Backward*, the Baptist preacher Edward Bellamy argued for a re-distribution of national resources away from the new, industrial rich to ordinary Americans.

#### FROM HISTORICO-CULTURAL BACKGROUND TO THE AMERICAN POLITICAL RIGHT

From these ethics, how did White evangelicals come to embrace the political and populist right? Recalling our minimal definition of populism as a duress-prodded us-them shift, we may say: while government and “outsider” wariness had been present since the seventeenth century, the duresses of the twentieth aggravated the White evangelical sense of multi-pronged losses and the appeal of the us-them frameworks that, as noted earlier, Amira, Wright, and Goya-Tocchetto, as well as Volkan, and Reicher and Ulusahin, describe. As White evangelicals,

<sup>49</sup>David W. Bebbington, *The Dominance of Evangelicalism: The Age of Spurgeon and Moody* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005).

<sup>50</sup>Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989).

like others under duress, draw upon cultural resources to identify solutions and a culpable “them”:

(i) commitment to building community, foundational in American and evangelical history and political culture, may become a self-protective struggle or, more specifically, a my-community-in-struggle against “outsiders” (new immigrants, minorities), who are threats to be constrained (civilizational populism); and

(ii) wariness of *oppressive* government/elites, also foundational to the American and evangelical experience, may become suspicion of government/elites *per se*, whose activities should be limited—except to constrain “outsiders,” as required by (i) (political populism).

In short, the very anti-authoritarianism and community building that contributed much to American vibrancy and that are bequeathed to evangelicals by history and doctrine *as the ethical life* may under distress turn to protective, us-them worldviews and practices. It is a shift that is both common under distress, as Volkan and Knutson write, and tragic as it yields solutions to duress that emerge from the *distortions* that duress itself prods—from community to exclusion, from wariness of oppression to wariness of government. While these shifts shape the populism of many Americans, the following sections will explore how an ethics of government and “outsider” wariness torqued into us-them frames has played out among White evangelicals.

### *Small Government, Big Military, Christian Warriors*

A key moment in the evangelical arc from duress to us-them populism was the 1965 Civil Rights Act, a government mandate to racial integration that animated the conflated suspicions of government and “outsiders” (minorities, new immigrants) along with fears of a (secular) government trouncing. The Republican “Southern Strategy” promised relief. As it wooed White evangelicals and southerners into the Republican tent, it created the “New Right”: small-government economics, religio-moral conservatism, resistance to “outsider” disruptions of local norms and law, and anti-communist foreign policy to defeat the biggest of big (atheistic) governments.

Understanding this as the ethical path for person and nation, two-thirds of White evangelicals in 1980 voted for the “New Right” Ronald Reagan, whose priorities were reduction of government’s footprint through tax cuts and business deregulation and exhausting the Soviet Union by outspending it in the arms race. During Reagan’s tenure, Grover Norquist founded the anti-tax organization, Americans for Tax Reform (1985), which gained White evangelical support

that year and each year since.<sup>51</sup> Since Reagan, White evangelicals have given strong majorities to the Republican party, from a low of 62 percent in the 1996 presidential race to a high of 84 percent in 2020.<sup>52</sup> In 2000, 79 percent of evangelicals voted for George W. Bush, whose major domestic achievement was again business deregulation and the tax cuts of 2001 and 2003. Making these tax cuts permanent was a legislative priority of the Christian Coalition.<sup>53</sup>

Accompanying these political commitments was substantial White evangelical support for the military, begun as protecting America from communism and continuing in protecting the nation from Islamist extremism and the faith tradition of Islam. Billy Graham, leader of post-war evangelicalism, thought of Christianity as “total war” and of Jesus as “our great commander.” Jerry Falwell, co-founder of the Moral Majority, called soldiers battling communism in Vietnam a “champion for Christ.”<sup>54</sup> Organizations such as the Overseas Christian Servicemen’s Centers and the Christian Military Fellowship aimed at recruiting White evangelical men into the military. By 2005, 40 percent of active-duty military and 60 percent of military chaplains identified as evangelical. White evangelical support for the 2003 invasion of Iraq was at 87 percent, nearly twenty points higher (59 percent) than the support of Americans overall.<sup>55</sup> Franklin Graham, son of Billy Graham, declared Islam a “very evil and wicked religion.”<sup>56</sup> Pat Robertson, Christian Coalition founder, held that it is worse than Nazism.<sup>57</sup> In 2002, 77 percent of evangelical leaders held unfavorable views of Islam and just 30 percent believed that American Muslims hold to democratic values.<sup>58</sup>

Adding to anxieties about foreign enemies was the end of the post-war economic boom, the flattening of middle-class real purchasing power, computer-assisted automation, and an increased presence of women and minorities

<sup>51</sup>Nicholas Confessore, “Breaking the Code,” *The New York Times Magazine*, January 16, 2005, 36–39, <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/01/16/magazine/breaking-the-code.html>.

<sup>52</sup>Michael Hout and Andrew M. Greeley, “A Hidden Swing Vote: Evangelicals,” *The New York Times*, September 4, 2004, <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/09/04/opinion/a-hidden-swing-vote-evangelicals.html>; Ruth Igielnik, Scott Keeter, and Hannah Hartig, “Behind Biden’s 2020 Victory,” Pew Research Center, June 30, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2021/06/30/behind-bidens-2020-victory/>.

<sup>53</sup>Bill McKibben, “The Christian Paradox: How a Faithful Nation Gets Jesus Wrong,” *Harper’s Magazine*, August 5, 2005, 36.

<sup>54</sup>Anne C. Loveland, *American Evangelicals and the U.S. Military 1942–1993* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997), 161–62.

<sup>55</sup>Jeff Sharlet, “Inside America’s Most Powerful Megachurch,” *Harper’s Magazine*, May 13, 2005, <https://therevealer.org/inside-americas-most-powerful-megachurch/>.

<sup>56</sup>“Franklin Graham Conducts Services at Pentagon,” *CNN*, April 18, 2003, <https://www.cnn.com/2003/ALLPOLITICS/04/18/graham.pentagon/>.

<sup>57</sup>Pat Robertson, “Statement by Pat Robertson on the 700 Club,” November 11, 2002, <http://www.patrobertson.com/PressReleases/bushresponse2.asp>.

<sup>58</sup>“Evangelical Views of Islam,” *Ethics & Public Policy/Beliefnet*, 2003, <https://www.beliefnet.com/news/politics/2003/04/evangelical-views-of-islam.aspx>.

in positions of authority—accumulating shifts that destabilized the traditional place of the breadwinner White male. As Kristin Kobes Du Mez documents, one response was a sharpening of longstanding us-them frameworks for which the Christian warrior was now needed, supported (“complemented”) by women who were sexually pure yet accommodating within marriage.<sup>59</sup>

Focus on the Family was founded by James Dobson in 1977 to promote a conservative vision of family and gender complementarity as a “call to arms.”<sup>60</sup> It became one of the largest Christian institutions—its 1995 annual budget topped \$100 million<sup>61</sup>—with wide influence over evangelical politics and home life. A scan of popular guides to evangelical living gives some indication of the sense of embattlement and the gendered and racialized “them”s at the battlefield: Tim LaHaye’s *The Unhappy Gays* (1978) and *Raising Sexually Pure Kids* (1993), Stu Weber’s *Tender Warrior: God’s Intention for a Man* (1993), and Josh Harris’s *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* (1997). The 1996 *Southern Slavery: As It Was*, by Doug Wilson and J. Steven Wilkins, offered a whitewash of the slave system while Wilson’s *Future Men: Raising Boys to Fight Giants* (2001) holds that the peace envisioned in the Bible pertains to the messianic era, until which time men must protect Christianity with force. Wilson’s 2005 *Black & Tan* made a scriptural argument for the slave system and described the Confederate general Robert E. Lee as “a brother in Christ.” Paul Coughlin’s response to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks was to write *No More Christian Nice Guy* (2005).

If White evangelicals felt beset by secularization, status loss, (big government) communism, Islamism, and economic and way-of-life changes, the sense of threat was aggravated by the election of the first African-American president. Barack Obama also increased regulation of business and finance and expanded government’s role in health insurance and social assistance. White evangelical radio host Eric Metaxas responded with traditional anti-Washington, anti-“outsider” animus laced with Christianized White supremacy: “Beltway [Washington, DC] and Manhattan elites,” he said, perpetrate a “new and accepted tribalism and xenophobia” upon “white European ‘Christian’ varieties” of people.<sup>62</sup> Similar views were frequent on both mainstream social media and more radical platforms such as Gab, CloutHub, Natural News, and Brighteon. Gab founder Andrew Torba writes of “the greatest Spiritual war . . . for a new parallel Christian so-

<sup>59</sup>For a highly recommended detailed overview, see see Kristin Kobes du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (New York: Liveright/W.W. Norton, 2020).

<sup>60</sup>James C. Dobson, *Straight Talk to Men and Their Wives* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1980), 157, 168.

<sup>61</sup>Seth Dowland, *Family Values and the Rise of the Christian Right* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 86.

<sup>62</sup>Eric Metaxas, *7 Men and the Secret of Their Greatness* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2013); Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*, 262.

ciety.” He envisions either the recreation of America as “a Christian nation” or seceding. He supported the January 6, 2021 riot at the US Capitol Building, seeking to overthrow the election of Joe Biden. He calls his support part of a “Silent Christian Secession.”<sup>63</sup>

### *The Battle Against “Outsiders”*

Along with a sharpening suspicion of government, racist, and xenophobic suspicion of “outsiders” was also a compelling worldview among White evangelicals through the twentieth century. As this is well-documented,<sup>64</sup> I’ll mention just two bookending moments. The Southern Baptist Convention was founded in 1845 as a church where members could preserve their chattel holdings, as slavery was understood to be supported by Christian readings of Scripture. When a century later in 1948, the Democratic party adopted the integrationist Harry Truman as their presidential candidate, Southerners, who had voted Democrat since they fought the Republican-led Union in the Civil War, launched a new Dixiecrat party with a platform that challenged Washington and racial integration with a double-barreled gun:

We stand for the segregation of the races and the racial integrity of each race. . . . We oppose . . . the control of private employment by Federal bureaucrats called for by the misnamed civil rights program. We favor home-rule, local self-government and a minimum interference with individual rights.<sup>65</sup>

More recently, populist “outsider” wariness has been voiced in the White supremacist cry, “you [new immigrants and Jews] will not replace us”,<sup>66</sup> in the

<sup>63</sup>Jack Jenkins, “Inside the Fraught Effort to Create a Christian Nationalist Internet,” *Religion News Service*, October 19, 2021, <https://religionnews.com/2021/10/19/inside-the-fraught-effort-to-create-a-christian-nationalist-internet/>.

<sup>64</sup>Randall Balmer, *Thy Kingdom Come: How the Religious Right Distorts the Faith and Threatens America—an Evangelical’s Lament* (New York: Basic Books, 2006); Randall Balmer, *Bad Faith: Race and the Rise of the Religious Right* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2021); Anthea Butler, *White Evangelical Racism: The Politics of Morality in America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2021); J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009); Karen L. Cox, *Dixie’s Daughters: The United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of Confederate Culture* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003); Robert P. Jones, *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020); and Pally, *White Evangelicals and Right-wing Populism*.

<sup>65</sup>“Platform of the States Rights Democratic Party, August 14, 1948,” *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/platform-the-states-rights-democratic-party#axzzliGn93BZz>.

<sup>66</sup>Yair Rosenberg, “Jesus Will Not Replace Us’: Why White Supremacists Go After Jews,” *The Washington Post*, August 14, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/>



Confederacy as a symbol of White pride; in the popularity of Trump's border wall to stanch immigration; and in the "Latino threat narrative" of honest and hardworking (White) communities "overrun" by "manipulative, lawless, lazy" foreigners.<sup>67</sup> The years 2022 and 2023 have seen the growing prominence and popularity of the overtly anti-Semitic Ye (the rap artist formerly known as Kanye West) and his supporter, the self-described Holocaust-denier and neo-Nazi, Nick Fuentes. Fuentes has called the January 6, 2021 Capitol Building riot "f-ing awesome," supports Vladimir Putin's bombing of Ukraine, and on Twitter he "railed against Jews and 'Israel first' policies, saying, 'Israel did 9/11, and we love Hitler.'"<sup>68</sup> Both Ye and Fuentes have dined with former president Donald Trump.<sup>69</sup>

Some thirty years after the Civil Rights movement, critique of Christianized racism and "outsider" animus became more frequent. In 1995, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) took an important, if far too late, step in issuing an apology "to all African-Americans for condoning and/or perpetuating individual and systemic racism in our lifetime."<sup>70</sup> In 2010 the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) and the SBC, among other organizations, called for comprehensive immigration reform including a path to citizenship for undocumented migrants.<sup>71</sup> But it has been an uneven reckoning. The SBC, which in 2019 found critical race theory a legitimate tool for societal analysis, in 2021 rejected it.<sup>72</sup> That year, Russell Moore stepped down as head of the SBC's Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC) after disagreements over the group's

acts-of-faith/wp/2017/08/14/jews-will-not-rosenberg-replace-us-why-white-supremacists-go-after-jews/.

<sup>67</sup>Jamie Longazel, *Undocumented Fears: Immigration and the Politics of Divide and Conquer in Hazleton* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2016).

<sup>68</sup>Meagan Saliashvili, "Twitter Reinstated White Nationalist Nick Fuentes. He Lasted 24 Hours," *Religion News Service*, January 25, 2023, <https://religionnews.com/2023/01/25/twitter-reinstated-white-nationalist-nick-fuentes-he-lasting-24-hours/>.

<sup>69</sup>Eugene Scott and Josh Dawsey, "Trump criticized for dining with far-right activist Nick Fuentes and rapper Ye," *The Washington Post*, November 25, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/11/25/trump-fuentes-ye/>.

<sup>70</sup>"Resolution on Racial Reconciliation on the 150th Anniversary of the Southern Baptist Convention," *Southern Baptist Convention*, 1995, [www.sbc.net/resolutions/899/resolution-on-racial-reconciliation-on-the-150th-anniversary-of-the-southern-baptist-convention](http://www.sbc.net/resolutions/899/resolution-on-racial-reconciliation-on-the-150th-anniversary-of-the-southern-baptist-convention).

<sup>71</sup>"NAE Ad Urges Bipartisan Immigration Reform," *National Association of Evangelicals*, May 13, 2010, <https://www.nae.net/nae-ad-urges-bipartisan-immigration-reform/>; Adelle M. Banks, "Evangelicals Find New Unity on Immigration," *Christianity Today*, July 13, 2010, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2010/may/evangelicals-find-new-unity-on-immigration.html>.

<sup>72</sup>Adelle M. Banks, "Southern Baptist Convention Resolutions Reflect Passion on Issues of Race, Abortion," *Religion News Service*, June 17, 2021, <https://religionnews.com/2021/06/17/southern-baptist-convention-meeting-2021-resolutions-reflect-passion-on-issues-of-race-abortion/>.

handling of race relations and sexual abuse cases.<sup>73</sup> “The presenting issue here,” Moore wrote to the ERLC, “is that, first and foremost, of sexual abuse. . . . At the same time, the other absolutely draining and unrelenting issue has been that of racial reconciliation.” Moore continued,

My family and I have faced constant threats from white nationalists and white supremacists, including within our convention. Some of them have been involved in neo-Confederate activities for years. Some are involved with groups funded by white nationalist nativist organizations. Some have just expressed raw racist sentiment behind closed doors.<sup>74</sup>

Importantly, the link between “outsider animus,” racist views, and White Christian self-identification is found to be strongest among faith groups that have historically been dominant: evangelicals in the South, Catholics in the Northeast. Echoing Reicher and Ulusahin’s work on “dominant group victimhood,” these Public Religion Research Institute findings suggest that, under the matrix of current duresses, formerly dominant groups, those most suffering losses, shift most to the us-them binaries. Reflecting this trajectory, in early 2023:<sup>75</sup>

(i) 65 percent of White evangelicals said newcomers threaten traditional American customs and values, compared with 40 percent of Americans overall in 2022;<sup>76</sup>

(ii) “people who agree that things have gotten so far off track that true American patriots may have to resort to violence in order to save our country are more likely than those who disagree with that statement to say God intended America to be a new promised land (51 percent vs. 27 percent)”; and

(iii) 51 percent of White evangelicals held that “immigrants are invading our country and replacing our cultural and ethnic background”—the “great replace-

<sup>73</sup>Russell Moore, “Russell Moore to ERLC Trustees: ‘They Want Me to Live in Psychological Terror,’” *Religion News Service*, February 4, 2020, <https://religionnews.com/2021/06/02/russell-moore-to-erlc-trustees-they-want-me-to-live-in-psychological-terror/>.

<sup>74</sup>Paul O’Donnell and Bob Smietana, “Leaked Russell Moore Letter Blasts SBC Conservatives, Sheds Light on His Resignation,” *Religion News Service*, June 2, 2021, <https://religionnews.com/2021/06/02/leaked-russell-moore-letter-blasts-sbc-conservatives-sheds-light-on-his-resignation/>.

<sup>75</sup>Public Religion Research Institute, “Are Immigrants a Threat? Most Americans Don’t Think So, but Those Receptive to the ‘Threat’ Narrative Are Predictably More Anti-Immigrant,” January 17, 2023, <https://www.prii.org/research/are-immigrants-a-threat-most-americans-dont-think-so-but-those-receptive-to-the-threat-narrative-are-predictably-more-anti-immigrant/>.

<sup>76</sup>Public Religion Research Institute, “Challenges in Moving Toward a More Inclusive Democracy.”

ment” theory—compared with 30 percent of Americans overall who agreed and 64 percent who disagreed.

These findings are consistent with those found in 2020 and 2021:<sup>77</sup>

(iv) 75 percent of White evangelicals held that Islam is at odds with American values and ways of life, roughly 20 points higher than any other religious group;

(v) 66 percent thought of newcomers as “invaders,” compared to 36 percent of Americans overall;

(vi) nearly 65 percent favored tighter restrictions on *legal* immigration; and

(vii) 57 percent prefer living in a country where most people are Christian; no other religious group comes within 20 points of this majority.

#### WHITE EVANGELICALS AND TRUMPIST POPULISM: NEW GUY, OLD ETHICAL FRAMES

In 2015, White evangelical us-them frameworks were not new. But they were animated by Trump and others on the populist right who tapped into and reinforced suspicion of America’s traditional “them”s. “Trump appears to have been uniquely able,” Lilliana Mason, Julie Wronski, and John V. Kane write, “to attract support based on preexisting animosity.”<sup>78</sup> Since 2015, others on the socio-political landscape have also learned the political effectiveness of animating traditional suspicions and targets. Judith Butler teaches that rootedness in familiar and respected tropes gives such animosity the feel of being natural and the imprimatur of being right.

Strategies that animated “outsider” wariness included Trump’s presentation of his trade wars and import tariffs as control over foreigners who cheat; his border wall against supposed criminal Latin Americans; his travel ban on six Muslim-majority countries; and his dubbing the coronavirus the “China virus.” Targeting immigrants for America’s woes proved so effective a tactic that it has since been picked up by other right-wing politicians such as Governor Greg Ab-

<sup>77</sup>Public Religion Research Institute, “Competing Visions of America: An Evolving Identity or a Culture Under Attack? Findings from the 2021 American Values Survey,” November 1, 2021, <https://www.ppri.org/research/competing-visions-of-america-an-evolving-identity-or-a-culture-under-attack/>; Public Religion Research Institute, “A Nation of Immigrants? Diverging Perceptions of Immigrants Increasingly Marking Partisan Divides,” March 12, 2021, <https://www.ppri.org/research/a-nation-of-immigrants-diverging-perceptions-of-immigrants-increasingly-marking-partisan-divides/>; and Jones, *White Too Long*, 161, 163–164.

<sup>78</sup>Lilliana Mason, Julie Wronski, and John V. Kane, “Activating Animus: The Uniquely Social Roots of Trump Support,” *American Political Science Review* 115, no. 4 (2021): 1508–1516, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055421000563>.

bott of Texas<sup>79</sup> and Governor Ron DeSantis of Florida.<sup>80</sup> Strategies that animated government wariness included Trump's calls to "drain the swamp" of "government insiders" and their elite, "fake news media," all salvos of his 2016 campaign. At the end of it, 60 percent of White working-class and lower middle-class Americans believed that the country needs a leader who'll "break the rules"<sup>81</sup> of the regnant elites, echoing traditional animus and Trump's amplification. He cut taxes, social services, and business regulation as government overreach.<sup>82</sup> In 2020–2021, he accused a "deep state" of stealing the 2020 election from him and framed medical information about COVID-19 mask-wearing as government infringements on religious and other liberties.

In sum, just before the 2020 election, 55 percent of White evangelicals saw Trump as "being called by God to lead at this critical time in our country."<sup>83</sup> Those who believe—with wariness of government as an ethics born of history and doctrine—that well-being hangs on constraining the state, saw Trump deliver tax cuts, reductions of social services, and gutting of government regulation in finance and business. His proposed 2020 budget cut federal spending on education, environmental protection, Medicare, Medicaid, Social Security, disability insurance, and Departments of Energy and the Interior.<sup>84</sup> He placed onto the Supreme Court three justices who support both a smaller governmental role and religious practice in the public sphere. Other White evangelicals—on the ethics of government wariness *and* shielding local norms and law from "outsiders"—hold that well-being hangs on limiting government *and* other "interlopers." They saw his tax cuts, reductions in social services and business regulation plus protectionist trade policies, xenophobic immigration protocols, and the encouragement given to those who seek to constrain "outsiders," seen as threatening (White) American

<sup>79</sup>Camilo Montoya-Galvez, "Texas Gov. Greg Abbott expands migrant busing effort to Philadelphia," CBS News, November 15, 2022, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/texas-migrant-busing-greg-abbott-expands-effort-to-philadelphia-first-bus-set-to-arrive-wednesday-morning/>.

<sup>80</sup>James Barragán, "Long the subject of rhetoric, migrants have now become props in political theater," *The Texas Tribune*, September 22, 2022, <https://www.texastribune.org/2022/09/22/migrant-busing-abbott-desantis/>.

<sup>81</sup>Carolyn Davis and Joanna Piacenza, "In Wake of Abrupt Comey Firing, Attitudes on Authoritarian Leadership," Public Religion Research Institute, 2017, <https://www.prrri.org/spotlight/fbi-james-comey-trump-authoritarian-leader-willing-break-rules/>.

<sup>82</sup>Julie Turkewitz, "Trump Slashes Size of Bears Ears and Grand Staircase Monuments," *The New York Times*, December 4, 2017, [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/04/us/trump-bears-ears.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/04/us/trump-bears-ears.html?_r=0).

<sup>83</sup>Thomas B. Edsall, "Mitch McConnell Would Like Trump to Fade Away: Good luck with that," *The New York Times*, February 24, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/24/opinion/mitch-mcconnell-would-like-trump-to-fade-away.html>.

<sup>84</sup>Jim Tankersley and Michael Tackett, "Trump Proposes a Record \$4.75 Trillion Budget," *The New York Times*, March 11, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/11/us/politics/trump-budget.html>.

culture. After the Charlottesville, VA clash between White supremacists and their political opponents, Trump declared there were “very fine people on both sides.”<sup>85</sup>

#### THE WHITE EVANGELICAL POLITICAL COMPOSITE OF “RELIGIOUS” AND NON-RELIGIOUS CONCERNS

In developing a political ethics, White evangelicals triage socio-political interests with “religious” ones, such as opposition to gay marriage. The White evangelical vote, like all votes, represents a basket of concerns with political and economic issues among the prime drivers. In the 2016 presidential election, the factors most important in determining evangelical choice of candidate were the economy (62 percent of “evangelicals by belief”; 59 percent of “self-identified evangelicals”) and national security (51 percent and 48 percent). Abortion was most important for 36 percent and 31 percent; LGBTQI matters, for 17 percent and 16 percent.<sup>86</sup> In 2020, the economy was again the highest priority for evangelicals by belief/regular churchgoers, followed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Abortion, religious freedom, and national security were selected by half as many evangelicals; all other concerns, including immigration and Supreme Court nominees, were selected by 8 percent or less.<sup>87</sup> In 2022, the year the Supreme Court voided constitutional protections for abortion (*Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization*), 46 percent of White evangelicals supported the right to legal abortion.<sup>88</sup>

The White evangelical vote is not a vote on solely religious issues with economics and politics as a tag-along. It is a choice for economic and political policies believed to be ethical and right.

#### CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

We return to our initial question: What in White evangelical religious and political history and in present circumstances makes right-wing populism look to be the most ethical stance? In sketching out an answer, we have looked at an ideational approach to populism that broadens to incorporate cultural, historical, and psychological findings.

<sup>85</sup>Gregory Krieg, “The 14 most shocking comments from Trump’s Charlottesville news conference,” *CNN*, August 16, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/08/15/politics/donald-trump-charlottesville-lines>.

<sup>86</sup>“Evangelical and Non-evangelical Voting & Views of Politics in America—Part 1,” *LifeWay Research*, May 9–16, 2018, <http://lifewayresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Voting-and-Views-of-Politics-in-America-Part-1.pdf>.

<sup>87</sup>“American Views on the 2020 Presidential Election,” *LifeWay Research*, September 23, 2020, <http://lifewayresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Report-Americans-Sept-2020-Election.pdf>.

<sup>88</sup>Public Religion Research Institute, “Most Oppose Overturning Roe v. Wade; Widespread Confusion Over a Post-Roe World,” May 3, 2022, <https://www.prii.org/spotlight/most-oppose-overturning-roe-v-wade-widespread-confusion-over-a-post-roe-world/>.

In a minimal definition, populism may be understood as: a way of understanding and responding to economic, status-loss, and way-of-life duresses (present or anticipated) that finds solution in us-them binaries (strong or soft) that draw in mediated ways from historico-cultural notions of society (who's "us," who's "them") and government (its proper size and role).

Guided by this definition, we looked in sequence:

- 1) at forms of duress confronting Americans and evangelicals;
- 2) at historical, religious, and political resources important in American and White evangelical political culture, yielding a wariness of government and other "outsiders" (new immigrants, minorities)—a wariness that may be democratically anti-authoritarian but also exclusionary; and
- 3) at the psychology of the shift, under duress, to us-them binaries.
- 4) Combining the above—duress, resources, and us-them shift—we explored how, under multivalent duresses, cultural resources may be drawn upon and distorted in the turn to us-them binaries. In this case study:
  - (i) commitment to building community may become a self-protective, my-community-in-struggle against "outsiders" (new immigrants, minorities), who are threats to be constrained; and
  - (ii) wariness of *oppressive* government/elites may become suspicion of government/elites *per se*, whose activities should be limited—except to constrain "outsiders," as required by (i).
- 5) We then looked at White evangelical politics of the last half century as it has expressed us-them frameworks in support for the small-government-ism, militarism, and nativist, xenophobic, and racist policies of the populist right.

In short, the very anti-authoritarianism and community building that contributed much to American vibrancy and that are bequeathed to evangelicals by history and doctrine *as the ethical life* may under duress turn to protective, us-them worldviews and practices. These combine with more classically religious concerns, such as opposition to gay marriage, to form White evangelical politics and the conviction that right-wing populist positions are most ethical for person and society.

This tale has a tragic cast, beginning with the accumulating sense of loss since the turn of the twentieth century and the growing appeal of us-them binaries as duresses remain unaddressed. The cast is tragic first for the ways in which these duresses distort the understanding of heritage and present circumstances. Duress turns our vision of past and present into its own image of embattled pain and

self-protective ire. It occludes. In the case study here, it turns community into my-community-against-others, and it turns wariness of oppressive government into wariness of government *per se*. Distinctions between productive and unproductive government programs are thus difficult to make as all government is presumed suspect. In objection, the White evangelical ethicist David Gushee writes, “We [churches] do not ask the state to do our job, but neither do we discourage sufficient tax collections for the state to do its job.”<sup>89</sup>

Duress warrants attention. But not every solution chosen necessarily warrants support. Solutions may draw from historically ethical principles, but insofar as principles are distorted by duress into strong us-them binaries, they are blind to Christian ethics. Binaries undergird exclusion; Christian ethics teaches hospitality.

It may be the task of Christian ethics now to teach the distinction between duress, which may warrant relief, and the selection of solutions born of duress’s distortions. The tension between them is seen in recent responses to immigration and racism. Many churches defied Trump and continued immigrant and refugee resettlement. And though racism riddles White evangelicalism and America, a step from exclusion to hospitality was taken in 2016, when Russell Moore wrote, “The man on the throne in heaven is a dark-skinned, Aramaic-speaking ‘foreigner’ who is probably not all that impressed by chants of ‘Make America great again.’”<sup>90</sup> While political psychology explains *how* duress prods us-them binaries, they are from Christian ethics, unsustainable.

<sup>89</sup>David Gushee, *After Evangelicalism: A Path to a New Christianity* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2020), 149.

<sup>90</sup>Russell Moore, “A White Church No More,” *The New York Times*, May 6, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/06/opinion/a-white-church-no-more.html>.