

The Real Origin of the Religious Right—It Wasn't Abortion

Most people think the Religious Right rose up in the 1970s to fight abortion after *Roe v. Wade*. But that's not how it started. The truth is more complicated--and more troubling. The Religious Right didn't begin as a crusade to "save unborn babies." It began as a political reaction to desegregation, civil rights, and fear of losing control over America's culture. Abortion became the rallying cry later, but only after leaders needed a more "respectable" cause to unify and mobilize white evangelical voters.

It Started with Race, Not Roe

In the 1950s and '60s, the Civil Rights Movement was gaining momentum. Black Americans were demanding their constitutional rights--equal access to schools, jobs, housing, and the ballot box. Federal courts and Congress responded with major changes: - The Civil Rights Act (1964) outlawed segregation in public spaces and employment. - The Voting Rights Act (1965) banned racist practices like literacy tests. - School integration was being enforced by court orders across the South. To many white conservatives--especially in the South--this felt like an attack on their way of life. Many believed that America was a "Christian nation" where white, Protestant values were the default. Civil rights felt like chaos. So what did they do? They left public schools and started private "Christian academies." These schools didn't hide their purpose. They were created to avoid integration.

Segregation Academies and the IRS Crackdown

By the late 1960s, these private schools were everywhere--especially in Southern states. Some were run by churches. Many received tax-exempt status, meaning they didn't have to pay taxes because they were considered religious nonprofits. But in 1970, the Internal Revenue Service (IRS)

announced it would no longer give tax exemptions to private schools that practiced racial discrimination. This hit schools like Bob Jones University, which banned interracial dating and only admitted Black students starting in 1971. This IRS move infuriated many white evangelicals. It wasn't about religion anymore--it was about the government taking away their control, their money, and what they saw as their freedom to run things their way.

Abortion: A More Palatable Cause

At first, abortion wasn't even controversial among many white evangelicals. When *Roe v. Wade* was decided in 1973, the Southern Baptist Convention actually welcomed it. In 1971 and again in 1974, they passed resolutions supporting legal abortion in cases of rape, incest, and the mother's health. But behind the scenes, activists realized that abortion had political power. It stirred emotion. It brought in Catholic allies. It gave the Religious Right a moral mission that didn't involve race. It was also deeply visual. Posters of fetus photos, "baby killing" language, and emotional testimonies were powerful tools. Unlike taxes and school integration, abortion provided a clean, black-and-white issue of life and death.

Conclusion: Don't Be Fooled by the Packaging

Abortion became the public face of the Religious Right--but it was never the origin of their power. It was the packaging--the thing they used to build a movement without looking like they were defending segregation and white supremacy. That's not to say everyone who opposes abortion is a fascist. But when religion is used to gain power, control laws, and target enemies, we have to ask: what's really underneath the surface? The fight over abortion today is not just about morality or life--it's part of a much larger political project that started decades ago, rooted in fear of social change. Understanding that history is the first step to seeing through the noise.

1964
Civil Rights Act passed
- Start of backlash among white evangelicals



1970
IRS revokes tax-exempt status
from segregated Christian schools



1973
Roe v. Wade legalizes abortion
- Evangelicals mostly quiet or supportive



1976
Paul Weyrich begins organizing
around abortion as a political tool-



1979
Jerry Falwell founds Moral Majority
- abortion becomes rallying cry



1980
Religious Right backs Reagan
- abortion becomes central issue

