

Research takes first look at catalyst behind evangelicals' forays into today's culture wars

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The University of Cincinnati's Andrew Lewis will present his research on religion and politics at the upcoming American Political Science Association annual meeting. Credit: Photo provided by Andrew Lewis

It's apparent to Andrew Lewis that as the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) expands its role in our nation's culture wars, there is one battle cry rallying the group's nearly 16 million members: advocating against abortion.

Lewis, an assistant professor of political science at the University of Cincinnati, has studied how leaders of the SBC apply the group's long-held strategy toward abortion politics to new areas of political concern, such as [free speech](#). That method provides a framework for the SBC's constituents to understand new issues and why they're important. For

certain political issues, abortion politics has ignited advocacy change. This approach comes with potentially significant consequences for the SBC.

In his research paper "Culture Creep: How Abortion Politics Shapes Evangelical Legal Advocacy," Lewis writes: Politics is affecting religion, instead of religion affecting politics, and it is happening in ways not previously unearthed.

"It's often the understanding that your religious perspectives affect your political proclivities," Lewis says. "But potentially in some of these areas – particularly ones that haven't been held over the long term like free speech – the political nature of the times may be affecting how members of the SBC interpret some of their traditional theological emphases."

Lewis will present his research at the American Political Science Association's (APSA) 2013 annual meeting and exhibition. He'll focus on how the SBC's view on abortion relates to its free speech advocacy. The APSA event, themed "Power & Persuasion," will be held Aug. 29 through Sept. 1 in Chicago. The APSA serves more than 15,000 members around the world, bringing together political scientists from all fields to promote awareness and understanding of politics.

New, in-depth analysis

This research out of UC's McMicken College of Arts & Sciences covers relatively unexplored territory. The UC2019 Academic Master Plan emphasizes producing new ways of understanding and transforming the world through research and scholarship. Lewis says the link between abortion politics and other hot-button politics for evangelicals has been under-analyzed by scholars of legal advocacy and religion and politics.

Yet it's an important area to understand. When a group as large and

influential as the SBC increasingly takes its concerns to the highest levels of the judicial system, the potential cultural repercussions could be widespread. Lewis says his work helps tell the story of how people are being represented before the US Supreme Court and what barriers and opportunities exist.

Among the reasons Lewis chose to focus on the SBC for his study were the group's historic tradition, organizational structure and vast membership. Because of the SBC's size, it is largely representative of mainstream evangelicalism in America.

Lewis' mixed methodological approach targeted three areas of analysis: framing of legal arguments; mobilization of the base; and legitimization of advocacy decisions. His data is drawn from interviews with SBC advocacy leaders, amicus brief filings, newspaper reports, internal group documents and surveys of the clergy and of the rank and file.

"For scholars, there's a missing understanding of religious legal advocacy," he says. "This connection between how one cultural battle, abortion, drives several other battles in the law hasn't been vetted well. My research is the first major approach to look at it this way."

Direct links in political strategy

The SBC is the world's largest Baptist denomination and the second largest Christian entity in the United States next to the Catholic Church. For nearly 40 years evangelical groups such as the SBC have been taking a more active role in legal advocacy, often presenting their case in front of the Supreme Court. When it comes to legal arguments, abortion is considered the top priority among the evangelical elite as well as the laity.

Lewis sees direct connections between abortions politics – such as the

legality of abortion protests – and the defense of free speech. He points to the Supreme Court cases *Hill v. Colorado* (2000) and this fall's *McCullen v. Coakley* as examples of how evangelicals engage the legal system to advocate for expanded free speech rights of abortion protestors. Lewis says it's a shift for conservative evangelicals who have historically been in favor of limiting rights to free speech.

Lewis hopes his research will provide in-depth perspective into today's cultural battles and how they play out in the legal sphere.

"While there is a cultural divide in American politics, there is more nuance in advocacy decisions than often reported," Lewis says. "I hope my research provides some insight into how religious individuals' views and perspectives get communicated to institutions that are often insulated from popular opinion, such as the Supreme Court."

More information: www.apsanet.org/2013/

Provided by University of Cincinnati

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