

# Poisonous partisanship: The stimulus bill and religious freedom

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Despite an economic emergency and a popular president, notions of bipartisan cooperation on Capitol Hill collapsed after about a week. The advantages of political partisanship remain extremely compelling.

The early days of the Obama administration brought reminders that religious partisans also remain deeply entrenched and fervently committed to continuing the culture war by whatever means necessary.

Consider the recent work of the Traditional Values Coalition and the American Center for Law and Justice. Their signature contribution to the debate on the stimulus package was to proclaim that Obama's bill would "stimulate anti-Christian bigotry" by "restricting the free exercise of religion."

What provoked this outcry? The two groups discovered a section of the bill that provides funds for modernizing university facilities but prohibits the money from being used to renovate buildings used primarily for religious purposes. (Also excluded are sports stadiums that generate ticket revenue.) The TVC and ACLJ weren't content to complain that this clause discriminates against religion—a complaint that has some plausibility, though it is one that the Supreme Court has rejected. No, they argued that the bill would (to quote the TVC press release) do nothing less than "curb religious liberty at institutions of higher learning" by outlawing campus ministries. The Obama bill would stop Bible study groups from meeting in the student activities building, the TVC thundered.

None of that is true. The provision does nothing to restrict religious freedom or prevent religious activity in any campus building. But the TVC and its allies did not allow the truth to get in the way of their favored narrative, which (to quote the TVC again) is that "this new administration and its secularist allies don't accept the First Amendment's protections of religious activity."

These religious partisans rely on exaggerations and, in this case, outright falsehoods to keep the culture war going and keep themselves in business—the business of poisoning political discussion.