

Today, evangelical Christians tend to be aligned with conservatives in defense of private property. But that was not always true. In the 19th and early 20th Centuries, evangelicals launched a major attack on property rights. As historian John Compton documents in a [recent book](#), they also adopted the idea of the “living Constitution” to justify their revisionist view of property.

The conflict between property rights and religion was sparked by moral opposition to drinking and gambling. Evangelicals wanted to ban alcohol and lotteries, both of which had been long-standing, widely accepted features of American life. Lotteries had even been used to finance the construction of churches. But prohibition of alcohol sale and lotteries threatened to destroy vested rights in those activities. Evangelicals argued that changing moral judgments could render some existing property rights illegitimate. They were largely successful in this effort.

These days, it is environmentalists, rather than evangelicals, who want to revise concepts of legitimate property rights. They believe that some uses of property, such as destroying wetlands or the habitats of endangered species, are illegitimate and undeserving of constitutional protection. It is somewhat ironic that the theories used to justify these views have their roots in the arguments of what would now be called the Religious Right.