

## THE CHRONICLE REVIEW

# Fundamental Mistakes

**This campaign is proving wrong decades of research on evangelicals.**



Photo Illustration by Mark Abramson

By *D.G. Hart* | JUNE 19, 2016

Once upon a time, social scientists who study religion and politics in the United States thought they understood voters who have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ — read: evangelical Protestants. Beginning in the late 1970s, when Jerry Falwell, a Baptist minister in Virginia and founder of Liberty University,

launched the Moral Majority, which became the lobbying arm of white Protestants alarmed by what they saw as the nation's moral decline, evangelicalism seemed to capture the affinity between conservative Protestantism and the GOP. That analysis looked plausible from Ronald Reagan to George W. Bush.

Then came Donald Trump. As pollsters quizzed voters and early primary returns came in, support for Trump among believers, who (one would think) should be offended by his failed marriages and vulgar remarks, was not only a surprise but a phenomenon that defied more than three decades of faith-based electoral expectations. As much as born-again leaders distanced themselves from Trump, polling data suggested that rank-and-file evangelicals were supporting him at levels that contradicted the assumption that conservative faith and conservative politics go hand in hand. In state

after state, from Massachusetts to Virginia to Mississippi, Trump won the evangelical vote that pollsters and social scientists widely assumed would go to Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio.

Pundits and political observers have been scratching their heads over the apparent inconsistency. But a generation's worth of scholarship on born-again Protestantism shows that evangelicalism was always a contrived identity that actually hid more than it explained. And Trump's unexpected appeal to evangelicals has shown that evangelicalism is a feeble hook on which to hang so much of the American electorate.

Older social-scientific surveys of the national electorate — say, before 1975 — generally make today's social scientists look like rocket scientists. For one thing, the older literature didn't distinguish between mainline and evangelical Protestants. They were all simply Protestant. Today we know better. Mainliners belong generally to the historic Anglo-American denominations and find their institutional voice (what little is left of it) in the ecumenical body, the National Council of Churches, which grew out of the Federal Council of Churches, founded in 1908. These mainline institutions were not sufficiently sound for evangelical Protestants, who in 1942 formed an alternative, the National Association of Evangelicals.

## The Trump Issue

How did Donald Trump's candidacy happen? What ideas has he upended? How is academe responding? What does his candidacy mean for the future of democracy? We asked scholars from a variety of disciplines to weigh in.

- The Clickbait Candidate
- Make America America Again
- Pox Populi
- Poor White Politics
- The Politics of Resentment
- The Jerk's Political Moment



Definitions of evangelicalism generally depend on certain religious convictions that set born-again Christians apart from other varieties. In a recent article in *The American Interest*, Peter Berger, an eminent member of the older generation of sociologists of religion, granted his blessing to a definition laid out by the president of the National Association of Evangelicals highlighting four basic beliefs: the authority of the Bible as the most reliable source of truth; the necessity of proselytizing; the death and resurrection of Christ as the only remedy for human sinfulness; and faith in Christ as the only path to eternal salvation.

That definition is certainly not the last word from social scientists. In a 2012 article in the journal *Social Forces*, a group of sociologists led by Robert D. Woodberry differentiates three aspects of evangelicalism: as an affiliation; as a series of doctrinal markers (along the lines of Berger's analysis); and as a religious movement. This sort of fluidity allows scholars to appreciate some of the differences that owe to denominational, regional, and ethnic and racial histories.

Scholars differ on how to measure the evangelical constituency, but by any reckoning it is a sizable slice of the public. By the definition in Berger's essay, some 30 percent of all Americans are evangelical — 29 percent of whites, 44 percent of blacks, and 30 percent of Hispanics. A survey from the Pew Research Center puts the share at 25 percent of the population — more than 60 million adults, making evangelicals a larger demographic than Catholics, African-Americans, or Hispanics. In an era of identity politics, the study of evangelicalism has added faith to race, gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation (for starters) as a category for social analysis.

Trump's rise does nothing to question the identification between evangelicals and the Republican Party, but it does undermine the scholarly consensus that explained the GOP's appeal to born-again Protestants. For instance, in a 1990 essay on recent Republican gains among conservative Protestants, Lyman A. Kellstedt and Mark A. Noll attributed evangelical votes for Republican candidates to (among other factors) the emergence and embrace of "the social-issue agenda" (i.e., sexual promiscuity, abortion, marriage) by the GOP. The challenge that Trump poses is whether evangelicals still qualify as traditional, orthodox, and morally serious if the candidate for whom they vote is none of the above.

Within recent memory, evangelicals gave their allegiance to John McCain once he added the evangelical Sarah Palin to the 2008 ticket. In 2012, Rick Santorum appealed especially to evangelicals during the GOP primary campaigns. And even though Mitt Romney was neither a Protestant nor a "genuine" social conservative, evangelicals held their noses and voted once again overwhelmingly for the Republican nominee in part because of GOP policies on abortion and marriage.

In this cycle's primaries, the good money was on either Ted Cruz, whose father is a pastor, or Marco Rubio, who spends a lot of his weekends at church, attending a Southern Baptist megachurch on Saturday evenings and worshiping at a Catholic mass on Sundays. In light of last summer's Supreme Court ruling on gay marriage, the expectation was for born-again Protestants to be even firmer in their resolve to promote traditional family ideals in the 2016 campaign. Only last fall, Russell D. Moore,

arguably the evangelical pope on social matters by virtue of his presidency of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, dug in his heels with the Supreme Court's *Obergefell* decision fresh in mind. An "Evangelical cave-in on sexual ethics is just not going to happen," Moore insisted in *First Things*. "There is no evidence for it, and no push among Evangelicals to start it."

**A**nd yet here we are. Donald Trump, the least devout and morally constrained Republican candidate, does not even need to add a faith-based vice-presidential nominee to his ticket to shore up the GOP's evangelical base. Five more months of campaigning could well reveal additional surprises, but so far Trump reveals the weakness of the scholarly consensus about evangelicals and American politics.

For starters, Trump underscores a not-so-convenient truth for those inclined to conclude that conservative religion equals conservative politics. Even as they were urging GOP candidates to defend "traditional" America, evangelicals were attending worship services that were anything but traditional. The so-called Praise & Worship phenomenon that arose in the past few decades brought "Christian rock" and dispensed with formality and decorum during services. Conservative Protestants may have opposed any deviation from educational or artistic norms at the local school or museum, but in church their liturgical preferences ran to the recent, young, and expressive. Paradoxically, evangelicals at church were doing what they opposed in universities — getting rid of dead, white, European men and the way they worshiped.

This was not new. Evangelical Protestantism going back to the days of George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards has always elevated the contemporary and vernacular over decorum and tradition. H.L. Mencken picked up on this while he was covering the famous early-20th-century evangelist Billy Sunday: "Even setting aside his painstaking avoidance of anything suggesting clerical garb and his indulgence in obviously unclerical gyration on his sacred stump, he comes down so palpably to the level of his audience, both in the matter and the manner of his discourse, that he quickly disarms the old suspicion of the holy clerk and gets the discussion going on the

familiar and easy terms of a debate in a barroom." Perhaps Trump is to American electoral politics what born-again believers are to Christianity — people for whom tradition is more slogan than a way of life.

Trump's candidacy also reveals that evangelicalism is simply a house of cards that social scientists, journalists, pollsters, and religious leaders have constructed to prove that born-again Christianity is large and influential. This construction of evangelical identity was precisely the goal of those 1940s Protestant leaders who hoped to build a coalition that could rival the Protestant mainline. To do so they approved an apparently flexible set of beliefs that might allow Protestants as diverse as stern Calvinists and Holy Ghost-filled Wesleyans to find common ground.

The shared sense of identity could be dumbfoundingly simple. A historian of 20th-century Protestantism, George Marsden, once quipped that to be an evangelical is to like Billy Graham. But while watching Graham on television preaching to thousands in some baseball stadium might be inspiring and may have given someone a sense of belonging to something big, that inspiration was far removed from the give and take of local congregations isolated from one another because of deeper religious differences. In other words, if evangelical identity was so thin that it could not overcome realities that prevented Pentecostals from worshiping with Presbyterians, how useful was it to explain the ways believers participated in electoral politics? Both a Baptist and a Methodist might vote for the same Republican presidential candidate, but was that the product of religion? Too much of the literature on evangelicals and politics said, "Yes."

**I**f social scientists abandon evangelicalism as a category of analysis, what are the alternatives? One is to take church membership (or any institutional membership) seriously. To be an evangelical is generally easy. A pollster asks if you identify yourself as born again and if you say yes, then — voilà — you are an evangelical. But actually joining a church is different, and standards vary from denomination to denomination. The work of identifying people by church affiliation is harder than assembling polling data. But chances are that becoming a dues-paying member of any organization is more significant than one vote every four years followed

up by an exit poll. Indeed, the importance of church membership actually turns out to be relevant among Trump supporters. Data increasingly show that Protestants who attend church regularly are much less likely to vote for Trump than are people who simply self-apply the label "born again."

A second lesson is that perhaps scholars should simply take religion less seriously. Faith may not explain a person's ideas or actions. In a review about a book on Ireland's "holy wars," Fintan O'Toole argues that religion was *not* the chief factor alienating Protestants and Roman Catholics in Northern Ireland — that it was, in fact, merely a tool with which to brand one's antagonist, and that it concealed a deeper economic divide: "What Ireland shows, again and again, is how the meaning of religious identity changes under the pressure of political and economic forces. It is manipulated by bigots, distorted by cynics, and waved as a flag of convenience by people who proclaim their religion far more often than they practice it. ... It influences in a fundamental way the sense of where one belongs in a divided society."

If it is possible to entertain such a perspective on Ireland's Christianity, is the case of American evangelicalism any harder? To be sure, the stakes are high — academic reputations, fund-raising potential, psychological well-being, even the health of American society rest on these categorizations and assumptions. But hasn't Donald Trump already exposed the limits of what we thought we knew about "evangelicals"?

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