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# THE DEMOGRAPHIC SHIFT

Through decades of experience in the American church, we have observed anecdotally the shift in political framework among congregants, as more congregants bring what seem to be more partisan lenses to theological discussions and their moral convictions. This chapter sets the stage for our overall discussion with the best research and polling data regarding the changing relationship between politics and religion among Protestant Christians in America over the last four decades.

From a research perspective, this anecdotal experience raises several pertinent questions:

- 1) Has there actually been a broader shift in partisan and/or ideological identification among evangelicals over the last generation?
- 2) Does religious identity or partisanship matter more for evangelicals' policy attitudes, especially regarding politically charged issues such as abortion?
- 3) What are the implications of shifts toward more ideological homogeneity for the younger generation and the health of congregations?

This analysis is concentrated on white evangelical Protestant churches, the context in which we are largely working and in which these changes have been primarily observed.

## **QUESTION 1. HAS THERE BEEN A PARTISAN AND/OR IDEOLOGICAL SHIFT AMONG EVANGELICALS OVER THE LAST FOUR DECADES?**

### **Partisan Shifts among Evangelicals**

White evangelical Protestant churches have undergone a dramatic transformation since the mid-1960s. Just before the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, white evangelical Protestants self-identified as 68% Democrat, 25% Republican, and 7% Independent—making up a significant part of what was often referred to at the time as “the solid Democratic South.”<sup>1</sup> While Democratic identification fell fairly steadily throughout the 1970s, it wasn’t until the presidency of Ronald Reagan, beginning in 1981, that more white evangelical Protestants than not identified their political party as the GOP.

The shift in partisanship with the Reagan election was fairly dramatic—with white evangelical Protestants serving as one of the principal drivers in what political scientists have called “the great white switch.”<sup>2</sup> For example, in 1978, just two years before Reagan’s election, 53% of white evangelical Protestants still identified with the Democratic Party, compared to 30% who identified with the Republican Party. By the beginning of Reagan’s second term in 1984, nearly half (48%) identified with the Republican Party, compared to only 40% who identified with the Democratic Party. Reagan’s campaign—during which he famously courted the evangelical vote by saying, “I know you can’t endorse me, but I endorse you”—was the watershed moment that marked the beginning of white evangelical Protestants becoming a bedrock constituency of the Republican Party.

This about-face in party identity over a fairly short period of time is dramatic and accounts for some of the changing experiences pas-

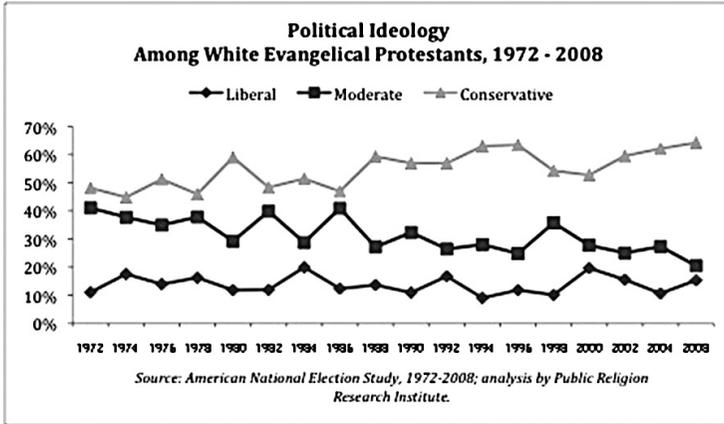
tors who looked out over the same pews during this period would have experienced. But the question remains whether these transformations have resulted merely in a switch in majority party preference or in a more dramatic shift toward greater homogeneity. The partisanship shifts in themselves do not on the face of it indicate increased homogeneity. For example, the number of political independents has remained relatively small throughout this period, hovering somewhere around approximately 12%. Moreover, the current balance between Republicans and Democrats, while inverted from its composition in the early 1970s, looks nearly identical. In 1972, 51% of white evangelicals identified as Democrats and 34% identified as Republicans. The year 2008 is nearly an exact mirror image, with 54% identifying as Republican and 34% identifying as Democrat. Thus, the transformation of the party identification rates only tells part of the story, largely because there continue to be viable conservative Democratic candidates at the state and local level in the South and the Midwest.

### **Increased Homogeneity: Voting Patterns and Ideological Shifts among Evangelicals**

If the full effect of the political transformation of white evangelical Protestants is somewhat masked in self-reported party-identification rates, it becomes more clear in voting patterns and especially in ideological shifts over the past few decades. For example, while only 54% of white evangelicals identified as Republican in 2008, voting patterns demonstrate higher levels of homogeneity than these numbers suggest. For example, nearly 8 in 10 (79%) white evangelical Protestants voted for Republican President George W. Bush over Democratic candidate John Kerry in 2004, and nearly as many (73%) voted for John McCain over Barack Obama in 2008.

Trends in self-reported political ideology over the last few decades also illustrate this striking transformation toward polarization and overall conservatism among white evangelical Protestants. If we rewind to the early 1970s, white evangelical Protestants were nearly evenly divided between self-identified conservatives (48%) and self-identified moderates (41%), with only about 1 in 10 (11%) identifying as liberal.<sup>3</sup> Over the 1970s and up until the Reagan years, while

there was some movement from year to year, this relative balance remained fairly consistent.



Beginning with the Reagan election in 1980, however, white evangelical Protestants became increasingly conservative, and the percentage of moderates among them dropped precipitously. The number of self-identified liberals remained consistently small at approximately 14%. For example, in 1978, two years before Reagan’s run for the presidency, there was an 8-point gap between the number of white evangelicals who identified as conservative and those who identified as moderate (46% and 38% respectively). By the end of Reagan’s presidency in 1988, the conservative-moderate gap had jumped to 32 points (59% and 27% respectively). By 2008, the conservative-moderate gap had grown to 44 points, with nearly two-thirds (64%) of white evangelical Protestants identifying as conservative, and only 1 in 5 (20%) identifying as moderate.

In summary, white evangelical Protestant Christians have undergone a dramatic political transformation since the late 1960s and early 1970s. They have gone from being part of the solid Democratic South to being a bedrock constituency of the Republican Party. But more important, they have shifted from being a conservative-leaning group in which the combined number of moderates and liberals rivaled the number of conservatives, to being a solidly conservative group in which the number of conservatives outnumber nearly 2 to 1 the number of moderates and liberals combined.

## **QUESTION 2. DOES RELIGIOUS IDENTITY OR PARTISANSHIP MATTER MORE FOR EVANGELICALS' POLICY ATTITUDES, ESPECIALLY REGARDING POLITICALLY CHARGED ISSUES SUCH AS ABORTION?**

While it is clear from the analysis above that white evangelical Protestants have become strongly associated with the Republican Party and now support Republican candidates in national elections in overwhelming numbers, the question of the independent influence this new partisan identity exerts on issue attitudes, and the question of the relative power of this identity over time, remains open. In order to answer these questions, the Public Religion Research Institute ran a basic regression model to test whether identifying as Republican was an independent predictor of attitudes among white evangelical Protestants on the issue of abortion at different periods between 1980 and 2008.<sup>4</sup>

Between 1980 and 1986, when controlling for a number of demographic factors, identifying as Republican was not a significant predictor of opposition to abortion among white evangelical Protestants. In other words, white evangelical Protestants who identified as Republican were no more likely than white evangelical Protestants who did not identify as Republican to oppose legalized abortion.

At the end of President Reagan's second term in 1988, however, identifying as Republican became for the first time a significant independent predictor of opposition to abortion among white evangelical Protestants. From 1988 to 2008, even when controlling for a number of demographic factors, identifying as Republican has consistently been a significant independent predictor of opposition to abortion among white evangelical Protestants. Specifically, beginning in 1988, white evangelical Protestants who identified as Republican were on average nearly twice as likely (e.g., 1.9 times more likely in 2008) as evangelicals who did not identify as Republican to oppose legalized abortion.

### **QUESTION 3. WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS OF SHIFTS TOWARD MORE IDEOLOGICAL HOMOGENEITY FOR THE YOUNGER GENERATION AND THE HEALTH OF CONGREGATIONS?**

There are at least two implications for the shift of white evangelical Protestants toward more conservative ideology and partisan homogeneity. First, it has created a backlash among a significant portion of younger Americans, who are reacting particularly against the close relationship between religion and partisan politics, particularly around social issues such as same-sex marriage. Second, a more ideologically homogeneous profile exposes white evangelical Protestants to the dangers of group polarization, the tendency of like-minded, insular groups to move to extreme positions over time.

#### **Negative Reactions among Younger Evangelicals to Culture War Politics**

There is convincing evidence, coming from research conducted by the evangelical-leaning Barna Group, that increased partisanship and ideological uniformity, particularly around anti-gay policies, has resulted in negative judgments about Christianity by younger Americans, including those raised in the church. In *Unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity*, Barna Group president David Kinnaman concluded that “Christianity has an image problem” among America’s youth. In a study of younger Americans between the ages of 16 and 29, Kinnaman found that the three most common attributes associated with present-day Christianity were that Christians are anti-gay, judgmental, and hypocritical. These attitudes persisted even among religiously affiliated youth, among which he found that “four out of five young churchgoers say that Christianity is antihomosexual [sic]; half describe it as judgmental, too involved in politics, hypocritical, and confusing.”<sup>5</sup>

There is also evidence that the effects of the attitudes documented by Barna may extend beyond a rejection of Christianity to a rejection of formal religious affiliation in general. Between 1990 and 2010, the number of religiously unaffiliated Americans—those reporting their

religion as nothing in particular—more than doubled from 8% to 18%.<sup>6</sup> This shift is being driven especially by the Millennial Generation, Americans under the age of 30. One-third of Millennials report that they do not belong to any religious tradition, making them more than three times as likely to have no formal religious affiliation than their grandparents (those aged 65 and older).<sup>7</sup> Moreover, this lower level of affiliation is also not merely a function of life cycle effects. Millennials are significantly more likely to be unaffiliated than members of previous generations at a comparable point in their life cycle. In the 1970s, for example, only 12% of Americans between the ages of 18 and 29 were unaffiliated with religion. Notably, nearly 1 in 5 (18%) Millennials say they were raised in a religion but are now unaffiliated with any particular faith.<sup>8</sup>

There is also evidence that the association of anti-gay sentiment with the public face of religion may play a strong role in driving younger people away from formal religious affiliation. In *American Grace: How Religion Unites and Divides Us*, well-known sociologists of religion Robert Putnam and David Campbell summarized the dynamic this way: “This group of young people came of age when ‘religion’ was identified publicly with the Religious Right, and exactly at the time when the leaders of that movement put homosexuality and gay marriage at the top of their agenda. And yet this is the very generation in which the new tolerance of homosexuality has grown most rapidly.”<sup>9</sup>

In a set of interviews with religiously affiliated Millennials, researchers at the Public Religion Research Institute also heard strong echoes of this theme. One interviewee summarized the challenge he felt maintaining his connection to his church in the face of widespread negative perceptions about religion among his peers:

Being intolerant and judgmental of gay people would be the biggest association people [my age] have with religion. I just don’t want to be associated with that. Certainly, there are plenty of faith communities who don’t believe that, but that to me is kind of the image that I have—religious folks like are judgmental, and like use the faith as a way to judge people. . . . To me, it doesn’t match with Jesus’ message.<sup>10</sup>

Even inside the church, this generational backlash is evident in the response among younger evangelicals to “The Manhattan Declaration,” a document drafted and signed by luminaries of the conservative evangelical and Christian Right establishment.<sup>11</sup> One primary purpose of the document was to be a missive from the older generation to the younger generation on the continued importance of focusing on “the sanctity of life, traditional marriage, and religious liberty.”

The document, however, created an unexpected negative reaction among some quarters of its younger target audience. Jonathan Merritt, son of former Southern Baptist Convention president James Merritt and author of *Green Like God: Unlocking the Divine Plan for Our Planet*, wrote a lengthy retort to the declaration for *The Washington Post*’s On Faith section.<sup>12</sup> Capturing the feelings of many in the younger generation about what he called “a new culture war manifesto,” Merritt noted the absence of any “notable evangelicals under 40” among the signatories. He also chided the authors both for the condescending tone of the document and for their exclusive focus on a few hot-button issues that dovetail with a partisan agenda.

Older generations often speak as though a handful of issues are the only ones that deserve our passionate witness and concerted attention. . . . Younger Christians believe that our sacred Scriptures compel us to offer a moral voice on a broad range of issues. The Bible speaks often about life and sexuality, but it also speaks often on other issues, like poverty, equality, justice, peace, and care of creation.<sup>13</sup>

## **Evangelicals and the Dangers of Group Polarization**

In addition to the potential backlash generated among younger Americans and evangelicals by a more homogeneous ideological and partisan footprint, white evangelical Protestants also face an inherent set of challenges because of this increased homogeneity. There is solid emerging evidence that homogeneous communities—whether secular or religious, politically right or left—have a particular vulnerability to becoming more extreme over time. In *Going to Extremes: How Like Minds Unite and Divide*, Harvard law professor Cass Sunstein unpacks

the political implications of a growing number of neuroscience and sociological studies of polarization and extremism.<sup>14</sup> After reviewing hundreds of studies in six countries, Sunstein sums up the clear conclusions of these studies of group polarization as follows: “Groups go to extremes. More precisely, members of a deliberating group usually end up at a more extreme position in the same general direction as their inclination before deliberation began.”<sup>15</sup>

In these studies of polarization, the effects of group deliberation are especially pronounced among groups that begin with some level of ideological homogeneity. Deliberations among these groups have two different effects: They increase the distance between these groups and others; and they significantly reduce internal diversity. In other words, interactions and deliberations among like-minded groups tend to tamp down dissenting views and move all individuals in the group to more extreme positions than they might hold without the effect of the group. Sunstein concludes, “When people talk to like-minded others, they tend to amplify their preexisting views, and to do so in a way that reduces their internal diversity. We see this happen in politics; it happens in families, businesses, churches and synagogues, and student organizations as well.”<sup>16</sup>

In the case of churches, these effects may also be compounded to the extent to which the homogeneity of the community is reinforced by other social circles that reflect the same worldview and echo the same messages. There is ample evidence in the general public that Americans are increasingly sorting themselves into geographical lifestyle enclaves that tend to share income and education levels, race, and political affiliations.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, Americans are increasingly sorting themselves into liberal and conservative reading networks, with few “bridging books” linking conservative and liberal reading circles.<sup>18</sup> Finally, Americans are increasingly getting their news not from broadcast news but from more ideologically identified blogs and news sources.

White evangelical Protestants are participating in these broad trends and may be more influenced by some of these than other Americans. For example, white evangelical Protestants are concentrated in the South and Midwest and tend to cluster in suburban or

exurban neighborhoods, especially following the outward migration from cities largely in reaction to desegregation in older neighborhoods and the upward mobility of many evangelicals over the last generation. Christian book clubs popular among evangelicals function to populate reading lists with books with ideological or partisan perspectives already familiar to white evangelicals.

Finally, white evangelical Protestants—more than any other major religious group—tend to get their news from ideologically driven sources. For example, more than twice as many white evangelical Protestants say they most trust Fox News to give them accurate information about current events and politics (41%) than say they most trust all the major broadcast news networks (ABC, NBC, and CBS News) combined (20%). In the general population, Americans are evenly divided between those who say they most trust Fox News and those who say they most trust the major broadcast news networks.<sup>19</sup>

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Returning to the three basic questions with which this chapter begins, there is indeed convincing evidence of a dramatic political transformation that has resulted in increased partisan and ideological homogeneity among white evangelical Protestants over the last forty years. This transformation has its roots in the cultural upheavals in the late 1960s and the 1970s, but the real change occurred following the election of President Ronald Reagan in 1980. Before Reagan, white evangelical Protestants were still a solid Democratic Party constituency; after Reagan, they had emerged as one of the most powerful groups in the Republican Party. Before Reagan, conservative evangelicals were roughly balanced by the presence of significant numbers of moderate and liberal evangelicals; after Reagan, conservative evangelicals dominated moderate and liberal evangelicals by a margin of 2 to 1.

These partisan and ideological shifts in identity were accompanied by an increase in the independent power of Republican partisanship among white evangelical Protestants. It was not until the last year of Reagan's second term in 1988 that identifying as Republican was a significant independent predictor of opposition to abortion among white