

## AMERICAN POLITICS

**Trump, White Evangelical Christians, and American Politics: Change and Continuity.** Edited by Anand

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The iron bond between Donald Trump and white Evangelicals poses a fascinating puzzle for scholars. MAGA enthusiasm bloomed in this community only after his 2016 GOP primary victory, but Evangelicals then clung to the thrice-married reality-show star through the vicissitudes of his presidency, two impeachments, the events of January 6, 2021, and his quest to return to the White House.

Explanations abound. Some analysts see nothing but partisanship: Evangelicals are staunch Republicans, and Trump had only a modest edge here over his GOP predecessors. Then there are transactional explanations: Evangelicals gave Trump their votes in return for judicial nominations, including the three Supreme Court justices who helped overturn *Roe v. Wade*. Or, perhaps, culture war issues provide the connection: (white) identity politics, Christian Nationalism, anti-immigrant sentiments, animus against Muslims, xenophobia, or opposition to feminism and gay rights (choose any combination). And for a few experts, Trump's appeal was his populist persona: macho leadership, violent expression, and a willingness to break the rules, replicating the style of the megachurch pastors on his "Faith Advisory Council."

Two veteran analysts, Anand Sokhey and Paul Djupe, have assembled a stellar cast of scholars to untangle all this. To set the stage, Ryan Burge and Kaylynn Sims outline the religious "sorting" of party coalitions, with the GOP increasingly reliant on Evangelicals and Democrats dependent on religious "minorities" and the unaffiliated ("Nones"), including agnostics and atheists. Although declining to speculate on the relative influence of religious and political factors on sorting, they agree with other contributors that the GOP suffers from its dependence on a shrinking religious base, while Democrats must triangulate among often devout minorities and secular voters.

The growing clout of those secular voters is addressed by David Campbell, Geoffrey Layman, and John Green in a lucid postscript to their 2021 book, *Secular Surge*. Using panel data (2017–2021), they distinguish the "nonreligious" (who are simply nonobservant) from "secularists" (who hold explicit secular values). They find that Republicans became both less nonreligious and less secularist, while Democrats have moved the other way,

increasing the "religious/secular" gap. As the secularists' Democratic vote rose from 66 percent in 2016 to 94 percent in 2020, they are of signal importance to the party but dwell in uneasy proximity to the party's minority religious constituencies.

While Campbell et al. distinguish among the "Nones," Napp Nazworth dissects Evangelicalism, identifying two camps: "fundamentalists" and "neo-evangelicals." The former is the sharp edge of Trump's coalition; neo-evangelicals agree on most political issues but lament his demeanor and extremism. Nazworth argues that the early Christian Right could act independently of the GOP, but now is merely a captive mobilization device, "Trump's trumpet" (p. 78).

Although politicians clearly shape partisan sorting, religious leaders also play a role. Indeed, Evangelical clergy often converted to the GOP before their congregants did. Adding to the research on cue-giving in sermons, Shayla Olson and Enrique Quezada-Llanes use quantitative text routines to count issue mentions in 46,203 sermons from 357 churches, overwhelmingly Evangelical and nondenominational. The findings are intriguing but inconclusive. Political content grew during Trump's run for the presidency, but declined after the inauguration, although mentions of crime and welfare increased, perhaps reflecting his dire presidential rhetoric. Of course, as Stephanie Martin has argued in her 2021 book, *Decoding the Digital Church*, Evangelical clergy seldom make explicit political statements but reflect on applicable "Biblical values." In any case, sermons are probably not the most important vehicle for clergy guidance on partisan choices.

Several authors echo the growing scholarly consensus that "backlash" to Christian Right politics has contributed to recent declines in religious affiliation. In an interesting twist, Paul Djupe asks whether Evangelicals see such reactions as threatening the efficacy of their efforts to spread the faith. In fact, such perceptions are occluded by a strong sense of "religious threat," heightened in monolithic religious environments. Thus, the stronger Evangelicals' political commitment, the less danger they see to their proselytizing mission. Ruth Braunstein elaborates on this "theological discourse of persecution," arguing that that Evangelicalism is no longer "embattled and thriving" (per Christian Smith in the 1998 study, *American Evangelicalism*), but rather is "smaller, more political, more radical" (p. 134).

The last half of the book considers the ideological bases of the alliance. Allan Tellis and Anand Sokhey find that Evangelicals are by far the most conservative religious group on racial issues, especially on financial reparations for slavery. Hilde Stephens and Gerardo Martí provide recent historical context for those attitudes, reviewing how conservative activists have campaigned against Critical Race Theory to mobilize conservative Christians. Eric McDaniel, Sarah Heise, and Abraham Barranca use a

2018 module of the Cooperative Congressional Election Survey (CCES) to demonstrate that Evangelical adherence to “white masculinity” predicts both a Trump vote and support for his policies. Andrew Lewis adds “religious liberty” as another ideological element, arguing that Evangelical commitment here is confined to a Christian nationalist “exclusive” interpretation, such as the freedom of religious businesses to refuse service to gays and lesbians. Using survey data and experiments, Lewis sees such exclusivism as a threat to religious freedom itself but hopes that Evangelicals may adopt a more “pluralistic” conception. Finally, Jeremiah Castle and Kyla Stepp buttress transactional explanations for Trumpism, reviewing his unilateral executive actions: eviscerating the “Johnson amendment”; taking comprehensive pro-life actions; moving the U.S. embassy in Israel to Jerusalem; issuing the “Muslim Ban”; and forging antitransgender policies. They rest their case with 2018 CCES data demonstrating that Evangelicals were indeed a strong public constituency for each policy.

As a whole, this volume does not provide a definitive answer to the puzzle posed by the editors, but the essays are uniformly well-done and provocative, adding to our understanding of religion and partisanship. I do have some reservations about the “Evangelicals and Trump” framing. A close look at the GOP religious coalition suggests broadening the focus to include other conservatives: traditionalist Catholics and Mainline Protestants, Latter-day Saints, Orthodox Jews, Latino Protestants (prominent on

Trump’s Faith Advisory Council), and Asian-American Christians of various hues. Republicans may have doubled down on a “shrinking” religious coalition, which holds on only by “overvoting,” but this conclusion ignores the dynamics of coalition building. If Evangelicals alone cannot provide a winning political base, conservatives from other traditions might provide reinforcements (and already have).

A related concern involves the religious variables considered by the authors. Evangelicals hold distinctive beliefs, but those get little attention. Although “Christian Nationalism” makes cameo appearances, there is no systematic analysis here. McDaniel et al. do note the power of biblical literalism on “white masculinity” and Braunstein asserts the impact of the “theology of persecution,” but those are exceptions. Although many national surveys neglect belief items, the American National Election Studies (ANES) consistently includes a biblical literalism question and has often used items on religious identities, both useful proxies for theological bent. Incorporating these might bolster the analyses: Does Nazworth’s distinction between fundamentalists and neo-evangelicals fit the data? Do theological perspectives shape attitudes beyond “white masculinity”? On race and immigration? On Israel? There is solid evidence that they do—and that this extends beyond the white Evangelical camp. The authors here have often used specialized surveys to good effect; they should explore belief questions. Then, we might have a richer picture of partisan religious sorting—and of Evangelicals’ strange worship of Donald Trump.