



Why America's White Evangelical Christians Turn Out at High Rates in Midterm Elections

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Back in October 2014, pollster Robert Jones pointed out that white evangelicals were declining as a percentage of the U.S. population, even in the South – which could have been bad news for Republicans who count on loyal support from white evangelical voters. Starting in November 2014, Jones predicted, evangelical population decline could start tipping close races to Democrats in Bible Belt states like Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, and North Carolina. But Election Day on November 4th proved Jones wrong. White evangelicals turned out at high rates and played a major role in handing Republicans decisive victories in Senate races across the country. White evangelicals may be declining as a percentage of the population, but because they flock to the polls when Democratic constituencies often stay home, they still rule the midterms.

For good and for ill, white evangelical Christians are one of the most effectively organized and reliably Republican constituencies. In my new book, *The Politics of Evangelical Identity*, I explain how white evangelicals became so closely tied to conservative politics in the United States but not Canada. I also ask what all observers of U.S. politics can learn from conservative evangelicals about how best to energize voters – especially in non-presidential mid-term election years, when overall turnout tends to be lower. Turnout power, I discovered, is built between elections, long before the campaign season starts.

Messages in Daily Life

Many outsiders assume that evangelical mobilization is a top-down affair, in which pastors and national elites tell evangelicals to come out on Election Day and vote for like-minded candidates. But I discovered that the process is much more gradual and involves many volunteer or “lay” religious leaders who play key roles in weaving politics into local religious life. The key leaders are people such as the Sunday School teacher who makes off-handed derogatory remarks about “liberals”; the small prayer group hostess with the portrait of George W. Bush on her fridge; and the pro-life friend at church who reminds you to get out and vote this November – and keep in mind that Democrats are for abortion, while Republicans support life.

Local opinion leaders are vital and effective because they translate national conservative messages into the everyday social worlds of evangelical church-goers. I label these local leaders “captains” in the culture wars, because they are embedded in the everyday lives of their followers. In contrast, culture war “generals” -- like James Dobson, head of the advocacy group Focus on the Family, Mike Huckabee, politician and media host, and television agitator Glenn Beck – put out general messages about issues like abortion and same-sex marriage that the captains and foot-soldiers must put into practice. Culture War captains are the people in evangelicals’ daily lives who offer models of what it means to be a good Christian, in the process mapping out why “we” have a different political identity than out-groups like “feminists,” “gay rights activists,” and “liberals” who vote for Democrats.

Long before election season rolls around, evangelicals are already primed with a shared narrative about American national identity. That narrative argues that the country is in decline, and “liberals” are to blame, because they are trying to limit the religious freedom of Christians. Of course, this narrative is promoted by Christian Right interest groups active in politics. But it is also promoted by media sources and organizations that are not perceived as “political” by rank-and-file evangelicals. For example, most evangelicals I observed in my research saw Focus on the Family as a resource for parenting and personal devotion, not as a partisan operation. Likewise, pro-life activists whom I interviewed did not see themselves as “political” leaders. For them, the pro-life movement is thoroughly religious. Indeed, most of their activities with pro-life groups involved prayer and Bible study, not protest and advocacy.

Because of these ongoing social realities, when Republican candidates invoke typical culture war narratives during election campaigns, their claims resonate with ostensibly non-political talk that evangelical Christians hear every day, including in spiritual settings or groups they consider non-political. Conservative arguments and identities resonate with evangelicals in election years, because local opinion leaders reinforce similar messages and identities in people's everyday social and religious lives.

Larger Lessons for Active Citizenship

What do these findings mean for movements that want to mobilize very different populations of potential voters? The evangelical example tells us that "getting out the vote" should be considered just the final step in much longer-term processes of base-building. Getting out the vote is most readily accomplished when particular election efforts build social relationships solidified long before particular campaigns, and when voter engagement invokes shared identities. Knocking on doors and making phone calls is just the last step.

In evangelical communities, election campaigns simply remind evangelicals about the lessons they have already learned from their religious community: that voting Republican is a natural extension of what it means to be a "good Christian." This message is not only delivered from on high during campaign season by Christian Right interest groups and campaign ads. It is also reinforced daily from the bottom-up by trusted local leaders in people's everyday lives.

Other groups aiming to increase midterm voting by types of voters who often stay home need to ask, first and foremost, what kinds of local opinion leaders might influence the low-propensity voters in question. What local settings could play the role of small evangelical gatherings or Bible study groups? Where might everyday people learn that voting is something good members of their community are expected to do?

More broadly, what organizational vehicles could identify and develop local leaders who can engage many more people in year-round efforts to strengthen shared identities and articulate values in daily life? All Americans have a lot to learn from evangelical Christian fellow-citizens, who really have all of this very much in hand. They know who they, what they are fighting for and against – and why active citizenship matters as one part of living a good life.

Read more in Lydia Bean, *The Politics of Evangelical Identity: Local Congregations and Partisan Divides in the United States and Canada* (Princeton University Press, 2014).