

Understanding Evangelical Political Positions in the United States

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ABSTRACT

Throughout the history of the United States religious fundamentalism has played a pivotal role in shaping its future. Evangelical Christians have historically been shown to be one of the most prominent religious influences on American governance. From the early days of white settlement of indigenous lands to the political mobilization of Evangelicals in the 1970s Evangelicals discourse has undoubtedly proven to hold strong institutional significance. With Evangelicals making up 25.4% (Religion, 2022) of the population extensive research has been conducted to determine Evangelical political opinion. Despite this documentation, research on individual Evangelical justification is lacking in the general body of knowledge. Through the use of a survey using political polling data followed up with open ended explanation questions, trends with secular and religious justifications were identified. While a small sample size may hinder the conclusiveness of this study, conclusions regarding trends in Evangelical response to gay marriage can be seen as polling data that reflects the general academic consensus. The findings of this survey will serve as a catalyst for further research not only into justifications for Evangelical political opinion but for further research into polling data on underlying justifications for voters in general.

Introduction

Ever since the inception of the United States, Christianity has played a key role in influencing the nation's cultural and political landscape. Historically, religion has been used to justify tribal behaviors creating an “us” versus “them” attitude. Christianity in early America is no exception, with the majority of white Protestants viewing themselves in a cultural conflict with other religious and ethnic groups (Altman 2019). For centuries, religious activism in the United States has been limited to a set few political issues such as prayer in school, gay marriage and abortion. With the rise of the Religious Right in the 1970s, Evangelical Christians have been expanding their range of political discourse, rapidly organizing to seek new political goals (Gonzalez, 2012). Considering that Evangelicals make up around 25.4% of the American population, studying this demographic is necessary to better understand the modern political landscape (Bean, et al., 2008). The Evangelical demographic has been increasingly more influential in American electoral politics as exemplified through the 2016 election, where appealing to “Christian Culture” won Donald Trump 81% of the Evangelical vote (Pally, 2020). Despite the extensive documentation of voting patterns and ideological prescriptions, little is known about the individual reasoning behind Evangelicals political beliefs, whether that be secular or religious reasoning, leading to the question: What influences Evangelical Christians to formulate their position on specific political issues?

Literature Review

In order to understand the political underpinnings of the Evangelical demographic, it is important to develop a better understanding of the historical context of Evangelical political action in the United States. To develop such an understanding, this literature review has been dedicated to furthering the analysis of this demographic by looking at two

different sections: the history of the Evangelical movement and the specific political beliefs held by the Evangelical demographic.

Before an analysis can be made, a consistent definition of Evangelicalism must be identified. The term “Evangelical” dates back to the beginnings of the Renaissance, with Protestants using the term to differentiate themselves from the Catholics whom they opposed (Altman, 2019). Michael Altman, professor of American Religious Studies at the University of Alabama, argues that as a result of the term Evangelical being a relatively exclusive term, it has little to do with Christian denominations, and more to do with distinguishing themselves from Christians who they saw as further from God. This historical precedent makes Evangelical a mostly Protestant term that has a deep history of opposing the Catholic Church. With this in mind, the term Evangelical can be prescribed to Protestant Christians who self-identify as Evangelicals who are relatively hegemonic in their spiritual beliefs.

Evangelicalism in America

As a result of early American settlers being overwhelmingly Christian, early American settlement patterns reflect the desire to connect religion and civic life. Christianity has been incredibly influential when attempting to justify political action. This can be seen through the Supreme Court case *Johnson v. McIntosh* in 1823, exemplifying the religious bias seen in the court system from an early date. In this case, white settlement on reserved Native American territory was justified through the Puritan belief in “God-given dominion.” God-given dominion would be the phrase used to justify white settlement by describing Native Americans as “heathens” who were destined to be governed by “Christian people” (Bernstein, & Jakobsen, 2010). So while the separation of church and state does hinder a fully religious government, Christian doctrine has been systemically ingrained into American governance.

Over time, there has been a historic fusion of American culture with Protestant ideas; commonly referred to as Secular Christianity. The fusion of Christianity with American culture can be seen with the introduction of the term Judeo-Christian Values. The term “Judeo-Christian Values” began to be used following the First World War, when fewer Americans were identifying as Protestants. Subsequently, Evangelicals began defining their cultural practices as Judeo-Christian Values in an attempt to connect their cultural values to that of American patriotism (Balmer, 2021). The Secular Christian doctrine of Judeo-Christian Values increased in prominence following the end of World War II. Despite the divorce from Protestantism three decades earlier, the 1940s experienced growth in religious groups as a result of American opposition to the Soviet Union and Communist ideology. The American perception of Communism as a primarily atheist ideology resulted in the American government appealing to Evangelical doctrine by prioritizing Christian over secular organizations (Schäfer, 2007). As such, Christian doctrine is commonly invoked to counter more secular ideas of governance and morality.

The importance of Evangelicalism towards American culture is further demonstrated through the Evangelical response to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. In response to the political activism seen at the time, Evangelical groups such as Fuller Theological Seminary, Christianity Today, and the National Association of Evangelicals denounced the Civil Rights movement (Evans, 2009). While many Evangelicals publicly denounced racism, they claimed to be against imposed institutional social and political change; preferring to seek social change through individualistic themes. The growth of such organizations signified an increase in political activism seen in the Evangelical community.

With the growing Evangelical movement, the 1970s saw the Republican party beginning to appeal to the Evangelical demographic for political support. Starting with the election of Ronald Reagan, Evangelicals gained substantial institutional power within the Republican Party, signifying the rise of the Religious Right (Pally, 2020). The religious right can be characterized as the beginning of the cementation of the Evangelical demographic as a consistent Republican voter base. Reagan was able to seize the Evangelical vote by appealing to a set of traditional family values regarding sexual behavior and family structure. Reagan would further his political ambitions by developing a narrative around Free Market Economics being intrinsically linked to Evangelical doctrine. In a similar way to Reagan, Donald

Trump would appeal to “Christian Culture” and nostalgic times of traditional Christian values to establish his Evangelical base. Traditional Christian values were the foundation for his narrative about national identity (Edgell, 2017). Trump’s win in 2016 continues to demonstrate the immense amount of political power Evangelicals hold in American political discourse.

Secular versus Religious Reasoning

Evangelicals in the United States have had an extensive history of political activism. With the rise of the Religious Right in the 1970s, Evangelical political discourse has expanded to issues not explicitly religious. The election of George W. Bush in 2000 was a conclusive victory for the Evangelical demographic, as Bush represented the values espoused by the movement (Bernstein, & Jakobsen, 2010). Following reports of abuse committed under the Bush administration at the Abu Ghraib prison camp, debate on whether or not torture was ethical to prevent terrorism ensued throughout the Evangelical community (Gushee, 2010). This torture debate would spark Evangelicals to defend Bush’s actions through secular justifications. Secular justifications such as calling those who opposed torture politically motivated “leftists” or pacifists who would not defend the country.

Despite the rise in secular justifications, the Evangelical demographic has not lost sight of political issues directly linked to the Bible. American support of Israel demonstrates just how a biblical literalist perception of the Bible can fuel policy. According to the Bible, in order to fulfill the End Times Prophecy, the Hebrews must return to Palestine. This sparked Evangelical interest in securing a Jewish state in the Middle East to ensure the return of their messiah. Following the events of the June 1967 war, Evangelical lobbying efforts were successful in securing foreign aid to the Israeli state, exemplifying biblical justification for Evangelical belief (Ariel, 2012). Despite the biblical belief that the Hebrews are “God’s Chosen people,” antisemitism is still a problem in the Evangelical community, with Evangelicals more likely to believe Jews choose money over people as well as lacking in contribution to American culture (Smith, 1999). Thereby creating an uneasy alliance between the two different religious groups.

Now that the secular and religious justifications have been established for Evangelical political activism, it is appropriate to demonstrate the extent of Evangelical political power in the United States using the demographic’s historic opposition to abortion. With the *Roe v. Wade* ruling in 1973, the Evangelical demographic became politically mobilized in their mission to outlaw abortion. The summer of 1992 saw the “Summer of Purpose” protests where Evangelicals organized in front of abortion clinics to further their cause to end abortion. The Baton Rouge Clinic in Louisiana soon became the epicenter for Evangelical activism with the protests erupting into violence between Evangelicals and supporters of the right to choose. Fifty-six arrests were made following the events of the Baton Rouge Clinic protest; however, these arrests were proven to be insignificant compared to the 625 arrests in Buffalo and 2,600 arrests made in Wichita over similar protests (HYMEL, 2018). These examples of Evangelical political action, demonstrate how polarizing Evangelical belief can be in America while also showing the extent of Evangelical political strategy.

To develop a better understanding of what fuels the ideological prescriptions assigned to the Evangelical demographic, this study will investigate individual justifications for a set of political issues categorized through religious and secular justifications commonly found in previous research.

Method

This study aims to identify justifications for Evangelical political positions. As such several methods were considered. These methods included: content analysis, historical analysis, and surveys. A content analysis was originally considered as this method would allow for the further analysis of Evangelical political positions, however as this study aims to answer for Evangelical justifications for existing political positions this method was deemed insufficient. Historical analysis was also considered as the history of the Evangelical movement dates back to as early as the Protestant

Reformation in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, specifically yielding an extensive history in American culture. Despite an extensive historical background, this method was deemed impractical as the element in question were political justifications. In order to study current Evangelical political justifications a survey was deemed the most viable method.

A survey was ultimately chosen mainly because of its ability for mass dissemination and potential to collect extensive qualitative and quantitative data. To identify Evangelical political justifications, two main variables needed to be obtained: Evangelical polling data on specific issues, as well as participant-driven responses. Evangelical polling data needed to be incorporated into the study as this data. If in line with previous data, it would serve as a reflection of trends seen in the Evangelical community in general. Once this quantitative data is received, an open-ended question is required in order to identify the individual justifications Evangelicals have for holding their aforementioned beliefs. Surveys however, do hold some limitations as they rely heavily on human participation. This method has always been limited to its ability to sample a significant population to conclusively identify trends. Any study involving human participants holds the risk of human error, however the Evangelical community in particular has a history of being relatively anti-science (Glass 2019), as seen through Evangelicals' beliefs that scientific advancements are often anti-theological to fundamental religious principles. Nonetheless in order to address a gap in the research new information on the topic at hand is required with surveys being the best option for the largest sample size possible.

Before compiling the survey, a Google Spreadsheet (see Appendix 1) was used to collect data on 114 Evangelical churches in the United States. Churches were chosen on the basis of having "Evangelical" or "Evangel" in their name to ensure the investigation of American Evangelicals. By using Google Maps, churches were identified throughout the country. Upon identification, church names, phone numbers, pastor names, addresses and emails were all collected in order to get in contact with these organizations. This data was added to the aforementioned Google Spreadsheet. Each church received an email (see Appendix 2) containing the Evangelical political positions survey. Following email dissemination, twelve phone calls were made to several churches with only two pastors responding to the message. One pastor requested physical copies of the survey to give out at a senior bible study class, while the other pastor filled out the survey online. Following survey dissemination through email, surveys were posted on Facebook, Reddit and the Evangelical message board Worthy Christian Forums in order to obtain the largest sample size possible (see Appendices 3, 4, & 5).

This survey begins by asking the participant several different diagnostic questions such as age, sex, party affiliation, etc. (see Appendix 6) for later analysis on how different demographics of Evangelicals relate to the justifications posed in the results. For example, party affiliation was particularly important as Evangelicals have historically voted overwhelmingly Republican (Edgell, 2017) making someone who votes for the Democratic party an outlier who can be further studied in the analysis. Specific denominations were also asked in the diagnostic questions to further analyze whether or not specific denominations were generally more likely to hold positions with religious or secular justifications.

Following the diagnostic questions, a series of political questions were asked with political issues that have historically been important to the Evangelical community (see Appendix 7). In order to study the qualitative justification, a quantitative political polling question must be asked first to identify whether or not this justification was for a position widely held for most of the Evangelical community. A five-point Likert scale was initially considered because of its use of a spectrum for participants to answer political questions. The Likert scale was eventually discarded as the quantitative questions only serve to identify outliers in the research. The five-point Likert scale would bring a level of specificity not needed which would ultimately distract from the study's main purpose of identifying political justifications. Instead of a five-point Likert scale, simple "Yes" or "No" questions were used to identify political polling data.

Following this diagnostic question, an open-ended question was asked to give the participant a forum for elaborating on their position. This set of questions reveals trends in Evangelical justifications when the quantitative data matches the hegemonic polling. This not only serves as a way to identify hegemonic justifications for Evangelical political positions but also aids in analyzing the differing justifications for outliers that cause disagreement with the

broader Evangelical community. For example, the issue of abortion has historically seen Evangelical Christians rally against the practice (Carwana, 2010), making participants who deviate from the historical precedent into outliers. Case outliers would then be asked to explain why they are pro choice; giving either a secular or a religious response which indicates where Evangelicals might stand divided.

Hypothesis

Since the Reagan administration, Evangelical Christians have historically favored the Republican party. Republican rhetoric shifted to appeal to the Evangelical wing of the party (Pally, 2020). As such, it is logical to assume that the data collected will be in support of Republican policies and conservative positions on social issues such as abortion and gay marriage. Religious justifications will most likely be more common than secular justifications as the Republican party has spent years using religious rhetoric to appeal to an Evangelical voter base. Secular justifications also would seem to be more rare as the Evangelical movement has historically rejected scientific advancement. With these hegemonic assumptions it is also possible that there are outliers. These outliers may answer diagnostic questions differently determining what has greater influence over them, their religion or their other demographics.

Results

In total, 32 responses were identified but only 19 were identified to be usable. Thirteen responses were deemed unsuitable for analysis as they were from either: Catholic, non-religious individuals, or in one instance outside of the United States. The 19 usable responses included several different denominations. The denominations identified included: Evangelical Free Church of America (EFCA), Lutheran, Assemblies of God, Baptist, Nondenominational, Methodist, and Pentecostal. The data received from this survey came from a diverse arrangement of 14 states (Appendix 8). The 2020 election was used to identify recent political trends and the dominant party in said states. Out of the 14 states, eight voted for the Democratic nominee Joe Biden and six voted for the Republican nominee Donald Trump. This, along with the relatively proportional male to female ratio (10:8), makes this study a diverse representation of Evangelicals throughout the United States.

According to a Pew Research Center poll, Christians make up 70.6% of the total population of the United States with Evangelical Protestantism being the largest denomination (25.4%) (Religion, 2022). As such, the research presented in this paper's conclusiveness is affected as the data is limited through its small sample size. Nonetheless, where the survey data reflects general polling data on Evangelical political beliefs, it is logical to assume the proportional trends between secular and religious justifications for political beliefs would remain constant if applied on a larger scale. While the sample size of this study greatly hinders its conclusiveness, these identifications will serve as a reasonable starting point for further research into the underlying justifications of the largest religious demographic in the country.

Before identifying the difference between religious and secular justifications, it is imperative to identify the constants and outliers in the already studied political positions. The beginning of this analysis starts with identifying whether the diagnostic data remains constant with previous political polling. The data collected identified 8 Independents, 8 Republicans, and 3 Democrats. While this may seem like it deviates from the established body of knowledge, the Traditional-Progressive Axis and the Patriotic Axis conclude that these individuals are overwhelmingly Traditional (73.7%) and Patriotic (73.7%). A significant number of moderates were identified, most of which being Independents (21%).

The frequency of church attendance and church related activities was also determined to identify the degree of dedication to religion. Four participants went to church several times a week, twelve went to church every week, and three went to church occasionally. Along with this, seven participated in religious activities several times a week,

five participated in religious activities weekly, and five participated in religious activities occasionally. Determining religious activity will help identify whether or not there are any significant trends in the data.

Before analyzing the data from the survey, it is important to establish the preexisting political opinion of Evangelical Christians. In the chart presented below, questions that were asked in this study's survey are presented with answers in accordance with pre-existing academic consensus on Evangelical political opinion on each topic.

Table 1: Pre-Existing data on important issues pertaining to Evangelical Christians

Question	Answer according to pre-existing data
What is your stance on abortion?	Pro Life, (Bernstein, & Jakobsen, 2010)
Do you support higher taxes on the rich?	No, (Pally, 2020)
Do you believe torture is justifiable against terrorists?	Yes, (Gushee, 2010)
Do you think the United States should send military and economic aid to Israel?	Yes, (Ariel, 2012)
Do you believe the United States is better as a result of immigration?	No, (Glass, 2019)
Do you support gay marriage?	No, (Baker, & Brauner-Otto, 2015)
Do you support including prayer into public education?	Yes, (Carwana, 2010)
Do you support the legalization of marijuana?	No, (Carwana, 2010)
Do you believe the United States should play a larger role in international affairs?	Yes, (Smidt, 1988)

Now that the preexisting academic consensus on Evangelical political opinion has been established, an analysis of the collected data was warranted. This table will be used to compare the preexisting academic consensus with the new data collected in the survey in order to identify new trends in polling data and to identify trends in secular and religious justifications for each question.

When applying the previous method of identifying secular and religious justifications, the data collected identified significant differences in the amount of religious and secular justification. As such, three issues will be analyzed: abortion, faith's role in government, and gay marriage. To better identify the trends in the data a Chi-Squared test for independence was employed. This test was deemed to be the most appropriate for data analysis as the Chi-Squared test helps allow a further analysis of trends between two categorical variables. In this instance, the respondents' answer was identified as the categorical variable, and the group variable was identified to be the Secular or Religious justification.

Table 2: Survey response to the question “What is your stance on abortion?”

	Pro-Life	Pro-Choice	Unsure
Religious Justification	8	0	1
Secular Justification	7	2	1

When performing the Chi-Squared test for independence, the null hypothesis was identified as: There is no association between the religious and secular justifications and abortion stance. Using the Chi-Squared test we can test the alternate hypothesis being: There is an association between religious justifications and abortion stances. After running the test, the p-value was calculated to be 0.36 which is greater than any significance level that would be used, meaning this test has failed to reject the null hypothesis, signifying no conclusive evidence that there is an association between religious justification and Evangelical stance on abortion.

Table 3: Survey response to the question “Do you believe your faith should play a more influential role in the US government?”

	Yes	No	Unsure
Religious Justification	6	1	2
Secular Justification	1	7	2

Upon analysis, the null hypothesis was identified to be: There is no association between the justification and opinion on whether or not religion should have a stronger influence on the US government. The Chi-Squared test was used to test the alternative hypothesis: There is an association between religious justification and opinion on whether or not religion should have a stronger influence on the US government. After conducting this test the p-value was identified to be 0.018. As this number is less than the 5% level of significance, the null hypothesis was rejected concluding that religious justification played a significant role in determining Evangelical opinion on whether or not religion should have a stronger influence on the US government.

Table 4: Survey response to the question “Do you support gay marriage?”

	Yes	No	Unsure
Religious Justification	0	9	0
Secular Justification	5	2	2

Before applying the Chi-Squared test to this question the null hypothesis was first identified as: There is no association between religious justification and stance on gay marriage. After the null hypothesis was identified the Chi-Squared test was applied to test the alternate hypothesis of: There is an association between religious justification and stance on gay marriage. Upon analysis the p-value was identified to be 0.003. Being that this value is larger than

the 5% level of significance, it can be concluded that there is a strong association between religious justification and stance on gay marriage.

Ultimately these three issues were chosen to be shown because of their importance in Evangelical politics. The Chi-Squared chart for abortion was shown to demonstrate Evangelical political opinion that is similar to previous polling data that also fails to show a significant correlation between religious justification and political opinion. The role of Christianity in the government was shown to demonstrate a response that does not correlate to previous polling data on the topic while still displaying a level of significance in religious justification. The question of gay marriage was displayed to showcase an Evangelical response that correlated to previous polling data, while showing a strong significance in religious justification. In total, levels of significance were found in: role of faith in government (0.018), US interventionism (0.013), and gay marriage (0.003). The tests that failed to reject the null hypothesis were abortion (0.360), torture (0.082), immigration (0.62), and prayer in school (0.918).

Discussion

From the data that arose in the results, it can be concluded that Evangelical political opinion is only statistically significant in three areas: the role of Christian faith in government, US interventionism, and gay marriage. In contrast, in the other four categories, no evidence suggests any strong correlation between justification and the respondents' answers. Several limitations however indicate that this research may not be conclusive because of the small sample size. For example, in the areas of: Christian faith in government, taxes on the rich, whether or not torture justifiable, immigration, prayer in education, and US Interventionism, Evangelical polling data contradicts previously applied research. This could be for a multitude of reasons; however, the most likely suggestion is that as a result of the relatively small sample size, these statistics do not provide enough information to draw specific conclusions. To remedy this limitation, going forward this study could be replicated on a larger scale through the use of a research institution. A larger sample size would most likely be able to better identify the religious and secular trends seen in the Evangelical community.

Several categories still correlate to responses outlined in the literature review. These are: abortion, gay marriage, sending aid to Israel, and the legalization of marijuana. Unfortunately, questions on Israel and marijuana could not be determined because of the limitation of having such a small sample size. Of the remaining categories, only a level of significance was only found in gay marriage. Levels of significance were also seen in the role of Christian faith in government and US interventionism. As a result, in these categories, the level of significance can be identified to influence "Yes" or "No" questions. First, in the role of Christian faith in the government, it can be concluded that there is a 0.018 level of significance in favor of religious "Yes" responses and secular "No" responses. Secondly, in the case of US interventionism, it can be concluded that there is a 0.013 level of significance in favor of secular no responses. Lastly, Evangelical justifications for positions on gay marriage show a 0.003 level of significance in religious no responses and secular yes responses. The information discovered in this study will help religious and political organizations understand the underlying reasonings for Evangelical political opinions. These organizations will, thus, be able to better connect with this demographic.

Future Directions

Before identifying future directions for the research presented in this study, the main limitation of this study must be addressed, that being the incredibly small sample size. In order for this limitation to be addressed, conducting this study on a larger scale would be ideal. This could be done through the use of a large polling organization such as that of the Pew Research Center. Going forward, replicating this study on a larger scale through a research organization would help to increase the sample size and thus remedy the limitation.

The use of a research institute would also help to answer the unresolved questions in this study, that being the six categories where Evangelical political opinion differed from the pre-existing academic consensus. With the

use of a research institute, conclusions on whether the difference in these six categories was a result of the small sample size or rather a result of genuine political shift in the Evangelical community could be identified.

The research presented in this paper is primarily for two main demographics, politicians and Evangelical community leaders. With the conclusions drawn in this study about Evangelical political trends, these leaders would be able to use this information to better understand the underlying political justifications for the relatively hegemonic Evangelical political bloc. Furthermore, the implications of this study are much greater than just identifying Evangelical political goals. With this study's emphasis on qualitative information in relation to polling data, it exemplifies the importance of qualitative data when interpreting quantitative polling data. Through the use of open-ended questions this data truly has shown that public opinion is much more than just quantitative polling data, highlighting the importance of incorporating more qualitative questioning in future polling endeavors.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the Evangelical demographic has immense influence over the American political landscape. Throughout the course of this paper, two justification categories were identified: religious and secular. Religious justifications, acting as the measured variable, determine how much Evangelicals use their religion to justify their pre-disposed political positions. With the survey employed in this paper, these findings were able to bridge the gap between political positions and religious justifications in areas such as the role of Christianity in the government, US interventionism, and gay marriage. While the small sample size limits the conclusiveness of this study, this paper can still make a proportional conclusion about the political issues of abortion and gay marriage as the polling data gathered from this survey correlates to the aforementioned literature review. With this in mind, it can be concluded that in the area of gay marriage, there is a significant correlation between justification and Evangelical political positions. As those who justify their political position through religious means were more likely to be opposed to gay marriage while those who justified their position through secular means were more likely to be in support the practice. Whereas in the case of abortion, there is not enough evidence to suggest any correlation between religious justification and Evangelical political positions, meaning that Evangelicals are likely to justify their political positions on abortion equally through religious and secular means. Despite the conclusions drawn in two categories, the polling responses of Christian faith in government, taxes on the rich, whether or not torture is justifiable, immigration, prayer in education, and US Interventionism differed from the previously identified research on the topic. This could either indicate that Evangelical political opinion in these areas has shifted or that the small sample size limits the accuracy of these responses. With Evangelicals making up 25.4% of the population (Religion, 2022), it is necessary for religious and political institutions to identify the underlying justifications for this demographic's voting patterns. The conclusions drawn about religious and secular justifications in this paper serve as a beginning to further analysis of not only religious justifications but political justifications in general.

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