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# Defining "Evangelicals" in Print Journalism

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DEFINING “EVANGELICALS”  
IN PRINT JOURNALISM

by  
Logan Daniel Williamson

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

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## Abstract

Evangelicalism, a movement grounded in faith and individual morality, appeared to integrate into the GOP in the late-1970s and 1980s. In 2016, national newspapers reported that 81% of white evangelicals voted for Donald Trump, prompting a question of how the movement is defined today. I look at the recent history of the evangelical movement and the troubles that scholars, analysts and other cultural observers have had in offering a conclusive definition for the term. Next, I seek to answer how print journalists define the term and how that influences or is informed by polling results on Election Day. I interview reporters and editors at some of the top newspapers in the U.S. for individual definitions and ask about the methodologies used in identifying evangelicals and measuring the vote of the religious demographic.

## Introduction

In the late 1970s and 1980s, white evangelicalism established itself as an enduring political force fused with the GOP as they gravitated to Republican candidate Ronald Reagan. Since his election, white evangelicals have trended conservative in their political preferences and have remained a reliable GOP voting bloc. In 2016, Donald Trump won the presidential election with 81% of the white evangelical vote, and pundits struggled to explain how evangelicals supported a candidate who seemed incompatible with the moral code of Christian theology (Fea, Gifford, Griffith, & Martin, 2019). “Evangelical” is originally a religious term dating back to the revival movements in continental Europe and North America in the 18th Century (Melton, 1999). However, there is a question of its sustained reliability as a religious term, because of its strong association with conservative politics (Gourley, 2016).

In scholarship and the media sphere, there is a serious lack of consensus on how to define “evangelical.” Evangelicalism, as a term and a movement, has no strong indicators upon which leaders agree, such as a “catechism, a hierarchy or any outward, visible unity in a structural form.” Evangelicalism spans generations of religious history, and it has different connotations depending on the speaker and geographical context (Wax, 2018).

In contemporary use, “evangelicals” are referred to in the context of American politics, and the term is associated with a particular subset of Christians variously defined. Often in the media, evangelicals are understood as generally Republican, as exemplified by news headlines such as these: “Poll: White evangelical support for Trump at record high” in an article for The Hill and “Evangelicals Keep Faith in Trump to Advance Religious Agenda” in a published interview segment by PBS Newshour (Newport, 2018).

Although the term has been used interchangeably with “conservative Christian,” and evangelicals are often portrayed as a monolithic movement, such a description “does not remotely cohere to reality.” Evangelicals are experiencing an identity crisis of sorts, and there are significant disagreements on the meaning of the term (Green, 2018).

First, I consider the origin of “evangelicalism” and some of its common definitions in scholarship and the media sphere. Next, I chart the course of evangelicalism from its reintroduction into the political arena in the late-1970s until the presidential election in 2016, looking at the group’s deep ties to conservative politics. By studying the documentation of evangelicals and the challenges to analyzing the religious group, I set the stage for my research question that I posit to reporters and news writers in the second half of this thesis. I ask how print journalists define what an evangelical is to look at how the religious group is generally viewed in the media sphere.

## Chapter 1: Evangelicalism

The term “evangelical” originally comes from the Greek word for “good news” or “gospel,” referring to the salvation purchased by the death of Jesus and granted to those who trust in him. It developed as a common name for those affected by the revivals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that swept the English-speaking world. In North America, these are generally referred to as the First and Second Great Awakenings. Puritan philosopher Jonathan Edwards, Anglican cleric George Whitefield and Calvinist thinker John Wesley served as catalysts for the emergence of this evangelical movement. Circuit-riding preachers from the Methodist Episcopal Church and Baptist ministers continued to spread the revivalist movement throughout the colonies. It led many colonists to convert by de-emphasizing the church and, in turn, placing an emphasis on simple Bible preaching, dramatic and immediate conversion (“born again” experience) and a zealous duty to evangelize (spread the good news of the gospels). It touched virtually all Protestant denominations (Fitzgerald, 2017).

Any Christian traditional enough to affirm the central tenets of the “old, nineteenth-century evangelical consensus” is categorically evangelical. Such beliefs include:

- Reformation doctrine of the final authority of the Bible
- Real historical character of God’s saving work recorded in Scripture
- Salvation to eternal life based on the redemptive work of Christ
- Importance of evangelism and missions
- Importance of a spiritually transformed life.

“Card-carrying” evangelicals are also conscious of the trans-denominational identity of evangelicalism, rather than finding identity exclusively within their own denomination.



Evangelicalism is difficult to define, because the religious movement has an expansive vision stimulating diverse groups of members that “do not always get along” (Marsden, 1991).

In modern scholarship, a thumbnail definition that is widely accepted is from historian David Bebbington. He lists a number of theological components that are displayed by every evangelical group, although he recognizes the “sheer heterogeneity” of evangelicals. A body of believers need not “show awareness of the term to be included.” His summary of evangelical distinctives is known as the “Bebbington quadrilateral,” and it includes the following:

- **Biblicism:** a great respect for the authority of the Bible
- **Crucicentrism:** centrality of the cross in evangelical proclamation
- **Conversionism:** a stress on a sudden or gradual “born again” experience
- **Activism:** quest for fresh converts yoked with social concern

(Noll, Bebbington, & Rawlyk, 1994).

The National Association of Evangelicals features Bebbington’s evangelical definition on its website along with the NAE Statement of Faith which articulates its own standard for the doctrinal beliefs of evangelicals. It serves as a creed of Christian orthodoxy for evangelicals, upholding a belief in the inerrant Word of God, the three-in-one Godhead, the divinity of Christ, the work of the Holy Spirit in salvation and its indwelling presence in the Christian. Several major Christian organizations adhere to NAE’s Statement of Faith, including the American Family Association, Shared Hope International and World Vision. Articles quoting it as their own statement of faith/values can be found on their websites (National Association of Evangelicals).

Religious historian Molly Worthen describes evangelicals roughly as a spiritual community that circles around a set of three fundamental questions: how to repair the fractures between faith and intellectual reason, how to have a personal relationship with God, and how to reconcile the demands of private faith with the constraints of the secularized public square. She proposes that evangelical Christianity be defined by its “history,” and she questions the adequacy of his “Quadrilateral” as a decent estimate of the trans-denominational movement as it exists today. She said doctrinally-based definitions such as Bebbington’s can be “limiting,” because it does not capture the disparate nature of evangelicalism. Evangelicals often disagree on what the doctrines are, and the term itself has come to mean, in some regards, how someone votes rather than what he/she believes. She argues evangelicals “have not had a single source of authority to guide them... or settle the troublesome question of what the Bible actually means.” She reflects on the presuppositions in American culture about evangelicalism and says it is important to look at the term in the context of its history and diversity (Faith & Leadership, 2013) (Worthen, 2013).

Style guides like the Associated Press Style Book and the New York Times Style Manual of Style and Usage define “evangelical” for the journalism industry. The AP Style Book says the term evangelical is as a noun: “‘Evangelical’ is a category of doctrinally conservative Protestants. They emphasize the need for a definite, adult commitment or conversion to faith in Christ and the duty of all believers to persuade others to accept Christ.” AP says the term was originally “used as an adjective describing Protestant dedication to conveying the message of Christ.” The NYT Style Manual of Style and Usage defines it as “the preferred term for conservative Protestants of many denominations who describe themselves as born again.”

In recent times, evangelicals have become entangled with conservative politics (Giles, 2019). I will provide a broad historical narrative of evangelicalism since its political ascendance in the mid-1970s.

### **Background on Political Involvement**

Out of the Watergate scandal in the early and mid-1970s came more public expressions of born-again Christianity, or evangelicalism. Democratic candidate Jimmy Carter, the governor of Georgia, reassured Americans with a promise to “never lie to you,” trailing President Gerald Ford’s unpopular decision to pardon Nixon. Carter was a man of faith who played up his evangelical identity, revealing himself to be “born again” during the campaign. “Born again” is a phrase from the Gospel of John in which Jesus informs a Pharisee, Nicodemus, that a man must be born again of water and of Spirit to enter the kingdom of God. As a candidate, Carter embodied the values of religious conviction and assuaged the anxieties of millions of American citizens (Miller, 2014).

In 1976, evangelicals “stepped into the center stage” in the eyes of America’s major media outlets. Evangelicalism had a period of immense growth after World War II, and the year 1976 marked the first post-war election in which the evangelical electorate had an apparent effect on the results of a national election. A high point for evangelicals came when the pollster George Gallup Jr. said that 50 million Americans could fairly be described as evangelicals, and a cover story in Newsweek magazine famously dubbed 1976 as “The Year of the Evangelical” (Miller, 2014).

However, this surge of evangelicalism soon generated Carter’s sharpest criticism. Left-leaning evangelicals favorable to Carter could not compete with right-wing evangelical groups.

Carter's rhetoric showed a strong religious impulse, repeatedly referring to his own private faith in God and the Holy Spirit, but his "sermon-like speech" only earned him so much political capital with the evangelical right. In contrast to Carter, right-wing evangelicals criticized the religious declension of American culture, sought to defend biblical ethics as grounds for national law and tried to influence public policy affecting family and morality. As president, Carter remained loyal to a secular Democratic Party that edged toward socially progressive views on gay rights, feminism and abortion. He finessed or avoided altogether the concerns of conservative evangelicals, and the energy of the religious demographic started to shift toward the Republican Party (Miller, 2014).

During Carter's campaign for re-election, factions of conservative Protestantism came to comprise a rightward-leaning coalition that the press dubbed the "Christian Right" (Miller, 2014). For the megachurch pastors and televangelists that fueled the movement, the task of organizing was helped by a wave of evangelical sentiment disaffected by Carter's presidency. There was also an emerging idea of fundamentalism in reaction to the so-called "Long Sixties," which was the idea that the 1960s lasted 20 years due to the tumultuous nature of the period that saw the anti-Vietnam War protests and the Roe v. Wade decision. It highlighted the growth of the evangelical right because of a sense of estrangement from mainstream political culture (Hart, 2002).

The "Christian Right" sprang up among networks of pastors across the South but Jerry Falwell, a high-profile Baptist pastor from Lynchburg, VA, co-founded and represented the movement. He was a nationally known evangelist, and his church had one of the largest and fastest-growing in the nation. His fundamentalist rhetoric had a major role in taking religious

sub-groups beyond their ecclesiastical differences, calling them to form a “coherent social and political movement” (Fitzgerald, 2017).

In June 1979, Falwell founded the Moral Majority, an organization designed to mobilize conservative Christians in the political arena against a moral decay in the country. “We’re fighting a holy war,” said Falwell at a speech at his own Baptist church. The Moral Majority was dedicated to supporting candidates with “moral character” to public office, and it functioned as a catalyst to “get out the evangelical vote” (Hart, 2002). Falwell claimed the organization was “ecumenical,” working with conservative Catholics, Mormons, other Protestants and even some Orthodox Jews. “It will take the greatest possible number of concerned citizens to reverse the politicization of immorality in our society,” he said in his book “Listen to America.” By the fall of 1980, it had registered an estimated 2-3 million voters across an alleged forty-seven state organizations (Fitzgerald, 2017).

Falwell said there was a serious crisis in the nation’s history of sinful behavior, and there needs to be revival to protect against the wrath of God. He discussed a Christian obligation to address social ills, to fight as citizens to free the country, and to reclaim America as a nation “under God.” He listed several national sins including the Supreme Court’s decision to legalize abortion, the EPA, homosexuality and the contagion of “secular humanism.” Passage of federal civil rights legislation, including the IRS ruling that revoked tax-exempt status from racially discriminatory schools, also “ignited the dynamite,” as Robert Billings, the Moral Majority’s first executive director, said of the evangelical campaign against government policies. In Falwell’s best-selling book, he provided a “biblical action plan” calling for prayer, national repentance and mobilization for political action (Fitzgerald, 2017).

In early 1979, Falwell began looking for an alternative candidate to Carter who “publicly identified with their side in the culture wars.” He gathered with delegates and politicians at the RNC convention in July 1980 to nominate Ronald Reagan as “the party’s standard bearer,” expecting his administration to reverse policies on abortion rights, curb the gay rights movement, restore prayer in public schools, and lead the nation to moral prosperity (Williams, 2010).

Reagan was the “odds-on favorite” for the nomination (Fitzgerald, 2017). He was a divorced Hollywood actor who rarely attended church, and, as governor of California, signed a “therapeutic abortion” bill into law, which allowed abortion under certain circumstances. However, a definitive moment for Reagan came during a National Affairs Briefing of the Religious Roundtable, a leading Christian Right organization, in August 1980. Reagan told a gathering of over 15,000 evangelical activists: “I know you can’t endorse me. But I want you to know that I endorse you and what you are doing” (Williams, 2010).

Reagan’s rhetoric appealed to the evangelical sense of disillusion with the moral paradigm in America. He often displayed a command of born-again speech and showed awareness of the evangelical belief that America was a “Christian nation” that had forsaken its God. In fact, Reagan’s courting of evangelicals was central to his campaign strategy. He called for a Human Life Amendment (that was later drafted during his second-term campaign effort), introduced a measure allowing parents to “opt out” of sex-education courses for their children, and promised to unveil anti-obscenity legislation (Fitzgerald, 2017).

Running against Carter, Reagan received a high number of electoral college votes and a majority of the popular vote, sweeping every southern state except for Carter’s home state of Georgia. 67 percent of (white) evangelicals voted for Reagan in the 1980 election. “It was the

greatest day for the cause of conservatism and morality in my adult life,” said Falwell (Williams, 2010).

After the presidential race of 1980 “thrust evangelicalism into the spotlight,” the energy of evangelicals resided on the conservative end of the left-right spectrum (Miller, 2014). By the late 1980s, it was clear evangelicals had colonized the Republican Party, delivering a solid vote for Ronald Reagan in 1984 (80%) and for George W. Bush in 1988 (80%) (Grzymala-Busse, 2015).

In the late-1980s, Jerry Falwell shut down the Moral Majority, saying its political ambitions had been realized. He was succeeded by Pat Robertson, the son of a U.S. Senator who had started a Christian television program, “The 700 Club,” claiming to heal the sick by faith and pray away hurricanes. In 1988, Robertson ran a standard conservative campaign for the Republican nomination for president, but won only a single caucus. He dropped out of the race and endorsed the establishment candidate, Vice President George H.W. Bush. However, the Bush administration turned out to be too moderate for evangelicals, disappointing and even infuriating much of his base. Robertson was “so fed up” with Bush that he decided to gain more access to the White House as a lobbyist (Williams, 2010).

In 1989, Robertson formed the Christian Coalition to exercise influence on U.S. public policy via outside donations and lobbying spending. By 1992, the Coalition had assimilated into the Republican Party, converting its rank and file and securing control of the GOP apparatus in more than a dozen states. During the first two years of Bill Clinton’s administration, the Coalition experienced massive growth in financing and membership, offering people of faith a place in Republican Party politics to launch crusades against him (Fitzgerald, 2017).

High-profile leaders in the Christian Coalition, such as executive director Ralph Reed, set the tone for national debates on immigration reform and creationism. In the 1994 mid-term elections, the GOP seized majority control of the House of Representatives for the first time in forty years. Three quarters of the white evangelical vote went to Republican candidates. “The Coalition mobilized four million voters and helped the Republicans sweep the South. It seemed unstoppable,” until Clinton was re-elected in 1996 and Reed departed from the advocacy group in 1997. The Coalition’s influence fell sharply, and in 1998, the inveighing against Clinton over the Lewinsky scandal and Republican losses in the mid-terms caused the breakdown of the Coalition (Fitzgerald, 2017).

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a highpoint for evangelical influence came during the administration of George W. Bush. He promoted the causes of evangelicals “with the conviction of a true believer” (Williams, 2010). Bush was born into an elite family along the American East Coast, but his adulthood intersected with late-20<sup>th</sup> century evangelicalism. In Bush’s public statements, he synthesized his “Jesus talk” with the political agenda of conservative evangelicals (Miller, 2014).

In 2000, he garnered 68% of the evangelical vote in the national election, although he defeated Democratic candidate Al Gore in a narrow victory. After the election, Bush’s chief adviser Karl Rove’s marshaled evangelical support for the president’s agenda. Evangelicals had become “politicized as never before,” counselling Bush to hold nothing back in his effort to return America to a conservative moral standard (Miller, 2014)

Bush’s first administration “saw a growing alliance with the Republican Party.” He gave evangelicals continued access to the White House, including the appointments of several



evangelicals to Cabinet-level positions. He supported faith-based and family programs and put moral issues front and center. By prosecuting the war on terror, Bush invoked evil in the face of Saddam Hussein's government in Iraq, often employing religious rhetoric to promote his military aims. A majority of evangelicals believed Bush made the right decision to invade Iraq in February 2003 and had a high view of his "strong leadership" style after 9/11. At the time Bush took office in 2000, evangelicals accounted for one-third of the Republican vote, but that figure increased to nearly 40 percent by the end of his term (Fitzgerald, 2017).

Evangelicals turned out in force to re-elect him in 2004, giving him 78% of their vote. However, the second Bush administration demonstrated the limits of evangelical influence in the national culture. Evangelicals had not produced the substantive legislative results that were expected, and pundits began talking about the "crackup" of the Christian Right. Abortion was still legal, and school prayer was not. Same-sex marriage was legal in a few states, and Americans were more supportive than ever of gay rights. Conservative evangelicals "captured a party, but found they could not change the culture" (Williams, 2010).

Pundits in the last two years of the Bush administration proclaimed the movement "dead," saying the era of the Christian Right is over (Williams, 2010). Many highly influential evangelicals had become disillusioned with the GOP and did not "bellow as triumphantly" with McCain as they had with Bush. Still, they remained the Republican Party's most loyal demographic, and in November 2008, 74% of the evangelical vote went to McCain and his conservative running-mate, Sarah Palin, against Barack Obama (Miller, 2014).

After Obama won, the Christian Right was still "many millions strong" and well-positioned to exert influence in national life (Williams, 2010). Reaction came in the form of the

Tea Party, a larger and more powerful group that “pushed a weakened Republican Party sharply to the right and filled the House with intransigents” (Fitzgerald, 2017).

The Tea Party was a corporate-funded movement that sought to fix the financial system, calling for tax reductions and smaller government. It had strong ties to the conservative Christian movement, elevating Sarah Palin as a spokesperson for it and accounting for a high percentage of white evangelical Protestants. To increase visibility, the Tea Party remained active only on economic issues, although many were conservative on social issues as well (Fitzgerald, 2017).

Christian Right leaders made a second alliance with Roman Catholic archbishops, aiming to influence the debate over a health care reform bill that Obama put at the head of his agenda. Obama devised federal mandates on contraception and abortion as part of the 2010 Affordable Care Act, and Christian groups sought exemptions saying that it suppresses religious freedom. It passed after a Senate amendment prohibited federal funds to pay for coverage of elective abortion. House and Senate Republicans refused to support the bill, but after anti-abortion Democrat Ben Nelson accepted the compromise, “a supermajority was achieved” (Fitzgerald, 2017).

By 2012, the “age of conservative evangelicalism” appeared to be winding down. Mitt Romney, an adherent of Mormonism (labeled a “cult” by many evangelicals), carried white evangelicals 78%-21%, but it was not enough to win him the election. Dejected and downcast, conservative Christian leaders inspired “end-times rhetoric” after hearing the election results. For American evangelicals, Obama’s election signified a decade of growing secularism and contributed to the antipathy they felt for him (Fitzgerald, 2017).

The Republican Party is heavily dependent on white evangelical political power, but evangelicals are a shrinking share of the American population. Evangelicals still comprise 25% of the total electorate, but a continental divide among evangelical voters on issues is widening. Support for anti-LGBTQ positions is declining. Stances on immigration are disputed in the evangelical community. Some evangelicals, such as Russell Moore and Jim Daly, criticized the “old-guard” religious right, disavowed the idea that the U.S. was a “Christian nation,” and showed themselves “open to compromise and working with others.” The Obama administration seemed to indicate a change of guard in evangelical leadership, as many opposed the Christian right’s emphasis on “below the belt” issues like abortion and sexuality (Fitzgerald, 2017).

By the time of the 2016 election, the evangelical world had become a “complex place.” Much of the media thought the right-wing Christian movement “dead.” Spokespersons for it had integrated into the Republican Party as elected officials, and the GOP largely absorbed its issues (Fitzgerald, 2017).

In 2016, national newspapers reported that 81% of white evangelicals voted for Donald Trump, a thrice-married casino owner who has been called the “antithesis” to biblical teachings (Milligan, 2017) (Baker, 2019) (Bailey, 2016). His win among evangelicals caused the nation to skewer them for “selling their souls” (Gerson, 2018), but the term itself begs further scrutiny: What exactly is an evangelical, and how do newspapers define or identify evangelicals in their reporting?

### **Definition Problem & its Effects**

For the last few decades, the term “evangelical” invokes an impression of politics more than theology or Christian practices. “Evangelical” has become disconnected from its historic

roots suggesting someone committed to classic evangelical beliefs. Now, its meaning has shifted to a cultural label rather than association with matters of doctrine and faith. (Kidd, 2017).

In 2008, Os Guinness addressed the political overlays that have obscured the meaning of the term “evangelical” in the U.S. in a public declaration titled “The Evangelical Manifesto.” In drafting this statement, Guinness sought to differentiate between evangelicalism as a renewal movement and its negative political connotations (Wax, 2018). It is essentially a “theological term, so it must never be confused with any purely human movement, let alone be laden with political and cultural baggage,” he said. In the statement, he reaffirms the term’s theological significance and the imperatives at the heart of the Christian faith, saying evangelicalism is in danger of losing touch with traditions that “go beyond any one nation and time” (Guinness, 2008).

Strong political partisanship has overcome the “aspirational” view to preserve the natural heritage of evangelicals, says Trevin Wax, the Director for Bibles and Reference at Lifeway Christian Center. He says a two-track model of evangelicalism has arisen: Evangelicalism as a renewal movement based on common beliefs and evangelicalism as a sociological and political phenomenon. He suggests there needs to be some “soul-searching” to consider the gap between historic evangelicalism and its “often-political manifestations.” Evangelicalism, at its core, is about renewal and has global connections that transcend its cultural intuitions in the U.S. An aspirational vision of evangelicalism identifies with its doctrinal commitments, and not the “narrow, American-centered view” (Wax, 2018).

Because evangelicals are often identified for political advocacy, some evangelicals in the U.S. are concerned that the public perception of the term has become distorted to describe “white

social conservatives.” NAE released a statement in 2018 clarifying what it means to be an evangelical, saying it is a Christian who believes in four foundational truths regardless of their political views. In 2016, 39 left-leaning evangelical leaders signed a statement countering the “false narrative” of evangelicals painting them as “predominantly white, right wing and unconcerned about the poor and oppressed.” There are efforts within evangelical communities to “reclaim” the term and the historicity of the movement (Smith S. , World Evangelical Alliance Head: Evangelicalism Needs to Be 'Reclaimed' in Trump Era, 2018).

After 2016, some evangelical church leaders started avoiding use of the term altogether, especially with outsiders to their faith. Christianity Today surveyed CTPastors.com readers (38% Senior/Solo pastors, 17% other pastors, 25% lay leaders, 20% business admin/other) regarding their comfort with the term. 70% of church leaders were comfortable describing themselves as “evangelical” to other Christians, but only 52% felt comfortable using the term with non-Christians. John Sommerville, senior pastor of a church in Minnesota, said his congregation stopped using the term outside the church, despite having heritage in the evangelical movement. He said that the word has been hijacked by people on the right and left, and the meaning has narrowed to mean “white Republican” (Rohane, 2016).

Concerned about the partisan leanings of evangelicals, many members of traditionally evangelical churches no longer identify with the term. A growing number of Christians in the U.S. have stopped identifying as evangelicals to dissociate themselves from the ultra-conservative element of the group. In 2017, the Princeton Evangelical Fellowship changed the name of its decades-old program to the Princeton Christian Fellowship. Tony Campolo, the former spiritual advisor to President Bill Clinton, said he is not comfortable calling himself evangelical, because the general public assumes things about him that aren’t true. Christians who

have fled the term have even created a support group on Facebook called “Ex-vangelicals” (Hesse, 2017).

Secular and religious people misunderstand the meaning of “evangelical,” and “view it through a political lens instead of a theological one.” Conservative white evangelicals have made headlines the past two years for backing Donald Trump in his presidential election victory. Media coverage may mislead some people into believing that conservative white evangelicals speak for evangelicalism as a whole (Smith S. , 2018).

## Chapter 2: Evangelicals in the News

For example, at the end of the 1980s, it was “commonly assumed” that the “Christian Right” consisted entirely of evangelical Protestants. Media failed to make the distinction since the time of the Carter administration in the mid-1970s. Indeed, when Gallup pronounced 1976 as “the year of the evangelical,” the mass media agreed. In 2016, several national publications released articles on white evangelicals for Trump that relate them to the “Religious Right” in the body or headline. The Religious Right is an even broader category than Christian Right, ranging from ten to fifteen million people (Wacker, 2000).

On Oct. 12, 2016, The Washington Post published an editorial on evangelical leaders backing Trump with the headline: “The Wrecked Religious Right” (Milbank, 2016). In an opinion piece published in The Guardian on Oct. 17 in which young evangelicals are applauded for taking a stand against Donald Trump, the headline reads: “I never thought I’d find common ground with white evangelicals. Enter Donald Trump; I’m happy to see the young religious right stand against tyranny” (Arceneaux, 2016). In an op-ed in the New York Times on Oct. 19 discussing divisions among pro- and anti-Trump evangelical voters, the headline reads: “The Religious Right’s Trump Schism” (Posner, 2016).

Polls suggest that many evangelical Protestants were not members of the Christian Right. Many born-again Protestants were sympathetic to the political goals of the Christian Right but showed little interest in winning elections. Many members of the Christian Right were also not evangelical Protestants. The Christian Right drew support from politically conservative Catholics, Mormons, and occasionally secularists (Wacker, 2000).

Some columnists still apply the term ‘fundamentalist’ to evangelicals. Fundamentalists are defined by several attributes: a personal relationship with Jesus, belief in the Bible as literally inerrant and a tendency to look for God-centered interpretations of history (Brouwer, Gifford, & Rose, 1996). On Dec. 4, 2016, The Charleston Gazette-Mail equated white evangelicals with “fundamentalists” in the 2016 election (Haught, 2016). On Oct. 3, 2016, The Daily Beast said that evangelicals emphasize a “fundamentalist” approach to the Bible (Michaelson, 2016).

Fundamentalists are evangelicals, but not all evangelicals are fundamentalists. Fundamentalism has a minor place within contemporary evangelicalism, accounting for only one of at least a dozen groups in evangelical Christianity. Fundamentalism’s “ideas, outlook and religious ‘goods and services’” penetrated virtually all other American evangelical movements and traditions. However, its initiatives mostly failed and coalition mostly dissipated, and the term “fundamentalist” acquired obscurantist, anti-intellectual tones (Carpenter, 1997).

2018 editions of style guides for journalism advise reporters to use the term “evangelical” instead of “fundamentalist,” except in cases when the person uses the identifier for him/herself. The New York Times Manual of Style and Usage reads, “As a religious term, the word (“fundamentalist”) should be used with care because of its connotations of rigidity. In Christian contexts, it is best applied only to those who so define themselves. Many conservative Protestants prefer to be called evangelical.” The Associated Press Stylebook reads, “In recent years, fundamentalism has to a large extent taken on pejorative connotations except when applied to groups that stress strict, literal interpretations of Scripture and separation from other Christians. In general, do not use fundamentalist unless a group applies the word to itself.”



News reports often leave the impression that all evangelicals are white and overlook people of color as part of the evangelical community. Such articles “fuel the perception” that evangelicals are of a single ethnic identification. After the election, several newspapers had headlines that did not specify the race of evangelicals that it referred to (Nittle, 2012).

On November 11, 2016, The New York Times issued its election report with the headline: “Evangelicals Believe Trump Will Keep Promises.” A few paragraphs down, it mentioned that the electorate termed “evangelicals” was really comprised of “white” evangelicals. Later, the headline was changed to “Religious Right Believes Donald Trump Will Deliver on His Promises” (Goodstein, 2016). On November 15, 2016, The Washington Post published an article with the headline: “Evangelicals put their faith in Trump.” Further along in the read, it gave the racial designation specifying “white” evangelicals who voted for the Republican candidate. Today, the headline on The Washington Post website reads: “Hopeful and relieved, conservative white evangelicals see Trump’s win as their own.” (Zauzmer, 2016) On February 3, 2017, The Christian Science Monitor featured this headline on an article: “Trump’s evangelical support is wide. But how deep? More than 8 in 10 Evangelicals voted for him – and the president has reciprocated with rapid policy moves aimed at pleasing them. But some Evangelicals remain wary.” It never gives indication that it is referring to “white” evangelicals in the headline (Bruinius, 2017). On November 14, 2016, USA Today had this headline: “What Trump vote means for evangelicals; President-elect won high percentage of their vote, despite his personal history. What does it mean?” In the second paragraph, it gave a statistic, affirming that it was, in fact, four out of five “white” evangelicals who voted for Trump. The article has been updated and now the headline reads: “White evangelicals just elected a thrice-married blasphemer: What that means for the religious right.”

Newspapers conflated “evangelicals” with racially specific “white born-again voters,” and in doing so, missed a story of a stark racial divide in evangelical Christianity. Specifically regarding the black/white divide, Pew reports revealed that 88% of blacks voted for Clinton in 2016, while only 8% voted for Trump. Racial interests seemed to be an “important driver” in the election and key to understanding the coalition that pushed Trump to victory. Coverage that fails to note racial disparities in the evangelical vote suggests that white evangelicals supported Trump exclusively because of “religiously based moral concerns.” Religious beliefs are often comparable across racial lines, yet there is a cultural history among white evangelicals that has drawn boundaries to exclude racial minorities. Studying the issue of race provides a window into understanding evangelicalism as a whole, and talking only about religious convictions affecting voting behavior “perpetuates a culture of white privilege” (Edgell, 2016).

### **Polling Problem & its Effects**

Print media often turns to exit polling to report on evangelicals (Huang, Jacoby, Strickland, & Lai, 2016). In fact, it was a single exit poll company, Edison Research, that collected the data that found the 81% figure in 2016. Edison Research asked 24,537 people as they left a voting place to self-identify their religion from a range of choices, including evangelical (Carter, 2016). It conducted the survey for the National Election Pool, a consortium of highly-circulated newspapers and representative elite press outlets that may influence how other news media characterize events or issues (Denham, 2014; Kim, Gonzenbach, Vargo, Kim, 2016; McCombs, 2005). These include: The New York Times, ABC News, The Associated Press, CBSNews, CNN, Fox News and NBC News (Huang, Jacoby, Strickland, & Lai, 2016).

Critics argue that there is a problem with self-identification as a way to measure evangelicals. Evangelicals are often associated with conservative politics, so respondents with

similar political ideas can get lumped together without necessarily meeting a rubric of evangelical beliefs. People may feel like they identify as an evangelical, even if it is “not an accurate measure of their religion,” according to John Green, professor at the University of Akron. Evangelical has a “muddled definition,” and its meaning can differ from person to person (Kurtzleben, 2015). It describes an “allusive group of Christians” that is demographically complex. Because it can “morph into whatever the possessor of the moniker wants it to be,” it complicates the self-description question as a metric (Goldsberry, 2017).

In Pew’s preliminary analysis of 2016, it approximated data published in NBCNews.com and/or CNN.com as of 11am on Nov. 9, 2016. Both media sources are included in the National Election Pool and get their data from exit-polling. The “white, born-again/evangelical Christian” categorization includes Protestants and non-Protestants (e.g. Catholics, Mormons, etc.) who self-identify as born-again or evangelical Christians (Smith & Martinez, 2016). In 2008, an American Religious Identification Survey found that 38.6% of mainline Protestants and 18.4% of Catholics identified as “born again or evangelical” (Silk, 2018). In other words, non-evangelical Christian groups can get categorized as evangelicals in an identification question, if the respondent misunderstands what the word means. By letting people self-identify, “you are going to walk into a mess.” (Smith S. , 2017).

In response to the self-identification model, some researchers developed a method of defining evangelicalism by one’s beliefs. Barna Group, a prominent Christian polling firm, defines evangelicals with a nine-question definition that queries one’s theological convictions. It apportions survey respondents into five faith groups: non-evangelical born-again, evangelical, notional Christians, other religions and secularists. It requires that someone has made “a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in their life today” and believes that when they

die, they will spend eternity in Heaven because they have confessed their sins and accepted Jesus Christ as their Savior. If he/she does not accept the remaining seven conditions (Satan exists as a living entity, the Bible is accurate throughout, etc.), that person is categorized as a “non-evangelical born again Christian.” If a person considers themselves a Christian but does not meet the criteria of the first two classificatory schemes, he/she is considered a “notional Christian.” Remaining segments are individuals of another faith (other faith) or individuals who do not have any faith-related ties or interests (skeptics) (The Barna Group, 2007).

Lifeway Research devised its own approach to identifying evangelicals based on belief and doctrine. It came up with a list of four core statements to which respondents must strongly agree to be considered “evangelical by belief”:

- The Bible is the highest authority for what I believe.
- It is very important for me personally to encourage non-Christians to trust Jesus Christ as their Savior.
- Jesus Christ’s death on the cross is the only sacrifice that could remove the penalty of my sin.
- Only those who trust in Jesus Christ alone as their Savior receive God’s gift of eternal salvation.

(National Association of Evangelicals)

After narrowing its definition to nine requirements, Barna reported in 2016 that only 7% of American adults were “evangelical” in contrast to Pew’s finding that 25% of Americans (roughly half of all Christians) are evangelical. Slight variances in Lifeway’s and Barna’s research definitions also resulted in different measurements of the sum of the overall evangelical

population. Lifeway found that 15% of Americans are evangelical using its belief-based definition. “Here's how squishy the term "evangelical" is: depending on the method of measurement, more than one-third of Americans are evangelical, or fewer than one-in-10 are” (Kurtzleben, 2015).

Each research protocol produced data that showed discrepancies in exit polling of evangelicals. Barna showed slightly less “evangelical” support for Trump (79%), with a margin of error of plus or minus 4 percentage points. However, it is worth noting that other Christian-aligned groups showed a significantly less favorable view of the candidate. Non-evangelical born again Christians gave the President-elect a comfortable margin, 56 percent to 35 percent. The remaining Christian-leaning segment, the notional Christians, split the vote, providing Trump with a two-point preference (49% to 47%) (The Barna Group, 2016). Lifeway, in a steep difference from initial exit poll data, found that only 53% of American evangelicals by belief voted for Donald Trump in 2016 (Weber, 2018).

Theologians often view belief-based definitions as the preferred method in identifying evangelicals. NAE President Leith Anderson said, “Evangelicals are people of faith and should be defined by their beliefs” (National Association of Evangelicals, 2015). Religion is, in essence, about theology, said McConnell, and this is the “only approach that directly measures beliefs” (Smietana, 2018). However, exit poll criteria for categorizing evangelicals “remain a part of the media narrative,” thus relying on each respondent’s own view of what the term means (Burge & Lewis, 2018).

How the media defines evangelicals is important in looking at how it frames issues and actions of the group. It is equally important to see how media framing influences individual

definitions (Goffman, 1986). Journalists often use polling results to analyze evangelicals, but in more qualitative reporting, it is unclear how they define the term. To understand the definition problem of the term “evangelical,” it is important to look at how media can affect an audience member’s thoughts or assumptions about evangelicals. Social interactionism, as developed by George Herbert Mead, suggests that media, as a form of communication, can construct the shared meanings inherent in social phenomenon and affect an individuals’ understanding of certain people, objects and events. Media offer important resources in constructing the social reality that audience members see and experience, and that is why I set out to talk to practitioners of the media to find out their definition of the term “evangelical” to see how that might trickle down to participants in this information system (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).

### Chapter 3: Methodology of this Study

The researcher conducted in-depth qualitative interviews over the phone or in person, then conducted a thematic analysis to identify emergent themes in the data. Qualitative interviews are a port of entry into a person's worldview or ideologies, inquiring into the "lifeworld" of the respondent to gain a clearer understanding of how they see and experience certain phenomena (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).

The researcher used a special kind of interview, known as the "long-form interview," to investigate the meanings that inform the actions of the respondent and to make sense of social scientific data. He used an open-ended questionnaire and maximized the time spent with the respondent and the time spent analyzing the data (McCracken, 1998).

The researcher employed a purposive sample to make informed judgements about what to observe and who to interview. He located sources at leading newspapers in the U.S., namely religion or political reporters, who have experience covering the public involvement of evangelicals. By talking to some of the nation's most influential reporters, he inquired into the theories, paradigms and frameworks that affect the media's handling of evangelicals generally (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).

## **Interview Questions:**

1. How do you define what an evangelical is?
2. How do think most journalists define the term?
3. Do you think the term evangelical has shifted in the public's perception as a marker of political affiliation rather than one of religious affiliation?
4. Do you think this can affect political polling on Election Days, since they often rely on the person to identify themselves?
5. Do you think self-identification is an effective/accurate method of measuring the evangelical vote?
6. Have you noticed a trend of people disowning the label "evangelical" after the last election?
7. In the future, do you think the media will need to develop a new approach to reporting on non-evangelical Christians, or reconsider the use of broad terms like "evangelical" in coverage?
8. In headlines and newswriting generally, do you think there is a clear distinction made between white evangelicals and other evangelicals of color?
9. Are evangelicals often viewed as part of the "Christian Right" movement, and is that a fair assessment?
10. Is there a difference between an evangelical and a fundamentalist?
11. Do you think there are other denominations or traditions within Christianity that should receive more media coverage?



## Chapter 4: How Journalists Define the Term

### **Survey respondents often defined evangelical by a shared set of theological beliefs, such as David Bebbington's 'Quadrilateral,' among various denominations.**

**Respondent 1:** The “Bebbington Four” is still fairly accepted.

**Respondent 2:** It would be someone who says they have had a born-again experience, accepts the Bible as literal truth and has a belief in Jesus Christ as savior.

**Respondent 4:** Evangelicals are Protestants who emphasize acceptance of Jesus Christ as their Savior, and the mission to share that, evangelize and try to persuade others to accept that faith as well. Often, that comes along with living a devout Christian life in personal and business dealings.

**Respondent 5:** Historically speaking, evangelicalism should be defined in terms of doctrine. There are a number of different definitions, but it primarily defines itself by how someone views the authority of the Bible.

**Respondent 6:** If they describe having a ‘born-again’ experience, that is a way to define it. I also think of ‘Bebbington’s Quadrilateral,’ where he identifies four qualities in people who are evangelical-identifying. Arguably, that is a narrow point of view, but something like that is a testable framework for understanding who an evangelical is.

**Respondent 7:** In my experience observing and writing about Christian churches, one characteristic continues to describe what I think of as evangelical Christians. Evangelical Christians are Christians who are evangelizing, gaining membership and bringing in new people, either unchurched or formerly churched.

**Respondent 8:** I define evangelical as a Christian who claims to have a personal relationship with God, has a deep faith in the Bible as an inerrant document and would generally describe themselves as being “born again.”

**Some respondents said “evangelical” has become a blanket term for conservative Christians.**

**Respondent 3:** For non-evangelicals and those unfamiliar with the evangelical world, the term ‘evangelical’ is often used as a shorthand for conservative Christian, but we don’t use it that way.

**Respondent 4:** Evangelical ascended to become the umbrella term for facets or subgroups of a conservative Protestant revivalist tradition, such as Pentecostals, Charismatics, or Holiness churches. Evangelicalism, as it is talked about today, includes people from each of those movements with common trends like the conversion experience or the imperative to evangelize.

**Respondent 6:** Journalists are in a bit of a bind, because the term has become so broad in its meaning. It has become a catch-all for white conservative Christians. It doesn’t serve the public well, because even though evangelical has become a sociological term, it also has some real specific meaning to it.

**Many respondents allow the individual person, or source, to identify his/herself as an evangelical.**

**Respondent 2:** Journalists usually allow the person to define who they are. If someone says they are an evangelical, we will use that terminology.

**Respondent 3:** There is no hard and fast definition. It varies from person to person. We usually allow sources to define the term for themselves. Certainly for someone who is a member of an

evangelical church or organization, we would use the term, or for anyone who describes his/herself as a fundamentalist Christian . Because it is not a legally or officially defined term, we generally would yield to the people we are writing about to decide whether they use the term for themselves. We only use it if someone specifically and religiously identifies as an evangelical.

**Respondent 6:** If people are using the term ‘evangelical’ to describe themselves, or if they go to an evangelical-identifying church, that is a way to define it. I try to give as much information to readers as possible as to what the context is, but I also go by what people tell me.

**Respondent 8:** I think the best way to know if someone is evangelical is to ask them. If someone thinks they are an evangelical, that is good enough for me.

**Respondent 9:** My approach is letting people self-identify. If I’m looking specifically for an evangelical voice to add to a story, I will ask that question. To find those folks, I will go to churches that I know associate with that identifier, perhaps a southern Baptist church, and ask a follow-up question: “Do you yourself identify as an evangelical?” My goal is not to label people, but to let them label themselves.

**Respondent 10:** There are two ways to approach the question of who is an evangelical: ask them to identify themselves or identify them based on some objective criteria.

**Because the term has become difficult to define, some respondents said that allowing people to self-identify may elicit some confusion about the term.**

**Respondent 5:** Because there is not a bulletproof definition, the lousy, self-definition thing makes for a lot of confusion about the term.

**Respondent 10:** Some evangelical leaders did not appreciate the 81% finding, and they would argue it is not enough to ask people, “Are you an evangelical?”. Many of them, particularly in the South, may come from a Southern Baptist background and may feel evangelical. Maybe they had some exposure or that is their family history. It doesn’t necessarily mean that they are devout, go to church on Sundays, read the Bible or pray. It might mean that they have a sociological identification with evangelicals, and if you forced them to choose what religious background they were, they will say evangelical, because that is all they know. The problem is that there may be no connection between their religious background and who they voted for. They might vote for Donald Trump because he appealed to their political ideology or values, and it just happens to correlate with their religious background. It is an unfair association for some people, because it is just a coincidence. It is not necessarily that people who hold evangelical beliefs are going to be Trump supporters. It’s more complicated than that.

**Some respondents said self-identified evangelicals may be claiming the descriptor even if they do not fit a strict religious definition.**

**Respondent 3:** I’ve met people who consider themselves evangelicals who are not religiously involved and do not fit a strict religious definition.

**Respondent 10:** Some researchers would argue that many of the people who call themselves evangelical aren’t really evangelical by strict religious definitions. It’s important to emphasize that not all people who identify as evangelicals really are evangelicals, and there are many who did not vote for Donald Trump.

**Several respondents said they cite polling data on evangelicals.**

**Respondent 6:** I use a few different concepts or frameworks to break down the question of who is an evangelical. The first is from the polling category of self-identified evangelicals. Based on that information, it helps us understand demographic trends in the United States.

**Respondent 9:** If there is a survey from Lifeway or PRRI or Pew, I will let them ascribe the evangelical label to the research they are talking about. I look at the source presenting the information and their explanation for what is going on, and I couch that information to the best of my abilities in my coverage.

**Respondent 10:** Journalists often quote data from an exit poll company or report on survey research that relies on a method of self-identification. I would say that most reporters do not take it upon themselves to define who is an evangelical. As long as we get research results that say x-percent of evangelicals voted this way or that way, we are going to report that. Generally, I am quoting a research organization that is reporting those results.

**Several respondents criticized, or are skeptical of, exit-polling that is conducted to identify evangelicals.**

**Respondent 1:** Polling doesn't get very specific, and the categories they use are narrow. Exit polls answer basic questions to identify if someone is a 'born-again' or evangelical Christian. I would have wanted pollsters to ask more about religious identity and the motivating factors that caused them to vote the way they did.

**Respondent 5:** We are in an interesting era where we are interviewing people as they come out of a voting booth, but that also doesn't tell us anything about the people who stayed home nor does it look at the more complex individuals who did not want to vote for Trump, but felt they had to. An uncovered story in this election is that a lot of evangelicals either didn't vote or voted

third party, rather than pull that lever against their conscience. I would also argue there are two different blocs of voters who voted for Donald Trump and two different stories. One is the bloc of voters that voted for him in the primaries and got him the nomination. The other is the bloc of voters who reluctantly voted for him in the general election, because he was the better of two horrible options. They felt they had to vote for him, because otherwise, they got Hillary Clinton, giving Democrats control of the Supreme Court and rulings on everything from First Amendment issues to religious liberty.

**Respondent 6:** For some categories, polling is effective, and for some it isn't. In terms of understanding the diversity of viewpoints, behavioral patterns, religious practices, life experiences and backgrounds of people who identify as evangelical or 'born-again,' I think it is too blunt of an instrument. Evangelical is a huge category of tons of people in the United States, and there is a wide range of experiences and viewpoints that come out of that world.

**Respondent 8:** Evangelical is the term that is used in a lot of the standardized polling, and it is commonly used when thinking about a certain part of the Republican coalition. The trouble is that evangelical is a religious term, not a political term.

**Respondent 10:** I do think whether it is Pew, Lifeway Research or exit polling companies, they need to be more careful asking people about their political preferences to be much more precise in their definitions. Some organizations zero in on beliefs, incorporating weekly church attendance and so forth. I think it would be better to ask people how often they go to church, if they pray daily, read the Bible or take it literally. Based on the answers to those questions, you could then come up with a category of evangelicals. That would be the more reliable way to identify evangelicals.

**Some respondents contextualize the data or add a disclaimer to the information.**

**Respondent 6:** Usually, we will identify the paradigm that they are using and note that it has some shortcomings. Then, we will report on the findings. For more qualitative stories with interviews to describe parts of the subculture or phenomena that I identify as part of the evangelical world, I try to get as specific as possible. I identify by region, education, class, denomination or certain institutions, if that is relevant. I try to offer as much information to readers about who I am actually talking about and what the actual group is specifically that is experiencing some sort of conflict, going through some sort of reckoning or championing a certain cause.

**Respondent 10:** It is incumbent upon journalists to warn readers that even though we are quoting data, we should raise a question about whether that data is reliable. If I am tempted to make a generalization about how white evangelicals voted, I need to be clear in my reporting that I am passing on data from some other organization. I may even say that we can't always be sure that what they say an evangelical is really an evangelical. Journalists need to be more careful about how we use those numbers.

**Others said that they aren't sure there is a better alternative to self-identification.**

**Respondent 4:** For political purposes, those who identify as white evangelicals or profess the things that white evangelicals believe can be reliably identified as Republican-supporting or socially conservative. Even for those that fit into the evangelical mold, identifying them by belief shows overwhelming support, as far as I know.

**Respondent 8:** I don't know if there is a better way to identify whether someone is an evangelical than asking them if they think they are. In exit polling, how many questions are you

going to ask? You don't have time to cover a lot of ground. It seems to me self-identification is the best way to do it.

**Respondent 9:** I don't feel comfortable speaking about the validity of polling or saying, "The people who study these matters are wrong." I am aware of the flaws that have been pointed out by researchers and the nuances of self-identification. There is, of course, a general understanding that people sometimes like to make themselves look holier than they are. However, I would get concerned about telling someone they are not evangelical when they say they are. I'm limited in my ability to question what somebody thinks they are, especially when it comes to religion. That is a strange role that I don't feel comfortable putting myself in. I acknowledge the fact that there are flaws, but within the flaws, we are attempting to measure something.

**Several respondents claimed much of the media has emphasized the conservative political behavior of white evangelicals and view it as a political rather than a religious identity.**

**Respondent 3:** There are people in the media who equate evangelical with the right wing. That's never been accurate, and that's probably less accurate today than any time in the last forty years.

**Respondent 5:** Evidence shows that the press tends to define it politically, or as a "white Republican." That's not what the word means, so not only is that not honest or accurate, it causes the press to miss a lot of important stories, because they don't know where to look or what they are looking at. For most American journalists, the word evangelical is a political term because politics, to them, is the only thing that's real. It assumes that religion isn't real, so it must be political.

**Respondent 9:** A lot of mainstream media write about evangelicals in the context of politics, and that is probably increasing, given that there fewer religion reporters in America writing about



religious people doing religious things. It is true they are often brought into the context of politics and voting.

**Some respondents observed a difference between how political and religion reporters define evangelical.**

**Respondent 2:** Most political reporters don't have in their heads a series of criteria about what an evangelical is, so that's why they allow the person to define it that way. For religion writers, they bring to it a set of criteria that they are looking for.

**Respondent 4:** Political reporters see demographics, who the voters are and how to define them. They discover certain characteristics that are salient and that becomes the go-to definition. It is not the job of political reporters to figure out what is going on in terms of doctrinal disputes, church growth strategies, church planting, denominational shifts. That doesn't describe their job. For religion writers though, it still is often our job to look at how evangelicals are voting politically, because that affects what goes on inside the churches.

**Respondent 7:** There's not a lot of overlap between people who cover religion and people who cover politics. The degree of ignorance about religion among people covering politics used to be vast. It has gotten better over the past few generations. Political analysts may not relate to religious people on a personal level, but they can respect the demographics enough to try to understand what is going on. Political reporters often say that evangelicals are conservatives, fundamentalists or Bible literalists, but the energy in the evangelical world is all over the map. The subject of evangelical Christians, who they are and how they vote, is changing dramatically in the United States. Some of the most successful churches don't fit the Jerry Falwell or Pat Robertson model. Political reporters who thought they figured out what that meant are out-of-

date now. There is a changing dynamic that they are way behind on, because they still think of a powerful, right-wing, highly politicized church.

**Respondent 8:** Political reporters may not know much about evangelicals or have given much thought about what an evangelical is. They have become used to thinking about evangelicals as a political force, because they've been important in presidential elections, state elections and local elections. Religious reporters have a much more sophisticated view about who is an evangelical, why they're an evangelical and what that means in religious terms. Political reporters don't necessarily have much of a sense of that.

**Respondent 9:** There is general lack of religious literacy in the country, and if you are not paying attention, you can muddy the waters quickly. If you are a political reporter and occasionally dropping in and doing a story on evangelicals, there is a good chance you don't know everything that you should in order to tell that story fully.

**Some respondents said journalists should study the religious convictions of evangelicals to understand their political behaviors.**

**Respondent 5:** Personally, I think that you are either part of an evangelical church with evangelical beliefs, or you're not. Here is where the confusion gets bad. Journalists think of issues like abortion or gay marriage as political issues, but it is not for Christians who believe the doctrines of their faith. No one is going to straighten this issue out as long as they keep saying that religious people vote a certain way because they want to vote for Republicans. Journalists have to treat religious issues as religious issues. They have political consequences, but that doesn't mean people are making decisions strictly for political reasons. There is a doctrinal factor in there. Call up evangelical leaders, and you will often get religious reasons for their

actions. That is at least half of the story of the white evangelical. If you take the religious component out, and the story falls apart.

**Respondent 6:** In the United States media, there is appetite for religion and politics, but more for religion as a political expression rather than religion as religion. It is important to report the politics, but it is more important to go deeper than saying all white evangelicals support Trump and that their beliefs are largely about abortion, personal freedom, LGBT people and gun control. There is more there, and reporting on the deep convictions of their faith is a much richer way to understand the political outcomes that are correlated. Noting the theological convictions or context can help us understand more deeply what is going on in politics. Many of my colleagues on the religion beat do a great job of asking people about the theological basis for their religious identity and don't make the easy connection between religious identity and political identity.

**Some respondents said evangelicalism is defined differently than fundamentalism.**

**Respondent 2:** It is interesting because the ("fundamentalist") was once embraced as a badge of pride, and then it became tainted. Now, it is considered a pejorative even when the term fairly applies. A lot of news organizations have moved away from use of the term, because the people who might be defined that way are themselves not comfortable with it. I generally avoid it unless the person themselves is using the term.

**Respondent 3:** There are evangelicals who are not fundamentalist, and there are fundamentalist who are not evangelical. Some in both of those groups would tell you that that's not possible, but nonetheless, there are people who identify themselves in both of those sub-categories. That's the

nature of religious affiliation. People find their little flavor, whatever it may be, and that becomes the way they define the term.

**Respondent 5:** Fundamentalists have a certain set of doctrines that define them. Evangelicals have a similar, but different set of doctrines that define them. Fundamentalists say the Bible is inerrant with no errors of any kind. Evangelicals use the word inerrant, but have a slightly different meaning. The key is that evangelicals take the Bible seriously. Fundamentalists take the Bible very literally, more than any other people in the history of Christianity.

**Respondent 8:** Fundamentalist Christians are more uniformly conservative and Republican than evangelicals. Evangelical has become a term that is often used as synonymous with fundamentalist, but they are slightly different.

**Some respondents said they object to the phrase “Christian (or Religious) Right” as descriptive of evangelicals.**

**Respondent 5:** A lot of evangelicals are connected to the ‘Religious Right,’ but that doesn't mean that all the people who ended up voting for their candidates wouldn't have preferred other options. Several of the most conservative religious leaders in America opposed Donald Trump all the way up through the election and still do today. They are not in the pro-Trump camp. They might back him on individual actions and then speak out against him on others.

**Respondent 6:** I prefer not to use the term ‘Christian Right’ in my writing, because I think it is often far too general and mushy as far as helping readers understand what you are talking about. The goal of good writing is to help people know what you are trying to say as clearly as possible. I think that term is imprecise, so I prefer not to use it. If you are talking specifically about a swath of people who are explicitly political activists, have a goal of moving forward Christian

priorities and work with institutions and groups to do that, I think that is fine. For those people, the term 'Christian Right' was developed. However, it is a loaded term that has a lot of negative connotation attached to it. People who are conservative Christian rarely call themselves the Christian Right. It is usually people from the left who don't like them who call them the Christian Right. That should be another note of caution. If this is a term that enemies of the group developed, it is probably better not to embrace the rhetoric of those enemies, because it may not necessarily be an accurate descriptor. It is not a great term for understanding conservative Christians on the broad political spectrum, nor is it a good term for understanding evangelicalism.

**Some respondents said that evangelicals, particularly white evangelicals, have wed themselves to conservative politics, or politics generally.**

**Respondent 1:** Evangelicalism has always been a cultural identity. If you look at the connections between evangelical theology and politics throughout the country's history, it becomes harder for white evangelicals to say their political identity is separate from their theological beliefs. It is interconnected. It is tied to how people organize their families, their social and political lives and their communities.

**Respondent 4:** If you look at the leadership, they are very much in the Trump camp, or they are muted. You didn't hear many megachurch pastors supporting Clinton. It was all from the center to the right, and I think the more quiet ones thought, all in all, we will support Trump or at least the Republican ticket. Something that could have stopped the relentless fusing of the 81% with Trump is if enough evangelicals demonstrably showed themselves at odds with him on issues. Certainly, they agree on Jerusalem and abortion and the Supreme Court. I am not aware of

anyone within the evangelical tradition who is willing to take a fierce oppositional stance to Trump. There are no pastors who are protesting particular policies loudly and clearly that I have seen. If they had shown themselves to be an independent voice, that could have distinguished them.

**Respondent 6:** I do not think it is a fabrication, in the sense that over the past four decades, a group of institutions and leaders have laid an explicit set of strategies in mobilizing Christian voters around certain causes on the right. Starting with the Moral Majority and Focus on the Family, some of these leaders we now see back in our political sphere with a lot of influence in the Trump administration.

**Respondent 8:** In the last few decades, evangelicals have become an important part of the Republican Party and some of the most loyal in the conservative movement.

**Respondent 10:** An association of evangelicals with the Republican Party is a phenomenon that dates back to the 1980s with the Moral Majority and Jerry Falwell.

**However, many respondents said there is a burgeoning movement, or an existing presence, of more liberal or younger evangelicals.**

**Respondent 3:** There is a growing movement of liberal-leaning evangelicals leading the evangelical practice in the country. Among the younger generations, there's a much broader variety of political perspectives.

**Respondent 7:** To me, evangelism is headed away from the divisive politics. Millennials, Gen-X and younger evangelicals really have no appetites for the hot-button issues of their parents. They seem to be hungry for messages of love, grace, compassion and community, and the churches

offering that are the ones that are growing. Today, evangelicalism is in the mode of people who are much more about the personal experience.

**Respondent 8:** Not every evangelical is Republican or conservative. There are evangelicals who might be culturally conservative, but they are socially liberal. I don't mean necessarily on issues of abortion, but on issues like taking care of the needy, the treatment of refugees and homeless people, or environmental protection.

**Respondent 9:** There are liberal progressive evangelicals as well. It is not just white conservative-leaning folks who have ownership over that title.

**Some respondents said journalists should approach evangelicalism holistically, reporting on younger evangelicals and voices that are less well-known.**

**Respondent 5:** If the only people you talk to are the leaders of religious right political organizations, you will only get that side of the story. It is a valid story, because that gives insight into the number of white evangelicals who voted for Trump, but you should also talk to the younger evangelicals who are leading seminaries and megachurches.

**Respondent 8:** If you are doing a quick story and want a comment from someone who represents a conservative Christian point-of-view, you might talk to a leader with that perspective. If you are doing a piece looking at evangelical voters with more depth and precision, you will want to go to other voices as well. There is a tendency to go to the voices who you know will speak out in favor of a certain point of view. It is important to be three-dimensional in talking about the evangelical vote, and that is something that takes additional steps, more phone calls and reaching out to voices that are less well-known.

**Some respondents said there are also important trends in evangelicalism regarding race.**

**Respondent 2:** There is a growing community of evangelicals of color who are gaining a voice and are not going to be quiet and allow white evangelical leaders to speak for them. This is a passage in American history that has opened people's eyes to the idea that the evangelical community is much larger than conservative white evangelicals.

**Respondent 4:** Even small subsets of the black church experience can be very different than the white church experience. That is why you will often hear of the black church as a distinct religious stream, because although it can be very revivalist and conversion-oriented, it can also have a very different social vision than a white evangelical church. Black and white evangelical churches might agree on the abortion issue, for instance, but speaking to rights and non-discrimination as a fundamental matter of human dignity often equals or supersedes other considerations in the black church.

**Respondent 6:** It is important to pay attention to the particular race of people's experiences. It can be a salient factor for understanding how they experience the world, church and/or politics. As a media body, we could always talk better and more about race and the way race informs life in the United States, and that includes religious life. I think there is a lot of confusion from the mainstream media about what has caused a large proportion of white self-identifying evangelicals to vote for Donald Trump, and there has been a surge of interest to figure that out with better or worse results depending on what you are reading. It is important, however, to not get caught up in that as a single-minded focus. There is a lot of important things happening in black churches across the United States. Many black self-identifying evangelicals may have experiences that are just as interesting and rich and relevant to our political time as white self-



identifying evangelicals. The nuance of race is important and always something to aspire to do better in our reporting. As a general principle, I would say that everybody can do better.

**Respondent 8:** Reporters often understand the political difference between black and white evangelicals. White evangelicals overwhelmingly vote Republican. Black evangelicals overwhelmingly vote Democrat, even though they have similar religious views.

**Several respondents said reporters often think of evangelicals as white and have grouped together evangelicals of different racial identities in their reporting.**

**Respondent 1:** In the last couple of years, the media has gotten better about saying “white” evangelical rather than just evangelical, particularly in headlines, because there is a racial identity closely tied to their political views.

**Respondent 2:** After Trump’s election, a lot of media outlets conflated the term ‘evangelical’ with white evangelicals. I credit evangelicals of color with making enough of a stink raising awareness among journalists that you need to make that explicit. Pollsters were doing that, but the reporters weren’t.

**Respondent 4:** Some reporters, if they are in a hurry, might just put “evangelical.” Mathematically, they might be correct, but sociologically, they might not be.

**Respondent 5:** The press is so locked into a paranoia about white evangelicals that they’re not even looking at Latino evangelicals, Asian evangelicals or others. They can be evangelical by every doctrinal definition of the word, and their conservative beliefs on marriage, abortion or other issues, may have caused them to vote for Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton. While the press continues to focus on white evangelicals, they neglect to cover the story of other

evangelicals. An overlooked statistic is the other evangelicals who voted for Donald Trump. In this case, that means they blew the story of Trump's election.

**Respondent 8:** When reporters talk about evangelical Christians as a force in the Republican Party, we often think of white evangelicals.

**Respondent 10:** Too often, people generalize about evangelicals, when they are talking about white evangelicals. The political profile of white, black and Latino evangelicals are all very different, and to do that suggests the link between the evangelical faith tradition and voting behavior is automatic. One of the theories for how white evangelical support originated for Republicans is that a majority of evangelicals are in the South, and there was a racial element to that dynamic in the 1970s. It is important to make the distinction that "white" evangelicals supported Trump, not evangelicals generally.

**Some respondents have observed a shift in which evangelicals are abandoning the term as an identifier and are questioning if there should be new terms to describe former evangelicals.**

**Respondent 1:** It is an open question right now. Many evangelical churches across the country, particularly young people and women, have been vocal about discomfort within their own communities. It is complicated, because the term itself is a product of everything else in their lives and all their other choices.

**Respondent 2:** There seems to be a lot of evangelicals in the United States who are uncomfortable being associated with the form of evangelicalism that has come to be thought of in the public's eye as the only form of evangelicalism, that is, the one that is so politicized, linked to the GOP and supportive of President Trump. People have questioned the use of the

term evangelical and have talked about coming up with other terms. Some people have said to just use the word Christian.

**Respondent 6:** I have encountered a lot of people who have expressed a weariness with always being politicized in their religious identity, particularly those within the evangelical category. Because evangelical, accurately or not, has become a politically-defined term, it can drive people to move themselves out of that category. It is important to pay attention to some of the nuance of people who don't feel they no longer fit within the category. If someone three years ago called themselves evangelical, and today does not and calls themselves something else, be it Christian, follower of Jesus, or whatever else, that is relevant. That person has gone on a journey of some sort that has led them to a decision and has informed that identification with a category and a label. As journalists, we have to follow the trail and say what is going on that makes people feel like they don't belong in this group anymore. We need to ask ourselves how we can look at the new thing that they are calling themselves, the distinctiveness to it, the urge for renewal and change, and the urge to root in different kinds of behaviors and orientations. It is important to follow people's lead, because the way people talk and think about themselves in terms of these labels and categories is relevant for understanding their experience. It is also good for respecting people and for the substance of reporting.

**Respondent 9:** I saw some articles about the rejection of the evangelical label. In short, we need to find out more about whether there is a big push away from the term evangelical at the top and at the bottom. We need to make sure that we are aware of a disconnect between the leaders of religious entities and regular folks who are living their lives but still have that religious belief.

**Some respondents said they already use other terms, such as “conservative Christian,” when it is appropriate.**

**Respondent 3:** There are occasions where it's more appropriate to discuss Christian conservatives, because that's a broader term that encompasses any number of denominations or religious affiliations.

**Respondent 8:** I've used the term evangelical, but I often try to use the term 'white fundamentalist' or 'conservative Christian,' which I think is more descriptive of someone's politics and more precise.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

Because the coupling of evangelicals and politics in the media is a relatively recent phenomenon, there is not much in terms of scholarship on this matter. Evangelicals' entry into politics effectively started in the late-1970s, and after George Gallup Jr. declared 1976 "The Year of the Evangelical," it was clear the media saw the advent of a movement.

However, coverage of them has come under scrutiny in recent years. Some of the problems that have arisen have not been studied thoroughly, as of yet. It will require some deliberation to figure out how to talk about politically conservative Christians in a way that doesn't overgeneralize, particularly with regards for race and other Christian denominations or traditions.

Religious and cultural observers struggle to define indicators of evangelicalism, and reporters are not in agreement on what the term means or how to define it either. A lack of consensus abounds among those tasked with defining the group, and until the debate is settled, there will continue to be reporting that is off-base.

It should be noted that the researcher could only get in touch with a small number of journalists for an interview, using a chain-referral technique starting at his university. However, if this serves as a representative sample for print media personnel, then it is significant.

For the future, reporters should look at the development of this issue in the Christian community. Is the term itself losing popularity among younger evangelicals, as well as among those who no longer want to be associated with evangelicals who have become such an influential body of voters for the Republican Party?

One of the most pressing concerns is the quantitative reporting of exit-poll data on self-identified evangelicals who may or may not adhere to core evangelical beliefs, or take into account the evangelicals who did not vote in the election. Should reporters refer to belief-based methods of measuring evangelicalism, as Lifeway and Barna have done, or does the nature of exit-polling demand a sort of convenience that only self-identification can offer? In qualitative reporting, are journalists being precise enough in talking about someone's religious experience, or is it simply more convenient to apply the "evangelical" label to someone who seems like a doctrinally conservative Christian?

These are the questions that interested parties should seek to answer in the next few years, and particularly for the forthcoming presidential election, there should be a standardized method of analyzing the political views of evangelicals, in a way that is fair and respects the group as a whole.

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