Religious Right?
American Evangelical Partisanship and Political Ideology

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This paper addresses the trends in evangelical American partisanship and political ideology over time. It asks to what extent evangelicals are truly part of the “religious right” and whether they truly exhibit a tendency to identify as more conservative and more Republican than other Christians and non-Christians. In order address this question, I utilize the General Social Survey for the years 1998, 2006-2012 as my data source and employ basic statistical tests of significance. I operationalize evangelical based upon a nuanced understanding of evangelical characteristics and seek to define the group not by institutional affiliation, but rather by core beliefs. Though I had anticipated that evangelicals would be no more or less conservative than their non-evangelical peers, this definition clearly demonstrates a gap in ideology between both evangelicals and other Christians as well as Christians and non-Christians. In this sense, it affirms the existence of an ideological gap between the religious and secular and lays the groundwork for further tests of causation and significance.
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Introduction

This research project is intended to explore the nature of evangelical American voting behavior and its impact on political partisanship and in light the current trend towards increasing partisan polarization in American politics. This trend has seemingly resulted in progressively more unproductive conflict within the federal government and very limited attempts at compromise. The consequences of this development have been controversial and far-reaching, the most recent and public example of which being the government budget crisis and ensuing seventeen day shut down. As we struggle with a growing gap in political ideology and method, questions about the relationship between religion and partisanship have become not only interesting, but also necessary (Desilver). With both individuals and parties defining themselves in increasing opposition to one another, the importance of religion and its impact on both social and economic issues is frequently brought up as a possible cause of this trend. In support of this claim, Christian fundamentalism and evangelical social agenda are often listed as playing significant roles in exacerbating political difference.

Research Question

While the formidable and heated debates that surround issues such as marriage rights and abortion are undeniably fraught with religious tension and ensuing social division, does it necessarily follow that religious voters, and evangelicals in particular, are inherently more conservative in their political convictions? To some extent, this has been a forgone conclusion in casual political discourse. It is, however, my belief that this popular opinion presents a rather limited understanding of both evangelical Christianity and its adherents. I instead propose that evangelicals, though likely exhibiting certain inclinations above others as a group, are no more strictly partisan in their tendencies than voters of spiritual indifference or those of another faith
or doctrine. Given this, I am interested in ascertaining to what extent the “religious right” is truly manifested in evangelical voting behavior. This paper examines key questions: Are evangelical Christians truly more conservative than other Christian groups and is this relationship significant? Are they more partisan and is the perceived gap between evangelicals and others increasing or decreasing over time?

**Literature Review**

The question of Christianity in American politics is incredibly vast in nature, difficult to enter into, and as old as our nation. Even as the framers of the Constitution were careful to set up a division between church and state (one could argue as much to protect the church as the state), Benjamin Franklin is recorded as asserting his belief that “God governs in the affairs of men” in the face of convention deadlock (Noll 183). Though his ensuing petition for prayer and fasting in an attempt to seek “the assistance of heaven” was tabled, it has since been picked up and used, as early as 1820 and as recently as the 1980s, to fuel the idea that the Constitution of the United States is divinely inspired and upheld (Noll 134). This is but one brief example of the complex and intertwined relationship inherent to American politics and Christianity. Christian politics have undergone innumerable transformations and shifts, not the least of which brings us to the often volatile conflicts that characterize contemporary discussion of evangelicalism and its influence.

It is now commonly held that the most recent shift in American religion lies in the increasing role it seems to play in the nation’s politics, most specifically its partisan tendencies (Putnam 369). While it is possible that this has always been the case and is just now becoming more apparent to us, the fact remains that strength of religious conviction is increasingly associated with conservative political views (Kellstedt 323). This division between voters of
religious faith and those less religiously inclined has come to be termed the “God Gap” and manifests itself not only along Christian vs. secular lines, but in accordance with a much more diverse understanding of the social groups and beliefs at play (Putnam 369). It is, rather than a divide between the “Christian Right” and the rest of the population, a divide between the secular and religious.

However, despite the increasingly pluralistic breakdown of the American religious populace, Christianity, most specifically evangelical Christianity, remains at the forefront of this discussion. Debates about the merits, or flaws, of the “Christian Right” have become central to current political conversation and understanding. This highly visible political movement, commonly marked as ignorant, rigid, and intolerant, has caused many to characterize evangelical Americans in general as falling to the far end of the political spectrum, as fundamentally conservative in their political positioning (Putnam 369). The nature of this division is, however, unclear.

*Identification and Belief vs. Affiliation*

Attempts to gain a better understanding of this ‘gap’ with respect to Christianity and its diversity of movements are troubled by categorizations and definitions that are considerably difficult to operationalize. Across much of the literature pursued, the importance of distinguishing between religious traditions and religious beliefs in looking at evangelical voting behavior is recognized and upheld (Lewis; Olson). Mark Noll (2001) succinctly addresses these differences in his book: *American Evangelical Christianity*. He suggests that there are two main approaches that allow one to effectively analyze evangelical political leanings. The first of these is based upon a definition of evangelicals according to a set of four core beliefs: biblicism, conversionism, activism, and crucicentrism. These four characteristics were first identified by
David Bebbington as the means by which the “evangelical pattern” is summarized and identified most effectively (Noll 13). *Biblicism* is defined as a “reliance on the Bible as the ultimate religious authority.” *Activism* is an evidenced concern for sharing one’s faith and *conversionism* an interest in persuading others to that faith specifically by means of the “new birth.” Crucicentricism, perhaps the most difficult characteristic to recognize and operationalize, is listed as a “focus on Christ’s redeeming work on the cross,” a belief that this is the sole means of salvation (Noll 13). Noll goes on to assert that, though the “Bebbington Quadrilateral” as this list has come to be known, does not identify a “cohesive, institutionally compact, or clearly demarcated group of Christians,” it does help to identify a broader theme that exists in a variety of Christian organizations (Noll 13).

In pursuing an analysis based on this belief driven model of evangelical definition, one is able to extend beyond denominational lines, or even perhaps, beyond lines of “self-identification.” This removes the variable: “Does one consider oneself to *be* an evangelical in name?” and replaces it with more quantifiable belief statements that bridge nominal gaps. In so doing, strength of correlation between political conviction and religious belief can be tested. This is to be compared with a method based more in affiliation or tradition in which certain denominations, or Christian categories, are termed more or less evangelical in nature. Individuals are then asked to identify themselves according to this affiliation and the correlation between political conviction and religious affiliation can be tested. This pursuit may help isolate whether or not it is in fact religious belief that most influences political perspective, or group membership that drives voter behavior (Noll 186). However, given the complex nature of evangelicalism and the diversity of churches that adopt evangelical doctrine as an evolving practice rather than in name or as part of tradition, this nominal identification can be limiting.
Theory and Approach

The struggle to define and operationalize the term “evangelical” is recognized by political scientists as they confront the fact that many Christians themselves do not have a common understanding of the term (Woodberry 66). As the term and movement it is associated with evolves, the denominations associated with it might also change. As a result, when possible, the use of multiple qualifiers, or doctrinal markers in sorting evangelical survey respondents from other Christians is recommended (Woodberry 67). Given this, for my purposes in answering questions of evangelical partisanship and ideology, I have decided to define the group according to the belief markers listed by Bebbington (1989). After identifying this group, I would expect them to have relatively similar views to other Christian groups rather than exhibiting an extreme conservative or Republican leaning. This stems from an understanding of evangelicalism as a diverse movement spanning not only multiple Christian institutions, but social spheres as well.

Data and Methods

In order to address the question at hand, I have utilized the General Social Survey from the years 1998, 2006, 2008, 2010, and 2012. The GSS is a comprehensive and relatively stable survey that has been in use for over four decades. It is administered by the National Data Program for the Sciences at the University of Chicago and is intended in part to facilitate time series studies of American opinions. I have chosen this particular source because it is one of the few readily available surveys that includes questions that can be used to operationalize the term “evangelical” according to David Bebbington’s quadrilateral. I am limited to the years selected because of the availability of these questions as they were originally introduced in a supplemental section and did not come into use regularly until 2006. While the questions available were somewhat limiting both in their content and their availability over time, these
surveys provide a large, random sample that reflects the United States’ voting population to a degree I could not achieve if attempting to conduct my own opinion research.

**Operationalization of Variables: Christians and Evangelical Christians**

Christian respondents in this study are fairly simply identified according to a single GSS variable, “RELIG” (Appendix A). This question asks individuals to identify their religious affiliation according to 13 general categories. Respondents selecting Christian, Orthodox-Christian, Catholic, or Protestant as their overarching affiliation were placed in a general “Christian” category.

In choosing to use the Bebbington Quadrilateral to subset evangelical Christians from this larger group, my operationalization of the variable becomes somewhat more nuanced. To match the four categories of evangelical belief and characteristics listed by Bebbington, I have selected four questions that align as nearly as possible with his criteria. These are, “BIBLE” “RELACTIV,” “SAVESOUL,” and “REBORN,” and can be found in the ensuing appendix.

BIBLE speaks to Biblicism, RELACTIV to activism, SAVESOUL to conversionism, and REBORN to crucicentricism. In order to be categorized as evangelical, a respondent must exhibit all four of these characteristics.

**Operationalization of Variables: Political Conservatism**

In order to operationalize political conservatism, I chose to focus on both party affiliation and ideological preference. This required the use of two survey questions, both of which present spectrums on which a respondent is asked to identify. The first, “PARTYID,” presents a spectrum of party affiliation based upon a binary between the two main parties in the United States, Democrats and Republicans. The second, “POLVIEW,” consists of a spectrum of political Conservatism to Liberalism (Appendix). As the crux of this paper hinges on the gap
between evangelical and non-evangelical respondents, criteria dictating what is and is not officially conservative or liberal, Republican or Democrat, are not necessary. Analysis of this variable depends upon a self-identified understanding of political position and whether or not a significant division of belief or practice exists between the different groups.

Method

Once the variables had been operationalized and subset, the actual method was fairly simple. As point estimates of partisanship and ideological view, I found the mean party identification score and mean liberal/conservative score for Christians, evangelical Christians, and Non-Christians. I then found the differences between each of these scores for each year and compared them over the five survey years studied, using a standard t-test to establish whether the trends exhibited are statistically significant.
Findings

Ideology

Table 1: Hypothesis Tests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Point Estimates</th>
<th>Difference from Non-Christian</th>
<th>p &lt;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-Christian</td>
<td>Evangelical</td>
<td>Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.53</td>
<td>4.63</td>
<td>4.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>1.135</td>
<td>0.615</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Non-Christian</td>
<td>3.49</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Evangelical</td>
<td>4.84</td>
<td>4.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>1.334</td>
<td>0.723</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-Christian</td>
<td>3.44</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Evangelical</td>
<td>4.97</td>
<td>4.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>1.569</td>
<td>0.806</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-Christian</td>
<td>3.51</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Evangelical</td>
<td>4.86</td>
<td>4.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>1.378</td>
<td>0.679</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-Christian</td>
<td>3.39</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Evangelical</td>
<td>4.86</td>
<td>4.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>1.468</td>
<td>0.797</td>
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With respects to the dependent variable political ideology, evangelicals clearly identify as more conservative than both their Christian and Non-Christian peers. This is evident even in 1998, when the groups show the least amount of differentiation. The table above contains the mean liberal/conservative identification score of the evangelical and Christians groups, the significance of these trends, as well as the extent to which they differentiate from the Non-Christian respondents. Though it is difficult to identify any significant trends over the seven-year span of 06-12, in comparison to the other groups, evangelicals evidence the greatest change since 1998 and are a total of 0.23 points more conservative than they were previously by the end of 2012. Christians, on the other hand, have stayed relatively stable, never shifting more than .07 of
a point in either direction. It would also seem that the Non-Christian segment of the sample has become more slightly more liberal in its identification, contributing to the expanding ideological gap exhibited. The graph below (fig. 1) demonstrates the ideological positioning of each of these groups and the way in which the gap has grown over time. Though it is clear that there has been a separation between evangicals, Christians, and Non-Christians since 1998, it is not clear whether or not this gap has continued to grow since 2006. Even in its slight fluctuations, it seems rather to have remained relatively stable.

Figure 1: Trends In Political Ideology Over Time
**Party Affiliation**

Table 2: Hypothesis Tests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Point Estimates</th>
<th>Difference from Non-Christian</th>
<th>p &lt;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Non-Christian</td>
<td>2.65</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Evangelical</td>
<td>2.91</td>
<td>0.234*</td>
<td>0.866*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>2.88</td>
<td>0.197</td>
<td>0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Non-Christian</td>
<td>2.43</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Evangelical</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>0.865</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td>0.497</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Non-Christian</td>
<td>2.38</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Evangelical</td>
<td>3.28</td>
<td>0.915</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>2.81</td>
<td>0.388</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Non-Christian</td>
<td>2.37</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Evangelical</td>
<td>3.13</td>
<td>0.781</td>
<td>0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>2.86</td>
<td>0.469</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Non-Christian</td>
<td>2.38</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Evangelical</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>0.859</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>2.83</td>
<td>0.404</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(*not significant)

Similar to the data on ideology, the mean party identification scores of each group appear the least divided in 1998. It is especially interesting to note that in 1998 there is little to no difference in evangelical and non-evangelical Christians as both point estimates fall well within the margin of error of the other. The next year for which I have data, 2006, stands in stark contrast to this closeness of identification, demonstrating a significant gap not only between Christians and Non-Christians, but evangelicals and other Christians as well. The gap between evangelicals and Non-Christians increases .63 of a point between 1998 and 2006. Again it is difficult to ascertain whether any group is trending in a specific direction in this seven-year span, though it is clear that the difference is maintained. By 2012, evangelicals show an overall shift of
.32 of a point towards identifying as Republican. Non-Christians again demonstrate a shift towards the more liberal side of things and are more likely to identify as Democrats (-.27).

It is worth noting, however, that though evangelical Christians trend towards the Republican side of the spectrum they still identify mostly as independent and are unwilling to take on the Republican label. Their mean score of 3.23, still places them soundly in the “Independent” category. The same can be said of Non-Christians who still seemingly identify as “Independent” or “Independent, Near Democrat” instead of strictly “Democrat.” This would suggest that, even as the gap in party affiliation seems to grow, individuals remain unwilling to identify themselves as anything but middle of the road, perhaps with a slight lean to the right or left.

It is also interesting, especially in looking at a plot of these mean party affiliation scores over time (figure 2), that difference in party identification seems most pronounced during presidential election years. This is by no means surprising as the rhetoric of a presidential campaign necessitates more open discussion of politics and division of public opinion, though the spikes in evangelical identification with Republicans may hint at the power of politics to shift the evangelical rather than the power of the evangelical to shift politics. A similar increase in division during elections years is evident in the data on ideology as well as shown in figure 1.
Evangelicals: The Demographic by this Definition

The belief that evangelicals might evidence a less partisan or conservative political position came with the assumption that evangelicals are indeed a diverse group with a variety of opinions befitting this diversity. However, it is worth noting that in using this method of defining and sub setting evangelicals from other Christians there are some very distinct demographic trends. Using this method, of about 14,000 respondents over the five years selected, almost 10,500 consider themselves Christians, while only 800 fit my evangelical criteria. That, first of all, suggests a fairly specific and narrow group. Secondly, of this group, 65.25% are female, 62.25% identify as White, and some 66.62% for whom income data is available list themselves as making 25,000 or more a year. All of this indicates a relatively cohesive group with certain tendencies that would be immensely likely to affect their political affiliations and ideology. Perhaps more limiting in this respect than a denominational or affiliation based approach, which would certainly allow for a greater sample size in its more expansive definition,
this method does have the benefit of pulling 351 cases out of the “Other” and “No Denomination” categories that would have otherwise been impossible to tease out and analyze.

**Conclusion**

Though questions about religion and Christianity in particular have improved and become more numerous over time, it was difficult to find consistent data on evangelicals according to this method and definition. Though challenging to find questions that aligned with all of Bebbington’s criteria, it was especially difficult to operationalize the term “crucicentricism” as it seems rare that a survey asks about understandings of the way in which “salvation” is accomplished. It was also very difficult to find the questions necessary to address these evangelical belief markers all on one survey as one or two often exist in one place, and the others necessary in another. I have suggested some ideal questions for identifying evangelicals based upon this criteria in Appendix B.

This limitation extended to questions about political ideology as feelings thermometers about political parties or people of another political ideology were not available on the same surveys that held the questions necessary to define evangelical. Respondents are asked to identify their own leanings and affiliations, but are not consistently asked to express their opinions about those who do not share these political positions. Given the increasing gap in American partisan politics, in analyzing the nature of evangelical political affiliation, it would be beneficial to understand how they feel about others as well, how willing they might be to “cross the aisle.” Also clearly at issue, is the relatively recent availability of the religious survey data and the gap that exists in the GSS from 1998 to 2006.

Laying this all aside, however, this paper demonstrates clearly that evangelicals according to this definition and operationalization certainly identify as more conservative than
both other Christians as well as Non-Christians. They are more likely to identify as conservative (even if they perceive this merely as just on the other side of independent) and are more likely to identify as Republican, especially during an election year. Christians have remained the most stable group even between 1998 and 2006, though perhaps this is because they represent such a large segment of the population. Conversely, and contributing to the existing partisan divide, Non-Christians demonstrate a shift to identifying as more readily liberal and as part of the Democratic Party. Whether or not these trends are increasing with time after the initial jump between 1998 and 2006 and what might be causing the shift is unclear. While it is certainly true that evangelicals have become more conservative over the last 15 years, so too have Non-Christians become more liberal and the overall difference each group exhibits not does not really suggest that one is shifting more drastically than the other. In fact, as the Christian group represents the majority of the population, evangelicals in their smaller difference from the Christian mean are actually closer to the majority American opinion.
Appendix A

SURVEY QUESTIONS PULLED FROM GSS

---Defining Christian---

RELIG:
This is a multiple-choice question in which respondents are asked to categorize their religious affiliation.

What is your religious preference? Is it Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, some other religion, or no religion?
1. Protestant
2. Catholic
3. Jewish
4. None
5. Other (specify)
6. Buddhism
7. Hinduism
8. Other Eastern
9. Moslem/Islam
10. Orthodox Christian
11. Christian
12. Native American
13. Intern-denominational

Respondents selecting Christian, Orthodox Christian, Catholic, or Protestant, were placed into the general, Christian subset of the overall population.

---Defining Evangelical---

BIBLE:
A multiple choice question designed to ascertain the significance of the Bible to the respondent. It includes four choices:

Which of these statements comes closest to describing your feelings about the Bible?
1. The Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken literally, word for word.
2. The Bible is the inspired word of God, but not everything should be taken literally, word for word.
3. The Bible is an ancient work of fables, legends, history, and moral precepts recorded by man.
4. Other

Those who hold that the Bible is the true word of God and believe it’s contents are to be taken literally, are considered to have an evangelical position on the Bible.

REBORN:
I simple yes, or no question:

Would you say you have been "born again" or have had a "born again" experience -- that is, a turning point in your life when you committed yourself to Christ?
   1. Yes
   2. No

Those who respond saying that have been “born again,” or are personally committed to Jesus Christ, are considered to hold a possibly evangelical view.

RELACTIV:
A multiple choice question presenting a continuum of religious activity and participation. Respondents are asked to identify how often they are involved in religious activities outside of standard or regular services.

How often do you take part in the activities and organizations of a church or place of worship other than attending services?
   1. Never
   2. Less than once a year
   3. About once or twice a year
   4. Several times a year
   5. About once a month
   6. 2-3 times a month
   7. Nearly every week
   8. Every week
   9. Several times a week
   10. Once a day
   11. Several times a day

Respondents identifying their level of participation as 2-3 times a month or more are considered active and to exhibit religious activism.

SAVESOUL:
This is another simple yes or no question designed to gauge an individual’s interest in proselytization.

Have you ever tried to encourage someone to believe in Jesus Christ or to accept Jesus Christ as his or her savior?
   1. Yes
   2. No

An individual responding, “yes” is considered to have an interest in converting others to Christianity.

---Defining Conservatism/Partisanship---
PARTYID:

This question is designed to classify party affiliation. It provides a spectrum ranging from 0 to 6 and ranges from “strong democrat” to “strong republican.”

Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, Democrat, Independent, or what?

0. Strong Democrat
1. Not Strong Democrat
2. Independent, Near Democrat
3. Independent
4. Independent, Near Republican
5. Not Strong Republican
6. Strong Republican
7. Other Party

POLVIEWS:

This is a feelings thermometer designed to gauge political ideology on a liberal/conservative scale. It ranges from 1 to 7, with 1 being “extremely liberal” and 2 being “extremely conservative.”

1. Extremely Liberal
2. Liberal
3. Slightly Liberal
4. Moderate
5. Slightly Conservative
6. Conservative
7. Extremely Conservative
Appendix B

Suggested Survey Questions for the Operationalization of “Evangelical”:

Conversionism:

Have you ever tried to encourage someone to believe in Jesus Christ or to accept Jesus Christ as his or her savior?

1. Yes*
2. No

Biblicism

How important is the Bible in helping you make decision about your daily life?

1. Very Important*
2. Somewhat Important
3. Somewhat Unimportant
4. Very Unimportant

Activism

How frequently do you speak about your faith outside of a Church setting?

1. Never
2. Rarely
3. Occasionally
4. Often*
5. Very Often*

Crucicentricism

Do you believe Jesus’ death on the cross is the only means of attaining salvation?

1. Yes*
2. No

(* Denotes evangelical identifier)
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Desilver, Drew. "Partisan polarization, in Congress and among public, is greater than ever” Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C.


