



What U.S. Evangelical Voters Really Want in Politics

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In December 2017, Roy Moore narrowly lost an Alabama Senate special election to Democrat Doug Jones, just weeks after numerous allegations of sexual assault surfaced — some of which involved minors. Although this outcome was lauded as a major Democratic victory, many asked why this race remained so close, given the seriousness of the accusations Moore faced. Some observers believe Roy Moore's strong showing despite these allegations reflects the strong pull of Republican Party identification among southern evangelical Christians. However, my research finds that Moore's near-victory is part of a larger story about evangelical sexual politics — and goes hand in hand with white evangelical enthusiasm about Donald Trump, a president whose life and conduct hardly seems to express Christian values.

The Puzzle of White Evangelical Political Choices

The exit polls following this Alabama senate race showed voting trends almost identical to those from the 2016 presidential election — white evangelicals again turned out to support a deeply controversial candidate. Roy Moore received 68% of the white vote in Alabama, and 80% of the evangelical vote, and most of those supported Moore said the allegations of sexual misconduct against him were a minor factor or none at all in their decisions. Indeed, an overwhelming 97% of those who said they participated in this election to show support for Donald Trump voted for Moore.

Many scholars and pundits suggest that race and white Christian Nationalism have spurred evangelical support for these Republican candidates. But even though race and racism are central to white evangelical voting behavior today, my research also finds strong connections between evangelical political beliefs and their understandings of gender and sexuality.

Defending White Heterosexuality

Strong evangelical support for Trump and Moore is indicative of a political and cultural climate in which evangelicals are willing to tolerate quite a bit in defense of heterosexuality. From 2016-18, I conducted ethnographic research at a white, upper-middle class evangelical mega-church in the Pacific Northwest, similar in many ways to the mega-churches found throughout the South. Through this in-depth research, I learned that contemporary evangelical voting behavior is grounded in a sexual politics that features a defense of heterosexuality. This defense is a final stand for evangelicals who feel they are losing on all other cultural fronts.

White evangelical Christians in the United States have experienced great upward social mobility over the last few decades. As a group, they are gaining ground economically even as they feel that they are losing the cultural influence — and the cultural capital — that used to coincide with economic success. In an effort to maintain, reinforce, and perhaps hold on to this influence, evangelicals work to maintain dominant identities in American society. They find sexual assaults abhorrent, and say as much when they discuss Trump, Moore, and the allegations against them. Yet their standards of evaluations shift when debates about such offense or about sexual identities occur alongside a broader conversation about evangelical heterosexuality — an identity their churches are adamantly trying to maintain and defend against the tides of social change.

Internally, evangelicals are actively debating what constitutes appropriate sexuality, and my work suggests they are moving toward the political center in these discussions. Evangelicals at my field site discussed bathroom bills, trans rights, women's rights, feminism, gay marriage, and the Black Lives Matter movement. They expressed "knowing" and "feeling" many of the same complexities other Americans consider about these issues, but also expressed worries that they felt are losing ground in moral fights for the soul of the nation.

Even as evangelicals discuss these hot-button issues, they spend more time discussing heterosexuality. Evangelical churches used to have same-sex attraction groups and devote energies to “pray the gay away” projects and to national, moral campaigns against homosexuality. Now, evangelicals focus instead on the heterosexual identity and ties they seek to protect. While they discuss gay marriage, they do so in relation to the sacred covenant of marriage they aim to uphold. And as they debate how to welcome gay congregants into the church, they spend much more time setting up small groups devoted to maintaining their own marriages, and supporting each other in married life. As evangelicals put up a defense around heterosexuality, they pivot away from a previous focus on countering sexual deviance.

Changing Conversations but Consistent Voting

As their stances change in ways I have just described, conservative evangelicals today prioritize candidates focused on defense of Christianity in words, if not actions. Scholars and pundits tend to underestimate the strength of evangelical support for candidates like Trump and Moore whose actions evidently do not align with the moral principles of an evangelical voting bloc. But white evangelicals themselves are willing to look beyond possible sexual misbehaviors, even alleged assaults, to find candidates who uphold Christian rhetoric and promise protections for their kind of Christians in the United States.

Evangelical Christians have been at the center of the United States’ most intense culture wars, and accordingly they are constantly evaluating and sometimes shifting their messages and rhetoric in order to remain relevant. In a nation of declining religiosity, evangelicals continue to thrive by many measures – and they are also changing their own conversations. However, it is important to distinguish between the sometimes-surprising shifts in intramural evangelical discussions and what these voters want when they go to the ballot box.

Today, U.S. white evangelicals do not necessarily need political candidate who are going to carry their understanding of Christian values into personal actions, but instead want candidates who will help them defend their identities and public cultural influence. Broad changes to American society make evangelical fear losses and want protection of the values vital to their distinctive group identity. Thus to understand evangelicals as voters, scholars and pundits must pay close attention to how political candidates discuss issues of gender and sexuality and speak out in defense of traditional religious freedoms and conservative Christian values like heterosexuality. Watch what they say, more than what they do.

Read more Sarah Diefendorf, “Evangelical Feminism and the Imagined Secular” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, (Forthcoming, 2018).