

CHAPTER ONE

IMMIGRATION, RELIGION, AND CONSERVATIVE POLITICS IN THE UNITED STATES

Prior to the election of Republican Donald Trump in November 2016, many political commentators expected the 2016 election results to signal the receding power of white evangelicals in U.S. politics. In the spring of 2015, Chris Kromm anticipated the group's diminishing role in U.S. elections and wrote in the *American Prospect*: "After a period of growth in numbers and political influence in the 1980s and 1990s, white fundamentalist Christians have seen the size of their congregations dwindle, eroding their political clout as well."¹ The executive director of the Public Religion Research Institute, Dr. Robert Jones, made a similar claim in the *Atlantic* in July 2016:

In recent years, for example, the Southern Baptist Convention, the largest evangelical denomination in the country, has reported steady declines in membership and new baptisms. Since 2007, the number of white evangelical Protestants nationwide has slipped from 22 percent in 2007 to 18 percent today. . . . A look at generational differences demonstrates that this is only the beginnings of a major shift away from a robust white evangelical presence and influence in the country. While white evangelical Protestants constitute roughly three in ten (29 percent) seniors (age 65 and older), they account for only one in ten (10 percent) members of the Millennial generation (age 18–29).²

But, to the surprise of many observers, the 2016 election was not the death knell of white evangelicals in American politics. Instead, it signaled the unprecedented consolidation and triumph of white

evangelical power in the electoral arena. The results of that election, in which Republican Donald Trump emerged victorious even after bragging on camera about grabbing “pussies,” mocking a disabled reporter, and disparaging Mexican Americans, were shocking even to the Trump campaign itself.³

Trump won a greater share of white evangelical voters than any Republican nominee in the previous four election cycles, despite a public record of behavior that contradicted “Christian convictions.”⁴ And even in the face of evidence of their overall demographic decline over the past decade, white evangelicals have maintained a steady presence in the electorate at 26 percent since 2008; in fact, this proportion represents even a slight increase from 2004, when white evangelicals made up 23 percent of all voters.⁵ In fact, white evangelicals largely drove the decisive “white vote” for Trump in 2016. Exit polls showed that a majority (57 percent) of white voters supported Trump, but it is worth noting that, if we remove evangelicals from the calculation, analysis of exit poll data shows that a substantial majority of non-evangelical whites supported Hillary Clinton (59 percent). In contrast, a very small proportion of white evangelicals (16 percent) supported Clinton in 2016.⁶

In post-election analyses, pundits turned their attention to rural voters, Rust Belt voters, and disaffected white men, but pondered over the white evangelical vote in particular.⁷ Representing more than one in every four voters, and with 81 percent supporting the Republican candidate in 2016 (up from a very solid 78 percent in 2012 and 74 percent in 2008), white evangelicals are undoubtedly among the most powerful voting blocs in U.S. politics today.

Like many Americans, I wanted to better understand the forces driving Donald Trump’s win, and, perhaps more importantly, to understand the underlying racial and religious dynamics that led to his victory. As I witnessed the rise of the Trump candidacy and all that it stood for, I asked myself two questions:

- First, given major shifts in the racial makeup of the country as a whole and of evangelicals in particular, to what extent is race a central determinant of evangelical political orientations?
- Second, if differences across racial groups exist within evangelical America, what accounts for these variations?

I was also interested in the forces that explain and account for the tenacity of the white evangelical political agenda, even in the face of massive demographic change.

These are the primary research questions this project seeks to answer. The project began many years ago as a study of how immigration is changing the U.S. population and its politics. I set out hoping to identify where growing numbers of Latinx and Asian American evangelicals were most likely to exert an impact on the broader evangelical political agenda. As a scholar of immigrant groups, I anticipated that demographic change would fundamentally shake the Christian Right and, perhaps as a result, the very foundations of traditional electoral divides in the United States. However, in the aftermath of an election in which white evangelicals played a pivotal role in electing Donald Trump, I was compelled to adopt a new focus that would incorporate an examination of the limits of demographic change in shaping politics, including evangelical politics, in the United States.

Rising Evangelical Power and Rising Numbers of Immigrants

Although the questions driving this book may be especially relevant to understanding the outcome of the 2016 election and Donald Trump's core constituency (white evangelical voters), they also arise from two long-standing trends that have occurred over my own lifetime and that serve to situate this study. I was born in 1972; since then, the United States has experienced the consequences of the "religio-political earthquake of the 1960s," one of which was a more prominent role for evangelical Christians as a major voting bloc for the Republican Party.⁸ Many scholars of religion and politics have observed that at the end of the 1960s attitudes about race and sex were changing sharply and that these transformations "triggered a return to evangelical Protestantism in American political life that hit a high-water mark in the first decade of the 21st Century."⁹ Study after study shows a strong association between evangelical identity and conservative political attitudes.¹⁰ Corwin Smidt, for instance, argues that evangelical Protestants constitute a distinct religious tradition in U.S. society because of their unique theological beliefs and worship style, and he further contends that adherents share a set of conservative political beliefs.¹¹ Clyde Wilcox

and Carin Robinson argue that religious orthodoxy helps to explain distinct patterns of political conservatism among evangelicals, and Ted Jelen and Marthe Chandler posit that evangelicals' conservative political attitudes are to some extent a response to messages from elites, such as national leaders, religious media, and pastors.¹² Based on much of the literature on religion and politics, then, evangelical identity is strongly associated with political attitudes owing to shared theological beliefs, cultural commitments, and religious messages.¹³ Although some evangelicals align with the political left, scholars of religion and politics observe that the majority are conservative politically; there is no doubt that conservative evangelicals “constitute a key GOP voting bloc in both national and local politics.”¹⁴

At the same time as evangelicals have gained prominence as a virtually unshakable core voting bloc in American politics, I have also witnessed the remarkable demographic transformation of the U.S. population. In 1965, Congress passed the Immigration and Naturalization Act (also known as the Hart-Celler Act), which replaced the provisions of the 1924 Immigrant and Nationality Acts. The earlier immigration laws had established quotas for each sending nation, strongly favored immigrants from northern Europe, and reinforced even earlier restrictions on Asian migration.¹⁵ The Hart-Celler Act ushered in a new era of mass migration to the United States based on skills and family reunification. Because of a confluence of domestic and foreign policy political developments, the 1965 act provided a catalyst for migration from Asia and Latin America.¹⁶ By 2000, 32 percent of adult immigrants were born in Mexico, 16 percent in Central America or the Caribbean, and 27 percent in Asia, while those from Europe made up less than 20 percent of all adult immigrants.¹⁷ Since then, the Asian population in the United States has grown the fastest, followed closely by Latinx, as a result of both migration and births.¹⁸ Migration has changed the face of the United States.¹⁹ According to the Pew Research Center, in 1960 fully 85 percent of Americans identified as “white (non-Hispanic),” a proportion that declined to 63 percent in 2011. In 1960, just 4 percent of Americans identified as Hispanic/Latino and fewer than 1 percent identified as Asian. By 2011, 17 percent of Americans identified as Hispanic/Latino and 5 percent as Asian.²⁰

These two post-1965 trends—the rise of evangelicals as a potent political force within the GOP, and massive demographic change driven by

international migration—have been studied in parallel, resulting in a large body of work on both topics. However, they have rarely been studied together. For instance, the most highly cited articles on evangelical identity and politics, perhaps because they were published in the 1990s, do not seriously attend to the significant waves of immigration from Asia and Latin America that have occurred in the post-1965 era.²¹ Even in later, influential studies on the topic, Latinx evangelicals are either grouped with white evangelicals or undifferentiated from other Latinx.²² At the same time, the most highly cited research on post-1965 immigration, including research on Asian American and Latinx political participation, mostly fails to attend to evangelical or Protestant Christianity.²³

To be fair, most scholars of evangelical identity and politics would expect the effects of religion on political attitudes to vary by race and ethnicity. For example, in an essay on “Evangelical and Mainline Protestants at the Turn of the Millennium,” Smidt writes that “a growing number of Hispanic and Asian immigrants in this country is coloring evangelical Protestantism in new, and different, ways. . . . Such growing diversity will likely make it more difficult for the tradition to maintain its relatively high levels of issue and voting cohesion politically.”²⁴ Yet the extent and nature of potential variation between these groups and white evangelicals has been neither studied systematically nor treated from a critical perspective.

By examining evangelical identity, post-1965 immigrants, and political attitudes in the pages that follow, I bring two separate political trends and areas of study together. In doing so, I reveal broader themes in U.S. politics, including the unexpected impacts of racial and ethnic variation within traditional voting blocs, and show that demographic change does not always result in a new political order.

Evangelical churches are without a doubt the largest, fastest-growing Asian American and Latinx organizations in the United States, and they are fueling demographic change within the larger evangelical community. The National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference and the National Latino Evangelical Coalition estimate that there are at least 15,000 Hispanic evangelical congregations in the United States. Templo Calvario, an Assemblies of God church in Santa Ana, California, has a membership of more than ten thousand Spanish-speakers. No fewer than eight thousand Spanish-speakers attend Lakewood Church

in Houston every Sunday in the remodeled arena that previously housed the Houston Rockets basketball team. In addition, hundreds of Latinx storefront and home-based churches have transformed religious cityscapes.²⁵

A staggering increase in the number of evangelical worshipers within the Asian American community can also be observed in various parts of the country. Korean Central Presbyterian Church, in Centreville, Virginia, boasts forty-six hundred Sunday worshipers, and New Song Community Church in Irvine, California, attracts three thousand Asian American worshipers every Sunday. On many college campuses, evangelical Christian organizations have become predominantly Asian American. Rebecca Kim notes that “there are more than fifty evangelical Christian groups at the University of California (UC) at Berkeley and the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA),” and that “the percentage of Asian Americans at InterVarsity (a popular campus fellowship organization) chapters on some West Coast and Northeast campuses and throughout parts of the Midwest is often as high as 80 percent.”²⁶ In 2007, reports show, there were as many as seven thousand predominantly Asian American churches nationwide.²⁷ More recently, mainstream evangelical seminaries have established programs dedicated to Asian American ministries. In 2013, the largest evangelical seminary in the United States, Fuller Seminary, established the Asian American Initiative, a new program dedicated to training students who would “critically and theologically address the issues and concerns of the Asian American community.”²⁸ In fact, between 2009 and 2013, a period when enrollment among whites at evangelical seminaries was declining, Asian American enrollment grew almost 20 percent.²⁹

Together, Asian American and Latinx evangelicals constitute about 13 percent of all evangelicals in the United States.³⁰ This proportion is surely going to increase as new immigrants enter the United States from Asia and Latin America and the number of white evangelicals remains steady or even falls.³¹ The Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) highlighted this demographic trend in its American Values Atlas project, released in 2014:

Today, roughly two-thirds (66 percent) of Protestants who identify as evangelical or born-again are non-Hispanic whites. Black evangelical Protestants make up 21 percent of all evangelical Protestants

in the U.S., while nearly 1-in-10 (9 percent) are Hispanic. Among evangelical Protestants under the age of 30, only 52 percent are non-Hispanic whites.³²

Robert Jones, CEO of the Public Religion Research Institute, shows that the proportion of white evangelicals in the population has declined in the past decade, but that the overall proportion of evangelicals in the United States has remained steady.³³ We are now seeing two trends so often studied separately—post-1965 immigration and post-1960 evangelical political consolidation—coming together. This book seeks to better understand the meaning of their relationship in U.S. politics.

The Plan of the Book

At the end of this chapter, I present a short history and demographic overview of evangelical America. Chapter 2 presents a systematic analysis of the role played by race and religion in attitude formation across groups that fall into different racial categories. Here I show that white and nonwhite evangelicals exhibit distinct attitudes about politics, even after accounting for important determinants of political attitudes, such as party identification. In chapter 3, I focus on the drivers of these distinct attitudes among white evangelicals, especially the “boundaries of community” and related feelings of relative discrimination, or what I call “perceived in-group embattlement.” This chapter ends by lifting up the voices of evangelicals themselves to narrate their own stories about racial and religious identities and group boundaries. In chapter 4, I take a closer look at how immigration trends are reshaping the evangelical community. I focus on the topic of immigration policy to underscore the main themes in the book and to better understand demographic change and its limits in evangelical America. I conclude by arguing in chapter 5 that although race turns out to matter a great deal in terms of evangelicals’ political orientations, there are serious structural limits to the influence of racially diverse evangelicals on the dominant white evangelical agenda. These limits stem from a host of factors, including Asian American and Latinx political participation rates, the fundamentally moderate political positions taken by Latinx and Asian American evangelicals, unequal political mobilization, and the

varying boundaries of racial communities. Recognizing these limits, I also identify the points at which evangelicals of color, particularly Latinx and Asian Americans, are likely to exert political pressure in the near future. Although these pressure points do not translate into a dramatic political realignment in the short term, they do reveal the nuanced ways in which demographic change is likely to impact the conservative politics associated with evangelicals in the future.

The Analytic Approach

I used a multimethod approach to answering the questions posed earlier, including systematic analysis of survey data, site visits to evangelical, Pentecostal, and Charismatic churches and religious gatherings, and in-depth interviews. Most of the quantitative data come from the 2016 Collaborative Multiracial Post-Election Survey (CMPS), which includes more than ten thousand completed interviews with white, black, Latinx, and Asian (“Asian American”) respondents from December 3, 2016, to February 15, 2017. The survey (and invitation) was available to respondents in English, Spanish, simplified Chinese, traditional Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese. Details on the survey methodology are included in the appendix.³⁴ Data were weighted, by racial group, to approximate the adult population in the 2015 American Community Survey (ACS) one-year data file for age, gender, education, nativity, ancestry, and voter registration status.³⁵ A post-stratification raking algorithm was used to balance each category within plus or minus 1 percent of the ACS estimates. As such, the CMPS provides useful information for making broad and systematic comparisons across racial groups. However, these data do not capture the substantive religious experiences of first- and second-generation immigrants, nor do they reveal the rich context in which immigrant religious adherents come to understand the influence of religion and other factors on their political orientation and participation. Hence, I also move beyond the survey data to better understand how race and religion interact in the everyday lives of evangelical Americans.

For example, from 2006 to 2008, members of my multiracial research team visited more than sixty evangelical and Pentecostal and ten Catholic worship sites to collect data. These site visits add both

breadth and depth to the study by providing information not available from the survey on the substantive nature of the relationship between religion and politics for Latinx and Asian American evangelical immigrant Christians—specifically, how religious spaces encourage political participation, share political information, and create political community. The site visits also gave us impressions of the demographic characteristics of members; enabled us to describe the religious leadership, the key themes of the services, rituals, and events, and community-building practices; revealed references made, both explicitly and non-explicitly, to social or political issues; and gave us access to the visual materials available to church and temple members and visitors. At each site, we recorded notes on a standardized “site visit in-take” form that helped us to organize key descriptive information, following Michael Foley and Dean Hoge’s method for identifying religious sites for their study *Religion and the New Immigrants*.³⁶ Some churches and temples were chosen for site visits because we were already familiar with them, and some were chosen because they were mentioned in media stories. Others were chosen either randomly or through word-of-mouth referrals from friends and acquaintances.

In-depth interviews help to inform general findings from the survey analysis and provide a more detailed, descriptive, and process-oriented account of the relationship between religion and politics for evangelical worshippers.³⁷ I conducted more than seventy interviews with Asian American, Latinx, white, and black worshippers in southern California and Houston, Texas, all of whom were recruited through social and academic networks and through contacts with religious leaders. Unlike the survey interviews, these interviews were not drawn from a national sample. I was able to achieve substantial variation, however, in gender, national origin, occupation, language of interview (English, Spanish, or Korean), and length of residence in the United States. All interviews, which lasted from thirty to ninety minutes, were transcribed in full. All interviewees are listed in table A1.1.

These open-ended, semistructured interviews allowed white, black, Asian American, and Latinx religious adherents to explain and elaborate on their religious beliefs, religious practices, relationships with religious leaders, and racial identity and also to relate the ways in which these aspects of religion and race as well as other potential motivations,

concerns, and attitudes informed their political thinking and action. Sample questions included:

“What does the term ‘religion’ mean to you?”

“What does the term ‘politics’ mean to you?”

“Do the members of your church/temple ever talk about community problems?”

“Do you ever talk with people at church/temple about moral values?”

“Do you know how your minister/pastor feels about same-sex marriage/affirmative action?”

“How important are the political views of your minister/pastor to your own political views?”

“As a member of both a racial or ethnic community and a religious community, do you ever feel conflict in terms of your views on social or political issues? Why or why not?”

This multimethod approach was invaluable in providing critical data on the relationships and communications between leaders and worshipers, the political and theological content of sermons, the context of services, community-building practices, and the complex racial, religious, and political identities of first- and second-generation immigrant worshipers. Evangelical churches do not focus their mission on political mobilization. Nonetheless, members of these institutions do receive information about the political views of their religious leaders and discuss politics with their fellow members. In interviews, religious adherents were not simply passive recipients of the political information that flowed around them, but often viewed such information with a critical eye.

The History and Context of Post-1965 Evangelical Demography and Politics

Religious categories are dynamic, overlapping, and often contested. Scholarly categories may not mirror categories of self-identification among religious adherents, but the definitions that follow provide a useful point of reference. Scholars of religion and mainstream evangelical organizations describe four theological commitments that together distinguish evangelical Christians: deep reliance on the Bible

as the ultimate authority, the sharing of one's faith through missionary actions and other work, conversion through a "born-again" experience, and the belief that Jesus died on the cross to redeem humanity.³⁸ Evangelicalism also refers to a religious tradition and style of worship.³⁹ Smidt notes that "within evangelical Protestant churches, one is more likely to encounter contemporary praise services, informal worship styles, and more 'free flowing' services."⁴⁰

As a tradition, evangelical Christianity, being part of the broader tradition of U.S. Christian Protestantism, is deeply rooted in U.S. history.⁴¹ In the 1920s, the divisions between U.S. Protestants that are reflected in current distinctions between "evangelical" and "mainline" Protestants became prominent during the debate surrounding the 1925 "Scopes Monkey Trial." When John Thomas Scopes, a high school science teacher, introduced his students to the theory of evolution, he was charged with violating Tennessee state law. The ensuing trial pitted Christian fundamentalist beliefs against evolutionary theories. William Jennings Bryan, one of the most prominent biblical literalists of the era, and a member of the prosecution's legal team, was widely judged as having failed to defend creationist beliefs and the fundamentalist perspective more generally. As a result of the theological disagreements that arose over the trial, the great majority of fundamentalist Protestants left their churches and denominations and established more theologically conservative houses of worship and organizations. Contemporary evangelicalism grew out of this break.⁴² Contemporary mainline Protestants grew out of the "modernist" side of this divide and tend to be less literal in their biblical beliefs, more open to multiple pathways to "salvation," and more focused, when it comes to sharing their faith and changing society, on social structures than on individual conversion.⁴³

For several decades after the Scopes trial, evangelical institutions and worshippers remained somewhat marginal to mainstream U.S. social and political life. But they did not stay at the periphery. Scholars trace the rise of evangelicals in U.S. politics to a series of social transformations that began in the 1960s:

Just as racial tensions peaked in the 1960s and populations shifted from cities and the country to the suburbs, changes in the manufacturing and service sectors of the economy dramatically altered the ways Americans labored. These shifts led to changing roles for

minorities and women in a labor force once dominated by white males. As a consequence of these demographic changes, domestic social concerns displaced previous worries about communism. New issues concerning women's roles in the domestic sphere and the labor force made many Americans uneasy. Further, concerns raised by the sexual revolution, the widespread availability of birth control, and countercultural movements of the 1960s seemed to undermine the very nature of the American family. Unease about race and skyrocketing crime rates in urban areas further contributed to the sense of familial precariousness.⁴⁴

The Republican Party would turn these attitudes to their advantage by "exploiting white anxieties over racial desegregation and concerns about cultural changes affecting the family."⁴⁵

The social characteristics of evangelicals have changed over time. In 1964, just 19 percent of evangelical Protestants (excluding black Protestants) claimed to have attended at least some college. By 2000, this proportion had grown to 45 percent.⁴⁶ More recent data from the 2014 Religious Landscapes Survey conducted by Pew show that a majority (56 percent) of evangelicals claim to have attended at least some college.⁴⁷

For some time now, evangelicals have made up about one-quarter of all Americans. In 1964, scholars estimate, evangelicals made up 23 percent of the population.⁴⁸ Their proportion increased slightly over time, to 26 percent of the population in 2007, then remained fairly steady (25 percent) into 2014.⁴⁹ In contrast to their mainline Protestant counterparts, evangelicals appear to be holding their own in U.S. society. Over the same period of 2007 to 2014, the proportion of mainline Protestants, who made up more than one in four Americans in 1964, declined from 18 percent to 15 percent of the population.⁵⁰

These statistics apply to evangelicals as a whole. If we disaggregate the evangelical population by race, however, it becomes apparent that the white evangelical population is declining. Using General Social Survey (GSS) data from 1988 to 2012 and the Public Religion Research Institute's American Values Atlas (2013–2014), the sociologist Robert Jones shows that white evangelicals made up just over 20 percent of the population in 2008 but had declined to 18 percent of the population by 2014.⁵¹ That evangelicals as a whole have maintained a solid presence in the United States in the face of a slow but steady drop in the

proportion of *white* evangelicals can be attributed to growing numbers of *nonwhite* evangelicals.

Latinx and Asian American evangelicals constitute a growing constituency in religious America broadly and in evangelical America in particular. The proportion of Latinx in the United States who identify as evangelical or born-again rose from 12 percent to 16 percent between 2010 and 2013.⁵² The proportion of Asian Americans identifying as evangelical or born-again rose from 16 percent in 2008 to about 25 percent in 2012.⁵³ Nonwhite immigrants seem to be the only source of growth for the American evangelical population.⁵⁴ As David Roozen, director of the Hartford Institute for Religion Research at Hartford Seminary, observed in December 2013, “It appears that racial, ethnic and immigrant communities are . . . the pockets of vitality within the overall decline.”⁵⁵

The prototypical image of the U.S. “evangelical voter” as white, highly religious, and politically conservative can be traced to the late 1980s, when the frequent references by scholars and political commentators to a “culture war” dividing American voters into two different political camps burnished this image. It was during this time that evangelical voters moved en masse to the Republican Party.⁵⁶ These divisions were assumed to be based on different moral and religious orientations.⁵⁷ And yet, even as the image of the evangelical voter became more familiar in the American imaginary, some scholars questioned this monolithic representation. For example, Nancy Davis and Robert Robinson wrote in a 1996 article that, “contrary to the portrayal of the religiously orthodox in popular media, and in some recent scholarship, they are not a united conservative front.”⁵⁸ Davis and Robinson reported, using 1991 GSS data, that evangelicals, even the most orthodox, “are divided on many of today’s most contested issues along lines of race, sex, class and age.”⁵⁹ Many others have also drawn attention to the demographic diversity among evangelical identifiers.⁶⁰ Still, the image of the evangelical voter has remained one-dimensional over time.

Immigration from Latin America and Asia may slowly change that image, but it persists, not only in the face of demographic change but also in spite of politically progressive white evangelicals’ earnest attempts to counter this monolithic image.⁶¹ The Evangelical Left certainly exists and offers an alternative to the traditional Christian Right ideological framework, but it has not attracted a mass following. Jonathan Merritt,

writing in the *Atlantic*, contends, for example, that “a constituency in itself does not a ‘movement’ make. The latter depends on infrastructure, organization, and leadership, elements that American religious progressives have not been able to produce—despite various attempts—on the scale that the religious right has.”⁶² I return to an analysis of progressive white evangelicals in the last chapter.

This book questions the assumption that racial and ethnic diversity have a predictable short-term role in disrupting the traditional and conservative Christian base. Observers are indeed correct that Latinx and Asian American evangelical Christians—particularly those who attend church often—tend to be more conservative in their attitudes toward the “hot-button” social issues (such as abortion and same-sex marriage) than do other Latinx and Asian Americans.⁶³ At the same time, they tend to be more Democratic than their white evangelical counterparts. The fact of the matter is that despite the growing presence of Asian Americans and Latinx in evangelical America, white evangelicals have only become more Republican over time.

The next chapter focuses on the political distinctions between white evangelicals and the growing numbers of nonwhite evangelicals.