

Political affiliations of evangelicals shift: A more even distribution

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A raft of recent polls and books suggest to some observers that the evangelical vote may be returning to a more even distribution between the Republican and Democratic parties.

One indication was a Zogby International poll released February 11 showing that about one-third of white evangelicals who voted in two Super Tuesday states voted in the Democratic primaries.

The survey of hundreds of voters from each political party in Missouri and Tennessee was taken by phone February 5 and 6, immediately following those states' primaries. About one-third of self-identified white evangelicals voted Democratic in both the Show-Me State and the Volunteer State peers.

Two organizations, Faith in Public Life and the Center for American Progress, commissioned the poll and held a conference call from Washington, D.C., with reporters. The poll was conducted in response to Christian leaders who criticized the media consortium conducting the most widely used exit-poll data. In every primary and caucus through mid-February the consortium neglected to ask Democratic primary voters if they were evangelicals. It did ask that question of voters in all Republican contests.

The nonpartisan Rothenberg Political Report called the Zogby findings not dramatic, saying that "a considerable minority of evangelicals" have voted Democratic in the two states for decades. Still, the Faith in Public Life report noted that only 25 percent of white evangelicals voted for Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry in 2004.

"Exit polls cannot ask about everything," observed religion columnist Peter Steinfelds of the *New York Times* last month. "The questionnaires handed voters hurrying away from polling places cannot be any longer than two sides of a single sheet of paper."

Not only that, pollsters like to repeat the same questions over time for the sake of comparison. Media organizations in the consortium sense a possible disappointment by evangelicals with the GOP and want to track that.

“The media is operating with an outdated script, and the experience I’m having on the road confirms the data,” said Jim Wallis, founder of the Sojourners/ Call to Renewal movement. In his recent talks at evangelical college and seminary campuses, Wallis said, he has seen far more enthusiasm for Democratic candidates than in past years.

“I would say that all the data—the Barna data, the Pew data, this [recent] data—show that evangelicals are leaving the religious right in droves, and the religious right is being replaced by Jesus, and that’s progress,” Wallis said.

The survey in January from evangelical pollster George Barna, whose poll one sociologist has criticized for its rather broad definition of “born again,” reported that 40 percent of born-again voters said they will vote for the Democratic presidential nominee in November, while only 29 percent plan to vote for the Republican.

That left about 30 percent of born-again respondents undecided before Super Tuesday. But in a more conservative subset of born-again voters that Barna calls “evangelicals,” 45 percent said they would support the Republican nominee and 11 percent would back the Democrat. “Most significant is that a whopping 40 percent of evangelicals are undecided,” said the Barna report.

Wallis commented that the shift “does not mean that people are moving from being partisan Republicans to being partisan on the other side.” But he suggested that some self-described evangelicals, after years of close identification with GOP politics, are going to be more independent.

More than a third of white evangelicals voted for President Bush’s Democratic predecessor, Bill Clinton, in the 1992 and 1996 elections. Asked if the new polls marked a return to pre-Bush dynamics, Wallis said evidence he has seen indicates that the concerns of younger evangelicals encompass global warming, poverty and the Iraq war as well as saving unborn children and opposing gay marriage.

Commentary and books by journalists and scholars also note that evangelical Christians are moving away from the political agenda that has defined them in the public eye.

Amy Sullivan, the national editor at *Time* magazine, says in her book *The Party Faithful: How and Why Democrats Are Closing the God Gap* that she sees hope for Democrats to “level the praying field” because of the efforts to reach people of faith by senators Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, who were still closely matched after Obama’s string of state victories following Super Tuesday.

According to Mark Silk, editor of *Religion in the News* and the blog Spiritual Politics, the Zogby polls in Missouri and Tennessee produced “no evidence that white evangelicals have a soft spot in their hearts for Barack Obama.”

Yet when Obama swept the February 12 primaries—in the District of Columbia, Maryland and Virginia—exit-poll data showed that Obama won decisively with Maryland voters who say they attend religious services at least weekly, and made significant inroads into Clinton’s usual edge with Catholic voters in Virginia and Maryland.

Washington Post columnist E. J. Dionne’s new book, *Souled Out: Reclaiming Faith and Politics After the Religious Right*, suggests that theologically conservative Christians are rediscovering scripture’s call to be concerned with multiple issues. “The end of the Religious Right does not signal a decline in evangelical Christianity,” he said.

“On the contrary, it is a sign . . . of a new reformation among Christians, who are disentangling their great movement from a political machine,” Dionne said. “Linking religion too closely to the fortunes of one political party or one leader or one group of leaders is always a mistake.”

At the same time, polling analyst John Green cautioned pundits about the dynamics of a long election campaign. “It is important to remember that when Bush first ran for president in 2000, he was not the favorite candidate of evangelicals or of the Christian right,” said Green, in remarks posted February 8 on the Web site of the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life.

Despite evangelical leader James Dobson’s endorsement last month of former Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee over Arizona senator McCain, the clear front-runner for the 2008 GOP nomination, Green said, “most evangelicals have a positive view of McCain,” according to a Pew survey of 1,500 adults January 30–February 2. At that point, 59 percent of white evangelicals liked him compared to 28 percent who didn’t.

“On Election Day in November, exit polls will ask all voters the same questions,” wrote Steinfels. “It will become apparent, for example, whether evangelicals experiencing Republican fatigue signaled that by voting Democratic or simply, as some polling for the *New York Times* suggests is more likely, by staying home.” - *Associated Baptist Press and other sources*