

Evangelical leaders see their influence falling

by [Adelle M. Banks](#) in the [July 26, 2011](#) issue

Are U.S. evangelicals losing their influence on America? A new poll from the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life seems to say just that, with the vast majority—82 percent—of U.S. evangelical leaders saying their influence on the country is declining.

At the same time, their counterparts in Africa, Asia and Latin America are far more optimistic. "There's both a huge optimism gap and a huge influence gap in terms of the way these folks perceive things," said Luis Lugo, director of the Pew Forum.

Researchers surveyed more than 2,000 leaders invited to attend the Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization in Cape Town, South Africa, last year. Findings were released June 22.

S. Douglas Birdsall, a minister and executive chair of the Lausanne Movement, which worked with Pew on the survey, said the U.S. pessimism is rooted in a changed culture in which Billy Graham has retreated from public life and government-sponsored prayer has been banned from public schools for more than a generation.

"So having gone from that position of considerable influence, even though we might actually have more influence than churches in . . . other parts of the world, the sense is that it's slipping from our hands," said Birdsall.

The perception of declining influence comes as the nation has become both more pluralistic and more secular. The vast majority of those

surveyed—92 percent—called secularism a major threat to evangelical Christianity.

Some evangelical denominations are starting to acknowledge pluralism in hopes of increasing their numbers. The Southern Baptist Convention, which drew its smallest attendance since World War II at its recent annual meeting held in Phoenix and is grappling with declining baptism rates, has launched a plan to diversify its leadership.

Researchers also found that evangelicals are far more pessimistic than their Global South counterparts about the current and future state of evangelicalism. About half (53 percent) of U.S. leaders said the state of evangelicalism is worse than it was five years ago, and nearly as many (48 percent) said they expect it to grow worse in the next five years.

Birdsall met with some 150 Lausanne Movement leaders in Boston in late June to map out steps to take during the next decade. He said topics were to include a focus on the authenticity and integrity of evangelicals' image, which sometimes has been besmirched by the moral failures of its leaders and overly influenced by a consumer-oriented culture.

"What can happen is that the minister becomes the communications marketing guru who knows how to appeal to various markets and so you attract people," he said. "When you do that, you lose your prophetic voice of what it means to challenge people to be in the world but not of the world."

Randall Balmer, a historian of American evangelicals who teaches at Barnard College, said leaders of the religious right—from the late Jerry Falwell to broadcaster Pat Robertson—promoted a "cult of victimization among evangelicals" that may have worked at the voting booth but hurt them in the larger culture.

"I think there is some waning of cultural influence," he said, pointing to the politicizing of the movement as the reason for greater visibility

but also cultural decline.

"Like it or not, when you become politically active, you become associated with the politicians you support," Balmer said, alluding to many evangelicals' embrace of the GOP. "Once you begin to covet political power and influence, you lose the prophetic voice."

Researchers found that just 18 percent of U.S. Lausanne representatives surveyed said religious leaders should stay out of political issues, compared to 78 percent who said they should express their political views.

Historian Mark Noll said a certain level of influence was taken for granted by evangelicals in past decades, with Graham's prominence and fewer concerns about political involvement. Noll, a historian of American religion at the University of Notre Dame, said successful congregations and ministries continue to thrive in parts of the country, especially locally, but "that local and individual strength doesn't show up on the evening news."

Birdsall agreed that evangelical influence may have changed but said it still exists, although perhaps in a different form.

"Though we are losing influence, it doesn't mean that we are pessimistic about our churches and their role in society," he said. "They're having influence in homes. They're having influence in caring for those who are marginalized, those who are the poor, the oppressed. It may not be as public." —RNS