

Are Iowa's conservative evangelicals irrelevant?

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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Like a lot of people, Paul Waldman [finds](#) this Rick Perry ad ridiculous:

Waldman's right, of course. He's also right that this bald play for Iowa's conservative evangelicals [isn't likely to work](#). But his explanation as to why is disappointing:

As ridiculous as [the video's] claims sound, the voters Perry is pleading with absolutely believe them to be true. And this is the most direct attempt by any of the candidates to go after those votes, to say to Christian conservatives, "I will be your sectarian candidate." You hate gays? I'm your man. You want America to be more Christian? Come on board.

But it is obviously not going to work, and not just because Perry has been such a desperately poor candidate. Circumstances have conspired to make the religious right -- as a distinct political entity that can be mobilized in unison during the primary -- essentially irrelevant. Four years ago, Mike Huckabee was able to ride evangelical support to victory in the Iowa caucus. But today, Newt Gingrich -- converted Catholic, thrice-married, admitted adulterer -- is [way out in front](#) among Iowa evangelicals, pretty much matching his support with Republicans as a whole. And there doesn't look to be anything Rick Perry can do about it.

There's a sort of dualism that comes up when political commentators talk about conservative evangelicals: either they're powerful and unflappable advocates for the couple of causes we've always associated with them, or they don't really exist as a voting bloc at all. But reality is, as usual, grayer: conservative evangelicals are a distinct interest group that's also made up of individual people.

Maybe some of them appreciate Gingrich's ability to articulate the narrative of a Christian America [in a bit more detail](#) than Perry's 30-second pander. Maybe some [share](#) his [relative moderation](#) on immigration policy--and maybe even those who [don't](#) share it appreciate that he's expressed his views a bit more consistently [than Perry has](#). And maybe a lot of them, like the rest of us, are preoccupied with economic issues right now (whether or not they're [pushing biblical theories to support the status quo](#)).

And is it possible that conservative evangelicals are smart enough to resist being manipulated by someone like Perry, who has shown repeatedly in this campaign that he doesn't really know what the hell he's doing?