Is the religious right waning?

By Lauren Turek
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This election season, the emergence of a virulent anti-establishment and white nationalist ethos has raised serious questions about the nation's moral character and the future of democracy. Yet religion and religious interest groups occupy a curious place—or lack of place—in the national conversation. The religious right, so consequential for the Republican Party in recent elections, has little pull with Donald Trump. Furthermore, despite the fealty to Trump pledged by many white evangelical leaders, recent polling indicates some cracks in the larger coalition of conservative Christian voters that have supported Republican presidential candidates over the past three decades.

When Trump and Hillary Clinton faced off last week in their final debate, they had the chance to expound on their proposed economic policies as well as their stances on immigration, foreign relations, and abortion. Although Trump nodded to the religious right when he vowed to appoint anti-abortion justices to the Supreme Court , in general such hot-button cultural issues have taken a back seat in this election. Outside discussions about religious liberty, especially during the primaries, the Republican candidate has spent little time on the Christian right's priorities.

In light of these developments, the media has devoted considerable attention to exploring the fracturing of the evangelical vote in response to questions about Trump's morality and treatment of women and minorities. A recent editorial in *Christianity Today* declared that "evangelicals, of all people, should not be silent about Trump's blatant immorality." White evangelicals still tend to support Trump over the other candidates. But polling demonstrates that among evangelicals in general "party affiliation is a much "stronger predictor of voting preferences than faith," and Asian, African-American, and Latino evangelicals overwhelmingly support Clinton. Demographic change has left some white evangelicals feeling besieged, but evangelicalism—never monolithic to begin with—may be in a process of adapting to the new American pluralism.

Such cultural adaptation would be in keeping with the recent history of evangelical involvement in politics.

Though many observers now conflate evangelicalism with political conservatism, evangelicals have not always been reliable Republican voters. From the 1940s to the 1960s—and even into the 1970s, a period when many of the events that laid the groundwork for the rise of the religious right occurred—evangelicals did not represent a cohesive voting bloc. While most did espouse conservative political opinions, a small yet vibrant evangelical left existed alongside them. In addition to basic political differences, evangelicals and other Protestants divided along regional, racial, and theological lines, as they do today.

Without political cohesion, they lacked influence in politics. For example, while documents from Richard Nixon's period in the White House indicate that the president viewed relations with Southern Baptists as "good politics" and a way to gain votes, his administration generally ignored policy suggestions from evangelicals inside and outside of the government.

Despite this, evangelicals tended to side with Nixon on the cultural issues of the 1960s, especially the debates over racial integration in religious schools, which led conservative Christians to develop stronger connections with the Republican party and with each other as they grew more politically active. Over the course of the 1970s, this political constituency expanded and developed a close alliance with the Republican party, which championed itself as the protector of morality, traditional values, and "law and order." By the 1980s, the religious right was firmly ensconced in the party.

Yet, as the current presidential campaign demonstrates, we should not assume that this connection is indelible. While the values championed by the religious right have had strong valence in some recent elections, the influence of this voting bloc waxes and wanes. Even during Ronald Reagan's presidency, a high point of evangelical visibility, the religious right did not gain tremendous legislative ground. Furthermore, the racial, ethnic, and regional divides that once prevented political cohesion remain.

The religious right has not always existed, and it has not existed in its current form for very long. This election may be a blip, and the religious right may re-coalesce around a more conventional Republican candidate in the future. But as American

culture and demographics continue to change, we may see new religious coalitions emerge that shift how we think about religion and politics.

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