Is the label *evangelical* more about politics than religious beliefs?

A growing number of evangelicals say the term has become a marker of politics more than beliefs.

by Harry Bruinius in the January 31, 2018 issue

Donald Trump (left) and Jerry Falwell Jr. (right) at the Liberty University commencement ceremony in May 2017.

(*The Christian Science Monitor*) For political pollsters and analysts, the term *white evangelical Protestant* has been one of the handiest demographic labels out there.

White Americans who say that they are born again or who self-identify as evangelical Christian have for decades voted consistently and overwhelmingly Republican. As a group, they reveal some of the clearest political positions of any subgroup. Making up around 25 percent of the population, white evangelicals are by far the group most worried about the threats they see as posed by immigrants. They are by far the most suspicious of Islam. They are by far the most resistant to same-sex marriage.

That makes it very “useful as a category of analysis in sociology and political science,” said John Schmalzbauer, a professor of religious studies at Missouri State University in Springfield. “The fact that 81 percent of people in a religious category voted for a single candidate suggests that it is a helpful way of mapping social reality,” he said, referring to the overwhelming support white evangelicals gave and continue to give to President Trump.

Yet even as the disruptive forces that helped propel Trump to the presidency continue to reshape American politics, a growing number of evangelicals themselves contend the term has been both distorted and corrupted during the Trump era, becoming a marker of politics rather than a belief system within the Christian faith.

Lately, a number of high-profile evangelical leaders, such as Scot McKnight and Peter Wehner, have been questioning or even abandoning the term. Younger evangelicals are starting to disavow the label. And after eight of ten white evangelicals in Alabama voted for former state chief justice Roy Moore for the U.S. Senate in December, despite women coming forward with accounts of unwanted genital contact with a 14-year- old and other sexual misconduct, some evangelicals have been wondering whether the term has become too toxic to have a future.

“The biggest issue about the word *evangelical* is whether it should be a political identification for an ethno-religious group, or whether, if you look at it from a worldwide or historical perspective, you see that evangelicalism has hundreds of different kinds of expressions,” said George Marsden, professor emeritus of history at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana and a leading scholar of evangelicalism. “As a religious designation, it’s become very confusing here in America to use the term *evangelical*. Every time you do, you have to clarify, well, you don’t mean just white evangelicals of a particular sort.”

As Marsden and other scholars point out, evangelicalism can describe a kaleidoscope of styles, from staid Calvinists to suburban megachurches to old-time Baptists. It also describes the faith of many black and Hispanic Protestants, groups who vote Democratic, and who usually don’t emphasize the term. Evangelicalism is also growing rapidly around the world.

For many scholars, the term *evangelical* refers to a set of Christian beliefs, and they cite standard ones described by the scholar David Bebbington in the 1980s. Evangelicals claim the primacy of the authority of the Bible. Evangelicals are also

characterized by their emphasis on salvation through the death and literal resurrection of Jesus Christ and the need for a personal conversion experience. This experience, then, should be shared with others for the purpose of evangelism, as well as various forms of social engagement and help for the poor.

For some Christian conservatives, the political behavior described by journalists and political pollsters misses the essence of true, churchgoing evangelicalism. Russell Moore, president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, the nation's largest evangelical Protestant denomination, said in 2016: "Secular people have for a long time misunderstood the meaning of *evangelical*, seeing us almost exclusively in terms of election-year voting blocs or our most buffoonish television personalities."

Marsden noted that some of the confusion draws from pollsters asking if a person is a born again or evangelical Christian.

"You have all sorts of people who say, 'I guess so,'" he said. "That makes it seem that groups of evangelicals are bigger than they actually are. And it also invites all sorts of people who aren't very deeply religious to say that they are in this cultural group."

With a more ethnically diverse and theologically focused definition of evangelicalism, the movement may not seem so politically uniform, scholars suggest.

"The crisis over the *evangelical* label is a crisis for the 20 percent of white evangelicals who did not vote for Donald J. Trump, as well as the lion's share of nonwhite evangelicals," Schmalzbauer said. "White evangelicals who sympathize with Trump's rhetorical defense of white Christian America and his religious nationalism are not worried about the future of the evangelical brand."

Even so, a number of other thinkers reject the move to limit the definition of evangelicalism to faithful churchgoers or an exclusive focus on doctrine and beliefs. Cultural change and perceived threats to political power have, in fact, long defined the anxieties of many white evangelical Protestants. After the Scopes trial in the 1920s, many evangelicals began a withdrawal from the country's political and intellectual life as "modernist" ideas and Darwinian science became cultural norms, leading to the emergence of a separatist fundamentalism.

“In the 1920s, ‘respectable evangelicals’ were distancing themselves from the fundamentalists,” said Tim Gloege, author of *Guaranteed Pure: The Moody Bible Institute, Business, and the Making of Modern Evangelicalism*.

A similar dynamic occurred in the 1950s, he says, when a group of “neo-evangelicals,” including figures like the theologian Carl F. H. Henry and the evangelist Billy Graham, again tried to distance themselves from their fundamentalist peers.

Both movements converged in the 1960s on politics. Historians such as Dartmouth’s Randall Balmer point out that the rise of the religious right, especially in the South, was a reaction against the desegregation of public schools and the rise of the private Christian academy.

“It’s hard to talk about modern, 20th-century American evangelicalism without putting race at the center,” said Kristin Kobes Du Mez, a professor of history at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan. “It’s not just a pure doctrinal matter.”

In addition to church attendance, there’s a “culture of consumption” of popular evangelical media, books, movies, and music, often promoted by television personalities.

In “the last half century of American evangelicalism, I find as a defining feature the desire to claim cultural power,” Du Mez said. “Along with that comes a Christian nationalism.”

It’s a political emphasis that has driven scholars such as Bill Svelmoe, chair of the history department at St. Mary’s College in Indiana, to reject both evangelical and Republican affiliations.

“What happens is, as you plant your flag over the Republican Party as the party not just with the right ideas about abortion, or even ideas about the economy, it becomes the moral party, God’s party,” Svelmoe said. “And now you have to defend everything with a religious fervor. And the folks on the other side are now your enemies. They are on the devil’s side.” *—The Christian Science Monitor*

A version of this article, which was edited on January 12, appears in the January 31 print edition under the title “Is the label ‘evangelical’ more about politics than religious beliefs?.”