

A GENERATIONAL SHIFT IN EVANGELICAL CHRISTIAN PARTISANSHIP

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ABSTRACT

Since the 1980s, evangelical Christians have been a steady and reliable voting bloc for the Republican Party. In 2004 alone, a full 77.5 percent of evangelicals voted for George W. Bush. Since around 2004, however, scholars and the media have been noticing a trend among evangelical youth (between 18 and 30 years old) – namely the rise of the young evangelical Democrat. It is alleged that younger generations of evangelicals are shifting their policy preferences to include an increased concern for social justice issues like poverty, homelessness, and environmentalism which is what is driving this shift towards the Democratic Party. This paper analyzes time series data from the General Social Survey from 2000 through 2012 and shows that a shift in partisanship among evangelical youth is occurring. Specifically, between 2002 and 2010 the percentage of young evangelicals identifying as Democrat nearly doubled. The question remains what implications this will have for partisan politics and this paper speculates as to how the Republican and Democratic Parties might respond to this shift in a once reliable voting bloc.

A GENERATIONAL SHIFT IN EVANGELICAL CHRISTIAN PARTISANSHIP

By
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INTRODUCTION

On June 21, 2008, *The Washington Post* reported that Senator Barack Obama was making a “full-throttle push for centrist evangelicals” in his quest for the Democratic presidential nomination (Burke 2008). Part of this push included the creation of a grass-roots project called the Joshua Generation, which included plans to hold concerts and house meetings to specifically target young evangelicals (Ibid.). A source close to the Obama campaign told *Christian Broadcast News* that “There is unprecedented energy and excitement for Obama among young evangelicals. The Joshua Generation project will tap into that excitement and provide young people of faith opportunities to stand up for their values and move the campaign forward” (Mazyck 2008). The choice to name the project the Joshua Generation was intentional, as the phrase is often used as a mobilization phrase within evangelical church youth groups and refers to the biblical story of Joshua, who did what Moses (a generation before him) could not, and led his people into the Promised Land (Burke 2008).

The effort by the Obama campaign to target the evangelical youth vote was successful. John Green, a Senior Fellow in Religion and American Politics at the Pew Forum on Religion and Public life noted that Obama was able to gain approximately 3 percentage points more of the evangelical vote than John Kerry had in 2004 (24% to 21%) and it is highly likely that this 3 percent shift was due to evangelical youth (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2008, 10). It appears that the Democrats were able to tap into a trend of young evangelicals moving to the left. In this paper, I investigate whether this shift to the left might be due to a

change in issue preference, specifically whether young evangelicals are developing stronger support for issues such as poverty and the environment.

Who are the Evangelicals?

To fully understand Senator Obama's 2008 strategy to target the evangelical youth vote, it is first necessary to know who evangelicals are as individuals and to have a historical perspective of evangelicals in politics. Evangelicalism is a theologically conservative branch of Protestant Christianity. Evangelicalism can typically be identified and differentiated from mainline Protestantism by a few distinct characteristics. First, evangelicals consider themselves to be born-again Christians, and when asked in surveys if they have ever had a born-again experience, the answer is "yes." This born-again experience is something that happens in adult life, and is something that must happen during a true conversion experience. After the born-again experience, evangelicals feel that they have been saved, and it is at that moment that they fully commit themselves to God. Essentially, in the born-again experience they shed their old selves and are reborn as a child of God (Fowler, Hertzke and Olson 1999; Smidt 2008; Brint and Abrutyn 2010). Another distinguishing feature of evangelicals is their high level of religiosity, which can be expressed both as frequency of attendance at church and frequency of bible reading (Brint and Abrutyn 2010). Another characteristic of evangelicals is their belief in biblical literalism, and when asked in survey questions if they believe the bible to be the true and authoritative word of God, the answer is typically "yes" (Gold and Russell 2007). Finally, evangelicals tend to hold very conservative moral stances on hot button social issues, such as abortion and gay marriage (Fowler, Hertzke and Olson 1999; Smidt 2008).

Evangelicals in American Politics

Although the history of evangelicalism dates back to the early 17th century, it was not until the 1970s that evangelicals in the United States began to be noticed by both politicians and the general public as they slowly emerged onto the political scene (Wald and Calhoun-Brown 2011, 206). One reason for the emergence of evangelicals onto the political scene during this time period is that evangelicals were responding to a number of developments that occurred in the 1960s, including the spread of drugs, the women's rights movement, and the practice of free love which encouraged premarital and extramarital sex (Ramet 2005, 431). Other scholars argue that it was three particular grassroots, local movements that took place in the 1970s that led to the emergence of evangelicals as a political force: a textbook controversy in West Virginia, a gay rights referendum in Dade County, Florida, and a campaign to defeat the proposed Equal Rights Amendment (Wald and Calhoun-Brown 2011).

Each of the grassroots evangelical political movements (the West Virginia textbook boycott, the Dade County, FL gay rights protest, and the defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment) was viewed by evangelical Protestants as “a crusade in defense of traditional Christian values and institutions” (Ibid., 208). The three campaigns were tied together by the belief that a godless society was on the rise and something needed to be done about it (Ibid., 208). The fact that all three campaigns were successful helped to raise the status of evangelicals as a strong political force that could bring about change.

The political successes of grassroots evangelicalism did not go unnoticed by what Wald and Calhoun-Brown call “secular conservative activists” (209). These conservative activists attempted to capitalize on the political energy, enthusiasm, and success displayed by the evangelical movement in order to restore the Republican Party which had faced consecutive

defeats in the 1974 midterm elections and the 1976 presidential elections (Ibid.). According to Wald and Calhoun-Brown, the secular conservative activists wanted to transfer the evangelical enthusiasm from a local political arena to the national arena. The activists encouraged evangelical political figures who were the most vocal leaders to make an attack on “big government” as standing in the way of traditional moral, religious, and economic values (Ibid.).

Into the 1980s: Evangelical Political Mobilization on a National Scale

The Moral Majority was founded in 1979 by television evangelist Jerry Falwell and was concentrated mostly in the southeastern United States (Wald and Calhoun-Brown 2011, 209). Falwell was one of the main driving forces in the Dade County, FL gay rights ordinance ban and was seen as a natural, strong vocal leader of the conservative Christian cause (Ramet 2005). The Moral Majority’s success was centered on direct-mail fundraising and campaigning and Falwell was able to gain most of the names and addresses for direct-mail contacts from Southern Baptist church registries (Ibid.). The main message of the Moral Majority echoed the message of the earlier local protests in both West Virginia and Dade County, Florida and as a result evangelical Christians were quick to open their checkbooks in support of political figures who were willing to stand up for traditional moral and religious values.

In 1980, evangelical Protestants, with the leadership of Jerry Falwell and the Moral Majority, united around the candidacy of Ronald Reagan for president (Wald and Calhoun-Brown 2011, 211). Reagan embraced the political efforts of the conservative evangelical leaders and vowed to work for enactment of their agenda. The Republican Party began to stake out a clearly conservative ground on cultural issues and evangelicals and religious conservatives responded enthusiastically (Layman and Hussey 2007). For example, Republicans modified their

party's platform and called for a constitutional amendment to ban abortion and to legalize prayer in public schools as a way to fully engage with evangelical leaders and voters (Ibid., 212). Leaders of the Republican Party granted considerable symbolic recognition to the emerging evangelical leaders by featuring them prominently at the Republican National Convention in 1980, which gave evangelical leaders the impression that they had a true place at the table in politics (Ibid.).

Since the 1980 presidential election of Ronald Reagan, evangelical Christians have been an extremely reliable and loyal voting bloc of the Republican Party. For example, in the 2004 presidential election evangelicals made up "39.8 percent of the GOP electoral coalition, and a full 77.5 percent of evangelicals voted for George W. Bush" (Guth et al. 2006, 228). These numbers indicate a reliable and steady coalition for Republicans.

Evangelical Democrats: Young vs. Old Evangelicals

Since around 2004, scholars and the media have been noticing a trend among evangelical youth (age 18-30) – namely the rise of the young evangelical Democrat (Kirkpatrick 2007; Smith and Johnson 2010). These evangelical youth have become increasingly more interested in seeing their church move beyond controversial issues like gay marriage and abortion and instead would like to see their church and their political leaders moving towards a focus on issues such as reducing poverty and securing environmental sustainability (Goodstein 2007; Kirkpatrick 2007; Banerjee 2008). The older generation of evangelical pastors and the traditional voice of the evangelical cause are dying off or losing steam and a younger generation of leaders are taking their place with a new perspective about what the evangelical platform's focus should be (Goodstein 2007; Kirkpatrick 2007; Luo and Goodstein 2007). The new

generation is weary of the Republican Party, and as a consequence it is alleged that their allegiance to the Republican Party is not as cozy as it has been in years past (Goodstein 2007; Kirkpatrick 2007).

Some scholars and journalists have noted that these evangelical youth became disenchanted during George W. Bush's presidency (Goodstein 2007; Kirkpatrick 2007). Bush targeted evangelicals on issues of traditional morality and family values while at the same time evangelical youth were becoming increasingly more interested in seeing their church move towards a greater focus on social justice issues such as a reduction of poverty and a focus on environmental sustainability (Goodstein 2007; Kirkpatrick 2007; Wehner 2007; Banerjee 2008). It is likely that Senator Barack Obama's campaign team was well aware of this shift occurring among evangelical youth which is why in 2008 his team created the grass roots project, the Joshua Generation, to try and seize the evangelical youth vote as a way to win the election.

It turns out that the Obama campaign's targeting of the evangelical youth vote in 2008 was actually successful. The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life held a conference on December 8, 2008 that was titled, "A Post-Election Look at Religious Voters in the 2008 Election" and nearly all panelists unanimously agreed that Obama did very well among evangelical youth voters. As already stated in this paper, John Green, a Senior Fellow in Religion and American Politics at the Pew Forum on Religion and Public life noted that Obama was able to gain approximately 3 percentage points more of the evangelical vote than John Kerry had in 2004 (24% to 21%) and it is highly likely that this 3 percent shift was due to evangelical youth (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2008, 10). Corwin Smidt notes that if the Democratic Party can "slice off 3 or 4 percent of all evangelical voters from supporting the Republican

candidate, this would provide an overall shift in vote totals of about 2 percent which could be the difference between victory or defeat in a close election” (2008, 25).

The data from the 2008 election seem to suggest there might be a shift or schism of some kind occurring in a once loyal evangelical voting bloc. If the schism in the evangelical voting bloc among evangelical youth is indeed occurring, this could shake up traditional partisan politics and potentially force both the Republican Party and the Democratic Party to rethink their election campaign rhetoric, their platform positions on important issues and their voter mobilization strategies. This shift within evangelical Christianity could have a great impact on politics, especially for the Republican Party. For more than 20 years, evangelical Christians have been an extremely reliable and loyal voting bloc of the Republican Party. If younger generations of evangelicals start to shift their policy preferences to include an increased concern for social justice issues like poverty and environmentalism, it is possible that a new alignment of partisan loyalties could take place and both the Republican and Democratic Parties could shift their campaign messages to appeal to this changing voting bloc.

To date, there appears to only be two empirical articles that have tried to measure this generational shift for policy preferences among evangelical youth. Smith and Johnson found that evangelical youth are indeed significantly more likely than older evangelicals to think that more should be done to protect the environment, however on issues such as same-sex marriage, abortion, and the war in Iraq, evangelical youth are in line with the conservative stance of older evangelicals (2010, 357). Farrell focused his analysis on young evangelical attitudes towards same-sex marriage, premarital sex, cohabitation, and pornography and found that evangelical youth are only slightly more liberal in attitudes towards these issues than older evangelicals (2011, 530). Farrell did not address whether or not young evangelicals are becoming more liberal

on social justice issues, which is what media speculation hints at. These two articles show that there is still a tremendous gap in scholarly literature and analysis examining the changing policy preferences of evangelical youth, especially with regards to policy preferences on social justice issues.

Although there have only been two empirical articles to date examining the generational schism among evangelical voters, other scholars have also noticed this trend even though they have not done empirical studies to back up their claims. Wilcox and Robinson note the increased visibility of young pastors at theologically conservative mega-churches, such as Rick Warren and Joel Hunter, who are expressing concern for the environment, AIDS, and global poverty from the pulpit (2011, 5). Both of these pastors continue to remain opposed to same sex marriage and are also pro-life, which allows them to keep their credence with the evangelical community while also working to broaden the political agenda of the evangelical movement and perhaps even move it outside of Republican Party politics (Ibid., 6). Wilcox and Robinson note that young evangelicals in particular appear to be open to this new message of politics from the pulpit and they are expressing far more concern for the environment, health care, and poverty than their parents ever did. Large portions of this new evangelical agenda and its partisan style of politics are increasingly becoming more appealing to the next generation of evangelicals (Ibid., 7).

Putnam and Campbell have also done research on what they consider to be a political generation gap among religious voters that is leading to a partisan shift. They argue that the partisan shift is due to “generational replacement” in which “an older generation of voters whose partisan allegiances reflect the coalitions of a previous political era die off and are replaced by political newcomers who come of age in a period of new political alliances” (2010, 377). Putnam

and Campbell say that this generation gap is greatest among voters under 35 when compared to voters over 65 (378). This argument makes sense in light of the shift within the evangelical community where older leaders of a different political era are dying off and losing steam and are being replaced by younger leaders of a new political era, such as Rick Warren and Joel Hunter. The political era of the 1980s was ripe with issues such as women's rights, abortion, and embryonic stem cell research. Although these issues are still politicized today, other issues have also become important such as environmentalism, poverty, and AIDS (Wilcox and Robinson 2011, 11). It is these new political issues that seem to be enticing a new generation of evangelical voters to become politicized.

Hypotheses

My hypotheses are based on media speculation that this shift in generational preferences among younger evangelicals has been occurring since 2004 (Kirkpatrick 2007; Goodstein 2007). My hypotheses are also based on media speculation that in 2008 in particular, young evangelicals voted in high numbers for Democrats (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2008, 10). As such, I am most interested in looking at time series data comparing multiple years to see if these shifts are indeed occurring over time. Ideally, I plan to look at data collected before 2004, during 2004, and after 2004 to see if the shift is occurring. Since media speculation points to the idea that younger evangelicals are becoming increasingly more interested in social justice issues such as poverty and environmentalism, my hypotheses are situated around those topics (Kirkpatrick 2007; Luo and Goodstein 2007; Banerjee 2008).

Therefore, first, I hypothesize that in comparing survey data from the year 2000 through 2012, younger evangelicals (between 18 and 30 years old) will show increased self-

identification as Democrats. Second, I hypothesize that in comparing survey data from the year 2000 through 2012, younger evangelicals (between 18 and 30 years old) are becoming increasingly more likely to support pro-environmental policies and anti-poverty policies. Third, I hypothesize that due to increased support of pro-environmental policies and anti-poverty policies, a comparison of survey data from the year 2000 through 2012 will show that younger evangelicals (between 18 and 30 years old) are becoming increasingly more likely to self-identify as Democrat.

METHODOLOGY

To test my hypotheses, I ideally needed to find a data set that was replicated in multiple years so that I could show a trend over time in the political party affiliation of evangelicals between the ages of 18 and 30 years old, and so I could also show a trend over time in the policy preferences for pro-environmental policies and anti-poverty policies of evangelicals between the ages of 18 and 30 years old. To do this I chose the General Social Survey (GSS) which is a survey produced by the National Opinion Research Center as part of the University of Chicago, and funded by the Sociology Program of the National Science Foundation. Since the GSS is conducted every other year, I decided to look at GSS data from 2000, 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010 and 2012. Ideally, I want to show a trend in political party affiliation and in environmental and poverty policy preferences of 18 to 30 year old evangelicals prior to 2004, through 2004, and after 2004.

To begin this study, I first had to accurately identify the population of evangelicals within the GSS data. Evangelicals are hard to identify in social surveys and there are conflicts between scholars as to the most reliable method to use in identifying evangelicals. Some scholars

feel that evangelical self-identification in social surveys is the most reliable method (Lewis, DeBernardo 2010). Other scholars feel that the best method to identify evangelicals in social surveys is to look at measures of biblical literalism, born again experiences, and frequency of church attendance (Hackett, Lindsay 2008). Finally, other scholars feel that the best method to identify evangelicals is to look at denominational affiliation, which is the measure I borrow for this study (Steensland et al., 2000). Steensland et al. (2000) developed a method for recoding the DENOM variable in the GSS into a new variable they label RELTRAD (religious tradition) which sorts individuals into categories of religious groups (e.g. Jewish, Catholic, Mainline Protestant, Evangelical Protestant, Fundamentalist) based on denominational affiliation (name of church/place of worship). Steensland et al. (2000) published their SPSS code to recode DENOM into RELTRAD specifically for the GSS, and I use this code in this paper to accurately identify evangelicals as my population. I then recoded the AGE variable in the GSS into three nominal categories, 18 to 30, 31 to 54, and 55+ which became my independent variables for the population of evangelicals.

My first dependent variable for this paper is political party affiliation (PARTYID). This variable was originally coded as: 0=strong Democrat, 1=not strong Democrat, 2=independent near Democrat, 3=independent, 4=independent near Republican, 5=not strong Republican, 6= Republican, 7=other party. I recoded this variable into Democrat (0 through 2), independent (3), and Republican (4 through 6) and labeled everything else system missing.

The second dependent variable for this paper is NATENVIR which asks, “are we spending too much, too little, or about the right amount on improving the environment” (Smith et al., 2013)? This question was asked in the exact same format across all seven years of GSS data that I am looking at. The third dependent variable for this paper is NATFAREY which asks,

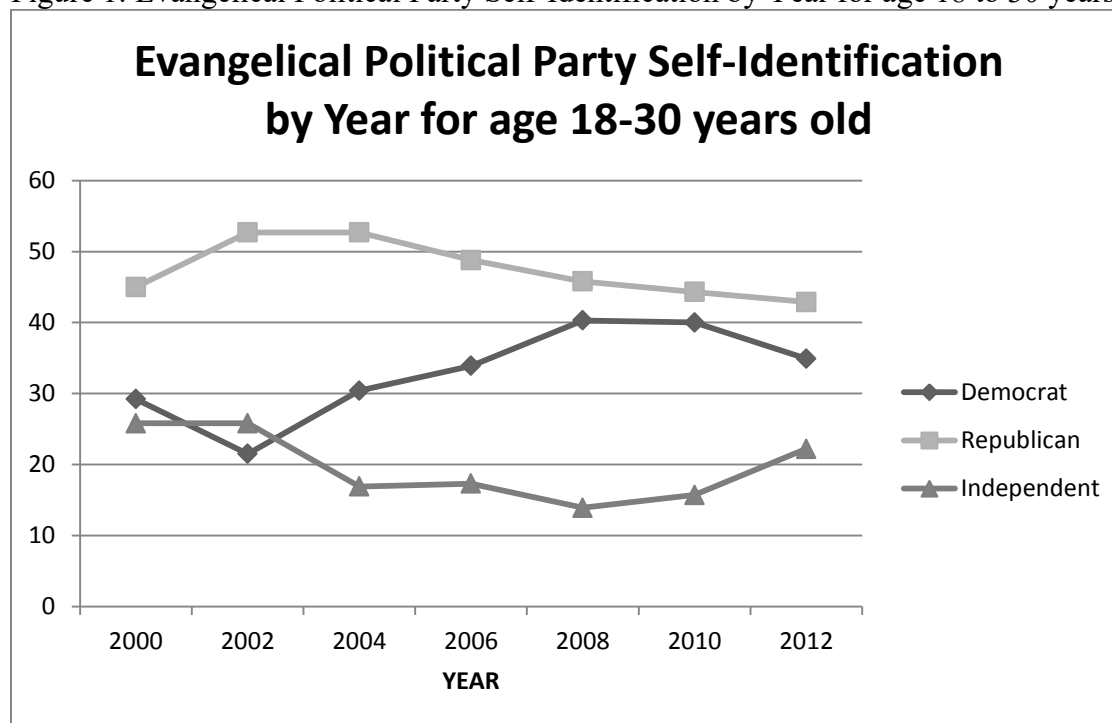
“are we spending too much, too little, or about the right amount on assistance for the poor” (Ibid.)? Again, this variable was asked in the exact same format across all seven years of GSS data that I am looking at which makes analysis consistent.

The statistical test I chose to run for this paper is a cross-tabulation since a cross-tabulation can show the distribution of cases across the values of a dependent variable for cases that have different values on an independent variable. I plan to run the same set of statistical tests for all 7 years (2000, 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012) of the GSS and compare the results for each year.

Results

My first hypothesis was that in comparing survey data from the year 2000 through 2012, younger evangelicals (between 18 and 30 years old) will show increased self-identification as Democrats. The results of this test are in Figure 1 below. As predicted, party identification as Democrat for 18 to 30 year old evangelicals has shown an *increase* over time. Specifically, between the years 2002 and 2008, self-identification as Democrat by young evangelicals (18 to 30 years old) increased by nearly 20 percent (2002 = 21.5%, 2008 = 40.3%). Additionally, self-identification as Republican showed a nearly 10 percent decrease between the years 2002 and 2012 (2002 = 52.7%, 2012 = 42.9%). Figure 1 does show that party-identification over time as Republican is higher than party-identification over time as Democrat for 18 to 30 year old evangelicals, however the 20 percent increase in identification as Democrat between 2002 and 2008 seems to be of particular interest.

Figure 1: Evangelical Political Party Self-Identification by Year for age 18 to 30 years old

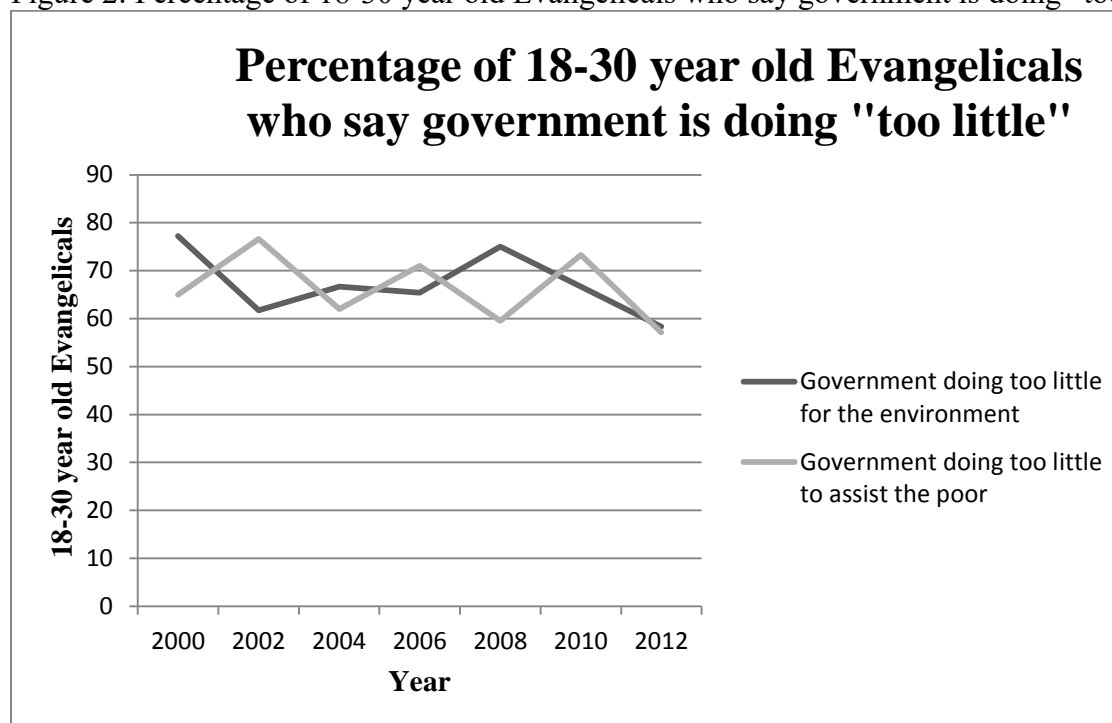


Source: General Social Survey.

My second hypothesis was that in comparing survey data from the year 2000 through 2012, younger evangelicals (between 18 and 30 years old) are becoming increasingly more likely to support pro-environmental policies and anti-poverty policies. The results of this test are in Figure 2 below. I measured “support” as individuals who answered the question “are we spending too much, too little, or about the right amount on assistance for the poor / improving the environment” as with the response of “too little.” A response of “too little” to this question would indicate that an individual is supportive of *increasing* spending on assistance to the poor and *increasing* spending on improving the environment which also would seem to indicate that the individual would support pro-environmental and anti-poverty policies. For the test of percentage of support for increased spending on improving the environment among 18 to 30 year old evangelicals, there was a 14 percent increase in support between 2002 and 2008 (2002 =

61.7%, 2008 = 75%). This seems to support the media speculation that starting around 2004, 18 to 30 year old evangelicals began to show an increased concern for the environment. For the test of percentage of support for increased spending on assistance to the poor, the percentages fluctuated each year between a low of 59.5% (2008) to a high of 76.6% (2002). Interestingly, from 2004 to 2006, percentage of support increased by nearly 10 percent (2004 = 62%, 2006 = 71%), but between 2006 and 2008 the percentage of support decreased again by almost 12 percent (2006 = 71%, 2008 = 59.5%).

Figure 2: Percentage of 18-30 year old Evangelicals who say government is doing “too little”



Source: General Social Survey.

My third hypothesis was that due to increased support of pro-environmental policies and anti-poverty policies, a comparison of survey data from the year 2000 through 2012 will show that younger evangelicals (between 18 and 30 years old) are becoming increasingly more likely to self-identify as Democrat. In this cross-tabulation I looked at the percentage of 18 to 30

year olds who self-identify as Democrat and controlled for support for environmental policies in one test and controlled for support for assistance to the poor in the other test to see if these policy preferences had any significant impact on the percentage of self-identification as Democrat. The numeric results and percentages of statistical significance are in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Percentage of 18 to 30 year old evangelical Democrats who say we are doing “too little”

	2000	2002	2004	2006	2008	2010	2012
% Dem who support environmental policies	27.9 *	24.1 **	36.5 **	35.3	34.8 *	53.3	40.0
	N=191	N=173	N=195	N=186	N=131	N=128	N=130
% Dem who support anti-poverty policies	36.8	20.6 **	46.5	40.9 *	75.0	42.4 *	37.5
	N=169	N=190	N=188	N=208	N=127	N=149	N=129

Source: General Social Survey

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Of particular interest to note is that between 2002 and 2004, the percentage of 18 to 30 year old evangelicals who showed support for environmental policies and who also self-identified as Democrats increased by nearly 12 percent (2002 = 24.1%, 2004 = 36.5%). This supports media speculation that starting around the year 2004, young evangelicals (18 to 30 years old) began to show greater concern for the environment. This data also supports my findings for hypothesis one, shown in Figure 1, which indicates that between 2002 and 2004, young evangelical self-identification as Democrat increased by nearly 10 percent (2002 = 21.5%, 2004 = 30.4%). Of additional interest to note is that between 2002 and 2006, the percentage of 18 to 30 year old evangelicals who showed support for anti-poverty policies and who also self-identified as Democrats increased by nearly 20 percent (2002 = 20.6%, 2006 = 40.9%). This again seems to support media speculation that starting around the year 2004, young evangelicals (18 to 30 years old) began to show greater concern for policies that would provide assistance to the poor. This data also supports my findings for hypothesis one, shown in Figure 1, which

indicates that between 2002 and 2006, young evangelical self-identification as Democrat increased by nearly 12 percent (2002 = 21.5%, 2006 = 33.9%). In 2008, the percentage of 18 to 30 year old evangelicals who showed support for anti-poverty policies and who also self-identified as Democrats increased to nearly 75%, however data for this year did not show statistical significance.

CONCLUSION

This paper is part of a larger master's thesis project which will also be looking at other generations of evangelicals (age 31 to 54, and 55+) to see if similar trends are taking place in partisan affiliation and in policy preference. This paper showed that a trend in increased identification as Democrat is indeed taking place among 18 to 30 year old evangelicals. This paper also showed that a trend in increased support for environmental policies and anti-poverty policies has had an impact on increased self-identification as Democrat among 18 to 30 year old evangelicals. Both of these findings support the media speculation that a change in young evangelicals began to occur in 2004 as a reaction against the policies and presidency of George W. Bush.

One confound of the study in this paper is that the data only shows trends in partisan affiliation and in policy preferences but did not test for whether or not these individuals actually voted in the election years that the data was gathered. Future research might take this into consideration. Future researchers might also take into consideration other control variables and demographic data such as gender, income level, level of education, and region of residence to see if any of these variables show significance.

It appears that Senator Obama's "full-throttle push for centrist evangelicals" in the 2008 presidential election and his creation of the grass-roots project called the Joshua Generation to specifically target evangelical youth was a wise strategy. Whether or not this trend in increased partisan affiliation as Democrat by young evangelicals will continue remains to be seen, however if future Democratic candidates can seize upon the strategies utilized by President Obama's campaign team, we might see a minor shake up in a once reliable evangelical Republican voting bloc.

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