

Walking Backwards Down the Stairs Trying to Get Higher:

Evangelical Christians and Election 2016

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Even before all the votes for Election 2016 were counted, political pundits were seeking to explain the meaning of the outcome. Given that exit polls showed 4 out of 5 white evangelicals voting for Donald J. Trump, the white evangelical vote was singled out by many as Trump's margin of victory. In a campaign dominated by two historically unpopular and untrusted candidates, white evangelicals find themselves being credited with voting in large enough numbers to deliver the victory for Trump.

Since much was made of Trump's campaign rhetoric criticising Muslims and *Black Lives Matter*, his promise to deport undocumented immigrants and his vulgar talk about women, the evangelical vote is under a microscope as political scientists try to make sense of who we are. More specifically, many cultural critics are asking if there is anything Christian about us. While it is true that almost 80 percent of those who voted did so for Donald Trump, there are a number of reasons to reserve judgment on the impact that evangelicals had on this election, even as we try to understand who we are politically in the days to come.

It will take months for scholars to weigh all of the exit poll data and determine the most statistically significant factors in Trump's surprising victory. While every vote cast in an election has equal weight, not all votes have equal significance. Because of the peculiar American invention called the 'Electoral College', students of American Presidential elections focus on the outcome of several 'swing' states when seeking to understand winners and losers in a Presidential election. In this election, Donald J. Trump's wins in the swing states of Pennsylvania, Ohio, Wisconsin and Michigan provided his margin of success in winning the Presidency.

Given that Trump's margins in each of these states, except Ohio, was very slim (under 60,000 votes in total), virtually any or every demographic group of voters in these states could claim to be the margin of victory or defeat. For instance, if black voters in all three states had turned out to vote for Hillary Clinton in the same numbers they voted for Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton would now be President. So while there are important questions to be asked concerning the motivations of those who voted (or didn't), a case can be made that in all three of these states a more complex 'religious' demographic can be credited with supplying the margin of victory - white, working class Catholics.

The significance of the 'blue-collar' Catholic voting bloc has been well known to astute campaigners for decades. Historically, blue-collar Catholics formed one of the foundations of the modern Democratic Party and delivered the Presidency to John F. Kennedy in 1960. This coalition kept the country solidly blue until the election of Ronald Reagan. The only exception to this was the presidency of Richard Nixon, and that was due to the defection of southern white voters, which the Democratic Party astutely replaced with urban voters. Ronald Reagan won two terms as president largely because blue collar Catholics walked across the aisle and cast their votes for him. Reagan won this group twice and scholars bequeathed to them the name 'Reagan Democrats'. What makes this voting bloc so significant is that it is willing to alter its party allegiance. Most voters stay with one party for their entire lives, and their way of protesting a candidate is not to vote at all, as opposed to voting for the 'other' party. Hence, it is not surprising that white

evangelicals voted for Trump. What will be interesting will be to see whom their sons, daughters and grandchildren vote for in the years to come.

Bill Clinton and his campaign worked hard to bring the Reagan Democrats back to the Democratic Party and they came back in large enough margins to help Clinton win the White House twice. Moreover, they have largely stayed with the Democratic Party until this election. If evangelicals wish to take credit for victories in Republican Presidential elections, it is not Ronald Reagan or Donald J. Trump for whom they deserve credit, but rather George W. Bush. Bush's campaign strategist Karl Rove worked tirelessly to get evangelicals to vote in sufficient numbers to win the White House in 2000 and 2004. But as white evangelicalism's share of the total population has been in decline, so too has their electoral power waned. Indeed, President Barack Obama was able to put together winning electoral coalitions twice without statistically significant 'defections' of white evangelicals to him.

Certainly, white evangelical turnout is a storyline in the 2016 Presidential election, but it did not provide Donald J. Trump the margin he needed to win the presidency. For this credit goes to the voting bloc of white, blue-collar, largely Catholic voters who came out and voted for Trump in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Wisconsin and Michigan. This was readily apparent on election night to many Democrats who immediately began speaking about how they had lost this group of voters who had historically been part of their electoral base.

There will be scholars who are critical of my analysis as making 'too much' of the Catholic faith of this voting bloc. They can persuasively argue that the Catholicism of these voters was not the motivating factor in their decision to vote for Trump, but rather their economic circumstances. I agree with this point whole-heartedly. When more extensive interviews are done with 2016 voters and the data is analysed, I believe that religion will not be a very significant factor in what drove people to vote for or against Donald J. Trump and Hillary Clinton. Instead, I believe economics was a primary motivation in how people voted in this election, with every other variable, especially religion, of lesser significance. For example, immigration was an important issue in this campaign, but I believe the concern about immigration is largely rooted in the economic concerns of a large influx of 'cheap' labour that depressed wages. This dynamic also undermines the viability of labour unions due to the alternative that inexpensive immigrant labour gives to union-shop owners, i.e. a business owner whose employees are union members.

In saying this, I do not deny that there is a racist and/or bigoted dimension to the immigration issue; I am merely saying that the racist dimension is secondary to the economic dimension. I am not persuaded that the votes cast by either Catholic or evangelical voters was primarily about religion or 'race', but rather about economics and related concerns. For example, since the blue-collar Catholics who voted for Trump voted twice for Obama, I don't find a white-racist narrative plausible in interpreting Trump's triumph.

Moreover, insofar as religion was a factor in the outcome of this campaign, the swing-voting bloc of Catholics deserves much more attention than evangelicals. The present media narrative that credits evangelicals with Trump's victory does a disservice to the role that Catholic voters played, and feeds a growing 'shame' narrative about evangelicals in America. Some in the media are quick to paint evangelicals as cultural scapegoats, while being reluctant to cast Catholic demographics in a similar light. This is due to a very simplistic reading of 'Red' and 'Blue' states and sweeping judgements about the character of voters in these states. e.g. The 'Bible Belt' is composed of Red

states and therefore the Bible must be a Red State playbook. However, it wasn't that long ago that, politically speaking, that the Bible Belt was Blue State territory and brought victory to Bill Clinton.

There is, however, another storyline concerning American evangelicals that is more significant than any 'blame' game currently surrounding the election of Donald J. Trump, and that is the precipitous decline of evangelicalism in America. If my thesis is wrong and if evangelicals were primarily responsible for the election of Donald J. Trump, then it is extremely unlikely this will happen again. By many different measurers, Christianity in America is in steep decline, especially among what David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons call the 'Next Generation' of evangelicals. Unless there is another 'Great Awakening', virtually every statistical measure of religious vitality (attendance, financial giving, etc.) shows evangelicalism is on a trajectory to becoming a minority religion in the USA within a generation. As the older evangelicals die off, there are fewer children and converts to take their place. This is important to keep in mind when seeking to interpret the results of Election 2016. It's difficult to reconcile the statistics that are coming weekly from Barna and Pew about the decline of Christianity in America with the argument that evangelicals made the decisive difference in the election of Donald J. Trump. In the unlikely event they did, that party is over.

It is increasingly obvious that religious faith is now optional in American Politics. Barack Obama is the first post-Christian president. In saying this I am not making a judgment concerning his personal faith. Rather, it is an admission that one no longer needs to be Christian to win the Presidency, nor is it necessary to speak to Christianity as president. America is now a generically religious nation. Some may question such an assertion by pointing out that Vice-President Mike Pence is seen as a man of sincere Christian faith. I agree, but at the same time I don't believe Pence's presence on the Republican ticket was a decisive factor. Indeed, had Pence's religious beliefs become a prominent consideration, Trump may not have won the blue-collar Catholic vote. Blue-collar Catholics and evangelicals don't tend to exchange Christmas cards or other pleasantries with each other. Indeed, they tend to view each other with suspicion. Hence, I believe that 2016 was our third straight post-Christian Presidential election. I'm not saying that people of faith didn't turn out to vote in this election, but I believe they were as deeply conflicted about the two major party candidates as were virtually all Americans. The voting public was presented with two candidates whose negative ratings were at an all-time high for presidential election. I believe a lot of Christians, just like a lot of other Americans, wished they could go into the polling place with a paper bag over their heads so that no one could implicate them as complicit in the results. I believe a lot of Christians wanted to vote in connection with their faith, but they honestly couldn't figure out how to connect it with the choices on offer. Even evangelical leaders who came out in support of Trump had to do intellectual and theological gymnastics to make their case. For them and many others, Election 2016 was like 'walking backwards down the stairs trying to get higher' (as Larry Norman famously sang).

For evangelicals, what does it look like to reposition ourselves so that we can climb back out of the basement and into the future? What can we do to escape the shame many of us felt when voting, along with the on-going scorn of our culture?

I have one modest proposal. If the 'American Dream' is a nation in which our children are better off than their parents, it is clear that the American dream has died. The Millennials know this. One cannot look at our national debt, our personal debt, the upcoming social security deficit hit as well as our trade deficit and conclude that the next generation will

be wealthier than the Boomers. The American Dream is over, and I would argue that this realisation is the primary reason Bernie Sanders almost won and Donald Trump did.

What is needed is a new dream, and the scripture gives us the wherewithal to dream this dream. Our happiness was never ultimately related to our standard of living, but is rather directly related to our quality of life, and in particular the quality of our relationships. We do not have to be wealthier to be fulfilled, rather we need for us all to have our material needs met, and then to devote ourselves to rediscovering what it means to love the lord our God with all of our mind, heart and soul, and love our neighbour as ourselves. This is no platitude but rather a blueprint for constructing the good life. We live in a nation where happiness came to be known as getting rich and living independently. What is apparent is that this is not working. A large swathe of our population does not have the opportunity to participate in work that is satisfying or that makes the best use of their training and experience, and we are losing hope that we can find fulfillment in relationships of any kind. The quality of life is directly related to the quality of our relationships. American needs a relational renaissance now more than ever.

The problem is that our political leaders do not know how to solve these problems. I am increasingly persuaded that the narrative guiding each political party is broken. Even if they got in power and had it completely, they wouldn't know how to solve the problems with which we are faced. Materialism and Individualism have driven the American Dream to a dead end. When other nations quit buying our debt, the depth of our predicament will become more apparent. The good news is that there is a way out of here, and it can be found in scripture: not in a simplistic reading of scripture as platitudes, but in an in-depth study of what it means to live well. For example, I believe it is time to proclaim the Old Testament concept of Jubilee in America. It is time for debt forgiveness, giving the next generation a fresh start rather than being saddled with the debt of their parents. It is time to treat the alien with dignity and respect. It is time to establish healthy relational boundaries.

And it is not just an Old Testament concept. Jesus thought it was a good idea as well.

How does this apply to the 21st century? That is the work before us; but it is time to do that work. There is no indication that the 21st century can work without it. I believe it is our only hope to finding an alternative to the present electoral dilemma in which we are walking backward down the stairs.

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