

## WW(W)ED? The Evangelical Question in 2016

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With [polls narrowing](#) and world watching, the unlikely specter approaches our doorstep: Donald J. Trump, President of the United States.

For the unthinkable to become reality, white evangelicals will have to put aside their misgivings and turn out to vote for Mr. Trump in numbers that match or exceed [recent patterns](#) of Republican Party support. Thus, the pressing question:

What Will (White) Evangelicals Do?

We already know what many evangelicals will do. Most white evangelicals will [hold their nose](#) and [vote for Trump](#). You can think of these evangelicals as constituting three types: Heritage Christians, Culture War Christians, and Partisan Christians.

Heritage Christians are [not particularly religious](#) yet continue to view America as a white Christian nation in which they should be privileged occupants. Heritage Christians were [early Trump supporters](#); they will not hold their noses while voting for Mr. Trump.

Culture War Christians are deeply religious and steadfastly conservative on hot-button issues surrounding [abortion and human sexuality](#). These are “single-issue” voters who may strongly dislike Mr. Trump yet vote for him anyway in hopes of tilting the Supreme Court in a more “pro-life” direction.

For Partisan Christians, the Democratic Party itself has become anathema, representing all the forces of secular liberalism against which conservative evangelicals have fought for much of the past century. The idea of voting Democrat is [inconceivable to this group](#)—particularly in an election year featuring a Clinton.

We also know what most black, Hispanic, Asian-American, and white progressive evangelicals will do. This group supports Hillary Clinton to the [same degree](#) that white evangelicals support Mr. Trump. They have been [consistent and vocal opponents](#) of Mr. Trump’s candidacy from the very beginning.

So what about the rest? What will the larger-than-typical proportion of [undecided evangelical pastors](#) and [others](#) do on election day, and those religiously serious evangelicals who support progressive racial, economic, and environmental social policy interventions whilst remaining strongly opposed to abortion under most circumstances?

There are more of these types of evangelicals than you think. Political scientist John Green calls some of them “[populist evangelicals](#)”; they constitute roughly 35 percent of the American evangelical population. Others are “[cosmopolitan](#)” or “*Christianity Today* evangelicals” after the flagship evangelical periodical. [Russell Moore](#) and [R. Albert Mohler Jr.](#) belong to this group; they have also been vocal Trump opponents from the beginning.

Many [younger evangelicals](#) fall into this category as well. They have long since rejected the fiery brand of old-guard Christian Right politics represented by the Jerry Falwells and James Dobsons of the world. However, they remain deeply conflicted about how to reconcile political convictions that cut across the liberal-conservative divide.

Voting for this group is an agonizing experience, replete with ethical contradictions, impossible choices, and challenges to personal religious identity. “I felt manipulated ... like I would be sinning if I voted for someone else,” a young evangelical woman [told me](#) after casting a vote for George W. Bush in 2004, “I actually cried when I left the voting booth, because I was *so* conflicted.”

What will *these* evangelicals do in 2016?

As a scholar of American evangelicalism who grew up among them, it has been stunning to watch Mr. Trump violate nearly every sacred tenet of conservative evangelical political conscience with impunity. In the 1990s, conservative evangelicals gravely [warned the nation](#) that the [honesty](#) and personal moral character of political leaders could not be separated from their capacity to govern; today white evangelicals [suddenly care less](#) about politicians’ character than does the [average American](#).

Conservative evangelicals call on political leaders to support “[family values](#)”; thrice-married Trump [demeans women](#) and brags about his sexual conquests. Conservative evangelicals champion the spread of democracy around the globe; Mr. Trump invites foreign actors to intervene on his behalf in an American democratic presidential election. Conservative evangelicals vigorously uphold religious freedom; Mr. Trump suggests banning all members of a major world religion from our shores.

*Christianity Today* [recently claimed](#) that “racial justice and reconciliation are now core for the movement.” [Mainstream evangelical leaders and institutions](#) have joined Hispanic and Latinx advocates of comprehensive [immigration reform](#). For these evangelicals, the 2016 election might be seen as something of a political truth serum. It is difficult to imagine evangelicals of this type casting votes for Mr. Trump without seriously damaging their credibility on matters of racial equality, human dignity, and transnational human rights.

What will undecided white evangelical voters do in 2016? It might be the difference between two starkly different futures for America and the world.

*Wes Markofski is a sociologist at Carleton College and author of the book “New Monasticism and the Transformation of American Evangelicalism.”*