

# The Christian Right Thesis: Explaining Longitudinal Change in Participation among Evangelical Christians

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*Many attribute George W. Bush's strong campaign performance to Republican efforts to increase turnout among evangelical Protestants by stressing issues that focus on "moral values." However, most scholarly studies either focus on demonstrating that moral issues affected vote choice in recent elections or they focus on documenting longitudinal changes in party loyalty or political attitudes among Evangelicals. Our task is to add to this literature by examining long-term trends in participation among Evangelicals and comparing those trends to trends among other major religious denominations. We find that, contrary to conventional wisdom, the increase in Evangelical turnout appears to have been driven by social and demographic changes among Evangelicals rather than by a political strategy. In fact, controlling for social and demographic changes, we find more impressive turnout gains among other groups, such as black Protestants and the nonreligious.*

"In dozens of interviews since the election, grass-roots activists in Ohio, Michigan and Florida credited President Bush's chief political adviser, Karl Rove, with setting a clear goal that became a mantra among conservatives: To win, Bush had to draw 4 million more Evangelicals to the polls than he did in 2000."

—Alan Cooperman and Thomas B. Edsall,  
*Washington Post*, 11/8/04

"Mr. Rove's relentless focus on turning out more Republican voters, many of them evangelical Christians, was the critical factor in Mr. Bush's victory, Republicans said."

—Elisabeth Bumiller, David M. Halbfinger and David E. Rosenbaum, *New York Times*, 11/4/04

Following the 2004 presidential election, numerous media sources were quick to conclude that President Bush's narrow victory was, in part, attributable to a dramatic increase in turnout among voters that identified with the Christian Right. However, systematic attempts to assess longitudinal change in participation rates among religious groups have not been forthcoming. Hence a major part of the conventional wisdom about why the Bush campaign was so successful remains largely unexplored. Instead, the scholarly postmortem of the 2004 presidential elec-

tion has focused primarily on whether the election turned on moral issues, such as gay marriage (see, for example, Abramowitz 2004; Burden 2004; Campbell and Monson 2007; Hillygus 2007; Hillygus and Shields 2005; Langer and Cohen 2005; Lewis 2005; Smith, DeSantis, and Kassel 2005). These studies are part of a larger literature that addresses longitudinal changes among religious groups in vote choice, party identification, and issue divisions (Brooks 2002; Brooks and Manza 1997, 2004; Bolce and de Maio 1999a, 1999b; Davis and Robinson 1996; Hunter 1991; Knuckey 2005; Layman 1997; Layman 2001; Layman and Hussey 2007; Manza and Brooks 1997; Sims 1996; Wuthnow 1989). Clearly, value voting and greater Republican loyalty among Evangelicals contributed to Bush's success in what appeared to be a pattern of increasing Republican electoral strength. The current literature, however, leaves basic questions unanswered about whether these value voters were at the polls because of the campaign or if they would have cast ballots in any case. Thus our study addresses an understudied aspect of the Christian Right Thesis—whether a part of increasing Republican electoral success is due to having mobilized

Evangelicals that would not have participated otherwise.<sup>1</sup>

Our task is to add to scholarly understanding of the ways in which religious groups affect the dynamics of national elections by examining their long-term trends in participation. To date, a conventional wisdom that credits changes in turnout among Evangelicals with some portion of Bush's electoral success has survived on little more than journalists' comments about "high" Evangelical turnout. And even some journalists have expressed concern over whether claims of a major Evangelical mobilization are rooted in sound evidence. In the wake of the 2004 election, and much ado about greater Evangelical turnout, Thomas Edsall noted in the *Washington Post*, "Exit polls do not permit a direct comparison of how many evangelical and born-again Americans voted in 2000 and 2004 because the way pollsters identified these voters changed" (November 8, 2004).

In short, a more systematic effort to understand longitudinal change in participation among members of different religious groups is needed. For example, "high" turnout implies a comparison to past turnout, but Evangelical turnout in 2000 and 2004 has yet to be compared to Evangelical turnout in previous elections in a systematic way. "High" turnout also implies a comparison to turnout among members of other religious groups, and again these comparisons have yet to be made. After all, high turnout among Evangelicals could simply reflect the greater political engagement of religious persons and not a unique response to Bush's campaign. In order to provide a more systematic study of the conventional wisdom we test the thesis that longitudinal changes in turnout among Evangelicals were unique relative to other religious groups and attributable to Bush's religious identity and specialized Republican party appeals. To do so, we analyze participation changes in major American religious groups from 1960 to 2004 using the National Election Study (NES) surveys. We find that turnout among Evangelicals did increase over time, but we also find that their greater participation is explained almost entirely by socioeconomic status (SES) factors. As a group, Evangelicals have posted impressive SES gains and, of course, SES is strongly correlated with turnout. To be sure, Evangelicals were targeted like never before in 2000 and 2004 (Monson and Oliphant 2007), but we find little evidence of a participation-

based response to those efforts. The more parsimonious explanation for increased turnout among Evangelicals is based on longitudinal changes in their socioeconomic characteristics. Moreover, several other groups, such as black Protestants and the nonreligious, managed more impressive increases in turnout over the same period of time. This suggests that a conventional wisdom that focuses on Republican gains due to stimulating Evangelical turnout overlooks other, more potent, mobilizations of other groups.

## Previous Literature

As we describe above, recent scholarly investigations into the Evangelical response to political campaigns have, for the most part, left long-term participation trends unexplored. This is not to say, however, that the recent literature has neglected questions about the Evangelical response to political campaigns altogether. On the contrary, there have been numerous efforts to explore the structure of Evangelical voting in cross-sectional analyses (which cannot answer questions about longitudinal change in turnout by design), and there have been numerous efforts to explore longitudinal changes in partisan loyalties among Evangelicals (which might have included investigations into longitudinal changes in turnout, but generally did not). We review this literature because it has much to offer regarding the changing structure of the parties' religious-based coalitions. But we also take pains to highlight another interesting dimension in the changing structure of the parties' religious-based coalitions—change wrought by differential mobilization. To be sure, a part of change in the size and strength of the parties' electoral coalitions occurs when groups once loyal to one party shift and become loyal to the other. But another important part of that story, and one that has not been investigated fully, is the role of differential mobilization. All else equal, if groups loyal to the Democrats participate less (or even maintain steady rates of participation) while groups loyal to the Republicans participate more, then differential mobilization also contributes to change in the size and strength of the parties' electoral coalitions. The conventional wisdom would have us believe that this is precisely what has occurred with respect to Evangelical participation, but the conventional wisdom rests on little or no systematic evidence.

We begin with cross-sectional efforts to document the role of moral issues structuring vote choice. These studies are an important part of the evidence

<sup>1</sup>See Manza and Brooks (1997, 42–43) for additional discussion of the "Christian Right Thesis."

that Evangelicals were crucial to Republican campaign success because these are the issues that the Republican campaign highlighted and used in micro-targeting directed at Evangelicals (Monson and Oliphant 2007). Several scholars have found that specific issues, such as gay marriage, played a significant role cultivating support for President Bush in 2004. Gregory Lewis (2005) conducted two analyses, one at the individual level (using data from a March 2004 *L.A. Times* poll), and the other at the state level (using Bush's share of votes per state from 2004). At the individual level, Lewis finds that views on gay marriage were significant predictors of vote intent, even controlling for a host of other factors. At the state level, he finds that states with more conservative views about same-sex marriage issues supported Bush at significantly higher rates in 2004.

Campbell and Monson (2007) also found that so-called gay marriage bans (GMBs) were crucial to Bush's 2004 reelection. Part of their evidence comes from regression models investigating the county level change in votes for Bush from 2000 to 2004 in states with GMBs on the ballot. They found that the percent of support for GMBs was a significant factor predicting increased support for Bush and that the effect of GMBs is explained almost entirely by the percent of Evangelicals in each county. In other words, GMBs mattered, but they really only manifest any effect on changed vote share through Evangelical value voters. They also conducted an individual level analysis of whether GMBs stimulated turnout in 2004 and whether the effect of GMBs on turnout was especially pronounced among Evangelicals. They find that GMBs did stimulate turnout and that they mattered most among Evangelicals.

While such efforts indicate that Evangelicals were motivated to turnout by moral issues and primed to think about moral issues once they arrived at polling places in 2004 (but see Abramowitz 2004; Burden 2004; Hillygus 2007; Hillygus and Shields 2005; and Langer and Cohen 2005), they are limited by research design from testing whether either pattern reflects a more long-term trend. For example, Campbell and Monson show that GMBs stimulated turnout among Evangelicals in 2004, but their study cannot answer questions about whether Evangelical turnout in 2004 was unusually high relative to past elections. Other studies explore long-term trends, but they have focused primarily on changes in partisan loyalty. The general thrust of these efforts has been a systematic analysis of changes in the religious composition of party coalitions in the United States in the context of the "Culture Wars" thesis.

For example, Layman (2001) frames his contribution as establishing a middle ground in the culture wars debate. If the debate is between those who maintain that a new religious cleavage has emerged in American politics along traditionalist-modernist lines to replace past denominational cleavages (Hunter 1991; Wuthnow 1989) and those who claim that denomination continues to define religious cleavages in American politics (Brooks and Manza 1997; Sims 1996), then Layman finds a middle ground identifying in the long-term trends an emerging traditionalist-modernist cleavage and shifting—but still important—denominational cleavages. Layman examines religious political cleavages from a variety of perspectives comparing the religious identities and beliefs of Democratic and Republican activists, Democratic and Republican party identifiers in the mass electorate, and Democratic and Republican voters. However, the role of turnout structuring long term changes among different religious groups is not a part of Layman's narrative. To be sure, Layman's analysis of long term trends in party identification and voting reveals a widening partisan gap within the Protestant denomination along the traditionalist-modernist dimension and increasing political differences across the other denominations (and compared to secular groups), but our concern is that a portion of these long term trends may relate to unexamined patterns of participation and nonparticipation.

Although Layman identifies longitudinal changes in American religious-political cleavages, he does not distinguish the role of changing participation patterns from other factors that contribute to those changes. Indeed, most contributions to the culture wars debate do not assess whether changing turnout patterns exist or contribute to observed changes in party loyalty (Bolce and de Maio 1999a, 1999b; Brooks 2002; Carmines and Layman 1997; Evans 2002; Knuckey 2005; Layman 1997; Layman and Carmines 1997; Layman and Hussey 2007). Manza and Brooks (1997) are a notable exception, in that they include an analysis of turnout in their assessment of religious change in the party coalitions. Like Layman, their study also shows increasing political division among white Protestants—with liberal Protestants shifting support away from the Republican Party and conservative Protestants moving in the opposite direction. But Manza and Brooks also test for linear trends in the participation of different religious groups from 1960 to 1992. They find none and conclude, "Most important for the Christian Right Thesis, there is no evidence of increasing participation by conservative Protestants at the ballot box since 1980" (61).

Brooks and Manza take up the Christian Right Thesis again noting,

Since 1980 most social scientists have found little evidence in support of popular and recurring commentaries that identify religion (and evangelical Protestants, in particular) as a major source of conservative political trends in the United States. But in the past several years a new line of research has reported results suggesting that earlier studies underestimated evidence that partisan change among specific religious groups has contributed to an emerging Republican electoral advantage. (2004, 421)

They again find less evidence of a religious basis for political change than other scholars, but the turnout dimension of the Christian Right Thesis receives considerably less attention than it did in their previous analysis. While they do estimate a model of turnout and consider turnout as a factor in each religious group's relative contribution to each party's coalition, the model assumes no turnout trending among religious groups (see Brooks and Manza 2004, Appendix B).

In short, the longitudinal turnout patterns of different religious groups have received only limited scholarly attention and have yet to be investigated rigorously in data that includes the most recent presidential elections—at least two of which have been described as evidence of a successful GOP strategy to inspire increased turnout among Evangelicals (e.g., the turnout dimension of the Christian Right Thesis).<sup>2</sup> We undertake a new test of the turnout dimension of the Christian Right Thesis by estimating models of turnout among different religious groups that add to previous studies in several ways. First, we estimate separate models for midterm elections and presidential elections. Republican gains in Congressional elections are an important part of the Christian Right Thesis and so the omission of midterm elections in Manza and Brooks (1997) and the failure to separate the two types of elections in Brooks and Manza (2004) leaves important questions unexplored. Second, by dividing the time period covered (1960–2004) into several periods and by using a set of dummy variables, rather than specifying linear trends, our models will be sensitive to nonlinear turnout changes. Third, we assess turnout trends over a longer time period than has been done previously. Manza and Brooks (1997) only cover 1960–92 and Brooks and Manza (2004) only cover 1972–2000. In part, Brooks and Manza (2004) eliminate the pre-1972 elections because of difficulty identifying divisions

among Baptist identifiers, but we are able to include pre-1972 elections because we divide the data into time periods. Hence, turnout trends can be compared over the entire period or by simply comparing post-1970 time periods (if one is concerned about an unmeasured pre-1972 split among Baptists).

## Data and Methods

We rely upon the NES data collection in order to examine longitudinal changes in participation among different religious groups from 1960 to 2004. One of the challenges associated with systematic comparisons of different religious groups lies in defining the relevant groups. Although the NES has collapsed subjects' religious affiliations into the major denominational categories—Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish—distinguishing evangelical Protestants from mainline Protestants requires that one return to the full list of religious affiliations. To do so, we follow the coding scheme developed in Steensland et al. (2000) and further refined in Brooks and Manza (2004). Steensland et al. conduct an empirical analysis comparing a variety of denominational categorizations using the General Social Survey (GSS). Their final scheme produces seven categories, and they demonstrate the empirical merits of their system compared to other categorizations. Brooks and Manza adapt the Steensland et al. system to the NES, and we follow their lead creating seven categories: mainline Protestant, evangelical Protestant, black Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, other religion, and nonreligious (see the supplementary online appendix at <http://www.personal.kent.edu/~rclasse/jop2010appendix.pdf>).

We begin by dividing the years covered in our data (1960–2004) into four periods, 1960–70, 1972–80, 1982–90, and 1992–2004.<sup>3</sup> We do so for several reasons. First, doing so will enable us to examine participation in each period rather than assuming linear patterns in participation change over time. Second, several of the religious categories are relatively small, and pooling is necessary in order to ensure that the estimates for each group involve a sufficient number of observations. Third, and most importantly, these periods mark important historical transitions for the religious groups in question. For example, Layman (2001) notes that the rise of secularism in the 1960s inspired increasing political involvement of organizations, such as the Moral Majority, the Religious Roundtable, and the Christian Voice, in the 1970s and 1980s. He notes, “The cultural progressivism of

<sup>2</sup>Green et al. (2007) do describe the percent turnout by religious groups, but their data only span 1992–2004 and they do not estimate statistical comparisons of changed turnout across the groups nor do they estimate multivariate models.

<sup>3</sup>Because crucial variables are missing, we omit the years 1962 and 2002.

the 1960s and 1970s and the orthodox response of the 1970s and 1980s drew the lines for a new form of American cultural conflict” (2001, 11). The final period captures the early years of the Christian Coalition. The organization devotes enormous resources to mobilizing its membership. During the 2000 presidential election it distributed over 70 million voter guides and its former president, Ralph Reed, served as the Southeast regional chairman for the Bush-Cheney campaign in 2004.<sup>4</sup> Finally, we also examine participation in presidential and midterm elections separately in order to eliminate the possibility that different numbers of presidential or midterm elections in each period confound the over-time patterns.

Our first test involves stratifying the data into the seven denominational categories outlined above and simply regressing turnout (e.g., whether the subject reported voting in the general election) on a set of dummy variables capturing our time periods (the first time period is specified as the baseline). These models test whether the rate of participation for each religious group changed significantly over the time period. In order to assess whether changes in participation among the seven groups were significantly different when compared across groups, we also estimate pooled models of turnout in which we include our set of period dummy variables, a set of dummy variables for the seven groups, and interactions between the group variables and the period variables. The model we estimate is described by the equation,

$$TO = \alpha + \beta_g GD + \beta_p PD + \beta_{gp} GD*PD \quad (1)$$

where TO is whether the individual reported voting, GD represents the set of group dummy variables, and PD represents the set of period dummy variables. The  $\beta_{gp}$  coefficients test whether the over-time change in turnout, in each period, for each group, was significantly different compared to the omitted group (mainline Protestants).

These initial models provide a basic, descriptive-level examination of the over-time turnout trends for each group and a comparison of these trends. However, it is well established that a variety of social and demographic characteristics shape political participation (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). While these effects would be orthogonal to period effects if the social and demographic characteristics of each group were uncorrelated with time; omitting these

important determinants of turnout would bias estimates of over-time participation change if groups’ social and demographic make-up also change over time (e.g., if the distribution of income among evangelical Protestants changes over time). In order to assess the possibility of bias, we reestimate each of the models described above with a set of social and demographic control variables. These controls include frequency of attendance at religious services (recoded 0–1), party identification (0 = Democrat, .5 = Independent, 1 = Republican), strength of party identification (the 7-point scale folded and recoded to range from 0 = independent to 1 = strong identifier), income (0–1), education (0–1), marriage (0/1), residence in the South (0/1), union membership (0/1), age (0–1), and age squared. In the first set of models, turnout is simply regressed on the period dummy variables and the social and demographic control variables for each group. Changes in the coefficients associated with the period dummy variables will indicate whether group membership or other changes were driving over-time change in turnout. In the interactive models, we again pool all seven groups and regress turnout on the group dummy variables, the period dummy variables, the control variables, the interactions between the group and period variables, and the interactions between the group and control variables, as shown in equation (2) below,

$$TO = \alpha + \beta_g GD + \beta_p PD + \beta_c CV + \beta_{gp} GD*PD + \beta_{gc} GD*CV \quad (2)$$

where CV represents the set of control variables. The  $\beta_{gc}$  coefficients test whether the effect of each control variable for a group was significantly different than among the omitted group (mainline Protestants). The  $\beta_{gp}$  coefficients test whether the over-time change in turnout, in each period, for each group, was significantly different than that of the omitted group (mainline Protestants), controlling for social and demographic factors.

## Results

Table 1 contains the over-time patterns of turnout changes for each group in presidential elections, and Table 2 contains the analogous analyses for midterm elections. The first column of Table 1 reveals significant declines in the turnout of mainline Protestants in the 1970s and 1980s compared to the 1960s. In the most recent elections, however, the decline in turnout was not significant. Because the regressions include

<sup>4</sup>Although we have included 2004 in the last period, we note that divisions of the data into alternative periods return identical patterns of results. For example, if the last period is designated “2000–04,” the pattern of results is the same as the one we report.

TABLE 1 Stratified Models of Over-Time Change in Participation (Presidential Election Years Only)

Period Dummies	Mainline Protestant	Evangelical Protestant	Black Protestant	Catholic	Jewish	Other Religion	Non-Religious
Constant (1960–1970)	1.63*** (.08)	.77*** (.08)	.52*** (.13)	1.64*** (.10)	2.32*** (.51)	.59* (.27)	.16 (.20)
Observed Turnout 1972–1980 Coefficient	84% -.42*** (.10)	68% -.17 (.11)	63% .10 (.18)	84% -.47*** (.13)	91% -.50 (.61)	64% .39 (.34)	54% .30 (.24)
Observed Turnout 1982–1990 Coefficient	77% -.41*** (.10)	65% -.196 (.104)	65% .11 (.17)	76% -.48*** (.12)	86% -.52 (.58)	73% .04 (.33)	61% .39 (.22)
Observed Turnout 1992–2004 Coefficient	77% -.17 (.10)	64% .25* (.10)	65% .40* (.17)	76% -.228 (.121)	86% .31 (.62)	65% .21 (.31)	63% .55** (.21)
Observed Turnout	81%	73%	72%	80%	93%	69%	67%
N	6137	4544	1489	4735	442	533	1757

\*p < .05; \*\*p < .01; \*\*\*p < .001. Logit estimates, all tests two-tailed, standard errors in parentheses.

only the period dummy variables, the changes in predicted probabilities would be identical to the observed changes in rates of turnout for each group, in each period. In order to provide this substantive information, we have also provided the observed rates of turnout, in each period, for each group. It is evident that mainline Protestant participation was off of the 1960s rate in all three subsequent periods, but the decline was greatest in the 1970s and 1980s. Turning to the second column of Table 1, the conventional wisdom that Evangelicals did something to inspire voter participation in recent decades appears to be confirmed. Unlike mainline Protestants, the decline in participation among Evangelicals in the 1970s and 1980s fails to achieve statistical significance, while the gain in participation in the most recent elections

more than twice exceeds its standard error. However, despite the enormous attention given Evangelical participation in the popular press, several other groups posted equally (or more) impressive gains. Black Protestants evidence steady gains in participation in each subsequent period with the gains reaching statistical significance in the most recent period and the same can be said of participation among the nonreligious. Indeed, each group boasts higher turnout in the most recent period compared to the 1960s, except mainline Protestants and Catholics. The overall pattern in Table 2 for midterm election participation is quite similar, with a few minor exceptions. In terms of robustness of effects, the turnout decline among mainline Protestants in midterm elections is robust in the most recent period—though it was not robust in the

TABLE 2 Stratified Models of Over-Time Change in Participation (Midterm Election Years Only)

Period Dummies	Mainline Protestant	Evangelical Protestant	Black Protestant	Catholic	Jewish	Other Religion	Non-Religious
Constant (1960–1970)	.64*** (.07)	.07 (.08)	-.02 (.14)	.68*** (.09)	1.25*** (.26)	.47 (.25)	-.00 (.18)
Observed Turnout 1972–1980 Coefficient	65% -.25** (.09)	52% -.27* (.11)	49% -.35 (.20)	66% -.30* (.12)	78% -.39 (.36)	61% -.43 (.32)	50% -.20 (.22)
Observed Turnout 1982–1990 Coefficient	59% -.06 (.09)	45% -.10 (.10)	41% .31 (.18)	59% -.45*** (.11)	70% -.24 (.40)	51% -.20 (.31)	45% -.46* (.21)
Observed Turnout 1992–2004 Coefficient	64% -.30*** (.09)	49% .16 (.10)	57% .13 (.18)	56% -.50*** (.10)	73% -.93** (.33)	56% -.42 (.29)	39% .15 (.19)
Observed Turnout	58%	56%	53%	54%	58%	51%	54%
N	4516	3566	1173	3633	340	469	1475

\*p < .05; \*\*p < .01; \*\*\*p < .001. Logit estimates, all tests two-tailed, standard errors in parentheses.

TABLE 3 Interactive Model of Over-Time Change in Participation (Presidential Election Years Only)

Period Dummies	(Baseline) Mainline Protestant	Period* Evangelical Protestant	Period* Black Protestant	Period* Catholic	Period* Jewish	Period* Other Religion	Period* Non-Religious
1972–1980	-.42*** (.10)	.25 (.15)	.52* (.21)	-.05 (.16)	-.08 (.62)	.81** (.36)	.73** (.26)
1982–1990	-.41*** (.10)	.21 (.14)	.51** (.20)	-.07 (.16)	-.11 (.59)	.45 (.34)	.79*** (.24)
1992–2004	-.17 (.10)	.42** (.15)	.56** (.20)	-.06 (.16)	.48 (.63)	.38 (.32)	.72** (.24)
Relig. Dummy (1960–1970)	1.63*** (.08)	-.86*** (.12)	-1.11*** (.16)	.01 (.13)	.69 (.52)	-1.04*** (.28)	-1.47*** (.22)

\*p < .05; \*\*p < .01; \*\*\*p < .001. Logit estimates, all tests two-tailed, standard errors in parentheses. N = 19,637.

most recent presidential elections. Also, turnout gains noted among Evangelicals, black Protestants, and the nonreligious in recent presidential elections are not robust in recent midterm elections. Finally, in contrast to the pattern in presidential elections there is a recent decline in midterm participation among those who identify as Jewish and those associated with other religions.

While the results in Table 1 and Table 2 provide information on over-time changes in participation within each group, Table 3 and Table 4 compare those changes across the groups. Because mainline Protestants are the omitted category in the set of group dummy variables, the pattern of participation among mainline Protestants is the baseline pattern against which the others will be compared. Hence, the first column of Table 3 is identical to the first column of Table 1. The estimates in the second column of Table 3 compare change in participation among Evangelicals to change in participation among mainline Protestants. These are the coefficients for

the interactive terms formed by multiplying the evangelical Protestant dummy variable and the period dummy variables. The last cell in the column is the direct effect of the evangelical Protestant dummy variable, and it indicates that participation among evangelical Protestants lagged compared to participation among mainline Protestants in the 1960s (e.g., when the included period dummies all equal zero). The significant coefficient for the most recent period indicates that Evangelicals did indeed zig where the mainline Protestants zagged—and the difference in participation patterns is statistically significant. Comparing the coefficient for the direct effect of the Evangelical dummy variable and the 1992–2004 interaction coefficient, it is evident that Evangelicals have yet to best the rate of participation among mainline Protestants (e.g., the participation deficit in the 1960s represented by -.86 is a larger coefficient than the combined gain among Evangelicals represented by .42 and the decline among mainliners represented by -.17). The significant interaction term, however, signals they are gaining ground.

TABLE 4 Interactive Model of Over-Time Change in Participation (Midterm Election Years Only)

Period Dummies	(Baseline) Mainline Protestant	Period* Evangelical Protestant	Period* Black Protestant	Period* Catholic	Period* Jewish	Period* Other Religion	Period* Non-Religious
1972–1980	-.25** (.09)	-.01 (.14)	-.10 (.22)	-.04 (.15)	-.14 (.37)	-.18 (.33)	.06 (.24)
1982–1990	-.06 (.09)	-.04 (.14)	.37 (.20)	-.39** (.14)	-.18 (.41)	-.15 (.33)	-.40 (.23)
1992–2004	-.30*** (.09)	.46*** (.13)	.43* (.20)	-.20 (.14)	-.63 (.34)	-.11 (.31)	.45* (.21)
Relig. Dummy (1960–1970)	.64*** (.07)	-.57*** (.10)	-.66*** (.16)	.04 (.11)	.61* (.27)	-.17 (.25)	-.64*** (.19)

\*p < .05; \*\*p < .01; \*\*\*p < .001. Logit estimates, all tests two-tailed, standard errors in parentheses. N = 15,172.

While this may indicate that there is still room for additional gains among Evangelical voters, the possibility of their adding additional conservatism to the electorate is balanced by the even more robust patterns of participation gains in the third column and in the last column. Again it is evident that Evangelicals did not have the monopoly on electorate expansion. Both black Protestants and the nonreligious also zigged where mainline Protestants zagged and both groups have gained ground on, but not yet surpassed, participation among mainline Protestants. And again, the pattern is very similar in midterm elections.

While Evangelicals, and several other groups—especially black Protestants and the nonreligious—have indeed gained ground on the rate of participation among mainline Protestants, we fear that attributing these gains to group membership may be premature. As described in the data and methods section, if the distribution of social and demographic characteristics among members of each group changed over time, these changes—not group membership—may account for the changes in turnout documented thus far.<sup>5</sup> We have reestimated the basic models having added our social and demographic controls in Table 5 and Table 6. Several of the patterns of over-time change revealed in the first three rows of these tables are starkly different than the patterns from Table 1 and Table 2. Of primary interest, the estimates in the second column reveal over-time declines in turnout among Evangelicals, controlling for social and demographic factors. The reversal indicates that recent turnout gains among Evangelicals are better attributed to gains on social and demographic indicators rather than their affiliation with Evangelical denominations. For example, regressing income on the period dummy variables for

<sup>5</sup>Too often scholars note longitudinal, distributional changes in pooled cross-sections and assume they are due to individual-level change (e.g., Evangelicals becoming more wealthy or more Republican). But there are other sources of distributional changes and one cannot isolate these sources without panel data. For example, newcomers and/or attrition can also change distributions to the extent newcomers differ from current members or differ from outgoing ones. Furthermore, newcomers to our designated groups come in two flavors: those who come of age within their denomination and those who switch denominations. Thus it is important to recognize that increased wealth among Evangelicals, for example, may be the result of upward mobility among individual Evangelicals, generational increases in wealth among Evangelicals, or due to wealthy mainline Protestant movement into Evangelical churches. We cannot disentangle these different sources of change due to data limitations, but we note that the group-level changes we document are crucial to understanding trends in religious politics in any case. To the extent one is worried about the role of denominational switching, however, Hout, Greeley, and Wilde (2001) indicate that different fertility rates—not switching—explain nearly all of the shift in the relative sizes of evangelical compared to mainline Protestant groups (2001, 470).

Evangelicals reveals positive gains in each period and significant ones in the most recent period.<sup>6</sup> Their education gains have been even more impressive. Furthermore, as others have documented (and we confirmed in our data), Evangelicals have become more Republican over time and the positive PID coefficient in the second column indicates that Republican Evangelicals are more likely to vote than Democratic Evangelicals. Granted, denominational affiliation and Republican targeting efforts deserve some credit for the positive independent effect of partisanship, but the over-time declines among Evangelicals are robust even if the partisanship controls are omitted.<sup>7</sup> In short, the turnout gains among Evangelicals appear to have more to do with social and demographic trends than with the Christian Coalition.

The balance of Table 5 reveals that the trends among mainline Protestants and Catholics remain negative after controlling for social and demographic factors and the trend among Jews, similar to what is observed among Evangelicals, also becomes negative. In contrast, the gains in turnout among black Protestants, those from other religions, and among the nonreligious suffer less with the addition of the control variables. Although the gains in turnout are no longer robust at conventional levels, the coefficients are at least positive. Nevertheless, the lack of robustness indicates that a portion—and perhaps even the lion's share—of credit for turnout gains among these groups also lies in social and demographic changes among members over time. Interestingly—in contrast to what we found among Evangelicals—these groups have not trended toward the Republican Party. Black Protestants have become significantly more Democratic over the time period studied, while we cannot reject the null hypothesis that the distribution of party identification among the nonreligious has not

<sup>6</sup>We describe several longitudinal changes in social and demographic variables among different groups in the text, but to conserve on space, we do not report full analyses in tables. These results are available from the authors upon request.

<sup>7</sup>In order to test whether the change in the trend that occurs with the addition of control variables is due to party identification (e.g., the positive trend among Evangelicals in Table 1 compared to the negative trend in Table 5), we reestimated the SES models without the partisan controls. This tactic effectively tests whether the SES variables alter the trends even if partisanship-related-turnout is credited (*vis-à-vis* the correlation between time and partisanship) to the period dummy variables. The results are robust to the modification (specifically, the Evangelical turnout trend remains negative). Changes in party identification clearly contribute to the increased turnout among Evangelicals observed in Table 1 and Table 2, but partisanship is not driving the results in Table 5 and Table 6.

**TABLE 5** Stratified Models of Over-Time Change in Participation with SES Controls (Presidential Election Years Only)

Parameters	Mainline Protestant	Evangelical Protestant	Black Protestant	Catholic	Jewish	Other Religion	Non-Religious
1972–1980	–.32** (.11)	–.14 (.12)	.24 (.21)	–.18 (.15)	–.87 (.58)	.59 (.48)	.24 (.27)
1982–1990	–.50*** (.11)	–.36** (.12)	.04 (.20)	–.28 (.15)	–1.24* (.55)	.23 (.45)	.23 (.25)
1992–2004	–.33** (.12)	–.20 (.12)	.18 (.21)	–.20 (.16)	–.56 (.62)	.27 (.42)	.44 (.23)
Attendance	1.07*** (.11)	.83*** (.11)	1.36*** (.22)	1.18*** (.12)	.72 (.64)	–.17 (.46)	—
PID	.32*** (.08)	.28*** (.09)	–.43 (.23)	.25* (.11)	–.20 (.44)	–.001 (.302)	–.27* (.14)
Strength of PID	1.13*** (.11)	1.42*** (.12)	1.35*** (.20)	1.37*** (.13)	1.25 (.70)	2.81*** (.40)	1.21*** (.17)
Income	1.14*** (.17)	1.02*** (.17)	.82** (.30)	.80*** (.19)	2.17** (.70)	.67 (.55)	.97*** (.24)
South	–.59*** (.09)	–.40*** (.08)	–.41** (.15)	–.47*** (.11)	.14 (.58)	–.23 (.37)	–.50*** (.14)
Education	2.43*** (.17)	2.50*** (.18)	1.77*** (.33)	2.20*** (.20)	1.84* (.80)	2.96*** (.58)	3.07*** (.25)
Union	.17 (.10)	.08 (.10)	.34* (.17)	.13 (.10)	–.22 (.43)	.19 (.28)	.12 (.14)
Age	4.95*** (.66)	5.66*** (.70)	3.73** (1.17)	7.24*** (.76)	–2.47 (3.57)	5.35* (2.38)	2.99** (1.03)
Age Squared	–3.62*** (.81)	–4.43*** (.87)	–2.64 (1.40)	–6.28*** (.97)	6.16 (4.34)	–4.06 (3.19)	–1.58 (1.37)
Married	.40** (.08)	.22** (.09)	.12 (.14)	.29* (.09)	–.43 (.42)	.45 (.29)	.42** (.13)
Constant	–2.55*** (.19)	–2.94*** (.20)	–2.54*** (.33)	–2.84*** (.21)	–.20 (.86)	–3.82*** (.67)	–2.85*** (.30)

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ . Logit estimates, all tests two-tailed, standard errors in parentheses.

changed. It may at first seem that the trend toward Democratic partisanship among black Protestants would suppress turnout (given what we note about evangelical Protestants), but the PID coefficient among black Protestants (and among the nonreligious) is opposite signed—meaning that Democratic black Protestants are more likely to vote than Republican black Protestants. This is interesting because the trends in changed party identification among black Protestants and the nonreligious increase turnout—just as changing partisanship among Evangelicals did—even though the groups are moving into different parties. Finally, we also want to highlight the importance of religiosity explaining turnout. Frequency of attendance at religious services is a potent predictor of participation for each of the first four religious groups listed in Table 5. But interestingly, the effect of attendance in these first four columns is smallest among Evangelicals. Granted, the across group differences are not large, but they indicate that

the religious services of Evangelicals are no more potent mobilizing membership than the religious services of mainline Protestants, black Protestants, and Catholics.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup>We were also interested in testing whether our results hold among the very religious. If religiosity is eclipsing denominational identity—as some culture wars studies suggest—then testing our model among very religious people is an important hurdle. Toward that end, we reestimated the models reported in Tables 5 and 6 for those in the most frequent category of the attendance variable. The patterns of results among the very religious are nearly identical to the patterns reported in Tables 5 and 6 (specifically, the turnout trend among very religious Evangelicals is still negative). In a similar vein, we reestimated the models having stratified by whether subjects perceived important party differences. We argue that lack of positive turnout trends among Evangelicals in Tables 5 and 6 raise questions about whether a strategy of focusing on moral issues succeeded. But the skeptic might wonder whether we would observe the same pattern among Evangelicals who perceive important party differences (because they are more likely to have been motivated by an increased focus on moral issues). Again, the pattern of results remains robust.

**TABLE 6 Stratified Models of Over-Time Change in Participation with SES Controls (Midterm Election Years Only)**

Parameters	Mainline Protestant	Evangelical Protestant	Black Protestant	Catholic	Jewish	Other Religion	Non-Religious
1972–1980	-.20* (.10)	-.27* (.11)	-.30 (.20)	-.16 (.12)	-.44 (.38)	-.19 (.38)	-.10 (.22)
1982–1990	-.13 (.10)	-.23* (.11)	.24 (.19)	-.39** (.12)	-.27 (.44)	.01 (.38)	-.50* (.21)
1992–2004	-.46*** (.10)	-.08 (.11)	-.04 (.21)	-.48*** (.12)	-1.02** (.38)	-.28 (.40)	.15 (.19)
Attendance	.69*** (.10)	.44*** (.11)	.54* (.21)	.54*** (.11)	.88 (.53)	-.20 (.42)	—
PID	.15* (.08)	.12 (.08)	-.49 (.25)	.17 (.09)	-.14 (.35)	.37 (.26)	.15 (.14)
Strength of PID	.87*** (.11)	.58*** (.11)	.97*** (.22)	.70*** (.12)	.96* (.43)	1.69*** (.33)	.82*** (.18)
Income	.71*** (.16)	.17 (.17)	.54 (.29)	.34* (.17)	.43 (.56)	.73 (.50)	.03 (.25)
South	-.39*** (.08)	-.04 (.08)	-.22** (.14)	-.43*** (.11)	-.92* (.35)	-.84* (.33)	-.27 (.15)
Education	1.31*** (.14)	1.51*** (.16)	1.03** (.31)	1.03*** (.16)	.97 (.58)	1.80*** (.47)	1.33*** (.22)
Union	-.07 (.09)	.18 (.10)	-.06 (.18)	.06 (.09)	-.68* (.32)	.11 (.31)	.14 (.16)
Age	4.79*** (.66)	4.76*** (.70)	2.46* (1.20)	5.60*** (.72)	1.77 (2.54)	3.23 (2.34)	3.78*** (1.08)
Age Squared	-3.80*** (.79)	-3.44*** (.87)	-1.11 (1.51)	-4.72*** (.91)	-.42 (3.05)	-1.24 (2.94)	-3.37* (1.41)
Married	.17* (.08)	.13 (.09)	.19 (.14)	.23** (.09)	.36 (.31)	.21 (.27)	.27* (.13)
Constant	-2.31*** (.17)	-2.29*** (.19)	-2.03*** (.33)	-2.04*** (.19)	-.95 (.68)	-2.74*** (.66)	-1.88*** (.27)

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ . Logit estimates, all tests two-tailed, standard errors in parentheses.

Turning briefly to Table 6, the overall midterm patterns are even more similar to the overall presidential election patterns than was the case without the social and demographic controls. Indeed the pattern of over-time change in participation for mainline Protestants, evangelical Protestants, Catholics, and Jews are all the same. But the pattern of weak increases in participation among black Protestants and those associated with other religions turn weakly negative. Only the nonreligious post positive, though insignificant, gains in midterm election participation and only in the most recent period.

Finally, in order to compare over-time trends from the more fully specified models across the groups, we again estimated pooled, interactive models. These results are reported in Table 7 and Table 8. Of primary interest is the observation that we cannot reject the null hypothesis that the over-time trend of

participation in presidential elections among evangelical Protestants was the same as the over-time trend among mainline Protestants. In contrast, the over-time participation trends in presidential elections among black Protestants and the nonreligious are significantly different—the trends themselves having been described by the results in Table 5. The basic story in Table 7 is that, once one controls for social and demographic factors, only black Protestants and the nonreligious differ significantly from the over-time participation pattern evident among mainline Protestants. We do not dispute the fact that Evangelicals increased participation in presidential elections—witness Table 1. Nor do we dispute that their over-time participation pattern is unique when compared to that of mainline Protestants—witness Table 3—though we would dispute that the pattern among Evangelicals is unique given the similar

TABLE 7 Interactive Model of Over-Time Change in Participation with SES Controls (Presidential Election Years Only)

Parameters	(Baseline) Mainline	Parameters* Evangelical	Parameters* Black	Parameters* Catholic	Parameters* Jewish	Parameters* Other	Parameters* Non-Religious
1972–1980	-.32** (.11)	.18 (.17)	.56* (.24)	.14 (.18)	-.54 (.59)	.91 (.49)	.56 (.29)
1982–1990	-.50*** (.11)	.14 (.16)	.55* (.23)	.22 (.19)	-.73 (.56)	.73 (.46)	.73** (.27)
1992–2004	-.33** (.12)	.13 (.17)	.51* (.24)	.14 (.20)	-.23 (.63)	.60 (.44)	.77** (.26)
Attendance	1.07*** (.11)	-.24 (.16)	.28 (.24)	.11 (.16)	-.36 (.64)	-1.25** (.47)	—
PID	.32*** (.08)	-.04 (.12)	-.75** (.24)	-.07 (.14)	-.52 (.45)	-.32 (.31)	-.59*** (.16)
Strength of PID	1.13*** (.11)	.29 (.16)	.22 (.23)	.24 (.17)	.12 (.71)	1.68*** (.41)	.08 (.21)
Income	1.14*** (.17)	-.13 (.24)	-.33 (.34)	-.35 (.26)	1.03 (.72)	-.48 (.58)	-.17 (.29)
South	-.59*** (.09)	.18 (.12)	.18 (.17)	.12 (.14)	.73 (.59)	.35 (.37)	.08 (.16)
Education	2.43*** (.17)	.07 (.25)	-.66 (.37)	-.23 (.26)	-.59 (.82)	.53 (.61)	.64* (.30)
Union	.17 (.10)	-.08 (.14)	.18 (.20)	-.03 (.14)	-.39 (.44)	.02 (.30)	-.04 (.17)
Age	4.95*** (.66)	.70 (.96)	-1.22 (1.34)	2.28* (1.01)	-7.43* (3.63)	.40 (2.47)	-1.97 (1.22)
Age Squared	-3.62*** (.81)	-.81 (1.19)	.99 (1.62)	-2.66* (1.27)	9.79* (4.41)	-.44 (3.29)	2.04 (1.60)
Married	.40*** (.08)	-.18 (.12)	-.28 (.17)	-.11 (.12)	-.83 (.43)	.05 (.30)	.02 (.15)
Relig. Dummy (1960–1970)	-2.55*** (.19)	-.39 (.27)	.01 (.38)	-.30 (.28)	2.35** (.88)	-1.27 (.70)	-.30 (.36)

\*p < .05; \*\* p < .01; \*\*\* p < .001. Logit estimates, all tests two-tailed, standard errors in parentheses.

patterns among several other groups in Table 3. However, we do raise serious questions about whether efforts sponsored by the Christian Coalition or other aspects of Evangelical affiliation are accurately characterized as the driving forces of voter mobilization. Clearly neither can be credited for the positive shift in the distributions of income and education among Evangelicals—and it appears that there is very little mobilization left to explain among Evangelicals once one controls for social and demographic factors—indeed no significant differences when compared to mainline Protestants.

Although the midterm election patterns in Table 8 are similar to those in Table 7, it must be noted that, controlling for social and demographic factors, Evangelical participation declined significantly less in the most recent midterm elections than did participation among mainline Protestants. Also, it bears mentioning that the pattern of over-time participation in midterm

elections among black Protestants is no longer significantly different than the pattern among mainline Protestants. Although this may indicate that Evangelicals did something different in midterm elections, even controlling for social and demographic factors, it must also be noted that the over-time trend in midterm elections, controlling for social and demographic factors, was a negative one (see Table 6). Hence, it would appear that the much heralded rise of the Christian Right—in presidential elections and midterm elections, alike—is primarily a result of demographic changes among those who consider themselves Evangelicals.

## Conclusion

Our results indicate that the Christian Right Thesis, as an explanation for Republican gains in electoral strength,

**TABLE 8** Interactive Model of Over-Time Change in Participation with SES Controls (Midterm Election Years Only)

Parameters	(Baseline) Mainline	Parameters* Evangelical	Parameters* Black	Parameters* Catholic	Parameters* Jewish	Parameters* Other	Parameters* Non-Religious
1972–1980	-.20* (.10)	-.07 (.15)	-.11 (.22)	.03 (.15)	-.25 (.39)	.01 (.39)	.10 (.24)
1982–1990	-.13 (.10)	-.10 (.14)	.36 (.22)	-.26 (.15)	-.14 (.45)	.14 (.39)	-.37 (.23)
1992–2004	-.46*** (.10)	.38* (.15)	.42 (.23)	-.02 (.15)	-.56 (.39)	.18 (.41)	.61** (.22)
Attendance	.69*** (.10)	-.25 (.15)	-.15 (.24)	-.15 (.15)	.19 (.54)	-.89* (.43)	—
PID	.15* (.08)	-.03 (.11)	-.64** (.26)	.02 (.12)	-.29 (.36)	.22 (.27)	-.001 (.158)
Strength of PID	.87*** (.11)	-.29* (.15)	.10 (.24)	-.17 (.16)	.09 (.44)	.82* (.35)	-.05 (.21)
Income	.71*** (.16)	-.55* (.23)	-.17 (.33)	-.37 (.23)	-.29 (.58)	.02 (.52)	-.69* (.29)
South	-.39*** (.08)	.35** (.11)	.17 (.17)	-.04 (.14)	-.53 (.36)	-.45 (.34)	.12 (.17)
Education	1.31*** (.14)	.19 (.21)	-.29 (.34)	-.28 (.21)	-.34 (.60)	.49 (.49)	.02 (.26)
Union	-.07 (.09)	.25 (.13)	.01 (.20)	.13 (.13)	-.60 (.33)	.18 (.32)	.21 (.18)
Age	4.79*** (.66)	-.03 (.96)	-2.33 (1.37)	.81 (.98)	-3.02 (2.62)	-1.56 (2.42)	-1.01 (1.26)
Age Squared	-3.80*** (.79)	.36 (1.18)	2.69 (1.71)	-.92 (1.21)	3.38 (3.15)	2.56 (3.04)	.43 (1.63)
Married	.17* (.08)	-.04 (.12)	.02 (.17)	.07 (.12)	.20 (.32)	.04 (.28)	.10 (.15)
Relig. Dummy (1960–1970)	-2.31*** (.17)	.01 (.26)	.27 (.37)	.27 (.26)	1.36 (.70)	-.43 (.69)	.42 (.32)

\*p < .05; \*\*p < .01; \*\*\*p < .001. Logit estimates, all tests two-tailed, standard errors in parentheses.

may overstate the religious dimensions of Evangelical voter mobilization. Several accounts of the rising tide of Republican support attribute credit to efforts and events that have transformed evangelical Protestants from deliberately apolitical roots into an increasingly active and partisan religious voting bloc (Layman 2001, 10–12). According to the Christian Right Thesis, historical increases in electoral participation by evangelical Protestants occurred in response to (1) the rise of moral issues on the national agenda, (2) the openly religious candidacy of George W. Bush, and (3) organized efforts to mobilize Evangelicals by Christian Right organizations (Campbell 2007; Campbell and Monson 2007; Monson and Oliphant 2007). That turnout has increased among Evangelicals is undeniable. It is also clear that the historical turnout trend among evangelical Protestants is different than that of mainline Protestants. But evidence that the trend is best described as

a function of sociodemographic changes in the composition of the denomination poses a problem for the Christian Right Thesis. Indeed, controlling for social and demographic factors, the historical trend is not one of increased participation, nor is the over-time pattern significantly different than the one observed among mainline Protestants. In light of changes among Evangelicals that have made them more prosperous and better educated as a group, one would expect increased participation even in the absence of moral issues on the national agenda, born again candidates, and voter guides. The explanation for historic increases in Evangelical participation lies not in the Christian Right Thesis, but in the basic precepts of the SES model of political participation.

Also of interest are the turnout patterns we uncover among other religious groups. Although there is no “Christian and Secular Left Thesis,” and although

increased turnout among secular voters and black Protestants has received far less attention recently (no doubt because the Democratic party did not emerge the victor in the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections), the raw increases in turnout over time are even more impressive than those of Evangelicals and they appear to be less a function of sociodemographic changes in the groups. Although the positive trends are not robust once one controls for sociodemographic factors, the differences between what happened among mainline Protestants and what happened among black Protestants, and the differences between what happened among mainline Protestants and the nonreligious, are robust. To be sure, early historical turnout gains among black Protestants have much to do with dismantling legal barriers to participation—but sustained increases in turnout are suggestive of unique efforts in black churches (Calhoun-Brown 1996). Likewise the results are suggestive of unique political influences at work among secular Americans. Perhaps these unique political influences are efforts by secular organizations, such as *Rock the Vote* campaigns, but it also seems plausible that increased turnout among the nonreligious represents a backlash against highly visible Christian Right campaigns (Bolce and de Maio 1999a, 1999b).

Finally, it bears mentioning that our findings do not refute the Christian Right Thesis as it relates to nonturnout sources for the rising political might of Evangelicals. For example, increasing political unity among Evangelicals due to changes in the partisan loyalties of leaders and members strengthen the voting bloc independent of turnout (Layman 2001). Also, growth in the size of the denomination adds electoral strength independent of turnout—and in 2004 evangelical Protestants, “were the largest religious tradition, including one-quarter of the adult population” (Green et al. 2007, 19). Thus, although sociodemographic changes best explain the *turnout dimension* of the Christian Right Thesis, we make no claims about how best to explain membership expansion and changing partisan loyalty. In any case, our results suggest additional scrutiny is required interpreting the religious dimensions of political participation—whether one is describing a burgeoning Republican coalition or a Democratic coalition that has retaken the presidency.

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