

## Young Americans: Their Faith, Attitudes, and Values

**By Amanda Nover<sup>1</sup>**  
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Using data from the 2008 American National Election Studies (ANES), this fact sheet explores the religious demographics of the Millennials (Americans between the ages of 18 and 29). Through the lens of religious affiliation, I examine the ways in which young Americans participate in politics and in their communities.

Overall, data indicate that young Americans who are more religious are more engaged, both civically and politically, than young people who are less religious, especially those with no religious affiliation. Smidt had similar findings in his 1999 study of religion and civic engagement. Smidt reports that even after controlling for education, age, race, gender, region, and social trust, both church attendance and religious tradition have significant impacts on levels of volunteerism and civic engagement.<sup>2</sup> Despite the importance of these findings, few scholars have examined such trends among younger Americans. Gibson's 2008 study of religion and civic engagement among young Americans indicates that attending services frequently and having theologically conservative beliefs encourage civic-mindedness among teenagers. Young religious Americans in this study were more likely to volunteer both through organizations providing volunteer opportunities and out of their own initiative. Gibson did not find, however, a connection between political engagement and religion.<sup>3</sup>

This fact sheet explores these trends in political engagement with a special focus on young evangelical Christians and examines the relationship between religious participation and civic engagement among young Americans.

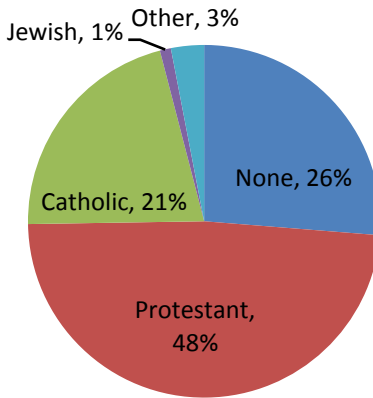
### Religious Affiliation

The religious affiliations of young Americans have changed over time. According to the American National Election Studies (ANES), since 1960, the percentage of young people claiming no religious affiliation has dramatically increased. In 1960, just three percent of 18- to 29-year-olds fell into the "None" category. By 1990, the percentage had grown to 17 percent, and by 2009, 26 percent of young Americans said they had no religious affiliation.

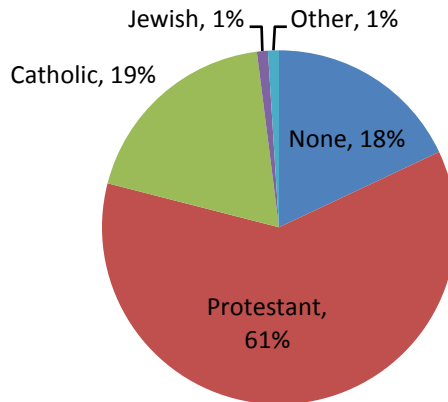
Moreover, young people are more likely to have no religious affiliation than older

Americans. Just 18 percent of the over-30 population claimed no religious affiliation, a rate eight percentage points lower than young people’s rate. Young people are also much less likely to be Protestant, compared with older Americans. Sixty-one percent of older Americans said that they were Protestant, compared with just 47 percent of the youth population. Catholics, on the other hand, claim a slightly higher percentage of young people compared with older people, as 19 percent of the over 30 population and a slightly higher 21 percent of the youth population identified as Catholic. One percent of both the youth and general population identified as Jewish. Young people were also more likely to claim “other” as their religious affiliation, with three percent of youth and just one percent of the over 30 population checking “other.” The “other” category includes Messianic Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, those who identify with more than one religion, and any other non-Jewish, non-Christian faith not listed on the survey.

**Figure 1: Religious Affiliation, 18-29**



**Figure 2: Religious Affiliation, 30 and Older**



Of those young people classified as Christian (Protestants and Catholics), 39 percent consider themselves “born-again.” This group makes up 27 percent of the entire youth population. Among older Americans, a much larger percentage is born-again. More than half (53 percent) of the over-30 Christian population consider themselves born-again, a percentage that makes up 42 percent of the American public. Thus,

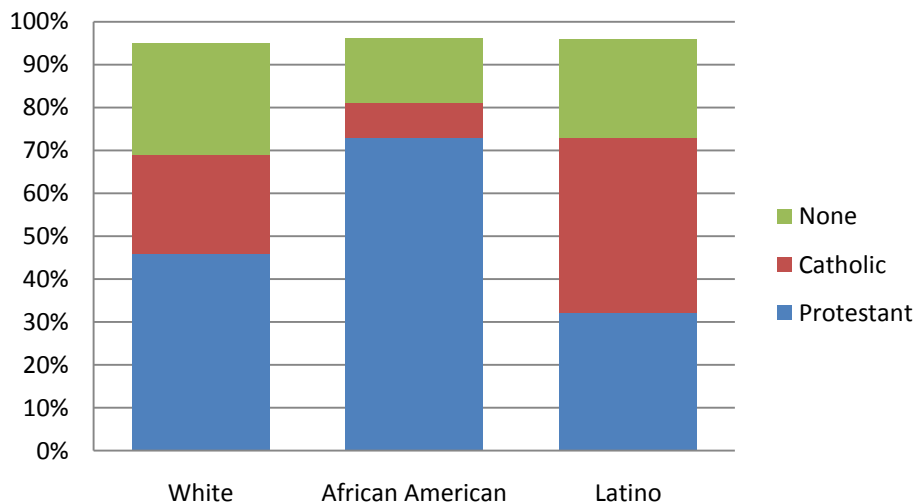
older Americans are significantly more likely to consider themselves born-again than younger people.

In the following sections, I focus on the three largest groups of young people: Protestants, Catholics, and those with no religious affiliation.<sup>4</sup> I also highlight born-again Christians in my analyses, as those who identify as born-again comprise a large portion of the general population.

### Characteristics of Young Americans and their Religious Affiliations

Young religious Americans make up a diverse group, as religious affiliation cuts across the racial, geographic, educational, and economic boundaries that divide people in other areas of public life. First, religious affiliation is not distributed evenly across races. Among young white people, 46 percent are Protestant, 23 percent are Catholic, 26 percent have no affiliation, and 38 percent consider themselves born-again. African Americans are the most likely to be Protestant, with 73 percent identifying as Protestant. Young African Americans are the least likely to be Catholic (8 percent), or to have no affiliation (15 percent). Last, young Latinos are the most likely to be Catholic at 41 percent. Thirty-two percent of young Latinos are Protestant, 23 percent have no affiliation, and 32 percent of Latinos consider themselves born-again.

**Figure 3: Religious Affiliation, by Race**



Young people of different faiths are also unevenly distributed across geographic regions in the United States. First, more than half of both young Protestants and those young people who consider themselves born-again reside in the South. Just seven percent of young Protestants and eight percent of young born-again live in the Northeast. The majority of young Catholics reside in the South and West, and the majority of young Americans with no religious affiliation are relatively evenly distributed in the North-Central region, South, and West.

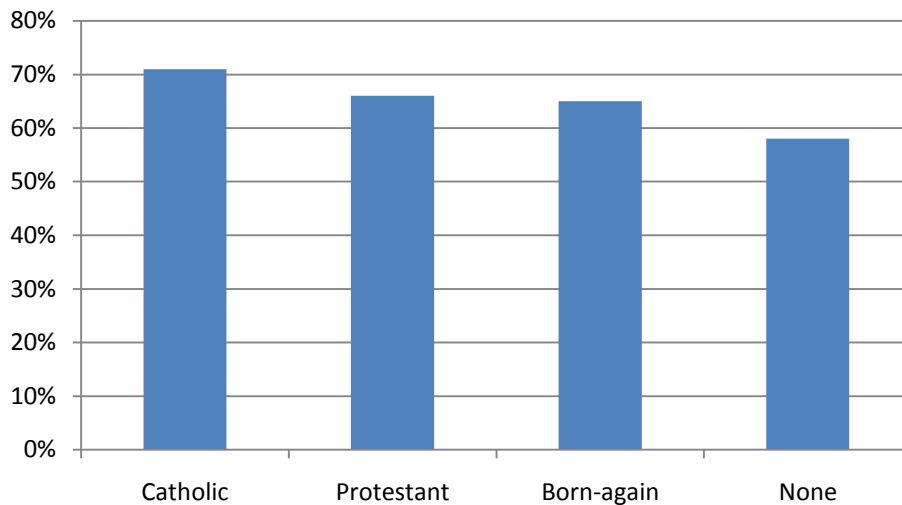
Among young Catholics, 85 percent have at least a high school diploma. Eighty-eight percent of young people with no religious affiliation received a high school

diploma. Protestants and born-again are the most likely to have a high school diploma, as 92 percent and 94 percent (respectively) of these groups graduated from high school.

## Political Engagement and Views

ANES data indicate that young Americans of faith were particularly likely to vote in 2008. Young Catholics were the most likely to vote and young Protestants followed closely behind (71 percent and 66 percent, respectively). High numbers of young Americans who consider themselves born-again voted as well (65 percent). Among those young people with no religious affiliation, however, just 58 percent turned out to vote on Election Day.

**Figure 4: 2008 Voter Turnout Rate, 18-29**



Not only did young religious Americans vote in greater numbers than those with no religious affiliation; they were also more likely to be engaged in other political activities surrounding the election. Young born-again Christians were more likely than all three other groups to be engaged in activities such as contributing money to political groups, attending political meetings or rallies, displaying campaign buttons or yard signs, and contributing money to political groups. They were particularly likely to talk to others about voting for or against a candidate, as young born-again's participation rate surpassed the three other groups by nine percentage points or more.

According to ANES data, the majority of young Protestants (59 percent) and Catholics (61 percent) favored Obama in the presidential election. An overwhelming 77 percent of young Americans with no religious affiliation voted for Obama. Among those young people who consider themselves born-again, however, McCain took the lead, as 58 percent of young born-again Christians voted for McCain and just 41 percent for Obama.

The youth preference for Obama may be a result of pessimistic feelings about the country and its leaders. According to ANES data from 2008, young Americans

generally agreed that things in this country were going down the wrong track. Young Protestants were the most pessimistic, with 92 percent agreeing that things had gone off on the wrong track. Ninety percent of young Catholics, 88 percent of born-again Christians, and 86 percent of those with no affiliation all agreed that we were on the wrong track. Views of President George W. Bush, on the other hand, were quite different among young religious groups. While very few young Americans with no religious affiliation (12 percent) approved of the way President Bush was handling his job, a much larger 44 percent of born-again Christians approved. This may be because Bush is also a born-again Christian and supported many socially conservative policies. Young Protestants and young Catholics are in the middle with 31 percent and 32 percent (respectively) approving of the way President Bush was handling his job in office.

## **Spotlight on Young Evangelicals**

For more than 20 years, American evangelical Christians have been a formidable force in electoral politics, generally supporting conservative candidates. Making up approximately 25 percent of the population, white evangelicals have been critical allies for the Republican Party. Now, though, one group threatens to complicate the picture: *young* evangelicals. While the cohort may once have been a consistent support base for Republican candidates, recent polls indicate that their votes may be up for grabs. Although the ANES survey does not ask respondents whether they consider themselves evangelical, several other surveys illustrate significant changes in the voting behaviors of evangelicals.

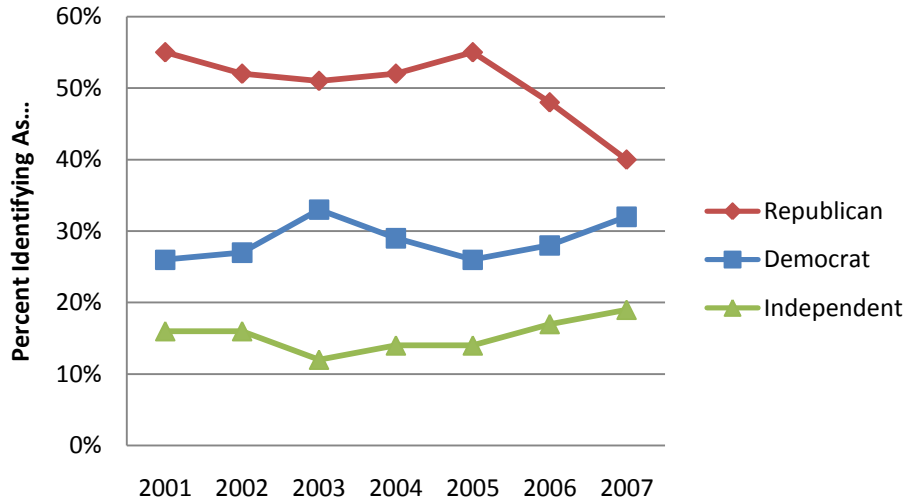
The definition of an evangelical Christian is debated—evangelicals do not agree on any one label or belief system.<sup>5</sup> Scholars often use the terms “fundamentalist,” “born again,” “conservative Christian,” and “Religious Right” haphazardly, though the terms have different meanings. When reporting poll data in this section, I will assume the definition used in the surveys conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, which defines an evangelical as simply a person who identifies as evangelical or born-again.<sup>6</sup> This definition is consistent among the other surveys that I cite in subsequent sections of this segment on young evangelicals.

The results of the 2006 midterm election were the first indications that evangelicals, especially those in the youngest cohort, were becoming more supportive of Democratic candidates. In House races in 2004, Republicans earned 74 percent of the white evangelical vote and Democrats earned 29 percent, creating a 49-point spread between evangelical preference for Republicans and Democrats. In 2006, though, Republicans received 70 percent of the white evangelical vote and Democrats earned 28 percent, narrowing the gap to 42 points.<sup>7</sup>

According to a series of surveys conducted by Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, young evangelicals have moved away from the Republican Party since 2001. In 2001, 55 percent of evangelicals between the ages of 18 and 29 considered themselves Republicans and just 16 percent identified as Democrats. These numbers remained somewhat stable until 2006, when young evangelicals became slightly less likely to identify as Republicans, with 48 percent identifying as Republicans. This trend continued into 2007, as just 40 percent of young evangelicals identified as Republicans. This shift away from the Republican Party resulted in a small increase of three percentage points for the Democratic Party.

There was also a modest increase in the number of Independents, coming in at 26 percent in 2001 and 32 percent in 2007.<sup>8</sup>

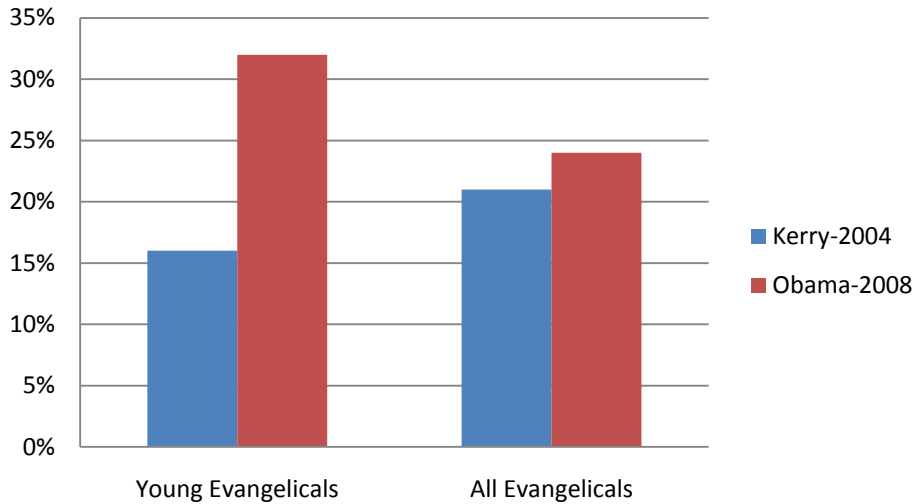
**Figure 5: Party Identification of Young Evangelicals, 18-29**



In September 2008, the Faith and American Politics survey conducted by Greenberg, Quinlan, and Rosner revealed that, while older evangelicals strongly favored John McCain, younger evangelicals' preference was not so clear. Among white evangelicals over the age of 30, 73 percent favored McCain compared with 22 percent favoring Barack Obama. Young evangelicals, on the other hand, were less supportive of McCain's candidacy. Although McCain still held a majority of young evangelicals, his support decreased to 62 percent to Obama's 30 percent.<sup>9</sup>

The 2008 election saw a marked change in young evangelical voting behavior. In 2004, Democrat John Kerry earned 16 percent the young evangelical vote, and 21 percent of the evangelical vote overall. Obama, on the other hand, had much greater success among young evangelicals. While Obama only gained three additional percentage points in the evangelical vote overall, he earned double the support from young evangelicals that Kerry received in 2004.<sup>10</sup> Exit poll data indicate that 32 percent of evangelicals between the ages of 18 and 29 voted for Obama, a number ten percentage points higher than evangelicals between the ages of thirty and sixty-four.<sup>11</sup> Though the long-term significance of the changing young evangelical vote is debated, the distinct change in candidate preference from 2004 to 2008 is an interesting phenomenon to study.

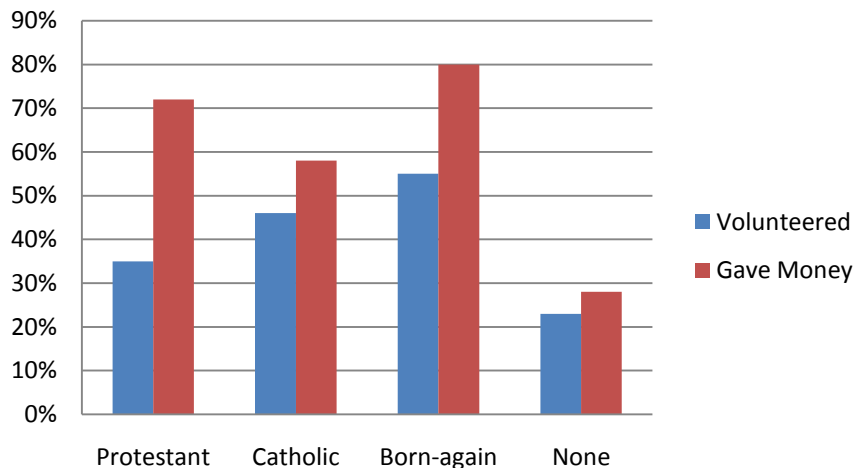
**Figure 6: Support for Democratic Presidential Candidates among Evangelicals, by Age**



### Civic Engagement and Views

According to 2008 ANES data, young Americans of faith are significantly more likely to volunteer and to contribute money to charity than young people with no religious affiliation. When asked if they had volunteered in the past six months, fully 55 percent of young born-again, 46 percent of young Catholics, and 37 percent of young Protestants said that they volunteered. Among young people with no religious affiliation, however, just 23 percent volunteered. Young people of faith were even more likely to say that they contribute money to a charity or church. An overwhelming 80 percent of young born-again and 72 percent of young Protestants said that they gave money to charity. A slightly lower but still significant 58 percent of young Catholics donated money. Among young Americans with no religious affiliation, just 29 percent contributed money to charity.

**Figure 7: Civic Engagement of Young Americans, by Religious Affiliation**



Young people in the “None” category were also the most likely to say that they do not belong to any groups or organizations. Fully 75 percent of young “Nones” said that they were not a member of any organizations, compared with 61 percent of young Protestants, 57 percent of young Catholics, and just 53 percent of young born-again Christians.

Percentages of young people contacting public officials regarding their views on an issue and attending community meetings were more equitable among groups. However, for neither of these activities were young “Nones” the most likely to participate or even the second most likely.

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<sup>1</sup> CIRCLE Research Intern. I thank Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg, Peter Levine, and Surbhi Godsay for their technical assistance and comments on earlier versions of this fact sheet.

<sup>2</sup> Corwin Smidt, “Religion and Civic Engagement: A Comparative Analysis,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 565, issue 1, pp. 176-192 (1999).

<sup>3</sup> Troy Gibson, “Religion and Civic Engagement among America’s Youth,” *The Social Science Journal*, vol. 45, Issue 3, pp. 501-514 (Sept. 2008).

<sup>4</sup> Because each of the other religious groups is so small, the number of people surveyed is too few to make judgments about the group as a whole.

<sup>5</sup> Robert D. Woodberry and Christian S. Smith, “Fundamentalism et al: Conservative Protestants in America,” *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 24, issue 1, pp. 25-56 (1998).

<sup>6</sup> “U.S. Religious Landscape Survey,” Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Alan Cooperman, “Democrats Win Bigger Share of Religious Vote,” *The Washington Post*, 11 Nov. 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Dan Cox, “Young White Evangelicals: Less Republican, Still Conservative,” *Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life*, 28 Sept. 2007 <<http://pewforum.org/docs/?DocID=250>>.

<sup>9</sup> “Young Evangelical Christians and the 2008 Election,” *Religion and Ethics NewsWeekly*, Greenberg, Quinlan, Rosner Research, Inc., 2008.

<sup>10</sup> Laurie Goodstein, “Obama Made Gains among Younger Evangelical Voters, Data Show,” *The New York Times*, 7 Nov. 2008.

<sup>11</sup> Eric Gorski, “Experts: Obama Gained Faithful Voters But Didn’t Redraw Map,” *USA Today*, 6 Nov. 2008.