

US Centre 2018 Student Essay Competition Winner: ‘The existential crisis at the heart of white evangelicalism’



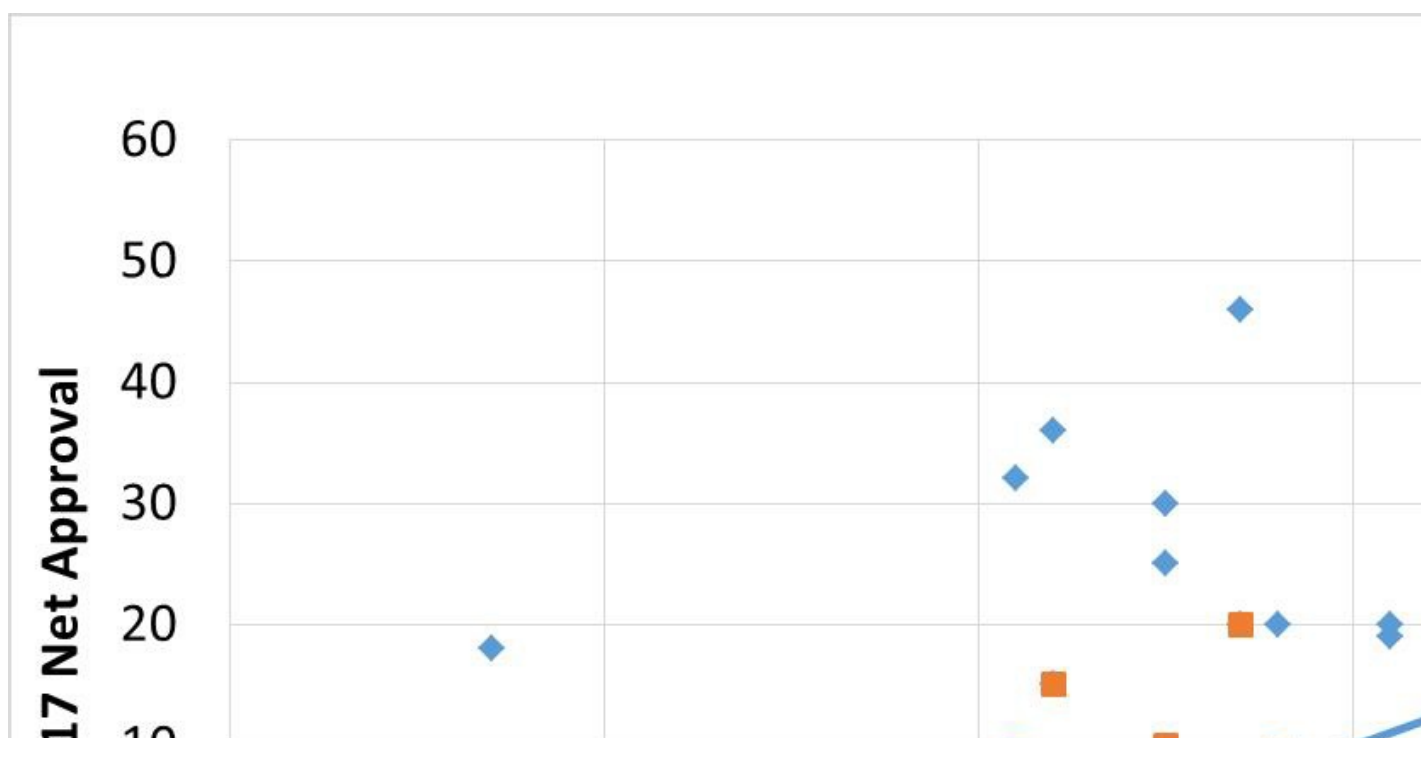
Religious rigidity has historically been one of the key fortifiers of White Evangelicalism but in 2018 it also poses its greatest existential threat. [Rafae Qazi](#) writes that, as diversity of race, sexuality and religion rises, the social cost of adhering to increasingly socially incongruous beliefs such as that on same sex marriage will also rise. Whilst 71 percent of older evangelicals support this traditionalist outlook, droves of young white evangelicals are disaffiliating, with 60 percent citing lack of faith and 29 percent specifically stating the church’s view on the LGBT community as a prominent cause for disaffiliation. The White Evangelical church may be towering over US politics in 2018, but it appears that its long term influence is on a serious decline.

- **This essay is the winner of the LSE US Centre’s 2018 Student Essay competition. [Click here](#) to read the runners up.**

Evangelicals have a deep tradition of political activism that is engrained in American history. When evangelist sympathising Presbyterian Minister John Witherspoon signed the Declaration of Independence he did so to demand the right to accept Christ as his saviour, without any political coercion. Thus, from its very inception, American evangelicalism has always been deeply political.

The morality of this fusion however has not always been so righteous. As Thomas Jefferson [took a razor](#) to his copy of the Gospels, Baptists with evangelical sympathies remained loyal, to enshrine the right to religious freedom. Thus, when leading evangelical Tony Perkins [offers](#) Trump a *mulligan* for his past faults we should not be surprised. Evangelicalism has a history of political opportunism and this period is no different. In 2011, [three in ten evangelicals](#) believed moral transgressions in private life lead to unethical public officials, however in 2016 with Donald Trump in the Oval Office, more than seven in ten declared personal morality did not matter to them. It was the elevation of Neil Gorsuch to the Supreme Court and the institution of prohibitive abortion policies that mattered.

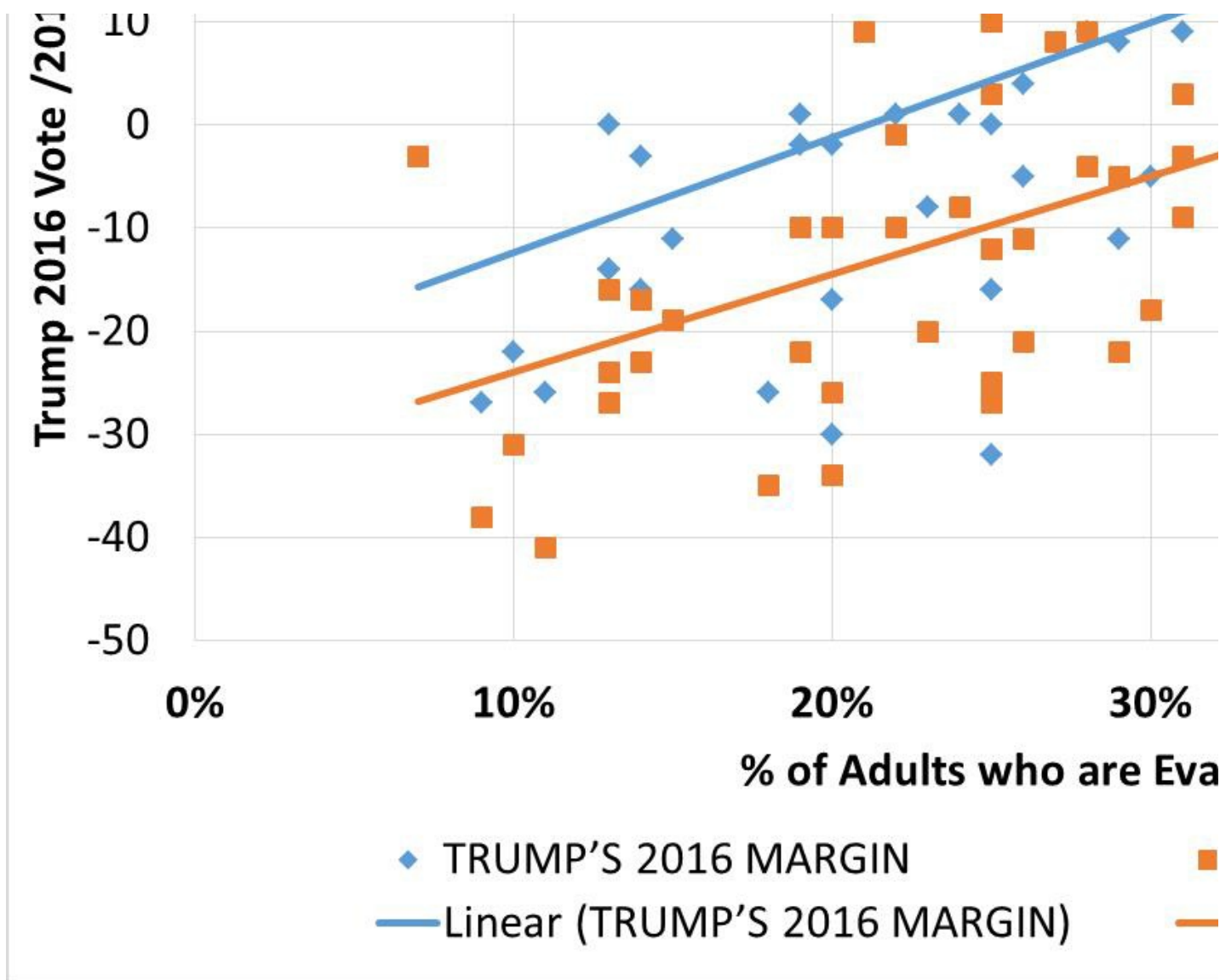
Figure 1 – Trends between Evangelical Population and Trump support per state



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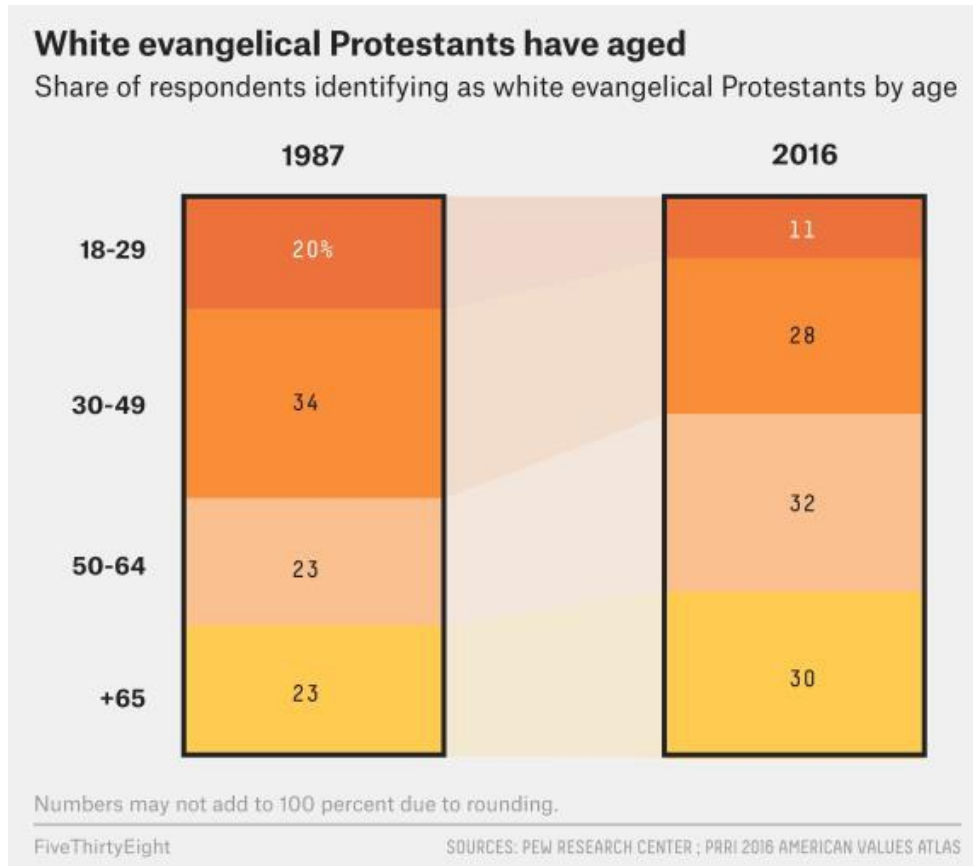
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Source: [Pew Research](#) and [Gallup](#). Graph produced by Author

The depth and vigour of the support was so great (Figure 1) that eight in ten white evangelicals voted for Trump, matching or exceeding the support gained by Bush and Romney. Whilst this may appear to indicate the staunch loyalty of this faction, it may also be the case, that those who felt uncomfortable with this support have left the church. In 2006 [23 percent of Americans](#) self-identified as white evangelical whereas by 2016 that figure dropped to 17 percent (Figure 2). Therefore, the political mobilisation force of evangelicalism is waning. A clear signal of this slow demise was when despite 80 percent of white evangelicals voting for Roy Moore in the Alabama Senate race, the same level of support they offered Trump, they were unable to elect him.

Figure 2



Source: [FiveThirtyEight](#)

With a falling membership, primarily due to youth disaffiliation it may be suggested that the evangelical church is losing influence. To revitalise it should reform. This would perhaps appease the [48 percent of White Evangelicals](#) under 30 who support the reformation and modernisation of beliefs, but it would also anger the majority in the traditionalist church who are over 65. Furthermore, a relaxation in its beliefs may make the church less attractive to its core members.

"In the long run, as the congregation ages and shrinks, their electoral influence will wane and 2018 may perhaps even be their last loud clamour"

US Centre 2018 Student Essay Competition winner Rafee Qazi writes on the existential crisis at the heart of white evangelicalism.

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"Donald Trump: Chosen by God to lead America" by [Ninian Reid](#) is licensed under [CC BY 2.0](#)

[Laurence Iannaccone](#) made the case that religious congregation is fundamentally a product that people produce collectively. The stricter the faith, the higher the social price paid for joining it, the more devoted the members and therefore the more superior the collective product. Those who are less passionate and unwilling to maintain their devotion are *weeded out*. What remains is a community of like-minded, devoted and heavily invested individuals. On the church floor, this would mean greeting, praying and socialising with the same people every Sunday and therefore developing a fierce bond between one another over a shared belief. Fundamentally, it is perhaps this tight knot that binds the community together. Relaxation of doctrine, lowers levels of entry and allows in less devoted individuals who threaten to fragment the community. This strict devotion may perhaps partially explain the strong relative *retention rate*. As Table One shows, whilst evangelicalism has one of 0.66, more moderate congregations of mainline Protestants and Catholicism have retention ratios of 0.52 and 0.59 respectively.

Table 1 – Religious switching in the US (percent of the general population)

	Childhood Affiliation	Entering Group	Leaving Group	Current Affiliation	Retention Rate	Net Gain/Loss
White evangelical Protestant	17.8	3.8	6.0	15.6	0.66	-2.2
White mainline Protestant	18.0	4.0	8.6	13.5	0.52	-4.5
Black Protestant	8.2	0.9	1.6	7.6	0.80	-0.6
Other non-white Protestant	5.6	3.0	1.4	7.2	0.75	1.6
Catholic	31.2	2.5	12.8	20.9	0.59	-10.3
Non-Christian religion	5.0	2.1	1.9	5.2	0.62	0.2
Unaffiliated	9.0	18.9	3.1	24.8	0.66	15.8

Source: [PRRI/RNS August 2016 survey](#)

It appears that the white evangelical church faces an all loss situation. If it sticks to its current doctrine it loses its already falling appeal to younger believers and thus threatens its future mobile activism. Billy Graham’s firebrand sermons in the 1950’s about the Satanic menace of Communism captured the public imagination and etched themselves in eternal memory due to the huge rallying crowds of supporters that they galvanised. This iconic mobilisation is under existential threat if the church fails to attract the youth. The median age of the church stands at 55 and is on an upward trajectory with a decreasing membership.

However, if the church does reform, it threatens to fragment its essence. The fierce bonds that hold those communities together are partially formed by their passionate shared devotion. If new entrants are allowed through relaxation of laws it upsets and fragments the current congregation.

There appears to be no clear solutions to these long-term problems.

However, with [35 percent of the GOP](#) still self-identifying as white evangelicals, we should not expect them to lose their political influence in the short or medium term. More Mike Pence’s are likely to occupy powerful Republican posts. But, in the long run, as the congregation ages and shrinks, their electoral influence will wane and 2018 may perhaps even be their last loud clamour.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USAPP– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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Rafee is a first year Philosophy, Politics and Economics student at the LSE. He is interested in American grand strategy and particularly its foreign policy with Pakistan. He has published with Social Vision and is passionate about using data driven social science research to improve public policy debate.