

Evangelicals and Moral Values in the Election of 2004

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On election night 2004 and in its immediate aftermath, much discussion focused on the importance of “moral values” as a basis for voter choice in the presidential race. Analysts, political activists, and pundits noted with evident surprise that a plurality of 22% of voters responding to the National Election Pool’s (NEP) election-day voter survey chose moral values (from a list of seven items) in response to a question asking “which ONE issue mattered most in deciding how you voted for President.” Subsequent commentary on the race argued that the Democrats (and the news media) had failed to appreciate the size and fervor of “values voters,” and seemed to conclude that Democrat John Kerry had failed to close the “God gap” between his party and the rest of the country.

The apparent rush to interpret the election through the prism of a single exit poll question quickly led to warnings that too much was being made of this datum – including a caution from the chief pollster for one of the television networks that sponsored the exit poll (Langer 2004). Subsequent analysis by academics and other pollsters also argued that the exit poll evidence was equivocal and could not be used to prove that the election hinged on issues such as gay marriage, abortion, and the like (Burden 2004; Hillygus and Shields 2005; Pew Research Center 2004).

But even if critics are right to question the simplistic conclusion that moral values – whatever they are – somehow arose from nowhere to swing the election to Bush, the impression left by the revisionist interpretations may also be misleading. Even if it did so inadvertently, the “moral values” polling item underscores the importance of a genuine group of “values voters”: white evangelical Christians.

Despite his advantage on the critical issue of terrorism (Pew Research Center 2005a; Hillygus and Shields 2005), President Bush would have lost his reelection bid without a strong showing among white evangelicals. Bush advisor Karl Rove said in a 2001 speech at the American Enterprise Institute that the 2000 election was closer than expected because of a shortfall in votes from conservative Christians. Rove was quoted as saying: “There should have been 19 million of them, and instead there were 15 million of them. So four million of them did not turn out to vote. ... But we also may be returning to the point in America where

fundamentalists and evangelicals remain true to their beliefs and think politics is corrupt and therefore they shouldn't participate. ... If this process of withdrawal continues, it's bad for conservatives, bad for Republicans, but also bad for the country. ... It's something we have to spend a lot of time and energy on.”

A key part of the Bush campaign’s strategy for 2004 was the mobilization of the “missing evangelicals.” Although the evangelical share of the 2004 electorate was not higher than in 2000 (23% in both years), the proportion of evangelicals voting for the president did rise – from 68% in 2000 to 78% in 2004. Bush’s gains among evangelicals exceeded his gains among all other groups in the population. While terrorism and Bush’s response to it were a very important reason for support among evangelical voters, the cluster of considerations captured by the term “moral values” arguably provided an additional edge – either as an explicit justification for voting for Bush or as a reason for the growing association of evangelicals with the Republican Party. Indeed, white evangelicals have become the bedrock of the Republican Party. In the 2004 election, they were the largest single demographic group among Bush voters, constituting fully 35% of his total. By comparison, African-Americans – the most loyal of Democratic constituencies – constituted only about one-fifth (21%) of Kerry's voters.

This analysis of the importance of the evangelical voter in the 2004 election and the controversy over the “most important issue” exit poll question draws on data from surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center from 1987 to the present, as well as exit polls conducted by Voter News Service, the National Election Pool, and the *Los Angeles Times*.

The Critique of NEP and the Rebuttal

Skepticism regarding the importance of moral values in the election centered on three related arguments. First, critics noted that although moral values was the choice of a plurality (22%) in the NEP poll, it barely exceeded “economy/jobs” (20%) and terrorism (19%). Iraq was mentioned by 15%. Even taking “moral values” at face value, issues related to foreign and military policy (terrorism at 19% + Iraq at 15%) easily

outpaced it. Second, it was noted that “moral values” conflates issues and the personal qualities of the candidates, since the term could logically refer to the moral attributes of Bush or Kerry. Third, some critics argued that “moral values” was not a specific issue such as Iraq or gay marriage; instead, in the words of ABC’s Gary Langer, “Moral values is a grab bag; it may appeal to people who oppose abortion, gay marriage and stem-cell research but, because it’s so broadly defined, it pulls in others as well” (Langer 2004).

	All	Bush	Kerry
Moral values	22	35	8
Economy/jobs	20	7	33
Terrorism	19	32	6
Iraq	15	8	22
Health care	8	4	13
Taxes	5	6	5
Education	4	2	7
Don't know	7	7	7

While these objections have merit, they also have their limits. Regarding the latter concern, abortion might be a specific example of an issue within the catch-all category of moral values, but one could argue that other terms on the exit poll list are similarly broad. For example, “economy/jobs” encompasses many different specific issues including the minimum wage, job training, economic development assistance to depressed areas, trade policy that affects the health of domestic manufacturing firms, and so forth. The omission of other issues related to the economy could also have distorted the results: Social Security was not even on the list, despite the president’s expressed desire to introduce private accounts to the system, and despite the fact that it was on the exit poll list in 2000 and was checked by 14% of voters.

Although moral values was indeed the choice of only a slim plurality in the NEP poll, it proved to be even more popular in the *Los Angeles Times* exit poll’s expanded format (12

options) that permitted respondents to choose more than one issue and also to choose among a mix of general and specific issues. The *Los Angeles Times* exit poll found that “moral/ethical values” led the list in *both* 2000 and 2004. In 2000, it was checked by 35% overall, and 55% among Bush voters. In 2004, 40% picked it, including 54% among Bush voters. In both years, the list also included abortion (in 2000 as a separate item checked by 14%, and in 2004 in an item labeled “social issues such as abortion and gay marriage,” which was checked by 15%). The fact that “moral/ethical values” led the lengthy *Los Angeles Times* list in both years – one election with and one without an overriding national security issue in play – strongly suggests that the term captures an ongoing and strong concern among a segment of voters.

The objection that “moral values” taps into opinions about the personal qualities of the candidates and not just issues is a reasonable one, though that was evidently true of only a minority of those choosing it. Pew’s question probing the meaning of “moral values” among those who picked it (discussed in detail below) found that 23% explicitly mentioned some kind of candidate personal quality.

<i>Los Angeles Times Exit Poll</i>			
Which issues, if any, were most important to you in deciding how you would vote for president today? (UP TO TWO REPLIES ACCEPTED)			
2004	All	Bush	Kerry
Moral/Ethical values	40	54	24
Jobs/economy	33	18	48
Terrorism/Homeland security	29	45	13
Situation in Iraq	16	11	21
Education	15	12	18
Social issues such as abortion and gay marriage	15	14	15
Taxes	9	11	7
Health care	9	5	14
Foreign affairs	5	3	8
Social Security	5	3	7
Medicare/Prescription Drugs	3	2	4
None of the above	2	2	3
2000	All	Bush	Gore
Moral/Ethical values	35	55	17
Education	25	20	31
Social Security	21	16	25
Taxes	17	25	9
Abortion	14	17	12
The environment	9	2	14
Health care	8	5	11
Medicare/Prescription drugs	8	6	10
Budget surplus	6	6	6
Foreign affairs	5	5	5
None of the above	4	4	3

Criteria for the Vote

“Moral values” were especially important to evangelical voters, whether in the NEP or Pew fixed-list question, or Pew’s open ended question that allowed voters to mention anything they wished. Indeed, most of the voters who mentioned moral values were white evangelicals, despite the fact that they constitute only about one quarter of the electorate.

In its post-election survey, the Pew Research Center replicated the seven-item issues list from the exit poll. From the closed-ended list, 27% of all voters said “moral values” was the most important issue in their vote (slightly higher than the 22% who picked it in the exit poll).¹ Among white evangelicals, fully 55% picked moral values, and no more than 11% (for terrorism) selected any other issue. On its face, this sizeable disparity between moral values and other issues would signal the importance of the concept for evangelicals. But a similar, and proportionally larger, disparity appeared even without the cue of the “moral values” terminology.

In Pew’s open-ended version of the question, 42% of white evangelicals mentioned either “moral values” explicitly (27%), a specific social issue such as abortion or gay marriage (8%), or made some reference to the morality or religiosity of the candidates (7%). No other issue was

Wide Gap Over the Issues That Matter				
	-- Fixed List* --		-- Open End** --	
	All voters	White Evang.	All voters	White Evang.
	%	%	%	%
Moral values (Net)	27	55	14	42
Moral values	--	--	9	27
Social issues [^]	--	--	3	8
Candidate’s morals	--	--	2	7
Iraq	22	9	25	14
Economy/Jobs	21	10	12	6
Terrorism	14	11	9	9
Health Care	4	5	2	2
Education	4	2	1	1
Taxes	3	0	1	1
Other	4	6	31	20
Honesty/integrity	--	--	5	5
Like/dislike Bush	--	--	5	4
Like/dislike Kerry	--	--	3	4
Direction of country	--	--	2	1
Leadership	--	--	2	1
Foreign policy	--	--	2	0
Don’t know	<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>5</u>
	100	100	100	100
Number of cases	(567)	(150)	(569)	(129)

* First choice among the seven items on the exit poll list.
 ** Unprompted verbatim first response to open-ended question.
 ^ Abortion, gay marriage, stem cells
 Source: Pew Research Center post-election survey, Nov. 2004

¹It’s certainly possible that the choice of “moral values” was somewhat more popular in this post-election survey as a result of the widespread discussion of the exit poll finding, though the 5 point difference between the exit poll and the Pew poll barely exceeds the threshold for statistical significance.

picked by more than 14% of evangelicals. By contrast, only 14% of voters overall (or about 6% of non-evangelicals) mentioned moral values or a closely related topic. Far more – 25% – mentioned the war in Iraq. Another way to look at the experiment is to consider that twice as many evangelicals as voters as a whole selected “moral values” from the exit poll list; in the open-ended version, without the cue, three times as many evangelicals mentioned something within the moral values framework. This strongly suggests that while the exit poll list may have inflated the number concerned about moral values, it did so more for the public in general than for evangelicals.

Defining Moral Values

Voters who were given the fixed list of issues (which corresponded to the choices on the exit poll) were asked to describe, in their own words, “what comes to mind when you think about ‘moral values’?” Among voters who chose moral values as most important from the list of seven issues, about half gave a response that mentioned a substantive issue. More than four-in-ten (44%) defined the phrase specifically in terms of social issues (and 51% among evangelicals), including abortion (28%), homosexuality and gay marriage (29%), or stem cell research (4%). A few other issues also were mentioned, including poverty, economic inequality, and the like.

But the meaning of moral values was not limited to substantive policies. Nearly a quarter of respondents (23%) who cited moral values as important explained their thinking in terms of the personal characteristics of the candidates, including honesty and integrity (cited by 9%). Almost one-in-five (18%) explicitly mentioned religion, Christianity, God, or the Bible. Another 17% answered in terms of traditional values, using such

“Moral Values” -- What Comes to Mind?		
	Chose moral values* %	Did not choose %
Social policies (Net)	44	18
Gay marriage	29	11
Abortion	28	8
Stem cells	4	3
Other policies	9	8
Candidate qualities	23	17
Religious references	18	11
Traditional values	17	35
Negative responses	1	12
Other (Vol.)	4	6
Means nothing/DK	2	15
Number of cases	(205)	(362)

Numbers add to more than 100% because voters could list up to two items.
 * Voters who selected “moral values” as either the first or second most important issue from the list of seven items.
 Source: Pew Research Center post-election survey, Nov. 2004

language as “family values,” “right and wrong,” or “the way people live their lives.”

People who did *not* choose moral values from the list of issues were also asked what the term meant to them. The pattern of responses was quite different from those who said moral values were an important consideration. Fewer mentioned a specific issue, candidate quality, or general religious theme; more answered in general terms, and 12% explicitly protested the imposition of others’ values on them, said the idea was being used as a “wedge” against Democrats, or otherwise expressed a negative reaction to the phrase.

The Partisan Realignment of Evangelicals

The rising political clout of evangelical Christians is not the result of growth in their numbers but rather their increasing cohesiveness as a key element of the Republican Party. The percentage of the population who are white evangelicals has changed very little (19% in 1987; 22% now) and what growth there was occurred in the late 1980s and early 1990s.²

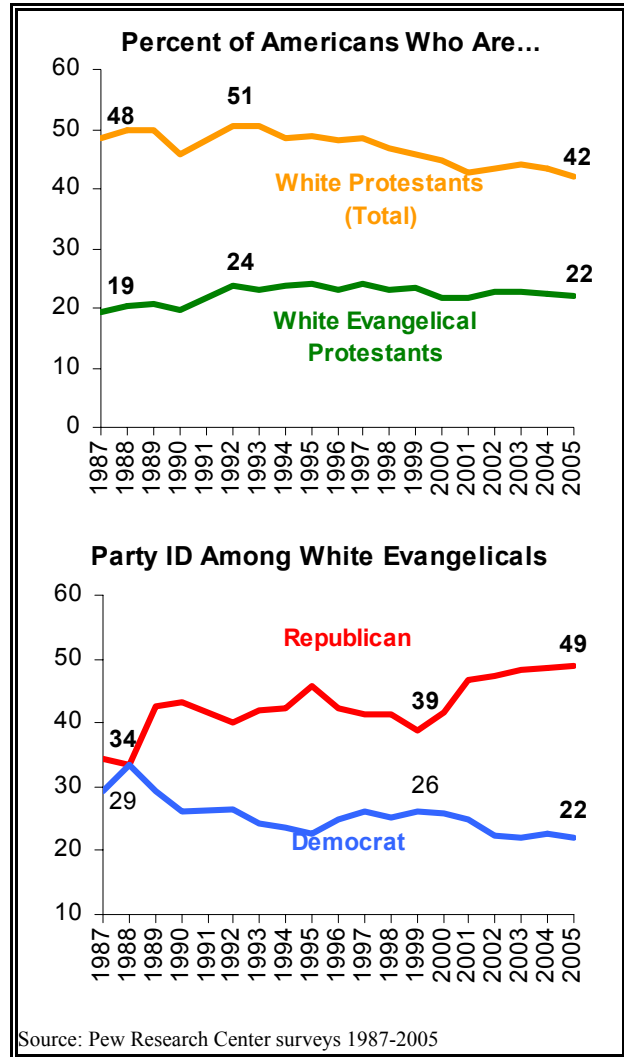
However, in 1987, white evangelical Protestants were closely divided in their partisan attachments, with 34% identifying as Republicans and 29% as Democrats. Today, Republicans outnumber Democrats within this group by more than two-to-one (49%-22%) – and hold a 62%-34% lead when partisan “leaners” are included. Given the relative stability in the party affiliation of other religious groups in the population -- and the population as a whole – this is a remarkable degree of change. Although Republican Party identification among both evangelicals and non-evangelicals increased slightly in the year following the September 11 attacks, it has since fallen back to pre-9/11 levels for non-evangelicals. Among evangelicals, it has continued to rise.

²“White evangelical Protestants” are defined by Pew as non-blacks who identify as Protestant or other Christian (but not Catholic) and answer “yes” when asked “Would you describe yourself as a “born again” or evangelical Christian, or not?”

This shift toward Republican identification among white evangelicals came in two stages. In the late 1980s, white evangelicals in the South were still mostly wedded to the Democratic Party while evangelicals outside the South were more aligned with the GOP. But over the course of the next decade or so, the GOP made gains among white Southerners generally – and evangelicals in particular – nearly eliminating this regional disparity.

The second stage began in 2000, coinciding with Bush’s election. In polling conducted by Pew in 1999, Republicans outnumbered Democrats among white evangelicals 39% to 26%; in 2000 the gap was 42%-26%. Since then, there has been growth in Republican identification among *both* Southern and non-Southern

evangelicals. Nationwide, Republican identification among white evangelicals has increased to 49% in polling conducted in 2005. In 2005, white evangelicals make up 22% of the population, and constitute nearly four out of every ten (37%) Republicans.



Presidential Vote, 2000 and 2004

Very few demographic groups vote overwhelmingly for one party or the other. African-Americans have been nearly unified in support of the Democratic Party since voting rights legislation promoted by President Lyndon Johnson expanded the franchise to blacks living in the South, drawing them away from the party of Abraham Lincoln. In presidential elections over the past 30 years, their level of support for the Democratic candidate has varied between 83 and 91%.

But white evangelicals are approaching this degree of political solidarity with the GOP. In the 2004 presidential race, George W. Bush received 78% of the vote among white evangelicals, up 10 percentage points from 2000. This was the highest level of support for Bush among any religious group (or, indeed, any demographic or social group other than Republican Party identifiers), and represented the largest increase of any group in his vote share compared with 2000.

President Bush significantly increased his margin among evangelicals but also made gains among other religious groups. Bush's overall gain from 2000 to 2004 was 3 percentage points. It was 5 percentage points among Catholics, 6 points among Jews, and 6 points among black Protestants. But he did not improve this much among all groups. He gained 2 points among mainline Protestants and 1 point among voters who identified with no religious

Presidential Vote by Religion, 2000-2004					
	2000 VNS Exit Poll		2004 NEP Exit Poll		<i>Bush gain</i>
	Bush	Gore	Bush	Kerry	
	%	%	%	%	
TOTAL	48	48	51	48	+3
Protestant (all)	56	42	59	40	+3
White Protestant	62	35	67	33	+5
Evangelical*	68	30	78	21	+10
Mainline*	53	43	55	45	+2
Catholic (all)	47	50	52	47	+5
White, Non-Hisp.					
Catholic	52	45	56	43	+4
Hispanic Catholic	33	65	39	58	+6
Black Protestant	7	91	13	86	+6
Jewish	19	79	25	74	+6
Other religion	28	62	23	74	-5
Secular	30	61	31	67	+1
Protestant					
Weekly or more	64	34	66	33	+2
Less often	48	49	52	47	+4
Catholic					
Weekly or more	53	44	56	43	+3
Less often	42	54	49	50	+7
Church Attend					
More than 1/wk	63	36	64	35	+1
1/week	57	40	58	41	+1
Few/month	46	51	50	49	+4
Few/year	42	54	45	54	+3
Never	32	61	36	62	+4

*Evangelical/mainline division in 2000 estimated from Pew's final pre-election poll. All other estimates based on Voter News Service (VNS) and National Election Pool (NEP) exit polls. (Pew's final pre-election poll in 2004 estimated that evangelicals would vote 79-21 for Bush..) Pew trends include Hispanics in its designation of white Protestants, exit poll figures adjusted to fit this definition.

tradition. Among religious voters outside of the Judeo-Christian religious traditions, he lost vote share (down 5 percentage points).

Still, it is interesting that Bush gained as much among the less observant Judeo-Christian voters as among the more observant. Among voters who never attend religious services, Bush’s support was up 4 points (and was up a similar amount among those who only occasionally attend). His gains were greater among both Protestants and Catholics who attend church less frequently than weekly than among those who attend weekly or more often.

Voter Turnout in 2004

Even though voter turnout was up significantly in 2004, there is no indication that religiously-committed voters in general – or white evangelicals in particular – boosted their level of participation more than other groups in the population. According to a comparison of exit polls and Pew surveys in 2000 and 2004, white evangelicals constituted the same percentage of the electorate in both years: 23%. Overall, there was remarkable stability from 2000 to 2004 in the religious composition of the electorate.

White Protestants constituted nearly half of the electorate (45%), divided almost evenly between mainline and evangelical Protestants (22% and 23% respectively). White, non-Hispanic Catholics were a similar percentage (21%). Other religious groups, including black Protestants, Hispanic Catholics, and others, were nearly one-quarter (24%). Avowedly secular individuals constituted 10% of the electorate, but it is worth noting that 15% of voters said they never attended religious services

Religious Groups as a Share of the Electorate			
	2000 VNS Exit Poll	2004 NEP Exit Poll	Change
<i>Tradition</i>	%	%	
White Protestant	46	45	-1
Evangelical*	23	23	0
Mainline*	23	22	-1
White non-Hisp Catholic	21	21	0
Secular	9	10	+1
Other	<u>24</u>	<u>24</u>	0
	100	100	
<i>Church Attendance</i>			
More than 1/week	15	16	+1
1/week	29	27	-2
Few/month	14	14	0
Few/year	28	28	0
Never	<u>14</u>	<u>15</u>	+1
	100	100	

*Evangelical/mainline division in 2000 estimated from Pew pre-election poll. All other estimates based on Voter News Service (VNS) and National Election Pool (NEP) exit polls. Pew trends include Hispanics in its designation of white Protestants, exit poll figures adjusted to fit this definition.

and another 28% said they did so only a few times per year. Voter turnout – as reflected in the number of voters from each of these groups in the electorate, relative to 2000 – was up among all of these segments, but no more by some than others.

Conservative Turnout Rises

Although not more religious, the electorate of 2004 was more Republican and conservative than the electorate of 2000. In 2004, Republicans matched Democrats 37%-37%, compared with 39% Democrat, 35% Republican in 2000. The percentage of self-identified conservatives rose four points (from 30% to 34%).

Conservative gains were about the same among less frequent churchgoers (up 2%) as among those who attend church at least once a week (up 1%). Similarly, turnout among Republicans who do not attend church weekly was up at least as much as among those who go less often.

Greater Turnout among Conservatives – and Not Just Churchgoing Conservatives			
<i>Percentage of all voters who fall into each group</i>	<i>2000 VNS Exit Poll %</i>	<i>2004 NEP Exit Poll %</i>	<i>Change</i>
Conservative	30	34	+4
Attend weekly	18	19	+1
Less than weekly	12	14	+2
Moderate	49	46	-3
Attend weekly	19	18	-1
Less than weekly	30	28	-2
Liberal	22	21	-1
Attend weekly	6	6	0
Less than weekly	16	15	-1

Discussion

Evangelical Christians have been a powerful force in American politics at many points in the nation’s history. They played a key role in the rise of the abolitionist movement, in the triumph of the progressive movement, and more recently in the rise of the religious right in the 1970s and 1980s. Despite considerable ambivalence about engaging in politics, many American evangelicals have come to believe that participation in politics is necessary to defend their values and promote their vision of society. Their growing solidarity on behalf of the Republican Party has been critical in the party’s electoral successes of the past decade, and promise to keep the party competitive for the foreseeable future. Petrocik (2005) argues that this shift has made the American party system more like that of other western democracies: “The mobilization of the

religious impulse by the GOP has created a Republican coalition that is highly similar to the coalitions that support Christian Democratic parties through much of the rest of the world. Its impact on American electoral politics is to make cultural and moral issues a centerpiece of party conflict, often able to trump economic concerns and major international events.”

The 2005 election was unusual insofar as the campaign was dominated by the issue of terrorism and the related judgments about the war in Iraq. It was also a remarkably candidate-focused election, with public opinion highly polarized around President Bush and, by extension, his signature policies. In this environment, there was less room than usual for other issues to play a decisive role in voter choice.

Still, the election was very close, especially in key states, and many other factors – including “moral values” – may have played a role in tipping the balance, especially insofar as they served to mobilize conservative evangelical Christians. The issue of gay marriage, for example, may have helped the Bush campaign in the linchpin state of Ohio, where a ballot initiative banning gay marriage was thought by many observers to have boosted turnout among religious conservatives. Though some analysts doubt whether the ballot initiative was decisive in swinging Ohio, and thus the election, to Bush (Freedman 2004), there can be little doubt that the issue was important to some voters, especially evangelicals. For instance, Lewis’s extensive analysis of state level polling (2005) concluded that “Same-sex marriage mattered in the 2004 election, less than some issues but more than most.” Campbell and Monson (2005) acknowledged that the gay marriage propositions had a downside: “Bush lost votes from secularly-oriented Republicans in states with a gay marriage ban.” Yet the balance of their evidence suggested that Bush was helped overall: “But given that there are a lot more evangelicals than secularists in America, and among Republican sympathizers specifically, Bush’s gains almost certainly outweighed his losses.”

Yet although they exhibited impressive political solidarity in the 2004 election and have become a significant part of the Republican Party, evangelicals remain a diverse group in many respects. Their strong support for George W. Bush reflects a combination of factors that may not

always be present in future elections: great personal affinity for the presidential candidate himself; heightened concerns about foreign and security policy tied, at least in part, to the Middle East and to Israel; and the elevated prominence of social issues such as gay marriage. Pew's typology of the American electorate revealed that evangelicals are not concentrated in a wing of religious conservatives, but instead constitute a sizable segment of each of three distinct Republican groups. White evangelicals are 43% of the aptly-named Social Conservatives, but also 34% of the business-friendly Enterprisers, and 37% of the "pro-government conservatives" (Pew Research Center 2005b).

The latter is an economically struggling bloc of voters who could defect from the party over bread-and-butter issues. Other kinds of issues could split evangelicals from the party as well. Although their support for a muscular foreign policy is solid right now, evangelicals could conceivably form alliances with liberal internationalists and oppose Republican Party doctrine with respect to the human rights policies of U.S. allies. And there have been interesting alliances between evangelicals and environmentalists in certain parts of the country. But as long as the issue of "moral values" remains on the political agenda, and the GOP is identified as the party most supportive of the evangelicals' interpretation of it, their attachment to the party is likely to remain strong.

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