



Background Memo: Donald Trump's Religious Right: A House Divided

Donald Trump's presidential candidacy has definitively divided a once-seamless fusion of evangelical theology and political conservatism. The release of a 2005 video recording in which Trump is heard boasting about sexual assault and attempted adultery is proving "[a bridge too far](#)" for evangelicals, as conservative commentator and #NeverTrump stalwart Erick Erickson put it.

This memo summarizes emerging divisions among evangelical elites, denunciations of Trump by prominent conservative Christian media outlets, and polling that demonstrates Trump's vulnerability among evangelicals. It also includes bios of experts who can speak on the record.

The fallout of the video's release has not transformed former conservatives into progressives. But they have for the first time polarized evangelical leaders into two vastly different camps: 1) leaders principally located in political movement conservatism – e.g., Jerry Falwell, Jr., Tony Perkins, Ralph Reed, James Dobson, etc., and 2) leaders rooted in churches and institutions that have traditionally maintained a distance from electoral politics.

The full consequences of this quickly growing divide are hard to predict, but present data strongly suggests a generational and, possibly, gender-based revolt within evangelicalism against many of its political institutions.

If evangelical voters continue to defect from Trump, it could effectively end his chances of winning the presidency and alter the landscape of the Republican party for years to come.

Furthermore, polling reveals significant differences between millennial-age white evangelicals and older white evangelicals, pointing to clear signs that a generational shift is under way, and that Trump's candidacy may be accelerating this trend.

The fallout from the Trump tapes also includes a public denunciation from Pastor James MacDonald, a member of Trump's evangelical advisory council.

The influence of conservative political institutions like Tony Perkins' Family Research Council and Ralph Reed's Faith and Freedom Coalition has derived largely from their claim to speak for the political commitments of millions of white evangelical voters. Such institutions may still represent mainstream evangelical political values on issues like same-sex marriage and abortion. However, Donald Trump's candidacy has caused an unprecedented split between these political institutions, which still support him, and evangelical spiritual institutions, which house a significant and substantive base of opposition.

Christianity Today and WORLD take a stand

Following the release of the 2005 tape, two of the most influential evangelical publications in the United States issued irrevocable denunciations of Trump. Taken together, the *Christianity Today* and *WORLD* editorials are a bellwether of the divide that Trump has opened between evangelical thought leaders in the political and spiritual spheres.

Christianity Today, the flagship publication of American evangelicalism founded by Billy Graham, has historically maintained a position of studious neutrality on political campaigns. But, as editorial director **Andy Crouch** wrote following the release of the Trump video tape, "[just because we are neutral...does not mean we are indifferent. We are especially not indifferent when the gospel is at stake.](#)" In the most stinging paragraph, Crouch writes:

"...Trump is an idolater in many other ways. He has given no evidence of humility or dependence on others, let alone on God his Maker and Judge. He wantonly celebrates strongmen and takes every opportunity to humiliate and demean the vulnerable. He shows no curiosity or capacity to learn. He is, in short, the very embodiment of what the Bible calls a fool."

Christianity Today's denunciation of Trump is unprecedented in its recent history, especially given that he represents the party that has been a standard-bearer on culture-war issues (abortion, sexuality) that remain theologically important to the *Christianity Today* editorial staff and readership alike.

The editorial by *WORLD* magazine is perhaps even more remarkable, given the magazine's deeply conservative political orientation and its extra step of declaring that [Trump should withdraw from the race](#). Editor-in-Chief **Marvin Olasky** and the editors write:

"Although *WORLD* over its 30 years has been more critical of Democrats than Republicans, particularly because of the abortion issue, we are not partisan. The standards we applied to Bill Clinton in 1998 are relevant to Donald Trump in 2016. A Clinton resignation would have been good for America's moral standards in 1998. A Trump step-aside would be good for America's moral standards in 2016. It's still not too late to turn the current race between two unfit major party candidates into a contest fit for a great country."

Evangelical women leaders speak up

The 2005 Trump video tape has sparked responses from several evangelical women leaders with huge followings – but whose prior public positions have been assiduously apolitical and spiritual.

Beth Moore (@BethMooreLPM) is a speaker and author whose massive influence, especially with women, extends far beyond her own Southern Baptist denomination. She launched a flurry of tweets in response to the Trump tape:

“Wake up, Sleepers, to what women have dealt with all along in environments of gross entitlement & power. Are we sickened? Yes. Surprised? NO”

“Try to absorb how acceptable the disesteem and objectifying of women has been when some Christian leaders don’t think it’s that big a deal.”

Moore’s remarks were subsequently [endorsed by Christine Caine](#), another extraordinarily popular speaker (@ChristineCaine).

In response to Jerry Falwell, Jr.’s, remark that “5 years from now, no one will remember what horrible things Donald Trump said about women,” Christian writer and television personality **Jen Hatmaker** (@JenHatmaker) tweeted “[This is disgusting. We will not forget. Nor will we forget the Christian leaders that betrayed their sisters in Christ for power.](#)”

To put these leaders’ influence in context: Beth Moore has 731,000 Twitter followers, Christine Caine has 283,000, and Jen Hatmaker has 106,000. Evangelical women leaders are often overlooked by media sources because they have not historically engaged electoral politics, but their actual reach and followership is often far greater than that of the professional political operatives who claim evangelicalism’s public mantle. For instance, Tony Perkins and Ralph Reed, two of the most commonly quoted Religious Right political operatives, have 26,000 and 11,700 followers, respectively.

Confirming a Trend: Polling analysis of the Evangelical vote

In the final months of the presidential campaign, the prevailing media narrative has been that Donald Trump enjoys a level of support from white evangelicals that is comparable with other recent Republican presidential candidates. A close examination of publicly available survey research proves otherwise. Additional polling shows Trump struggling badly among millennial evangelicals.

A significant shift in the evangelical vote from 2012

For decades, white evangelical Christians have been a reliable part of the Republican base. In past presidential elections, white evangelical voters have consistently supported the Republican candidate by huge majorities.

In the past three presidential elections, Republicans have captured well over 70% of white evangelical voters. However, three recent national polls report that just over 60% of white evangelicals support Trump. As detailed in the chart below, this represents a historic net shift away from the Republican candidate.

Note that all the 2016 polls cited below were conducted before or partially before last week’s release of the tape documenting Trump’s boasting of sexual assault and attempted adultery.

	Republican Pres. Candidate	Democratic Pres. Candidate	Difference	Net change from previous election
2004 (Bush-Kerry)*	79%	21%	+58	N/A
2008 (McCain-Obama)*	73%	26%	+47	-9
2012 (Romney-Obama)*	79%	20%	+59	+12
2016 (Trump-Clinton)**	63%	17%	+46	-13

Sources:

* [Pew Research Center](#)

** Polls by [Pew Research Center](#), [CBSNews](#), and [Public Religion Research Institute](#) reported virtually the same levels of support: Pew: 63%-17%, CBS: 62%-17%, PRRI: 65%-16%.

The Barna Group, a respected evangelical polling firm, released a poll of likely voters on October 10. Founder **George Barna** described the results:

“Although Trump has a huge lead over Clinton among evangelicals, the most noteworthy finding in this regard is that more than four out of ten evangelicals currently refuse to vote for either of those two candidates. Nearly three out of ten are presently undecided, making them the largest block of undecided votes still up for grabs. One out of eight evangelicals plan to protest the quality of the major party candidates by voting for a third-party or independent candidate. This behavior by evangelicals is unique over the course of the last nine election cycles.”

An emerging generational gap

In 2012 Romney won young evangelicals by 65 percentage points, with a staggering 80% support. In 2016, a poll commissioned by Faith in Public Life Action revealed Trump had only 40% support - half that of Romney. Among millennial evangelicals Trump still leads, but only by 15 percentage points, a huge shift from four years earlier and a sign that the new generation of evangelicals differs politically from older generations.

Sources:

[2016 poll conducted by Expedition Strategies and commissioned by Faith in Public Life Action](#)
[2012 poll by Public Religion Research Institute](#)

An outsized impact on battleground states

Based on 2012 exit polls, every 1 percentage-point drop in Trump's share of the white evangelical vote represents a loss equivalent of over 300,000 Romney voters. With high concentrations of evangelical voters in key Southern and Midwestern battleground states, a small shift in evangelical support away from Trump can have an outsized impact.

Iowa - 38% of the 2012 electorate identifies as evangelical

North Carolina - 35% of the 2012 electorate identifies as evangelical

Ohio - 31% of the 2012 electorate identifies as evangelical

Colorado - 25% of the 2012 electorate identifies as evangelical

Florida - 24% of the 2012 electorate identifies as evangelical

Source: [2012 CNN exit polls](#)

Trump keeps the politicians, loses the church

As *Christianity Today* [reported](#), many of Trump's elite evangelical backers have remained unwavering in their support following the release of the 2005 video. The supporters listed by *Christianity Today*, however, are almost all individuals affiliated with conservative political institutions such as Ralph Reed, James Dobson and Tony Perkins.

Equally telling are the few defectors, who are primarily based, instead, in church-related institutions. **Wayne Grudem**, a noted evangelical theologian, authored a lengthy and widely-cited (and, among #NeverTrump-ers, widely panned) theological and ethical argument for electing Trump. After the revelation of the audio recordings, Grudem [withdrew his endorsement](#), calling the 2005 tape "morally evil" and writing:

"I previously called Donald Trump a "good candidate with flaws" and a "flawed candidate" but I now regret that I did not more strongly condemn his moral character. I cannot commend Trump's moral character, and I strongly urge him to withdraw from the election."

This trending division between evangelicalism's professional political operatives and its pastors and thought leaders represents a natural extension of the pre-existing #NeverTrump faction among conservatives, which has been grounded in pastors (e.g., **Max Lucado, Thabiti Anyabwile, Gabriel Salguero**) and Christian academics and writers (e.g., **James K.A. Smith, Karen Swallow Prior, Alan Noble, Matt Anderson**), rather than conservative politicians. #NeverTrump leaders from the political arena, such as **Russell Moore** and **Eric Teetsel**, are the exception that prove the rule, given their concern with other issues (immigration, criminal justice reform, etc.) in addition to the traditional priorities of the Religious Right.

Sources

Rev. Jennifer Butler

Jennifer is the founding CEO of Faith in Public Life (FPL) and Faith in Public Life Action, and chair of the White House Council on Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships. Before leading FPL, Jennifer spent ten years working in the field of international human rights representing the Presbyterian Church (USA) at the United Nations. She is also an ordained minister in the PC (USA). While mobilizing religious communities to address the AIDS pandemic and advocate for women's rights, she grew passionate about the need to counter religious extremism with a strong religious argument for human rights. Butler is the author of [Born Again: The Christian Right Globalized](#), published by University of Michigan Press.

Michael Wear

A consultant to Faith in Public Life Action, Michael is founder of Public Square Strategies, LLC, and a leading expert and strategist at the intersection of faith, politics and American public life. As one of President Obama's "ambassadors to America's believers" (Buzzfeed), Michael directed faith outreach for President Obama's historic 2012 re-election campaign. Wear is the author of the forthcoming book [Reclaiming Hope: Lessons Learned in the Obama White House About the Future of Faith in America](#). He also writes for The Atlantic, Christianity Today, USA Today, Relevant Magazine and other publications on faith, politics and culture.

Noel Castellanos

Noel serves as CEO of the Christian Community Development Association (CCDA) and has worked in full-time ministry in Latino, urban communities since 1982. He has served in youth ministry, church planting, advocacy and community development in San Francisco, San Jose, and Chicago. Castellanos established the CCDA Institute, which equips emerging church leaders in the philosophy of Christian Community Development. He was also appointed to serve on President Obama's Council for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, and is a highly sought-after speaker, motivator, and mentor to young leaders nationwide. Noel is the co-author of [A Heart for the Community, New Models for Urban and Suburban Ministry](#), and has contributed to various books and publications, including Deep Justice in a Broken World, A Heart for the City, and Crazy Enough to Care.