

Nominal evangelicals for Trump

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

February 29, 2016

It's Super Tuesday, and the many conservatives who are just as appalled by Donald Trump as liberals are have fear in their hearts. Can anything stop him?

[Almost half of today's Republican voters self-identify as evangelical Christians](#). But as we've seen in South Carolina and in polling around the country, this is hardly a guarantee that they won't vote for a...well, I won't detail the reasons Trump makes an unlikely evangelical champion. You can find such snarky little serial lists in any of the dozens of articles contemplating what on earth could be going on here. Evangelical *leaders* are mostly [opposing Trump in no uncertain terms](#). How can this guy be winning votes from their constituents?

Over the last several months, people have offered quite a few reasons:

- **Some suggest [he's simply scamming evangelicals](#)** into thinking he's with them on the issues. But this is pretty condescending. There's little reason to think Trump's supporters don't see what the rest of us see. And it's not like he keeps his cards close to his chest.
- [David Brody's view](#) is more interesting: **Trump's boldness could be its own advantage with evangelicals**, distinct from whatever it is he's being bold *about*. Evangelicals might at some level respect him for his clarity about right and wrong, even if their own moral vision is a good bit richer than *Trump right, haters wrong*. Though this alone, of course, is hardly enough to ignore the actual things Trump seems to think are right.
- Which points to the pragmatism of populism: When people feel beleaguered, **a strongman can look appealing**—details of biography, ideology, and character aside. Leadership, [however perversely defined](#), becomes more important than values. [Carter was an evangelical; Trump is a winner](#). (Great

deck from *Rolling Stone*: “[Having failed to make America Christian, evangelical Trump supporters will settle for making it ‘great.’](#)”) And of course there are plenty of evangelicals [who just want the candidate who’s the least like President Obama](#).

- Nor is all this simply pragmatism without a goal, a compromise for nothing. **Among GOP voters, [being anti-establishment has become its own end](#)**—and [evangelicals are very much a part of this](#). So whatever else Trump is, he is [the enemy of evangelicals’ enemy](#): Washington elites.
- Robbie Jones makes **a strong case that [evangelicals are no longer values voters but rather nostalgia voters](#)**: “a culturally and economically disaffected group that is anxious to hold onto a white, conservative Christian culture that is passing from the scene.” Trump’s values aren’t the point; it’s his desire to make-America-great-again on their behalf and on at least a few of their terms. But is it fair to call such nostalgia *Christian* in any meaningful sense?

Indeed, this is the question all these explanations leave us with. When Trump supporters self-identify as *evangelical*, what exactly are they self-identifying?

It’s not necessarily that they’re all that religious, [says Jack Jenkins](#). He’s right. The Barna Group has long taken the category most people might just call “evangelicals” and divided it into three—based not on church attendance or self-identification but on the extent to which people’s beliefs line up with evangelical teaching. [In a recent survey, Barna found](#) that of these three groups, only the two “less evangelical” ones have a higher view of Trump than do voters generally, and those in the middle category don’t by much.

As for the most strictly defined evangelical group, they don’t like Trump that much. A good bit less than voters generally, in fact.

Now, *liking* isn’t the same as *voting for*. Still, this is an important point: it’s not evangelicals who find Trump appealing so much as it is *nominal* evangelicals. It’s a question of the relative thickness of religious identity—of how much people’s faith actually shapes their lives, how much the gospel empowers them to resist rival narratives of a bully’s protection or “white Christian culture” or making America great again.

We mainline Protestants are quite familiar with nominal religious identity. But we aren't the only ones. On Trump, it isn't just that evangelicals aren't listening to their leaders. It's that some of them lack the moral formation to resist Trump's appeals to their baser instincts. [David Gushee puts it well](#), emphasizing that this is the fault of Christian institutions, not just individuals:

In the Christian moral formation of these supposed Christians they have not been offered an adequate inoculation against this kind of politics. What they needed was instruction in a version of Christianity with ironclad commitments to civility, solidarity, justice, mercy, compassion, rule of law, and human rights, commitments so strong and so well-engrained in believers that to support someone like Trump would be unthinkable. But they have not received that inoculation. So it is not there now, when it is needed, when the body politic faces a mesmerizing candidate of this exact type.

Nominal evangelicals are all over white America, [especially in the cultural evangelicalism of the South](#). Their own church leaders don't like it any more than does the GOP establishment that's still trying to shore up their value votes. The Donald, however, is convinced it's going to be huge.