In 2004, the dominance of the Republican coalition in presidential elections was becoming conventional wisdom. After all, when the smoke cleared in November 2004, the Republicans had won five of the last seven contests. Furthermore, although Democrat Bill Clinton won the Electoral College (and therefore the presidency) in 1992 and 1996, in both elections he failed to win a majority of the popular vote. Among the most important constituencies that enabled the Republican Party’s electoral dominance was religiously committed evangelicals. Motivated by opposition to cultural liberalism and the language of religious traditionalism, they turned out in droves to vote for like-minded candidates such as Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush (Campbell and Monson 2007; Green et al. 2007). The symbiotic relationship between evangelicals and Republicans ensured that both would remain powerful parts of American politics.

Yet by 2008, both secular and religious observers were wondering whether evangelicals might be leaving the very coalition that they had helped build. In particular, observers speculated that young evangelicals were substantially more liberal than older generations. A variety of sources also suggested that young evangelicals were more likely to vote for Barack Obama in 2008 than they had been to vote for other recent Democratic Party candidates (Edwards 2008; Zogoby 2009). Writing for ABC News, Dan Harris (2008) claimed that young evangelicals were “breaking from their parents and focusing on a broader range of issues than just abortion and gay marriage.” Within the
evangelical tradition, much ink has been spilled explaining how and why young evangelicals are different and what it means for the church (Kinnaman 2011; Krattenmaker 2013; Vicari 2014b; Wehner 2007).

However, other commentators deny that young evangelicals are embracing the Democratic Party or political liberalism. Russell Moore, president of the Southern Baptist Convention’s Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, depicts young evangelicals as tired of the “culture wars” rhetoric and the divisive politics of the New Christian Right, but just as conservative and countercultural as previous generations (Nazworth 2014). In her book *The New Faithful*, Colleen Carroll (2002), a former speechwriter for George W. Bush, describes a new generation of faithful Protestants and Catholics who are rejecting liberalism and returning to orthodoxy. Descriptive statistics seem to support the notion that change has been overstated, too: of the 1,329 evangelicals ages eighteen to twenty-nine in the 2016 Cooperative Congressional Election Study, just 11 percent identified themselves as “liberal” or “very liberal,” while almost 54 percent identified themselves as “conservative” or “very conservative.”

These conflicting accounts highlight the need for a more thorough understanding of public opinion among young evangelicals. Evangelical Protestants constitute roughly one-quarter of the population, and they have been an important factor in American politics for the past several decades. As such, any changes in public opinion among young evangelicals could reverberate throughout the American political system for years to come. In this chapter, I briefly introduce evangelical Protestants. I then ask two important questions about young evangelicals. First, are their political beliefs changing? Second, are any changes we see driven by factors internal to the church, or are they driven by factors external to the church? Finally, I highlight the need for a more thorough social scientific study of public opinion among young evangelicals. In particular, I stress the importance of using multiple data sources and grounding the analysis in a social scientific theory of public opinion. This discussion paves the way for Chapter 1, in which I introduce my own theory of public opinion among young evangelicals.

The Foundations of Religious Influence on Political Behavior

To understand religion’s influence on political behavior, we must first confront the problem of conceptualizing religion itself. Religion, by its very nature, is a multidimensional concept. Researchers have attempted to capture that multidimensionality through emphasizing the three b’s: believing, behaving, and belonging (e.g., Kellstedt, Green, Guth, et al. 1996; Layman
Each of these dimensions of religion provides the potential for religion to influence public opinion (e.g., Kellstedt, Green, Guth, et al. 1996). The most common way of understanding religion is in terms of belonging to one of several religious traditions. The marketplace of religion in the United States is enormous, encompassing hundreds of denominations and many thousands of nondenominational churches (Finke and Stark 2005). While researchers recognize that the social contexts of individual churches and denominations can provide powerful insight into public opinion (e.g., Djupe and Gilbert 2009), most researchers find it helpful to group denominations into a handful of religious traditions. Corwin E. Smidt writes, “A religious tradition reflects a characteristic way of interpreting and responding to the world” (2007, 30). Common schemes separate individuals into broad categories that include evangelical Protestant, mainline Protestant, black Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, and the unaffiliated (Kellstedt, Green, Guth, et al. 1996; Leege and Kellstedt 1993; Smidt, Kellstedt, and Guth 2009). Smaller traditions, like Muslims, Hindus, and nontraditional Protestants (i.e., Mormons, Christian Scientists, and so on), are often grouped together in an “other” category or left out of analyses.

In this book, I follow the majority of the social science literature in understanding evangelicals as those who belong to the evangelical Protestant religious tradition. The denominations that make up evangelical Protestantism are those that pushed back against modernization and secularization in the early twentieth century. They are characterized by several theological commitments, including an emphasis on the Bible as the authoritative Word of God, a belief that Jesus Christ is the only way to salvation, and an emphasis on evangelism (spreading the faith). A long list of denominations fall under the evangelical Protestant banner, including Southern Baptists (and many other Baptists), the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, the Christian Reformed Church, nearly all Pentecostals, nearly all charismatics, and many nondenominational Protestant churches (for a detailed explanation of coding for religious traditions, see Steensland et al. 2000).

Within this broad evangelical tradition, there is considerable diversity (e.g., Hunter 1983; Kellstedt, Green, Smidt, et al. 1996). In particular, history has witnessed a number of smaller religious movements within evangelicalism that emphasize specific theological and political doctrines. For example, the fundamentalist movement that arose around the start of the twentieth century responded to the growth of cultural modernism by advocating adherence to the “fundamentals,” including the literal truth of the Bible, a premillennial dispensationalist eschatology, and a separationist stance toward a society that seemed increasingly hostile toward conservative
Protestant theology (FitzGerald 2017; Kellstedt and Smidt 1996). Later in the history of the fundamentalist movement, influential fundamentalists, such as Jerry Falwell and Ken Ham, encouraged adherents to take a more active role in sharing their religious viewpoints with the broader society. The beginning of the twentieth century also saw the rise of the “spirit-filled” movement, which is closely affiliated with Pentecostal and charismatic churches. This subdivision of evangelicalism emphasizes the gifts of the Holy Spirit, including glossolalia (speaking in tongues), prophesy, and healing by faith (FitzGerald 2017; Smidt et al. 1996). In the 1950s, Billy Graham and other influential evangelicals triggered the “neoevangelical” movement, pushing back against the fundamentalist tendencies toward polarizing rhetoric and separatism (Strachan 2015). Neoevangelicals used institutions such as Fuller Theological Seminary and the magazine Christianity Today to advocate a more intellectually engaged, theologically conservative version of evangelical theology (FitzGerald 2017).

While many of these religious movements are variations of theological conservatism, there is also a sizable progressive movement within evangelicalism. Led by organizations such as Jim Wallis’s Sojourners and Tony Campolo’s Red Letter Christians, this nondenominational movement rejects both the harsh rhetoric and the narrow focus on cultural issues characteristic of the New Christian Right. Instead, progressive evangelicals seek to expand the evangelical issue agenda to include social justice issues like poverty, immigration, and global affairs (see Campolo 2008; Wallis 2006). Differences aside, these progressive evangelicals held much in common with other movements within evangelicalism, including a continued commitment to the authority of the Bible. Clearly, then, while the concept of an evangelical religious tradition captures the common social and theological characteristics held by evangelicals, there is also considerable diversity within the tradition.

One advantage of conceptualizing evangelicals in terms of belonging is that it facilitates recognition of evangelical Protestantism as a social group identity. A consistent finding in political science research is that the average American has relatively low levels of political knowledge (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). Rather than spending their time developing a sophisticated understanding of politics and policy, the public often turns to “heuristics,” or logical shortcuts, to understand political phenomena (Popkin 1994; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991). One particularly powerful heuristic is social identity. Voters evaluate parties (Campbell et al. 1960; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002), candidates (Campbell, Green, and Layman 2011; Castle et al. 2017; Popkin 1994), and political issues (Kinder and Kam 2009; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991) in terms of their relationship to and effect on a variety of social reference groups.
In the case of evangelicalism, the intense connection between evangelicalism and the Republican Party (and political conservatism) that was reinforced by the rise of the Christian Right in the 1970s and 1980s paved the way for a mass-level shift among evangelicals (e.g., Hunter 1991; Layman 2001). The Republican Party’s adoption of cultural conservatism on issues like abortion made issue-based sorting possible for evangelicals concerned by the growing signs of sexual liberalism in the United States (Adams 1997; Killian and Wilcox 2008). The Democratic Party’s embrace of cultural modernism, symbolized by the 1972 presidential candidacy of George McGovern, provided an out-group contrast that further sped the movement of evangelicals to the Republican Party (e.g., Layman 2001).

Another way of conceptualizing religion’s influence on political behavior is in terms of behaving. Research has identified a growing gap on a number of measures of political behavior between those who are active participants in religion and those who belong to a tradition but are not as involved (Green 2010; Layman 2001; Layman and Green 2005; Smidt, Kellstedt, and Guth 2009). Religious commitment may affect political behavior for a variety of reasons. Those who attend religious services and are otherwise active in their faith are more likely to be exposed to political messages through church attendance (Guth et al. 1997; Olson 2009; Smidt 2004). Such individuals may also be more likely to develop social networks and civic skills that translate to political efficacy (Campbell 2004; Djupe and Gilbert 2009; Wald, Owen, and Hill 1988, 1990). Finally, drawing on findings that the parties are becoming increasingly polarized in terms of religious commitment, new evidence suggests that religious commitment may be becoming a social group identity in its own right. Republican candidates in particular may use religious language to build support among Republicans and social conservatives (Castle et al. 2017).

Finally, researchers might conceptualize religion in terms of religious beliefs. When writers use the terms “evangelical” and “born-again” interchangeably, they are employing a belief-based definition. Evangelicals hold a number of distinctive theological beliefs, including the importance of a personal conversion (often in the form of a “born-again” experience), a faith that the Bible is the authoritative Word of God, and a dedication to evangelism (Oldfield 1996; Smidt 2007, 2013). As I discuss throughout this book, many of these beliefs can become politically relevant given certain social conditions. For example, the evangelical tradition’s stringent norms on sexual behavior are undoubtedly an important factor in evangelicalism’s opposition to cultural issues such as abortion and gay marriage (e.g., Cook, Jelen, and Wilcox 1992; Jelen 2009). However, religious beliefs affect politics in terms of more than just social issues. Numerous works have tied various religious
beliefs to attitudes on issues ranging from social welfare programs to foreign policy (see Guth 2009; Wilson 2009). Clearly, the multidimensional nature of religion creates numerous paths in which religion can influence politics (Castle 2018a; Leege and Kellstedt 1993; Smidt, Kellstedt, and Guth 2009).

Major Trends in Evangelicalism Today

Over the past two decades, scholars have identified several major trends that are radically altering the American religious landscape. One very important trend is that fewer Americans are associating themselves with organized religion (Castle and Schoettmer 2019; Hout and Fischer 2002; Putnam and Campbell 2010). This trend seems to be concentrated among Millennials, who are increasingly taking unconventional approaches to religion or abandoning religion altogether (Smith and Snell 2009; Wuthnow 2007). One reason for this may be the secularization that has affected all modern industrial nations. However, Michael Hout and Claude Fischer (2002) suggest that another important factor in the declining percentage of Americans who affiliate with religion is the increasingly close relationship between religion and political conservatism. In short, moderates and liberals are opting out of religion because their religious identity seems increasingly at odds with their political identity. This trend is evident among all generations, but it is particularly strong among younger Americans.

The effects of this trend are evident when looking at religious adherence over time. Figure I.1 shows, from the General Social Survey, 1972–2014 (Smith, Hout, and Marsden 2016), the percentage of respondents under thirty years of age who identify with the most common religious traditions in the United States: evangelical Protestant, mainline Protestant, black Protestant, Catholic, unaffiliated, and other faiths. To make the graph more readable, I limited the data to the time period from 1994 to 2014. From the graph, it is clear that the percentage of youth with no religious affiliation has grown steadily during this period, from 16 percent in 1994 to 33 percent in 2014. This decline has come primarily at the expense of mainline Protestantism, whose share of the youth religious market shrank from 10 percent to 5 percent, and Catholicism, whose share shrank from 32 percent to 24 percent. Evangelicals are also feeling the effects of the trend toward secularism: the percentage of evangelicals in the under-thirty population has fallen from 24 percent in 1994 to a low of 17 percent in 2014. Clearly, then, young evangelicals today are coming of age in a much different religious marketplace than previous generations.

What about the young evangelicals who are still involved in the faith? If moderates and liberals are leaving the church, it is possible that those mod-
Figure I.1. Membership in religious traditions and religious commitment among young evangelicals.

Note: Error bars represent 95 percent confidence intervals.
erates and liberals who remain would reduce their level of commitment, thereby leading to a drop in the aggregate level of commitment. However, the data suggest that this is not the case. The bottom panel of Figure I.1 shows the mean religious commitment of evangelicals ages eighteen to twenty-nine over time, again using data from the General Social Survey. Some movement is apparent in the results: religious commitment among young evangelicals bottomed out at .59 in 1996, and rose to .68 in 2002, likely due in part to the wave of religiosity that swept the country in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The mean religious commitment score for 2014 was nearly .68, essentially equaling the historical high point for this time period. In short, evidence suggests that among those young evangelicals who maintain their faith, their aggregate level of religious commitment is about the same as it has always been.

Another major trend is that American evangelicalism is becoming more racially and ethnically diverse. This should not be surprising, as America in general is becoming more diverse (Jones 2016). We can see this diversity in Figure I.2, which plots the racial diversity of evangelicals by age group using the 2016 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) (Ansolabehere and Schaffner 2017). While 95 percent of evangelicals ages sixty-five and older are white (non-Hispanic), that number falls to 83 percent among evangelicals ages eighteen to twenty-nine. The biggest source of the increasing

![Figure I.2](image-url)
diversity is Hispanics, who make up just 2 percent of evangelicals sixty-five and older but 8 percent of evangelicals ages eighteen to twenty-nine. However, we also see about a 4 percent increase in the percentage of Asians and a slight increase among mixed-race individuals. Clearly, then, there is evidence of sociological change among young evangelicals. Young evangelicals are different from their parents in several ways, including growing up in a social context where evangelicals make up a smaller proportion of the population and where the evangelical tradition is more racially and ethnically diverse than it used to be.

The Politics of Young Evangelicals: Two Questions

Another important set of questions, addressed at the start of this chapter, concerns the political identities and issue attitudes of the youngest generation of evangelicals. Due in part to the multidimensional nature of religion, the relationship between evangelical identity and political attitudes has varied over time. While evangelicals were politically withdrawn for much of the 1930s and 1940s (Jelen 1991), the period from the 1970s to the present has seen evangelicals taking a much more active role in American politics (Hunter 1991; Putnam and Campbell 2010; Wilcox and Robinson 2010; Williams 2010). Mobilized by the growth of cultural modernism in American entertainment, media, law, politics, and public life, evangelicals became the backbone of the highly influential “New Christian Right” (Capps 1994; Leege et al. 2002; Martin 2005; Wilcox and Robinson 2010; Williams 2010). Highly committed evangelicals became an important part of the Republican Party’s electoral coalition and were instrumental in the success of Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush, as well as in countless congressional, state, and local victories (e.g., Williams 2010). Thanks in part to the public visibility of the Christian Right and the prominence of evangelical candidates like George W. Bush and Sarah Palin, evangelicalism has become increasingly associated with the public image of the Republican Party and ideological conservatism in the minds of voters from all faith backgrounds (Campbell, Green, and Layman 2011; Layman 2001).

While this association between evangelicals and the Republican Party has become axiomatic in American politics, there is some question as to whether this connection is weakening among the youngest generation. Since 2006, a variety of popular commentators have in one way or another suggested that young evangelicals, those who fall into the Millennial generation, are substantially more liberal than previous generations. Commentators have suggested several potential types of change. First, observers have speculated that evangelicals are becoming more liberal in their positions on issues such
as LGBT rights, poverty, the environment, and immigration (Dokoupil 2009; Wehner 2007). Second, observers have argued that evangelicals are de-emphasizing cultural issues like abortion and gay marriage and are instead embracing new issues like economic inequality, the environment, and immigration (Banerjee 2008; Harris 2008; Lee 2015; Murashko 2014). Finally, observers have speculated that young evangelicals are on the brink of abandoning their relationship with Republican Party (Edwards 2008; Zogoby 2009).

In academic terms, then, these journalistic accounts posit a “cohort effect.” Scholars note that there are at least three possible ways in which time might influence public opinion: age effects, period effects, and cohort effects (Ryder 1965). Here, I use the hypothetical example of attitudes on war to help illustrate the differences between these three types of effects. Age effects occur when some age groups hold different positions than other age groups systematically over time. A typical example of age effects might be young people opposing war until they reach an age in which they are no longer eligible for the draft. Period effects occur when specific events in society at a particular point in time drive those living through the event to change their opinions, no matter their age or generation. For example, if television coverage of a war caused a drop in support for the war over time that was not concentrated among one age group or generation, that would be a period effect. Finally, cohort effects occur when a particular generation’s common experiences inform their opinions. For example, if the generation of young people who turned eighteen during the time of a war remained antiwar throughout their lives as a result of the atrocities they saw on the battlefield, this would constitute a cohort effect.

This basic account leads to two important questions about young evangelicals. First, are young evangelicals’ political beliefs changing? On the one hand, there are any number of important social dynamics that might be leading to change within the evangelical tradition. One of the most important changes is the continuing influence of modernization and secularization, which together decrease the public and private influence of religion and increase the reliance on science, technology, and bureaucracy. Another important change is the retirement or death of many of the leaders of the New Christian Right, including Jerry Falwell and Phyllis Schlafly, and the emergence of a new generation of evangelical leaders like Rick Warren and Joel Osteen who many say have a gentler, less abrasive rhetorical style. These changes are summarized further in the pages ahead.

On the other hand, political science theory gives us reason to be skeptical of any change. For example, given the emphasis on the relative consistency of party identity in the social-psychological tradition (Campbell et al. 1960; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002), it would be surprising to find that
young evangelicals are abandoning the tradition’s deeply entrenched association with the Republican Party. In addition, past predictions of a more liberal generation of young evangelicals have generally been proven premature. A generation ago, James Davison Hunter (1987), the famous sociologist of religion, argued that young evangelicals were embracing theological liberalism. Calvin College political scientists James Penning and Corwin E. Smidt (2002) responded with an exhaustive profile showing that young evangelicals were as conservative as ever. Therefore, absent sufficient evidence, we should approach any claims of major change within the evangelical tradition with a healthy degree of skepticism.

This discussion leads naturally into a second, and perhaps even more interesting, question: If young evangelicals are changing, why? Are any changes we see driven by factors internal to the church, or are they driven by factors external to the church? Observers who posit a liberal-leaning cohort effect among young evangelicals disagree on the causes. In the previous generation of the debate over young evangelicals, Hunter (1987) argued that modernization and secularization were responsible for the liberalization of young evangelicals. Justin Farrell (2011) supports this narrative, arguing that a declining belief among young people that God is the source of moral authority is responsible for liberal trends among young evangelicals concerning their beliefs about pornography, cohabitation, premarital sex, and same-sex marriage. Others suggest that changes within the church, like turnover among religious elites and changing religious teachings on issues as diverse as gay marriage and the environment, are responsible for the change (Harris 2008; Mendenhall 2006; Vicari 2014a; Wear 2014).

Each of these questions could have important implications for American politics and society. If young evangelicals are becoming more liberal, it could change American politics for years to come. Despite the overwhelming Republican victories of 2014 and 2016, a long-term demographic analysis suggests that if present coalitions hold, the Democratic Party has the advantage in the long run. Whites are shrinking as a portion of the population, while racial minorities and Millennials are becoming a bigger part of the voting-age population. If young evangelicals are becoming more liberal, it would suggest that the Republican Party’s long-term electoral fortunes are even more dire. Alternatively, if young Republicans are more or less as conservative as ever, it would suggest that the Republican Party might be able to focus on making incremental changes to its platform and/or constituency to remain competitive.

Likewise, the question of the source of any changes in opinion is deeply important. If the evangelical tradition is pushing members toward a more liberal perspective, it would represent an important shift from the last three
decades of scholarship on religion and politics. On the other hand, if forces outside the evangelical tradition are causing any change we see, it might lead us to ask a different set of questions about the durability of the evangelical tradition in the face of social trends like secularization that have led to a breakdown of organized religion in other advanced democracies. Clearly, then, answering each of these questions is quite important for understanding the past, present, and future of American politics.

Answering the Two Questions with Social Science

Given the potential stakes, it should be surprising that to date there has been little academic research conducted on young evangelicals, and the few studies that exist yield somewhat contradictory findings. In a short research note, Buster Smith and Byron Johnson (2010) find that young evangelicals are similar to their older counterparts on issues including abortion, stem cell research, marijuana use, welfare spending, health care, and the Iraq War. Only on the environment did they find substantial evidence of liberalization among young evangelicals. However, their data are only cross-sectional, and therefore they cannot say whether young evangelicals are becoming more liberal over time. Farrell (2011) shows that young evangelicals are more liberal on same-sex marriage, premarital sex, cohabitating, and pornography. However, he finds that higher education, delayed marriage, and shifts in views on moral authority are the likely causes, rather than changes in religion itself. Most recently, Mikael Pelz and Corwin Smidt (2015) find evidence of consistency in young evangelicals’ political identities and social issues but some evidence of change on nonsocial issues, like the environment, foreign policy, and government aid to the needy. Again, though, their data are entirely cross-sectional. Thus, while these works serve an important purpose in beginning to test the empirical claims being made in this debate, this scholarship highlights the need for both additional data as well as a more unified theory of public opinion among evangelicals that can help explain why we see change in some instances and continued conservatism in others.

To provide a more robust explanation of trends in public opinion among young evangelicals, several advances are necessary. First, it is clear that more data are needed to develop a more complete understanding of young evangelicals’ political attitudes. Many of the stories on the liberalization of young evangelicals have relied on observations from political elites, field studies of particular events (such as the gathering of young evangelicals in New York City reported on in Harris 2008), or at best, cross-sectional data (e.g., Smith and Johnson 2010). In this book, in addition to cross-sectional data, I employ time-series cross-sectional data, including the General Social Survey
(Smith, Hout, and Marsden 2016), to examine how evangelicals’ attitudes have changed over time. However, an important limitation of time-series cross-sectional data is that it cannot help us understand the causes of any observed change. Therefore, I also use panel data, including the 2010–2014 Cooperative Congressional Election Study Panel Survey, to test certain aspects of my argument. In addition, I supplement the quantitative analyses with a series of forty-two semistructured hour-long interviews with evangelical college students conducted at five universities in 2014. These interviews help provide context for the quantitative data.

Second, the existing scholarship has not attempted to explain why we see stability among evangelicals on some issues and change on others. Thus, any social scientific investigation into public opinion among young evangelicals has to break new theoretical ground if it is to help sort out the truth about their views. In particular, a satisfactory theory must be able to (1) explain why we see evidence of change on some issues but continued conservatism on others as well as (2) adjudicate between “change from the outside” and “change from the inside” to help us understand the likely source of any shift in opinion. Answering these questions is crucial to developing a fuller understanding of trends in public opinion among young evangelicals. In Chapter 1, I introduce just such a theory.