



## **POPULISTS OR INTERNATIONALISTS? EVANGELICAL TRIBES AND GLOBALIZATION**

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### Evangelicals' Responses to the Immigration Debate

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Evangelicals, though often portrayed as a right-wing populist “tribe” in their politics, in fact hold quite diverse perspectives on immigration and have reacted in multiple ways to it. Rather than one evangelical tribe with a singular position on immigration, there are—and have long been—multiple responses to the different ethical principles at stake in immigration. Evangelicals believe, identify, respond and engage with immigration in ways ranging from right-wing populist to liberal internationalist.

Moreover, when it comes to immigration, in some cases it is not theology or faith per se that is the prime driver of the policy views that evangelicals adopt. In other words, evangelicals' views on immigration are often strongly influenced by factors other than their faith. [As Michael Gerson argued in a recent meeting of Trump critics](#) at evangelical Wheaton College, “People’s views on, say, immigration are not shaped by their theology, but by their class, their politics and their tribe.”

To be sure, whites who affiliate with evangelical denominations and churches are indeed more conservative on immigration policy than other religious groups, but evangelicalism is more diverse and dynamic on these issues than is commonly assumed. In our new book, [Evangelicals and Immigration: Fault Lines Among the Faithful](#) (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), Lyman Kellstedt and I address a range of divisions amongst evangelicals on these issues. This diversity stems from a variety of historical, racial, cultural, socio-political and theological differences, and is especially evident when comparing evangelical leaders with evangelical laity.

It is worthwhile to consider three key fault lines that characterize the relationship of evangelical Protestantism to the complex immigration issue: 1) historical differences amongst evangelical leaders, e.g. a long-standing contrast between more internationally-minded evangelical elites focused on missions versus more nationally-minded elites worried about security and rapid demographic and cultural change; 2) contemporary differences amongst evangelical leaders, many today espousing

internationalist support for immigration reform and an openness to refugees, a number of voices in the middle and a conservative nationalist/populist vocal minority; and 3) contemporary differences amongst “evangelical laity”—with racial/ethnic differences and ideological and partisan considerations driving diverse perspectives.

### **Historical Christian Leadership**

Evangelical history has more than a few precedents of nuance and complexity in response to immigration, reflective of varying responses that have existed long before the language of “political tribes” came into popular parlance.

Throughout U.S. history, there have been populist and nationalist responses to various waves of immigrants. In the mid-1800s, many Protestants (and not just ones espousing “evangelical” theology) responded to the first wave of European migration by affiliating with the Know-Nothing Party, pushing back against Catholic migrants. Mainline Protestants and secular academics led the charge in defense of White Anglo-Saxon Protestant values and established religion, and many evangelicals joined as well. At the turn of the century, as migration rapidly increased due to ease of travel and other push/pull factors, some Protestants, evangelicals among them, again engaged in efforts to restrict immigration, slowing the pace of newcomers arriving at American shores and constraining the type of folks permitted (e.g. excluding Asians, among others).

However, there were numerous evangelical leaders and organizations that defied this nativist tendency in various ways. In fact, in the late 1800s many internationalist evangelical Protestant pastors and denominations were the most prominent advocates of Chinese immigrants, based on humanitarian concern and missional aspirations. And in the early 1900s, many evangelicals (e.g. the Salvation Army and the YMCA) focused their efforts on integrating those already here via missions, settlement houses and outreach. After World War II, it was churches, amongst other religious institutions, that were on the front lines of refugee and migrant resettlement. Notably, this included extensive refugee resettlement by doctrinally conservative Southern Baptist, Assemblies of God, Lutheran, Mennonite, Nazarene and Black and Hispanic Protestant churches, among others.

As well, there have always been evangelicals engaged with migration that have not been decidedly nationalist or internationalist in perspective, but somewhere in the middle. These “in between” groups have included evangelical churches with conservative ideological proclivities focused on resettling Cuban refugees fleeing a “godless, communist” regime from the 1960s onward, and evangelical churches heeding President Reagan’s call in the 1980s to provide legal support to undocumented migrants applying for legal status after the passage of the Immigration Reform and Control Act (1986).

### **Contemporary Evangelical Leadership**

Today, evangelical leaders include many globally missions-minded pastors and organizational/parachurch leaders who are forthrightly internationalist in orientation as part of their commitment to fulfill the Great Commission. While most of these leaders hold conservative positions on many domestic social and “culture wars” issues, in international affairs they break quite starkly with the right-wing populist stereotype. Often they find themselves in strange-bedfellows coalitions with more progressive religious and political groups when it comes to issues that transcend borders, including immigration. When examining the leadership level of evangelical Christianity as a whole, the

internationalist bent is actually the majority position. However, there is at the same time a sizable minority of evangelical leaders who are indeed right-wing populists on immigration—and this minority has become more energized in the Trump era. Although limited in number, they are increasingly vocal and are getting a greater hearing under the current administration, which views politically conservative evangelical voters and donors as a key base.

This influential minority of the evangelical leadership class include well known leaders like Jerry Falwell Jr., Franklin Graham, Robert Jeffress, Ralph Reed, James Dobson, Tony Perkins and Harry Jackson, among others. Many are members of Trump's "[Board of Evangelical Advisors](#)", which unsurprisingly skews heavily to the right. A number of its members have been outspoken in support of a physical border wall and strong border security in general. And some back nearly every position Trump has taken on immigration, including leaders like Paula White and Jerry Falwell Jr., who even supported his practice of separating families at the border (in spite of conservative emphases on family unity).

Even Trump's Board of Evangelical Advisors, however, is somewhat divided on the issue of immigration, as some members are actually somewhere between the conservative populist and internationalist camps within evangelicalism. Many of its members did in fact speak out against family separations at the border (including Ralph Reed, James Dobson, Johnnie Moore and Franklin Graham). Many back legislation to support DREAMers and/or were vocal against Trump's DACA rescission (including Jordan Easley, Ronnie Floyd, Greg Laurie and Richard Land).

What's more, Advisory Board members Richard Land and Tony Suarez have pushed for comprehensive immigration reform (CIR) for many years. CIR is a "grand bargain" policy approach that combines increases in border control with some compassionate provisions for immigrants who arrived or stayed in the country illegally. Also in between the populists and internationalists, there are some key megachurch leaders who have remained quiet on the issue (including Rick Warren and Joel Osteen), wanting to be welcoming in their congregations, but fearful of addressing such a polarizing topic. However, even Warren (whose church is extensively involved in Rwanda and with HIV/AIDS efforts in Africa) responded quickly when President Trump referred to TPS or Temporary Protected Status countries including Haiti and African and Central American nations as "shithole countries." "It hurts evangelism," [Warren said of the president's comments](#). "I've sort of come to expect him to say outlandish things. I sort of expect that from him. But I do expect more from the church and from Christian leaders."

Notwithstanding the recent Trump phenomenon, internationalist voices at the leadership level of evangelicals have become increasingly active over the last 15 years, speaking out and mobilizing with regard to immigration. They have advocated for various forms of CIR, and they have done so under an array of organizations, notably during the George W. Bush administration's push for CIR in 2006-2007. These policy proposals have been led by Samuel Rodriguez' NHCLC (National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference), the CCIR (Christians for Comprehensive Immigration Reform) led by Jim Wallis, Ron Sider and others, and the ERLC (Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission) of the Southern Baptist Convention, led by Richard Land (see Melkonian-Hoover, "[The Politics of Religion and Immigration](#)").

During the Obama years and continuing into the Trump era, evangelicals have come together under a large umbrella organization called the Evangelical Immigration Table (EIT). [Leaders of and signatories](#)

[to the EIT](#) include the following: the National Association of Evangelicals' Leith Anderson; InterVarsity's Tom Lin; Christian Community Development Association's John Perkins; Southern Baptists' ERLC leader Russell Moore; Council for Christian Colleges and Universities' Shirley Hoogstra; National Hispanic Leadership Conference's Samuel Rodriguez; Fuller Seminary's Mark Labberton; Focus on the Family's Jim Daly; World Relief's Scott Arbeiter, Matt Soerens and Jenny Yang; the Korean Churches for Community Development's Hyepin Im; World Vision's Edgar Sandoval; Wesleyan Church's JoAnne Lyon; Dallas megachurch pastor Tony Evans and the National African American Clergy Network's Barbara Williams-Skinner, among 200 key evangelical leaders.

In addition, influential evangelical pastor Tim Keller, founder of NYC's Redeemer Presbyterian Church, has become increasingly outspoken in defense of refugees. Bishop Claude Alexander, senior pastor of Charlotte's Park Church, helped [spearhead a petition of evangelicals to Trump to counter racism against immigrants and people of color](#), endorsed by over 100 key evangelical leaders and with over 20,000 signatories.

### **Contemporary Evangelical Laity**

In contrast to the pattern and trend we see at the leadership level of American evangelicalism, white evangelical laity are increasingly conservative on the issue, exemplifying a right-wing populist mindset buttressed by strong Republican Party identification and the conservative media. However, a more internationalist mindset prevails amongst evangelicals of color and among centrist and leftist white evangelicals. Moreover, there are many rank-and-file evangelicals who have complicated positions on the issue of immigration, which are neither clearly populist nor clearly internationalist. Many of these folks acknowledge the hard-working contributions of immigrants and support DREAMers, but also want more border security and greater limits on the numbers of migrants ([Evangelicals and Immigration](#), see chapter 4, multiple data sources).

Those of a more internationalist mindset, evangelicals of color and center/left white evangelicals in general are more supportive of immigrants and immigration reform (see chapter 5, CCES data). Our research also demonstrates that support for more immigrant-friendly positions increases among evangelical laity who:

- are active in their churches and regularly attend (a finding that is most evident among whites);
- are part of congregations where clergy speak about immigration;
- worship alongside immigrants, and;
- have immigrant friends, neighbors and/or coworkers (see chapter 6, Pew 2014 Landscape Survey, Henry Institute Cooperative Clergy Studies and our own evangelical church survey).

### **How to respond**

What are the implications for evangelicals today? The starting point is to encourage evangelicals to move beyond narrow parochialism and “tribalism” of either a right-wing or left-wing stereotype. Evangelicals should worship together across color lines, serve together, recognize the diversity of evangelical history and draw upon practices like refugee resettlement that reflect the best of themselves. This does not mean there's a singular way to perceive immigrants or immigration policy. But there are

rich traditions, practices and theological understandings that can shape how evangelicals respond. Today, evangelicals have been called out by a great many critics for acting un-Christian when it comes to immigration, for being driven by politics, ideology, fear and hype, not nuanced, careful, biblically reasoned engagement and care. Congregations can and should play a role in helping evangelicals consider ways to support biblical and ecclesiastical understandings of the rule of law, stewardship, justice and mercy. [As Lyman Kellstedt and I have argued elsewhere](#), there is an urgent need for evangelicals—leaders and laity alike—to fully apprehend the “moral components of the immigration issue—honoring the Biblical values of ‘welcoming the stranger,’ keeping the families together, considering the justice implications of migration nationally and globally, and acknowledging the conditions in other societies that lead to immigration in the first place,” as has been done before.

Clergy have done this historically with issues like race, abortion, marriage, and poverty. There is no reason why it can’t be done with immigration. Wise leadership at the congregational level can, over time, minimize evangelical opposition to immigrants and promote the pursuit of just, reasonable, and merciful immigration reform.

And there is evidence that white clergy are giving increased attention to immigration ([Evangelicals and Immigration](#), see chapter 6).

Finally, [as I argued for the Center for Public Justice back in 2006](#), the federal government needs to act to implement just and reasonable immigration reform. Failure to act has increased the scapegoating of immigrants for all that is wrong in this nation; the nativist and racist backlash has spiraled and includes not only the vilification of immigrants and refugees, but very often that of all Hispanics and Muslims living in the U.S. Shamefully, many white evangelical Christians have fallen prey to this fearmongering and racism. Meanwhile the liberal left has become more extreme as well, rendering principled compromise even less likely. Righteous government leadership and rhetoric could help solve, rather than exacerbate, these problems. In sum, absent reforms, polarization in this nation will increase, and with it the potential for serious civil conflict.

Individual evangelicals, churches and government all have a role to play in helping to mitigate against the narrow tribalism into which evangelicals and others in our nation are withdrawing. Evangelicals can draw upon a moral and religious foundation for thinking and acting in ways that do not discount popular or national concerns, but also recognize the call to share the Gospel with everyone in word and in acts of love and service—a call that transcends our temporal tribes and embraces all the world that God so loves.

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