

# Obamagelicals



Obamagelicals:  
How the Right Turned Left

By

Ronald Eric Matthews, Jr.  
and Michele Gilbert

**CAMBRIDGE  
SCHOLARS**

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P U B L I S H I N G

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## PREFACE

Growing up with completely different backgrounds has given us two unique and diverse perspectives on the world and especially on politics. One of us is the son of a conservative white Protestant evangelical preacher who grew up in the racially divided Deep South believing that the world was a complicated place and government was for the select few. While the other, a biracial liberal, who resided for nearly a decade in Washington, DC, holds dear the fundamental belief in the power and promise of an effective government. By working together, we have found that because of our passion for a brighter future, better government and safer world, we have far more in common than we originally thought.

We first came together in August 2001 as doctoral students at Kent State University. By chance, we migrated to the back of the classroom along with what would become our dearest and cherished friends, James Holland and Tunjay Durna, and began a discussion about anything that had to do with politics that continues to this day. As we became the “Seinfeld Four” studying for candidacy exams, we shared with each other a passion for understanding public policy issues and the decision-making process. Countless hours were spent eating chicken wings and debating the merits of Kingdon’s policy streams model, punctuated equilibrium, B.A.C levels and Maryland basketball. One of us constantly found a way to bring up Protestant evangelicals into the discussion while the other one of us always reminded her friends to consider the role of race in the political sphere and the possible disproportionate impact of public policies. As a result, we developed a passion and interest in understanding how our backgrounds and religious beliefs affected our views of the political process. This book is a product of those shared passions and conversations. In writing this book, we have gone through the process of debating the issues, analyzing the data and flushing out their religious convictions, political tendencies and personal beliefs. We spent countless hours debating and attempting to better understand how religion and Protestant evangelicals mesh and how Protestant evangelicals became Obamagelicals helping Senator Obama become President Obama. Given the book’s continual evolution, we would be amiss if we did not acknowledge the help of so many people throughout the process.



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# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

The election of Senator Barack Obama (D-IL) as the 44<sup>th</sup> President of the United States was an election for the ages – one that will be researched and analyzed for decades to come. It will take years to fully grasp the tidal wave of support and excitement that swept Barack Obama into the White House. Nearly three years have passed since the onset of the campaign, and many political scientists, policy entrepreneurs and everyday voters are still discussing the historic presidential election of 2008. It shattered traditional political and socioeconomic barriers and in turn shed light on questions of race, religion, social class and diversity.

At the center of any election are questions surrounding the current issues and the candidate's platforms, which lay out the candidates' agenda, issues and details how the candidate will address the current pressing public policy issues. The presidential election of 2008 was no exception. Americans were dealing with the disintegration of the country's capital markets, wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, high unemployment, a growing number of personal bankruptcy filings and home foreclosures, continued civil unrest in the Middle East and a general concern about the overall direction of the country's moral values. These issues created deep anxiety and presented challenges for the presidential candidates faced with some of the most daunting issues the United States has confronted, not least the gravest economic crisis since the Great Depression (Waggoner, 2008; Balz and Johnson 2009, xiii; Smidt et al, 2010). Additional questions were raised regarding immigration, global warming, nuclear proliferation, international and domestic terrorism and same-sex marriages/civil unions. Many Americans were clamoring for change in a positive direction believing that anything but the status-quo would not only begin to fix the problems facing the United States, but position the country for a prosperous and brighter tomorrow.

Americans felt Barack Obama could best tackle these concerns; thus he won the presidential election in convincing fashion. His 53% of the popular vote was the highest for any Democrat since Lyndon Johnson (Leip 2008)<sup>1</sup>. His electoral vote totals—375 to McCain's 163—were

comparable with those of Bill Clinton in 1992 and 1996, but all the more impressive because he was African-American. History records that the traditional path to the White House is a journey white southerners conquer by utilizing their white political connections but in this case, Obama, a relative political newcomer, broke away from this tradition and won by nearly 10 million votes, 69,457,897 to McCain's 59,934,814 (Balz and Johnson, 2009, 372). Obama possessed the unique ability to reconfigure electoral politics and create never before seen voting coalitions that will possibly become a blue-print for future electoral races.

In many aspects, this book is a lot like watching a movie and then reading the book that the movie is based on – you already know the ending. In this case, you know Senator Barack Obama is elected President of the United States in an unprecedented fashion. But what we sometimes miss, just like when we simply see the movie without reading the text, is the nuances, narratives and rich descriptions that provide detail and background information that is often produced through hours of painstaking analysis and research. While the outcome of the presidential election is known, the role of campaign strategies, policy development and key groups should be further explored.

Campaign analysts and political junkies provide a wide range of explanations for how Obama, a junior senator from IL, was able to become the most powerful elected official in the world. Every word, campaign stop and event has been analyzed in an attempt to offer some reasonable explanation for the change in political climate and exuberance experienced by the electorate. Explanations include Obama's charismatic demeanor, the campaign's community organizing style, use of the internet and social network sites and endorsement of powerful celebrities (i.e. Oprah). While these factors all may have played a role, many have also pointed to the end result of increased voter turnout of specific demographic groups.

Voter participation among young people accounts for a large percentage of the total increase in votes cast. Fifty-three percent of eligible voters 18 to 30 years of age actually voted in 2008 (Tisch 2008). African-Americans had the highest turnout rate among 18- to 24-year-old voters — 55 percent, an 8 percent increase from 2004 (Lopez, 2009). However, voters who fell into older age groups (45-64 and 65-plus) had the highest voting rates (69 percent and 70 percent, respectively). Similarly, older African-Americans increased their turnout by 5 percentage points to 65 percent, nearly matching whites of the same age cohort. In all, minorities made up nearly 1 in 4 voters in 2008, the most diverse electorate ever (Lopez 2009).



Another factor that may have contributed to Barack Obama's election that has not received much consideration focuses on the most unlikely religious group: white Protestant evangelicals. Incredible as it may sound, exit poll data indicates that the number of young (ages 18-44) white Protestant evangelicals, the perceived base of the Republican Party, who for so many years has championed morality issues and self-responsibility, supported Obama in record numbers compared to their support of John Kerry in 2004 (Sullivan 2008; see also Waldman.com 2008). Table 1.1 shows that nationally, 28% of white Protestant evangelicals voted for Obama (Pew Center for the People and the Press 2008). This is unprecedented given the white evangelical vote has been one of the most reliable demographic groups for the Republican party with 68% of white evangelicals casting their vote for Bush in 2000 and 78% in 2004 (Pew Research Center for People and the Press).

**Table 1-1 Votes in Presidential Elections by Religion by percent**

	2000		2004		2008	
	Gore	Bush	Kerry	Bush	Obama	McCain
Total	48.0	48.0	48.0	51.0	53.0	46.0
Protestant/Other Christian	42.0	56.0	40.0	59.0	45.0	54.0
Evangelical/Born Again	24.0	68.0	21.0	79.0	26.0	73.0
Non-Evangelical	n/a	n/a	44.0	56.0	44.0	55.0

Source: 2008 Pew Research Center for the People and the Press.

The surge of 5% of the Protestant evangelical support for President Obama, who by all accounts is liberal in social policies and moral issues, reflects stunning changes among voters who have traditionally voted for the most right-wing Republican candidates. Furthermore, Barack Obama may have been perceived as a different type of Democratic candidate to the evangelical community. He openly discussed his faith. For example, in his book the *Audacity of Hope* (Obama 2006), he penned one of the most introspective discussions of personal religious views by an office holding politician.

This revelation generates an interesting paradox that warrants further research and exploration. How does one explain white, born-again Christians who stereotypically are thought of as “perpetuating racial division in lieu of tearing it down” (Emerson and Smith 2000, preface) supporting Obama in record numbers? While it is unproblematic to note

that young voters, both white and African-American would support a candidate over 35 years younger than his opponent, how does one reconcile the fact that 30% of white, evangelicals over the age of 30, typically the bastion of the Republican Party, have a favorable feeling toward Obama and less than 45% have a warm feeling when it comes to the Republican Party (Green and Greenberg, 2009)? From a statistical analysis standpoint, when one sees states that have traditionally voted Republican and comprised of largely white Protestant evangelicals, such as North Carolina with 40% white Protestant evangelicals, shift and vote for Obama in large numbers, one has to ask what is going on? In the case of Obama, he garnered 6.57% more votes than Kerry did in 2004 in North Carolina (Pew Center for People and Press). We will discuss white Protestant evangelical turnout and swing state results in more detail in Chapter 2 but Obama's victories in Indiana, North Carolina, Colorado and Virginia provide a glimpse into what happened in 2008. Indiana is carried by a Democratic nominee for the first-time since 1936; Virginia for the first-time since 1948; North Carolina for the first-time since 1976; and Colorado for the first-time since 1964 (Todd and Gawiser 2009).

Moreover, when attempting to fully understand Obama's victory and the role of the white Protestant evangelical, one should also consider the margin of victory with the popular vote and the percentage of eligible voters that are Protestant evangelicals. In the 2008 presidential election, the margin of victory in swing states averages out to be 3.1% resulting with a shift of 75 additional electoral votes to Obama from Kerry in 2004 (Todd and Gawisher 2009). Furthermore, the average white Protestant evangelical vote in swing states comprises 30% of the voting population. There is no doubt that a shift in the voting patterns in these states can be attributed to changes within the white Protestant evangelical polity, but to what degree and what precipitated the changes?

The change in the 2008 white Protestant evangelical vote increase for Obama, the Democratic candidate, brings numerous questions to mind. Have the voters changed or was there something unique about Barack Obama? Are the issues that have galvanized the Republican Party not that important anymore as many morality voters have party-hopped? Are new, younger, white Protestant evangelicals redefining morality politics in a whole new light? Are older white Protestant evangelicals, often referred to as religious right extremists, laying down their arms declaring that the cultural war is over? Or are they simply becoming a minority in the conservative world of politics? Are white Protestant evangelicals redefining the cultural war as they engage in new battlegrounds and utilize new coalitions? Is this new approach to "matters of faith" a sudden turn to

the left or has it been a more gradual turn similar to erosion as conservative white Protestant evangelicals and religious voters are putting reason above rhetoric? Is this shift a result of the campaign strategies of Obama who by all accounts rather a brilliant campaign? How much of this shift can be attributed to the ability of Obama and his campaign to frame key issues and have them placed on the campaign agenda while choosing to not discuss other issues? Did Obama's campaign simply reach out to the white Protestant evangelical constituency through grassroots operations or was this shift strictly a backlash against the Republican Party? This text seeks to explore these questions and begin to explain how President Obama and his election strategies capitalized on the shifting views of white Protestant evangelicals thereby altering the political landscape of the 2008 Presidential election and in so doing created the Obamagelical.

## **Who are Obamagelicals?**

The term "Obamagelical" was first coined by Steve Waldman from Beliefnet.com to differentiate between white Protestant evangelical traditionalists who consistently vote Republican (and this case for Senator McCain) and white Protestant evangelical centrists and modernists who had "shifted" to the Democrat Party and voted for Senator Obama (Waldman 2008). Two factors are central to the reality behind the creation of the Obamagelical. The first is a "liberal" theological perspective that involves less traditional views of the divine, spirituality and religious authority (Green 2008). Obamagelicals do not necessarily view the Bible as being the literal world of God and as such do not place as much emphasis on scriptural interpretation. When surveyed, 59% of Obamagelicals believe that the Bible is both literal and figurative compared to 74.7% of traditional white Protestant evangelicals (Waldman 2008).

The second factor is a liberal perspective on political issues. Issues such as abortion and same sex marriages are still important but not the driving force behind their political beliefs or platform. For the Obamagelical, issues such as poverty, environmental stewardship, the economy, the war on terrorism, etc. are equally as important and are moral issues of the day. Interestingly, Campolo (2006) refers to them as "red-letter Christians": they quote the words of Jesus in red from their Bibles but have a liberal political bent in the social life as such are beginning to shift to the Democrat Party.

Therefore, we expand upon the definition of Waldman (2008) by noting that Obamagelicals are white Protestant evangelicals, who have chosen their own path and have redefined what they consider to be moral

issues—issues that they feel express the new battleground for the culture war that has become so important in shaping the Protestant evangelical tradition and faith. In essence, we contend an Obamagelical equation would be conceived as:

***Obamagelical* = voted for Obama + white Protestant evangelical + Bible is both literal and figurative+ stance on moral issues are not the primary factor in their voting**

We believe that the creation of the Obamagelical occurred over time as political views, social concerns and theological beliefs shifted and were redefined based on world events, domestic concerns, and Obama's campaign. Furthermore, we contend that this shift has occurred on two fronts—a generational shift and a theological shift which Obama's campaign was able to capitalize on (see McKenzie 2008).

In the case of the generational shift, the Protestant evangelical leadership that had been the stronghold of the conservative Protestant movement had fallen by the wayside by 2008. The founding generation of leaders like Jerry Falwell, Paul Weyrich and Charles Dobson, who first guided Protestant evangelicals into Republican politics 30 years ago were all but gone. Dobson announced his plans to find a successor for Focus on the Family in 2007, Falwell died in May of 2007 and Weyrich, who helped organize and lead the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think-tank and the Moral Majority with the help of Falwell, became seriously ill in 2007 and passed away in 2008. This void was quickly replaced with new, younger, white Protestant evangelical leaders like Rick Warren, TD Jakes and Bill Hybels. These younger, white Protestant evangelical leaders have capitalized on the mega-church movement and broadened their large congregation's attention to issues other than abortion and same sex marriage. For example, Protestant evangelical leaders signed joint statements demanding the United States take action on the situation in Darfur and global warming. The statement also went on to condemn the policy on the use of torture by the United States. Saddleback Church, located in California and one of the most prominent Protestant evangelical churches in the country with membership in excess of 40,000 sponsored the Civil Forum on the Presidency in August 2008. Moderated by Pastor Rick Warren, both Obama and McCain were asked questions related to stem-cell research, global warming, the economy, greed and environmental stewardship. This event was seen by a national television audience and broadcast by CNN. The new evangelical leaders also have brought a theological shift to the white Protestant evangelical tradition and in so

doing push politics and social issues to the forefront.

The theological shift has seen Protestant evangelicals move from primarily focusing only on abortion to becoming activists in other issues that they believe have moral overtones. Kirkpatrick (2007) notes that they have:

“... a renewed attention to Jesus’ teachings about social justice as well as about personal or sexual morality. However conceived, though, the result is a new interest in public policies that address problems of peace, health and poverty — problems, unlike abortion and same-sex marriage, where left and right compete to present the best answers.”

The impact of these two shifts can be seen in a survey conducted by Public Religion Research on behalf of faith in public life (Faith in Public Life 2008). When asked, Protestant evangelicals indicated that they had heard sermons on political and social issues such as the War in Iraq, atrocities in Darfur, issues related to immigration, global warming and the environment. This is not to suggest that Obamagelicals lack a sense of value and lifestyle distinctiveness when framed through the morality lens but rather these issues are not the driving force behind their existence. In many cases, Obamagelicals are redefining what constitutes a moral issue. Their focus is on individual piety through evangelistic and social missions as they work to make the world a better place (Waldman 2008). The values are further exhibited when one examines the most important issues identified by Obamagelicals regarding the 2008 election. Table 1.2 shows the issue priorities of the general voting population, Obamagelicals and the evangelicals who voted for McCain.

**Table 1-2 Issue Priorities of Protestant Evangelicals 2008**

	<b>General Population</b>	<b>Obamagelicals</b>	<b>Protestant Evangelicals Voted for McCain</b>
1.	Economy	Economy	Abortion
2.	War in Iraq	War in Iraq	Character
3.	Health Care	Reducing Poverty	Cleaning up the Environment
4.	Terrorism	Character	Fighting Islamic Radicalism
5.	Illegal Immigration	Environment	Gay Marriage

Source: Waldman 2008

It is important to note that the two top priorities among Obamagelicals mirrors the top two priorities identified by the general electorate prior to the election, while only one of McCain's priorities in anyway resembles national concerns- Islamic radicalism and the War in Iraq. We offer two theories for this situation which will be developed further in the following chapters. First, as previously noted, many white Protestant evangelicals are redefining issues of importance. While McCain continues to "recycle" old campaign themes and mandates, the converted Obamagelical has broadened their agenda to include issues of social importance across the continuum of society such as the reducing poverty and environmental stewardship. Secondly, Obama has put forth a concerted effort to reach out to white Protestant evangelicals hiring a Director of Faith Outreach for his campaign (Sullivan 2008). And by all accounts it appears to be on message as the campaign heads for the homestretch.

## **One Caveat**

In this text we are going to attempt to show the differences that exist between young, white Protestant evangelicals who have an allegiance to Obama (thus Obamagelicals) and older, more conservative, white Protestant evangelicals, who show loyalty to McCain. But we do not want to suggest by inference or by impression that one group is better – politically or spiritually- than the other. The reality is that studying and researching Protestant evangelicalism is complicated and multi-faceted. We recognize that Protestant evangelicalism is not monolithic. Protestant evangelicalism is a highly complex, diverse religious tradition that for many years has been treated as a monolith for numerous reasons. We have elected to simply not refer to all evangelicals as "Christians" or as "evangelicals". Our reasoning for this is quite simple. When asked to identity ones religious beliefs, many Americans identify themselves as "Christians" and many different types of evangelicals exist. Where once, evangelicalism only referred to a specific "brand" of Protestantism, this is no longer the case. Today there are groups of Catholic evangelicals, Anglican evangelicals and other traditions such as Anglican, Lutheran, and Methodist have sects of evangelicals in their midst. It is for this reason we use the term "Protestant evangelical" throughout the text. It is also important to note that throughout the text we refer to "Protestant evangelicals" as "white Protestant evangelicals". Our reasoning for this is also simplistic in nature. We believe and recognize that Protestant evangelicalism is not solely limited to the white community. There are more than 24,000 Hispanic congregations that consider themselves to be

“Christians” or “evangelicals” and Black evangelicals are quickly becoming a dominant force in conservative politics (National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference 2010; Riley 2007).<sup>2</sup> So throughout this text, we have elected to refer to a specific group within the large mosaic of Protestant evangelicalism, that being white Protestant evangelicals.

## **Obamagelicals: A Shift to the Left**

This book demonstrates how rhetorical strategies normalized, marginalized, and/or anaesthetized the traditional views of the white Protestant evangelical voter and gave younger white Protestant evangelicals, who self-identify as being centrists or modernists, a voice that had otherwise been drowned out by the traditional old guard of the Protestant evangelical religious right.

*Obamagelicals* argues Obama capitalized on this completely different set of value issues that resonated with white Protestant evangelical centrists and modernists in ways never dreamed possible. This text is exploratory in nature and while it is our hope that we can shed light on many of the aforementioned questions, as policy analysts and researchers, we hope that it raises more queries that generate an on-going dialogue about the role religion plays in campaign cycles and the importance of recognizing the impact of individual theological beliefs in the election of governmental officials in a democratic process. This book accomplishes this by exploring the relationship between key relevant policy issues and the new moral views of the Obamagelical that become focal points for the Obama campaign at a time when McCain used traditional rhetoric to discuss abortion, gay marriage, presidential experience and character.

*Obamagelicals* is a unique contribution to the current, interdisciplinary conversation about the role of white Protestant evangelicals in the democratic process and the victorious presidential election of Barack Obama. First, it is unique because it treats Protestant evangelicalism not as a monolith but as a mosaic—comprised of numerous denominations and belief patterns. Through this creation of space on the theological continuum of Protestant evangelicalism, believers draw attention to themselves by creating distinction and attention. As a result, each denomination or group can take a particular political stance in an attempt to garner political influence or political capital. This book examines how the shift in theological interpretations of the scriptures lead to shift in cultural and political issues that went undetected by Republican candidate Senator John McCain but embraced by President Obama.

Furthermore, unlike many of the works published in the field of

political science and sociology, that rely heavily on new methodological techniques and strategies, *Obamagelicals* provides a consistent methodological approach, that is easy to understand for those interested in religion and politics. Using data analysis and cross-tabulations, each topic or theme employs simple, easy to understand variables thereby allowing for a cross-comparison. We can begin to examine the connections between religiosity and political participation on such key policy issues as the economy, War in Iraq and Afghanistan, and same-sex marriages, and between political power (the ability to radically transform the political landscape) and religious denominations within the mosaic of Protestant evangelicalism. Each chapter incorporates current survey research data from the 2004 and 2008 National Election Survey.

*Obamagelicals* is organized into seven chapters. Chapter 2 provides a theoretical framework that will underpin the examples that follow by providing a historical overview of white Protestant evangelicalism in the United States and their influence in national political elections in recent years.

Chapter 3 explores the issues and debate surrounding the war in Iraq. Much of the debate within Protestant evangelical community has focused on answering the question, “When is a war just?” We examine this question and conduct an in-depth analysis into the campaign strategy of Obama and McCain as they woo Protestant evangelical voters. The War in Iraq served as a major factor in the 2006 Congressional elections and in this chapter we examine the role of the candidates in capitalizing on the sentiments of the country and in particular young, Protestant evangelicals.

Chapter 4 provides an analysis of the issues surrounding the crumbling of the economy and the strategic plans of both candidates to address this volatile issue. In 1992, President Bill Clinton told the American electorate that, “It’s about the economy, stupid!” (Carville 1992). As we analyze the 2008 presidential election we find that that sentiment rang true once again as more and more Protestant evangelicals and Americans for that matter list the economy as a primary area of concern (Waldman 2008). In an October 2008 pre-election poll, more than 80% of all-Americans listed the economy as their top campaign issue and more than 78% of Protestant evangelicals listed it at the top. Chapter 4 examines the role the economy played in the 2008 election and provides insight into how Obama and McCain addressed the issue. At a time when the electorate was looking for leadership and character, which candidate reassured the voters that they possessed the needed traits to insure confidence and stability?

Chapter 5 provides a brief overview of the traditional moral arguments



that Protestant evangelicals have also rallied around: family issues. In this chapter we will look briefly at the questions related to abortion. Is the issue of abortion as caustic as it was 20 years ago, or has its value as a political lightning rod dissipated leaving conservative Protestant evangelicals weakened in the political arena? Just as important, what differences existed between the McCain campaigns and the Obama campaigns or was the abortion issue not important enough to the political mainstream to warrant much attention?

Chapter 6 investigates one of the new issues on the moral front of the culture war campaign undertaken by white Protestant evangelicals – same sex marriages. Understanding how centrist and modernist Protestant evangelicals and the various denominations within Protestant evangelicalism, relates to the rhetoric surrounding the same-sex marriage/ civil union debate and the stances of the Obama and McCain campaigns gets to the very heart of shift that is occurring in the white Protestant evangelical tradition. Obamagelicals see same sex marriages and civil unions in a much different light than more conservative white Protestant evangelicals and this chapter explores how these differences were evident in the voting patterns of those that support Obama.

Finally, Chapter 7 will serve as a brief conclusion, drawing together themes from the previous chapters as we look towards 2012. Obamagelicals teach us interesting lessons about religion and politics and provide us with a unique opportunity to further explore and theorize about why these shifts occurred.



# CHAPTER TWO

## PROTESTANT EVANGELICALS AND PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

*"The subject of presidential selection has greatly divided the House, and will also divide people out of doors. It is in truth the most difficult of all on which we have had to decide."*

—James Wilson (PA) Constitutional Convention of 1787

What do people look for when selecting and voting for a U.S. president? Is it their campaign promises? Is it their character? Is it their loyalty to their political party or perhaps the fact that they do not belong to a political party at all? Is it their looks and charisma? Is it their stance on morality issues? It is their attention to a specific issue such as global warming or a more comprehensive approach like environmental stewardship that peaks one's interest? For many Americans, the selection of a President is an arduous and complicated task. But what has become such a difficult decision for citizens was vaguely addressed by the founding fathers when the selection process was developed. For the framers of the Constitution, someone who wants to become the President must be a United States citizen who has lived in the country for 14 years and at least 35 years old. While these are the only legal requirements for the position; most citizens have a number of expectations of Presidential candidates which could be considered informal requirements. The selection of a President is greatly influenced by their social agenda and willingness to bring about change. In 2004, the three most important qualities of presidential candidates, as identified by a nationwide potential voter pool, was a willingness to bring about change (24%), a clear stand on the issues (17%) and possessing strong leadership skills (17%) (Associated Press 2007; see also Smidt et al 2010). For many, the candidate's appearance and charisma are important attributes. For example, handsome and articulate Kennedy's televised debates and his Camelot dreams when compared with the non-charismatic,

badly in need of a shave, but seasoned veteran Vice-President Nixon swung the election to Kennedy in 1960 (Bhide 2008).

Many times, one of the most important factors that impact an individual's support for a presidential candidate hinges on the voter's perception of the candidate's religiosity. In addition, the specific faith of a candidate also matters greatly. For American voters, atheism is the chief pariah. A Pew Forum survey found that while 38% of Americans were reluctant to vote for a Muslim candidate, 52% would have the same reluctance about an atheist (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2008). More recent polls have shown the percentages to be as high as 70% (Smith et al 2009, 34). Many Americans have had reservations about voting for presidential candidates that were Catholic, including the defeat of John Kerry in 2004 and the election of Kennedy in 1960, because of their perceived alliances to the Pope (Slayton 2001).

For years, presidential nominees have dealt with the meshing of their personal religious beliefs with the public's perceived views, especially regarding public policy issues that have a moral slant, for years. Whether it was Smith (1928), Kennedy (1960) or Kerry (2004) answering questions about Catholicism, Romney (2008) addressing concerns with Mormonism or Obama (2008) responding to questions related to being a Muslim, religion plays a huge role in the selection of a president. Typically, at least 70% of Americans reported that they agreed with the statement "It is important that the president should have strong religious beliefs" (Pew Center for the People and the Press 2008; Smith et al 2010, 32). For the Protestant evangelical, perhaps the most important qualifications are the candidate's religious and moral views. There are several important individual and political reasons for this being the case.

First, as we discussed in Chapter 1, religion and spirituality are extremely important to the white Protestant evangelical. Survey data points out that 61.5% of white Protestant evangelicals indicate that their religious beliefs are not only important but they are also a factor in their daily life decisions while among white Protestant evangelical traditionalists like Pentecostals, more than 17% specified that their religion was the single most important component of their life (Spirit and Power Survey 2007; National Study of Youth and Religion 2003).<sup>1</sup>

Secondly, many times biblical interpretation of the Bible determines which issues are important to the white Protestant evangelical. The American democratic system of politics allows and sometimes advocates, not only religious freedom, but also religious pluralism. White Protestant evangelicals capitalize on this opportunity, to not only promote their religious ideals and principles, but to also actively engage in agenda

setting strategies and policy formulation at all levels of government. Moral issues such as abortion, same sex marriage and stem cell research have become issues that have been the major focus for white Protestant evangelicals over the past presidential elections.

In this chapter, we provide a framework for understanding the role of white Protestant evangelicals in the 2008 presidential election and thus the creation of the Obamagelical. First, we offer insight into the role white Protestant evangelicals have played in several presidential and congressional midterm elections leading up to 2008. Through this overview and analysis, we present a strong case that white Protestant evangelicals have had a major impact in the selection of American presidents and in public policy matters and that their role cannot be minimized or taken for granted.

Next, we conduct an in-depth analysis of the 2004 presidential election from the perspective of the white Protestant evangelical. It is our contention that the 2004 presidential election between President George Bush and Democrat nominee, Senator John Kerry, was not only a turning point in American politics, but also the momentum changer that initiated the process by which the chasm between the more religiously observant Americans who self-identify as conservative white Republicans and the more secular, white liberal Americans who self-identify with either political party began to close and shrink. We contend that it was this slow disappearance of the “God-Gap” that has resulted in the creation of a new political white Protestant evangelical known as the Obamagelical (Smidt et al 2010). What pollsters call “The God Gap,” is the range between the percentages in a specific religious demographic group voting Republican or Democratic between two elections. If the God Gap increases while the percentage of voters choosing the Democratic Party candidate shrinks, it reveals not only the small but important number of religious swing voters, but also a major failure of the Democratic Party to make a compelling case for its overall policies to a broad range of religious voters (Berlet and Fredrickson 2010)

We examine the 2008 presidential election paying close attention to the economic and moral issues that were important in the selection of the 44th President of the United States. Understanding the context in which this election occurred when seen through the eyes of the white Protestant evangelical provides unique insight into the role religion plays in politics and into the selection process itself.

We conclude this chapter by laying some methodological foundations for the remainder of the text as we paint a picture of the newly created Obamagelical.

## White Protestant Evangelicalism and Elections

To date there have been 54 presidential elections in which votes were cast.<sup>2</sup> While the popular vote was not the chosen method until 1836, there is no doubt that an individual's personal religious weighed into their decisions prior to that time period as well as since then. American Protestantism has always played a role in elections in some way, shape or form and in recent years white Protestant evangelicals have risen to be key players in the electoral process. In 1928, Alfred Smith, a self-proclaimed Roman Catholic, loses the race badly to Herbert Hoover as white Protestant evangelicals and mainstream Protestants fear that Smith will answer to the pope and not the voters (Slayton 2001). Smith's liberal stance on prohibition also hurt him with conservatives waging war in the Temperance Movement (Lichtman 1979). White Protestant evangelicals began a shift to the Republican Party in large numbers during the turbulent times of the 1960's and early-1970's due in part to their opposition to *Brown v. Board of Education* and the Civil Rights and Voting Acts of the 1960's (Zoll 2006). In this section we examine four presidential elections and two congressional midterm elections, in which white Protestant evangelicals played a key role, either in the selection of a winner or in addressing key policy areas.

**1976 Presidential Election:** The 1976 presidential election pitted incumbent President Gerald Ford (R-MI) against Democrat nominee, Georgia Governor Jimmy Carter. Carter, a self-proclaimed "born again Christian" and Sunday school teacher of the First Baptist Church in Plains, GA. ran on the platform of restoring honesty and integrity to the White House. It is important to note that prior to the 1976 election, white Protestant evangelicals did not form a comprehensive partisan voting coalition. In the Midwest, they were principally Republicans; in the South, almost entirely Democrats (Novak 2008). But with the rise in discontent over the Watergate scandal and questions over presidential character and moral integrity white Protestant evangelicals seized the opportunity to make an impact in 1976. White Protestant evangelicals comprised more than 35% of the population and Carter, the southern Democrat, set out to rally the troops (Witcover 1977). President Ford pardoned President Nixon of any and all crimes associated with Watergate and then watched his poll numbers embark on a free-fall. By the time the Democrat Convention occurred, Carter held a 33 point lead in the polls over Ford- a lead that seemed to be insurmountable. However, through a series of miscues Carter's lead began to evaporate and white Protestant evangelicals served