

“Cohesion and Division: American Evangelicals and Their Political Leaders”

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Evangelicalism has become far more prominent in American political life over the last thirty years. Two kinds of leaders have presided over the evangelical movement's ascent—those in elected, public office and leaders of the evangelical subculture and its institutions. While these two groups of leaders have cooperated on particular policy initiatives—such as those around sexuality and the human body—there is also a surprising degree of distance and tension between them. Further, rank-and-file evangelicals do not have the same social profile as the movement's leaders or those public officials they have elected to office, contributing to additional tensions among the various factions. This essay examines contexts in which these groups have cooperated as well as opposed one another, paying particular attention to developments since evangelicals entered the public stage in the late 1970s. Drawing upon interviews conducted with evangelical institutional leaders (N = 157) and national, public leaders who are evangelical (N = 203), I argue that evangelical political life reflects remarkable unity coupled with paradoxical degrees of division and dissent. I then suggest these divisions reflect larger fractures within the movement between two kinds of evangelicals: those whom I call “cosmopolitan evangelicals” and those I refer to as “populist evangelicals.” These two segments hold differing priorities and visions for the movement, yet they share underlying convictions and beliefs. I conclude that evangelicals and their leaders have drawn upon four elements of political action—organizing instruments, rhetorical strategies, institutional arrangements, and strategic initiatives—to facilitate the movement's ascent.