

# Fading white evangelicals have made a desperate end-of-life bargain with Trump

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Televangelist Paula White compared Donald Trump to a "king" in an appearance on the evangelical program "The Jim Bakker Show." White is considered to be Trump's closest spiritual adviser. USA TODAY

**They are a grieving community. After decades of equating growth with divine approval, they're on the losing side of demographics and LGBT rights.**

One of the biggest mysteries of Donald Trump's presidency has been white evangelicals' steadfast and enthusiastic support for him. Unlike Mormons, who saw a nearly 20-point falloff in [support for Trump](#) compared with their typical support for Republican presidential candidates, white evangelicals' support for Trump was in line with, and even slightly higher than, their 2004 support for fellow evangelical George W. Bush (81% vs. 78%, respectively), according to the exit polls.

And unlike Trump's arts council and economic advisory councils, which saw so many resignations that the committees themselves dissolved, Trump's [evangelical advisory committee](#) has seen just one resignation and is standing by their man.

While many may want to simply dismiss this turn of events as pure hypocrisy, anyone seeking understanding will want to look deeper. White evangelicals branded themselves as "values voters." That they could support Trump as strongly as Bush and more resolutely than arts and business leaders ought to serve as a signal that something dramatic has happened in the interim.

The key to understanding the puzzling white evangelical/Trump alliance is grasping the large-scale changes — most prominently the declining numbers of white Christians in the country — that have transformed the American religious landscape over the past decade. These tectonic shifts are detailed in a new report Wednesday [by the Public Research and Religion Institute](#), which I direct. Based on interviews with more than 101,000 Americans last year, the American Values Atlas is the largest survey of religious and denominational identity ever conducted in the USA.

The general [decline of white Catholics](#) and [white mainline Protestants](#), the more liberal branch of white Protestantism anchored in the Northeast and upper Midwest, has long been noted by sociologists. But until recently, their white evangelical cousins in the South and lower Midwest had seemed immune to these trends. This evangelical exceptionalism was not lost on white evangelicals themselves, who frequently pointed a judgmental finger at their more liberal

cousins, arguing that there was a direct link between more progressive theology and denominational decline.

But one of the most important findings of our survey is that as the country has crossed the threshold from being a majority white Christian country to a minority white Christian country, white evangelical Protestants have themselves succumbed to the prevailing winds and in turn contributed to a second wave of white Christian decline in the country. Over the past decade, white evangelical Protestants have declined from 23% to 17% of Americans.

During this same period, the proportion of religiously unaffiliated Americans has grown from 16% to 24%.

The engines of white evangelical decline are complex, but they are a combination of external factors, such as demographic change in the country as a whole, and internal factors, such as religious disaffiliation — particularly among younger adults who find themselves at odds with conservative Christian churches on issues like climate change and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights. As a result, the median age of white evangelical Protestants is now 55, and the median age of religiously unaffiliated Americans is 37. While 26% of seniors (65 and older) are white evangelicals, only 8% of Americans younger than 30 claim this identity.

The evangelical alliance with Trump can be understood only in the context of these fading vital signs among white evangelicals. They are, in many ways, a community grieving its losses. After decades of equating growth with divine approval, white evangelicals are finding themselves on the losing side of demographic changes and LGBT rights, one of their founding and flagship issues.

In the 1980s, a term such as “the [moral majority](#)” had a certain plausibility. Today, such a sweeping claim would be met with a mountain of counter evidence from public opinion polls, progressive religious voices, changing laws and court decisions.

Thinking about white evangelicals as a grieving community opens up new ways of understanding their behavior. Drawing on her interactions with dying patients and their families in the 1960s, psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross identified at least [five common “stages” of grief](#), which have become staples of understanding responses to loss: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. As Kübler-Ross found, when the stubborn facts of one’s own demise don’t yield to denial or anger, people commonly attempt to make a grand deal to postpone the inevitable.

While there are some lingering pockets of denial, and anger was an all-too-visible feature of Trump’s presidential campaign, thinking about the white evangelical/Trump alliance as an end-of-life bargain is illuminating. It helps explain, for example, how white evangelical leaders could ignore so many problematic aspects of Trump’s character. When the stakes are high enough and the sun is setting, grand bargains are struck. And it is in the nature of these deals that they are marked not by principle but by desperation.

White evangelicals have clearly seen Trump's presidency as a possible way to stave off changes that would constitute the real end of an era where their cultural worldview held sway. These insights certainly don't necessitate abandoning negative judgments about this grand bargain. But in our deeply divided country, understanding the motivations of our fellow citizens, even those with whom we strongly disagree, is no small thing.

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