

Understanding evangelicals and immigration reform

By [Michael Gerson](#), Published: November 7

In the immigration reform debate, evangelicals have become a political prize claimed by restrictionists and reformers alike. Both sides have a case to make.

Of the major American religious groups, white evangelicals are the most skeptical about immigration. [According to a recent poll](#) by the Pew Research Center's Religion and Public Life Project, more than 60 percent believe that the growing number of immigrants "threatens traditional American customs and values" and more than half view immigrants as an economic burden rather than contributors.

At the same time, many evangelical leaders and institutions — including the [National Association of Evangelicals](#) and the [Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention](#) — are high-profile advocates for comprehensive immigration reform that includes a path to citizenship for undocumented workers.

It is often said that evangelicals are not monolithic on immigration. The reality is more troubling to the faithful, or should be. Their views on immigration are less a function of their religious beliefs than of their group identity. White evangelicals and Hispanic Christians, for example, differ greatly from one another on immigration policy, not because of different theologies but different social positions. On this issue, believers generally take their cues not from their catechism but from their cohort. Only about a quarter of all churchgoers report even hearing the issue of immigration mentioned in their place of worship (the figure is much higher for abortion or gay marriage).

Yet, as professor John Green of the University of Akron pointed out at a recent [Faith Angle Forum conference](#), the polling offers two sources of encouragement for advocates of comprehensive immigration reform.

First, even in the religious group most skeptical of reform — white evangelicals — more than 60 percent believe that undocumented workers should be allowed to stay in the country "with conditions." Green cites this as evidence the country has learned something from the ongoing immigration debate, in which mass deportation is widely dismissed as impractical. The content of these "conditions," however, is up for debate. The requirement to learn English is popular with all religious groups. Evangelicals generally endorse a "secure-the-border-first" approach, while Catholic and mainline Christians are divided about the phasing of reform. Strong evangelical support for a 10-year waiting period before citizenship is decidedly not shared by Hispanic Christians.

In general, evangelicals seem open to a legal status for undocumented workers, when accompanied by strong affirmations of order, assimilation and legality. Probably not that different from many other Americans.

Second, Green points out an interesting distinction between cultural issues among white evangelicals. Those who attend worship services more frequently are more likely to oppose same-sex marriage — tending toward the traditionally conservative position. But immigration provides a contrast. Those who attend worship services more frequently are less likely to see newcomers as a threat to American values. They tend toward the less typically conservative view.

Why, on this particular cultural issue, does religious intensity pull some people away from their predominant group identity?

It could be that religious congregations are growing more diverse. Perhaps 15 percent of American Latinos [consider themselves to be evangelicals](#). Many evangelical denominations and mega-churches are engaged in serious Hispanic outreach. And many smaller churches are being reinvigorated by immigrant participation. The Pew study found (naturally) that members of congregations that include many immigrants are more favorable toward immigrants. Familiarity breeds sympathy.

The greater openness of regular attenders toward immigrants could also be the result of teaching from the pulpit or in the Sunday school class. While, as I noted, such messages are relatively rare, they are not unknown. And they are not new. Leaders such as [Richard Land](#) and [Ralph Reed](#) have encouraged immigration reform since the 1990s. Elite evangelical opinion, which has always been more favorable to immigration, may be gradually sinking in.

And Christian theology does have a current in favor of compassion and hospitality. A regular exposure to the teachings of Jesus — assuming that is what actually happens in churches — would tend to diminish a focus on national or group identity and encourage a broader notion of neighborliness. This does not dictate the details of immigration policy, but it necessarily entails a conception of illegal immigrants as persons, and a resistance to the division of their families.

On the polling evidence, politicians might lead evangelicals in either direction on immigration reform. But for evangelicals themselves, it would be a discrediting shame if their group identity counted more than their deepest beliefs.

http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/michael-gerson-a-christian-split-on-immigration/2013/11/07/f50fbf5e-47e2-11e3-b6f8-3782ff6cb769_story.html