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# Under God: Political Views and Experiences Among Young Adults Attending an Evangelical College

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## Abstract

While polarization has increased the saliency of political values, political meaning-making has been scarcely addressed in higher education literature and training. Additionally, even though the political orientation of evangelicals has been back in the spotlight since the 2016 presidential campaign, little research has been done to explore the interplay of faith commitments and political values among students at an evangelical college. This study examined religiosity, ideology, political attitudes, the salience of political identity, and experience with political differences among students at an evangelical Christian liberal arts institution ( $n = 223$ ). Descriptive data confirmed the salience of religious belief and practice among the surveyed students and revealed that they endorsed the views that cross partisan boundaries, suggesting that they were more complicated politically than their ideology, party affiliation, or voting decisions would convey. While political identity was not an important part of personhood for most students, ideology predicted conflict, open-mindedness, and self-censorship.

## Introduction

Political division has become a defining characteristic of the United States (Dimock & Wike, 2020), the nation with a convicting motto, “Out of many, one.” The past two presidential elections further uncovered the profound differences around core values and beliefs among Americans. In one multinational study, the researchers found that our nation has experienced the highest rise in affective polarization (Boxell et al., 2021), with ordinary citizens affiliated with one political party increasingly disliking and distrusting those affiliated with the other party (Iyengar et al., 2019). Amplified by the echo chambers of social media, political noise drowns out any attempt at a dialogue. We cannot hear each other, and what is more despairing, we do not want to.

The University of California in Los Angeles Higher Education Research Institute’s annual freshman survey revealed that today’s first-year college students are more politically polarized than they have been in the last 50 years (Stolzenberg et al., 2018). Over 60% of young Americans are “worried America will not be able to overcome its current divisions” (Harvard University Institute of Politics, 2021, p. 11). While growing polarization has increased the saliency of political identity (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015), the subject has been scarcely explored in higher education and student affairs training and literature (Morgan, 2021).

This study investigated the religious beliefs and practices, political views, and impact of political divisions in the lives of college students attending an evangelical Christian college. This research contributes to the higher education and student development field, as student affairs professionals have an opportunity to facilitate respectful and productive dialogue in safe settings to reconcile some of these divides. In the absence of literature addressing the role of political meaning-making in student development, this study also contributes to understanding the political identity development of college students on a Christian college campus by presenting a more nuanced narrative of students’ political attitudes and experiences.

## Literature Review

The scarcity of higher education research on political identity could be related to a generally low political engagement among college students during the 1980s and 1990s when many student development theories emerged. Following the Vietnam War era, students often saw politics

as “individualistic, divisive, negative, and often counterproductive to acting on the ills of society” (Longo & Meyer, 2006, p. 2).

Political identity and ideology are related concepts (sometimes used interchangeably) that have been challenging to operationalize (Theodoridis, 2013). In political science, ideology is measured using respondent self-reports of their ideological views. While often perceived as something negative by the general public, in political science, ideology is a neutral term that refers to an interrelated set of political beliefs (Freeden, 1996) forming the shared cognitive basis for a group or social identity (van Dijk, 2006). Partisanship is a more tangible concept and, thus, easier to measure and research. Within the sphere of American political science, party identification has been the primary variable included in the analysis to explain voting decisions and political meaning-making (Huddy & Bankert, 2017).

#### Evangelicals and Politics

Evangelicalism is both a global religious movement and a system of beliefs within Protestantism, defined by Bebbington (1989), based on four central commitments: (1) biblicism (high regard for and obedience to the Bible as the ultimate authority); (2) conversionism (the necessity of the new birth by the power of the Holy Spirit); (3) crucicentrism (a core emphasis on Christ’s sacrifice on the cross); and (4) activism (or evangelism—the need to share the Gospel, locally and globally). However, as astutely noted by Van der Borgh (2018), religious movements cannot define themselves exclusively “in terms of their confessional identities . . . all religions are co-identified by a sociocultural identity” (p. 162). Historical realities have shaped the attitudes, beliefs, and practices of White American evangelicals—not shared by evangelicals of non-White backgrounds or in other parts of the world—and directed their political affections (Smidt, 2013). Likewise, non-White evangelicals’ racialized experience in the United States has affected their political commitments (Calhoun-Brown, 1998). However, as research shows, across racial and ethnic groups and across political parties, evangelicals’ political meaning-making is usually more nuanced and complex than the political opposites would make it sound.

#### Evangelical Students and Politics

Although evangelicals are the largest religious group among young adults, little is known about how their faith shapes political outlook and civic engagement (Stackaruk & Singer, 2022). In a nationally representative survey of 1,989 young adults aged 18 to 25, evangelical young adults

were the only group to select religious texts as the primary source of influence (along with friends) on political issues and community engagement (Stackaruk & Singer, 2022). They were also more likely to view civic engagement as important and more engaged than their religious and non-religious peers.

Bryant (2005) offered a composite portrait of an evangelical subculture based on an in-depth qualitative study of an evangelical student presence on a public campus. In terms of the students' political beliefs, she concluded that evangelical student organizations are intentionally silent to avoid polarization. Many participants deliberately avoided identifying as Republicans or Democrats and often revealed holding "both liberal and conservative attitudes simultaneously" (p. 11). These attitudes included the support for welfare programs, environmental stewardship, and gun control (commonly perceived as liberal commitments), as well the conservative stance on abortion rights. The author found the students' view of LGBTQ+ matters ambivalent, expressing "significant conflict between their interpretation of biblical scriptures and their warm connections to gay or lesbian friends" (p. 12).

#### Politics, Stress, and Close Relationships

Over the past seven years (since the 2016 presidential election), researchers have focused on the impact of the tumultuous political environment on mental health. Following the 2016 presidential election, there were reports of significant stress, notably among Democrats, women, young adults, and college students unaffiliated with the Christian faith (Hagan et al., 2018; Hoyt et al., 2018).

Several studies examined how political engagement (Ballard et al., 2020) and sociopolitical stress (Ballard et al., 2022; Hagan et al., 2018) affect students' well-being. Ballard et al. (2022) defined sociopolitical stress "as the intense feelings and experiences people have that stem from an awareness of, exposure to, and/or involvement in, political events and phenomena" (p. 2). In a study of 769 students attending a large public university, one out of four met the criteria for clinically significant symptoms of stress related to the 2016 election (Hagan et al., 2018).

In another study, 76% of college students agreed that the 2020 election "was stressing them out" (Ballard et al., 2022, p. 4). However, students self-identifying as Republicans, ideologically conservative, and Christian reported the lowest stress levels, even though Trump, the candidate they most likely supported, lost the election.

A recent study with a representative sample of 850 college students nationwide found that a person's vote for a presidential candidate influenced one's openness to build friendships with, date, and work for someone with an opposing choice (Generation Lab, 2021). The effect was stronger for Democrats, with 71% responding that they would "definitely not" or "probably not" go out on a date with someone who voted for the opposing presidential candidate (compared with 31% of respondents who identified as Republicans). These findings demonstrate the impact of political polarization on relationships and suggest that partisanship influences social interactions.

#### Political Discourse in the College Setting

The college setting is a natural space for political development (Finlay et al., 2010; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), where exposure to new ideas helps students clarify their values and influences the formation of their identity. However, opportunities for intentional political discourse have been limited to specific majors or small groups of students with specific (and similar) interests (Thomas & Brower, 2017).

In her book *Angry Politics*, Stacy Ulbig (2020) argued that civil debate around potentially polarizing issues is a skill that needs to be taught in college. Yet, even before the cancel culture reached its momentum, a survey of 19,969 undergraduate students from 55 colleges and universities found that "a majority of students feel they can't express their opinions on campus, especially when they are in the ideological minority and even if they believe their college fosters a climate that supports free speech" (Anderson, 2020, para. 1). Understanding student perceptions of the impact of political disagreements on their close relationships and their meaning-making around political identity can help faculty and staff offer more informed, intentional support for their development inside and outside the classroom.

#### Research Questions

We sought to address the gap in the literature regarding Christian students' political views and engagement, aiming to answer the following research questions:

1. How central are religious beliefs and practices to college students at an evangelical Christian liberal arts institution?
2. What are the patterns of students' political self-identification?
3. What attitudes on diverse contemporary political issues are endorsed by the participants?

4. Have students experienced significant polarization and interpersonal conflict related to the 2020 presidential election?
5. Is there a relationship between the study's main variables (i.e., religiosity, ideology, political identity, and political conflict)?

## Method

This survey-based study sought to explore the patterns of political ideology, attitudes, and identity, as well as the experience with political conflict in American students attending a private liberal arts institution identifying with evangelical Protestant tradition in the Midwest.

### Participants and Procedures

The study's sample was drawn at a private Christian college in the Midwest where the student population reflects the qualities we intended to explore (i.e., a primarily evangelical student body). Upon receiving the institutional review board approval, we visited classes, sent an email, and posted flyers encouraging students to participate in the study. Data were collected in May and September 2022 through an electronic survey.

Out of 292 responses, 69 were excluded for missing data or not meeting the inclusion criteria (undergraduate status, 18 to 29 years old age group, and American citizenship). Men comprised 51.0% of the sample, and women 46.5% (2.5% selected Other or Prefer not to say). The participants came from 35 states and, racially, were 75% White, 13% Asian, 2% African American, and .5% Native American, with 9.5% selecting "other" or "prefer not to say." Of those who chose White, 6.5% identified as Latino/a or Hispanic. The racial/ethnic composition of the sample was representative of the student population at the institution as a whole. The age ranged from 18 to 24, with 23.76% being first-year students, 19.80% sophomores, 27.71% juniors, and 28.71% seniors. As expected for this demographic group, 96% were never married.

### Measures

The survey consisted of questions to assess one's religiosity and view of the Bible, ideological self-identification, party affiliation, voting history and decision (for presidential election only), political attitudes, the salience of political identity, and the impact of political discord on significant relationships.

#### ***Measures of Religiosity***

We were particularly interested in this sample because of the expected high levels of religiosity. The Centrality of Religiosity Scale (CRS) assesses the salience of religious thought, expression, and experience (Huber

& Huber, 2012). We used the five-item version of the scale, measuring religious thought (“How often do you think about religious issues?”), belief (“To what extent do you believe that God or something divine exists?”), public practice (“How often do you take part in religious services?”), private practice (“How often do you pray?”), and experience (“How often do you experience situations in which you have the feeling that God or something divine intervenes in your life?”). Respondents answered each item using a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (*not at all/never*) to 5 (*very much so/very often*); higher scores represented a more evident centrality of religiosity. The measure of internal consistency (Cronbach alpha) of the five-item scale was .85 (Huber & Huber, 2012;), .93 in our previous study (Bayne et al., 2021), and .75 in the current study, demonstrating adequate reliability.

Additionally, the survey included the question from the American National Election Study (ANES) survey, a national survey of voters in the United States conducted before and after every presidential election. This question attempts to gauge the participants’ view of the Bible by asking which of the given statements reflects their feeling about the Bible:

1. The Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken literally, word for word.
2. The Bible is the word of God but not everything in it should be taken literally, word for word.
3. The Bible is a book written by men and is not the word of God. (American National Election Survey, 2021, p. 185)

As it was done elsewhere in the literature (see Yancey & Quosigk, 2021), we included these questions to explore the participants’ theological orientation (progressive or conservative) based on their belief about the Scriptures.

### ***Measures of Political Identification***

Ideological self-identification was assessed through a 7-point Likert scale, from 1 corresponding with extremely liberal to 7 corresponding with extremely conservative (Bayne et al., 2021). Respondents also answered whether they were registered with a specific party; whether they thought of themselves as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or something else; whether they thought of themselves to be closer to the Republican or Democratic Party; and the degree of identification (*Strong* or *Not very strong*). Finally, they were asked for whom they voted in the 2020 presidential election (Trump, Biden, Other, or Decline to answer).

### ***Political Attitudes***

Attitudes toward specific political issues were assessed with a 12-item Political Attitudes Questionnaire (PAQ) created by Pyszczynski et al. (2018), with the participants indicating on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 6 = *Strongly Agree*) their agreement with the statements listed in Table 1. In the Pyszczynski et al. (2018) study, the scale yielded good reliability ( $\alpha = .83$ ), and it did likewise in our study ( $\alpha = .81$ ).

### ***Salience of Political Identity and Responses to Political Conflict***

The Political Identity and Relational Impact Scale (PIRI) is a new instrument intending to capture personal and relational responses to political conflict (Bayne et al., 2021). It consists of 30 items and a four-factor structure (Conflict, Identity, Open-Mindedness, and Self-Censorship). In its initial validation study (Bayne et al., 2021), it had the following measures of internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha): .88 (Conflict), .85 (Identity), .80 (Open-Mindedness), and .76 (Self-Censorship). In the present study, Cronbach's alphas were .87, .87, .73, and .82 for Conflict, Identity, Open-Mindedness, and Self-Censorship, respectively.

### *Analyses*

We answered Research Questions 1, 2, 3, and 4 using descriptive statistics. To answer Research Question 5, we measured the strength of the association between the study variables by calculating Pearson correlation coefficients and performing a multiple regression analysis.

## Results

### *Centrality of Religious Beliefs and Expressions*

The responses to the CRS confirmed the salience of religious belief, experience, and practice among the surveyed students. The majority of the respondents thought of religious issues often or very often (85%,  $n = 170$ ) and experienced situations in which they felt that God intervened in their life (occasionally: 34%, often or very often: 53%,  $n = 175$ ). Ninety-five percent ( $n = 190$ ) endorsed a belief that God exists, with 6% believing in God “quite a bit” and 89% selecting “very much so.” They reported regularly participating in religious services (once a week or more than once a week: 89%,  $n = 179$ ) and praying either daily or several times a day (82%,  $n = 164$ ).

Based on the responses to the ANES survey items on the view of Scripture, 99% believed the Bible to be the word of God, with 24% affirming the statement that “the Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken

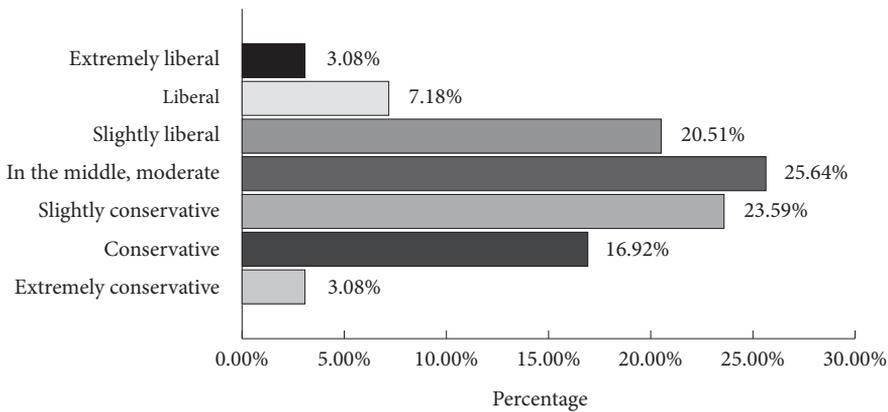
literally, word for word,” and 74% agreeing that “the Bible is the word of God but not everything in it should be taken literally, word for word.” Out of 203 students, three agreed with the statement that “the Bible is a book written by men and is not the word of God.”

*Ideological Self-identification, Partisanship, and Presidential Election*

As seen in Figure 1, the sample was reasonably balanced ideologically, slightly leaning to the conservative side ( $M = 4.22, SD = 1.41$ ), with the individuals most frequently self-identifying as “moderate, in the middle” (25%,  $n = 50$ ). Overall, 30.77% of respondents described themselves as liberal (across the three liberal categories), and 43.59% described themselves as conservative. Women were more likely to identify as liberal ( $M = 3.87$ ) than men ( $M = 4.56$ ), reflecting the trend in the country (Survey Center on American Life, 2022).

**Figure 1**

*Self-Reported Ideology*



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In response to the question about the political party affiliation on voter registration 46.70% of respondents ( $n = 92$ ) did not have an official party affiliation, followed by 36.04% registered as Republicans, 8.63% as Democrats, and 8.12% as Independents. One person selected “other.” However, based on another question (“Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or something else?”) a different pattern emerged, with slightly more than half of the students identifying as Republicans (50.25%,  $n = 100$ ), followed by 26.53% identifying as Independents, 10.05% as Democrats, 7.54% selecting “no preference,” and 5.53% “other.” Interestingly, of those who identified as Republicans, less than half (48.98%) called themselves “a strong Republican” (as opposed to “not a very strong Republican”). For

those identifying as Democrats, 45% called themselves a strong Democrat (vs. 55% describing themselves as “not a very strong Democrat”).

Finally, 73.23% of the participants ( $n = 145$ ) voted in the 2020 presidential election, with 41.33% voting for Trump, 24.49% for Biden, and 14.29% for another candidate. Almost 20% of the respondents declined to answer.

### Political Attitudes

Attitudes toward specific political issues were assessed with a 12-item Political Attitudes Questionnaire (PAQ). Higher scores denoted greater endorsement of the statement. We used these items to explore how our sample rated statements that are often points of division along political lines in order to get a more in-depth perspective of student political ideology.

**Table 1**

*Responses to Political Attitudes Questionnaire*

Survey Item	Strongly Dis-agree	Moder. Dis-agree	Some-what Disagree	Some-what Agree	Moder. Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean/ SD
The traditional (male/female) two-parent family provides the best environment of stability, discipline, responsibility, and character.	5.8%	4.9%	5.8%	11.2%	11.7%	60.5%	5.0/1.53
America’s domestic policy should do more to ensure that living and working conditions are equal for all groups of people.	4.0%	2.7%	9.91%	30.0%	22.0%	31.4%	4.57/1.31
The use of our military strength makes the United States a safer place to live.	1.8%	7.6%	13.9%	22.0%	21.1%	33.6%	4.54/1.37
America would be a better place if people had stronger religious beliefs.	4.9%	5.8%	8.1%	28.3%	29.1%	23.8%	4.42/1.35

The more money a person makes in America, the more taxes he/she should pay.	7.6%	7.2%	9.4%	30.9%	24.2%	20.6%	4.19/1.45
It is the responsibility of political leaders to promote programs that will help close the income gap between the rich and the poor.	8.1%	8.15%	11.7%	28.7%	24.7%	18.4%	4.09/1.47
Taxation should be used to fund social programs.	5.4%	7.2%	15.2%	38.6%	22.9%	10.8%	3.99/1.26
Gay marriage threatens the sanctity of marriage.	13.9%	10.76%	13.45%	20.18%	13.0%	28.7%	3.94/1.76
Flag burning should be illegal.	15.2%	10.8%	19.7%	17.9%	12.6%	23.8%	3.73/1.73
There is no “right way” to live life; instead, everyone must create a way to live which works best for them.	14.8%	20.2%	21.1%	22.9%	15.2%	5.8%	3.21/1.45
Our society is set up so that people usually get what they deserve.	14.3%	19.7%	26.0%	23.3%	12.6%	4.0%	3.12/1.36
Spending tax dollars on “abstinence education” rather than “sex education” is more effective in curbing teen pregnancy.	23.8%	25.6%	20.2%	21.1%	6.7%	2.7%	2.70/1.35

*Note.*  $N = 223$ . Survey items are listed in descending order of the mean value, ranking the items from the highest to the lowest agreement.

As shown in Table 1, most students (72.2%) strongly or moderately agreed that the traditional male/female two-parent family is the best environment for a stable upbringing aiming to develop character and responsibility. However, there was no strong consensus on whether same-sex marriage threatens the sanctity of marriage, with 41.7% of respondents strongly or moderately agreeing with the statement and almost a quarter of them strongly or moderately disagreeing. Perhaps in the same vein, 43.9% agreed that there is no “right way to live life;

instead, everyone must create a way to live which works best for them.” Yet, only 18.8% disagreed the country “would be a better place if people had stronger religious beliefs.”

While ideologically, the sample was leaning slightly toward the conservative orientation, an overwhelming majority of participants agreed (83.4%, across the agreement categories) that “America’s domestic policy should do more to ensure that living and working conditions are equal for all groups of people.” Similarly, most respondents believed that (1) people with higher earnings should pay higher taxes (75.9%, with varying degrees of agreement), (2) political leaders must promote programs closing the income gap between the rich and the poor (71.8%), and (3) “taxation should be used to fund social programs” (72.3%), although the most common selection on these items was “somewhat agree.” Finally, 60% of participants disagreed that “our society is set up so that people usually get what they deserve.”

While the desecration of the American flag has not dominated the news headlines in the last thirty years, perhaps with national anthem kneeling protests becoming a much more polarizing issue, 36.4% of respondents expressed their belief that flag burning should be outlawed, 26% agreed that it should be legal, with a significant portion of students remaining ambivalent (37.6% selecting either somewhat agree or somewhat disagree). Lastly, most students (81.2%) agreed, in varying degrees, that “the use of our military strength makes the United States a safer place to live,” a belief that might have been reinforced by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

#### *Salience of Political Identity and Responses to Political Conflict*

The salience of political identity, the relational impact of political conflict in significant relationships, and the approaches to political difference and conflict were measured utilizing PIRI. Table 2 summarizes responses to each PIRI question, organized in the ascending order of the mean value, ranking the items from the highest to the lowest agreement.

**Table 2***Results for Political Identity and Relational Impact Scale*

PIRI Item	Mean	SD	Agree (Composite)	Factor
I maintain respect for people who hold different political values.	1.77	.96	78.6%	Open-Mindedness
I can respect opposing perspectives when I know others are informed about political issues.	1.81	1.01	78.22%	Open-Mindedness
I can understand why someone would vote differently than me.	1.96	1.10	73.76%	Open-Mindedness
My significant relationships stay the same regardless of what is happening in politics.	1.98	1.09	70.29%	Open-Mindedness
I like to keep a sense of humor when talking about politics	2.32	1.23	53.47%	Open-Mindedness
I can discuss politics without feeling the need to change the other person's opinions.	2.40	1.21	58.42%	Open-Mindedness
My political identity is influenced by my personal history and background.	2.42	1.26	58.42%	Identity
I am selective about who I talk to about politics.	2.52	1.49	55.44%	Self-Censorship
I tend to support candidates from the same political party.	2.59	1.43	58.42%	Identity
I tend to only talk about politics with someone who I trust.	2.60	1.51	46.53%	Self-Censorship
I like to joke around with people who have different political values than me.	2.73	1.51	44.55%	Open-Mindedness
I could see myself voting for someone from another political party.	2.83	1.39	39.11%	Open-Mindedness

I try to keep the peace in my relationships, even if that means not sharing my own beliefs.	2.89	1.56	45.55%	Self-Censorship
In the past, I have voted for or supported candidates from different political parties.	2.95	2.07	23.76%	Open-Mindedness
I experience tension when discussing politics within my relationships.	3.20	1.52	32.67%	Conflict
I think it is difficult to have conversations with people who have different political opinions than me.	3.36	1.47	25.25%	Self-Censorship
I try to avoid discussing politics with people who disagree with me.	3.40	1.48	27.72%	Self-Censorship
Politics feel personal to me.	3.54	1.47	19.31%	Identity
Political discussions can hurt my relationships.	3.58	1.57	23.77%	Conflict
I feel personally impacted by political election outcomes.	3.52	1.63	24.26%	Identity
I am more informed about politics than people who support opposing candidates.	3.67	1.68	15.84%	Identity
I feel distressed when my candidate loses an election.	3.69	1.63	13.37%	Identity
This election cycle distanced me from people I care about.	3.70	1.79	20.3%	Conflict
My political identity is important to me.	3.80	1.43	14.85%	Identity
This election cycle created tension in my close relationships.	3.86	1.82	18.32%	Conflict
My political views represent who I am as a person.	3.91	1.71	18.81%	Identity

I think my relationships have been divided by political disagreement.	4.02	1.69	15.85%	Conflict
I avoid contact with significant others who have different political values than I do.	4.16	1.81	12.88%	Conflict
I react emotionally to election outcomes.	4.19	1.63	11.89%	Identity
I have lost relationships because of political differences.	4.40	1.91	12.87%	Conflict

*Note.*  $N = 202$ . Percentages for Composite Agree include Strongly and Moderately Agree. Likert-type responses to each item ranged from one (*Strongly Agree*) to five (*Strongly Disagree*), with a lower mean representing a higher level of agreement.

The results indicated that political identity (as measured by PIRI) was not psychologically central for most participants (see Table 2), and the experience of politically-based relational conflict was relatively low. For example, only 15% agreed that their political identity was important to them, and 19% thought their political views represented who they were. Although 33% of the respondents reported experiencing tension while talking about politics, 13% admitted losing relationships because of political differences. The top six items with the lowest mean (reflecting the highest agreement) were a part of the Open-Mindedness Scale. Most participants agreed that they could be respectful to those who differ from them politically (79%), and they could understand why someone would vote differently (74%).

#### Relationships Among Constructs

Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to examine the linear relationship between religiosity, political ideology, conflict, identity, open-mindedness, and self-censorship (with the latter four constructs measured by PIRI subscales). The relationship between political ideology and religiosity was weak but statistically significant ( $r(204) = .36$ ,  $p < .01$ ), indicating that as reported religiosity increases, reported conservatism also increases. There were also weak but statistically significant correlations between political ideology and conflict ( $r(204) = .23$ ,  $p < .01$ ), open-mindedness ( $r(204) = .23$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and self-censorship ( $r(204) = .19$ ,  $p < .01$ ). To clarify, increased conservatism was significantly associated with decreased conflict, decreased open-mindedness, and

decreased censorship. However, weak correlations indicate that, though there was statistical significance among these constructs, practical significance may be limited. Lastly, the associations between political ideology and identity and between religiosity and conflict, identity, open-mindedness, and self-censorship were not statistically significant.

Multiple linear regressions were completed to further examine the association between political ideology, conflict, open-mindedness, and self-censorship. The relationship between political ideology and conflict was statistically significant, indicating political ideology is a significant predictor of conflict  $F(1,192) = 10.60, p < .01, R^2 = .05$ ). Those who identified as liberal were more likely to have higher levels of political conflict, while those who identified as conservative were more likely to have lower levels of conflict ( $\beta = .23, p < .05$ ). Additionally, the relationship between political ideology and open-mindedness was statistically significant  $F(1,195) = 10.58, p < .01, R^2 = .05$ ), indicating political ideology significantly predicts open-mindedness within the sample. Those who reported being more conservative also reported lower levels of political open-mindedness, while those who reported being more liberal reported higher levels of political open-mindedness ( $\beta = .23, p < .05$ ). Political ideology was also a significant predictor of self-censorship  $F(1,196) = 7.00, p < .01, R^2 = .03$ ). Liberalism predicted increased political self-censorship while conservatism predicted decreased self-censorship ( $\beta = .17, p < .05$ ). It is important to note that the open-mindedness scale in PIRI included items measuring partisanship loyalty and not only one's disposition to respect the viewpoints of others and tolerate differences in politically pluralistic contexts. (There was no statistically significant relationship between ideology and open-mindedness related to the latter construct.)

**Table 3**  
*Pearson Correlations for Study Variables*

Variable	<i>n</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. PIRI–Conflict	206	—					
2. PIRI–Identity	206	.23**	—				
3. PIRI–Open-mindedness	205	— .04	— .20**	—			
4. PIRI–Self-censorship	206	.29**	.09	— .02	—		
5. Religiosity	204	.13	.05	— .06	— .03	—	

6. Political Ideology<sup>a</sup>      198    .23\*\*    —.12    .28\*\*    .19\*\*    .36\*\*    —

<sup>a</sup> For political ideology measure, lower numbers indicate leanings toward liberalism, and higher numbers indicate leanings toward conservatism.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

**Table 4**

*Regression Coefficients for Study Variables.*

Variable	$\beta$	SE	$p$
PIRI–Conflict	.227	.406	.001
PIRI–Open-mindedness	.227	.335	.001
PIRI–Self-censorship	.186	.028	.009

*Note.*  $N = 197$ . Political ideology predicts conflict, open-mindedness, and self-censorship in the sample, as measured by the PIRI.

## Discussion

This study explored the patterns of political identification, endorsed political values, and experience with political conflict among young people attending an evangelical Christian college. As expected, the sample consisted of highly religious students, confirmed by the CRS scores. The high CRS scores demonstrate the salience of religious belief to one's identity. Based on ideological self-identification, the sample slightly leaned toward conservatism, which was not surprising. After all, the connection between political conservatism and high religiosity has been long established (Malka et al., 2012). However, the results showed that the participants most frequently saw themselves in the middle of the political spectrum. While students affirmed a two-parent traditional family structure as an ideal environment for the flourishing of children, there was less consensus about the impact of same-sex marriage on the institution and sanctity of marriage.

Based on the findings, many students did not neatly fit into the right, traditionally occupied by those who are socially and fiscally conservative, or the left—those who are socially and fiscally progressive. And they looked anything but Libertarians, who are typically socially progressive and fiscally conservative. The pattern from the data represented those identified by the fourth combination—socially conservative (to an extent) and fiscally progressive. Perhaps their fiscally liberal position can

be narrated through the words of a participant in Bryant's (2005) study of evangelical students:

I think a lot of conservative Christians feel that it's not the government's place to do that, to help the poor and stuff, and that it should be organizations and churches and stuff like that. But I don't think that necessarily actually happens. The church doesn't always help the poor like they should. And so, if they're not doing it, I'd rather someone do it than no one. (p. 11)

Like this study's sample, students in Bryant's research "leaned toward the right, but did not hesitate to embrace liberal positions that better accommodated their commitment - often derived from their Christian faith - to alleviating social problems such as poverty" (pp. 12-13). Overall, when it comes to their views on economic issues, they look very much like the members of their generational cohorts, "progressive and pro-government" (Pew Research Center, 2020, para. 5).

Yet, the students in the current study mostly identified as Republican, suggesting some tension between partisanship loyalty and endorsed beliefs, which is, as noted earlier in the article, fairly common. "American Christians, both liberal and conservative, must deal with conflict between the traditional dictates of their faith and their personal political views and allegiances" (Ross et al., 2012, p. 1). There are several plausible explanations for the students' allegiance to the Republican Party despite their diverse (and sometimes divergent) views, but the in-depth discussion of this fascinating dynamic is beyond the scope of this paper. Notably, the measure we used to draw out the students' political attitudes did not include the question about abortion, which is very important to evangelicals. In the recent Pew Research Center study (2022), White evangelicals were more likely than other religious groups and twice as likely as the general population in the U.S. to say abortion should be illegal.

The study revealed that, within this sample, politics played a modest role in shaping or illuminating one's identity across the ideological spectrum and that political identity was less salient for students identifying as ideologically conservative and highly religious. Not surprisingly, the experience of politically-based relational conflict was also lower for those who did not see that their political views represented who they were at their core. Previous research documented a particularly strong emotional response to the presidential elections among Democrats, liberals, and those who did not identify with Christian faith both in 2016

(Hagan et al., 2018; Hoyt et al., 2018) and 2020 (Ballard et al., 2022), regardless of who ended up in the White House.

According to LeBaron and Pillay (2006), differences of opinion do not inevitably result in a conflict unless these differences are about something that deeply matters. In their book, *One Faith No Longer*, Yancey and Quosigk (2021) offered a thorough, research-based account of what matters most to conservative Christians (described as those who believe that the Bible was divinely inspired and authoritative): “Conservative Christians do not put strong emphasis on political agreement in order to determine if you are one of them—their major concern is whether you agree with them theologically” (p. 4).

The most encouraging finding was related to the reported openness, desire to understand, and (perceived) capacity to maintain respect toward those who hold politically different viewpoints. Again, these results were similar to the dispositions of openness and humility Bryant (2005) encountered in her research projects on evangelical students 15 years ago.

### ***Implications for Research and Practice in Higher Education***

Building on the results of this study and other recent research about college students and politics, further inquiry can explore (1) how ideological orientation and political attitudes are formed and, potentially, transformed during the college years; (2) whether students perceive any discrepancies between their faith-animated worldview and party affiliation, and if so, how they rationalize their political commitments; (3) what additional variables interact with their ideology and political attitudes; and (4) how the college environment helps and hinders the political dialogue. Future studies can also tease out whether low political conflict stems from students’ understanding of what matters most, biblically, or whether a politically homogeneous environment and cultural or economic privilege contribute to the relative insignificance of politics to their identity. Additionally, a study capturing socioeconomic variables and their impact on student views, as well as the environmental and interpersonal variables, could offer causal explanations for the reported opinions and experiences.

Faculty and student development professionals have an incredible opportunity to model and encourage respectful conversations about differences that matter. As wisely noted by Michele LeBaron (2003), “cultural generalizations are not the whole story, and there is no substitute for building relationships and sharing experiences, coming to know others

more deeply over time” (para. 8). This observation is strongly supported by the research that shows “political opponents respect moral beliefs more when they are supported by personal experiences, not facts” (Kubin et al., 2021). It is hard to think of a better place for the stories to be invited, shared, and valued than a faithful learning community within higher education.

Beyond promoting an open dialogue, we need to share with our students a compelling vision for the pursuit of the common good (and personally commit to this work) through gospel witness and community engagement, transcending partisan divisions. For those who work at institutions identifying with the evangelical tradition, it may be helpful to teach about the sizable minority of evangelicals whose passion for sharing the gospel was clothed into a tangible effort to alleviate human suffering (see Magnuson, 2004; Smith, 2004).

#### Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, its sample was non-random and was drawn from one college, limiting the generalizability of the results. Second, the 12-item version of PAQ did not include questions about polarizing issues, such as abortion, climate change, and immigration, thus limiting the opportunity to understand student positions on these topics. Capturing their attitudes could have helped better comprehend the reasons for partisanship loyalty. Third, although the ANES measure used to determine participants’ view of the Bible has been a long-established tool (Yancey & Quosigk, 2021), the more nuanced survey items would help locate them along the progressive-conservative theological spectrum. Fourth, this study involved Christian students attending an evangelical institution rather than evangelical students. Directly inquiring about their evangelical beliefs would make the connection between evangelical faith and political identity and conflict less tentative. And finally, since this study relied on self-reported data, we need to consider social desirability bias, in which participants present themselves as more religious or open to differences than they are.

#### Conclusion

With little scholarship on faith and political meaning-making in college students, this study contributes to the student development field by exploring political leanings and experiences with the political difference among those who attend an evangelical liberal arts institution. Drenched with constant reminders from the media and literature of how divided Americans have become, we found that these divides do

not extend to the students who participated in this study (at least not to the same degree). In our sample, political identity was not salient to one's personhood, and openness to understand and respect others' political viewpoints was the disposition most consistently expressed. Yet, one's placement on the ideological spectrum predicted the relational impact of political divisions and self-censorship, with those leaning toward the liberal orientation experiencing greater conflict and engaging in self-censorship strategies to manage it. Overall, the findings showed that the participants were far more complicated politically than the labels (conservative or liberal), party affiliation, or voting decisions would convey.

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