

Media coverage of Evangelical Christians ignores Blacks and Latinos

Written by Nadra Kareem Nittle Maynard Institute for Structural Inequalities
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With state and national Republicans emphasizing religious wedge issues, such as health coverage for contraception and separation of church and state, the media have frequently reported on the demographic most aroused by these issues - evangelical voters. But have the media accurately portrayed these evangelical Christians?

For many, the answer is a resounding "no."

News reports often leave the impression that all evangelical Christians are white and usually support the most conservative Republican candidates. Totally overlooked is the fact that many African-Americans, Latinos and other people of color are evangelical Christians whose views are rarely cited.

With its narrow coverage of this demographic, the media may have an inadvertent impact on the political process. Evangelical Christians are portrayed as the most committed religious believers in America. Does this give the perception that God backs their positions on issues including abortion and same-sex marriage? Does that give an unfair advantage to candidates aligned with issues supposedly receiving divine support?

People of color, a growing segment of the evangelical community, and their positions on issues are rarely seen or heard in the media. Religion scholars and experts say it's critical that the media quickly adjust coverage to include all evangelical Christians or risk giving an unfair advantage to candidates supported by the largely conservative, white evangelicals.

An example typical of the media coverage appeared last Dec. 18 as the primary election season approached. The Washington Post published a feature-length article suggesting that evangelicals were unsure about which candidate to support for president. All of them interviewed in the piece were white, and "the right to life" predictably surfaced among their top concerns. Such articles fuel the perception that evangelicals are a monolithic group politically and racially.

The Post could not be reached for comment.

Lisa Sharon Harper, author of the book "Evangelical Does Not Equal Republican or Democrat" and co-author of "Left, Right & Christ: Evangelical Faith in Politics," says the term "evangelical" has a meaning different than what is portrayed in the mainstream media.

"The media would do well not to call [the religious right] evangelicals," says Harper, also director

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of mobilizing for Sojourners, a Christian social justice organization in Washington. "They're really thinking about a political bloc. They're not thinking about theological evangelicals."

Harper notes that political evangelicals tend to be white, live in suburban or rural areas and have a history of supporting a conservative agenda over the past 30 years. In contrast, she says theological evangelicals have existed for hundreds of years and have challenged the status quo.

She points to William Wilberforce, the evangelical Christian, who led the movement to abolish slavery in Great Britain in the late 1700s and early 1800s. Wilberforce also worked to end poverty and cruelty to animals and to expand educational access.

Harper says contemporary evangelical Christians strive to raise awareness about similar issues. "What you're finding among theological evangelicals is there's such a broader spectrum of issues that they care about," she says. "It won't just be abortion or same-sex marriage. It will also be the prison industrial complex and how that impacts the Black community and the Latino community. It will be the issue of immigration."

Ron Sider, founder of Evangelicals for Social Action in Wynnewood, Pa., and author of "Fixing the Moral Deficit: A Balanced Way to Balance the Budget," agrees that the media should be more precise when using the term "evangelical."

Sider notes that evangelicals are a racially diverse group. The Latino evangelical population is growing thanks to rising numbers of Hispanic Pentecostal churches. He says that many African-Americans attend churches that also fall under the evangelical umbrella but that Blacks may not openly identify as such.

"It's entirely understandable [Blacks] don't like the term evangelical because for the past couple of decades evangelicals who've voted for Republicans don't seem to be concerned about racial justice issues," Sider says.

Views of the religious right, as evangelical voters are also known, concern Sider because he doesn't believe that their agenda is biblical enough. A biblical political agenda would also include economic justice and environmentalism, known in Christian circles as "creation care," he says.

Sider says he understands, for example, why conservative evangelical voters are concerned about the federal deficit, but he objects to solving the deficit by slashing benefits for the poor, a group for which Christ advocated.

"I say that isn't biblical. That's unjust."

The Rev. J. Herbert Nelson II, director of public witness for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Washington Office, says the media have neglected to explore differences in political ideologies among evangelical Christians because journalists are under pressure to craft stories that will grab attention, a strategy that doesn't always allow for nuanced coverage.

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Nelson says the media have identified the religious right as Christian fundamentalists. He objects to Christian conservatives being represented exclusively as evangelicals and says political titles detract from pressing issues.

"I think it's a problem we're facing, this deep categorization that we've bought into at all levels of discourse," Nelson says. He contends that how Christians and other groups politically identify depends on circumstances in which they find themselves at a given time. "Nobody's conservative or liberal or moderate all of the time," Nelson says.

He also says that Christian views on issues such as contraception are more complicated than the way they are depicted in the media, that some evangelicals do fight for health coverage for contraception because it may help women treat medical conditions such as endometriosis.

Nelson also cites churches that have distributed condoms in impoverished areas where mothers already struggle to feed children. He says these evangelicals have tried to meet needs of people in their communities.

Edward Gilbreath is editor of UrbanFaith.com and senior director of digital & consumer media at Urban Ministries Inc., in Chicago. He is also an editor at large for Christianity Today and author of "Reconciliation Blues: A Black Evangelical's Inside View of White Christianity."

Gilbreath encourages the media to report more comprehensively on evangelicals. He recalls a time when news networks thought they were representing diverse viewpoints in Christianity by interviewing two prominent figures: the Rev. Jesse L. Jackson and the Rev. Jerry Falwell, who died in 2007.

He says the media operate similarly today, contacting the same sources repeatedly to fill their need for "a quick, predictable voice." Usually, the voices are those of whites.

When journalists report stories that don't fit a conventional narrative, Gilbreath says they challenge paradigms. "It messes with their labels of who evangelicals are, who liberals are, who conservatives are," he says.

Gilbreath contends that journalists may hesitate even to take the simple step of including a Black evangelical in a story about evangelical voters because they don't know how to do so without making the entire story about race. He says journalists must interview a Black evangelical as just another voice in a larger piece about Christian viewpoints.

Gilbreath advises reporters: "Avoid the sort of easy labels and stereotypes and dig deeper for different voices and different perspectives. Don't settle on that sort of typecast voice. Try to go beyond that sort of ideologically driven source."

Nadra Kareem Nittle writes media critiques for the Maynard Media Center on Structural Inequity, part of the Maynard Institute for Journalism Education. This project is made possible by a grant from the W K. Kellogg Foundation. For other media critiques, please visit <http://mije.org/mmcsi>.