

THE BRAND OF EVANGELICALS

A Barna Briefing, 2019

*A Barna special report delves into the good, the bad
and the political ideas about this segment of Christians*

Niccoló Machiavelli, the Italian political philosopher, once wrote that, “Everyone sees what you appear to be, few experience what you really are.”¹ These words, written more than five hundred years ago, seem incredibly relevant to 21st century American evangelicals.

This religious group has assumed a unique place in national discourse. The cohort of Christians has courted controversy, no matter how you slice it—whether evangelicals only make up just 6 percent of the U.S. population (as Barna’s legacy tracking of the group suggests) or whether they comprise a larger share of the public (as other polls, which use different measures, indicate). The parade of stories trying to explain the relationship between evangelicals and the Republican Party seem never ending and are likely to continue into a heated election year. And this puts the future of American evangelicalism in a precarious spot. Evangelicals derive their name from their primary motivating factor—a desire to perform the Great Commission, to share their faith with and persuade others. However, their ability to preach the Good News may be hampered by a culture that perceives evangelicals in ways that they may not fully comprehend.

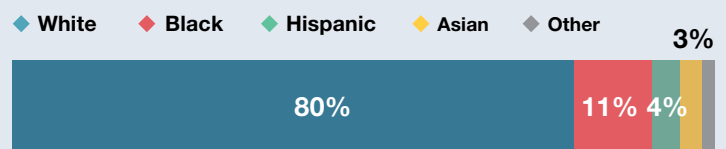
Barna’s research has long included evangelicals, and we’ve developed a pronounced portrait of this Christian minority over the years. For this special report, however, our aim was different. We set out to understand how the *general public* understands evangelicals. What emerges is a portrait that should serve as a warning, but also provide hope that the public is still receptive to the message of evangelical Christianity. Based on a nationwide study of U.S. adults, we discovered that Americans view evangelicals through a political lens, which corresponds with mixed feelings toward this religious group. However, many people still understand evangelicals as a committed group of believers who put their faith first.

1 Niccoló Machiavelli, *The Prince*, (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Pub. Co., 1995).

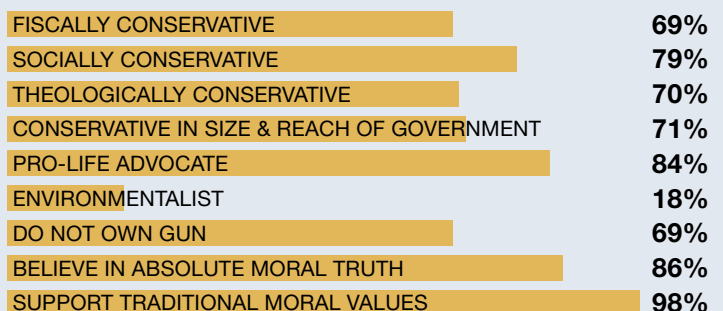
WHO ARE EVANGELICALS?

Let’s take a quick look at how Barna defines evangelicals. Our reporting on this group stems from a 9-point definition that is based upon what a person believes and not their self-identification with that label. This group currently accounts for 6 percent of the U.S. adult public and has not fluctuated much over the 28 years that the firm has tracked the group. Foundationally, adults who meet the evangelical definition have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in their life today and believe that, when they die, they will go to heaven because they have confessed their sins and accepted Jesus as their savior. Additionally, they must say their faith is still very important in their life and sense a personal responsibility to share their about their faith with others—statements underscoring the evangelistic attitude that is fundamental to the group (and its name). Other core theological beliefs round out our definition, including an affirmation that Satan exists, that Jesus Christ came to earth and lived a sinless life, that the Bible is accurate in all of its teachings, that salvation comes only through grace and not works, and that God is the omniscient, omnipotent, creator of the universe who still rules the world today. Barna doesn’t determine this group by their church attendance or denominational affiliation, or even whether they might self-describe as “evangelical” or as “Christian.”

Barna’s definition of evangelicals does not assume an ethnicity, such as white evangelicals. As such, about four out of five of evangelicals (80%) are white, with 11 percent being black, 4 percent Hispanic and 3 percent Asian.



A conservative framing of evangelicals in the public eye holds true in our profile of the faith segment. Most evangelicals describe themselves as conservative, though they are more likely to say they are socially conservative (79%) than fiscally conservative (69%) or theologically conservative (70%). Looking at specific policies or issues, seven out of 10 (71%) take a conservative view of the optimal size and reach of government; more than eight out of 10 (84%) say they are pro-life advocates; less than two out of 10 (18%) say they could be described as an environmentalist; and seven out of 10 (69%) do not own a gun. Nearly nine out of 10 (86%) believe in the existence of absolute moral truth, and almost all (98%) support traditional moral values.



U.S. ADULTS DEFINE EVANGELICALS BY THEIR CONSERVATISM

What are the traits or qualities that people believe evangelicals represent? Barna asked respondents to identify adjectives they might use to describe the evangelical community in general. The most commonly selected terms relate to the group’s conservatism—primarily as “religiously conservative” (37% of all U.S. adults select this term) and “politically conservative” (27%). These popular perceptions are in line with other Barna data on the [demographics of evangelicals](#), who on average tend to identify as politically conservative (see sidebar). Other common descriptors are a mix of favorable perceptions (23% “caring,” 22% “friendly,” 22% “hopeful,” 20% “encouraging”) along with unfavorable opinions (21% “narrow-minded,” 17% “homophobic,” 10% “misogynistic,” 10% “racist”).

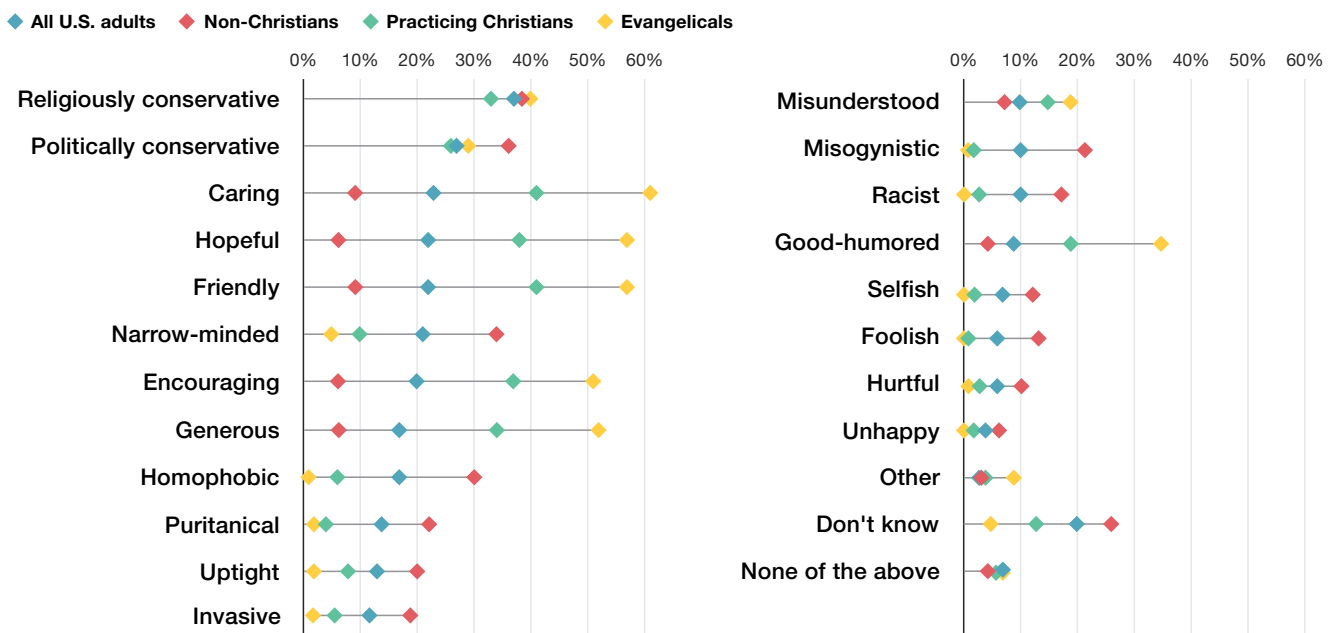
Evangelicals are, unsurprisingly, more sympathetic to their own kind. They describe their fellow evangelicals with positive traits at significantly higher rates than the general population (61% “caring,” 57% “hopeful,” 57% “friendly,” 52% “generous”) while rarely using negative descriptions (5% “narrow-minded,” 2% “uptight,” 1% “homophobic,” 1% “misogynistic”). They are also twice as likely as the general population to believe evangelicals are “misunderstood” (19% vs. 10%).

Barna also analyzed the opinions of practicing Christians—a group of Christians who attend church at least once a month and indicate having made a meaningful commitment to Jesus. This group includes most evangelicals but represents a wider swath of engaged believers, amounting to about one-quarter of Americans, rather than the narrowly defined evangelicals. As expected, the perceptions that practicing Christians hold about evangelicals fall somewhere in the middle of the general population and core evangelicals. Those outside the Church, whose responses we’ll return to later in this report, fall at the other extreme, expressing more reservations and aversions toward evangelicals.

PERCEPTIONS OF EVANGELICALS AMONG U.S. ADULTS

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Which of the following words, if any, would you use to describe evangelicals in general?



n = 1,067 U.S. adults | November 12-19, 2018

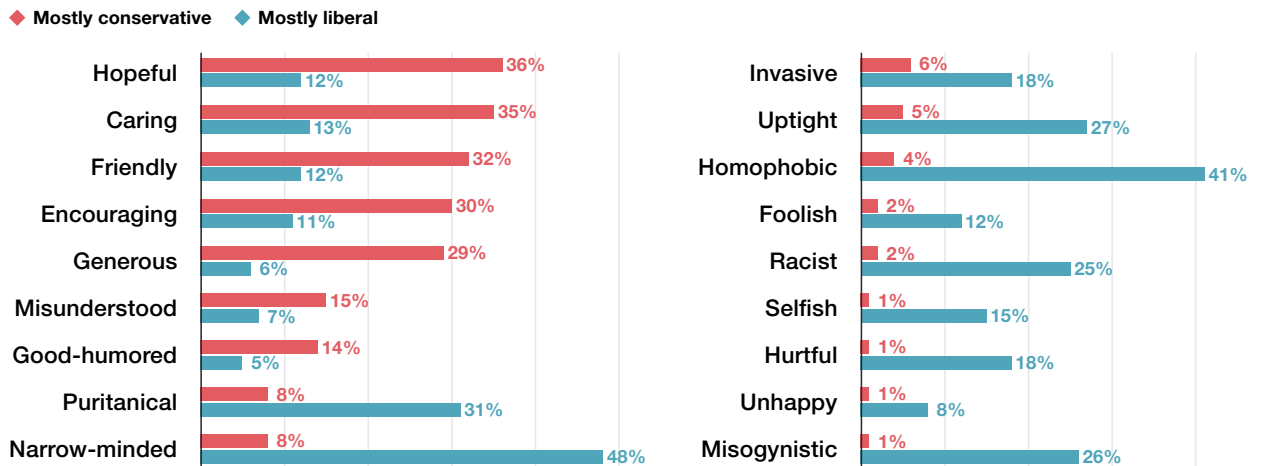
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Along lines of political ideology, the divide is dramatic. Across the board, those who identify as “mostly conservative” are *significantly* more likely than those who identify as “mostly liberal” to view evangelicals positively. Again, considering the conservative leanings of evangelicals, these numbers make sense. Some of the most striking differences surface around whether terms like “misogynistic” (1% conservative vs. 26% liberal), “racist” (2% vs. 25%), “homophobic” (4% vs. 41%), “narrow-minded” (8% vs. 48%), “caring” (35% vs. 13%) and “hopeful” (36% vs. 12%) might apply to evangelicals.

DIFFERENCES IN PERCEPTIONS OF EVANGELICALS ACROSS POLITICAL IDEOLOGY

Barna

(only descriptors with statistically significant differences shown below)



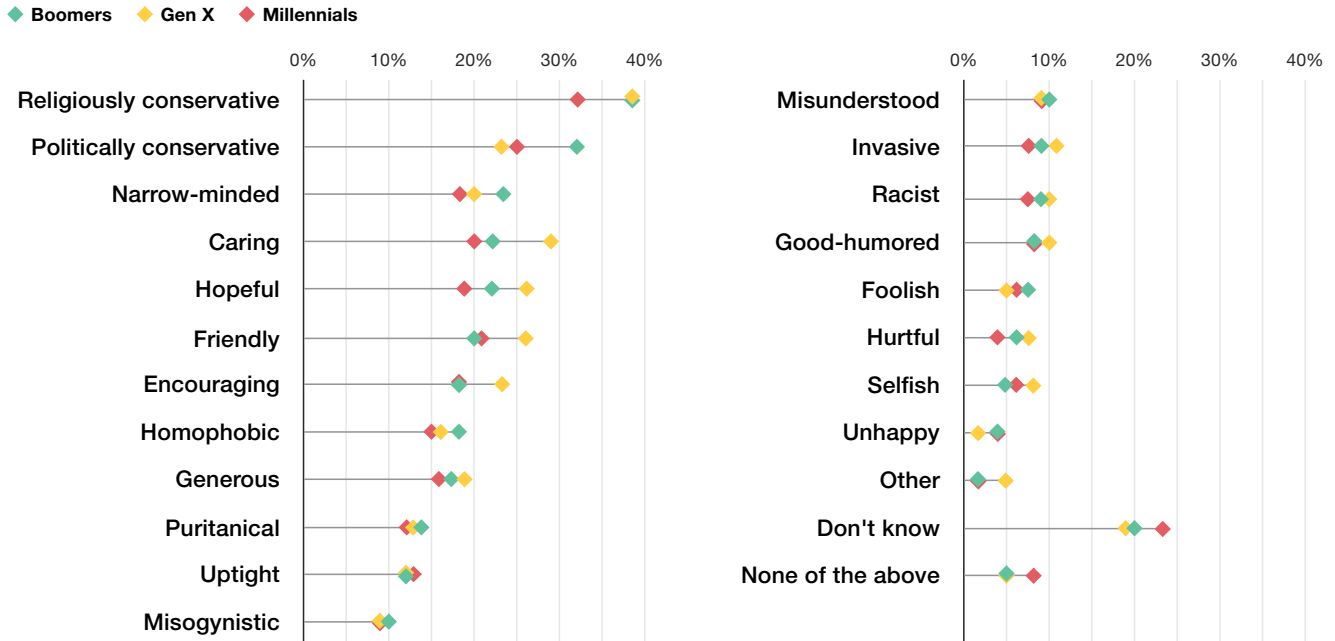
n = 646 U.S. adults | November 12-19, 2018

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Some noteworthy differences in opinion regarding evangelicals emerge across a few key demographics. For example, if you are male, a Boomer, white, highly educated, non-Christian or politically liberal, you are more likely to view evangelicals as politically conservative. In addition, those who are more educated or politically liberal are also more likely to view evangelicals as religiously conservative.

Interestingly, though one might expect more negative attitudes toward evangelicals among younger adult generations who are typically less religious, the study showed almost no statistically significant differences among Millennials, Gen X and Boomers for this question (and others). (The sample sizes for those at either end of the generational spectrum—Gen Z and Elders—are not large enough to report on.) Some key differences do emerge when drilling down into particular demographic and faith segments across age groups, running parallel to the patterns observed among all U.S. adults.

GENERATIONAL PERCEPTIONS OF EVANGELICALS



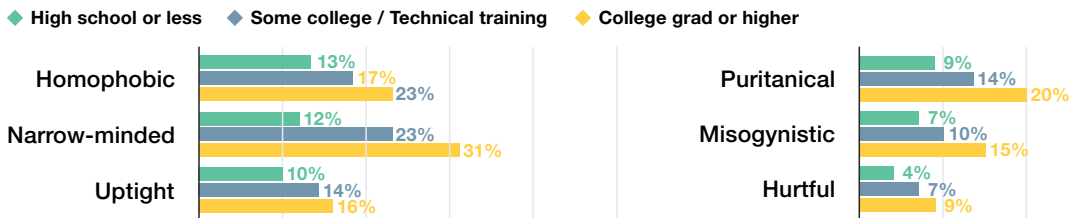
n = 998 U.S. adults | November 12-19, 2018

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Looking at level of education, faith, region or political ideology produces split opinions on evangelicals. More educated Americans are, in general, more likely to view evangelicals negatively. They favor adjectives like “narrow-minded” (31%), “homophobic” (23%), “puritanical” (20%), “uptight” (16%) or “misogynistic” (15%).

DIFFERENCES IN PERCEPTIONS OF EVANGELICALS ACROSS EDUCATION LEVELS

(only descriptors with statistically significant differences shown below)



n = 1,067 U.S. adults | November 12-19, 2018

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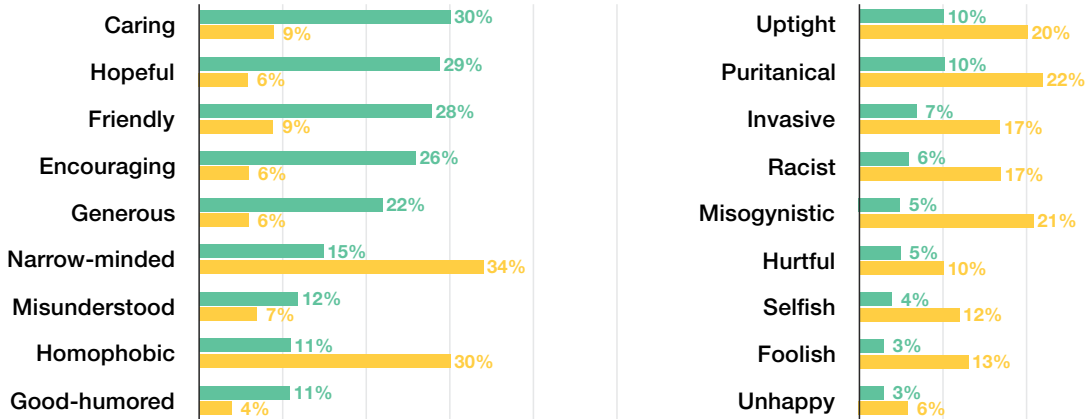
When compared to all Christians, non-Christians are more predisposed to hold negative ideas about evangelicals. They favor adjectives like “narrow-minded” (34%), “homophobic” (30%), “misogynistic” (21%), “racist” (17%) and “uptight” (20%).

DIFFERENCES IN PERCEPTIONS OF EVANGELICALS AMONG CHRISTIANS & NON-CHRISTIANS

Barna

(only descriptors with statistically significant differences shown below)

◆ Christian ◆ Non-Christian



n = 1,067 U.S. adults | November 12-19, 2018

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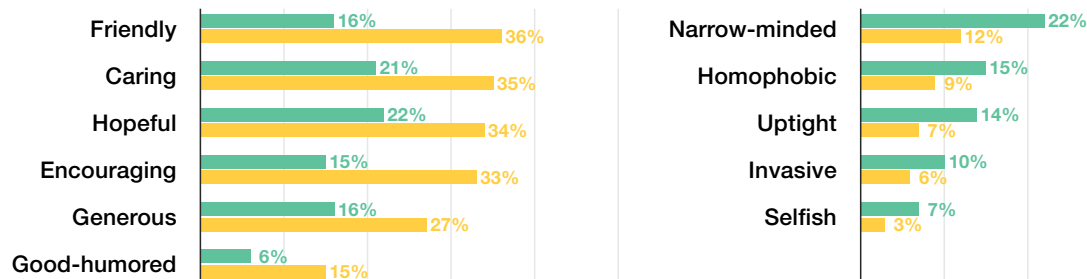
Protestants and Catholics are also divided on evangelicals, with the former holding more favorable views than the latter. Protestants tend toward using adjectives like “friendly” (36%), “caring” (35%) and “hopeful” (34%), while Catholics are more likely to use “narrow-minded” (22%), “homophobic” (15%) and “uptight” (14%).

DIFFERENCES IN PERCEPTIONS OF EVANGELICALS AMONG CATHOLICS & PROTESTANTS

Barna

(only descriptors with statistically significant differences shown below)

◆ Catholic ◆ Protestant



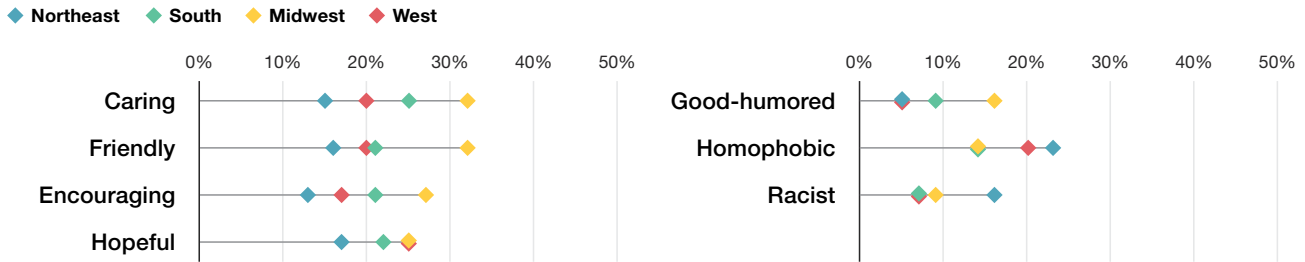
n = 715 U.S. adults | November 12-19, 2018

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Those in the Northeast, the most [post-Christian region in America](#), are more likely than residents of other regions to describe evangelicals as “racist” (16%) and “homophobic” (23%). They are also less likely to view them as “caring” (15%), “encouraging” (13%), “friendly” (16%) or “hopeful” (17%). Evangelicals tend to find the most favor in the Midwest, with the South and the West somewhere in between.

DIFFERENCES IN PERCEPTIONS OF EVANGELICALS BY REGION Barna

(only descriptors with statistically significant differences shown below)



n = 1,067 U.S. adults | November 12-19, 2018

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MOST AMERICANS HAVE HAD A NEUTRAL PERSONAL EXPERIENCE OF EVANGELICALS

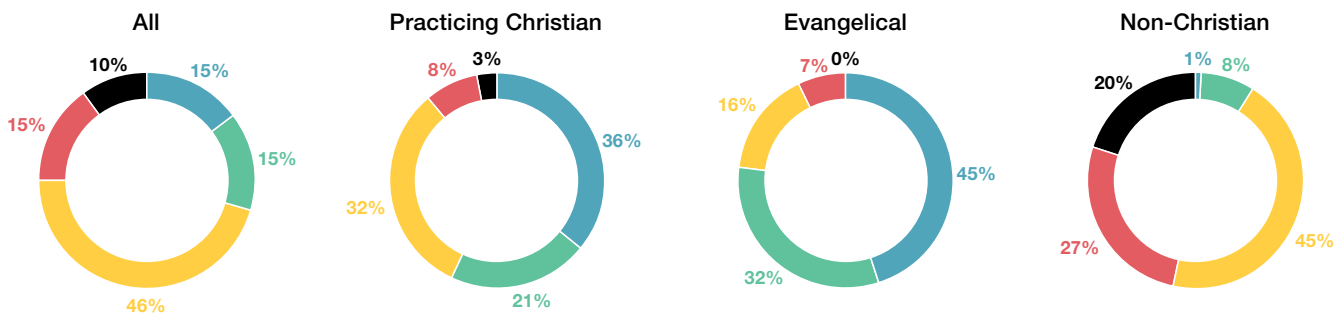
Given the wide mix of descriptors that might be applied to evangelicals, are U.S. adults open or opposed to this group?

When asked to characterize whether their own opinion of evangelicals is positive or negative, the plurality of U.S. adults (46%) expresses a “neutral” opinion. Three in 10 (30%) have a very or somewhat positive impression of the faith group, while one in four (25%) holds a very or somewhat negative opinion. A plurality of practicing Christians (36%) and evangelicals (45%) says their overall perception is very positive.

EVANGELICALS' REPUTATION AMONG U.S. ADULTS Barna

What is your overall perception or opinion of evangelicals?

◆ Very positive ◆ Somewhat positive ◆ Neutral ◆ Somewhat negative ◆ Very negative

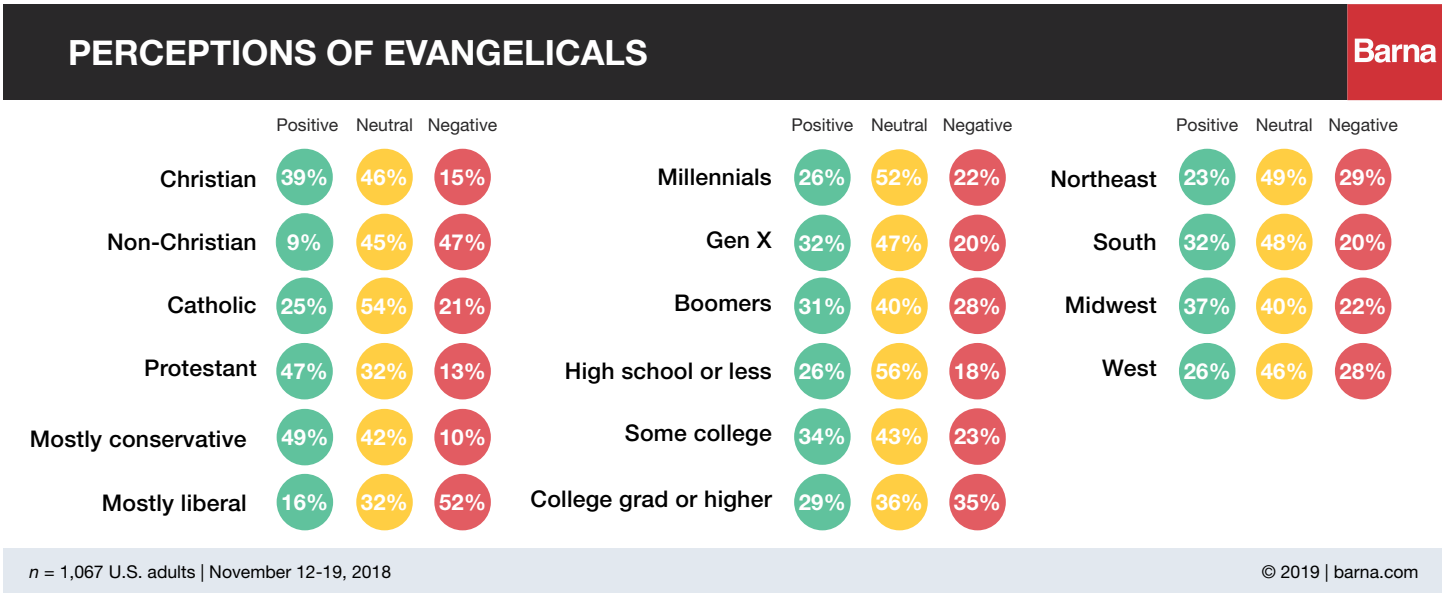


n = 1,067 U.S. adults | November 12-19, 2018

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On the question of personal opinion of evangelicals, a political divide emerges again. Just about half of those who identify as mostly conservative (49%) have at least somewhat positive perceptions, while an equivalent proportion of those who identify as mostly liberal (52%) has at least somewhat negative perceptions. The balance of opinion is expressed as indifference toward evangelicals (42% conservative, 32% liberal have neutral perceptions).

As the following chart details, other divides emerge by religion, education and region, consistent with those seen when Barna asked respondents to select adjectives for evangelicals—however, ambivalence is still more common than outright aversion or enthusiastic embrace. This holds true regardless of one’s generation, with the data showing no marked differences or very strong opinions when looking at age alone. Even among Christians, a plurality (46%) says their overall perception is neutral.



WHAT REASONS LIE *BEHIND* PERCEPTIONS OF EVANGELICALS?

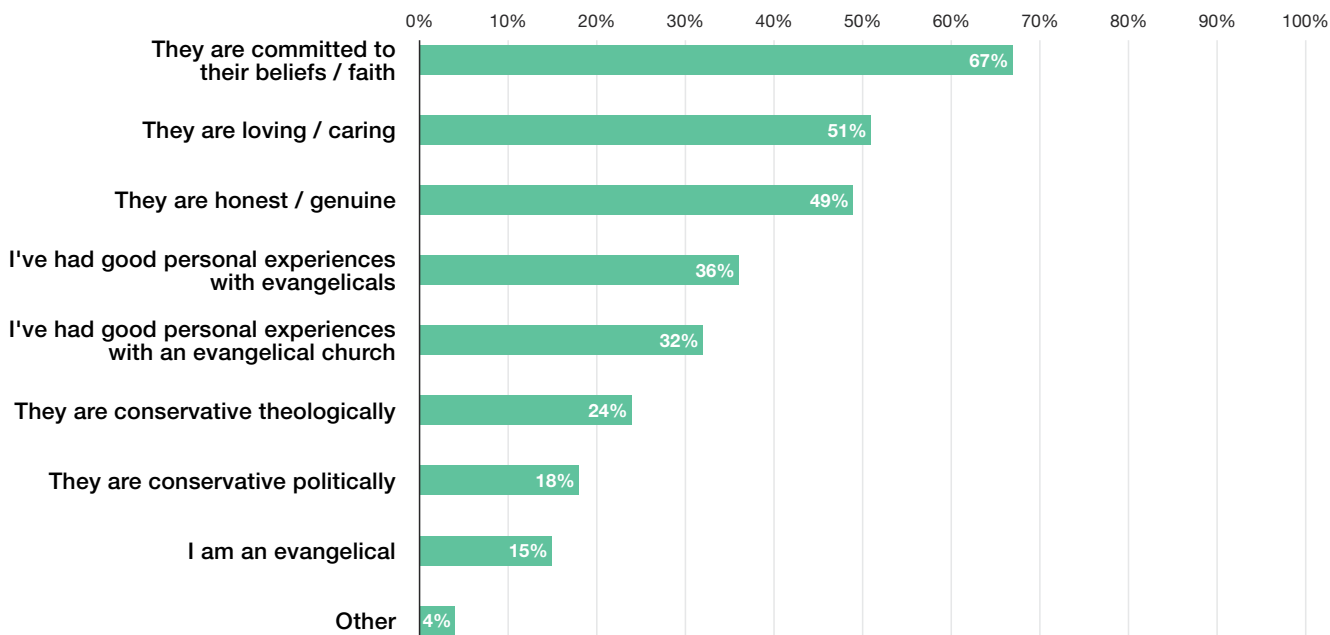
Barna pressed further to ask why certain conceptions of evangelicals exist. Of course, given the nature of survey research, we can only report on what people think underlies their opinions. Still, we discovered that evangelicals are respected—or critiqued—for their commitment to their beliefs.

Among those who have a positive opinion of the group, evangelicals are commonly admired for their commitment to their beliefs and to their faith (67%). People who like evangelicals also tend to value the personal character of evangelicals, such as a perceived caring or loving nature (51%), and regard them as honest and genuine people (49%). About one-third also says they have had good personal experiences with evangelicals (36%) or a good personal experience at an evangelical church (32%). Other reasons for positive associations with evangelicals are shown in the chart.

REASONS FOR POSITIVE OPINIONS OF EVANGELICALS

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Why do you have a positive opinion of evangelicals? Select all that apply



n = 322 U.S. adults who have a positive opinion of evangelicals | November 12-19, 2018

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Across demographic groups, we see the same reason for having a positive opinion of evangelicals: They are committed to their beliefs and faith. Beyond this top response, warm feelings toward evangelicals are related to their caring or loving nature and their reputation as honest and genuine people.

However, among non-Christians, the number of those who hold a positive opinion is small enough that Barna could not examine motivations for any favorable feelings. This in itself is a telling finding from the research.

TOP REASONS FOR POSITIVE OPINIONS OF EVANGELICALS

Why do you have a positive opinion of evangelicals? Select all that apply

	They are committed to their beliefs and faith	They are honest / genuine	They are loving / caring		They are committed to their beliefs and faith	They are honest / genuine	They are loving / caring
All respondents	67%	49%	51%	South	66%	44%	49%
Mostly conservative	68%	54%	53%	Midwest	69%	55%	59%
Mostly liberal	53%	37%	38%	West	70%	59%	52%
High school or less	55%	56%	48%	Millennials	55%	54%	40%
Some college	71%	43%	51%	Gen X	67%	44%	58%
College grad or higher	75%	44%	47%	Boomers	73%	47%	52%
Christian	68%	50%	51%	Men	68%	50%	49%
Non-Christian	54%	41%	47%	Women	65%	48%	53%
Catholic	70%	38%	34%	Hispanic	64%	50%	48%
Protestant	67%	54%	55%	White	67%	51%	52%
Northeast	61%	38%	40%	Black	74%	41%	52%

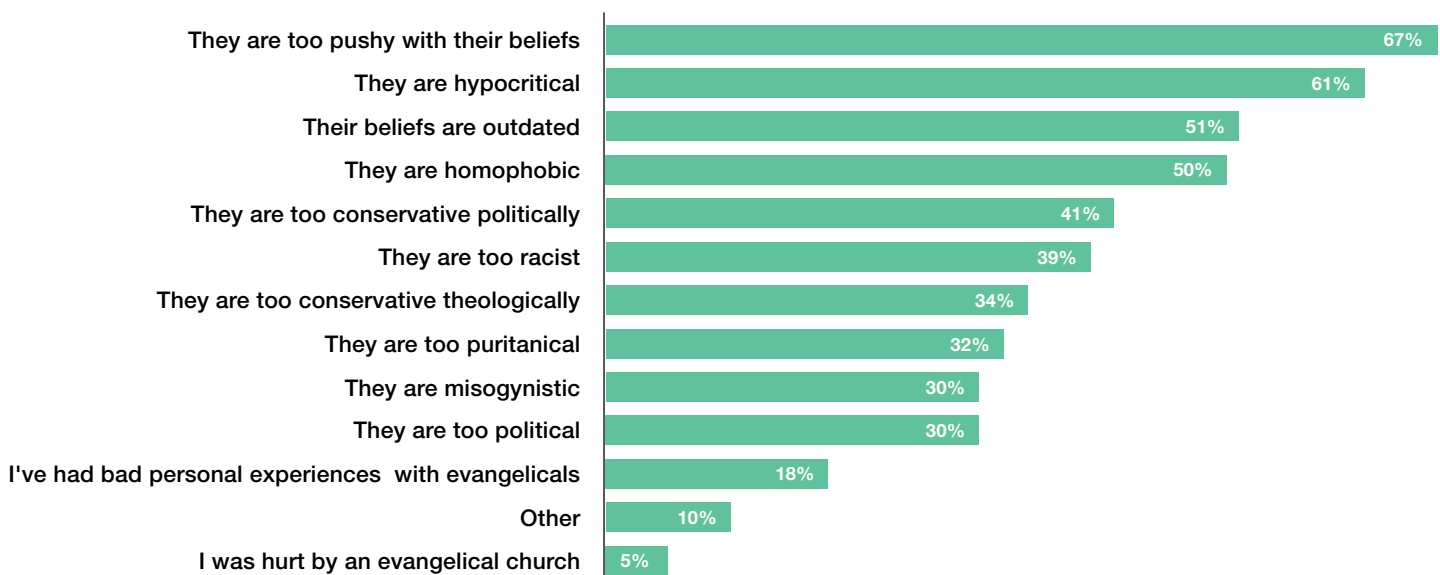
n = 322 U.S. adults who have a positive opinion of evangelicals | November 12-19, 2018

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On the other hand, among those who have a negative opinion of evangelicals, a common criticism is that they are pushy with their beliefs (67%)—perhaps speaking to views of [the act of evangelism itself, which, Barna’s research shows, doesn’t sit right with many Americans, even practicing Christians.](#)² Among those who are turned off by evangelicals, six in 10 (61%) call evangelicals hypocritical, and half see their beliefs as outdated (51%) or homophobic (50%). Four in 10 say their negative perception is connected to evangelicals being politically conservative (41%) or racist (39%). Additional reasons for negative perceptions are shown in the accompanying chart.

REASONS FOR NEGATIVE OPINIONS OF EVANGELICALS

Why do you have a negative opinion of evangelicals? Select all that apply



n = 268 U.S. adults who have a negative opinion of evangelicals | November 12-19, 2018

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² Barna Group, *Reviving Evangelism*, (Ventura, CA: Barna, 2019).

Again, catalysts for negative opinion of evangelicals are fairly consistent across demographics and are usually spurred by the idea that these Christians are too pushy with their beliefs—an interesting contrast to the fact that evangelicals’ commitment to their beliefs is the primary reason other adults have a positive impression of them.

In a mirror image of the analysis of unfavorable opinions, some groups—including those more likely to be represented among evangelicals, such as conservatives —are so unlikely to hold a negative opinion that Barna had insufficient data to examine their reasons for resistance.

TOP REASONS FOR NEGATIVE OPINIONS OF EVANGELICALS

Barna

Why do you have a negative opinion of evangelicals? Select all that apply

(some groups reported on previously have not been included in this chart because of low sample size)

	They are too pushy with their beliefs	They are hypocritical	Their beliefs are outdated	They are homophobic		They are too pushy with their beliefs	They are hypocritical	Their beliefs are outdated	They are homophobic
All respondents	67%	61%	51%	50%	South	69%	70%	52%	46%
Mostly liberal	71%	67%	59%	70%	Midwest	77%	57%	52%	52%
Some college	71%	77%	52%	52%	West	63%	56%	46%	43%
College grad or higher	65%	62%	51%	54%	Millennials	68%	51%	54%	46%
Christian	64%	62%	38%	46%	Gen X	72%	72%	67%	60%
Non-Christian	69%	60%	61%	52%	Boomers	58%	60%	42%	43%
Catholic	70%	63%	37%	41%	Men	69%	66%	52%	50%
Protestant	58%	58%	41%	53%	Women	63%	54%	50%	49%
Northeast	58%	58%	58%	58%	White	72%	63%	52%	52%

n = 268 U.S. adults who have a negative opinion of evangelicals | November 12-19, 2018 *West: too conservative politically (51%)

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Taken together, these results may leave evangelicals to feel confused. For instance, one of the frequently noted positive qualities of evangelicals is that they have a commitment to their faith / beliefs. However, at the same time, many respondents also indicate that evangelicals are too pushy with their belief system. On its face these two findings seem contradictory, yet public opinion research often finds that individuals can espouse two opinions that seem entirely incongruent. What can be inferred is that many people admire that evangelicals are people of deep faith but want to make it clear that this same belief system would not work for them personally.

CONCLUSIONS & CONSIDERATIONS FROM BARNA PRESIDENT DAVID KINNAMAN



The findings of the *The Brand of Evangelicals* report are a clear indication of the divided nature of the U.S. population—and evangelicals are at the epicenter of many of those differences of opinion, worldview and practice. On the one side, there are evangelicals and those favorable toward evangelicals; the other side includes those who hold unfavorable views of evangelicals. It appears never the two shall meet.

The divide is so strong that Barna researchers found few non-Christians who hold positive views of evangelicals and few evangelicals who express reservations about their own cohort. In other words, there's a crisis of people holding their differences—in this case, regarding evangelicals—in an appropriate tension beyond stark negative or positive characterizations.

And some of these stereotypes are often overly flattering or unduly critical. In other words, the current political and religious landscape is a dangerous place for nuanced, both-and, truth-and-grace perceptions to exist.

In addition to those two sides of the “Divided States of America,” an important part of understanding the perceptions of evangelicals is the large percentage of Americans who have no opinion of evangelicals—that is, who express neutrality or no opinion in response to the survey questions. For these adults, there is an impregnable fortress of indifference toward evangelicals. The extreme views (both favorable or unfavorable) dominate the discussion, but the middle ground doesn't really know what to think about evangelicalism. That's not a sensational story these days, but it's an important one.

Somewhat surprisingly, the research does not neatly fit the narratives that *younger* Americans are lining up against evangelicals or that support comes only or mainly from old-guard Christians. What generational differences we found are more strongly correlated around things such as political, educational and religious lines. While additional research is needed (including larger samples of practicing Christians and evangelicals), this study indicates the term evangelical has not completely alienated younger Christians ... yet.

However, the most significant question arising from this research is the missional question: *Whose perception should matter most to evangelicals?* And, more to the point, should evangelicals care about their reputation among non-Christians? The preponderance of evidence from Barna Group's work suggests that most Christians think it should and that younger Christians are even more concerned about this gap in perception.

Of course, it's most important that Christians of all traditions, evangelical or otherwise, concern themselves *with the reputation of Jesus*, not merely the perceptions of evangelicals. Yet, will the public witness of evangelicals be a bridge or a barrier to the very thing they hold most dear: persuading others to put their faith in Christ? The findings strongly suggest that the perceptions of evangelicals are more barrier than bridge on the road to gaining a hearing for the gospel. As such, the results of this research require much soul searching among Christians to discern a way forward with the current “evangelical brand.” Christian leaders need a gospel-driven, robust *why* behind pursuing their convictions as a matter of public witness—and they require a coherent *how* to be persuasive people about Jesus in a more distracted, divided society.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

Interviews with U.S. adults included 1,067 web-based surveys conducted among a representative sample of adults over the age of 18 in each of the 50 states. The survey was conducted from November 12 to 15, 2018. The sampling error for this study is plus or minus 3 percentage points, at the 95% confidence level. Minimal statistical weighting was used to calibrate the sample to known population percentages in relation to demographic variables.

Christians self-identify as Christian.

Practicing Christians are self-identified Christians who say their faith is very important in their lives and have attended a worship service within the past month.

Non-Christians do not self-identify as Christian.

Evangelicals say they have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in their life today and believe that, when they die, they will go to heaven because they have confessed their sins and accepted Jesus as their savior, plus seven other conditions. These include saying their faith is very important in their life today; believing they have a personal responsibility to share their religious beliefs about Christ with non-Christians; believing Satan exists; believing that eternal salvation is possible only through grace, not works; believing that Jesus Christ lived a sinless life on earth; asserting that the Bible is accurate in all that it teaches; and describing God as the all-knowing, all-powerful, perfect deity who created the universe and still rules it today. Being classified as an evangelical is not dependent on church attendance or the denominational affiliation of the church attended and respondents are not asked to describe themselves as evangelical.

Millennials were born 1984 to 1998.

Gen X were born 1965 to 1983.

Boomers were born 1946 to 1964.

**Gen Z and Elders are excluded for small sample size.*

ABOUT BARNA

Barna is a private, non-partisan, for-profit organization under the umbrella of the Issachar Companies. Located in Ventura, California, Barna Group has been conducting and analyzing primary research to understand cultural trends related to values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviors since 1984.

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