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## To be of one mind?: integrating an LGB orientation with evangelical beliefs\*

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### ABSTRACT

While there are many identities that individuals associate themselves with, none may be more powerful than sexual orientation and religious beliefs. Previous scholarship has described how lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) individuals try to reconcile their sexual orientation with their evangelical theology using the framework of cognitive dissonance, yet these LGB evangelicals have never been assessed in a randomly sampled survey. Using the 2016 Cooperative Congressional Election Study this research describes how LGB evangelicals grapple with the cognitive dissonance that occurs in many facets of their lives. Two issues are analyzed that could tap into their religious identity (abortion) or sexual orientation (gay marriage). The findings indicate that LGB evangelicals are often more liberal than their evangelical counterparts but are more conservative than the LGB community.

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## Introduction

In 2015, the website *Vox* published a story entitled, “All Politics is Identity Politics,” an often repeated phrase by both pundits and political scientists to describe the concept that voters mentally identify with a specific social group which then shapes the way they view the political world (Wiarda 2014; Yglesias 2015). There are many identities that can have influence over an individual’s partisan identification including occupation, race, ethnicity, or geography. Some have argued that the election of Donald Trump was due in no small part to his ability to activate white identity politics, allowing him to sway many moderate working classes voters who had previously voted for Democratic candidates (Eberstadt 2017). Oftentimes these identities can reinforce each other, as in the previously mentioned combination of white working-class voters, but there are instances when these identities can clash and have significant social and political implications.

Take, for instance, the powerful identities of sexual orientation and religious affiliation. More specifically, consider the case of an individual who believes in a conservative form of

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\*Upon publication, both the syntax as well as the data files to replicate this analysis will be posted publicly on the GitHub page of the author of this work. In addition, an [appendix](#) will be posted on the authors’ website that contains a variety of supporting tables and figures for this analysis.

American Christianity, while also struggles to reconcile that theological outlook with their identity as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB). While both these identities can be held by a single individual, they must be held with a great degree of tension. There is a tremendous amount of social science research that indicates that evangelical Christians are one of the strongest voting blocs that oppose extending civil rights protections to LGB individuals (Bernstein 1997; Fetner 2001; Linneman 2003; Soule 2004; Lax and Phillips 2009; Brewer 2014), yet there are hundreds of thousands of Americans who identify as LGB evangelicals in the United States.

These conflicting identities must be navigated in a number of aspects of an LGB evangelical's life but none may be more difficult or more consequential than the political arena. On one hand, if the LGB identity takes precedence, then an individual may feel compelled to vote for the Democratic party's candidates, which has often expressed a desire to extend rights such as marriage and adoption to the LGB community (Wood and Bartkowski 2004). On the other, no religious group in the United States has a stronger alliance with the Republican Party in the last several decades than evangelical Protestants (Smith and Martinez 2016). In addition, a vote for a GOP candidate would likely translate into stronger restrictions rights, something that evangelicals have advocated for decades (Wald and Calhoun-Brown 2006). To date, social science has been unable to provide empirical evidence from a random sample to begin the process of understanding how LGB evangelicals navigate the choices afforded to them by the American political process. Using the 2016 version of the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), this work will begin to understand how partisanship and vote choice are arrived at when individuals express two diametrically opposed identities. In addition, two contentious social issues will be considered as a test of their two identities. In looking for an area in which an LGB evangelical's sexual orientation may outweigh their religious identity, a close examination of same-sex opinion will be conducted. On the other hand, the topic of abortion should likely be an area in which an LGB evangelical feels more convicted by their conservative theology, as the LGB community in general does not take an explicit position on abortion rights.

## Literature review

A cursory glance at Christian theological history illustrates why an individual who is both a practicing homosexual as well as a faithful evangelical would encounter daily conflict. The vast majority of orthodox Christian doctrine has indicated that committing a homosexual act is a clear violation of the Bible's precepts. For instance, the Mosaic code of conduct indicates that, "If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them" (Leviticus 20:13). This same idea is central to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah from the book of Genesis, in which God brings destruction to the two cities because of their homosexual behavior (Wolkomir 2006, 25). Many theologians have argued that this prohibition against homosexual behavior did not dissipate with the appearance of Jesus Christ and the establishment of the new covenant. For instance, in the New Testament, the apostle Paul writes, "In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error" (Romans 1:27). This

passage is seen as the clearest and most relevant evidence to argue for the sinfulness of homosexual relations (Miller 1995). In total, most scholars agree that there are six instances in the Bible where homosexual acts are described as “abominable or unnatural” (Moon 2004, 57).

Given that the Bible speaks in such clear and unambiguous terms about the reality of homosexuality (according to evangelical Protestants), the tension that is felt by someone who has a homosexual orientation alongside a conservative Christian theology would likely be tremendous. There has been a good deal of work among social scientists to understand the theological and social processes of reconciling incongruent beliefs and behavior. The earliest work in the study of LGB evangelicals began in the mid-1980’s and was focused primarily on a qualitative exploration of groups that had emerged to support these individuals. The foundational example of this work comes from Scott Thumma’s exploration of Good News, an evangelical parachurch organization with a mailing list of several hundred (1991). Thumma’s participant observations were concerned with gaining an understanding of how the members of Good News reconciled their two seemingly contradictory identities. Thumma describes a strategy that Good News employed which included: convincing members that it is acceptable to change one’s religious beliefs; presenting alternative doctrines that could justify a homosexual orientation; and concluding with an attempt to come to terms with the “new gay Christian identity” (Thumma 1991, 342). Thumma notes that many of the individuals who fully complete this transformation process become more pious and orthodox as a result. Thumma grounds this exploration in the larger context of cognitive dissonance (Prus 1976).

Cognitive dissonance, the psychological process through which an individual tries to reconcile inconsistent beliefs, has been well studied in the field of psychology beginning with the canonical work of Festinger (1962) and has been extended to a number of fields including economics (Adam and Rosenbaum 1964; Akerlof and Dickens 1982) and the sociology of religion (Burris, Harmon-Jones, and Tarpley 1997). There are a number of reasons why cognitive dissonance would be most acute among LGB evangelicals, these include the reality that evangelicals are the most likely religious group to label homosexuality as immoral (Hunter 1983; Wolff et al. 2012) and a strong desire among evangelicals to maintain the traditional familial structure (Ammerman 1987; Ellison and Sherkat 1993). But a direct explanation from the creator of the term is instructive. Festinger notes that “if two elements are dissonant with one another, the magnitude of the dissonance will be a function of the importance of the elements” (1962, 16). It would be difficult to find two more important elements of an individual’s life than their religious beliefs and their sexual orientation.

The desire to reduce this dissonance could compel LGB evangelicals to pursue a number of remedies including joining groups like the aforementioned Good News to help reconcile their theology and their lifestyle or to enroll in gay conversion therapy as a means to eliminate the behavior which generates the dissonance (Haldeman 1994; Nicolosi, Byrd, and Potts 2000). The existence of evangelical groups that stand on both sides of this issue is emblematic of the internal struggle that is felt by those who both identify as LGB as well as evangelical. In fact, work by Michelle Wolkomir puts this difference in stark relief when she compares the tactics of two Christian group she dubs Accept and Expel. Accept is an organization that helps LGB individuals come to a new understanding of the Bible’s admonitions that allow individuals to engage in homosexual activity with

feelings of sinfulness or shame. On the other hand, Expel's mission is to convince participants that their homosexuality orientation is a result of childhood trauma and must be confronted and worked through before they can return back to a heterosexual orientation that is pleasing to God and in accordance with the teachings of the bible (2006, 147). It is quite striking the book begins with leaders from both groups praying for their members, but each group desiring an entirely different outcome out of their time together (2006, 14).

Other empirical analysis has followed largely in the footsteps of Thumma and Wolkomir in its utilization of interviews and participant observations of churches or religious groups that are welcoming to those living the LGB lifestyle. For example, work by Wilcox (2002) included site visits and interviews with five congregations in California that ministered primarily to the LGB community. A similar methodology was employed by Rodriguez and Ouellette (2000) who interviewed 40 participants in a gay-positive church in New York City. Both studies largely corroborate the original findings described by Thumma (1991). For clergy in both settings, one of the primary tasks was to integrate conflictual religious and sexual identities. Ministers in the California congregation opted for an identity integration approach by espousing a belief that an LGB orientation is an immutable part of each congregant's existence and therefore cannot be sinful. For those in the New York City congregation, many began to integrate the two identities by becoming involved in the ministry activities of the church body which was not limited to just bible study but also community service activities (Rodriguez and Ouellette 2000). In this way, conflicted church members were helped along in their own process of identity integration through the process of helping others reduce their cognitive dissonance (Maclean, Walker, and Matsuba 2004).

Other analysis has found similar yet unique patterns in racial minority congregations as well. For example, a qualitative analysis of 34 African-American gay men who regularly attended traditionally black churches found these individuals came to terms with this cognitive dissonance through dissonance reduction, but that they often take the approach of delegitimizing leaders who preached anti-gay messages (Pitt 2010). Many of these African Americans contend that since the church was unable to be an effective voice during the era of segregation, then their positions are not valid on the issue of gay rights. One scholar calls this strategy "attacking the stigmatizer" (Yip 1997). More recent research that included gay men and lesbian women found largely the same strategy: integrating religious beliefs with sexual orientation by either finding alternative interpretations of biblical passages or minimizing the importance of one's own sexual orientation as a means to alleviate the dissonance (McQueeney 2009). However, some scholars note that boiling down this reconciliation process to changing one's perspective from a literalist view of the bible to a non-literalist interpretation is overly reductive. For instance, Moon writes that is not merely an individual liberalizing their theology, instead, "The difference, in fact, seems to come from the experiences that shape members' everyday theologies" (2004, 58).

However, while these studies of homosexuality and religious belonging have done a great deal to shed light on the process of cognitive dissonance reduction by painting rich and nuanced portraits of how these individuals navigate their two conflictual identities, they have yet to turn that empirical lens on another crucial identity: political ideology. Undoubtedly, both these identities can be reconciled in a number of ways that have been described in detail by previous scholarship. One area where this reconciliation is impossible, though are highly politically charged social issues like abortion and gay marriage.

Before the *Obergefell v. Hodges* Supreme Court decision in 2015 (Liptak 2015), the culture wars were a centerpiece of American politics with clear partisan lines being drawn on social issues (Hunter 1992; Layman 2001). While many LGB evangelicals could simply ignore anti-gay rhetoric from Christian leaders, it is not a conflict that is easily pushed aside when one considers the continually polarizing American political landscape. Or consider the highly charged nature of the abortion debate. While evangelicals have been strongly opposed to abortion rights, the LGB community has remained on the sidelines of the debate (Lewis 2017). Because of the relative silence of the LGB community on this issue are homosexual evangelicals more influenced by their religious identity in this specific instance?

Political science has long understood that voters are pulled in a number of directions when they weigh their choice during an election season. There are a variety of terms for this phenomenon including “cross-pressured voters” who are pulled in multiple directions or “cross-cutting electoral cleavages” that divide an individual’s political loyalties. Some of the earliest work in voting behavior recognizes this fact. For example, *The People’s Choice* notes that voters are subject to “competing pressures” that can arise from, “social status, class identification, or voting traditions” (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1944, 60). The authors of *The American Voter* notes that these “cross-pressured” individuals will vote with less enthusiasm than those who have consistent partisan feelings (Angus et al. 1960). While subsequent analysis of survey data cast serious doubts on the reality of the cross-pressured voter (Pool, Abelson, and Popkin 1965), there has been somewhat of a renaissance in the field in the past decade.

In the last several years, political science has taken a careful look at the social networks that are ubiquitous in American political life. Beginning with work by Diana Mutz (2002), scholars began to take note of the real impact that an individual’s close circle of friends have on their political predispositions and voting behavior. Mutz finds that individuals who are enmeshed in networks that involve higher levels of political disagreement (which could lead them to feel cross pressured) are less likely to be active in the political process (Mutz 2002, 2006). Subsequent analysis using this network approach have largely reinforced this initial finding (McClurg 2003; Campbell 2006; McClurg 2006). Extending this theory of cross-cutting messages to the study of the media (Goldman and Mutz 2011) as well as online social networks (Bakshy, Messing, and Adamic 2015) have concluded that individuals actively seek out information that reinforces their political outlooks which subsequently reduces their feelings of being cross-pressured or suffering from cognitive dissonance.

There have been a few instances in modern American politics when the two major political parties have actively sought to emphasize electoral cleavages. The most relevant to this discussion is an effort undertaken by the Republican Party during the re-election of President George W. Bush to emphasize state-level referendums that would have constitutionally prohibited same-sex marriage (Dao 2004). This coordinated effort was done as part of a larger strategy to drive up evangelical Protestant turnout, especially in places like Ohio, where they would go to the polls to vote in favor of the constitutional amendment but also cast their vote for the Republican candidate (Craig et al. 2005; Lewis 2005; Olson, Cadge, and Harrison 2006; Camp 2008; Donovan, Tolbert, and Smith 2008). How was an LGB evangelical to navigate the reality of the 2004 and subsequent presidential elections? On one hand, Republican candidates have consistently espoused a strong opposition to

abortion and a desire to protect religious freedom which is central to an evangelical identity yet were opposed to extending civil rights to LGB individuals. On the other hand, the Democrat party while being in favor of abortion rights, has also been more willing to extend rights to same-sex couples. When faced with these enormous pressures from their two conflictual identities, how do LGB evangelicals reconcile these differences in the ballot box?

## Data

While previous work has illuminated a great deal about the tension felt by LGB evangelicals, these conclusions have been arrived at through the primary method of participant observations and/or interviews of a small number of subjects. Most of these studies use a small sample size of one to five churches to provide an in-depth portrait of the LGB evangelical community (Thumma 1991; Rodriguez and Ouellette 2000; McQueeney 2009). However, there have been two exceptions to this methodological approach that use survey methods in addition to a qualitative approach. For example, work by Pitt (2010) included some summary statistics about 34 African American gay men, but the sample size was much too small to draw statistical conclusions. The largest effort to quantitatively assess LGB evangelicals comes from a survey of religiously active lesbian women which was conducted in 1996. The methodological drawback is that this sample was not collected randomly but instead was a convenience sample of 148 individuals who were recruited by the snowball method. While this approach managed to increase the statistical power, the results are not representative of LBG evangelicals in general because a disproportionate percentage of respondents came from women that lived in Massachusetts and New Hampshire (Mahaffy 1996, 394).

The reason that scholars have been unable to generate a truly random sample of LGB evangelicals is one of practicality. According to the best estimates, approximately 4% of Americans identify as LGB on surveys (Black et al. 2000; Gates 2017). In order to collect a sample of sufficient statistical power to conduct statistical analysis of LGB individuals would require a total survey population of nearly 10,000 individual respondents, a prospect that is financially unviable for the vast majority of researchers. This reality is made exponentially more difficult when considering the reality that evangelicals make up only 20% of the population themselves (Lewis and Burge 2017).

However, a recently available survey has overcome many of these obstacles faced by social scientists. The Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), which has been conducted bi-annually beginning in 2008, included a number of questions about religious identity and sexual orientation in the 2016 wave. The sheer size of the 2016 CCES population (64,600 respondents) allows researchers unprecedented access to a truly random sample of LGB evangelicals that were navigating the political environment in 2016.

## Measures

The two central concepts of this inquiry (LGB orientation and evangelical affiliation) need to be carefully measured to ensure that each group is accurately represented in the data. There has been a long debate in the scholarly literature about the most appropriate way to measure the concept of evangelical Protestant (Stouffer 1955; Smith 1990;



Green 1996). The most widely used is the RELTRAD scheme which places individuals into the evangelical category if they affiliate with churches that are traditionally considered to be part of the conservative Protestant movement (Steensland et al. 2000; Woodberry et al. 2012; Stetzer and Burge 2016). The RELTRAD approach has been widely used (having been cited over 1300 times), however, it is important to note that this measure taps into just one dimension of religiosity: identity. While this taxonomy is used extensively in the social science literature it leaves out other possible expressions of religiosity including religious behavior (such as church attendance) or religious belief (biblical literalism) (Leege 1996; Layman 1997, 2001). In addition, another shortcoming of this approach is that it gives little attention to the intensity of the evangelical identity. For instance, a Southern Baptist who attends church once a year will be included as an evangelical alongside a Pentecostal who attends services three times a week. Using the general guidelines of RELTRAD, respondents in the CCES were sorted into a dichotomous measure of evangelical Protestantism, which resulted in 11,198 or 21.2% of respondents receiving this label.<sup>1</sup>

The CCES also poses the following question to respondents: “Which group do you most closely identify?” with the response options of “lesbian/gay woman,” “gay man,” “bisexual,” and “other” included as LGB. In total the 2016 CCES contained 4,743 LGB individuals (8.3% of the total survey population). The LGB evangelical measure consists of those who are classified affirmatively by both measures and makeup 485 respondents or .85% of all individuals in the CCES.<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, while evangelicals were 21.2% of the entire CCES, LGB individuals were only half as likely to identify as an evangelical (10.2%).

## Demographic characteristics

In order to understand how distinct these groups are from each other and the general population, summary statistics were computed for a number of basic demographic variables with the results being displayed in Table 1. It is clear from these findings that LGB evangelicals look distinct both from the evangelical sample as well those who identify as LGB. For example, the mean age for LGB evangelicals is over six years older than LGB individuals but 2.8 years younger than evangelicals in general. These

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics of evangelicals, LGB, and LGB evangelicals.

Variable	Evangelicals	LGB	LGB evangelicals	Notes
Age	52.2	43.0	49.4	Significant at .05
Race	74.5% white 17.7% black 4.0% Hispanic	69.5% white 13.3% black 5.3% Hispanic	74.7% white 15.9% black 5.3% Hispanic	
Education (mean)	3.45	3.80	3.50	Scaled from 1 (No HS) to 6 (grad. degree)
Income (mean)	5.94	6.00	5.57	
Gender	44.0% male	58.4% male	59.2% male	Scaled from 1 (<10k) to 16 (150k +)
Marital status	60.4% married 11.1% divorced 18.0% single 2.3% dom. part.	25.0% married 5.8% divorced 55.2% single 10.8% dom. part.	32.0% married 9.6% divorced 39.9% single 10.9% dom. part.	
Church attendance (mean)	4.08	2.06	3.44	Scaled from 1 (never attend) to 6 (attend more than weekly)



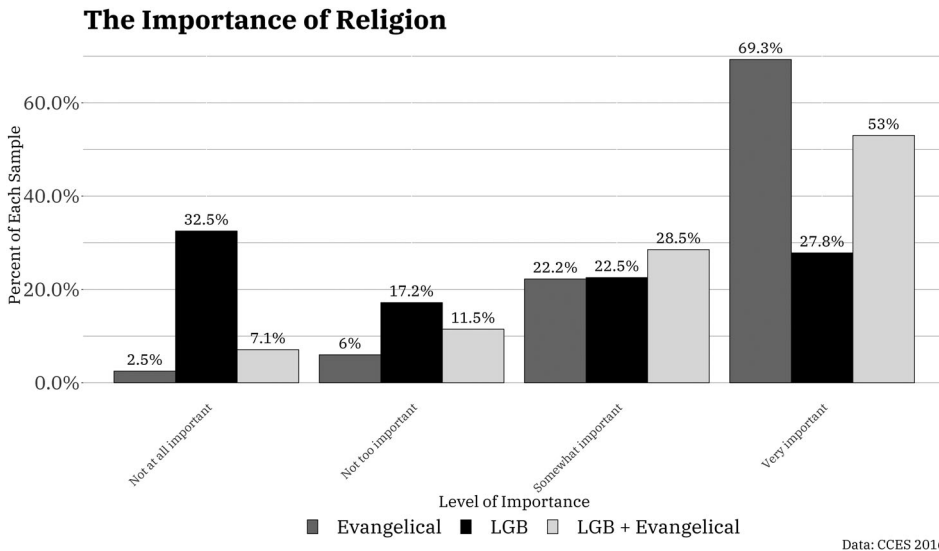
differences persist across several other factors, as well. Comparing education and gender, LGB evangelicals fall in the middle of the spectrum with LGB individuals having higher education and more likely to be male, but evangelicals being lower on both accounts.

The church attendance measure is one where an initial test of the cognitive dissonance theory can occur. Obviously, evangelicals indicate the highest average level of church attendance scoring 4.08 on a scale that ranges from 1 (never attend) to 6 (attend more than once a week). On the other hand, LGB individuals report church attendance that is half the level of their evangelical counterparts. Standing between these two extremes are LGB evangelicals with a mean score of 3.44. Note, that while LGB evangelicals clearly attend less than evangelicals generally, they still attend at rates that are almost 25% higher than LGB respondents. It seems here that while LGB evangelicals are being pulled in both directions, their church attendance is closer to their religious tradition than their sexual orientation.

One final descriptive result provides significant insight into how LGB evangelicals deal with cognitive dissonance. A number of previous scholars have noted that one of the primary causes of tension among LGB evangelicals arises from the fact that their lifestyle stands in opposition to the traditional family structure that is pervasive in evangelicalism (Ammerman 1987; Mahaffy 1996; McQueeney 2009). It is clear from these results that LGB evangelicals are stuck between their two identities. While 60.4% of evangelicals reported that they were married, just 25% of LGB evangelicals report being in a marital relationship, compare this to only 32% of LGB individuals who say that they are married. When looking at rates of singleness, only one in five evangelicals report never having been married, the rate for LGB evangelicals is double (39.9%). This could indicate that many LGB evangelicals have dealt with their cognitive dissonance by avoiding the institution of marriage entirely or they may be practicing voluntary celibacy as a mean to not run afoul of their church's doctrine.

One important caveat is that the survey merely asked respondents their marital status and not whether they were in a same-sex marriage. But, the survey does offer the option of stating that an individual was in a domestic partnership. The differences between the three groups are quite instructive. Consider that just 2.3% of evangelicals indicate that they have entered into a domestic partnership. Compare that to the rates of domestic partnership by both LGB (10.8%) and LGB evangelicals (10.9%). This is worth careful consideration. If an individual both identifies as an evangelical and espouses an LGB sexual orientation, they are pulled in both directions. Their theology tells them that a marriage is between a man and a woman, but their religion also teaches that family structure is important. As a way to find a middle ground it appears that some of these LGB individuals seek out familial structure through the only avenue that was available to them: a domestic partnership, which they entered into at rates that were similar to their LGB counterparts.

To get a general sense of how important the issue of religion is to LGB evangelicals the CCES asks, "How important is religion in your life?" with response options ranging from "Not at all important" (1) to "Very Important" (4). The results of this analysis are available in [Figure 1](#). The general sense is that large numbers of individuals of all three groups indicate that religion plays a significant role in their lives. However, there is some noteworthy variation specifically among LGB individuals. While nearly 70% of evangelicals say religion is "very important," and 53% of LGB evangelicals express the same sentiment,

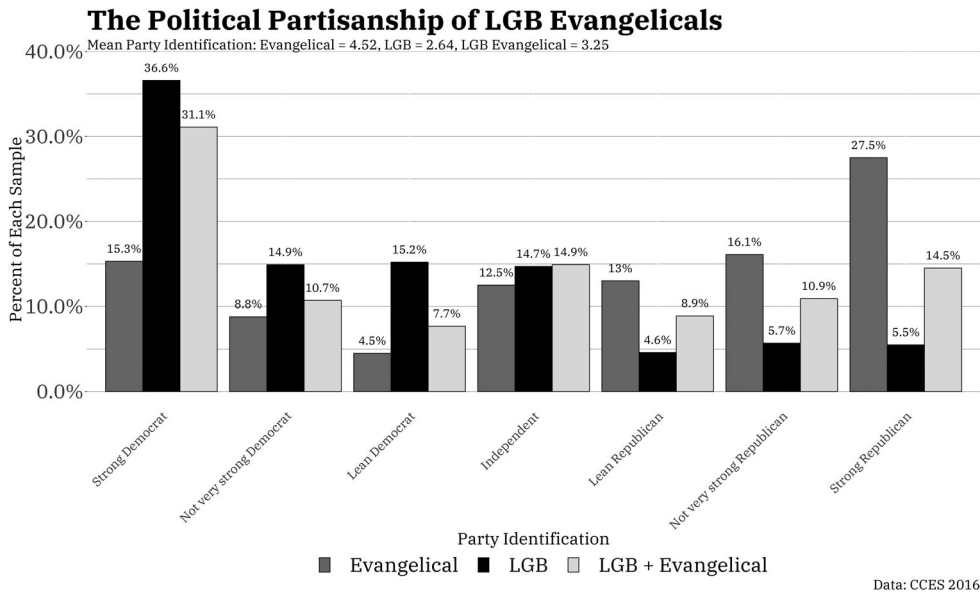


**Figure 1.** Distribution of religious importance question.

only 27.8% of LGB individuals report similar feelings. From this perspective, LGB evangelicals look much more similar to their evangelical counterparts than those from the LGB community. This is particularly apparent among those who say that religion is “not at all important,” where LGB members are four times as likely to choose this option than those who are both LGB and evangelical. In light of this result, it appears that if LGB evangelicals have drifted away from their religious identity, that drift is quite subtle and that they still hold their religious beliefs in high esteem.

### Assessing political partisanship and vote choice in 2016

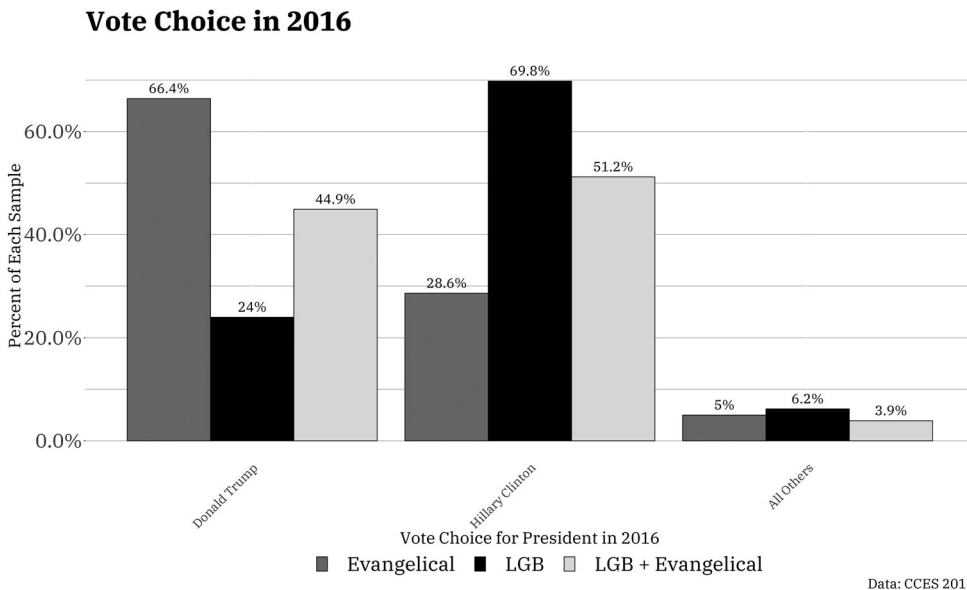
While LGB evangelicals have to deal with the reality that they are being pulled in two different directions in multiple arenas, none is more acute than in the world of politics with its increasing polarization in recent years (Westfall et al. 2015; Achenbach and Clement 2016). These LGB evangelicals likely feel a tremendous amount of cross pressure in their political lives as their evangelical affiliation draws them toward a Republican affiliation, while LGB evangelical who place a greater emphasis on same sex marriage might be persuaded to align themselves with the Democrat party. Figure 2 is a histogram visualizing the distribution of a seven-point party identification question posed to all respondents in the CCES. If one observes the far-left group (those who identify as “Strong Democrats”) the results indicate that LGB evangelicals look much more similar to their LGB counterparts than their evangelical brethren. The results of this analysis indicate that an LGB evangelical was twice as likely to identify as a “strong Democrat” than all evangelicals. When one moves to the Republican side of the histogram, an intriguing pattern emerges for LGB evangelicals. For each step to the right, the percentage of LGB evangelicals rises. The distribution of party identification leans slightly to the left with 49.5% of LGB evangelicals indicating that they are Democrats, on the other hand only



**Figure 2.** Distribution party identification question.

34.3% of LGB evangelical identifying as Republicans. Comparing that to the percentage of evangelicals and LGB individuals who identify with the GOP finds a sharp contrast. For example, 55.1% of evangelicals indicate an affiliation with the Republican party, while just 18.9% of LGB individuals were Republican. This is succinctly expressed through mean party identification. The mean for evangelicals was at 4.52 on a seven-point scale, the LGB evangelicals mean for party identification was 3.25, and 2.64 for LGB individuals.

While in some areas like the church attendance measure and party identification, the cognitive dissonance of being an LGB evangelical can be lessened by moving one or two categories up or down on a larger scale. However, when in the arena of American politics one is not afforded the same variety of response options as the ballot box is realistically a binary choice. Figure 3 indicates the vote choice for the three groups under examination. Here, the differences between LGB and evangelical voters is stark. In fact, the gap between the two candidates was nearly the same for these two groups but in the opposite direction, a 35-point spread in favor of Clinton for LGB voters, a 37.8-point spread in favor of Trump for evangelicals. The votes among LGB evangelicals were much more evenly split with Clinton receiving 51.2% of the vote, compared to Trump’s 44.9% share, however, this difference is not statistically significant. The cross pressured pattern that emerged when describing the party identification of the three groups continues here when looking at vote choice. The LGB evangelical vote was stronger for Clinton than their evangelical counterparts, but support for Trump was much stronger among LGB evangelicals than those in the larger LGB community. It appears that LGB evangelicals stand in the middle ground between their two identities, with some voters responding more to the pressure of their sexual orientation, while others are more persuaded by their evangelical affiliation.



**Figure 3.** Vote choice in the 2016 presidential election.

### Finding dissonance in the two identities

While the Cooperative Congressional Election Study is a tremendous survey instrument that allows a great deal of insight into the opinions and behaviors of the American public, its primary goal is to assess public opinion and political behavior among its respondents. While this does not afford scholars the opportunity to delve into a variety of human behaviors like the General Social Survey allows, it does create scenarios where a researcher can try to isolate when either of the two identities of LGB evangelicals may come to the fore. Consider two of the most significant and contentious political issues in the American politics: gay marriage and abortion. As previously mentioned, gay marriage is an issue that was at the heart of the culture wars in American politics for decades (Hunter 1992; Frank 2005). It was also an issue in which evangelical Protestants were the most strident and outspoken (Olson, Cadge, and Harrison 2006; Campbell and Monson 2008). However, there is likely no issue that more LGB individuals agree on more than legalizing same-sex marriage. In fact, 83% of LGB respondents in the 2016 CCES indicate that gays and lesbians should have the right to legally marry. Therefore, if an individual held to an evangelical belief, while also espousing an LGB orientation, this would likely be an area in which their sexual orientation might hold sway over their political opinions. On the other hand, abortion is also a topic that has also been central to evangelical's engagement with politics (Evans 2002; Jelen and Wilcox 2003; Lewis 2017). However, abortion is not an issue that has any immediately apparent ties to the LGB community. The ability of a woman to have access to abortion services would likely be an issue area where an LGB evangelical would find justification for their political opinion from their religious belief rather than their sexual orientation and therefore espouse anti-abortion opinions.

## Abortion rights

The CCES asks respondents whether they “support or oppose” abortion rights in a number of scenarios.<sup>3</sup> In Figure 4, four of these scenarios are displayed with the mean indicated by a dot, and 95% confidence by capped lines. Each proposal is recoded so that more support for abortion rights are to the right of the graph and less support is to the left. On the broad-based abortion question which asks if an individual supports abortion “as a matter of choice” there is a clear difference among the three groups. As could be expected from their vote choice, evangelicals are the least supportive group and LGB individuals are the most supportive. At the statistical midpoint are LGB evangelicals. Here, it would appear that they are caught between both their identities in much the same way that LGB evangelicals were divided on their vote choice. This pattern begins to breakdown somewhat when the survey moves to more nuanced policy that deals with abortion rights. For instance, the survey asked if employers should be able to decline abortion coverage in their insurance plan for their employees. In this instance, there is little substantive difference between evangelicals and LGB evangelicals. For the remaining questions including allowing federal funding for abortion and banning abortions after 20 weeks gestation it is clear that LGB evangelicals have opinions that look more similar to their religious identity than their sexual orientation. This provides some support for the idea that LGB evangelicals find their religious identity more instructive than sexual orientation in the area of abortion rights.

How does the importance of abortion interact with the importance of religion in an LGB evangelical’s life. The CCES asked respondents, “How important (is abortion) to you?” with responses ranging from “no importance at all” (1) to “very high importance” (5). A simple linear relationship was specified between the abortion importance question

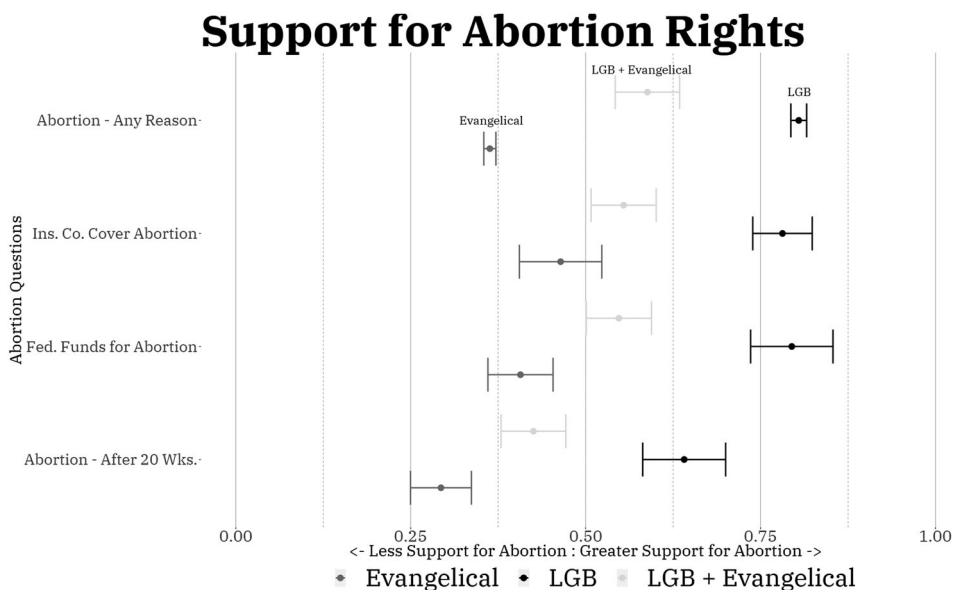
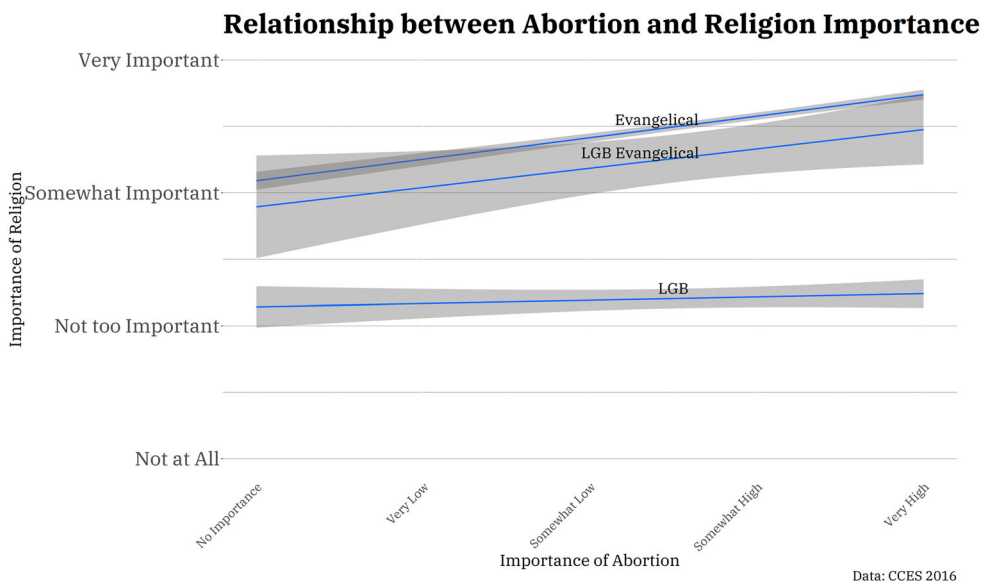


Figure 4. Support for abortion rights in four scenarios.

(on the X-axis) and the importance of religion (on the Y-axis) for each of the three groups, with the results being found in Figure 5. The trend line is displayed along with 95% confidence intervals in the darkened areas. To begin, LGB respondents place a low level of importance on religion, no matter how central abortion rights are to their political beliefs. This is not the case for the other two groups. For evangelicals, there is a positive statistical relationship between the importance of religion and the importance of abortion. Said another way, the more an evangelical cares about their religion, the more they care about abortion rights (or vice versa). The same general pattern emerges for LGB evangelicals, as well. In fact, at both the top and bottom ends of the abortion importance scale there is no statistical difference between evangelicals who are LGB and those who are not. It is important to note that because of the smaller sample size of LGB evangelicals, that it is not possible to say that there is a statistically positive relationship between these two variables. However, this provides tacit support for the idea that LGB evangelicals see abortion through an evangelical lens as opposed to an LGB one.

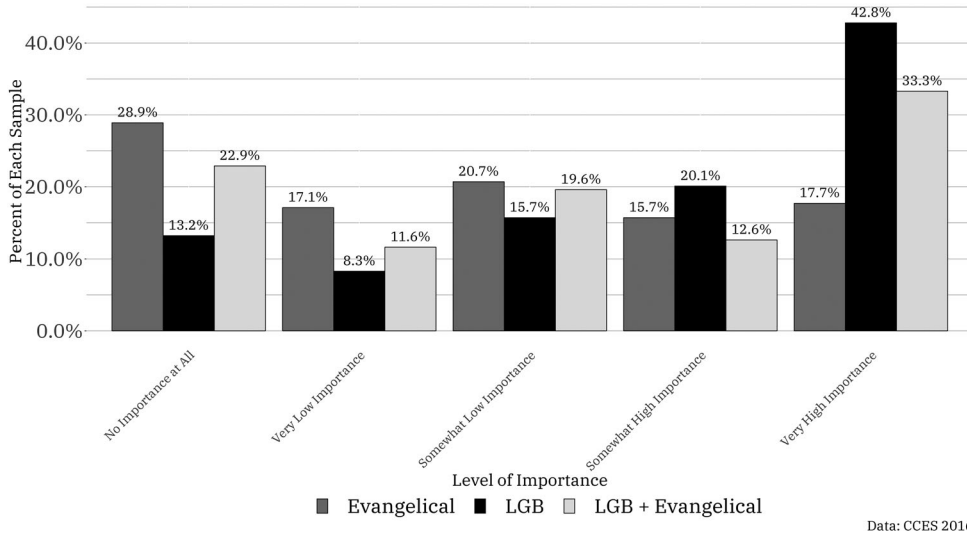
### Gay marriage

Turning now to the case of gay marriage, the CCES asked respondents, “How important (is gay marriage) to you?” with responses ranging from “no importance at all” (1) to “very high importance” (5). The distribution of these responses for each of the three groups being investigated is displayed in Figure 6. Looking at the “very high importance” response percentages is instructive. While only 17.7% of evangelicals indicate that gay marriage is of high importance, the percentage among LGB respondents is 25 percentage points higher (42.8%). But, those who are LGB evangelicals are somewhat caught between these two groups with 33.3% saying that gay marriage is of very high importance. However, what



**Figure 5.** Relationship between religion’s importance and abortion importance.

## The Importance of Gay Marriage



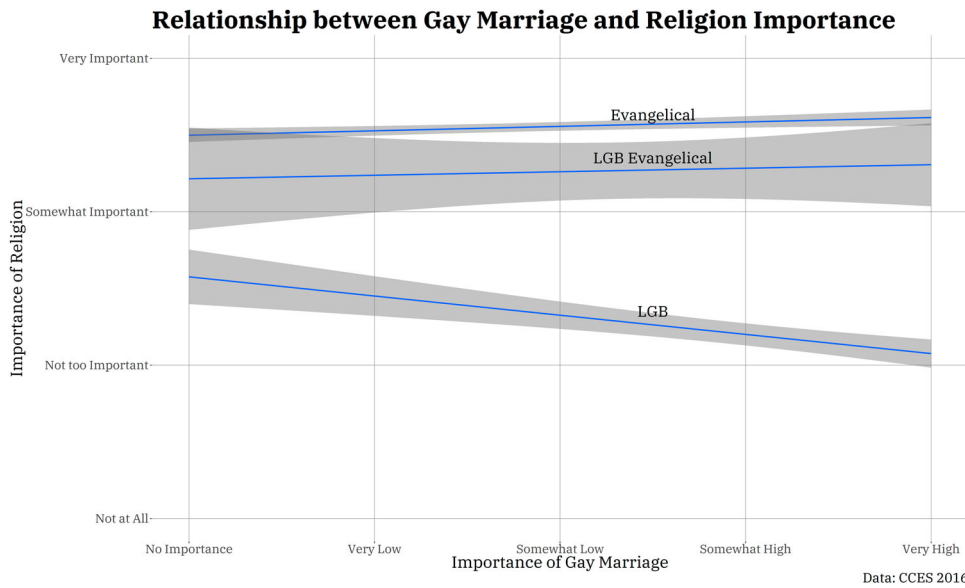
**Figure 6.** Distribution of gay marriage importance question.

is even more noteworthy are those who indicated that gay marriage has “no importance at all.” For those who are LGB and evangelical, this is the second most popular response choice at 22.9%. This percentage is much closer to the 28.9% of evangelicals who indicated that gay marriage was not important at all than the 13.2% of LGB respondents who chose this response item.

It seems that the approach to easing cognitive dissonance for LGB evangelicals takes on two entirely different approaches when considering the importance of gay marriage. For a third of this population, they continue to emphasize the necessity of marriage for same-sex couples, but on the other hand, nearly one quarter of LGB evangelicals take the complete opposite approach and say that gay marriage is of no importance at all. If one collapses these response items into “high importance” and “low importance” categories, 45.9% of LGB evangelicals think gay marriage is of high importance, compared to 62.9% of LGB respondents and 33.4% of evangelicals. It seems that LGB evangelicals exist, in the aggregate, at the midpoint between the other two identities.

To take this analysis a step further: what is the interaction between these two variables? [Figure 7](#) displays the linear relationship in a similar way as the analysis conducted for [Figure 4](#), with importance of gay marriage on the X-axis. While evangelicals express the strongest levels of religious importance, there is no statistically significant relationship between these two variables for this group. Said another way, whether an evangelical thinks gay marriage is of no importance at all or of very high importance, they still indicate religious importance at the same relative level. The same is true for LGB individuals. While LGB evangelicals evince lower levels of religious importance as compared to evangelical in general, there is no relationship between religious importance and the importance of gay marriage. For those who indicate that they are LGB, there is a negative relationship between religious importance and gay marriage importance, which is statistically





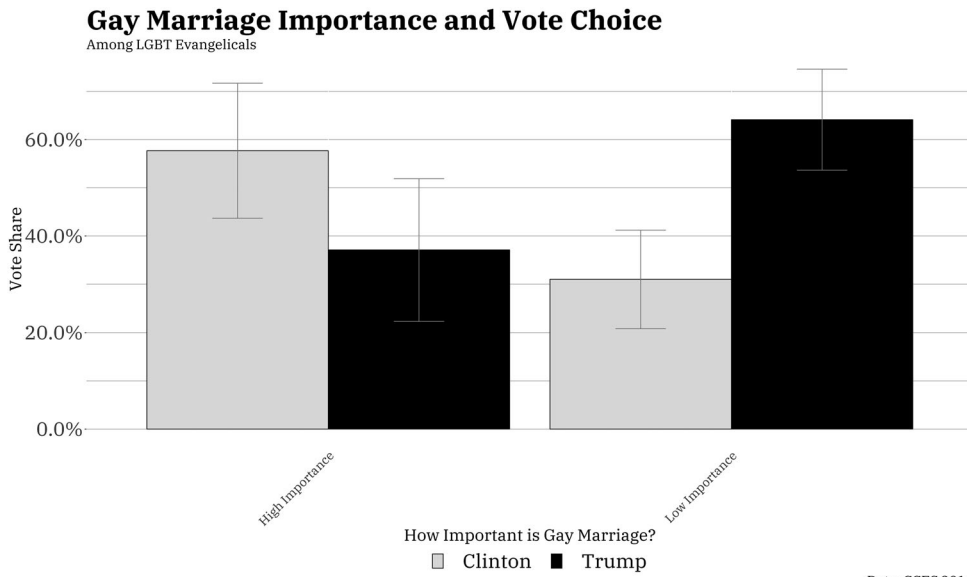
**Figure 7.** Relationship between religion's importance and gay marriage importance.

significant. This means that as an LGB individual places more emphasis on gay marriage, that the result is a lower level of importance on religion (or vice versa). The results for LGB evangelicals provide a mixed-bag. Because the sample size is relatively small, the confidence intervals for this group remain large enough that the relationship is not statistically significant, however, the general trend looks the same as evangelicals. That is, LGB evangelicals do not mitigate their importance in religion even as they place a greater importance on the ability of LGB people to marry someone of the same sex.

It seems like a worthwhile endeavor to look at vote choice through the lens of the importance of gay marriage, as this may give some insight into how this specific cross pressure alters vote choice among LGB evangelicals. The results of this analysis are displayed in [Figure 8](#). For those LGB evangelicals who believe that gay marriage is of high importance, Hillary Clinton received a higher proportion of the vote, but the difference is not statistically significant. On the other hand, those who believed that gay marriage was of low importance, Trump received over two thirds of votes cast by LGB evangelicals, with his advantage being statistically significant. This result seems to provide some support for the cross pressured theory insofar as when gay marriage is seen as a vital issue, LGB evangelicals are more likely to vote in a similar fashion to other LGB votes, yet when gay marriage is seen as a low priority issue then the evangelical identity comes to fore and these individuals act more like traditional evangelicals in the voting booth.<sup>4</sup>

## Discussion

To return to the framework of cognitive dissonance, the originator of the term, Leon Festinger, believed that when an individual is confronted with this psychological



**Figure 8.** Vote in the 2016 presidential by LGB evangelicals separated by importance of gay marriage.

inconsistency there are three coping strategies that are employed to reduce these conflictual feelings (1962). The first is to find new ways to think about the ideas that are in conflict. There is evidence of this in the results reported here, specifically in regard to the significant numbers of LGB evangelicals who feel that gay marriage and abortion are important issues. The reality that there are nearly a quarter of LGB evangelicals think that gay marriage is of no importance at all seems to indicate that a significant number of these individuals have managed to reconcile their cognitive dissonance by minimizing the importance of a key identity in their lives. However, the same pattern is not evident when considering their religious identity, as LGB evangelicals are much less likely than their LGB contemporaries to rate the importance of religion as very low. Yet when looking at the interaction between religion's importance and the importance of gay marriage or abortion the pattern for LGB evangelicals looks somewhat more like the evangelical group than the LGB group.

LGB evangelicals do not show strongly positive relationships between religion's importance and culture war issues importance, but there is not a negative relationship either (as exists for LGB individuals and abortion). It appears that, on the whole, LGB evangelicals have forged their own unique cognitive path toward resolving these two identities.

Another technique that Festinger suggests is to change some behavior that causes the dissonance. Here, the data indicates that this is not occurring when viewed through the lens of church attendance, in fact the opposite is occurring. There has been a great deal of scholarship that indicates that the conservative turn in American evangelicalism has driven moderate individuals away from the church entirely (Hout and Fischer 2002; Patrikios 2008; Djupe, Neiheisel, and Sokhey 2017). One could easily assume that this trend would be evident in the lives of those evangelicals who abandoned religion when they realized that their sexual orientation was not going to be affirmed by their evangelical congregation (Huckfeldt, Plutzer, and Sprague 1993). Yet, in fact, these data indicate that is

has been highly unlikely that there has been a mass exodus of LGB evangelicals from the pews. While LBG evangelicals attend church at slight lower rates than evangelicals in general (about 8% less), they attend church much more frequently than LGB respondents. There could be a methodological reason to consider: many LGB evangelicals have left the fold over time and those who remain are the truly devoted. It is impossible to explore this possibility without the benefit of a large panel study. Nonetheless, this finding indicates that LGB evangelicals are not overcoming their dissonance by staying away from the church.

A final means to cope with cognitive dissonance, according to Festinger (1962) is to change the social environment that reinforces that dissonance. The demographic differences do find this occurring in a number of arenas. For example, while LGB evangelicals are attending church at a high frequency, they are slightly younger and slightly more educated than their evangelical counterparts. A younger and more educated population may be related to other factors as well. For instance, this could indicate a majority urban or suburban population, which are (generally speaking) more educated and younger than those that live in rural areas. Unfortunately, the CCES does not ask respondents the size of the city in which they currently live, but it does ask how long they have lived in their current location. The data indicates that LGB evangelicals have lived in their current location for two years less than evangelicals but 18 months longer than LGB individuals. While, not explicitly reinforced by data, it seems possible that many LGB evangelicals grew up in a rural community where evangelical Christianity played a central role. When they transitioned into adulthood they moved to a more densely populated environment but did not shed their religious affiliation. By doing this, they still affiliate with an evangelical church, but this urban church may be much more permissive of the LGB lifestyle than their rural childhood church. Previous scholar has indicated that there is tremendous variation in religious theology and practice across the urban/rural divide (Chalfant and Heller 1991).

Turning the discussion toward the results of the political partisanship and vote choice, the reality of cross cutting cleavages come in to full view. The results from the 2016 Presidential vote choice reveal that LGB evangelicals do not cast their ballots like either evangelicals or members of the LGB community. While evangelicals voted overwhelmingly in favor of Donald Trump, and LGB voters were even stronger for Hillary Clinton, LGB evangelicals closely split their votes among the two candidates. These results, on their face, indicate that some LGB evangelicals feels stronger pressure from their LBGT identity, while some are more influenced by their evangelical affiliation. However, one of the primary limitations of this data and subsequent analysis is that there is no means to gauge the intensity of an individual's religious or sexual identity. For example, an individual could identify as LGB, however see this part of their existence as a small portion of their overall identity. The same could be said for an evangelical affiliation. As mentioned previously, using a dichotomous measure could conflate nominal evangelicals with those who are highly active and deeply religious. Subsequent surveys would do well to ask questions that tap in to the centrality of either identity.

While these results provide a nuanced view of how LGB evangelicals orient their world around both religious and political concerns, one has to wonder how all these political opinions will shift as the United States moves further away from the *Obergefell* decision. It is clear from this data that many LGB and LGB evangelicals feel strongly about the issue,

but as public support continues to shift toward more acceptance of gay marriage, the need for candidates and parties to highlight same sex marriage will begin to diminish. Will that shift the voting calculus for LGB evangelicals, with their religious identity taking precedence and their LGB orientation taking a backseat? Will abortion politics play an even more prominent role in the culture wars going forward? Hopefully social scientists can continue to explore these questions in the future.

## Notes

1. Full coding syntax is available on the author's Github page: BLINDED.
2. All statistics are calculated by using weights supplied by the authors of the CCES for use in an analysis that includes questions that include sexuality (variable name = common-weight\_vv\_lgbt). These weights will be included (where appropriate) throughout the remainder of the analysis. With a sample size of 485 and a total population of 64,600 the margin of error is  $\pm 4.4\%$  (Bulpitt 1987).
3. Full question wording in the [appendix](#).
4. The same analysis was done using abortion importance to divide LGB evangelicals but there was no statistical difference in voting patterns.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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## Appendix

### Variable Coding

#### Age:

2017 – birth\_yr

#### Income:

“Thinking back over the last year, what was your family’s annual income?”

1 = Less than 10k; 2 = 10k -20k; 3 = 20k-30k; 4 = 30k-40k; 5 = 40k – 50k; 6 = 50k – 60k; 7 = 70k-80k; 9 = 80k-100k; 10 = 100k – 120k; 11 = 120k – 150k; 12 = 150k-200k; 13 = 200k – 250k; 14 = 250k – 350k; 15 = 350k – 500k; 16 = 500k or more; else = NA

#### Education:

“What is the highest level of education you have completed?”

1 = No HS; 2 = High School Graduate; 3 = Some College; 4 = 2-year; 5 = 4-year; 6 = Post-grad; else = NA

#### Male:

“Are you male or female?”

1 = Male; Female = 0; else = NA

#### White:

“What racial or ethnic group best describes you?”

1 = White; else = 0

#### Church Attendance:

“Aside from weddings and funerals, how often do you attend religious services?”

1 = Never; 2 = Seldom; 3 = A few times a year; 4 = Once or Twice a Month; 5 = Once a week; 6 = More than once a week; else = NA

#### Religion Importance:

“How important is religion in your life?”

1 = Not at all important; 2 = Not too important; 3 = Somewhat important; 4 = Very important; else = NA

#### Gay Marriage Importance:

“How Important is [gay marriage] to you?”

1 = No Importance at All; 2 = Very Low Importance; 3 = Somewhat Low Importance; 4 = Somewhat High Importance; 5 = No Importance at All; else = NA

Each variable was normalized so that the maximum value was 1 and the minimum value was zero as a means to aid interpretation.

#### Abortion Importance:

“How Important is [abortion] to you?”

1 = No Importance at All; 2 = Very Low Importance; 3 = Somewhat Low Importance; 4 = Somewhat High Importance; 5 = No Importance at All; else = NA

#### Abortion Scenarios:

Always allow a woman to obtain an abortion as a matter of choice

1 = Support, 0 = Oppose

Prohibit all abortions after the 20th week of pregnancy

1 = Oppose, 0 = Support

Allow employers to decline coverage of abortions in insurance plans

1 = Oppose, 0 = Support

Prohibit the expenditure of funds authorized or appropriated by federal law for any abortion

1 = Oppose, 0 = Support