

December 2000

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Bush Scores with "Born Again" Voters

Open the gates that the righteous nation may enter, the nation that keeps faith. --Isaiah 26:2

Barna Research recently released some significant and surprising information about how Christians voted in the presidential election that I thought would be interesting to you. Data, based on surveys conducted throughout the campaign, including interviews conducted both the week before and the week after the election, showed that 59% of born again adults voted.

As expected, President-elect George W. Bush won a majority of the born again Christian vote by a margin of 57% to 42%.¹ However, Vice President Al Gore had growing momentum among the born again segment, especially during the last 2 months of the campaign when he won more than 80% of the born again votes that were decided between Labor Day and Election Day. In fact, according to researcher George Barna, "nearly one-fifth of all voters made up their minds about whom to support within the last ten days of the election period."

Other surprises from religious voters include the fact that Bush carried the vote among adults who attend mainline Protestant churches, a group who usually tend to favor more liberal-leaning, Democratic candidates. And Gore won a close victory among Catholics, 49% - 44%.

After reading this research one may wonder how the church could be so divided on the choice of a president. This information might be a clue: Barna makes a distinction between people who are born again and people who are evangelical.

"Born again Christians" were defined in the survey as people who said they have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in their life today. They also indicated a belief that when they die they will go to Heaven because they had confessed their sins and had accepted Jesus Christ as their savior. Respondents were not asked to describe themselves as "born again."

The proportion of born again Christians has remained consistent since 1995, hovering in the 39% to 43% range during that period. Surveys reveal that large numbers of born again Christians find their "spirituality" more a comforting than compelling presence in their lives. Only a minority of this group (44%) are certain of the existence of absolute moral truth.

Within the born again community, are Evangelical Christians who hold a traditional, biblical view of God; believe the Bible is accurate in all that it teaches; say that Satan is a real spiritual entity; contend that Jesus never committed a sin; and believe that salvation is by God's grace and cannot be earned by good behavior.

They also say that their religious faith is very important in their life and that they have a personal responsibility to share their faith in Christ with non-believers.

This niche represents 8% of the adult population—a level that has not changed since 1993 when it was at 11%.

What an eye-opener! Only a small percentage of people whose beliefs put them in the born-again category understand that their faith must impact their lives and that God calls Christians to be world-changers.

In another survey earlier this year, George Barna reports that in a typical week, about four out of every ten people sitting in the pews of Christian churches are not even born again. Basically, we don't have to leave the church building to go to the mission field; non-Christians make up 40% of our congregations!

It is clear that we can't expect churchgoers to vote for people of moral character when they have neither a grasp of what that means or the Holy Spirit to help them discern.

This information is very valuable as we consider how to improve our strategy for educating Christian voters. First of all, it is never too late to talk to our friends and neighbors, pass out voter guides and hold voter education forums in our churches. With one-fifth of all voters making up their minds about whom to support for president during the last 10 days before the election, we cannot afford to give up prematurely.

Another important lesson for us to take to heart is that we cannot assume that a particular denomination will vote in a particular way or that certain churches will not be open to voter guides because they are traditionally liberal. Who can explain why a majority of Catholics, whom we assume will vote pro-life, would choose Gore over Bush? We need to put away our old assumptions and reach out to every person of faith.

Researcher George Barna had this reaction to the survey results. "Clearly, Mr. Bush would have been trounced if he had not gained the favor of born again Christians. Similarly, the substantial support that Mr. Gore received from black churches made an impact on his showing."

No matter how you look at these results, though, it becomes obvious that Christians are a significant voice in the voting process, but they are certainly not a unified, monolithic voting bloc as is sometimes assumed...It also indicates that perhaps people's faith commitment is not as defining a force in their decision-making as other personal attributes and considerations."

Let us pray that Christians will grow in their relationship with Christ so that all they say and do, including how they vote, will reflect both their faith in God and a deep understanding of His Word.

Rick Forcier

Executive Director

¹ Bush Decisively Won Born Again Vote. But Gore Gained Most of the Born Again Voters Who Decided Late, *The Barna Update*, 11/13/2000, <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=75>