

Study examines religious affiliation and social class

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Philip Schwadel. Credit: University Communications/University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Younger generations are closing the social class gap between evangelical Protestants and mainline denominations, a University of Nebraska-Lincoln sociologist of religion has found.

And in what appears to be an important shift in the U.S. religious landscape, a growing number of younger-generation working-class Americans are not affiliated with any particular religious denomination.

"When lower-class Americans aren't choosing to be evangelical, they're increasingly choosing to be nothing," said Philip Schwadel, associate professor of sociology.

Schwadel's findings, published in the July edition of *Social Science Research*, could hold implications for the future role of conservative Christian groups in U.S. society and politics. Since the election of President Ronald Reagan in 1980, evangelical Protestant groups have been significant players in the Republican Party.

"The results . . . show considerable change in the social-class hierarchy of religious traditions in the United States," he wrote. "In younger cohorts, differences between evangelical and liberal Protestants are greatly reduced, and evangelical Protestants no longer have lower levels of education and income than do affiliates of 'other' religions and the unaffiliated."

The underpinnings of Schwadel's study date to 1929, when theologian H. Richard Niebuhr identified what he called "Churches of the Disinherited"—sects whose theology and worship style appeal to people of lower means and prestige. Based upon the history of other Christian denominations, Niebuhr theorized that such sects would evolve into mainstream denominations as their members became upwardly mobile, gaining more education, more income and more prestigious occupations.

Yet empirical research conducted since the 1970s has not found much change in social class differences across denominations in the United States.

"One major lack of finding is that evangelicals in most empirical research did not really change relative to other Americans," Schwadel said. "They didn't become more middle-class."

The difficulty researchers faced, Schwadel said, was measuring change by generation and not merely over time. Niebuhr's theory predicted generational change—that the denominations would evolve as the original members' children and grandchildren gained more education, better jobs and more income.

Previous studies looked at change over time—but the generational effect was masked by the large size of the Baby Boom generation as well as by the influence of age on religious attitudes. Those in their 70s often have a different perspective on religion than those in their 20s, Schwadel said.

Using a technique developed by other sociologists to measure changes over generations, Schwadel separated the responses of more than 31,000 white participants in the General Social Survey from 1973 to 2010 into five-year birth cohorts from 1900-1904 to 1975-79. He examined the correlations by cohort between religious affiliation and three measures of social class: income, education and [occupational prestige](#).

He said he limited his study to white respondents because the relationship between religious affiliation and social class may vary by race.

Schwadel is among the first to apply the birth cohort approach to the sociological study of religion. He examined those identified as evangelical Protestant, liberal Protestant (Presbyterian, Episcopal and United Church of Christ), moderate Protestant, Pentecostal, nondenominational Protestant, Jewish, Catholic, other religions (such as Mormon, Hindu and Muslim) and the unaffiliated.

On the aggregate, evangelical Protestants continue to have lower education, income and occupational prestige levels than those in most other religious affiliations, he found. Yet the differences in occupation and income narrow considerably among younger generations of Protestants.

Schwadel said he found the result to be a combination of younger evangelical Protestants gaining social class status while the other affiliations lost status. The most significant reduction in social class difference occurred between evangelical Protestants and those who are unaffiliated.

Some of Schwadel's specific findings:

- Only Pentecostals have lower levels of social class than white evangelical Protestants.
- In younger cohorts, differences between evangelical and liberal Protestants are greatly reduced.
- Differences between evangelicals and Catholics increase moderately across cohorts, with younger Catholic cohorts gaining social status.
- Catholics are the "glaring exception" to the pattern of cohort-based declines in [social class](#) differences between evangelical Protestants and other white Americans. Catholics gained in income and education levels compared to evangelical Protestants.
- Evangelicals also continue to be disproportionately lower class compared to moderate Protestants and Jews.
- Those unaffiliated with a specific religion are no longer a small, elite social group, with relatively high levels of education, income and occupational prestige. Among younger generations, the education, income and occupations of the unaffiliated are comparable to those of evangelical Protestants.

"As Niebuhr's model predicts, white evangelical Protestants have become more similar to affiliates of some other religious traditions in terms of both education and family income, and this change occurs predominantly across birth cohorts," Schwadel wrote.

"In other words, evangelical Protestants no longer are necessarily the churches of the disinherited."

Provided by University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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