On November 4, 1980 the evangelical incumbent knew that his race for reelection was over before the polls had closed. Elected at a ratio of 2:1 by his fellow evangelicals, the tables turned on the Southern Baptist Sunday school teacher as he lost the support of evangelicals by the same ratio by which he won it.

The fact that this rather unpopular president lost the support of the country is no shock, but the reality that evangelicals shifted their support over the course of four years away from someone who spoke their language and tried his best to live the private life prized by evangelicals poses an interesting question. What was it that made the majority of evangelicals decide to vote against a man who shared more of their beliefs than any President of America’s past?

Born again ten years before the election, Jimmy Carter told the country that “Jesus comes first on my life, even before politics”, a statement Americans had previously never heard from a presidential candidate.1 His opposition was Ronald Reagan, an attractive actor who successfully courted evangelicals despite the fact that his personal life was a far cry from the evangelical ideal exemplified by Carter.

A force other than that of personal piety was propelling many evangelicals to the right. Evangelicals had begun to craft their image for America and they did not want Americans to have the option of choosing immorality and propel their beloved country in a sinful direction. In the decade after the scandal of Nixon and disillusionment with the

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American political scene: evangelicals wanted a president with a pristine image. Jimmy Carter’s complicated image did not make sense to many evangelicals and translated as fraught with inconsistencies. To the dismay of evangelicals Carter did not seek to ally himself with evangelicals in the political arena but instead granted an interview to Playboy magazine and gravitated towards those with similar political ideologies. Carter did not court evangelicals, who viewed his prime supporters as including Gloria Steinem, Ralph Nader, environmentalists, and many other secular and atheist groups.

Ronald Reagan carefully left his divorce out of his image and embodied the glossy persona of a wholesome American running for office. His image of America as a country that should be free of sexual impurity resonated more with evangelicals than the complex image given by Jimmy Carter. Reagan linked his American image with a positive past and spoke of an America in which the majority wanted to live moral lives. Instead of praising America’s glorious past, Carter’s image complicated history and called out for help, connecting America not with a great tradition but with a flawed past. This image worked in the midst of the disillusion of the 1970’s but was no match for the image Ronald Reagan would craft.

Who the evangelicals supported mattered more in the 1980 than in any previous election because evangelicals started to take politics more seriously in the post-Watergate years. Evangelicals became and still are a large group of American voters with great political power. It is not enough for a candidate to have personal piety as political candidates can no longer ignore their desire for a purer, more moral America. Candidates who ally themselves with evangelicals and put forth a positive image of America can gain millions of votes from America’s evangelicals.