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Democracy Dies in Darkness

ACTS OF FAITH

The stunning difference between white and black evangelical voters in Alabama.



By Michelle Boorstein

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Another group of evangelicals helped Doug Jones in his unexpected win against Roy Moore Tuesday: Black evangelicals.

In recent years the word “evangelical” has become nearly synonymous with white, conservative Republicans. But in Alabama, one of the most evangelical states in the country, as well as across swaths of the American South — race and religion mix in a different way.

Ninety-six percent of African-American voters chose Jones, a Democrat, and the vast majority of those people self-identify, according to exit polling, as evangelical or born-again. That, combined with the high turnout rate among African-Americans — close to the rates of the two times Barack Obama ran for president — gave a spotlight to the religious perspective of black evangelicals.

So what does that mean about black Christianity in Alabama? Or about American evangelicalism?

Like much of American identity, the answer is a stew of regionalism, race and faith, among other things.

Alabama is heavily evangelical, regardless of one’s race. In its special election, 76 percent of African-Americans identified as born-again or evangelical, according to exit polling, along with 72 percent of whites. In national exit polls for the 2016 presidential election, 57 percent of blacks and 39 percent of whites identified as born-again or evangelical.

Several Southern states include more Americans than the national average who identify as “evangelical,” and who say religion is important in their lives. But that leads to very different voting conclusions for black Christians than for white ones, as well as for Latino or Asian Christians.

Part of the issue is language.

In many parts of the country, Christians who technically fit the theological-school definition of “evangelical” — have high regard for the authority of the Bible, believe in the essential importance of sharing one’s faith, among other metrics — sometimes don’t call themselves evangelical because the word has taken on such a partisan and even racial tone in recent years. And sometimes people who *don’t* identify with the theological-school definition use the word because it fits their politics. The faith of many Christians of color is sometimes misunderstood because of chaos over the word “evangelical.”

But in Alabama, black Christians use the label, and experts think faith organizers were able to motivate such voters by urging them to reclaim their own religious values in the public square.

Black Christians in Alabama thought that “we need to show the world that we as people of color have a voice, that this is the place that birthed the dream” of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., said the Rev. Marvin Lue Jr., pastor of Stewart Memorial CME Church in Mobile and chairman of the board of the organizing group Faith in Action. Lue said black Christians in Alabama were motivated to turn out by issues such as mass incarceration, a struggling state educational system and a “mentality that continues to consider us as second-class citizens.”

Black evangelicals in Alabama are less motivated by the issues that heavily drive white evangelicals — specifically abortion and the rise of LGBT rights.

The Washington Post’s Eugene Scott this week reported from Alabama on black voters, who told him they were primarily motivated by making sure someone who reminded them of President Trump didn’t win:

“But what these black voters knew was that Moore had adopted Trump’s “Make America Great Again” slogan — and for residents of a state that has deep-rooted racial tensions running through its veins, some moments of America’s past are not among the state’s finest moments.”

Race generally trumps religion in Alabama overall as a dividing line among voters — and that is certainly true among African American voters.

Black evangelicals voted Tuesday in Alabama like black voters overall, according to exit polling. Of that group, 95 percent voted for Jones, compared with 98 percent of black non-evangelicals.

The racial divide in the nation is far more pronounced in Alabama than in the country overall. In 2012, the last presidential election for which Alabama had an exit poll, 84 percent of whites voted for Republican Mitt Romney. Nationally, 59 percent of whites nationally voted for Romney.

But that may be breaking a bit. Although Moore, a former state Supreme Court justice, won white evangelicals by 62 percentage points, he lost non-evangelical whites by 29 points. White non-evangelicals are one of the few white groups Jones won.

While African Americans and white evangelicals voted pretty consistently in recent elections in Alabama, white non-evangelicals shifted significantly.

African American voters made up about 29 percent of voters in Alabama Tuesday, exit polls show. That is similar to African American turnout in Obama's two elections according to exit polls.

Lue said he thinks the turnout still would have been very high among black voters even without the explosion of controversy after The Washington Post reported that Moore was accused of making sexual advances toward several teenage girls when he was in his 30s.

"African American women, even though they were sympathetic, they understood their issues are different from their white counterparts. As awful as those allegations were, African American women are dealing with domestic violence on a daily basis," he said.

Black Christians were motivated by knowing Jones as the lead prosecutor of two Ku Klux Klan members involved in the bombing half a century ago of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Lue said.

Randy Brinson, a Montgomery doctor, longtime head of the state's Christian Coalition, organizer of young evangelical voters and a Republican who lost in the Senate primary against Moore earlier this year, said Jones was able to elevate religious values such as humility and grace, rather than specific social issues that sometimes separate black and white evangelical Christians.

"He was successful in talking about such things as virtues rather than riding in on a horse or, 'We're here to tell you what to do.' You had the Old Testament [Moore] versus the New Testament. Moore was preaching the Old Testament of law and punishment and Jones was in more soft tones — but not even in explicitly religious terms. It was such a contrast," said Brinson, who has engaged black Christians for years in his organizing work and as a candidate.

This was inspiring for black evangelicals, Brinson said, who were not going to be motivated by the primary issues Moore characterized as faith-based.

Scott Clement and Emily Guskin contributed to this report.