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Young evangelical vote in question

Panel: He's a Democrat, but Obama holds appeal

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Special To The Times

PRINCETON BOROUGH — The young evangelical vote is up for grabs in the 2008 election and may even go to Democratic candidate Barack Obama.

That was the feeling of panelists and some students during a round-table discussion Friday at Princeton University.

"I think that Obama is an appealing candidate for younger evangelicals, both for his politics of hope and for his personal Christianity," said Robin Rogers-Dillon, an associate professor of sociology at Queens College. "If it's a race with Hillary Clinton, I think it's almost certain the evangelical vote will go to John McCain. If it's with Obama I think it remains an open question."

Panelist Melani McAlister of George Washington University agreed.

"I think it'll matter a great deal who the Democratic nominee is," said McAlister, an associate professor of American studies and international affairs. "I think Obama's going to pull in a lot of moderate evangelicals if he's the candidate."

Princeton University senior Kristen Molloy said she wouldn't put herself in the young evangelicals category but sees the appeal of Obama, a senator from Illinois, for young voters, both evangelical and nonevangelical.

"Obama speaks to the younger people more than other candidates," she said.

McAlister and Rogers-Dillon, along with Michael Hout of the University of California at Berkeley, spoke about evangelicals and the 2008 election at the panel discussion. The event was scheduled months ago, before the panelists knew which candidates would still be in the race.

Rogers-Dillon said young evangelicals do not differ from older evangelicals on issues such as abortion and gay marriage but are broadening the issues with which they are concerned. She said young evangelicals have expanded their concern to include social issues such as the environment, poverty, sex trafficking, HIV/AIDS and human rights.

Although the group is broadening, it does not necessarily mean young evangelicals are liberalizing.

"The generational change in young evangelicals cannot be understood in the traditional left/right divide," she said.

She said that part of the electorate is made up of voters who came of age after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, and who sometime lack the warrior attitude held by older evangelicals.

McAlister agreed that war is one thing that divides evangelicals.

"Iraq is one thing evangelicals really do not agree on," she said.

Rogers-Dillon said the support for the Bush administration among young evangelicals has dropped from 87 percent in 2002 to 45 percent today.

"I do not think that this is evidence that the younger generation is more left wing than the older generation," Rogers-Dillon said. "Younger evangelicals have a different relationship with politics."

Hout agreed that evangelicals differ among themselves. He said they are sharply divided by class, and those in the upper class are more likely to vote Republican.

"I think it's no coincidence that evangelicals burst on the political scene right around the same time they were growing rapidly as a segment of the electorate," he said.

Graduate student Ryan Harper said he thought the talk illustrated an energy and unity among young voters this election.

"It's seeing people coming together despite religious affiliations with common beliefs," he said. "It's not necessarily a gap on religious grounds but a generational gap."

Harper said he is a Christian but not an evangelical.

"I celebrate secularists and evangelicals," he said. "There's energy afoot among young voters. That's always a good thing."

Molloy said hearing about how young evangelicals are broadening but not necessarily liberalizing was interesting.

"If they're talking about poverty, they're not necessarily talking about welfare," she said.

Rogers-Dillon said that although the young evangelical influence is small at this point, it represents an important change in the electorate.

"The dynamics we see overall among young evangelicals do reflect an important shift in American politics," she said.

"In this election more than ever there is no evangelical vote," McAlister said, "There are only evangelicals voting."

PHOTO CAPTION: 1. ROGERS-DILLON 2. HOUT