Christian Nationalism in Support for Donald Trump

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ABSTRACT

This literature review aims to understand Donald Trump’s contradictory and overwhelming support from Christians and especially white evangelicals, considering his public display of non-religious behaviors. Further, this literature review explores the association between Christianity and the Republican party throughout America’s political history, drawing on instances such as Proposition 187 and Donald Trump’s travel ban to display that white evangelicals are motivated to support Trump because of their fear of becoming a minority. These ideas are related to Christian nationalistic ideologies, reflecting that a main supporter of Donald Trump is Christian Nationalism. From a sociological understanding, this literature review analyzes how fear is capable of uniting people under views that are discriminatory and nationalistic. It also provides insight into how certain groups are able to stay intertwined throughout history, through the combination of leaders and those who are willing to follow out of fear and reassurance.
INTRODUCTION

The separation of church and state is a phenomenon in American politics that many have discussed and debated for all of America’s history, remaining prevalent even in today’s times. Dating back to America’s beginnings and although not directly pronounced in any documents, the idea that there should be a distinction between that of religion and politics is one that has been brought to the forefront by many historical figures. For example, in 1802, Thomas Jefferson responded to the Danbury Baptist Association’s letter in which they expressed firstly their congruence to his presidential win, but also their fear towards the Connecticut Federalist government’s lack of religious laws. In Jefferson’s response to the association, a “wall of separation between church and state” was argued and introduced, and perhaps remains one of the most prevalent phrases in American history to this day (Dreisbach 1999). Further, while no literal or specific mention of a separation of church and state is discussed in America’s Constitution, the first Amendment in the Bill of Rights states that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof” (Hanley et. al. 2003:12) leading many Americans to the conclusion, or at least assumption, of a separation between religion and politics.

Considering this supposed separation of church and state, it is compelling that Americans continue to disagree on what exactly the founding fathers intended by their indirect yet obvious statements regarding a needed split between religion and politics. Further, it becomes rather important to look at the closeness these two share in the American political system, especially considering this supposed distinction between the two, yet lack of actual separation. In more recent politics, this idea becomes increasingly relevant when looking at the 2016 presidential election of Donald Trump, as well as his continued support throughout his presidency and even
after his loss for reelection in 2020. Although a number of factors ultimately contributed to his success, Christian Nationalism can be viewed as a main contributing factor to his triumph (Baker, Perry, and Whitehead 2020).

To truly understand the relationship Christian Nationalism has in relation to Donald Trump’s support, it is first necessary to understand what Christian Nationalism is. Joseph Baker, Samuel Perry, and Andrew Whitehead (2020) discuss Christian Nationalism as a sort of ideology that advocates for a fusion of Christian and American civic life with a Christian identity and culture. (Baker, Perry, and Whitehead 2020). In other words, Christian Nationalism stands as the idea that the nation of America should be a Christian nation. The ideas of Christian Nationalism in relation to Donald Trump will be explored in this literature review in two ways: firstly, the ways in which Christian Nationalistic ideologies favored Donald Trump, and second, how Donald Trump utilized Christian Nationalistic views to further expand his campaign.

This literature review aims to understand the role that Christian Nationalism played in Donald Trump’s political success, as well as understand why many who identify with Christianity so highly favored Donald Trump’s presidential campaign. Further, an understanding of the phenomenon between Donald Trump’s apparent lack of religiosity yet his high religious following will be looked at. In order to do this, this literature review draws on the idea that there has been an association between Christianity and the Republican party for many years dating back in America’s history, and will look at instances in American political history, including Proposition 187 in 1994 and Donald Trump’s 2017 travel ban. Although it may appear that Donald Trump has united Christianity and politics under his campaign, it will rather be explained how he simply utilized already existing ideas to further his Christian following as the Republican candidate in both the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections.
GOD TALK: THE HIDDEN TIE BETWEEN CHRISTIANITY AND THE REPUBLICAN PARTY

Even with recent elections sparking a lot of obvious relations between religion and politics, it is important to understand that Christianity and the Republican party have been interrelated for a lot longer than since Donald Trump has been a prominent political figure. Among the history of the Republican party and Christianity reoccurs a theme most commonly known as God Talk, or what some authors refer to as Covert Cues. Coined in 2006 by Republican David Kuo, the term God Talk refers to the Republican party’s conscious use of religious ideology and terminology without explicitly stating anything religious. It acts as a coded language of such, as a way to appeal to a certain group of voters. Since no explicit use of language is utilized, God Talk does not simply appeal to one type of person, but it is conducted in such a way that select voters tend to recognize certain cues and are able to make assumptions about the candidate from them (Djupe and Calfano 2014). In the chapter Religious Cues and Electoral Support of their book God Talk, Paul Djupe and Brian Calfano (2014) give examples of republican figures who have used this coded language in the past, including George W. Bush in his 2003 State of the Union Address, in which Bush used multiple references to Christian bible passages without explicitly stating anything religious. For example, in Bush’s speech he says, “I believe in an America that recognizes the worth of every individual, and leaves the ninety-nine to find the one stray lamb” (Djupe and Calfano 2014:46). Although this may sound as simple as a statement of worth about the general American citizen, to those familiar with the bible this reminds them of a classic biblical parable: The Parable of the Lost Sheep.

God Talk is a tactic the Republican party has utilized as a way to sidestep the possibility of coming off as Christian or as having Christian nationalistic ideologies, yet still appealing
towards a generally evangelical group. Moreover, the use of God Talk does not include candidates using political terminology, which similarly allows voters to make assumptions about a running candidate’s political views, furthering the connections amongst Christianity and the Republican party. In other words, “candidates that use God Talk rely on the receiver to infer political attachments” (Djupe and Calfano 2014:46). It is also noteworthy that God Talk is most effective “when an established relationship exists between the group and a political stance, such as that between evangelicals and the Republican party” (Djupe and Calfano 2014:46). Expanding on this idea, God Talk would be much less effective if a tie was being attempted between evangelicals and a candidate in the Democratic party. This understanding of the usage of God Talk by Republican political members can be further related to Donald Trump and his presidential campaigns in both 2016 and 2020, which will be explored in the next section of this literature review.

**EVANGELICAL SUPPORT FOR DONALD TRUMP**

Considering Donald Trump’s exhibition of behaviors that most would view as the opposite of religious, his support from Christian voters since before his time in office to continued support after his election loss in 2020 is fascinating. For example, in a 2016 speech he gave at Liberty University (which, importantly to note, is a Christian University), Donald Trump attempted to quote the “Second Corinthians” but stated instead a quote from what he called the “Two Corinthians” (Whitehead, Perry, and Baker 2018). Further, during another speech he was unable to name a single bible verse when asked which one was his favorite. This evidence seems contradictory then when in fact, 81% of white evangelicals voted for Donald Trump in the 2016 election with only a three percent decrease in the 2020 election, at 79% of white evangelicals giving Trump their vote (Thompson 2022). This leads to the curiosities then of why Donald
Trump’s main support comes from Christians, and can be assessed through a lens considering white evangelicals’ fear of becoming a minority, as well as Donald Trump’s understanding of and usage of this fear as a way to gain support.

Firstly, it is important to consider data that shows where Donald Trump’s support comes from. In a study conducted by the American Trends Panel and explained by Jack Thompson (2022), white evangelicals were compared to other religious groups in assessing three factors addressing their preferences for the president of the United States. These factors included if they consider it important for the president to share their religious beliefs, if the president has strong religious beliefs in general, and if they want a president who will stand up for their religious beliefs. It was found that white evangelicals were 59% more likely to want a president who shares their religious beliefs than those who do not identify as Christian, as well as 62% more likely to want a president who has strong religious beliefs rather than those who do not identify as Christian. In fact, white evangelicals were found to have the highest preferences for elite religiosity than those associated with any other religion. Thompson analyzes this data to show that “elites who frame themselves as being religious are more likely to attract support from highly religious voters” (Thompson 2022:766). This can be applied to Donald Trump who, although not particularly religious himself, has support from white evangelicals considering “many [of the] policies championed by Trump…have sought to further white Christian interests” (Thompson 2022:769). This support system that Trump displays towards Christians overpowers his display of non-Christian actions. However, considering these ideas it is next important to consider why these associations are in place, and a supporting factor of this can be attributed to evangelicals’ fear of becoming a religious minority.

EVIDENCE OF EVANGELICAL’S FEAR OF BECOMING A MINORITY: PROPOSITION
A main cause for Donald Trump’s main support from evangelicals comes from specifically white evangelicals fear that they are becoming a religious minority. Amongst other factors, feelings of cultural anxiety, as well as white Americans’ feeling a threat to their sense of dominant group status (Thompson 2022) was the most significant contributor to Donald Trump’s support. Keep in mind that this expands ideas of Christian Nationalism to the idea of White Christian Nationalism.

In order to understand this fear amongst white evangelicals as well as examine plausible causes of it, we can first look at and analyze Proposition 187, a ballot initiative in California from 1994 that denied certain services such as welfare and medical care to undocumented immigrants. Although this proposition was ultimately declared unconstitutional, analyzing responses in support of the ballot by Christian leaders can allow insight into the idea that fear of becoming a minority is a constant among evangelicals, and can later be associated with this same fear in support for Donald Trump. Among public Christian support for Proposition 187 was Reverend Lou Sheldon, the leader of thousands of conservative evangelical churches in Anaheim, California. Reverend Sheldon argued that “Biblical commands to welcome the ‘sojourner’ referred only to hospitality toward people passing through one’s land and did not include taking newcomers into the community” (Alexander 2022:7). Further, support for Proposition 187 came from Reverend Jim Baize, a leader of the Midway Baptist Church near San Diego. He claimed that Proposition 187 “was appropriate since the Bible says people are ‘not to steal’ or ‘not take what doesn’t belong to us’” (Alexander 2022:7). While research trends show evidence that immigration enhances the economy, many Christian supporters of Proposition 187 believed that undocumented immigrants were taking resources away from them.
On the other side of this support, however, were a majority of Christians and Christian leaders who denied support for Proposition 187, naming it as “racist, xenophobic…cruel, and inhospitable” (Alexander 2022:8). Other Christian leaders provided evidence towards the bible supporting acceptance of immigrants, even stating that Mary and Joseph, Jesus’s parents, were in fact themselves refugees (Rother 1994 and Alexander 2022). Further, and most importantly, three bishops from California-evangelical Lutheran Churches in America “described the initiative [for support for Proposition 187] as being rooted in fear” (Alexander 2022:8). It can be noted that those who supported Proposition 187 did so out of economic fears, and views that can be associated with Christian Nationalistic ideas, including racist and xenophobic ideas. The support shown from Christian leaders, as well as many evangelicals following of these leaders, were rooted in economic fears including racist and xenophobic views. However, economic fear was pronounced the strongest, as these groups did not want to appear as being racist or xenophobic.

EVIDENCE OF EVANGELICAL’S FEAR OF BECOMING A MINORITY: TRUMP’S TRAVEL BAN

According to the polling organization Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI), by 2017, 61% of white evangelical American Christians supported a temporary ban on Muslims entering the U.S. Further, according to the Pew Research Center, Donald Trump’s travel ban had a 76% approval among white evangelical Protestants (Alexander 2022). Similar to Proposition 187, there were members of the Catholic clergy who made statements showing support for the travel ban, including a priest from New Jersey and a pastor in Ohio who stated that they were “worried about Muslims coming to the United States in any significant number (Brunius 2017). Other Christian leaders showed their support by expressing national security concerns, saying that
the travel ban was a “pause button” on countries that threaten America’s security. Others further claimed that although Christians are “called to help those in need, the president of the country does not have the same responsibility to show hospitality” (Alexander 2022:10). These Christian leaders believe that Trump was simply protecting Americans and American law. However, similar to Proposition 187, it is important to understand that the travel ban had no effect on national security, and that, also similar to Proposition 187, white evangelicals’ fear of immigration is reflective of their fear of becoming a minority.

CONNECTING PROPOSITION 187 AND THE TRAVEL BAN TO CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM

To fully understand the connection between these ideas, it is necessary to recall the definition of Christian Nationalism from Baker et. al. (2020) in which they define Christian Nationalism as an ideology that advocates for a fusion of Christian and American civic life with a Christian identity and culture. This understanding of Christian Nationalism can be analyzed in relation to Proposition 187 and the travel ban, as Christian Nationalism promotes an idea, and has for centuries, that America should be a Christian nation. This is significant considering that Christian nationalism adopts the idea that America should be a Christian nation, where white Americans typically hold a dominant group status. Considering Trump’s travel ban and discriminatory views and actions, as well as looking at correlations between the travel ban and Proposition 187, it becomes evident how this fear of becoming a minority, which is associated with Christian Nationalistic views, were the strongest supporting factor for voting for Donald Trump.

Although slightly mentioned before, it is also important to note Donald Trump’s campaigning, which was composed of and laced with Christian ideas and religious terminology.
While Trump has explicitly stated biblical phrases during speeches, he also utilized his understanding of white evangelicals’ fear of becoming a minority as a tactic to gain support from this specific group of people. He advertised that the United States is ultimately losing its Christian heritage, playing to the public the idea that something must be done to protect America’s Christian roots (Whitehead, Perry, and Baker 2018). This explains how, even with Trump’s lack of knowledge about Christianity as well as his anti-religious actions, evangelicals still decided to show him support, considering his support and advertisement that their fear of becoming a minority is real and will be protected in office by him. Christian nationalistic views, in direct association with fear of becoming a minority, were utilized by Donald Trump to gain support from an already highly religious and fearful group.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

This literature review discussed the role that Christian Nationalism played in Donald Trump’s support and success, building off of the idea that white evangelicals are fearful of becoming a minority. To do this, more recent as well as historical events were assessed and analyzed, and ultimately aided in understanding that many evangelicals are fearful of becoming a minority. Donald Trump successfully utilized this fear in order to gain support, as well as show support of Christian nationalistic ideologies. This literature review understood that Christianity and the Republican party have been related for a large amount of America’s history and looked at instances throughout this history where the Republican party has implemented subtle yet effective Christian and Christian nationalistic views into its agenda. While the understanding that Christianity and the Republican party was evident in most sources, limitations include no specific statement of this relationship within peer reviewed databases.
REFERENCES


