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Religion and Politics in the 2016 Election: A Stakeholder Analysis

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Table of Contents

- I. Introduction
- II. Central Research Question
- III. Hypotheses and Observable Implications
- IV. Methodology
- V. Historical Analysis
- VI. Key Stances
- VII. 2016 Election Stakeholder Analysis
- VIII. Major Takeaways & Concluding Remarks
- IX. References

Introduction

The 2016 Presidential Election was one of the most contentious presidential contests in American history. Deciding between Donald J. Trump and Hillary Clinton wound up as a battle of ideology and character not seen in decades. While Clinton was the front-runner at the beginning of her campaign, then-candidate Trump was ridiculed on television daily with many political commentators not taking his candidacy seriously. As months went on, many Republicans began direct attacks on Trump, including candidates Ted Cruz and Jeb Bush. These attacks were mostly on President Trump's character and past behavior, which top Republicans considered "unchristian."¹ This concept of unchristianity opens the conversation about what Christianity or any other religious group thought of Trump.

Some called it "one of the prime paradoxes of the 2016 election."² In other words, how could a religious person support a candidate who "flaunted his adultery, praised Planned Parenthood and admitted to never asking for God's forgiveness?"³ Many faith leaders eventually supported Trump, but they did not start out by doing so. For example, Ted Cruz appeared to be the original religious front-runner on the right. Over the course of the election, however, religious and political leaders started to give into the idea that Trump would become the nominee and ultimately represent the Republican Party. Some chose to endorse Trump outright; others chose to endorse Clinton instead or to remain silent for the election. That being said, the evolution of choice of candidate on religious grounds begs the question of how religious leaders made the determination to support a candidate. How the decision was made and how it shifted

¹ Gabriel, T. (2016, February 27). *Donald Trump, Despite Impieties, Wins Hearts of Evangelical Voters*. The New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/28/us/politics/donald-trump-despite-impieties-wins-hearts-of-evangelical-voters.html?_r=0.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

over time is of special significance to understand the role religion plays in politics and the role politics plays in religion. Of utmost importance, however, is attempting to resolve this paradox of religious groups supporting non-religious or anti-religious candidates. This article seeks an answer by tracing the choices of three faiths—Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism—from the 2016 election back to the origins of their involvement in politics in America.

Central Research Question

What motivated religious groups to support or oppose a candidate in the 2016 Presidential Election?

Hypotheses and Observable Implications

Hypothesis: Religious groups were willing to forgo their beliefs and morals in order to promote their policy agendas, and 2016 was the best evidence of that yet.

- Implication 1: Protestants saw Trump as a better figure to push forward their policy agenda rather than Clinton.
- Implication 2: Jews, Catholics, and Protestants would have voted for an unchristian candidate like Trump in larger numbers than usual.

Methodology

In order to answer the research question, the best level of analysis is at the faith level. Christianity, Judaism, and Catholicism together make up the three faiths that hold the most influence over politics in America. Renowned sociologist Will Herberg set one of the standards of religious study at the national level to include each of these three faiths because the United

States is what many academics call a Tri-Faith nation. Herberg outlines as such in his book “Protestant–Catholic–Jew” written in 1955. These three faiths are also the three traditions that spend the most money for political action committees (PACs), lobbying, and direct support of candidates in recent elections. Demographically, Protestants make up 43% of America, Catholics at 20%, and Judaism at 2%.⁴ Christianity as a whole still makes up roughly 65% of people in the US as of 2019. These Abrahamic traditions share many political characteristics in common, but they also have many differences in (1) political positions during the 2016 election, (2) abilities to affect the political process, (3) final assessments of the 2016 election. To be clear, each religious group either in an organized or unorganized fashion has participated in the political process for decades in the United States.

Taking a look at these three major differences, this paper aims to analyze what cost-benefit calculation went into political decision-making, and what stakes were involved for each religious group. We assert that the religious voter first takes into account their religious and political beliefs, then conducts a cost-benefit calculation of each political candidate, and ultimately chooses a candidate as seen in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1: Stakeholder Analysis Framework

⁴ *In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace*. Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project. (2020, June 9). <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>.



To investigate the difference in decision-making for each of the three major groups and in the aim of discovering the motivations of religious groups in politics, this paper conducts a stakeholder analysis based on modern political history and the 2016 election. This stakeholder analysis involves defining the relevant actors, understanding the context they are operating under, and observing what risks and rewards would come from backing any particular candidate. In this case, the relevant actors are religious groups, loosely defined, under their umbrella terms of Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish. For context, the paper first gives a brief overview of each religious group's history with politics in the US and then constructs a model for political decision-making for each religious group in how they came to their consensus candidate.

Historical Analysis

Protestants

Arguably the oldest influence on American politics is the Protestant tradition. Made up of over 200 denominations in the US and around 45,000 denominations worldwide, Protestantism traces its American roots back to the very foundation of the country, which is why it is the most important for the sake of this analysis.⁵ First of all, there's an important distinction between the different types of Protestants, with Evangelical Protestants generally more conservative and mainline Protestants more liberal. While the story of mainline Protestantism plays an important role in the history of Christianity in the United States, Evangelicals vote for candidates as a supermajority together and therefore are of special importance.

In 2018, religious scholar and truly an expert on religion and politics John Fea wrote *Believe Me: The Evangelical Road to Donald Trump*. This book lays the groundwork for answering the paper's central research question when Fea roots Protestantism and Politics back to the times of pilgrims and puritans, seeking to purify the Church of England and building a society of their own. Almost every American president was a Christian Protestant. Countless Senators, Congressmen, Judges, and other political leaders have come from one of the hundreds of denominations of Protestantism. When holding 51% of all Americans in 2009, Protestantism still thrives in modern America as well.⁶

⁵ Coffey, D. (2021, February 27). *Why does Christianity have so many denominations?* LiveScience. <https://www.livescience.com/christianity-denominations.html#:~:text=Pentecostal%2C%20Presbyterian%2C%20Lutheran%2C%20Baptist,the%20Study%20of%20Global%20Christianity>.

⁶ Fea, J. (2020). *Believe Me: The Evangelical Road to Donald Trump*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

Religious scholar and the author of *Religion and the Culture Wars* John Green summarized the normative expectation of politics and religion for Protestant and Evangelical voters: “One belief is that the Bible is inerrant. It was without error in all of its claims about the nature of the world and the nature of God.” One would expect, therefore, that the political behavior of such an Evangelical person would be to vote in line with the Bible, including the infallibility of things like the Golden Rule or the Beatitudes, or any other teachings from Jesus about behavior. Political candidates Evangelicals vote for under this premise would have to be most in line with a Christ-like figure, someone with Christian character, although they don’t necessarily have to be Christian. A good example of that was Ronald Reagan, where Protestants came out in tremendous support for him even though he had a shaky history with conservatism coming from his background as an actor in California. Reagan did an excellent job of campaigning to Protestant voters and convincing them that he had the public and God’s interest at heart.

Fea’s *Believe Me*, however, talks about how Evangelical voters have transitioned from entirely voting for Christ-like individuals to political strongmen who can get the job done. This incredible analysis of political Machiavellianism describes the religious voter’s struggle to decide between the older Christian character and the new strongman politics models, Fea understands that the Evangelical vote is rapidly changing from the early 20th century towards candidates who do not match the traditional profile. He argues recent decades have been the best example of that yet, with 2016 as the prime election. Strongman politics means choosing a political strongman, or sometimes in Christian terminology a political *Messiah*, to get a policy agenda done. The main reason for this was the big shift that happened in the 20th century, where changes like *Roe v. Wade*, the divorce revolution, the psychology revolution, removal of school

prayer, etc. which were all major challenges to the traditional way of life that Evangelicals and Protestants knew and loved. Selecting a strongman who promised to reverse *Roe* or end illegal immigration became the most attractive candidates, independent of their moral fortitude.

An additional problematic element of the Evangelical voting patterns is that they are predominantly white, dislike immigrants, and think that liberal America is changing the country for the worse. When taking into account race, evangelicalism can often dwell into the realm of what Fea calls “evangelical white fear.” Among many of its areas, one of the most prevalent is the fear of immigrants coming from strange countries or from those with a different skin color invading the nation. Over the course of the 20th century from the passing of anti-immigration laws to gerrymandering and Jim Crow, evangelical white fear permeated throughout the 50 states. When it came to actually voting in the ballot box, Fea writes, “fear is so dangerous because it usually stems from legitimate concerns shared by a significant portion of the voting population.”⁷ Protestant politicians and church leaders used the idea of fear to push a predominantly conservative agenda. White fear did not stop there, however.

In the second half of the 20th century, there was a specific individual who made it his mission to combine the religious right with the Republican Party. Jerry Falwell Sr. created a political “playbook” that is still being used today as the religious right’s agenda in state and federal government. He founded an organization called the Moral Majority in 1979 to carry out this agenda, creating alliances with important political and religious leaders to advocate for conservative issues. Talking about the Moral Majority, Fea writes it was:

⁷ Ibid.

“[A]n organization designed to raise money for conservative politicians, to encourage people of faith to seize power in the federal government, and to rid the country of pornography, abortion, and homosexuality. They fought against communism, socialism, and all forms of big government and sought to restore America to its Christian roots.”

Continuing on the rhetoric of white evangelical fear, Falwell made sure that the religious right ought to promote his agenda or else they were not fearing the “proper conclusion” when Jesus Christ returns to Earth. Falwell searched for political messiahs who could deliver his agenda independent of the moral cost. This messianic thought would go through each presidential candidate that the religious right endorsed, but most clearly Donald Trump in 2016. The concept of a political messiah is not a new one, but it is especially important when the second coming of Jesus Christ is integral to one’s conservative beliefs.

The groundbreaking documentary “Reversing Roe” (2019) offers a unique perspective into how the Falwell Playbook panned out after the landmark Supreme Court case that effectively legalized abortion in the United States. When it became evident the Supreme Court would be the only avenue to reverse abortion legalization, the religious right united with the Catholic Church and other pro-life groups to put conservative judges on federal benches. In other words, Falwell insisted that Republican Presidents appoint pro-life Supreme Court Justices.

The abortion issue and many other controversial topics support the theory that the Republican Party and the religious right became one and the same, although that was not the case in earlier periods of American history. That said, Guth et. al (1996) illustrated that by the 1980’s, evangelical preachers, ministers, and leaders were “overwhelmingly conservative and Republican” whereas mainline Protestants had larger swaths of Democrats. When Obama ran for

President, Protestants were faced with another important period of reflection and contemplation in deciding which candidate to choose. The major pushback was that “Obama’s biracialism, single-parent upbringing, and global experiences made him a poster child for the demographic changes taking place in the country.”⁸ If white evangelical fear ever meant anything to the religious right, it definitely came up in the 2008 and 2012 general Presidential elections. Thus, we have constructed the relevant context required to see the religious and political components Protestants included in their calculations when deciding a candidate in 2016. The conversation now turns to Catholics and Jews.

***Side Note:** It is important to stress that the religious right or the Republican Party are not a monolithic block of voters. The Republican Party has changed a lot in recent years. For example, the Pew Research Center found that the percentage of Republicans “less likely to support a gay or lesbian candidate for president” has gone from 62% to 38% from 2007 to 2016.⁹ The focus of this portion of the paper is simply to describe the increasing binding between the religious right and the Republican Party.

Catholicism

The story of Catholicism in US politics comes mostly from anti-Catholic sentiment and members of the Catholic Church holding powerful elected and federal offices. From a normative perspective, Catholicism’s rules and beliefs are handed from the Pope in the Vatican all the way down to individual parishes and church communities. This hierarchical structure makes it easier

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Masci, D. (2020, May 30). *Faith and Politics in the 2016 Presidential Race*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/01/27/key-findings-faith-and-politics-in-2016-presidential-race/>.

to see how the Catholic Church, as an official entity, relates to religion and politics in the US. For example, since 1892 the Church has promoted the principle of “subsidiarity.” Pope Pius XI in Catholic Social Teaching defined this principle by stating it is “a grave evil and disturbance of right order to assign to a greater and higher association what lesser and subordinate organizations can do.”¹⁰ Pope John Paul II expanded this concept to how the government should operate, stating the Catholic Church “insists on necessary limits to the State's intervention” and that government operations should be as decentralized as possible.

When discussing modern partisan politics, the Republican and Libertarian parties often include principles of subsidiarity in their national agenda. Therefore, one might expect the context of subsidiarity and other elements of Catholic Social Teaching to influence the Catholic vote in the direction of conservatism. Like with Protestants, abortion has also been a huge part of Catholic politics, where the Church vehemently opposes the legalization of abortion. Of course, that has not always been the case. Catholics have and continue to vote in large numbers for liberal candidates, with the Catholic vote generally split half and half in Presidential elections for Republican or Democrat candidates (Pew Research Center, 2016).

That said, Catholics have also often been demonized in American politics. From the Know-Nothing Party, the Ku Klux Klan, to Members of Congress and Presidents, there have been major attempts to promote anti-Catholic legislation and policies in the country against the “popery” that any Catholic politician would engage in. When John F. Kennedy was running for President in 1960, this conversation came back to the forefront of American society. In more

¹⁰ Wright, K. S. (2017, February). *The principles of Catholic social teaching: A guide for decision making from daily clinical encounters to national policy-making*. The Linacre quarterly. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5375653/>.

recent years, however, rhetoric about “popery” or anti-Catholicism has mostly dissipated from the forefront of the political agenda.

Judaism

To begin the conversation about Judaism in politics, it is important to understand the different types in the US. Orthodox, Conservative, or Reform Jews have differing opinions on some fundamental issues about politics. That said, Jews vote about 7 in 10 for Democrats, peaking at 79% for presidential candidate Al Gore in 2000 (Pew Research Center, 2016).

Like Catholics, Jews in the United States come mostly from waves of immigration much later than members of the Protestant tradition. Anti-immigration sentiments combined with widespread anti-semitism has greatly impacted the Jewish vote in the US. Even at the end of the 20th century, anti-semitism was seeing a comeback in the United States. To the Jewish people, anti-semitism and anti-zionism often go hand-in-hand. The implications for the 20th Century in American politics therefore became promoting and defending Israel, while supporting political candidates who did the same. For example, President Truman in 1948 became the first leader to recognize Israel as a legitimate country (Reuters).

To date, however, there have been no Jewish presidents and very few members of the Jewish community in the House or Senate. While making up only around 2% of the population, Judaism joins Catholicism in holding many more seats in Congress than their proportional equivalencies. That being said, there appears to be a sharp divide between the majority of Jewish-Americans and the more right-wing minority. While most of the analysis in this paper has focused on majorities in the three faiths, politically conservative Jewish-American have a very important role in American politics. The late Jewish billionaire Sheldon Adelson is a prime

example, as he would donate millions each election cycle to see a Republican candidate elected to office. This provides one insight that will be discussed further on about the division between religion and personal beliefs.

Key Stances

So far, this paper has given a broad overview of considerations that religious groups and individuals hold when voting in elections. This historical, ideological, and dogmatic context highlights just how complicated one's vote can be when deciding which candidate to choose. One additional element to be explored, therefore, is the key stances passed down from the three faiths to their followers. While the Catholic Church holds official positions on controversial issues, Judaism and Protestantism do not have a united front on every subject. That being said, Table 1 illustrates some of the other considerations a religious voter would have to take into account when selecting a candidate who supports or opposes issues their religion is passionate about. The table reflects multiple sources' understanding of the Tri-Faith's positions leading up to and through the 2016 election.

TABLE 1

Issue	Key Stances		
	Protestantism	Catholicism	Judaism
Gay Marriage	Mainline / Evangelical Split	Officially Opposed	Traditionally Opposed but Mix Support
Abortion	Mainline / Evangelical Split	Officially Opposed	Somewhat Support ¹¹
Israel	Mainline / Evangelical Split ¹²	Generally Support ¹³	Generally Support
Transgenderism	Mainline / Evangelical Split	Officially Opposed	Generally Support ¹⁴
Immigration	Mainline / Evangelical Split ¹⁵	Generally Liberal ¹⁶	Majority Liberal ¹⁷

The 2016 Election Stakeholder Analysis

¹¹ Schnell, L. (2019, July 28). *Jews, outraged by restrictive abortion laws, are invoking the Hebrew Bible in the debate*. USA Today. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2019/07/24/abortion-laws-jewish-faith-teaches-life-does-not-start-conception/1808776001/>.

¹² *Israel: Catholics and the Jewish people? Are we into Replacement Theology?* Israel: What do Catholics believe about the Jewish people? Are Catholics into Replacement Theology? (2021). <https://www.catholicbridge.com/catholic/replacement-theology.php>.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ *Stances of Faiths on LGBTQ Issues: Reform Judaism*. HRC. (2021). <https://www.hrc.org/resources/stances-of-faiths-on-lgbt-issues-reform-judaism>.

¹⁵ Melkonian-Hoover, R. (2019). *Populists or Internationalists? Evangelical Tribes and Globalization*. Public Justice Review. https://cpjustice.org/uploads/Melkonian-Hoover_FINAL.pdf.

¹⁶ *Catholic Church's Position on Immigration Reform*. USCCB. (2021). <https://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/immigration/churchteachingonimmigrationreform>.

¹⁷ Kampeas, R., & Baur, J. (2020, November 3). *For most American Jews, immigration looms large in the voting booth - and they don't like what Trump has done*. Jewish Telegraphic Agency. <https://www.jta.org/2020/11/03/politics/for-american-jews-immigration-looms-large-in-the-voting-booth-and-they-dont-like-what-trump-has-done>.

The 2016 Presidential Election saw stupefying levels of campaign fundraising, special interest spending, political commentary, and overall divisiveness. When the time finally came for each American voter to go into the ballot box and cast their vote in 2016, how much did religion play a factor in that decision? If religion played a significant role, Catholics, Protestants, and Jews were essentially deciding who was the lesser of two evils. Under normative expectations, Catholics, Protestants, and Jews would vote for the candidate most in line with their closely-held values. Since all religions share the Golden Rule of treating others like one would like to be treated, it would be expected that religious individuals would vote against those who violate the Rule. The historical and religious context begs the question of just how much people still cared about their core religious values in 2016. From this paper's methodology, we assert that the religious voter took into account their historical and ideological context, weighed the risks and rewards of a candidate, and then ultimately selected a candidate. In a first-pass analysis, the Pew Research Center offers excellent insight into religious affiliation and politics in the 2016 Election as seen in Table 2 and Figure 2. Table 2 is not broken down by religious affiliation, but rather gives insight into religion and politics in the 2010s. For the disconnect between voting for values vs. voting for a strongman, the important parts to highlight include the Republican figure where 81% of Republicans think religion is very important in their life, and 47% believe in absolute standards for right and wrong.

TABLE 2

Landscape Questions ¹⁸	Democrat / Lean	Republican / Lean
Belief in God (Absolutely	76%	90%

¹⁸ *Religion in America: U.S. Religious Data, Demographics and Statistics*. Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project. (2020, September 9). <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/party-affiliation/>.

Certain & Fairly Certain)		
Importance of Religion in One's Life (Very Important)	47%	81%
Belief in Absolute Standards for Right and Wrong (There are clear standards for right and wrong)	23%	47%
Belief in General Standards (Right or wrong depends on the situation)	75%	50%

FIGURE 2: Presidential Vote by Religious Affiliation and Select Races

Presidential vote by religious affiliation and race

	2000		2004		2008		2012		2016		Dem change '12-'16
	Gore	Bush	Kerry	Bush	Obama	McCain	Obama	Romney	Clinton	Trump	
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	
Protestant/other Christian	42	56	40	59	45	54	42	57	39	58	-3
Catholic	50	47	47	52	54	45	50	48	45	52	-5
White Catholic	45	52	43	56	47	52	40	59	37	60	-3
Hispanic Catholic	65	33	65	33	72	26	75	21	67	26	-8
Jewish	79	19	74	25	78	21	69	30	71	24	+2
Other faiths	62	28	74	23	73	22	74	23	62	29	-12
Religiously unaffiliated	61	30	67	31	75	23	70	26	68	26	-2
White, born-again/evangelical Christian	n/a	n/a	21	78	24	74	21	78	16	81	-5
Mormon	n/a	n/a	19	80	n/a	n/a	21	78	25	61	+4

Note: "Protestant" refers to people who described themselves as "Protestant," "Mormon" or "other Christian" in exit polls; this categorization most closely approximates the exit poll data reported immediately after the election by media sources. The "white, born-again/evangelical Christian" row includes both Protestants and non-Protestants (e.g., Catholics, Mormons, etc.) who self-identify as born-again or evangelical Christians.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of exit poll data. 2004 Hispanic Catholic estimates come from aggregated state exit polls conducted by the National Election Pool. Other estimates come from Voter News Service/National Election Pool national exit polls. 2012 data come from reports at NBCnews.com and National Public Radio. 2016 data come from reports at NBCnews.com and CNN.com.

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SOURCE: Pew Research Center, 2016

From this data, Catholics and Protestants voted for Trump at a rate of 52% and 58% respectively. Evangelicals, on the other hand, voted for Trump at 81%. Jews voted for Clinton 71% to Trump's 24%. For anyone who lived through the 2016 election, this table makes sense according to the polls of the time. That being said, there is a very obvious disconnect between voting by values and voting by political agenda. Headline after headline in 2016 questioned how it was possible, but these election results confirm Fea's earlier suspicion that America is increasingly voting for political messiahs or strongmen as opposed to those who fall most in line with religious values. Catholics were conflicted in their vote while Evangelicals and Jews had two-thirds or higher supermajorities. The reasoning behind those supermajorities, or even the Catholic divide, is a fascinating yet puzzling component of constructing a stakeholder analysis.

Another important finding from the data was the change in vote from 2012 to 2016. The 'Other faiths' category and Catholics saw the biggest swing in votes over to the Republican Party from 2012 to 2016, with a 12% and 5% change respectively. Pundits in 2016 attributed this change to a variety of reasons, but this paper argues that such changes can be explained in part or in whole by the increasing trend to vote for a political strongman, which Trump prided himself on.

Protestantism

We begin to breakdown each of the three faith's decision-making with Protestants and Evangelicals. Following the stakeholder analysis model, this is the point in which each religious individual made a cost-benefit calculation of backing a particular candidate. The benefits come from pushing forward a favorable policy agenda, while the costs are either negative policies or

setbacks in normative expectations of what one might hope a President to behave like. For Evangelicals, the benefits Trump could provide outweighed the costs.

A study of religious trends in the 2010s, Guth (2019), reaffirmed an earlier finding from decades ago that asserts Evangelical clergy are majority Republican and mainline Protestant clergy are majority Democrat. These clergymen give out political endorsements that hold influence over their congregation. Trump originally did not receive support from such conservative leaders.¹⁹ Senator Ted Cruz, Dr. Ben Carson, and Senator Marco Rubio all pandered significantly more to the evangelical and religious right in the first few months of the Republican primary, with tremendous success. Both Cruz and Rubio held several campaign rallies targeting evangelical voters across the Bible Belt. As Trump's rhetoric about building a wall to keep out immigration and his many other stances started to take hold, Evangelicals began gravitating towards him. Gregg Keller, a former leader at the Faith and Freedom Coalition sums up the Protestant viewpoint perfectly when stating they "are taking a look at Trump and saying he's not with me on all these issues, but the overall larger imperative for us is to tear down this system that has not served us for a very long time."²⁰ In this instance, "all these issues" refers to Christianity and Christ-like characteristics. Keller understands the stakeholder calculation Protestants made and outlines how they ultimately got Trump into the White House. Trump was not the superhero figure of everyone's childhood, but he was the man who could get the job done.

¹⁹ Guth, J. L. (2019). Are White Evangelicals Populists? The View from the 2016 American National Election Study. *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 17(3), 20–35. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2019.1643991>

²⁰ Gabriel, T. (2016, February 27). *Donald Trump, Despite Impieties, Wins Hearts of Evangelical Voters*. The New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/28/us/politics/donald-trump-despite-impieties-wins-hearts-of-evangelical-voters.html?_r=0.

When the final evaluation came for Protestants to select their candidate, Clinton did not seem much better on face value after the email-scandal and “making virtually no effort to court evangelical voters.”²¹ Because of this, Clinton carried marginal support from evangelicals through the general. To her benefit, Clinton did well with mainline Protestants such as the United Methodist Church, while Senator Bernie Sanders did better with “Mennonite, LCMS, and RCA Democrats.”²²

Catholicism

The Catholic vote, narrowly split as it was, underwent a similar process as the Protestants and Evangelicals. Given the ideological and religious preferences of a Catholic’s background, that religious individual had to back a candidate and make a decision come Election Day. The Catholic Church does not endorse presidential candidates publicly, but the Church did provide ample signaling for guidance throughout the election. On July 1st of 2016, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Office of General Counsel (USCCB-OGC) issued a report called “Political Activity and Lobbying Guidelines for Catholic Organizations” due to the tremendously controversial nature of the presidential election.²³ In other words, the USCCB understood just how difficult it was for Catholics to move forward in the election and remain calm. Around the same time period, Pope Francis in the Vatican released a statement saying, “A person who thinks only about building walls, wherever they may be, and not building bridges is

²¹ Fea, J. (2020). *Believe Me: The Evangelical Road to Donald Trump*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

²² Guth, J., & Schmidt, C. (2019). Annual Meeting of the Southern Political Science Association. In *Protestant Clergy in the 2016 Presidential Election*. Austin, TX; Southern Political Science Association.

²³ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. (2016, July 1). *Political Activity and Lobbying Guidelines for Catholic Organizations*. Washington, D.C.

not Christian.” and “This is not in the Gospel.”²⁴ If the Pope holds any sway over Catholics in America, certainly this was a signal of Trump’s un-Christianity. Was this the Pope’s endorsement of Hillary Clinton, even though she was the candidate who supported abortion? Clearly the statement was anti-Trump, and yet Catholics voted for Trump at a rate of 52%. Therefore for Catholics as well, the cost-benefit calculation of the stakes leaned in Trump’s direction and they believed Trump’s benefits outweighed any moral or political costs.

Judaism

The Jewish community voted largely the way they have in previous elections, finding Hillary Clinton as the consensus candidate receiving 50% or more of the ballots cast. To reiterate, the Jewish community has a contrast between the majority of its members and the right-wing minority. Roughly 7 in 10 Jews in the United States support the Democrat Party either outright or leaning towards the Party.²⁵

The subgroup of Orthodox Judaism, on the other hand, identified as 57% Republican with the remainder as Democrat or no preference.²⁶ One quite famous right-wing Jewish businessman, the late casino-mogul Sheldon Adelson, was paramount to the success of Donald Trump in 2016. He single-handedly spent \$82 million in the 2016 election and held the record

²⁴ White, C. (2020, October 27). *New bipartisan super PAC ad highlights Catholic opposition to Trump's reelection*. National Catholic Reporter. <https://www.ncronline.org/news/people/new-bipartisan-super-pac-ad-highlights-catholic-opposition-trumps-reelection>.

²⁵ *Jewish American's Social and Political Views*. Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project. (2020, May 30). <https://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/chapter-6-social-and-political-views/>.

²⁶ Ibid.

for most money spent by an individual ever when he donated in 2020 at \$172 million.²⁷ Adelson and right-wing Jewish groups often found members of the Republican Party to support Israel, and many candidates they support are white, born-again Evangelical Christians. For example, televangelist and pastor John Hagee founded the Christians United for Israel, which signaled to many the alliance between the Evangelical and Jewish religious right.²⁸ For Orthodox and right-wing Jews in 2016, their clear candidate to promote their policy agenda was Donald Trump.

For the Jewish community more broadly, however, the story is quite the opposite. Like the Catholic or Protestant vote, the Jewish vote is very important for any aspiring presidential candidate. J.J. Goldberg's *Inside the American Jewish Establishment* states, "The New York offices of the American Jewish Committee and the Anti-Defamation League have become obligatory stops for presidents and prime ministers."²⁹

The 2016 election was no different, but with one candidate having a much bumpier road than the other. Donald Trump was supported by several groups who hold anti-semitic views. These endorsements were mixed with other negative events in the campaign cycle. At an event in December 2015, Trump made a comment about not wanting to take the money of Jewish fundraisers there, and he joked that everyone in the audience wanted to cut a deal with him. David Duke, the former KKK Grand Wizard, endorsed Trump. The presidential candidate did not originally disavow or condemn Duke, which faced significant backlash in the Jewish community. Trump also held back on condemning anti-semitic comments against journalist Julia

²⁷ *Adelsons give big to GOP super PACs, setting new donation record*. OpenSecrets News. (2020, October 21). <https://www.opensecrets.org/news/2020/10/adelsons-set-new-donation-record/>.

²⁸ NPR. (2006, September 18). *Pastor John Hagee on Christian Zionism*. NPR. <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=6097362>.

²⁹ Goldberg, J. J. (n.d.). *Jewish Power: Inside the American Jewish Establishment*. The Washington Post. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/books/chap1/jewishpower.htm>.

Ioffe, a scandal which also involved Trump's wife Melania. Lastly, Trump promoted the America First agenda, which many in the Jewish community saw as America isolationism similar to that which delayed our involvement in World War I and II.³⁰ Thus the election results were not surprising with the Jewish community as a whole, which voted 71% for Clinton. Out of the three faiths being analyzed, Judaism was the only tradition that pulled Clinton out of the cost-benefit calculation. Regardless of Adelson or other right-wing Jewish positions on Zionism, the Jewish community voted in favor of Clinton and other Democratic candidates who are not the most Zionistic figures in the United States.

Tri-Faith in 2016 Summary

In summation, we come back to the process of how a religious group, or more importantly a religious individual, made that key decision to support a candidate in 2016. They weighed the context of their religion and personal beliefs, the stakes involved, and the candidates they had to choose from. For some groups, supporting Trump or Clinton meant huge strides in potential policy gains. For the religious right, Trump was the perfect candidate for ideas of traditional marriage, anti-immigration, anti-transgenderism, and other right-wing beliefs. For the religious left, Clinton held opposite beliefs and sought to continue if not augment the policies in place under the Obama Administration. Each side of the religious aisle felt threatened at the potential stakes of electing the other's candidate. And thus Table 3 provides a final summation and some examples of Political Action Committees and key issues each religious group in this analysis held in the 2016 Presidential Election.

³⁰ Heilman, U. (2016, June 2). *Donald Trump's anti-Semitism controversies: A timeline*. The Times of Israel. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/donald-trumps-anti-semitism-controversies-a-timeline/>.

TABLE 3

Source ³¹	Protestantism	Catholicism	Judaism
Consensus Candidate (50% or greater)	Trump	Trump	Clinton
Sample of PACs	Keep the Promise PAC ³² , United in Purpose ³³	CatholicVote.org, Catholics Count, Not Our Faith PAC*	JStreetPAC, Republican Jewish Coalition, American Israel Public Affairs Committee, American Jewish Committee
Key Issues	Abortion, LGBTQ, Transgender, Immigration, Big Government	Abortion, Immigration, Human Rights, Subsidiarity, LGBTQ, Transgender	Anti-Semitism, Zionism, Israel-Palestine, Combating BDS Act of 2016, H.R. 318

*Founded in 2020, included as example³⁴

Major Takeaways & Concluding Remarks

³¹ Martínez, J., & Smith, G. A. (2020, August 27). *How the faithful voted: A preliminary 2016 analysis*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/09/how-the-faithful-voted-a-preliminary-2016-analysis/>.

³² Glueck, K. (2015, September 9). *Prominent evangelical taking over pro-Cruz super PAC*. POLITICO. <https://www.politico.com/story/2015/09/ted-cruz-2016-super-pac-david-barton-213460>.

³³ Fang, L. (2020, May 23). *Inside the Influential Evangelical Group Mobilizing to Reelect Trump*. The Intercept. <https://theintercept.com/2020/05/23/coronavirus-evangelical-megachurch-trump/>.

³⁴ White, C. (2020, October 27). *New bipartisan super PAC ad highlights Catholic opposition to Trump's reelection*. National Catholic Reporter. <https://www.ncronline.org/news/people/new-bipartisan-super-pac-ad-highlights-catholic-opposition-trumps-reelection>.

Affirming the original hypothesis, there is a major disconnect between voting by one's faith and voting by one's political agenda. To be clear, the old game is gone. Spirituality in politics in the traditional understanding is decaying. For Evangelicals, voting for Trump was placed above any problems they may have had with his character or background. For Catholics, they were faced between someone denounced by Pope Francis and someone who supports anti-Catholic policies like abortion. And for Jews, even with their positions on Israel and Zionism they still continue to vote for Democrats who are not the most Zionist political figures. Religion just doesn't have the grasp it did in recent decades.

On the other hand, religion and politics still incredibly intermingled, hence the correlation between religious affiliation and voting patterns. In many parts of this country, religion continues to be a driving factor in their political behavior. That said, religion is not everything. If the average citizen could only choose candidates who aligned perfectly with the Torah, the Bible, or the Quran, they would not be able to vote. Sacrifices in religious belief are always made, as evidenced by the election of every president since Reagan, and it descends all the way down to even local political candidates. One candidate disagrees with voters on abortion, another disagrees over school prayer, another disagrees over divorce and the role of the family. This shift in political behavior is a modern idea, where candidates are not chosen by how closely they align with the moral figurehead of a religion but rather how much they are the political figurehead of an ideology.

While organized Judaism and Catholicism certainly faced a paradox in their 2016 candidate choice, the degree to which Protestants voted for President Trump continues to be the most puzzling. No other religious group voted for Trump in such large numbers. Part of the

explanation for this phenomenon is that Protestants identified with the “Make America Great Again” model the most and made up Trump’s target group of working-class citizens.

These individuals had a nostalgia for the past and fear of the future. Whether their sentiments were misguided or not, many of Trump’s supporters saw an influx of immigration, trends in demographics, changes in popular culture, and Democratic control of Washington as massive threats against the way of life that they are trying to get back to. And so, they decided to vote for Donald Trump. The question remains, at what cost? It is important to see the humanity in all those across the political spectrum. Every voter made value judgments about what matters most to them, and many of those judgements transcended the strict rules and codes from their religion. This paper does not make any moral evaluations about the voting habits of any particular religious group. Rather, it focused on reconciling the religious vote with a non-religious candidate.

On a final note, this paper did not cover every aspect of religion and politics in the United States, and it was limited to only three groups. Further research should study other religious affiliations including atheism. Of special interest, there is a growing alliance between Islam and the political left when it comes to issues like Palestine.

As to the religious right, the trends seen in 2016 and 2020 will likely continue. Unfortunately, religious beliefs are put more on the backburner for politics and strongman theory takes the lead. The shift seen from the religious right is especially troubling, and potentially even dangerous to the health of US democracy should votes be cast based on white evangelical fear yet again.