Nathanial C. Null

Prof. Nelson

POLS 415

Religious Influence on Presidential Election in the United States

Section One. Intoduction

[question]

How does religion affect presidential elections in the United States? The United States has had a long history of religion influencing politics and voting behaviors. The United States claims to have a clear separation of church and state. When it comes to elections, religion plays some direct and indirect roles in the public sphere. The religious diversity of the United States is an important factor: it has a clear majority of Christians but also has many people that believe in other faiths.

[significance]

This research is important. Some wonder if the decline in religious individuals itself influences politics, and whether the role of religion is changing. This research also can help those seeking to determine possible trends for upcoming elections.

Religion plays not only a huge role in the United States, but all over the world. Religion plays a large role in what people believe. People’s beliefs affect their voting behavior. Using religion can help political scientists predict how people are going to vote. This question can also give insight into how much religion actually effects politics. Religion used to play a key role in politics, but this question could help examine to what extent religion is still affecting politics.

Knowing how religion effects politics can help political scientists figure out how elections should be run, make accurate predictions, and influence politics. Religion is a key factor in culture and politics.

The next section of this paper discusses the existing literature on religion and politics and provides the theoretical framework for the rest of the paper. This paper then examines the 2016, 2012, and 2004 presidential campaigns. This paper examines several mechanisms for religion’s influence: its use as a weapon in campaigns; the significance of religious identity among voters; and, its influence on framing issues in campaigns. I argue that across all of these areas, religion is…. [TRY TO MAKE A CLAIM HERE THAT IS AN ARGUMENT].

Section Two: Literature Review

The purpose of this literature is to address how religion affects politics in the United states. This literature review will focus on how much religion affects politics through voters beliefs. This includes if people are more likely to vote for people of the same religion and less likely to vote for people of a different religion.

Long looks at the question “Does religion matter to politics?” He states that a huge part of politics comes from people’s culture, and culture can be highly influenced by religion. Many questions that have been asked when looking at the relationship between religion and politics. Barber not only claims that American politics is influenced by religion, but that America’s voting base is ruled by their religion. Tushnet also assumes that religion plays a role in politics and looks to what extent that Religion plays a role. There is a consensus in the United States the voter beliefs are influenced by religion (Barber 2012, Long 1995, Tushnet 1988).

So what is the approach to the question?

Butters talks about how many candidates that run for office today usually must claim they believe religion. Butters then gives Hillary Clinton as an example. Hillary Clinton was a Methodist all her life and gained the support of someone by talking to them about the bible. The man she talked to was Baptist. She talked to a man that believed in a different denomination of Christianity and won his support. Hillary could talk to people on a personal level, but she did not bring in her religion into her campaign very much. Barber pulls a quote from a man named Schulman, a history professor at Yale, that says “it’s almost impossible to win the presidency without some show of serious religious commitment.” Hillary did not show that she was Methodist to the public and she did not talk about religion. This may have hurt her in the long run. Butters article shows that religion is important.

Argument: Is religion losing its value in politics?

While Butters argument is valid, a study that Lipka points out shows that 56% of the American population believes religion is losing its influence in America, and they believe that is a negative thing. While Lipka shows that religion is losing influence, Lipka also shows that about half of the United States wants to see Churches address political issues and candidates and state who they support. This starts becoming a conflict in church and state separation. These studies do show that Long was right when he said that culture influences political culture, and culture can be highly influenced by religion.

While presidents in contemporary society are doing better when they take religious standings, there is supposed to be a separation of church and state. The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, or IEP, addresses this separation. There are arguments that having church and state separate discredits some traditions and knowledge that religions have to offer. The more liberal stance that comes from the separation of church and state is that each individual should have the right to fairness and a government that is biased to one religion is unfair to the citizens that do not believe in that religion (IEP).

Argument: Religion can be used as a weapon.

The evolution of a divide between church and state has led to a secular left and a religious right (Gerteis). Gerteis does not directly ask a question in his article, but he covertly addresses how religion can be used against people as a weapon. While Christians may look for other Christians to vote for, regardless of denomination, certain religions can spring fear in people. Gerteis talks about how Rick Santorum claimed that Obama had Muslim beliefs. This could spark fear in a public that is a majority of Christians. Suarez also addresses that topic. He wrote this article two years after Obama was elected and talks about how there are still some people still think Obama is a Muslim. This helps answer the question, “how does religion affect American politics?”

Another thing to look at is what people vote on. Do they vote on candidates religious backgrounds, party religious backgrounds, or on topics that have to do with? Schatzberg suggests that people vote on topics that relate to their religion. These topics include gay marriage and abortion. Republicans tend to be against both of these topics for religious reasons. The Republican party has a Christian backing.

There is a vast amount of research and studies that have been created to look at the relationship between religion and politics in America. One thing that sticks out to me after looking at these sources is that none of them address why this is worth studying. Clearly these address that religion plays an important role in politics, but none of the sources say why we really need to look at this relationship. I would like to use my paper to address the question, “How does religion affect politics?” But I think it is also important to address why this is worth studying.

Lipka looks briefly at why it is important to study this relationship through statistics. Lipka does not come out directly and say that these studies can be used to help get a sense of where the country is heading, but that is something the studies can be useful for. This information can be used for more than looking at how American’s might vote in the future. It could be beneficial to look to how voters respond to candidates that believe in different religions and see who is more successful. This research can be used to see if a Methodist tends to be more popular than a Mormon. People who are looking for a candidate to endorse could look at this information and find a Lutheran candidate who they can support rather and a Jewish candidate; if research shows that Jewish candidates do not receive as much support. There are many possibilities that this research could be used for other than just predicting where the American public is leaning.

Many of the sources that I have found use the method of looking at qualitative data. Very little research actually puts the relationship into numbers for quantitative data. For my research project, I would like to include both methods. There are some numbers out there that can really reinforce certain ideas or concepts.

There is more qualitative data than quantitative data. Many scholars and researchers have looked at trends and how people think. There is a lot of historical analysis. Historical analysis will most likely be the main method used in my research paper. Historical analysis is the most effective method to look at with my project because it allows for research to be looked for many years and pick out trends that will stand out in history. Those trends can be observed by how they have changed and how the relationship between religion and politics has evolved. This can help predict what changes will be seen in the future. This means that the history analysis will lead into a scenario-building method.

In my study, I expect to find many candidates to be more favorable if they identify as some denomination of Christianity. I expect that a majority of the American public will identify as Christian and that they will be more likely to vote for candidates that identify as Christian. I think that I will find that particular denominations of Christianity will not make a difference. So long as the denomination is part of Christianity, other denominations will vote for them. I also expect to find that some religions will never be voted into office. I expect to find that there would be less favorability to a candidate that would identify as anything other than Christian. I also think that I will find a trend that points to politics moving away from religion, but politics will not move completely away. The last trend that I expect to see is that there will be some resentment to atheist candidates. From the what I have looked at so far, it seems that the American public disapproves of politics moving away from religion and atheists will receive resentment.

Research Methods:

For my research paper, I will be using historical analysis. Historical analysis will help to look at how religion and politics are related. This will help to predict how people vote. It will be important to look at early election in the U.S. and to observe how elections have evolved with politics into today’s politics.

The process will be to first find reliable sources that store an accurate history of how religion has played a role in politics. These sources should only need to date back to the mid-20th century at most. After these sources have been looked at, they need to be compared to each other. This will help look at how politics and religion have evolved together and separately. It will also be important to look at the most recent president election and how politics played a role in that election.

This method will be strong with potential data because political scientists have been looking at this for some time now and gathering information. This method is also strong because it should allow for accurate predictions. One weakness in with this method is that the previous election seemed to break a lot of trends in politics. Making predictions after this election will be hard. Another weakness of this trend might be finding accurate sources. There are many sources on religion and politics so finding sources that are accurate and agree with each other. These are possible weaknesses, but I think the strengths will help with accuracy.

Section 4: 2004 Campaign:

One campaign that shows how religion influences American presidential elections is the 2004 presidential election. The 2004 election had many factors that played a role in how people voted. The election was expected to be close. Bush did not win the popular vote in the 2000 election and his response to 9/11 was debated, so this election was going to be close as well. The main factor that seemed to influence this election was going to be morals between the two candidates since there was so much debate over everything else. Bush was known as a Methodist while Kerry was known as a Roman Catholic. The next few pages are going to look at how voters religious affiliations affected the way they voted, comparing similar religions, and looking at whether or not religion made a significant difference in this election.

Weekly attending Evangelical Protestants were the only group that considered moral values to be the most important factor in the campaign. Moral values are attained from church and think moral values are most important (Green 13). 97.2% from this group think that Bush had better moral values. Republican church goers thought that Bush was overwhelmingly better with moral values than Kerry. They also thought Bush was overwhelmingly better in his foreign policy than Kerry. Almost all republican Christians thought Kerry had a better economic policy. Latino Catholics and Black protestants that attend church weekly are the only groups in this list that believe Bush had better morals than Kerry (Green 15). All Democratic groups thought Kerry had a better foreign policy, overwhelming so from black voters. Every group averages believing that Kerry had a better economic policy (Green 15).

White voters support Bush. Non-white voters support Kerry. White protestants approve of Bush more than other groups dislike Bush. Weekly attenders of church also have a higher support rate of Trump than a dislike of people who do not attend church weekly. There was a 10% difference in men’s approval rating of Bush while there was only about 3.5% difference in women, who supported Kerry. There was a 1.2% difference in the number of people less than support Kerry. There was about an 8% difference of people over 40 who supported Bush (Green 17). All of these statistics are really close. The only set of statistics that are not close are the statistics from religion which are clearly in favor of Bush. Religion seems to play the biggest role in voter influence due to determining morals. Not only is religion relevant, but perhaps the deciding factor in the election, which is Green’s thesis.

After looking at all of these statistics, it can be seen the religion clearly played a large role in this election. Religion was not only relevant but seems to be the determining factor in this election. Voters were focused on morals rather than any other factor. There are a couple of reasons that morals were so important in this election. After a cheating scandal with Bill Clinton, people wanted someone who could guarantee better moral judgements. Since George W. Bush had already been in office for one term without any major moral questions, voters had already seen the Bush was morally stable. Kerry would have had to figure out early in the election that morals were going to play a huge part in the election and then play off those moral values.

Another reason morals could have been so relevant could have been because of post 9/11 stereotypes. After 9/11, America was nervous and wanted a leader they could trust to do the right thing. Bush thought that going into the Middle East was the right decision and many people agreed with him. They trusted his judgement and reassured the public that he would catch Osama Bin Laden. This showed that his moral compass pointed towards justice and many right-wing Christians saw this conflict as a Christian vs. Muslim conflict and sided with Protestant President.

Section Five: 2012 Campaign

The 2012 United States presidential election was an interesting election to look at because it was much closer than the 2008 election. Obama won the 2008 election with nearly ten million more votes than McCain and almost 200 more electoral votes. Yet in the 2012 election, Romney was only short by three million votes and a little over one hundred electoral votes. Obama was an African American man that attended a Lutheran church is Chicago until the pastor of the church made some comments upset many Democrats and some Republicans and cause Obama separate from the church. Romney was a Mormon and people were skeptical of having a Mormon president because many people did not know much about Mormonism. This section is going to look at how religion was used as a weapon and how there was a decrease in care about religion in this election

One of the main reasons religion was brought up in this election was to bring up accusations against Obama. There were many Republicans who claimed that Obama was a closet Muslim. This is one of the rare examples in which religion was used negatively in an election. Even before the election, some Republicans claimed that Obama was a closet Muslim to try and build rhetoric before the election started. While this was used against Obama, it did not seem to affect him too much. He still won by over one hundred electoral votes and three million popular votes. While Obama got less votes than he did in the previous election, this is most likely due to other factors.

There are many factors that attribute to Obama losing votes. Romney was extremely charismatic. He tended to be a better public speaker than Obama. Factors like this attribute to Obama losing votes.

Romney is a Mormon politician. It was brought up but not really used to support him or attack him. There were some democrats who tried to use Mormonism against him claiming that he supported polygamy, but they were quickly shut down by contemporary Mormons.

Overall, religion seemed to not play any vital role in this election. The election was not very close and while religion was brought up in multiple conversations from political scientists, it did not seem to make any vital impact on the election.

This could be listed as one of the first elections in which religion did not play a huge role. Both sides tried to use religion to hurt their opponent, but neither was effective in severely damaging their opponent’s chances at winning. Just because this is the first example that shows religion did not play a vital role in the election does not mean that this was a sudden change. The number of religious individuals in the United States has been decreasing for the past few decades.

Section Six: 2016 Campaign

The 2016 presidential campaign did not offer very much religious influence. Trump was mainly a businessman while Hillary was known to not be completely trustworthy. Neither of these politicians were known for their religious beliefs. Hillary never focused on religion in her campaign but when asked claimed she was Methodist. Trump talked about religion very little in his campaign. He claimed to be a Presbyterian and after I talked to Chaplain Teri Ott at Monmouth College, she informed me that the Presbyterian Church and denounced Trump as a Presbyterian because part of being a Presbyterian is actively participating in a Presbyterian community, and he has not actively participated.

Even though the Presbyterian Church denounced Trump as a Presbyterian, it did not stick during the election. This was either because people just believed him or voters did not care. Religion played a significant role in this election as well as the last election. Issues revolved more around social issues rather than religious issues and values.

According to the Pew Research center, only 30% of voters think Trump is at least somewhat religious. Many people from his own party do not even consider him to be especially religious. 48% of voters claimed that they thought Hillary was somewhat religious. The number of voters that considered her to be religious is overwhelming compared to Trump. Even thought Hillary was considered by most voters to be more religious, why did she not win?

Pew research has also done research on factors that would make a person more likely to receive votes as well as factors that would make a candidate less likely to receive votes. One of the factors that cause a candidate to receive less votes according to Pew is a long history in Washington. There tends to be a lot of distrust towards politicians that have spent a lot of time in Washington. There seems to be a stigma that people who spend a lot of time in Washington are corrupted and untrustworthy. This was a huge factor for Hillary. It could be heard all over the news and from friends and colleagues that people did not trust Hillary. They cared more about her past in Washington than they did for her religious background.

Pew lists that the factor that is viewed negatively is not believing in God. Most voters did not believe Trump was religious, yet they voted for him anyway.

Section Seven: Final Analysis and Conclusion

In recent years, there has been a decrease in influence by religion. At the 2016 General Assembly for the Presbyterian Church, it was stated the half of the members are above the age of 65. The number of churchgoers has been decreasing over time. Newer generations are becoming less interested in church. The youth are not following in their parents’ footsteps. Youth in general are becoming less religious.

There has also been a decrease in Republican voters. Since 2000, the only election in which a Republican won the popular vote was in the 2004 election, which was very close. I believe there is a correlation between the drop in religious churchgoers and the number of Republican voters.

Religion has become decreasingly important, especially in recent elections. Many voters are unaware or simply do not care about a candidates religious affiliation and are focusing more on issue-based voting rather than religious affiliation-based voting. The next thing to look at is where this is going to take the United States.

This could be answered by looking at the number of non-religious people in the United States. According to Pew Research, about three percent of the population seem to be atheist. Yet about nine percent of United States citizens do not believe in God. These two statistics mean vastly different things. Many Hindus do not believe in one God and would then say no to believing in God. Muslims refer to God as Allah and could also so no to believing in God. In all of my research, there was no good statistic to give the percentage of people who are atheists.

According to a study done by Cox, there may be more atheists that studies can predict. In a random sample with many questions, many more people stated that they do not believe in God when there were more questions that just one. There are still some issues with the wording of the question and separating Atheists out from people who do not believe in the Christian God, it still showed higher numbers than any of the Pew Research results. This still suggests that overall there are more atheists than can be accounted for. One reason Cox provides for Atheists appearing in lower numbers in surveys is because they are not answering truthfully. Cox refers to another survey done in which only thirty percent of Christians feels warmly towards Atheists. Because of this resentment towards Atheism, many Atheists may feel compelled to not answer surveys honestly.

With no real answer as to how many Atheists are in the country, it is hard to determine how much of a role they play in politics. One thing that can be taken out of all this research is that people tended to vote for other people of the same religious affiliation. With the vast number of Protestants in the country, Bush received many Protestant votes. In the election between Obama and Romney, Obama was a protestant Lutheran while Romney was a Mormon. People could relate to a Lutheran more than a Mormon, and that could be one reason why Republicans really wanted voters to believe that Obama was a Muslim. In the 2016 election, both candidates claimed to belong to protestant denominations. Neither candidate focused on the topic of religion because either they did not know enough about religion to be able to discuss it or the public simply did not care.

After looking at the 2016 election, it is important to look at whether religion did not play much of a role in the election because the candidates were both protestant and there was nothing to benefit from talking about religion or if it is because religious affiliation among presidential candidates is losing its significance. After examining all this research, I believe that religion is losing its influence in politics.

After looking at all this research, it can be used to observe parties and where they are heading. The Democratic party is in an interesting position. In the 2000 and 2016 elections, a democratic president came out of power. Republicans won both of these elections but lost the majority vote in both elections. The Democrats have a majority of votes but they cannot rally enough votes in the states that matter.

Democrats are losing the battleground states, yet they seem to be gaining members. Republicans are losing majority votes but can rally together where it matters. One of the main factors that brings Republicans together is religion. Religion has managed to bring the party together on issues to win certain states and take elections. Republicans are using ideas from religion like morals and social issues to draw anger towards Democrats and get them out to vote. Anger is one of the top emotions to convince a voter to go out and vote. The Republicans are convincing their partisans to go out and vote by angering them.

The Democrats have won majority votes but cannot seem to get the votes where it matters. This could be because Democrats focus on equality and social justice which encompasses many issues and they cannot find just one issue to get all the Democrats to rally behind them. There is an increasing number of non-traditional, non-religious people. There are people who are religious but find themselves not going to church because of the right-wing policies that come with being religious.

The Republicans find themselves in an interesting place. One of the main groups that is a part of the Republican party is Evangelical Christians. Religion in general tends to support the Republicans. With religion on the decline, the Republicans seem to be losing their numbers. Republicans many support group is decreasing and this can be seen in elections. In the most recent election, Trump lost the popular vote by about three million votes.

One thing the Republicans should consider is trying to appeal to another large demographic. Focusing on religious people and issues surrounded by religion has kept the Republicans relevant in national elections but the decreasing number of religious voters hurts them. The Republicans could look towards focusing on another group to make up votes that they have lost in the past decades.

In theory, this could help the Republican party. However, the United States is currently extremely polarized. The Republican part would have to find a demographic that is not polarized and work towards getting voters from this group to vote Republican. The issue with theory is that both the democrats and the Republicans have been trying to convince non-polarized voters to vote for them anyway. So not only would they have to find a group that’s not only non-polarized, but also large enough and growing in numbers to make up for the numbers they are losing from people becoming less religious.

Religion is still extremely relevant in politics, there is no denying that. But there is a decrease in influence that religion has on politics. The Democrats have shown in multiple elections that they have more numbers than the Republicans.

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