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Divine Endorsement and Sacred Votes: An Analysis of Religious Cueing in Republican National Convention Presidential Nominee Acceptance Speeches from 1980-2020 and What They Reveal About Donald Trump's Evangelical Christian Strategy and Success

By
MORGAN SUMMER DELONG

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Supervisor: **EVELYNE HÜBSCHER**

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Author's Declaration Form

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Abstract

Prior to former President Donald Trump entering the 2016 presidential election campaign, he and the "religious right" had little to no affiliation with one another. Despite this divergence, Donald Trump secured the highest percentage of evangelical Christian voters, more than any prior republican, or democratic, presidential nominee in the history of the United States. Employing content and discourse analysis on 11 Republican National Convention (RNC) speeches from seven republican presidential nominees ranging from 1980 to 2020, this research aims to code, identify, and analyze themes in religious cuing as they pertain to the Christian evangelical voting bloc. From these findings, exploring the strategy of Donald Trump and his historic evangelical voter support.

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Introduction

In 2016, former President Donald Trump, achieved something that no other Republican presidential candidate had yet to accomplish. Following an unprecedented and polarizing campaign, Trump earned 81 percent of evangelical Christian votes and secured the presidency. This statistic sparked debate and confusion inside and outside of the American evangelical community, the broader population, and even the larger global community. Was this just a party loyalty vote? Was it an anti- Hillary Clinton vote? Or were evangelical voters sincerely enchanted by Trump's promise to "Make America Great Again"? Scholars and political pundits scrambled to explain this historic turnout. Who are the people and what are the motivations behind that 81 percent and can we differentiate the various motivations behind their Trump support?

The evangelical Christian voting block is crucial to secure and to nurture for any Republican candidate. A Pew Research study conducted in 2019 identified that 43 percent of American adults (110 million people) identify as protestant Christians and of that 59 percent identify as evangelical Christians (64 million) (Pew Research 2019). The 2016 and 2020 elections were salient for religious identity and had a significant impact on the outcome, especially the evangelical Christians who represented one-fourth of all voters in the 2020 election (Newport 2020). In the face of adultery claims, sexual misconduct allegations, and his brash personality and commentary, Trump needed to find a way to connect with the evangelicals if he was going to secure the party nomination and ultimately the presidency. A return to the country's traditional values and foundations of faith were core tenants of Trump's "making American great again" and putting "America First", a message well received by the evangelicals.

This research is motivated from the polling data that Donald Trump, had a higher rate of evangelical voter support in the 2016 presidential election (81 percent) than Mitt Romney (2012), John McCain (2008), George W. Bush (2000, 2004), Bob Dole (1996), George H.W. Bush (1988, 1992), and Ronald Reagan(1990, 1984), or any other presidential nominee that we have polling data for (Espinoza 2020). Trump's ability to maintain the evangelical support following a rocky and controversial four years in office, and salacious a personal life is puzzling. One way to attempt to explore this relationship is through religious cueing. This research seeks to compare Donald Trump's use of religious cues in his 2016 and 2020 Republican National Convention speeches to the nine other republican presidential nominees since 1980 and identify if there is any evidence to support the rhetoric was undertaken strategically to gain the support of the evangelical Christian voting bloc? I hypothesize Trump and his campaign recognized the structural pattern of evangelical support for republican candidates prior to his bid for the presidency in 2016 and targeted evangelicals in the 2016 and 2020 campaign, especially using religious cues to resonate with evangelicals in his RNC speeches.

Religious cues "create information shortcuts linking religious identity or values with a political candidate or issue" (Westfall and Russell 2019). Religious cues can also be conceived of as religious rhetoric or religious signaling. Observing these cues in RNC speeches aims to help tell the story of religious and evangelical cuing in the republican party. Over 40 years, we can recognize consistencies, trends, themes, and aberrations. In examining religious cues, we see what's strategic, what is party line, and what is expected of the republican candidate (regardless of their faith). In analyzing these speeches, we gain valuable insight into the past, present, and future of the republican party and evangelicals.

What influence did Donald Trump's religious cues and rhetoric have on evangelical voters? And how can exploring previous republican nominees inform our understanding of this relationship? This research is unique in that it specifically aims to understand evangelicals, not the entire "Christian" umbrella of voters as they pertain to Donald Trump and to religious cueing strategy. Why evangelicals? Studying evangelicals as a distinct subset of Christians is crucial due to their unique socio-political influence. Unlike the broader Christian population, evangelicals possess a cohesive and active political identity in the United States. This group is known for its high voter turnout and consistent support for conservative policies and candidates, making them a pivotal force in American politics. Their specific beliefs often drive distinct voting behaviors and policy preferences, such as strong opposition to abortion and same-sex marriage, which are less uniformly prioritized among non-evangelical Christians (Pew Research Center 2019). Therefore, examining evangelicals separately from the broader Christian population provides more precise insights into their significant impact on political and social landscapes. Donald Trump's courting of and pandering to the evangelicals, both through religious cues and other strategies, raises meaningful questions surrounding the role of religion in American politics and of religious influence on policy agenda setting and actions. This research question is pertinent in the field of political science and public policy for the insight it may offer into the strategic messaging to evangelicals and implications to a politician's policy agenda and actions. This questions also speaks to many elements that influence Republican party ideology and to the coalition of religious voters.

Literature Review

Religious signaling, or cueing, by a politician can be traced back to the 1789 inaugural address of the first president of United States, George Washington, where he offered "fervent supplications to that Almighty Being who rules over the universe" (Domke and Coe 2010). In their book "The God Strategy: How Religion Became a Political Weapon in America", Domke and Coe (2010) lay out a framework for religious language signaling and explain it as a central tenant of what they call the "God Strategy"—a strategy employed by politicians who meticulously shape their public communication to resonate with the large base of religious voters in the United States. The God strategy, put simply, is used by politicians to "encourage voters to use their religious concerns as the decisive factor in their voting decision." They propose that at the heart of the "God Strategy" are been four main signals:"(1)Acting as political priests, by speaking the language of the faithful; (2) Fusing God and country, by linking America with divine will; (3) Offering acts of communion, by embracing iconic religious elements, and (4) Engaging in morality politics by trumpeting bellwether issues." (2010). Politicians do this overtly, but also through indirect means, or "dog whistles" -- some of their messaging strictly meant to resonate with a specific religious community (Domke and Coe 2010). Calfano and Dupe add to this, noting the "code" should only function for the in-group as it does not use symbols that are easily recognized by any voter but instead draws on word sequences that are generally known only to evangelicals (2019). Westfall and Russell (2019) define this as "implicit cues" and "coded" religious language, which they find is used in higher frequency in the political discourse realm because the only "religious cue receiver" recognizes the real meaning. They hypothesize that politicians employ this strategy because the return is high and alienation risk is low.

In a 2009 study, Hoffman and Howard examined the nature of the rhetoric employed in Democratic and Republican party nomination acceptance speeches since 1948. They note that

1980 was a significant year for the religious right, coming into its own as a "recognizable and influential electorate group" (Hoffman and Howard 2009). They found that republicans nominees started incorporating "significantly more religious rhetoric" in the 1980s and democrats did not. They captured religious signaling by coding all mention of a religious deity (ex: God, Lord, Creator), Bible verse, and any other religious reference (ex: saints, prayer, crusades, or religion). Westfall and Russell (2019), studying the political effects of religious cues, argue that a "critical way that religion and religiosity are connected to politics is through religious cues, which create information shortcuts linking religious identity or values with a political candidate or issue." They identify two types of cues—identity cues and linkage cues. Identity cues aim to engage an in-group/out-group impact and center on an individual's religious identity. Linkage cues simply link the candidate with religious values and beliefs.

Especially in the age of mass media and endless information at our fingertips, citizens must organize and negotiate the mass flow of information by finding shortcuts to aid in their decision making. It is not possible for them to absorb the or evaluate the onslaught of information any other way. One of these shortcuts is the recognition and association with "cues" (Domke and Coe 2010). Religious cues are distinguishable from other types of cues by their link to a moral value system (Westfall and Russell 2019). They are calculated religious signals sent by political candidates to connect with the voter's "core values and beliefs" (Domke and Coe 2010). Religious cueing reduces time and energy, allowing transmission of key information and concerns directly to the voter. Cues allow for the voters to identify their desired candidate or issue stance without incurring the costs associated with processing complex information (Bartels 1996).

Calfano and Djupe (2009) also explore the relationship religious cues and electoral support. proposing a specific “GOP Code”. Their research found that, using a GOP religious cueing code, white evangelicals can identify candidates as Republican and can indicate their support for those candidates. The “GOP Code” was able to gain the recognition and support of the in-group (evangelicals) and was unnoticed by other groups (Roman Catholics, mainline protestants).

Seeking to lay the groundwork for a deeper understanding of how general religious cues affect political outcomes and interact with other factors, McLaughlin and Wise (2014) tested how “subtle” and “overt” religious cues influence political evaluations based on citizens' religiosity. Like Domke and Coe (2010), they found a significant negative effect for overt religious cues, but no significant effect of subtle cues, finding that politicians who use overt religious cues risk alienating many potential voters. However, as citizens' religiosity increases, religious cues become more effective. They also found that the effect of subtle religious cues on candidate favorability is dependent on whether a citizen shares the same party as the political candidate.

Hughes (2019) found that Trump has used religious language at a higher rate than any president from the last 90 years by analyzing 448 presidential public addresses. These addresses included every President from Franklin D. Roosevelt (1933-1945) to Donald Trump (2016-2020) and Hughes coded for “religious terms” and “explicit references to God”. Using content analysis of 175 Trump rally speeches during his 2016 campaign and since becoming president plus 30,00, Hughes (2020) also found that Donald Trump’s use of religious language increased during his four years in office, illustrating that religious language may be employed strategically. Hughes theorizes that Trump strategically uses his public addresses as opportunities to “alleviate the likely cognitive dissonance felt by these

supporters" (2020). This deliberate use of religious rhetoric suggests a calculated effort to strengthen his connection with his religious voter base.

Cognitive dissonance is the most basic explanation for the unlikely Trump and evangelical relationship. Cognitive Dissonance Theory (CDT) was first introduced by Festinger in 1957. CDT suggests that when someone encounters information or actions that clash with their personal beliefs, they feel uncomfortable and recognize the inconsistency. This discomfort motivates them to find a way to align their actions and beliefs. Typically, they will adjust their perceptions to achieve this consistency. However, this is not the case with evangelical Trump supporters. They willfully ignore the cognitive dissonance they experience or try to justify it through prioritizing other moral imperatives, i.e. supporting a candidate who promises to be pro-life, even though that candidate had an alleged affair with a porn star and public sexual assault allegations. Simmons, Ludden, and Harris argued "too many conservative Christians make a habit of rejecting verifiable truth by giving priority to a sort of blind faith that justifies the cognitive dissonance they experience." (2020). The need to maintain a consistent worldview leads evangelicals to reinterpret or ignore information that conflicts with their beliefs, thereby sustaining their political and religious alignment with Trump.

Issue ownership theory suggests that voters believe certain political parties are more capable of handling specific issues than their opponents (Hughes 2019; Petrocik, Benoit, and Hansen, 2003; Sides, 2006). These perceptions can sometimes be based on objective measures, but they often stem from deeply ingrained beliefs. Petrocik, Benoit, and Hansen (2003) analyze how candidates use partisan acceptance speeches to approach issues through the lens of issue ownership. They observe that certain issues are perceived as "Democratic" while others are

seen as “Republican.” Politicians are acutely aware of these perceptions and frequently align their public rhetoric accordingly. Research has shown that candidates strategically focus their campaigns and media coverage on issues where their party is perceived as stronger. 2024 Pew Research data compliments issue ownership theory when it comes to religious and voting patterns as they largely reflect partisan lines finding that majority of white evangelicals tend to vote for republican candidates as do white Catholics and white non-angelical protestants. Conversely, a large majority of atheists, agnostics, Black Protestants and American Jews tend to vote for Democrat candidates.

There is also the psychological Social Identity Theory (SIT), developed by Tajfel in 1981 and then applied to evangelicals and Donald Trump by Comer and Jacobi (2021). SIT theorizes the mechanisms behind how groups seek to find common purpose and unify around certain issues, essentially functioning as the “in-groups” (Comer and Jacobi 2021). SIT views people as group members influenced by their group's behavior, beliefs, and ideology, not just as individuals who choose to affiliate. In a critical examination of social identity theory, Huddy expounds, “according to social identity theory, additional motivational factors are needed to account for the development of inter- group discrimination, but mere categorization is sufficient to explain the creation of social identity” (2001). Shared values within a group (like supporting a political candidate) create distinctions between in-groups and out-groups. This is crucial for understanding evangelical Christianity, which consists of various sub-groups with common political goals. Group members need to identify with their in-group, affecting their interactions with other groups. This also helps explain why some evangelicals felt pressure to vote to Trump, despite some moral objections and concern as they wanted to stay in the “in- group” or compare themselves to the “prototypical member” (Lakoff 1987; Comer and Jacobi 2021). This theory, along with Issue Ownership Theory, offer the beginning of a theoretical

framework to examine Trump and his evangelical support—positing that their votes were not for his character but for his policy promises and advocation of social issues important to them.

Historical Background

The American Evangelical Profile

"Evangelical" as a term comes from the Greek word "euagelion" which translates to the "good news" or the "gospel" (Noll 2019). Therefore, in its' most simple form, an evangelical is someone who's faith is has been transformed by the "good news" of Jesus Christ and they are meant to share that salvation with others. For non-religious people, it can be difficult to conceptualize American evangelicals, as the term is both a political and religious identity. And further, the political identity and religious identity are not mutually exclusive. In a critique of the "fuzzy" evangelical term, prominent American theologian, ethicist, preacher, and president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission (the public-policy arm of the Southern Baptist Convention), Russel Moore writes that evangelical "is an attempt to categorize a chaotic and contradictory cast of characters who often have little in common except for a few phases and aspirations" and that "no one signs up at a central office to be an evangelical"(Moore 2023). It has become both a religious identity as much as a political identity, and the two are not mutually exclusive, requiring a level of nuance to grasp.

There are many interpretations and iterations of evangelicals, however the formal religious body is defined by four distinctives, as published by the National Association of Evangelicals (2024):

(1) Biblicism: a high regard for and obedience to the Bible as the ultimate authority
(2) Conversionism: the belief that lives need to be transformed through a "born-again" experience and a lifelong process of following Jesus
(3) Crucicentrism: a stress on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross as making possible the redemption of humanity
(4) Activism: the expression and demonstration of the gospel in missionary and social reform efforts

The first distinctive, upholding the Bible as the ultimate authority becomes difficult when there are over 31,000 verses in the Christian Bible and hundreds of different versions (Du Mez 2020). How does one prioritize which verses to follow strictly and which to not acknowledge? A common critique of evangelicals and their political engagement is that their reading of the bible is highly selective (Campbell 2023). This is important to understanding the mind and moral compass of evangelical voters as they weigh Biblical commands in relationship to their activism through citizen engagement and voting behavior.

Evangelicals are part of a larger global community of "born-again" Christians; however, the largest population of evangelical Christians is in America. A firm number of how many evangelicals there are in the United States varies, however, according to a Gallup Survey done in 2018, 34 percent of the entire United States identifies as an evangelical (Gallup 2018). In the 2014 U.S. Religious Landscape Study, conducted by telephone interviews with upwards of 35,000 Americans from the 50 states, the again the Pew Research Center gained valuable insights about the evangelical Christian population in the United States. The study found that evangelical Protestants constitute a substantial portion of the U.S. population, with particularly high concentrations in the South, an area often referred to as the "Bible Belt." (Fitzgerald 2017). The Bible Belt is a region where evangelical Protestantism plays a dominant role in the cultural, social, and political life of the area. This region includes states such as Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia (Tweedie 1978). Evangelicals in this region are known for their high levels of church attendance, conservative social values, and strong political engagement—making them a powerful voting bloc.

The American Evangelical Political Trajectory (since 1980)

Many religious scholars, sociologists, and political scientists agree that the 1980 presidential election was a turning point for evangelical political identity and for religious cueing in presidential addresses (Domke and Coe 2010). Reagan's acceptance speech, given on July 17th, 1980, was the first time the poignant and recognizable phrase "God Bless America" was spoken in an acceptance speech for a presidential nomination convention, for both the DNC and RNC (Domke and Coe 2010). From this speech forward, Domke and Coe (2010) found that the mention of "God" by presidents went from averaging 47 percent in the time frame of FDR and Carter (1932-1976) to upwards of 90 percent in the time frame of Reagan to George W. Bush (1980- 2004). Prior to this 1980 presidential election cycle, the evangelical vote was not a given nor a clear priority for the republican party. In fact, democrat Jimmy Carter had secured their vote by 25 points just four years earlier in the 1976 election (Hayward 2004). Carter was notoriously a "born again" Christian and lauded by evangelicals for his profession as a southern-Baptist preacher (Hayward 2004). The seismic and lasting shift is theorized to have taken place when Reagan began to actively pursue and nurture the evangelical relationship; those who were disappointed and disillusioned with Carter's policy outcomes around issues of abortion and gay rights, among others (Fitzgerald 2017). The combination of dissatisfaction with Carter and the courting from movie-star Reagan, who touted American exceptionalism infused with Divine providence, led to Reagan's 25-point lead over Carter with evangelicals, scoring over 76 percent of their vote, an unprecedented feat at the time (Domke and Coe 2010).

Things were never the same. Catering to evangelicals, specifically the evangelical right, would become a necessity for electoral success. The evangelicals found their permanent

home in the republican party and their firm footing in American politics. It became a symbiotic relationship, both the presidential nominees and evangelical voting bloc needing one another for relevancy and viability. For example, in the 2004 election cycle, George W. Bush enjoyed a campaign victory in which 36 percent of his total votes were cast by evangelicals (Pew Research, 2004). We see this symbiotic relationship on manifested in Trump and the evangelicals.

Donald Trump and the Evangelicals

Many authors, both in support and in staunch defense of the unlikely relationship of Donald Trump and evangelical Christians, have sought to bring context and understanding to Trump's historic 2016 evangelical success (Moore 2023; Fitzgerald 2017; Du Mez 2020; Howe 2019; Alberta 2023; Verhaagen 2022; Butler 2021; Campbell 2023; Fea 2018; Sider 2020). They have a transformative relationship with one another—each seeming to bring the other closer to goals (Rosin 2023). In an interview on a conservative talk show radio program (Flashpoint) on October 21st, 2021, Donald Trump stated, "Nobody has done more for Christianity, or for evangelicals, or for religious itself. "(Newsweek 2021). Whether this is a true statement or not, Trump was able to use his 2016-2020 presidency to build trust among evangelical voters. Trump was able to deliver two conservative supreme court justices, instilling hope in evangelicals that Roe v. Wade would be revisited, and abortion would be made illegal. Another move that delighted evangelicals occurred when Donald Trump broke foreign policy precedent and moved the United States embassy in Israel (Dreier, 2024). Pew Research Center conducted research on the linkage between Trump and evangelicals following the 2016 and 2020 election as part of their American Trends Panel. They found that "Six in 10 in this group were consistent Trump supporters who cast ballots for him in both 2016 and 2020, and an additional 18% were Trump converts — they backed him in 2020 after voting for another candidate or not voting at all in the 2016 general election."

(Pew Research 2021). These numbers tell a story that Trump's rapport and messaging to the evangelicals is complex, robust, and strategic across the four years.

In an attempt explain the mind and strategy of Trump in the election, author Stephen Mansfield argues that Trump "lived in a transactional world […] he expected to pay up for privileges given, for access and power provided" (Mansfield 2017). This transactional relationship explains a lot in how Trump attempted to relate to the evangelicals, offering privileges in exchange for the power that came from the Presidency. Part of earning these privileges meant he needed to convince the evangelicals of their powerlessness in this culture. In his book The Immoral Majority, author Ben Howe argues that Trump's appeal to the "powerlessness" and "disenfranchisement" feelings of evangelicals was "devastatingly consequential" in the 2016 election (2019). By feeding into their fears of disenfranchisement, Trump promised power and priority to the evangelicals, something they could not resist in the end.

In a spiritual biography about the faith of Donald Trump, a book written in support of Trump among the Christian faith community, the authors write that President Trump won over evangelicals not by pandering to them, but by "supporting them and all their most important issues without pretending to be something he's not" (Brody, Lamb 2018). They argue it was not so much a strategic act, but a perfect pairing—Trump and his evangelicals-- each delivering to the other what they ultimately wanted. These authors speak for many in the evangelical voting bloc, believing that Trump is not perfect but he, "surrounded himself with believers who think he is the one guiding figure who can return us to the traditional values-hard work, discipline, duty, respect, and faith-that have long been the foundation of American life, and truly make America great again in all ways"(Brody, Lamb 2018). Part of Trump's

infamous campaign slogan and strategy of "making American great again" is returning to the foundations of tradition Christian faith and values and, a message well received and by the evangelicals.

Trump has proved a conundrum to many because the religious signals he sends are not perceived as congruent with his personal life, typically an important test for evangelical voters (insert a few here). Speaking to this incongruency, Strang writes, "Trump is an enigma, a brash self-promoter, casino owner, and man of the world […] yet he is also a devoted husband and father who has surrounded himself with men and women of faith and has made religion a key component of his image" (2017). In his own autobiography, *Great Again: How to Fix Our Crippled America*, Donald Trump dedicates a few short paragraphs to his personal Christian faith. He begins by stating that his religious values were instilled by his mother and that he attended a presbyterian church every Sunday for bible class in his childhood. Going on, he writes,

> *"I think people are shocked when they find out that I am a Christian, that I am a religious person. They see me with all the surroundings of wealth, so they sometimes don't associate that with being religious. That's not accurate. I go to church, I love God, and I love having a relationship with Him." (Trump 2016).*

Trump shows an awareness that his Christianity may surprise people because of his lifestyle, but ultimately wants to reassure people that he is religious and has a relationship with God. Interestingly, it is his wealth that he thinks is incongruent with being religious, not acknowledging the other character traits and fumbles that are what counts for more of the dissonance. In his final paragraph dedicated to his faith, he aims to place high importance on the Bible. "I think the Bible is the most important book ever written--not even close" (Trump 2016). Again, we see an iteration of him wanting to communicate the value and presence of faith in his life. While his precarious actions may seem antithetical to the Christian faith, Trump wants to build confidence that he is one of them. This is essential to evangelical voters

want a leader who shares their faith and experience. In a 2024 Pew Research report on religion, only 37 percent of U.S. adults say it is important to have a president with the *same* religious beliefs as their own, however 91percent of evangelicals say, “it is at least somewhat important to have a president who stands up for people with their religious beliefs” (Pew Research 2024). Further, 51 percent of republicans say it is important that the president has the same religious beliefs as their own, compared to 25 percent of democrats (Pew Research 2024).

Donald Trump has become a master in the “Us-vs-them” narrative. And it was received enthusiastically by the evangelicals. Peter Drier, an American journalist, wrote “He shares, and augments, their fear that the country they know is slipping away — if not already lost, what with upheavals like legalized same-sex marriage, acceptance of gay and transgender rights, and the ascension of religious and racial minorities.”(Drier, 2024). Another way of phrasing this narrative, is to make evangelicals see themselves as the victim. Drier goes on to observe, “white evangelicals view themselves as victims in a culture war that involves religion, politics, race, education, gender roles, economics, and individual liberties.” (Dreier, 2024). Trump preys on their fears. He sympathizes with their feelings of betrayal amidst a growing progressive American society. When he fails, loses, or even faces criminal charges, he has built a narrative that is being persecuted and that they are next. He presents himself as their savior, the “embattled outsider who always rose triumphant over the myriad forces trying to bring him down (Fea 2018). He is both a victim alongside them and their savior.

When it comes to domestic and foreign policy initiatives, evangelicals can tend to take on a Christian nationalism perspective (Du Mez 2020). And this contributes to how evangelicals shape their attitude towards the “other”. Christian nationalism—"the belief that America is

God's chosen nation and must be defended as such—serves as a powerful predictor of intolerance toward immigrants, racial minorities, and non-Christians." (Du Mez 2020). Therefore, a vote for Trump was a symbolic defense of America's perceived Christian heritage. There is a significant overlap between the beliefs of Christian nationalists and Trump's broader nationalist agenda. Both emphasize the idea of American exceptionalism, a return to traditional values, and a resistance to perceived external and internal threats to national identity (Whitehead, Perry, and O Baker 2018). Christian nationalism "operates as a unique and independent ideology that can influence political actions by calling forth a defense of mythological narratives about America's distinctively Christian heritage and future" (Whitehead, Perry, and O Baker 2018). It is not the objective of this paper to discuss the merits or dynamics of the Christian nationalism argument as it pertains to the evangelicals, however it is a piece in understanding the much larger puzzle as Trump was able to bring together two blocs of support, evangelicals and white nationalists behind his "nationalist credo" of Americanism (Bjork-James 2020). The relationship between Christian nationalism, and Donald Trump is complex and multifaceted, but it is imperative to see the links between the three.

Gorski (2019) posits that white evangelicals were driven by concerns of abortion, religious freedom, and the Supreme Court when considering their vote. Trump's "racialized, apocalyptic, and blood-drenched rhetoric" was an attracting force, he claims. In 2016, Trump was not the first choice of many evangelicals. However, when he rose as the winner and into the election, Gorski (2019) claims evangelicals had an easy decision in their plethora of reasons to choose Trump or Clinton, who supported abortion rights and federal funding of planned parenthood. Holder and Josephson (2020) explore how Donald Trump's white house aspirations are completely dependent on how he nurtures his relationship with the

evangelicals. Martí (2019) writes extensively about how Donald Trump's promise of a conservative dominated Supreme Court was a significant reason why he was able to secure the evangelical voting bloc support. He makes the claim that even though Donald Trump's character and life experiences did not align with traditional evangelical values, they turned their attention to his political potential instead. Trump secured evangelical support because of promise and then delivery of a conservative majority supreme court, exhibiting that evangelical placed their highest value on Trump's political deliverables, prioritizing them above Trump's personal life that is at odds with the traditional moral values of evangelicals (Espinoza 2018; Marti 2019).

Race, age, and religious orientation dynamics provide interesting insight for Trump's campaign and why the focus on evangelicals over other identity groups. Among all religious and racial groups polled by Pew Research in 2024, white evangelical protests have the highest positive opinion of Trump—66 percent report they have a favorable opinion of him and 30 percent report they have a *very* favorable opinion of him. Next, 51percent of what Catholics express a positive view of Trump followed by white nonevangelical protestants with 47 percent and Hispanic protestants with 45 percent positive opinion. Conversely, 79 percent of Jewish Americans, 80 percent of black protestants, 82 percent of agnostics, and 88 percent of atheists have unfavorable opinions of Trump (Pew Research 2024). In addition to race and religion statistics, generational shifts in the evangelical voting bloc are key to watch as the republican evangelical strategy may begin to lose momentum. Simply, the strength of the evangelical voting bloc is getting older, with a median age of 55 (Haberman 2018). Statistics from the Public Religion Research Institute reveal that the evangelical demographic in the U.S. is shrinking each year (Cox and Jones 2017).

Many scholars find the affective polarization explanation illuminating in the Trump and evangelicals' relationship. Affective polarization refers to the phenomenon where partisan individuals (e.g., Republicans) increasingly distrust and dislike candidates from the opposition party (e.g., Democrats) (Margolis 2020). In other words, evangelicals may have chosen the lesser of two evils, opting for Trump over Hillary Clinton and Joe Biden (Du Mez 2020). They are not necessarily voting for Trump as much as they are casting a vote against the democratic candidate. Complementing the affective polarization method, another explanation for Trump's success is partisanship identity and party loyalty. Simply put, Republicans voted for and will continue to vote for the Republican presidential candidate (Margolis 2020; Jelen and Wald 2018). Significant electoral voter turnout from devout evangelicals is not unique to the non-traditional character of Donald Trump, but rather it is in line with broader trends of evangelical electoral voting behavior (Margolis 2020). Though this explanation doesn't account for the fact that even before other candidates started to drop out of the race, Donald Trump was the most popular candidate of all evangelicals (Stetzer and MacDonald 2018). This is in line with what (Du Mez 2020) argues, writing that the 2016 election was not an aberration or simply a pragmatic choice, but an intentional vote for Trump, reveling a deep shift for the "moral majority" and what matters most to them. These combined factors illustrate the complex interplay of emotional and partisan dynamics in shaping evangelical voter behavior.

Research Design and Justifications

According to a Pew Research report published in 2024, 85 percent of White evangelical voters identify with or lean toward the GOP while only 14 percent align with the Democrats. There has been a 20-percentage point rise in the share of evangelicals who associate with the GOP and a 20-point decline in the share identifying as or leaning Democratic over the past 30

years (Pew Research 2024). For this reason, this research only focuses on the republican candidates for president since 1980 (Issue ownership theory). However, thanks to research from Domke and Coe (2010), we know that since 1952, that democratic and republican president candidates combined averaged 2.4 “invocations of God” and 11.8 “faith terms” in nomination acceptance speeches, based on their criteria of the terms. Additionally, from 1992-2004, democratic nominees averaged 4.3 “god invocations” and 16.5 “faith terms” in their acceptance speeches at the Democratic National Convention (DNC) (Domke and Coe 2010).

The RNC is the quadrennial (every four years) meeting held by the U.S. Republican Party where the selection of the vice presidential and presidential nominees takes place for the general. The justification for choosing the RNC presidential nomination acceptance speech as the speech for analysis in this study is its’ longevity and notoriety and it’s trust among voter. The RNC speeches are uniquely valuable to this research because they are the candidate’s opportunity to build majority support, to cast vison, and to inspire the base. A candidate’s acceptance speech effectively kicks-off the general election campaign and provides the nominee a “significant rhetorical opportunity” (Hoffman and Howard 2009).

The RNC goes back to 1856. In the 19th and mid-20th century, the identity of the republican party nominee was not always clear prior to the convention, but from the mid-20th century carrying on to today the nominees is typically identified months in advance. This allows for the RNC to be strategically staged event and rally made for television viewing. The main events include the keynote presidential nominee acceptance speech (as analyzed here) and the announcement and acceptance of the vice-presidential candidate. Additionally, its’ accessibility (both live and for later viewing) makes is salient for candidates. The RNC has

been televised nationally since 1952 and is viewed by upwards of ten million live viewers. It is also the site of what scholars posit was the genesis for religious cueing on the right. (Domke and Coe 2010). It stands as a constant across generations of voters and candidates analyzed in this thesis (1980-2020). The convention speech serves as a moment and signal to evangelical voters that this is the candidate to get behind and serves as an opportunity for the candidate to communicate clear policy goals and moral claims to their base. Outside of the presidential debates, the party convention keynote speeches are the most watch speeches of the election and campaign cycle. It is where the party signal to the base their agendas, goals, and promises. Every word is planned, nothing is unintentional, every single utterance is strategic.

This research employs the "Religious Terms Coding" adapted from Hart and Childers (2005), Domke & Coe (2010), and Hughes (2019, 2020), with additional words and phrases identified as "evangelical code". Hart and Childers (2005), define their listing as "religious terms" composed of "broad-based, Judeo-Christian terminology, religious personalities, and theological constructs" Domke and Coe (2010), account for two types of cues: "invocation of God" and "invocation of Faith". "God terms" are explicit references to God and words/phrases that reference the construct of religion called "faith terms". Hughes (2019) combined Domke and Coe's two categories (God terms, faith terms) to produce a comprehensive "religious terms" list made up of 103 terms. It is from this comprehensive list that I added another category called "evangelical religious cues" where I identify terms that specifically resonate with the evangelical community.

These cues include "abortion", "Israel", "pre-marital sex", "abstinence", "union of a man and a woman", "Supreme Court", "religious freedom", "Light", "tradition", "family unit", among

several others. Many of these "evangelical religious cues" deal with issues of abortion (in the pro-life context), religious freedom (in all contexts), and the supreme court (in the context of justice nomination). These issues were chosen based on research conducted by Lifeway Research in 2016 and 2020 evaluating which characteristics are most important to evangelical voters (Lifeway Research 2016, 2020). These three were also identified by Gorski (2019) as issues that evangelicals find important when considering their vote. The majority of the "evangelical religious cues" fall under what Westfall and Russell (2019) define as "implicit cues" and "coded" religious language, which they find is used in higher frequency in the political discourse realm because the only "religious cue receiver" recognizes the real meaning.

I explore my hypothesis through content analysis and discourse. Both interested in exploring social realities and phenomena, the discourse analysis is meant to "highlights the precarious nature of meaning and focuses on exploring its shifting and contested nature" and the content analysis "assumes a consistency of meaning that allows for occurrences of words (or other, larger units of text) to be assumed equivalent and counted." (Herrera and Braimoeller, 2004). The manual content analysis and discourse analysis are both are valuable to gaining insight to the evangelical strategy and types religious cueing in RNC speeches and how Donald Trump compares. The discourse analysis allows for room to explore, in additional to content analysis, evangelical cues in their specific context. Because of the manual coding involved in this project, it provided an opportunity to add more words to the "evangelical religious cues", as the context is extremely important. Other studies used coding programs, and while that eliminates the margin for human error, it does not consider implicit cues or antidotes that may resonate with the evangelical voter.

In this analysis, 11 Republican National Convention (RNC) keynote acceptance speeches from seven republican presidential nominees from 1980 to 2020 are analyzed to track and compare the frequency and themes of religious rhetoric and religious cueing in relation to the evangelical voters. All speeches, in both full transcript and video media form, were obtained from The American Presidency Project, an online database whose goal "is to be recognized as *the* authoritative, non-partisan on-line source for presidential public documents" (The American Presidency Project 2024). The available convention viewing data was gathered from Nielson. Evangelical voter data used was collected from Pew Research Center exit polling (1980-2020).

In this analysis, each speech was checked manually using the "religious terms" and "evangelical religious cues" the number of was recorded. All data was collected in Microsoft excel. For each RNC speech, the total word count for the speech was recorded and then the number of "religious terms" and "evangelical religious cues" was recorded. Then the percentage in relation to the entire speech word count (for example, 10 "Religious Terms/Evangelical Religious Cues" in a speech of 100 words = speech contained 10% religious cueing) were recorded and compared across the eleven RNC speeches, as well as the RNC viewership numbers and evangelical voter turnout for context and comparison.

Results and Discussion

In **Figure 1.** The evangelical voter turnout rate and viewership data is listed for reference and for context, it is not presented as a causal mechanism or to prove any substantial correlation. The analysis of religious cueing in Republican National Convention (RNC) speeches from 1980 to 2020 yielded fascinating findings, consistent with much of the literature. This data

demonstrates a varied, but consistent use of strategic religious cues and evangelical themes across the 20 year time span. In **Figure 2.** the average religious cue per speech was 18.6 times and the average percentage of religious cues per words in the speech was 0.39. George W. Bush holds the highest percentage of religious cueing at 0.58 percent in 2000 and Donald Trump holds the lowest percentage at 0.1 percent in 2016.

Election Year	Presidential Candidate	Speech Views (million)	Evangelical Voter turnout	Total Words in Speech	Religious and Evangelical Cues	Percentage of Speech
2020	**Donald Trump**	**23.8**	**76%**	**5680**	**25**	**0.44**
2016	**Donald Trump**	**32.2**	**81%**	**5086**	**5**	**0.1**
2012	**Mitt Romney**	**30.3**	**78%**	**4087**	**22**	**0.44**
2008	**John McCain**	**38.9**	**74%**	**3975**	**22**	**0.55**
2004	**George W. Bush**	**27.5**	**78%**	**5012**	**18**	**0.36**
2000	**George W. Bush**	**18**	**68%**	**4117**	**24**	**0.58**
1996	**Bob Dole**	**17.8**	**57%**	**5771**	**21**	**0.36**
1992	**George H. W. Bush**	**n/a**	**63%**	**4870**	**16**	**0.33**
1988	**George H. W. Bush**	**n/a**	**68%**	**4469**	**25**	**0.56**
1984	**Ronald Reagan**	**n/a**	**80%**	**5064**	**17**	**0.34**
1980	**Ronald Reagan**	**n/a**	**67%**	**4640**	**10**	**0.22**

Figure 1. A graphical representation of the RNC candidate nomination speeches from 1980-2020 allowing for comparison cues usage in relation to the total word count. Full Transcripts of the speeches were obtained from The American Presidency Project, the available convention viewing data was gathered from Nielson, and the Evangelical voter data used was collected from Pew Research Center exit polling (1980-2020).

Average evangelical voter turnout (1980-2020)	72%
Average total words in RNC speech	4797.363636
Average amount of religious and evangelical cues	18.63636364
Average Cue Percentage of the Speech	0.389090909

Figure 2. Combining the data from Figure 1., the average evangelical turnout (1980-2020), average totally words in RNC speeches, average amount of religious and evangelical cues, and average cue percentage per speech are presented. Data for voter turnout was obtained from Pew Research and speech transcripts were obtained from The American Presidency Project.

The cues themselves are where we really begin to see the evangelical signaling dynamics on display. It is no surprise that the word "God" is the most used word, with a total of 25 invocations. Other high frequency words include: church/churches" (7), "bless/blessed/blessing" (9), pray/prayer (9), "Religion/Religious" (10), "God Bless America"(10), God Bless You (11), "faith" (15). In addition to these higher frequency words, it is of interest to observe the words not used. For example, no candidate recites the word "Jesus" or "Jesus Christ". This is fascinating as a relationship with Jesus Christ is a tenant of the evangelical faith. Evangelicals believe the "good news" of the Bible, the Son of God, came to earth to save and redeem sinners (Kidd 2019). The omission of these central religious references may be a strategic decision to appeal to a broader audience without alienating non-evangelical voters.

In the most recent election cycles, Donald Trump's use of religious rhetoric and its impact on evangelical support is particularly noteworthy. In 2020, Donald Trump achieved a 76 percent evangelical voter turnout with a total of 25 cues, resulting in a 0.44 percent cueing rate. This was a significant increase from his 2016 RNC speech, where Trump saw an 81 percent evangelical voter turnout, but only included fives cues, leading to a 0.1 percent cueing rate, the lowest of all speeches analyzed. Trump's most used word, from both speeches, is "God"

(5), though he does not directly reference "God" once in his 2016 speech. The absence of "God" in 2016 is perplexing, however he does something rare in this address that no other candidate does, he thanks the evangelical community directly, saying:

> *"At this moment, I would like to thank the evangelical and religious community because I'll tell you what, the support they have given me, and I'm not sure I totally deserve it has been so amazing and has had such a big reason for me being here tonight. So true. They have so much to contribute to our politics, yet our laws prevent you from speaking your minds from your own pulpits. An amendment, pushed by Lyndon Johnson, many years ago, threatens religious institutions with a loss of their tax-exempt status if they openly advocate their political views. Their voice has been taken away." (Trump 2020)*

We see many strategies at play in his rhetoric. First, the specific recognition of the evangelical community. This shows his keen awareness of what they have to offer him and what he needs to say and do to obtain their support. We also see the "us-vs-them" and victim complex referenced earlier in this paper. Trump strategically creates false narratives that position him, and only him, as both victim of and savior to the problem (Espinoza 2020). From the beginning of his strategy with evangelicals, and the large religious community, Donald Trump has aimed to incite fear and present himself as the one who can be their protector. Trumps transformation, from 0.1 percent to 0.44 percent is the largest increase between any two election cycles, and any candidate. —a shift that could contribute to the hypothesis that there is a significant strategic adjustment in his campaign to solidify and perhaps expand his evangelical base.

Going back four years to 2012, former governor Mitt Romney garnered a whopping 78 percent evangelical voter turnout with his speech consisting of 22 cues, also achieving a 0.44 percent religious cueing rate. Romney is a special case as he was the first member of the Church of the Latter-Day Saints, commonly called Mormons, to run for president. There was

fear and much speculation among the GOP strategists prior to the election that Romney would not be warmly received by the evangelicals because of his Mormon faith (Pew Research 2012). We see him addressing this fear indirectly:

> *"We were Mormons and growing up in Michigan; that might have seemed unusual or out of place but I really don't remember it that way. My friends cared more about what sports teams we followed than what church we went to." (Romney 2012).*

He is signaling to evangelicals that though his Mormonism may appear unusual, it is not something to be concerned with. He wants to underscore the differences and play to the commonalities. His church choice is as arbitrary as his sport team loyalty. Church is a poignant word for Romney, as he uses it five times, the most usage of any of the other candidates.

In 2008, John McCain, a practicing evangelical and honored war hero, used 22 cues, resulting in a high rate of 0.55 percent cues. McCain was direct in his appeal to the evangelicals, not mincing words about their voting priorities and concerns, "As president, I will protect the sanctity of life. I will honor the institution of marriage. And I will guarantee America's first liberty: the freedom of religion" (2008). We know these promises, especially "freedom of religion" land with this demographic (Howe 2019). Further, McCain used the word "God" six times, the most frequently of all nominees in this study. Though he did not win the general election, McCain was well liked among evangelicals, with a 74 percent voter turnout.

George W. Bush won both of his presidential election races in 2000 with 68 percent evangelical votes and in 2004 (78 percent evangelical votes). In 2000, Bush has the highest rate of cueing in an acceptance speech, 0.58 percent, with 24 total cues. The following election cycle was a slight decrease, with 18 cues, translating to a 0.36 percent cueing rate. Bush's speeches can be categorized as having a strong emphasis on the family and traditional values. Much like the other candidates, Bush expresses staunch support of for the protection

of marriage and the unborn. He goes as far as to talk about sex in an aim to inspire compassionate conservatism:

> *Children without fathers in neighborhoods where gangs seem like friendship, where drugs promise peace, and where sex, sadly, seems like the closest thing to belonging. We are their country, too. (Bush 2000)*

This is a unique appeal, drawing on evangelicals' belief that sex should be saved for the commitment of marriage. This is an example of two of the elements of the Domke and Coe's "God Strategy; we see Bush acting as political priests, by speaking the language of the faithful and engaging in morality politics by trumpeting bellwether issues, though it is an odd topic to wade into for a presidential nominee acceptance speech.

In Bush's 2000 speech we see a prime example of what Westfall and Russell (2019) define as "implicit cues" and "coded" religious language where the "religious cue receiver", evangelicals, recognizes the real meaning. While encouraging his fellow Americans that big government is not the answer, rather the work of community organizations will change people "heart-by-heart", Bush recounts a Christian ministry and volunteer:

> *"I think of Mary Jo Copeland, whose ministry called "Sharing and Caring Hands" serves 1,000 meals a week in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Each day, Mary Jo washes the feet of the homeless, then sends them off with new socks and shoes." (Bush 2000)*

To the average, non-religious American, this does not stand out or resonate in any substantial way. However, to evangelicals, they can immediately recognize and receive the "washing of the feet" as a direct reference to Jesus Christ washing the feet of his disciples in the Bible (John 13:1-17). Though it is subtle, it's strategic and meant to communicate to the evangelicals that he is one of them.

The 1996 republican nominee Bob Dole was ultimately defeated by incumbent President Bill Clinton, but still managed to secure 57 percent of the evangelical vote (the lowest in this analysis). His speech contained 21 cues, making up 0.36 percent of his speech. Dole, like both Bushes, put heavy emphasis on the family unit, appealing to evangelicals and their high value on the traditional family. He fans the flames of the "old values" enduring and how they should not be "compromised and never abandoned", urging voters that "one must never compromise in regard to God and family and honor and duty and country" (1996). He indicts Clinton and the democrats:

> *"What we have in the opinions of millions of Americans is crime and drugs, illegitimacy, abortion, the abdication of duty, and the abandonment of children. And after the virtual devastation of the American family, the rock upon which this country was founded, we are told that it takes a village, that is collective, and thus the state, to raise a child." (1996)*

Make no mistake, these are fighting words. He charges abortion as an act contributing to the devastation of the American family.

George H.W. Bush won his first presidential campaign in 1988 with the support of 63 percent of evangelical voters and lost his second in 1992 despite his 68 percent of the evangelical vote. In his first RNC acceptance speech he delivered a speech with 25 cues, yielding a 0.56 percent rate, and in his second speech he had a 0.33 percent cueing rate including 16 cues. In both speeches, Bush makes bold statements for his pro-life position, mentioning it five different times. To relate and connect to the issue, Bush expressed:

> *You see, we must change, we've got to change from abortion to adoption. And, let me tell you this, Barbara and I have an adopted granddaughter. The day of her christening, we wept with joy. I thank God that her parents chose life. (1988)*

He accomplishes many evangelical signals in this passage. First, he urges that adoption is the solution to abortion, the argument of many evangelicals. He then references his own adopted granddaughter's christening, making him the only

candidate in this study who references to a christening or baptism. This sacred ritual is very important to evangelicals (Noll 2019). His mention of his family and granddaughter also serve to supplement his overarching theme of a strong family unit, insisting that family is "the essential unit of closeness and love". Bush makes a point to mention in both speeches the "voluntary prayer" in school and comes to its' defense from the opposition (democrats). He also, like Reagan, leans into America's Divine destiny. However, he notes that it's conditional on our choices and actions, "I believe that America will always have a special place in God's heart, as long as He has a special place in ours." (Bush 1992).

And finally, Ronald Reagan's 1980 and 1984 speeches put him on a trajectory to win big with evangelicals, scoring first 67 percent and then a whopping 80 percent evangelical voter turnout. In 1980, cues made up for 0.22 percent of his speech (10 cues), and then the percentage grew in 1984 to 0.34 percent of the speech (17 cues). The 1984 speech built on Reagan's four years in office. In line with these conditions, Reagan covered the entire spectrum for evangelicals, mentioning "out-of-wedlock births", support for the "State of Israel", calling for a voluntary prayer amendment to "get the Lord back in the schoolrooms", and an adherence to the "sacredness of human life", among other cues (Reagan 1984). Reagan also implemented his now famous line comparing and encouraging America to be that "shining city on a hill" (Reagan 1984). This is another example of an indirect religious cue, striking meaningful connection with those whose recognize the reference. "City on a Hill" is a Biblical reference to the message Jesus shared in His Sermon on the Mount, instructing His followers to be of "salt and light" and that their light cannot be hidden (Matthew 5:14-16). Reagan is invoking strong themes of American exceptionalism here, wanting to inspire both nostalgia and hope for the future, and encourage his base that "some

lights seem eternal", reassuring them that "America's is." (1984). Perhaps more than any other candidate, Reagan fuses God and country, by linking America with divine will (Domke and Coe 2010). His words were masterfully prepared, delivered, and received by evangelicals, all culminating in Reagan securing a landslide victory of 525 electoral votes compared to Walter Mondale's mere 13 (Fitzgerald 2017).

As mentioned previously, 1980 was the first use of "God Bless America" in a presidential nominee speech, but moments before those three words, Reagan did something else that surprised the nation:

> *"I have thought of something that is not part of my speech and I'm worried over whether I should do it. Can we doubt that only a Divine Providence placed this land, this island of freedom, here as a refuge for all those people in the world who yearn to breathe freely: Jews and Christians enduring persecution behind the Iron Curtain, the boat people of Southeast Asia, of Cuba and Haiti, the victims of drought and famine in Africa, the freedom fighters of Afghanistan and our own countrymen held in savage captivity. I'll confess that I've been a little afraid to suggest what I'm going to suggest--I'm more afraid not to--that we begin our crusade joined together in a moment of silent prayer."*

Attributed as a monumental turning point for the "moral majority" and evangelicals in politics, it is clear to see how this roused the evangelicals. And it was strategic. Domke and Coe (2010) describe it as a "moment when religion and partisan politics were brought together through mass media as never before […] a moment when religious conservative became a political force in the United States". Ronald Reagan was a trained Hollywood actor who delivered a perfect performance for the evangelicals—inviting them to join in the crusade for the soul of their nation, inviting them to pray, and invoking "Divine Providence", among other dynamics.

This scope of this research does not account for the multitude of other factors that undeniably impacted the religious cueing frequency and strategy. For example, Donald Trump may have

increased his religious cues in 2020 based on the democratic candidate he was running against. Hilary Clinton was largely private about her faith while Joe Biden is a devout Catholic. This could prove true for all the nominees. Another example could be the conditions of the Supreme Court at the time and whether it had a conservative or liberal majority. For example, candidates might have intensified their religious rhetoric to align with or counteract the court's composition, as this could influence key evangelical voter demographics concerned with issues like abortion, religious freedom, and other moral and ethical matters in line with their political philosophy. Other contextual elements, such as significant socio-political events or disasters such as the 9-11 terrorist attack or the Covid-19 pandemic should be considered. Additionally, this research does not address the vice-presidential candidates and the role they played in garnering evangelical support.

Conclusion

This research sought to explore how Donald Trump, seemingly the most unlikely candidate to win historic evangelical support, made strategic use of religious cueing in his electoral campaign. Based on the content and discourse analysis, we can see a clear strategy of religious and evangelical cueing across the 40 years examined. Though the cues do not make up any significant percentage of a given candidate's speech (all less than 1 percent), every president employs them for political gain and using material within their current political context. Looking at Trump specifically, we can observe a religious strategy in 2020, more than 2016, possible revealing a strategy once the initial support was secured. Though not necessarily reflected in the frequency or quantity, Trump's strategic and historic reference to the "evangelical community" in his 2016 speech reveals an awareness of their vote salience.

It is important to note I am not claiming evangelical support is responsible for Trumps' popularity and success, nor that the evangelical voting bloc are his sole priority. I argue that Trump strategically garnered evangelical support in combination with other important voter blocs. My research is different in that I focus specifically on the evangelical voting bloc, not just the "religious right" or entire the entire corpus of "protestant Christian" voters in the United States. I acknowledge that not every evangelical Christian votes for the Republican party or is represented in this research. The evangelical voting bloc is dynamic and not a monolith, though there is much research and historical accounts of trends we can observe in the voting bloc. I argue that Donald Trump and his campaign staff knew how to tap into the evangelical psych and provide a solution to their fears of faith embattlement and persecution, whether that is real or perceived. My research does not prove or attempt to prove any causality or clear connection between religious cueing frequency and evangelical voter turnout. It aims to explore one small piece of a much larger dynamic puzzle.

There is a plethora of future and further research opportunities in this area, both in quantitative and qualitative methods. An analysis of Trump and his competition (Clinton, Biden) could prove really fascinating to this extent. It would also be interesting to study the evolution of Trump's religious cueing within each election cycle (2016, 2020, 2024) to see if there is any increase or decrease across the lifespan of the individual campaign and combined campaigns. the inclusion of additional sources for analysis and comparison. This could include campaign websites, social media, campaign speeches, debates, targeted ads, emails, etc. The RNC acceptance speeches only begin to scratch the surface of exploring Donald Trump's religious rhetoric. Additionally, a study observing evangelical opinion polling data before and after a speech with heavy religious cueing could yield fascinating results for republican and democratic candidates alike.

This research was effective in identifying religious cues in Donald Trump's rhetoric, as well as other republican presidential nominees back to the 1980 election cycle, and observing the shifts, similarities, and themes between the election cycles. While this research does not test nor present a substantial theory of evangelical religious cues in comparison to evangelical voter turnout, I hope to have identified a possible connection between religious cues and evangelical voting trends of former President Donald Trump and other republican candidates. Though it would be very difficult, and require much more extensive and comprehensive research, to draw a comparison between religious cue frequency and evangelical turnout, it is interesting that the year of the highest evangelical voter turnout for a republican candidate also happened to be the year with the least religious coding present in the acceptance speech.

With another election in his near future, this paper served to illuminate the religious cues in Trump's 2016 and 2020 campaign strategies and may provide a window into his tactics for the 2024 election. Examining the ways in which religious cues are strategically utilized, specifically targeting the evangelical Christian voting bloc, is essential to understanding any national republican candidate's campaign strategy. By exploring the strategic interplay between Donald Trump and the evangelical community, like religious cueing, we unlock the deeper currents that shape American political tides and forecast the future landscape of electoral power.

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