

Pastors and Politicians: Donald Trump and the Evangelical Conscience

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Abstract

Stretching back to the Moral Majority movement, there has been staunch historical support for the Republican Party by white, born-again Christians. In the state of Kentucky, 49% of adults self-identify as evangelical and on the national level, a quarter of the electorate in 2016 identified as a white evangelical. The 2016 Presidential election brought the dependability of this voting bloc into question, revealing a divide among national evangelical leaders regarding the Trump candidacy. From botched Bible verses to leaked video of lewd comments about women, evangelicals had to weigh Trump’s morality and Christian commitment against his presidential platform. This project explores whether the rift seen at the national level extended deeper to local levels of church leadership. The methodology used included online surveys sent to pastors in the southeastern Kentucky and northeastern Tennessee regions, and also face-to-face interviews with selected religious leaders. The divide seen among national leaders was mirrored on the local level of leadership, even while rank-and-file evangelicals continued to vote in high numbers for the Republican candidate. Clear patterns emerged in the way that local leaders make their political decisions.

1. Introduction

President Donald Trump has proven to be a controversial figure, not only during his time in the White House but also throughout his presidential campaign. It was during the 2016 presidential election that Mr. Trump seemed to have caused a rift amongst evangelical voters. Russel Moore is a prominent evangelical leader and president of the Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission. He compared candidate Trump to a Bronze Age warlord and suggested that evangelicals would have to “repudiate everything they believe” to vote for him.¹ Other national evangelical leaders expressed similar views about his personal morality.

This is significant because ties between white evangelicals and the Republican Party have traditionally been strong. Since the early 1980s, evangelical leaders forged an alliance combining a conservative social platform with Christian moral values. Evangelicals have expected two things of presidential candidates, to uphold socially conservative policies to return America to its Christian heritage, and to exemplify a high standard of Christian morality in their own personal lives.² Coverage during Mr. Trump’s candidacy exposed information that contradicted these expectations. This put evangelical leaders in a tough position to weigh their traditional support for Republican candidates against these moral issues. As a result, a divide occurred among national evangelical leaders with some supporting Trump and others vocally distancing themselves from the candidate. This paper sought to identify how religion impacted the decision-making process of evangelical religious leaders in southeastern Kentucky to either support or not support Mr. Trump. Information was gathered from an online survey and personal interviews created and conducted by the authors.

1.1 Definitions

The term “evangelical” is defined according to the following characteristics: a belief in the significance and importance of personal conversion, a belief that the Bible is the perfect word of God, and an emphasis

on the importance of being a witness with the intention of converting others to Christianity.³ The evangelicals comprising this study's sample are located within the Bible belt region of the United States, specifically in the Appalachian region of southeastern Kentucky and northeastern Tennessee. This region is known for its high levels of religiosity. For instance, 49 percent of adults in the state of Kentucky self-identified as being an evangelical.⁴ This percentage is significantly higher than the national level of evangelical presence, where a quarter of those that voted in the 2016 election identified as white, born-again evangelicals.⁵

The data indicates that the rift observed at the national level did not manifest at the local or regional level. Instead, we found overwhelming support for Mr. Trump. In Kentucky, 62.5 percent voted for the Trump candidacy.⁶ In the southeastern counties of the state, 70 percent to 85 percent of the electorate voted for Mr. Trump.⁷ The data of this paper confirms these numbers. Only a small portion of those surveyed would conclude that national leaders had made an impact on them locally. Beneath this monochromatic voting pattern, interviews revealed that evangelicals arrived at their decision in distinctly different ways. Ultimately, evangelical leaders approached Mr. Trump's candidacy from four main perspectives. These four perspectives included Prophetic, Morality, Christian Issue, and Pragmatic voters. It was clear that local evangelical leaders were also divided over Mr. Trump's candidacy, but this study revealed a variety of different reasons motivating ballot choices.

2. Theory

Christian evangelicals have exhibited a tendency to support the Republican Party, its platform, and its candidates. This penchant for the Republican Party is rooted in the concept of group identity. When an individual identifies with a group, he or she is more likely to adopt the norms of that group. These norms include the behaviors and attitudes that characterize a group. For example, if someone identified with an environmental group, he or she would be more likely to adopt behaviors such as composting and recycling, as well as similar attitudes toward issues such as global warming and energy production. These attitudes and behaviors in turn can be used to define the group, and what it means to be a group member. These norms could include supporting a specific political party, often one that advocates public policy that is in line with other norms the group may have. If an individual strongly identifies with a group, it is probable they will adopt the norms of that group, including identifying with and voting for a party the group supports.⁸

The concept of group identity suggests that people who identify as Christian evangelicals will accept and embrace evangelical group norms. Through movements like the Moral Majority of the 1980s, support of the Republican Party has become an evangelical group norm.⁹ Research suggests that frequent social interactions lead to increased adoption of group norms: "regular church attenders can more easily pick up on group norms and have their political views reinforced through casual conversations with fellow congregants."¹⁰ For the evangelical Christian leaders surveyed in this study, the expectation was that the propensity to affiliate with the Republican Party would be greater due to high levels of involvement within the social group and greater degrees of social interaction than the typical evangelical Christian.

The trend of evangelical Christian support for the Republican Party is patently observable and fits into a larger theoretical framework that informed this study's research question. Specifically, this study was designed to understand how evangelical Christian leaders in southeastern Kentucky and northeaster Tennessee made their voting decision, a concern that is best discerned in the broader context of vote choice theory. In 1960, Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes suggested that party identification was the primary motivation behind for whom a person will vote. Party identification is defined as "a long-term stable psychological affinity for one of the two major parties"¹¹ Their voting decision model, called the Michigan model, is a leading model in vote choice theory.

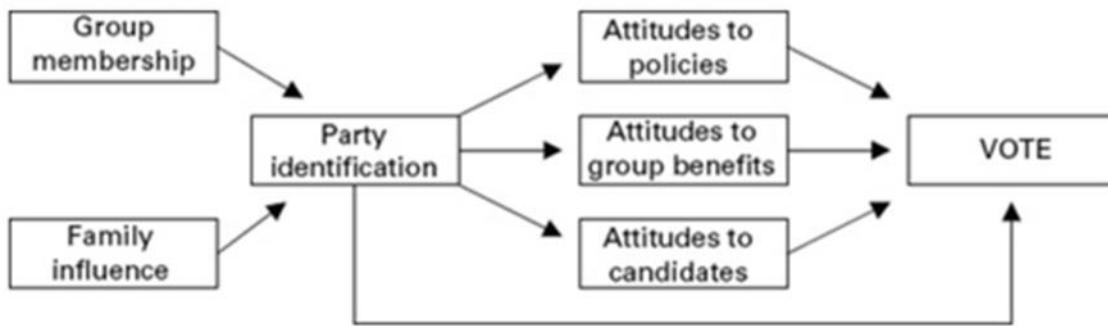


Figure 1. Michigan Socio-Psychological Model¹²

The model is comprised of several parts, the first being long-term influences. This includes family influence and group membership, both shaping an individual's party identification. In the environmental example, membership in an environmental group does impact an individual's party identification, but that influence must be weighed against family influence, which could reinforce or contradict their environmental attitudes and association with that party. The potential for tension to exist between family influences and membership in the evangelical church is present. If a contradiction between the two is present, an individual reconciles those differences, with one outweighing the other or an internal compromise between the two being met. These long-term influences act as the prism through which an individual observes the political realm, resulting in identification with a party.

If vote choice could be boiled down to these long-term influences though, an election outcome would be simply a matter of arithmetic, uncomplicated by the clash of issues and candidates. In reality, there are several short-term influences that either reinforce or change a person's vote. Party identification is still the most accurate indicator of how a person will vote, but the elements that vary from election to election can intervene and cause a person to vote against their party identification. These influences include attitudes to policies, group benefits, and candidate characteristics. For example, a voter who identifies with the Green Party due to their membership in an environmental group may choose to vote for a Democratic candidate instead because they believe that party's platform is strong enough on environmental issues and has a better chance at winning office. For the purposes of this study, we focused on how attitudes towards the candidacy of Donald Trump affected how regional evangelical Christian leaders cast their ballots, using the Michigan model as the guide to understanding the influences on vote choice.

3. Methodology

This research study sought to find how the religious beliefs of local evangelical leaders in southeastern Kentucky and northeastern Tennessee affected their decision-making process in the 2016 election season. To pursue this goal a mixed method approach was implemented, using both quantitative data gathered from surveys and qualitative data gathered from interviews with evangelical leaders in our region. This allowed for the gathering of a larger amount of data for statistical analysis, but also provided an opportunity to gather more insight into the thoughts of these leaders by engaging in a dialogue.

The survey used was designed to obtain data on the participants' political orientations, voting choices in the 2016 election, positions on faith in politics, information sources, and concerns regarding the Trump candidacy. Survey participants were selected on the basis of two criteria. First, they must be a church leader in an evangelical church; Second, their church must be in a region extending north to Richmond, Kentucky; south to Knoxville, Tennessee; east to the Virginia border; and west to Whitley City, Kentucky. Bing and Google maps helped identify evangelical churches in this region which was then compiled into a list of churches to contact. These public sources were also used to find potential participant contact information (street addresses, E-mail addresses, and phone numbers). Survey respondents were not asked for their name or other personally identifiable information in order to protect their privacy. Surveys were conducted through SurveyMonkey.com. Just under 300 surveys were sent to evangelical leaders in our region and the response rate was around 8 percent.

Candidates for interviews were selected from pastors and ministry leaders in the region in much the same manner as survey participants. Consideration was taken in diversifying our interview base by intentionally interviewing female evangelical leaders in addition to males (which make up most evangelical leaders in our region). We contacted pastors

and ministry leaders via email and phone and asked if they would be interested in participating in an interview. Some interviews were conducted over the phone while most were conducted face-to-face. Thirteen interviews were conducted in total. Interview questions covered many of the same topics as the survey questions, with the hope they would provide greater insight into the leaders' thought processes. All interviewees were asked the same base-set of questions in addition to follow-up questions based on information that they shared during the interview.

Interviews were recorded with the interviewees' consent and later transcribed so that we could analyze the data more efficiently. In analyzing the interview data, important phrases, words, and concepts were tagged in each interview. This allowed for the grouping of interviewees into categories based on what was important to them in their decision-making process, such as morality, Christian issues, and party affiliation. Consideration of the sources from which these leaders acquired political information was analyzed, in addition to the people who influenced them, to see if there was a trend in who evangelicals were looking to and trusting in for election information.

4. Data Analysis

4.1 Influence Rift

The data points to an "influence rift" between national evangelical leaders and the target population. The views of national evangelical leaders are not influential concerning the political decision making of local evangelical leaders. One-hundred percent of all research participants were aware of the controversy among evangelical leaders regarding the Trump presidential candidacy. Yet 88 percent of the target population felt as though this divide at the national level did not influence their decision regarding which candidate to support. Roughly 10 percent of evangelical leaders in the target region felt that the national divide exerted any influence on their political decisions. Of those evangelical leaders that identified an influence, not one acknowledged a national evangelical leader as most influential in developing their opinion. Instead, these individuals were most influenced, at 63 percent, by cable news; this is followed by 29 percent being most influenced by family and friends. The remaining 8 percent were most influenced by radio, political interest groups, and various campaign literature.

These statistics indicate that although there was great awareness of national evangelical leadership views, it had little if any effect. The clear majority, 88 percent, found this awareness to be negligible. One interviewee stated, "There's not a single religious leader that would change my vote". The remaining 12 percent that felt an impact did not even categorize the national evangelical leadership views as contending for most influential. Thus, this reveals an influence rift. National leader influence did not have a tangible influence upon the decision making of the local leadership counterpart.

4.2 Concerned Voters' Decision Making

Of all survey respondents, 54 percent voted for Donald Trump in the presidential election. Of those that voted for Trump, 85 percent stated that they held "serious concerns" about him. Of these concerned Trump voters: 46 percent held concerns about his temperament, 31 percent his ego, 23 percent his lifestyle, 15 percent his attitude towards women, and 8 percent his attitude towards people with disabilities.

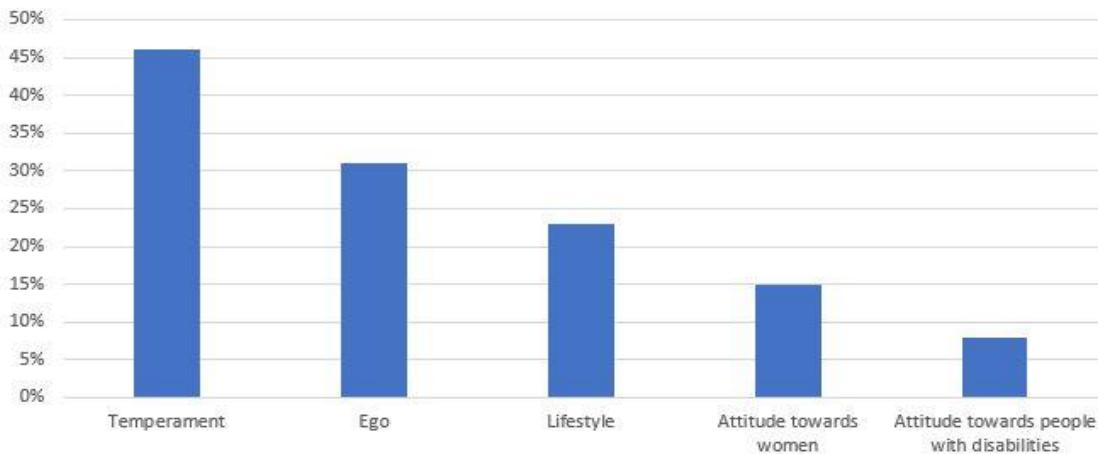


Figure 2. Trump Voters' Serious Concerns

Figure 2 When survey respondents who had already disclosed that they had voted for candidate Trump, they were asked what serious concerns if any they had with candidate Trump. A variety of answers were given, but it demonstrates that survey respondents grappled with issues similar to those that national evangelical leaders were addressing.

These serious concerns were mirrored at the national evangelical leadership level. A connection could be bridged based upon a premise of local evangelical leaders following voiced concerns of the national counterparts. However, this appears unlikely when compared to the dismal rate at which national leaders influenced local leaders. This connection could be best explained on the basis of a shared intrinsic moral system held by evangelicals.

With 85 percent of local evangelical leaders that voted for Trump holding serious concerns about his character and lifestyle one must ask the question, “Why did they, despite serious concerns, vote for Donald Trump?” Their reasoning seems to reflect the same reasoning held by many other Trump supporters. Eighteen percent of respondents noted his support for the American people and values, 18 percent to his status as a political outsider, 27 percent to his positions on issues and policy. The predominant reason given for supporting Trump, at 36 percent, was Trump being “not Hillary Clinton.” On this plurality position, one interviewee who voted for Trump had this to say, “I did not want to vote for him personally, but I sure didn’t want Hillary Clinton to win.”¹³

This sentiment was commonly expressed by the target population that voted for Trump. These evangelical leaders held even more serious concerns with Clinton’s morality than Trump’s. In many of these local leaders’ minds it was a case of the lesser of two evils. One interviewee had this to say, “probably my worst voting experience of my life, I didn’t even want to go . . . I felt guilty afterwards . . . I still in the end felt the conviction was that I couldn’t not vote for [Trump] because I was afraid Hillary might win.” Thirty-six percent of Trump voters that held serious concerns about their vote for Trump made their decisions based on the unacceptability of the alternative. Despite regretfully voting for Trump, they did so based on the commonly expressed premise that “a vote against Trump was a vote for Hillary.” These individuals, faced with serious moral concerns about Trump, decided based on the premise of the lesser of two evils.

While no local level evangelical leaders were most influenced by the national counterpart, data reveals the most influential sources for these local leaders. The most influential source for developing political opinions in the 2016 election, at 63 percent, was cable news, followed by 29 percent being family and friends. The remaining 8 percent were divided between radio, political interest groups, and campaign literature.

5. Voting Patterns

Through analysis of interview data, we were able to identify four distinct categories to explain how evangelical Christian leaders in our region decided for whom to vote. All interviewees held similar group membership, attributed to their leadership role in an evangelical Christian church. This group membership informed their party identification,

which for the most part was also similar. Most self-identified as either a Republican or as a moderate independent who leaned towards the Republican platform; only one self-identified as a Democrat, leading that individual to vote for Clinton in the general election. Most interviewees made the decision to cast their ballot for Donald Trump. The only exceptions were a write-in vote, an abstention, and the aforementioned Clinton vote.

Patterns in interview data revealed four clear categories for how individuals addressed the Trump candidacy. The first category was Prophetic Voters, who looked for prophetic guidance in casting their vote. The second category was Morality Voters, who felt compelled to judge Trump's morality before making their decision. The third category was Christian Issue Voters, who assessed Trump's position on Christian issues before voting. The final category was Pragmatic Voters. These voters refused to apply a moral standard informed by Christian values when deciding to cast their ballot. Considering the differences in these categories is important when examining the political decision-making processes of evangelical Christian leaders. Each individual approached this controversial candidacy in a different way, but their similarities demonstrate trends in evangelical political thought that hold ramifications for future election cycles.

5.1 Prophetic Voters

The pattern of the Prophetic voter in the research data was distinctive. Out of all respondents, only one claimed to have voted for Donald Trump due to a prophetic prediction. As this interviewee stated, "Well, traditionally as a person, Trump is kind of out there. He's a character, not very prestigious as far as politics go, he's not even really a politician, which is cool. That's what was appealing to me. Then primarily I went off of a prophecy that was given by Kim Clement in 2009, that's really what I went off of." When further asked about this prophecy the interviewee stated that the prophecy, to an extent, spelled Mr. Trump's name out. He went on to say,

It actually kind of spelled his name out The prophecy really disclosed the word Trump in there, and it was like the trumpet was going to sound and God was going to use his "trump card." Then he said he was going to be called "The Donald." When it was said it was just kind of one of those things that went over your head. But when he started running these things just started popping up on pastor friendly websites and it just had a lot of buzz going around. I just said to God, if this is your guy, and he's the guy for this season then that's the way I'm going to vote.¹⁴

For this interviewee, the real motivation behind his voting decision was this single prophecy. With the confidence that Trump was God's chosen candidate, this prophetic voter was able to cast his ballot without any serious reservations.

The interviewee noted that this prophecy was "popping up on pastor friendly websites, and it just had a lot of buzz going around." This quote indicates that there is a network of prophecy oriented evangelicals, which points to a population that we touched on but did not fully account for. Time constraints on the research kept us from further pursuing this intriguing possibility. Future research may reveal more voters who fall into this prophecy category.

5.2 Morality Voters

The category of voters that perhaps had the biggest hurdle to jump over when deciding which candidate to cast their vote for in the 2016 presidential election were the Morality voters. These voters made their decisions based upon their Christian moral principles and held candidates to moral criteria. These voters are defined by the fact that they chose to vote for their candidate based on who they believed was the most morally justified choice through the lens of their Christian world view. Using morality as the driving force in the voting procedure led interviewees to differing conclusions, with the category split between Trump, Clinton, and even write-in candidates.

There were many reasons that a morality-driven Christian leader would be led away from voting for Donald Trump. This is expressed well by the quote "I couldn't vote for Donald Trump either, just on moral grounds."¹⁵ Donald Trump's questionable morality was one of the major factors contributing to the split among evangelical leaders at the national level regarding Trump's candidacy. Leaders such as Russell Moore could not get over the things that Trump had said and the way he had publicly conducted himself, and as such refused to support his campaign.¹⁶ Other evangelical leaders such as Franklin Graham chose to support Trump because they believed he was an honest man who wanted what is best for the country.¹⁷

This split in morality-based votes was mirrored at the local level by respondents. Trump's comments about women which came to light during the election season also did not sit well with some of the Christian leaders we interviewed. One interviewee said, "But [Trump], you know, has the integrity of a strip-club owner or something."¹⁸ Another

respondent said that “his treatment of women was repulsive.”¹⁹ These sentiments were shared by other interviewees who voiced dissatisfaction with Trump’s moral character.

While some respondents chose to not vote for Trump based upon his morality, some found ways to justify Trump morally and vote for him despite the issues they may have had with him. “We all have a past,” said one interviewee said when asked about Trump’s morally questionable history.²⁰ This forgiving stance toward Trump’s moral issues reflects the widely held evangelical belief that we are all “sinners saved by grace.” One of the most important positive factors helping Trump with evangelicals on the issue of morality was the claim that he had a salvation experience early in the campaign season. Many survey respondents and interviewees were unconvinced of Trump’s salvation, such as the respondent who said, “but his salvation, I question that pretty heavily.”²¹ Others trusted Trump’s claim of salvation. “Part of being a true Christ follower is that your mistakes and sins are forgiven and the past and we’re not sinless even when we do come to know Christ.”²² For some voters Trump’s claim of salvation erased any concerns about his morality. They saw Trump as a new man who did not need to apologize for or to justify anything he had done in the past. These same voters were also not bothered by Trump’s behavior during the campaign season, which some leaders considered to be rude and not typical Christian behavior: “New believers are like babies; they make messes.”²³

Some morality-based voters resolved their doubts about the Trump candidacy by judging his character in comparison to that of his competitor, Democrat Hillary Clinton. This “lesser of two evils” perception of the 2016 election was expressed by many interviewees: “I did not want to vote for him personally, but I sure didn’t want Hillary to win,”²⁴ and “for us it really was the less of two terrible choices.”²⁵ For these Morality voters it was not that Trump was necessarily a morally-desirable choice, it is just that they viewed Hillary Clinton and the Democratic Party as a whole to be much worse morally by comparison. These voters typically viewed Hillary Clinton as dishonest, corrupt, and scheming: “Hillary knows how to be a politician.”²⁶ In addition to her long career in politics, perhaps the most cited reason that interviewees were against Hillary Clinton was that she is pro-choice. For many voters this was morally unjustifiable and literally any pro-life candidate would have gotten their vote. “I vote on the terms of life, especially in the realm of abortion”, one interviewee stated. This perception caused some interviewees to not vote for either of the two candidates as they viewed the choice between the lesser of two evils as still being evil.

Morality voters may have had the most issues to address in choosing whom to vote for in this last election. The suspicion that the Democratic Party was anti-Christian and morally corrupt kept them away from the party. Yet at the same time, they were sensitive to Donald Trump’s questionable past and abrasive talk. This made the Morality voter a more complex and volatile voting group that was truly unpredictable due to their application of Christian moral principles.

5.3 Christian Issue Voters

Perhaps the most predictable category of voters in the 2016 presidential election were the voters primarily focused upon Christian issues. These issues ranged from abortion to retaining/returning religious liberties through Supreme Court nominations. These interviewees unanimously voted Trump. Despite this, many were voting based on positions taken by the Republican Party on Christian issues, which resulted in an “unfortunately Donald Trump”²⁷ vote.

A presidential candidate’s views on abortion during the 2016 election was a major factor for evangelical voters. Many had an attitude of, “if you are in favor of abortion I am not going to vote for you for anything”²⁸ and “any pro-choice candidate is not going to get my vote.”²⁹ The single issue of abortion possibly held the most powerful influence on these voters. When comparing what many considered to be the only two presidential choices, Trump or Clinton, Christian Issue voters found themselves between a rock and a hard place. Although many evangelicals had significant qualms about Trump, Christian Issue voters felt forced to choose between an immoral man and a pro-choice candidate. With the level of importance placed on this issue by Christian Issue voters, the only true choice was the candidate representing the anti-abortion party, prompting a Trump vote.

Considering the emphasis given to abortion, these Christian Issue voters also turned to the make-up of the highest court of the land. These voters knew that any hope of reversing *Roe v. Wade* rested with the appointment of conservative justices to the Supreme Court. As such, the winner of the 2016 presidential election was expected to be afforded during their term an opportunity to replace several current justices. As one interviewee stated, “his presidential election was obviously going to change the makeup of that court.”³⁰ Not only do these evangelical voters view Supreme Court decision-making as a means of attacking abortion but also as a defense for religious liberties. One interviewee commented, “The only reason that I ended up voting for Trump is because I felt like the people who surrounded him may be able to influence him enough [on] things like Supreme Court justices.”³¹

While Christian Issues voters may have had the simplest process in deciding who to vote for, this was not necessarily an emotionally easy process. Many felt that Trump was an unfortunate necessity. For many voters in this camp, it was not a "pro-Trump" vote but an "in-spite of Trump" vote.

5.4 Pragmatic Voters

The final category of voters that we identified during analysis of interview transcripts can be classified as Pragmatic voters. Unlike the other categories, Pragmatic voters did not consider faith to be instrumental in their decision-making processes. Instead, they selected a candidate based on secular criteria. This category is the most distinct of the evangelical voter categories, but their choices were unanimous: Pragmatic voters in the target region chose to cast their ballots for Donald Trump.

On the matter of faith, there was a degree of variance among Pragmatic voters. Faith views and political views could be seen as a Venn diagram, in which overlap between the two spheres existed for some, but were totally separate for others. As a whole, these voters expressed that they "don't mix [their] religion and politics a whole lot."³² One interviewee seemed to express a desire to use faith to inform his voting decision in the 2016 election, but said that "it was difficult to make faith a filter one way or the other."³³ Another pragmatic voter stated though that "years before Trump ever decided to run," she had reached the conclusion that she "would never vote for a candidate based on their morality."³⁴ This voter adopted the most drastic position on the issue of using faith to inform a voting decision. Even with this variance, Pragmatic voters adopted a two spheres approach to their vote choice, selecting a candidate not according to any sort of faith benchmarks, but instead based on the candidate's leadership ability and their platform on entirely secular issues.

This represents a critical departure from how evangelicals voted under the traditional Moral Majority model. While these voters continued to express a preference for the Republican Party and its platform, the reasons for doing so lay not in any sort of moral conviction. Part of what makes this voting pattern intriguing is the history of evangelical voters. During the election of President Carter, evangelicals were called "to abandon their historical distrust of politics," resulting in the greatest mobilization of white evangelical voters in previous elections.³⁵ After President Carter's election, a conservative push for evangelical mobilization came under the banner of the Moral Majority movement. Led by Pastor Jerry Falwell, the movement changed the way that many evangelicals approached the political sphere. The Christian Right movement in general transformed evangelicals from removed citizens, to engaged voters working to preserve the moral heart of the nation. In the 2016 Presidential election season, a portion of the evangelical population captured in this Pragmatic voting pattern moves away from this model, but maintains political engagement rather than returning to the detached behavior exhibited by evangelicals prior to mobilization.

For voters from other categories, the salvation of candidate Donald Trump factored into their political decision-making. Pragmatic voters seemed uninterested in Trump's salvation, not knowing if Trump was a born-again Christian but also not really caring one way or the other. When asked about whether they believed that Trump was in fact saved, pragmatic voters expressed similar sentiments. One interviewee said that he "could never know [Trump's] heart,"³⁶ making it a moot point from his perspective. Another suggested that speculating on the matter may even be inappropriate for evangelical Christians to engage in, saying that "we aren't really fruit inspectors."³⁷ For Pragmatic voters, the matter of Trump's salvation status simply did not play a role in how they reached their voting decision.

Pragmatic voters felt unburdened by the need to apply faith-based criteria in making a choice. Their belief that God is in control of all situations removed some of the pressure of election results. "The Bible teaches that anybody who's in power, comes to that power by God's work... if it is God's intention that person be in office, they will be in office,"³⁸ said one Pragmatic voter. The idea that "the providential will of God was going to win out, no matter what"³⁹ gave Pragmatic voters the space necessary to make the decision that they felt would be best for the country with the knowledge that whatever the electoral outcome, God remained in control. And for some, it was the reminder that "God has never needed a sympathetic government to do His work"⁴⁰ that allowed them to cast their ballot for someone who incited discord among the evangelical Christian camp.

So if faith was not informing the voting decisions of Pragmatic voters, what was? The answer to this question varied from one Pragmatic voter to the next, but generally their decisions revolved around secular issues that permeated the election season. Several were searching for a candidate that spoke to their positions on economic matters, such as jobs and taxes. One interviewee was attracted to Trump because he proved "that he's not just going to bend over to do whatever the establishment wants him to do."⁴¹ Another said that he felt that Trump "did well in exposing the fact that both parties haven't done a good job of representing a vast demographic of Americans."⁴² The same qualities that attracted many non-evangelical voters to Donald Trump appealed to these Pragmatic voters as well. Even for a

Pragmatic voter who articulated some moral reservations regarding the Trump candidacy, he hoped that “the ideas that [he] wanted to win out [were] a bigger deal than the person espousing them.”⁴³

Pragmatic voters faced the same hurdle that other evangelical Christian leaders had to confront before reaching their final voting decision. But for Pragmatic voters who took on a two spheres approach, their hurdle seemed much smaller. They did not need to excuse any immoral behaviors or perceived lack of commitment to the Christian faith exhibited by candidate Trump. Instead, they were able to cast their ballot for Trump with the understanding that it was not a reflection of their own faith views. Just as Morality voters and Christian Issue voters could not fathom voting without finding a way to reconcile their faith position with the Trump candidacy, Pragmatic voters felt that moral behavior was irrelevant to their vote. As one interviewee states, “I would never vote for someone based on his character.”⁴⁴ The separation of faith and politics meant that Pragmatic Voters could overlook issues that presented big problems to other evangelical Christian leaders.

6. Conclusion

At the end of the campaign, evangelical voters turned out in droves to cast their ballots for the Republican candidate, just as they had in previous elections and will likely do in elections to come. Despite the questions raised often and loudly by several national evangelical leaders, the evangelical voting bloc remained a reliable element of the Republican coalition. But just as President Kennedy’s candidacy raised serious questions about the role of religion in the White House, President Trump’s candidacy presented a defiant challenge to those voting in accordance to moral and religious principles.

Outsiders could look at the 2016 election cycle and dismiss the outcries of religious leaders as simply white noise, pointing to the high margins as an indicator that the pattern has held. To take this view would be missing a subtle transformation within evangelical leadership. Pastors no longer deliver lengthy sermons on political topics, distribute voter guides to their congregants, or look to national leaders for cues on how to cast their ballots. This individualistic approach that pastors are taking towards politics is a stark departure from the days of Jerry Falwell and the Moral Majority. The fact that evangelicals continued to support the Republican candidate is not being disputed. However, it is clear that decision-making processes of evangelical leaders has evolved. In addition to the traditional evangelical model which concerns itself with the morality of a candidate, other patterns of decision making have emerged. Prophetic, Christian Issue, and Pragmatic voters all signal a departure from the traditional model, even if the prevalence of this departure remains to be explored.

This change did not occur overnight; however, it was not until Trump’s controversial candidacy that these leaders underwent a period of self-reflection that provided evidence for this change. As politicians consider the role that evangelicals will play in future elections, and as pastors reflect on their role in the political realm, acknowledging this change is critical.

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25. Interview 9.
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27. Interview 4.
28. Interview 13, 4 November 2017, Williamsburg, KY.
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32. Interview 12, 1 November 2017, Williamsburg, KY.
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39. Interview 9.
40. Interview 7.
41. Interview 12.
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