

Christian nationalists are enamored with Putin, even if they oppose Russia, new research says

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Russian President Vladimir Putin has found support in an unlikely place: the U.S.

Specifically, Christian nationalists, a subsection of America's religious right, have flocked to the country's autocratic leader, according to new research from a team of social scientists, including Sarah Riccardi-Swartz, an assistant professor of religion and anthropology at Northeastern University.

Riccardi-Swartz says this level of support for Putin among Christian nationalists is especially notable given their simultaneous opposition or indifference to Russia itself.

"Even if Christian nationalists are ambivalent to Russia as a geopolitical construct or if they view it as a threat, they are still favorable towards Putin as a political figure," Riccardi-Swartz says. "This seems to suggest that Americans who subscribe to Christian nationalist ideology are attracted to Putin as a strong man and ethno-nationalist leader just as they were with Trump."

Christian nationalism is an ideology that has, in recent years, has spread throughout Christianity in the U.S., Riccardi-Swartz says. It's not isolated to a single denomination and is defined by the belief that the U.S. is a Christian nation with specific values that must be protected from "some sort of moral decline because of the diversity of democracy and the diversity of society at large," Riccardi-Swartz says.

As a result, it's become inseparable from the "gods, guns, country mentality" that defines portions of the Republican party and U.S. conservatism, Riccardi-Swartz says.

To measure how favorable Christian nationalists were toward Putin and Russia, Riccardi-Swartz and her colleagues used data from the Public Religion Research Institute's 2018 American Values Survey, the Pew Research Center's American Trends Panel from 2021 and the 2022 National Addiction and Social Attitudes Survey. The data captures

Christian nationalist sentiments during Donald Trump's presidency, post-Trump and after the Ukraine invasion based on responses to a series of survey questions.

The study found that in 2018, respondents who indicated that America was or still is a Christian nation tended to score higher on favorability of Putin. Meanwhile, those who still believe the U.S. is a Christian nation, the most extreme category on the study's Christian nationalist scale, were also the most likely to be favorable toward Russia.

In 2021, the results were largely the same: As respondents scored higher on Christian nationalist measures, they were more likely to be favorable to Putin.

Notably, in 2022, after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, people who scored very high or very low on the study's Christian nationalist measures were both less favorable to Russia. However, the one thing that remained consistent was that as people placed higher on the Christian nationalist scale, the more they supported Putin as a leader. Russia's autocratic leader is, at least for the American religious right, somehow separate from the country he leads.

"Even if the actions of the state are somehow violent and perpetrating violence towards another country, the man himself seems to exemplify what Christian nationalists desire, which is arguably a white ethno-state," Riccardi-Swartz says.

The shift from the Red Scare concerns around the spread of Russian influence to Christian nationalists embracing Putin as aspirational might seem like a radical change. But for Riccardi-Swartz, it's not that surprising given the history of religious conservatism in the U.S. and Russia. The country, particularly during the Soviet era when the state worked to reduce the role of religion, has historically been the target of

evangelical efforts by American religious conservatives.

"American conservatives were always enamored with the idea of either saving Russia from itself or, now, using Russia to save themselves," Riccardi-Swartz says.

Riccardi-Swartz says Putin's attempt to brand himself as a protector of "traditional values" and Russian Christians, resulting in the resurgence of the Russian Orthodox Church, has also helped remake Russia into a symbol for Christian nationalists. To them, it's no longer an atheistic communist country; it's a place where Christians have religious freedom, according to Riccardi-Swartz.

"That seems very appealing to conservative Christians in the United States who feel our liberal democracy is infringing on their religious beliefs," Riccardi-Swartz says.

Between Putin and Christian nationalists, the ideal is a "purity"—cultural, religious, racial or sexual—that's in opposition to perceived social immoralities.

"LGBTQ+ rights, [transgender rights](#), abortion access, reproductive equality—that is a threat to them because they perceive of that as somehow tainting the purity of their social culture," Riccardi-Swartz says. "The goal then is to create a world in which the [social values](#) reflect that of their Christian values."

Riccardi-Swartz is adamant that this research is not just data-based social scientist theory. Christian nationalism is reshaping the state of affairs in the U.S. Trump rode a wave of popularity among Christian nationalists to the White House, which resulted in key Supreme Court picks. The conservative majority on the nation's highest court has since used that power to rethink everything from reproductive rights to the

separation of church and state.

At the same time, anti-trans rhetoric, framed as a response to perceived attacks on "traditional values," has become a pillar of Republican politics, resulting in a slew of legislation targeting transgender people and the LGBTQ community at large.

Riccardi-Swartz says if Putin is a source of inspiration for Christian nationalists, who have gained tremendous political power in recent years, that's only the beginning.

"If they look abroad to places like [Viktor] Orban's Hungary or Putin's Russia, those are places in which it's not just started; it's active," Riccardi-Swartz says. "That's appealing because they say, 'Hey, look, here's a blueprint for what we can do here.'"

The paper is published on the *SocArXiv* preprint server.

More information: Samuel Perry et al, The Religious Right and Russia: Christian Nationalism and Americans' Views on Russia and Vladimir Putin Before and After the Ukranian Invasion, *SocArXiv* (2023). [DOI: 10.31235/osf.io/bp79r](https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/bp79r)

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