How strong a role does religion play in US elections?

March 19 2020, by Jérôme Viala-Gaudefroy

Joe Biden at McKinley Elementary School in Des Moines, Iowa. Credit: Phil Roeder/Flickr, CC BY

On March 17, Joe Biden took firm control of the Democratic nomination process, winning primaries Florida, Illinois and Arizona by significant margins. The ongoing coronavirus epidemic is in part

responsible, having reshaped voters' worries and expectations, but the role played by religion in Biden's resurrection should not be overlooked.

Indeed, Biden's comeback began in South Carolina, where his win gave much-needed momentum for Super Tuesday. In that state, black voters make up a majority of the Democratic electorate. So it is no surprise that all the Democratic presidential candidates, including Bernie Sanders, flocked to African-American churches before the primary.

Black Americans, who are largely Democrats and older and less liberal, are the most religious group: 83%say they believe in God (compared with 61%of whites). They are also more likely to attend church and pray.

Greater presense of religion in American life

Even outside the African American community, the American people as a whole continue to stand out for their religiosity:

- 55% say they pray regularly (compared to about 10% in France and 6% in the UK).
- 87% say they believe in God.
- 56% say they believe in God "as described in the Bible"

In other words, Americans are still far more religious than people in any other wealthy nation.

A match between a secular socialist and a centrist Catholic

Of all of the presidential candidates, Bernie Sanders is probably the least religious. He identifies himself as both Jewish and secular, does not participate in any organized religion and defends the separation of

church and state.

Sanders has a political vision of religion. He connects religious beliefs in general, and his Jewish heritage in particular, to social and economic justice. He often praises Pope Francis, and calls him a socialist.

But the rise and success of identity politics suggests that race or religion may matter more than economic justice.

Sharing faith, making connections

Joe Biden's record on race may be great, but he was vice president to the first black president, Barack Obama. Contrary to Sanders, he has not been talking about religion but rather about his faith. And he has done so not in political terms but in emotional and personal terms. For instance in a town hall meeting in South Carolina, he was able to connect with an African American pastor whose wife was killed by a white supremacist by sharing personal tragedy: the loss of his own wife and daughter in 1972 and his son in 2015.

By building an empathetic bond with voters, he also avoids taking pointed positions on controversial issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage. This seems to be working: he is the only Democratic candidate considered "rather religious" by more than half of American adults (55 percent).

While expressing genuine grief, he has turned his sorrow and pain into political assets, having no qualms about using them in this campaign ad, for example, where he says almost word for word what he expressed in the CNN town hall interview with the pastor.

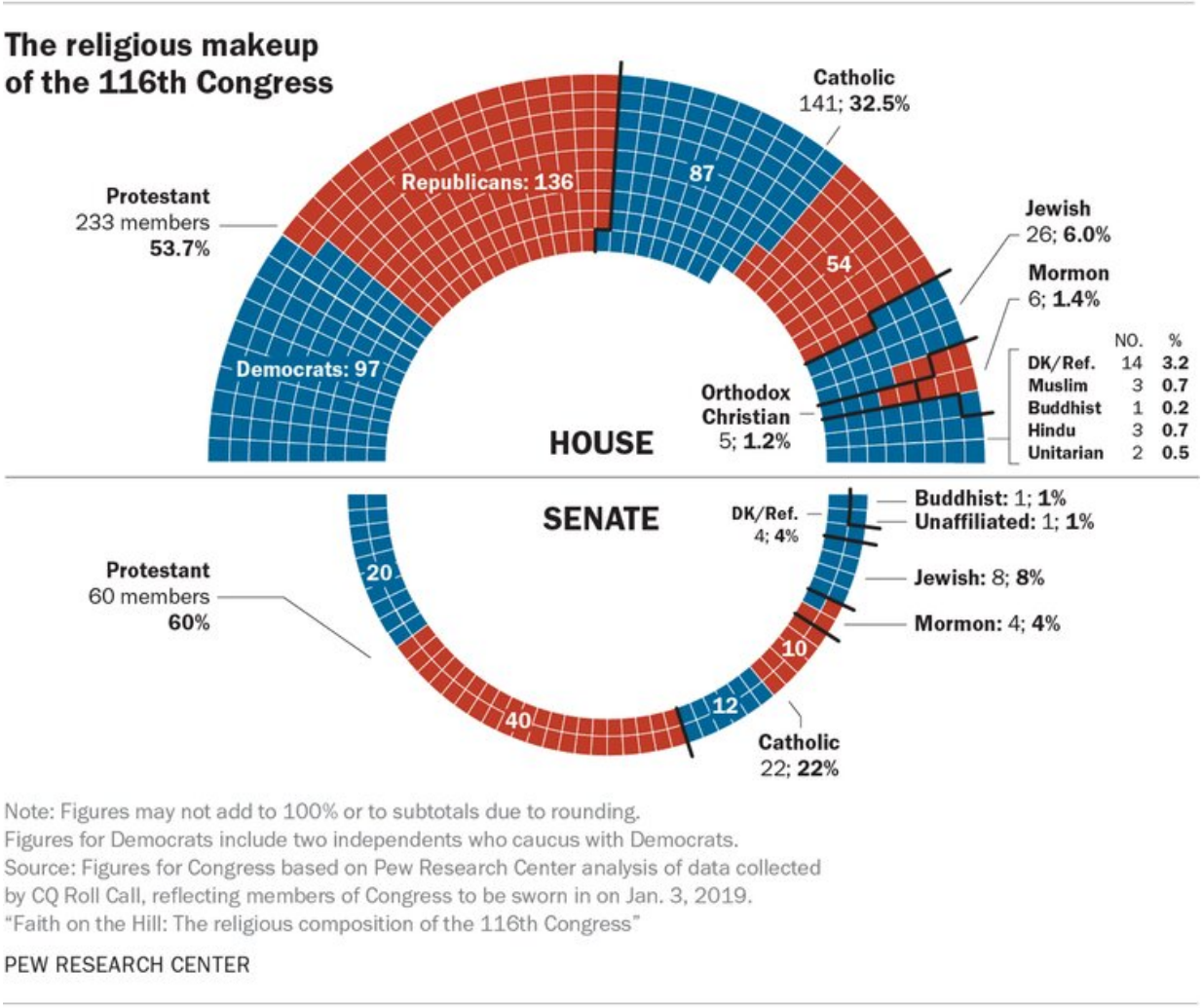
He won 65% of the most religious black voters in South Carolina as well as a good size of the religious white voters (43% compared to 16% for

Buttigieg and 14% for Sanders).

Religion in Congress

If you have doubts about the relevance of religion in politics in the United States, just look at the US governing bodies. The 116th American Congress is more diversified on the religious level, but remains overwhelmingly Christian (88% against 71% of the adult American population).

Only one elected representative, Senator Kyrsten Sinema (Democrat of Arizona), claims to be nonreligious and no member describes themselves as an atheist. Even someone as far to the left as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez mentions her Catholic faith in Congress and even quotes the Bible on social networks.



Religion in the White House

Religiosity is even more visible in the White House. US presidents have been invoking faith and God ever since George Washington expressed his "fervent pleas to this Almighty Being who rules the universe" in his 1789 inaugural address. Moreover, scholars observe that the use of religious language and even explicit references to God have increased in

presidential rhetoric since the 1980s. For example, David Domke and Kevin Coe write that iterations of the phrase "God bless America," the most explicit statement linking God and country, are now expected in all major speeches, although they were almost entirely absent prior to Ronald Reagan.

According to a recent study by semantic scholar Ceri Hughes, this trend seems to be even more pronounced with Donald Trump.

Although he claims to be a Presbyterian Protestant, there is ample evidence, as historian John Fea has shown, to suggest that the current tenant of the White House is the least religious president of the modern era. Yet he invokes religion the most, and the political strategy is obvious: after all, in 2016, 81% of white Evangelicals voted for Trump. His promise: to defend them in the culture wars, especially on the subjects of abortion, LGBTQ rights and school prayer.

Beyond the particular case of Donald Trump, all presidents of the modern era have identified as Protestant Christians, with the notable exception of John Kennedy whose Catholicism proved to be a campaign issue for him. No person of the Jewish faith has received a presidential nomination from a major party (Joseph Lieberman received only the Democratic vice presidential nomination in 2000), and the Mormon affiliation of Mitt Romney, the Republican candidate in 2008, was not without controversy.

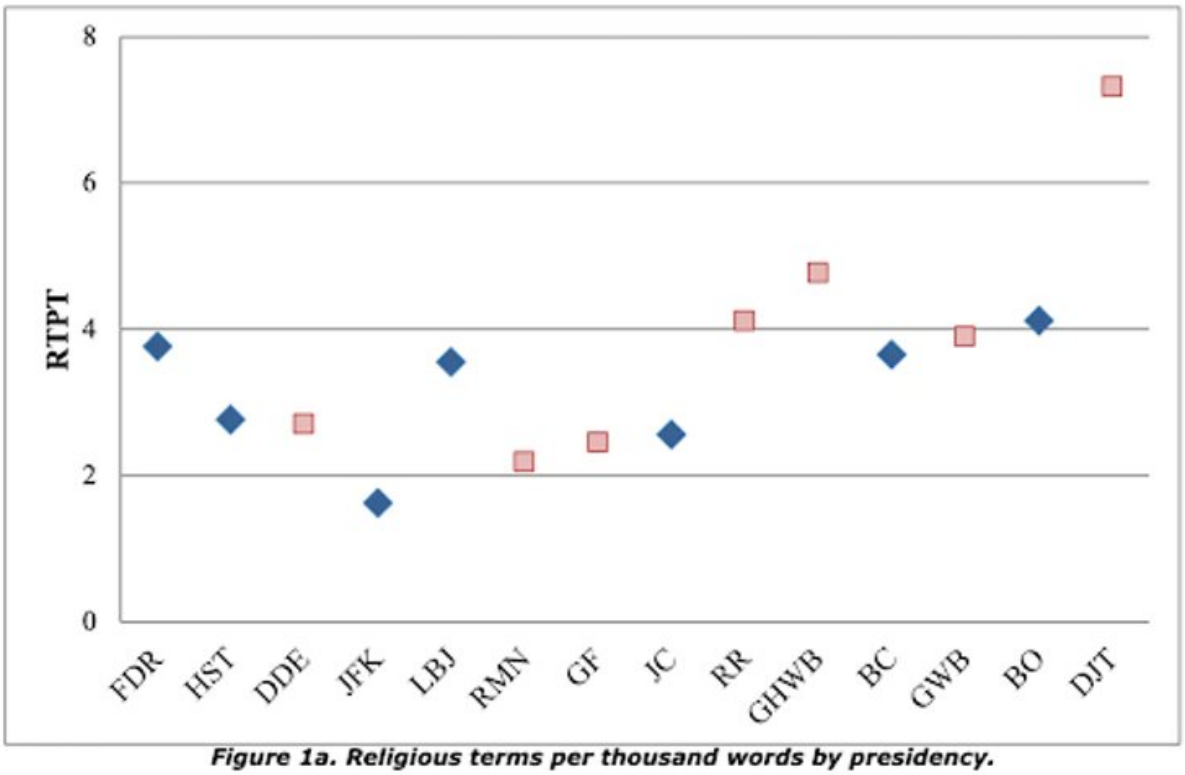


Figure 1a. Religious terms per thousand words by presidency.

Religion in Presidential rhetoric.

A changing religious landscape

The ever-increasing presence of religious rhetoric in political discourse is both the reason for and the consequence of the politicization of religion, particularly of white Evangelicals, since the 1970s. This politicization has highlighted the racial divide that exists in the United States. According to the PRRI (Public Religion Research Institute), a non-profit, non-partisan organization, "no religious group is more closely linked to the Republican Party than white Evangelical Protestants."

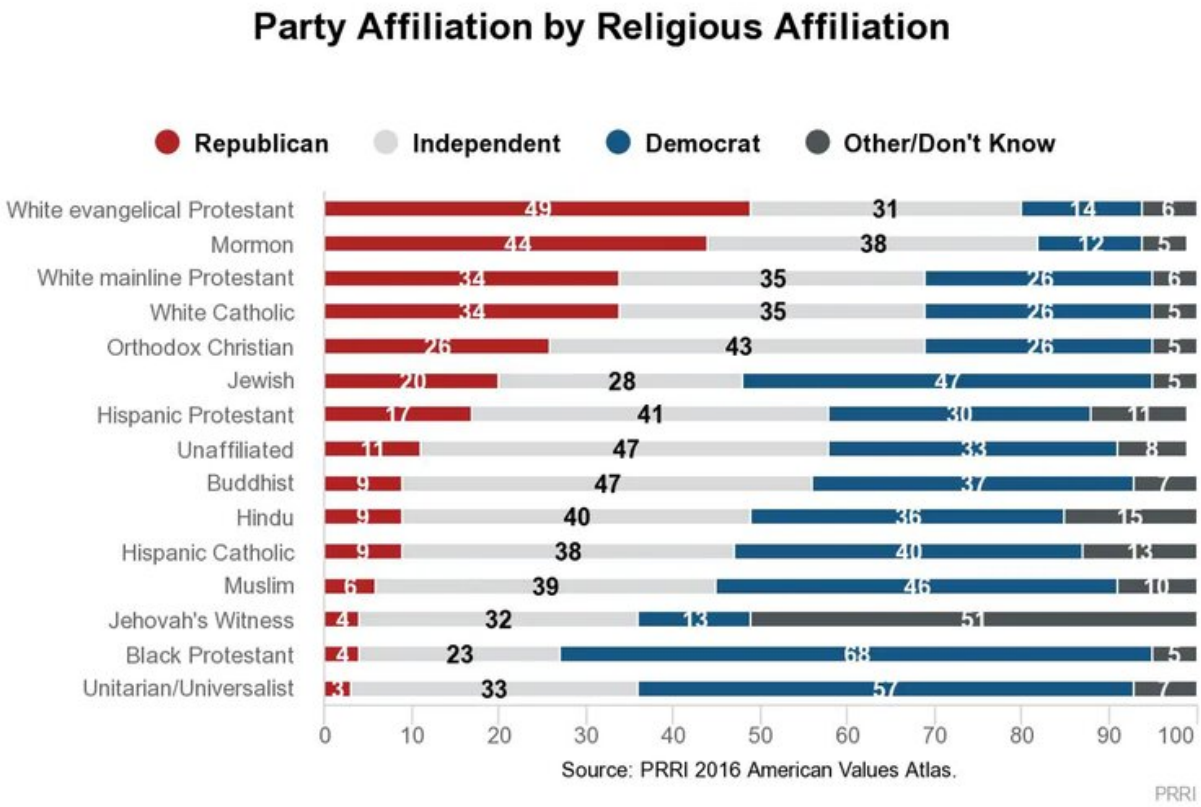
The label "evangelical," however, is a complex one. It is a trans-denominational movement mostly within Protestant Christianity based

on a set of personal core beliefs:

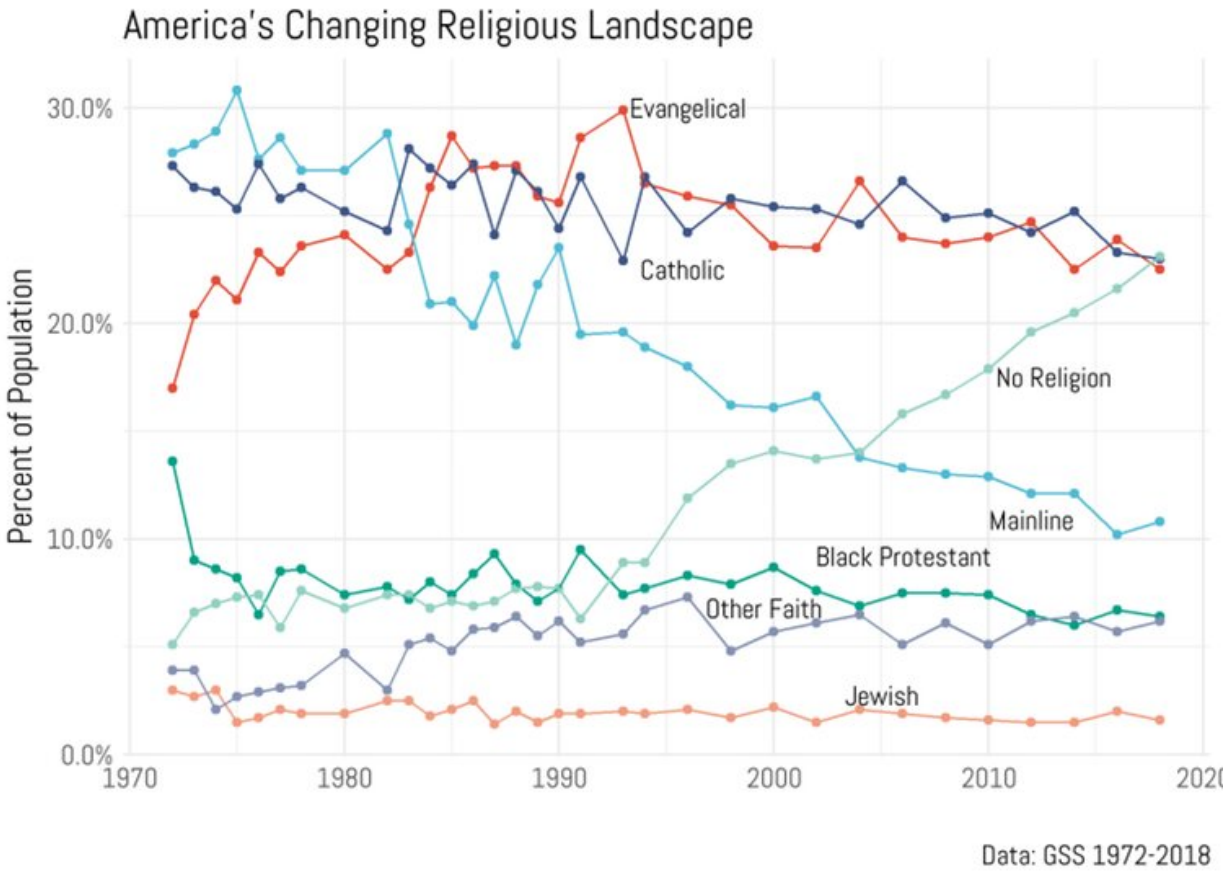
- The Bible at the center of faith
- The atonement for sins through Jesus' death on the cross.
- Personal conversion and salvation.
- The sharing of the gospel, from which this movement takes its name.

But not all evangelicals are white and conservative. There is a small proportion of non-white Evangelicals (about 25%) as well as some white Evangelicals who are progressive (about 15 percent) and tend to vote for Democrats.

Nevertheless, statistics show a slow erosion in the number of Americans who identify as Evangelical Protestants__ since the 1990s, particularly in the younger generations. Similarly, the number of Catholics has slowly declined, while the number of historic Mainline Protestants has virtually collapsed.



Party Religious Affiliation.



America s Changing Landscape.

See this graph by political scientist Ryan Burge (based on GSS data) :

The trend most discussed by academics (here, here, or here) is the increase in the number of Americans who do not identify with any religion, namely the *nones* (not affiliated with a religion). They are now at least as numerous as evangelicals, if not more. But as researcher Lauric Henneton notes, *nones* have in common only that they do not want to be counted as belonging to a religious group or established traditions. It says nothing about their actual beliefs.

A 2014 Pew Research Center survey shows that atheists and agnostics are on the rise, but still account for less than a third of nones, with the rest identifying themselves as "nothing special." Unsurprisingly, Bernie Sanders is a favorite among the *nones*.

Religion and younger voters

Younger generations are increasingly unaffiliated with a religion or a church, but they are also the generations least likely to vote which reduces their impact on the elections. Even if they voted more, as they did in 2018, America's institutional political structure amplifies the power of whiter, more rural, more Christian voters.

Religion is thus likely to continue to play a major role in US elections for years to come. And with the help of what Katherine Stewart calls the "Christian nationalist machine," Donald Trump will certainly make religious identity a central element of his campaign.

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