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Religious Views as a Predictor of Vote Choice

Erienne Plotkin

"Religious institutions are neither designed nor intended to mobilize political action. Yet, across the globe, they seem to have done precisely that" (Wald, Silverman, and Fridy).

Key words, names, terms, concepts: religion, religion and politics, religious belief, religiosity; voter choice; 2008 election.

Introduction to Research

This is a study of the relationship between the religious beliefs of people in the United States and their voting patterns. It is also a comparison between such results and that of more traditional voting predictors such as economic status or education level of voters. In general, there has been an apparent separation of church and state. More common predictors of voting behavior that have been used in the past are traditional demographics such as education levels and economic status. Although these traditional predictors are often accurate, religious belief and churches may play a greater, if insufficiently recognized role in the political voting process.

This study hypothesizes that the religious variables will be superior to the predictive power of other demographic measures of the same population. This study will compare the results of religious questions to those of "To what economic class do you belong?" and "What is the highest level of education you have completed?" that are often used as reliable predictions of voting behavior.

Literature Review

Kenneth D. Wald and Clyde Wilcox researched the lack of inclusion of religion in the discipline of political science before the 1980s, as well as the reason for its resurgence at that time in their article "Getting Religion: Has Political Science Rediscovered the Faith Factor?" The first part of their research discussed the origin of political science as a discipline. It was based heavily on sociology; the authors argue that had it drawn on European social theory instead there might have been a greater emphasis on religion. They also account for the separation of church and state at the time of the founding of our country as an additional factor. In general, political scientists largely had little faith and little interest in religion.

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The latter part of their research concludes that the resurgence of religion in the 1980s was due to Iran becoming an Islamic republic. The United States felt threatened, and thus created a counterpart in the Christian Right. Also, social issues emerged at and after that time provoking the new Religious Right to cling to their Biblical values, so scholars were inspired to study the influence and power of religion.

The authors collected quantitative data of the amount of religion-related articles in the *American Political Science Review* from 1960-2002. Also, they drew on surveys of political scientists' faiths, which were conducted by UC Berkeley's Research Center. The authors chose to use manifest content statistics of the numbers of religious articles in academic journals because that was all the data support they needed for their own article. They did not need to survey people with degrees of interest in religion or any other survey questions. They only needed hard statistics of the contents of scholarly journals. However, they did analyze such data that presented itself, not relying only on manifest content analysis. They discovered that more than 80% of the religious articles that were present appeared in the subfields of public law, political philosophy, and religion itself. Religion was largely ignored in other subfields in the *Review*.

The data acquired was thorough and covered a convincing number of years of the *American Political Science Review*. However, Wald and Wilcox did not account for outside variables that would explain the lack of religious articles in political journals, such as lack of public interest or other cultural subjects that were more relevant to the society at the time. Nathan J. Kelly and Jana Morgan Kelly address the relationship between religion, ethnicity, and partisanship among Latinos in the United States in their work "Religion and Latino Partisanship in the United States." They attempt to answer the question of whether or not religion is a factor in Latino's voting patterns.

Kelly and Kelly conclude that religion does play a great factor in Latino voting preferences. They also discuss the largely ignored cleavage of Catholic/non-Catholic Latinos that has resulted in inaccurate research in the past. Religion is very important to Latino politics and, surprisingly, Protestant Latinos are more likely to be Republicans than Catholic Latinos. "In fact, affiliation with a mainline Protestant church as opposed to the Catholic Church produces, on average, a shift of almost a full point scale (with religious commitment at its mean level)" (Kelly and Kelly). The authors also found that those who hold no religion are much more likely to identify with the Democratic Party, more so than Roman Catholics (Kelly and Kelly). They used data from the National Election Studies of 1990-2000, which presented hard quantitative statistics that included respondents' religion, national origin, and time spent in the United States. There was ample and extensive data to support their conclusions. They explained not only that religion was important and why, but *how* people's politics were influenced by religion.

In the article "God's Party? Race, Religion, and Partisanship Over Time," Eric L. McDaniel and Christopher G. Ellison research how the Republican Party has attempted to recruit minorities into membership, and how successful these attempts have been. In addition, they also attempt to tackle the ever-present question of why these attempts are or are not successful. It is widely known that the Republican Party has reached out to some ethnic minority groups because of their common moral belief system with regards to abortion, homosexuality, and of course, religion

itself. McDaniel and Ellison affirm the direct correlation between conservative religious beliefs and Republican Party identification, citing scholars such as Layman and Wilcox in their explanation. Specifically, the factor of Bible literalism was used as evidence of their argument: "Christians with a literal interpretation of the Bible have become a core section of the party, moving from outside of mainstream politics and becoming a true force within the political system (Green, Rozell, and Wilcox 2003)" (McDaniel and Ellison). The GOP has been successful gaining Latino support, especially in the 2004 campaign with George W. Bush's "family values" campaign. As support, McDaniel and Ellison referenced studies that related how closely people believe in the Bible to their partisanship.

They drew from data from the Houston Area Survey, a randomly dialed telephone survey of residents of Harris County, Texas. They chose this study because it included data of race/ethnicity and partisanship over 20 years. This survey was very detailed, thorough, and convincing. It surveyed nearly 14 thousand people of different races and religions over 20 years with regards to party partisanship. The dependent variable of partisanship used a point system and the biblical literalism variable was recorded in a dichotomous measure. In order to determine how bible literalism influenced party ID over time, the authors used an interaction term, multiplying the bible literalism with the year measures. If the product was a positive coefficient, then the literalism did have an effect on party ID over time, and the converse for a negative coefficient. They controlled for age, education, income, gender, and ideology, the latter measured on a three-point scale.

From this data, they concluded that the GOP is most appealing to Anglo Protestants, then to Latinos, and finally blacks were virtually unaffected. They discussed the correlation between Bible literalism and religiosity to Republican partisanship, but also said that blacks have a historical loyalty to the Democratic party despite strong religious beliefs, a contradiction that should have been more thoroughly explained.

Geoffrey C. Layman's "Religion and Political Behavior in the United States: The Impact of Beliefs, Affiliations, and Commitment from 1980 to 1994" explores the growth of religiosity from people's religious beliefs to their political views. He concluded that when the variables were religious commitment and predicted probability of voting Republican, the probability of voting Republican steadily increased through the years.

Layman used statistical data to support his hypothesis that America has become, or had become at that time, divided into religious and nonreligious factions. He concluded that those with a high commitment to their religion were increasingly more likely to vote for Republican candidates than those who were less religious. To establish what denoted a strong commitment to religion, Layman used survey questions as data. One of the survey questions was the level to which they literally believed in the Bible. If someone strongly believed in the Bible, Layman would say argue that person would be so committed to their religion that it would affect their voting preferences. Therefore, in my study, I have chosen to use a similar question regarding Bible literalism as a meaningful way to distinguish those whose voting would be swayed by religion and those who would not.

Jim Dee covers the birth of the "New Right" that distinguished itself from the pre-1964 Republican ideals in his work "God's Own Voters." He wrote that the Republican Party actively tried to change their image and modernize

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the party. They spent millions of dollars to revamp their advertisements and outreach to voters, but once the party brought in evangelical Christians, it achieved its goal. New blocks of voters joined the Republican Party, and with renewed spirit also came an increase in voter turnout.

Clyde Wilcox teamed up with Mark J. Rozell and John C. Green in their joint article "Social Movements and Party Politics: The Case of the Christian Right." They studied Virginia, Minnesota, Washington, and Texas, monitoring the 1994 Senate election results in all four states to find out whether or not religion was an influence on people's vote choice. They discovered that the less people felt religion was a divisive issue, the greater a margin the Republican candidate won in the election. Using binary variables of whether or not voters felt religion was a divisive issue in the election, the authors found their hypothesis to be proven right. In Virginia, 42% of the voters felt religion was divisive, and 43% voted for the Republican candidate. In Minnesota, 40% thought it was divisive, and 49% voted for the choice on the Right. In Washington, a mere 13% felt it was divisive, and 56% of the votes went to the Republican. Finally, only 16% of Texans felt religiously divided, and 61% of the vote went to the Republican candidate. The authors also used thermometer scale surveys as data. Voters were asked to rank certain organizations and memberships on a thermometer scale, and Wilcox et al. documented the percentage of voters who ranked the issue as supportive as 75 or higher on the scale. The two issues of support that held my interest were those of "Christian Conservative" and "Christian Coalition" (Green, Rozell, and Wilcox). Twenty-eight percent of Virginians ranked Christian Conservatives as at least a 75 on the thermometer scale, and 30% felt warmly towards the Christian Coalition. In Minnesota, 31% supported both the issues. In Washington, where voters voted more Republican but gave less credit to religion, 38% supported Christian Conservatives and 40% supported the Christian Coalition. Texas, which held the largely victory for the Republican candidate, almost half supported Christian Conservatives (45%) and over half favored the Christian Coalition (51%) (Green, Rozell, and Wilcox).

Holes in Research

There has been ample research and data given about the variation between the different religious denominations and their voting record or affect on voting decisions (Knoke; Layman; Kelly and Kelly).

The American National Election Studies received financial funding from the National Science Foundation and created an extensive survey system that has contributed to countless studies of political science throughout the decades. However, the initial questionnaires did not accurately test for religious influence of voters. Due to serious error in data collection and analysis, scholars of religion and politics were often forced to use alternative methods and collections of study. Eventually, the ANES developed and enlarged the religious content so that researchers would be better able to study the relationship between religion and voting behavior (Wilcox and Wald).

Wilcox and Wald argue that modern scholarly work (post 9-11) that includes religion ignores its place in a broader context, and instead focuses on a "current events perspective" (Wilcox and Wald). As a result, this research will only be of interest to highly religious individuals, rather than the general group of political scientists.

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Plenty of research has indicated that evangelicals are inclined to side with the Republican Party, but there has been little exploration as to the future of this relationship. Stratos Patrikios tackles this query in his article "American Republican Religion? Disentangling the Causal Link Between Religion and Politics in the US." He dubs religion as an "unmoved mover" in terms of influences on politics (Patrikios). He uses data from the ANES studies, in particular the elections of 1972-6, 1992-6, and 2000-4. He concludes that one's attendance at church helps shape one's partisanship, and in turn, that partisanship reinforces such church attendance.

David Knoke analyzed the different variables that effected the results of the elections of the 1960s, arguing that religion played the largest role, in his piece "Religion, Stratification and Politics: America in the 1960s." Knoke argues against dichotomous variable measures, for they "often conceal as much information as they reveal" (Knoke). He uses a multivariate model that analyzes the relationship between the socioeconomic status, religious views, and presidential vote preference, a relationship that had been seen as unrelated in past research.

Knoke used a multiple classification analysis to discover the relationship between occupation, religion, education, income, and party identification. The use of MCS was similar to that of a multiple regression analysis. It uses an additive effect of the independent variables to the dependent variable, which, in a sociological survey might not always be rationalized. Knoke first asserts that religion is influential in order to progress with the MCA analysis.

Knoke surveyed the presidential elections of 1960, 1964, and 1968, finding that in each, religion held both the strongest zero-order and the strongest partial relationship to party identification. Second to faith, voters' education was a predictor of party identification. Occupation and income were approximately equal predictors, trailing behind education. Knoke assumes that if religion had no influence over vote choice, then it would show little in variance to party identification, when controls were added for education, income, and occupation. However, the data showed that religion's increment over party identification was between one to two times greater than that of social stratification. In the concluding words of Knoke: "The detailed coding of the religious variable revealed that it was the single most important of four predictors of political party identification, and was comparable to, if not more important than the *combined* effects of education, occupation, and income" (Knoke).

Given the time period during which this study was conducted, and the significance given to President Kennedy's Catholic religion, it might be expected that religion would be one of the large factors in vote preference. However, since this study, there has been none performed to further study if religion contributes to vote choice even when the religion of a presidential candidate was not an issue. I intend to study the relevance of religious views to vote choice in the present time, using the presidential elections of 2004 and 2008, as provided by NES data.

Hypotheses:

I intend to research the relationship between the theological beliefs of people and voting patterns in the United States, compared to the traditional relationship with regards to education levels and economic status and voting

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patterns. It is a new and interesting way to measure people's beliefs and their vote choices, and I intend to prove that it is superior to the predictive power of other demographic measures of the same population. I plan to use questions that have to do with people's religiosity, in particular: "How often do you pray every day?" and "Do you believe the Bible should be taken literally?" and compare the answers to the results of how those people voted in the 2008 election. I also want to research other questions that were commonly used as accurate predictors of voting, such as "What is your household income of the last year?" and "What is the highest level of education you have completed?" I hypothesize that the theological questions will prove a better indicator of voting patterns than the latter two questions.

Voters who pray more often than once a day will be more likely to choose a Republican candidate than voters who pray once a week or less often. The latter portion of voters will be more likely to choose a Democratic candidate. Voters who believe that the Bible is the word of God and should be taken literally will be more likely to choose a Republican candidate than voters who believe the Bible was written by man and should not be taken literally. The latter portion of voters will be more likely to choose a Democratic candidate.

The above hypotheses, if proven correct, are more accurate predictors of voting behavior than the classifications of economic status and education levels.

Data Analysis:

The question "Do you go to religious services every week, almost every week, once or twice a month, a few times a year, or never?" was asked from the National Election Studies organization during the 2008 Time Series. Out of the entire sample, almost 25% of voters who attend church every week voted for Senator McCain, compared to those who attend church every week and voted for then-Senator Obama: 17%. Almost 11% of the sample attended church a few times a year and voted for Obama, while a mere 7% of these voted for McCain. The rate of frequency that one went to church correlated to the choice of candidate. While Patrikios's study linked church attendance with vote choice, and Layman's work studied the relationship between religious and political views, my data analysis proves that their theories are still relevant and accurate to the present day. Very religious voters will choose the Republican candidate; non-religious voters will choose the Democratic candidate.

Figure 1 shows the independent variable of how often the voters pray and the effect on the dependent variable of vote choice during the 2008 Presidential election. "Outside of religious service, do you pray several times a day, once a day, a few times a day, once a week or less, or never?" The more often voters prayed, the more likely they were to vote for McCain rather than Obama. There was an overwhelming majority of people in the survey sample who never prayed and voted for Obama versus those who never prayed and voted for McCain. The less often voters pray, the more likely they are to vote for Obama rather than McCain. The gap started at less than one percent between the presidential choices, but gradually, as voters reached closer towards "never pray", the gap widened to almost three percent, in Obama's favor.

I've analyzed the dependent vote choice when influenced by the independent variable of the degree of Bible literacy: "Do you believe the Bible is the word of God and should be taken literally?" Those who felt the Bible should be taken literally voted more often for McCain; those who felt the Bible should not be treated as the word of God voted more often for Obama. These results are displayed in Figure 2.

Bible literacy was another excellent indicator of vote choice. Out of the entire sample, McCain's voters with strong Bible literacy views outnumbered Obama's voters with strong literacy by two percent. Obama's voters with weak Bible literacy almost doubled McCain's voters with weak Bible literacy, as can be seen in Figure 2.

I analyzed the relationship between one's household income of 2007 and their vote choice and presented the data in Figure 3. As is self-explanatory from the graph, household income is not an accurate predictor of vote choice. Those whose income was below \$17,000 annually overwhelmingly voted for Obama, but the middle class of voters more so overwhelmingly chose the Republican candidate. While between \$60,000 and \$99,000, voters favored Obama, once income passed the \$100,000 mark, voters once again voted for McCain. There appeared to be no incremental or logical incline or decline to the relationship between household income and vote choice.

The level of education one has completed also does not seem to have a correlation to one's vote choice. One would expect an incremental relationship with an increase of education that would lead proportionally to a preference over one candidate or another. As the graph of Figure 4 shows, there is no steady or relevant relationship between an increase or decrease in education and voting behavior.

The data is clear: religiosity, as measured by church attendance, biblical adherence, and biblical literacy, has shown itself to have far superior predictive and explanatory powers in analyzing Presidential choices in modern elections, or at least the 2008 election.

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Figure 1:

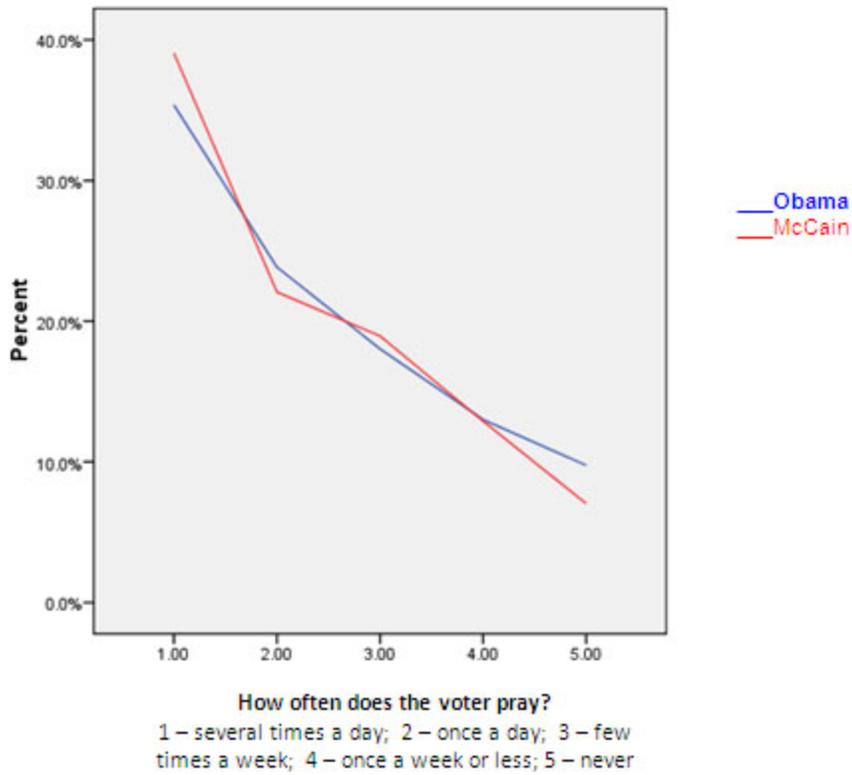
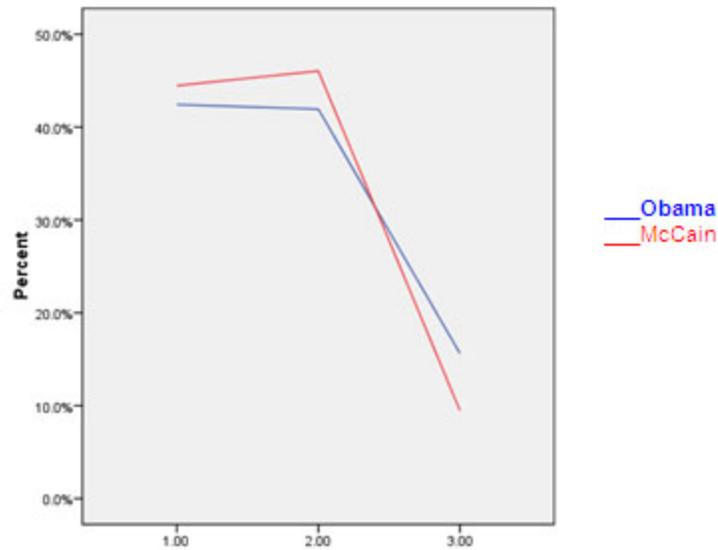


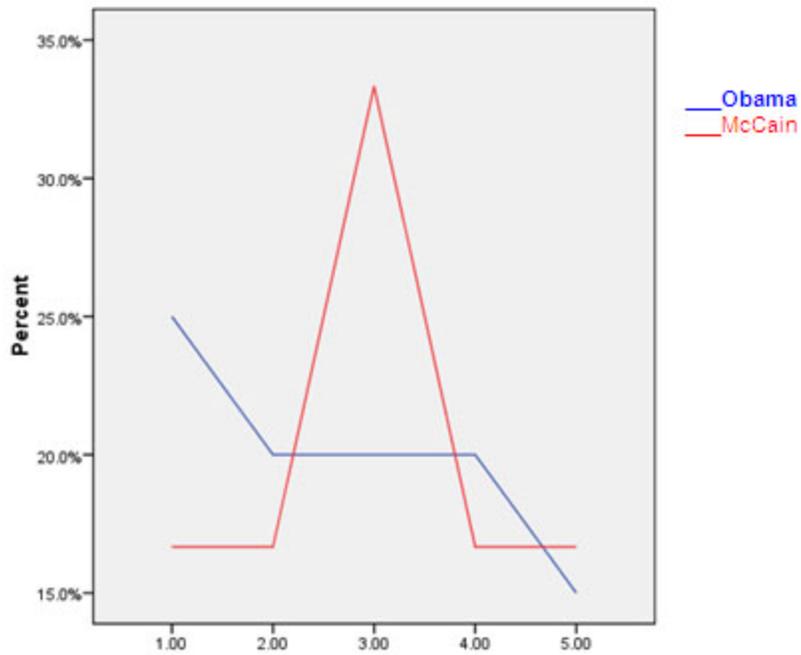
Figure 2:

Which of these statements comes closest to describing your feelings about the Bible?

- 1 – The Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken literally;
- 2 – The Bible is the word of God but not everything in it should be taken literally;
- 3 – The Bible is a book written by men and is not the word of God

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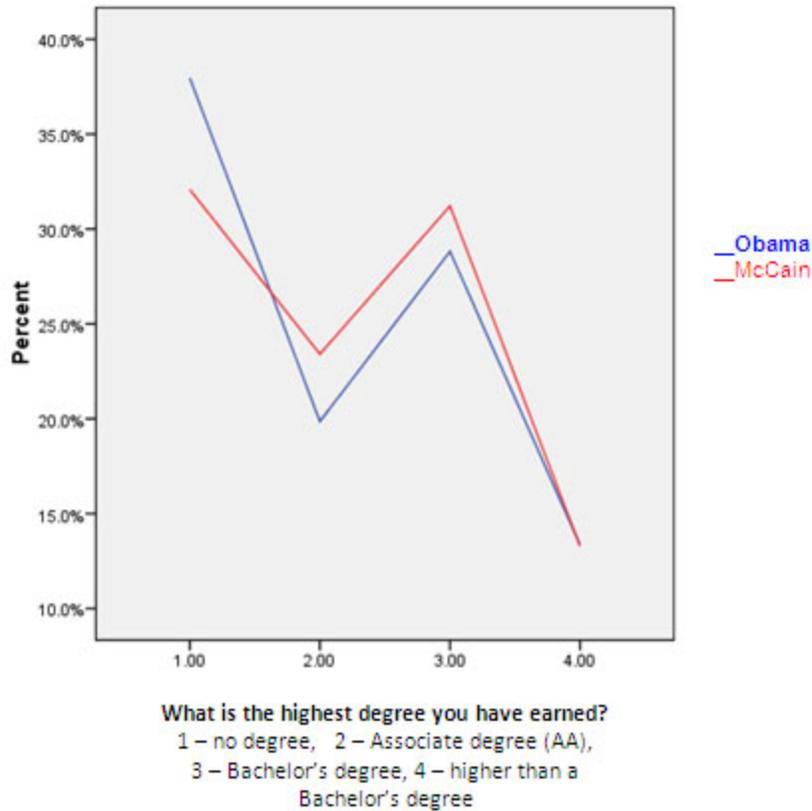
Figure 3:



Income of all members of household in 2007, pre taxes:

1 – none to \$16,999; 2 – \$17,000 to \$39,999; 3 – \$40,000 to \$59,000; 4 – \$60,000 to \$99,999; 5 – \$100,000 and above

Figure 4:



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*All data taken from the National Election Studies