

## ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: MINDING THE GOD GAP IN  
PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGNS: HOW THE  
MEDIA FAILED TO COVER FAITH IN 2012  
AND 2016

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Recent coverage of faith in the American political discourse has yielded a dominant image of American religion as increasingly polarized and defined by a few strident voices. In particular, the coverage of American political discourse in presidential campaigns fails to capture the diversity and depth of faith that pervades American life as well as misses an opportunity to elevate public debate. To analyze the extent to which presidential campaign news captures the varied expressions of faith represented in the United States, this study examines the coverage of candidate faith and religion as an issue in the two recent presidential elections of 2012 and 2016. Faith as expressed by the four final candidates in these elections differs in meaningful ways. Using content analysis of *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today*, this study examines how the campaigns present candidates' religious identities, how the candidates themselves portray issues of faith, and how religion emerges as an issue in campaign coverage. In addition, the study identifies and analyzes key frames used in news coverage of candidate

faith in U.S. campaigns The analysis shows that political party plays a significant role in what little coverage a candidate's faith receives. For Republicans, because candidate faith plays a more central role throughout the campaign and especially during the early primaries, the coverage reports extensively on candidates' use of their religious identities to appeal to religious voters. In the coverage of Democrats, the discussion of religion more commonly emerges in relation to a news item, such as an approach to a contentious policy, that has a religious dimension. A common reality reflected in the coverage of both parties is that a candidate's long-term authentic religious devotion does not translate into strong campaign strategy regardless of the party of the devout candidate. Overall, analysis of the coverage of faith in 2012 and 2016 reinforces the idea that religious expression and practice differ significantly along political party lines. By recasting campaign coverage to reflect more thoroughly on issues of faith, the media could improve voters' understanding of religious pluralism as a founding American ideal and help raise levels of trust and interest across both party and religious lines. Deepened appreciation of religious pluralism could help revitalize the public forum to support competition among different ideas, value productive compromise, and reduce the determination of any single group to dominate.

MINDING THE GOD GAP IN PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGNS:  
HOW THE MEDIA FAILED TO COVER FAITH IN 2012 AND 2016

by

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## Dedication

To my husband and son, Lansing B. Lee, III and Lansing B. Lee, IV, who have taught me to venture beyond safe choices and have cheered me on every step along the way.

## Acknowledgements

From my first visit to the Merrill College of Journalism through the final paragraph of this project, my advisor, Sarah Oates, has welcomed me, guided me, believed in me, and spurred me on to find the motivation and self-confidence I needed to complete this work. She befriended me from the start - despite my taste for Carolina blue – and encouraged me at every turn, making it possible for me to stay the course and find my voice on an issue that matters to me.

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friend and colleague. She has generously shared lessons learned through her own research, often introducing me to valuable tools and resources that have facilitated my progress. Robin Sundaramoorthy, current doctoral candidate, and Merrilee Cox, Merrill graduate and fellow adjunct lecturer, have sustained me as invaluable friends and colleagues through the final months of this project. Vanessa Nichols-Holmes, Janet Woolery, Serap Rada, Tiffany Njumbe, and Clint Bucco have consistently made it a pleasure to deal with all the logistical and administrative issues that arise for students and instructors in Knight Hall. Finally, every member of the Merrill College community contributes daily to creating an incomparable workplace that combines professional aspiration with personal caring to promote high levels of achievement.

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

## Section 1: Introduction

In political campaign coverage, the media typically limits its treatment of religious faith to the identification of the tradition with which each candidate is affiliated and the impact that affiliation will have on the election outcome. Such coverage is at best incomplete. It fails to capture the enduring presence and impact of religious belief on American political attitudes and behavior. The resulting public debate proceeds with an inaccurate perception of the nature and role of faith in political life. If political reporting explored the faith of each candidate beyond affiliation and reflected on religion's varied roots and influences in greater depth, media coverage of campaigns could elevate the political discourse by fostering greater understanding even amidst enduring differences in perspective. For example, by exploring how candidates who share deep commitment to the same faith can disagree sharply on policy, coverage could illuminate the cross currents of influence that can flow out of the same religious traditions. Coverage could also examine how shared values emerge from different doctrinal beginnings. Embracing diversity as a defining element of our religious landscape, the media could explore expressions of faith more completely. In the process, it could also reflect the importance of faith to a significant portion of the voting public and so raise levels of trust in and resonance with the political process and the coverage it receives. In addition, by treating candidate faith as a source of insight into a character, style of leadership, and approach to governance, the media could shed light on the potential concerns and benefits each candidate's faith brings to the political arena.

By analyzing election coverage in 2012 and 2016 in three national newspapers, *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today*, this study finds that coverage of candidate

faith varies depending on the party of the candidate: Republicans more often employ their religious identities as a campaign asset and therefore receive more coverage of their faith than do Democrats. Religion-related coverage of Democratic candidates generally focuses on news items that have a religious dimension with almost no attention given throughout the campaign to a candidate's expression of faith or its place in the public arena. A consistent factor regardless of party is the reality that even if a candidate is known to have an authentic deeply held faith, incorporating that faith into a campaign message can be tricky and rarely proves to be a powerful campaign strategy.

Faith is not a footnote in American politics. As understood in traditional studies of voter behavior, religion falls well behind political identity and economic interests as a deciding influence. Nonetheless, religious faith constitutes a force worth recognizing in American culture and society. From the practical reality that even small religious constituencies have shifted election results to the broader impact faith can have on political socialization, religion continues to matter in election campaigns and to the electorate (Wald, 1993; Green, 2007; Kellstedt, 1993). By minimizing coverage of faith in the American political context, the media neglects a relevant factor both in election outcomes and in the political formation of much of the American electorate. Given its enduring influence in the American political context, faith merits greater clarity and consideration in election coverage. By identifying and describing faith's expression and impact more carefully and completely, the media could equip voters more fully to evaluate the decision-making process and leadership style of each candidate. Such coverage could also lead voters into more effective communication across different perspectives. When media collapse coverage of faith to labels rather than clarification of meanings and implications, voters

gain reinforcement for often-polarized positions rather than support for more enlightened interactions (Levendusky, 2016).

Recasting campaign coverage to reflect more thoroughly on issues of faith requires a clear assessment of the current state of that coverage. This study will examine the coverage of candidate faith in the two most recent presidential elections to determine how faith was framed in the public discourse in 2012 and 2016. The study will analyze how each presidential campaign presented the faith of its candidate and how the media reflected those varied approaches to faith. This study will thus explore the question of how well the media meets democratic expectations in its support of quality dialogue across a diverse range of views as well as between power holders and mass publics. Using content analysis of national media coverage of the 2012 and 2016 presidential campaigns, the study will quantify and qualify the amount of coverage faith received in the political context. Based on that content analysis, the study will identify and analyze the frames applied in the coverage of candidate faith (Tankard, 2001). Finally, by examining the attention given, this study explores the extent to which media treatment of candidate faith reflects the pervasiveness and priority of faith in the campaigns themselves and among the American electorate.

Candidate faith in the 2012 and 2016 campaigns ranged from Mitt Romney as a Mormon, who represented non-traditional but devout conservative religion to Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton as two devout liberals, who challenged the idea that political liberalism and religious devotion could not go together. It could be argued that one succeeded while the other failed. Finally, the most curious case is that of Donald Trump, an irregular church goer with a public lack of moral compass who unabashedly and successfully put himself forward as the candidate whom religious conservatives should support. This is a puzzle that we must and should

explore in order to understand why the seemingly inexplicable -- a 'Godless' candidate who benefited from the so-called 'God Gap' -- has happened in U.S. politics.

Coverage of faith in the 2012 and 2016 campaigns shows that the faith of Republican candidates receives significantly more coverage than the faith of Democrats, regardless of the actual faith and religious practices of each candidate. Likewise, coverage of religious voters' response to candidates appears much more often in relationship to Republicans than to Democrats. While religion-related coverage appears throughout the months of the campaigns, the related narratives essentially repeat themselves showing little change or development over time. The repetitive patterns of coverage in both elections reflect a journalistic approach to religion in political campaigns that defines a broad social influence in narrow terms and produces at best an incomplete picture of the role religion actually plays in the nation's public life. Voters lack information and perspective they need to participate effectively in the public arena, contributing to defensive, dichotomous debate instead of open explorations of issues and policies.

## Section 2: Campaign Coverage and Religious Faith

### Subsection 1: Religion and Voter Behavior

Traditional studies of voter behavior have tended to marginalize religion, viewing it only as an affiliation and excluding consideration of religious faith's influence on belief and action (Leege and Kellstedt, 1993). In their 1952 study of the American electorate, based on the National Election Survey (NES), University of Michigan researchers Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes identified attitude toward party as the primary influence on voter behavior at the narrow tip of a "funnel of causality" while sociological factors, including religious affiliation, have a foundational influence at the mouth or start of the funnel, but little discernible impact on actual vote decision (Converse and Markus, 1993). Subsequent studies of voter behavior have



explored alternative influences on voter behavior, but the significance of partisan identity has largely held up over time (Campbell et al., 2009; Green, 2007; Green et al., 2004; Iyengar and Simon, 2000).

Amidst this stability, Kellstedt, Wald, and Leege asserted that religion, variously conceived and measured, “contributes fundamentally to the belief systems of Americans” (Wald and Smidt, 1993, 44). To reflect a large portion of the American electorate more completely, the traditional approach to studying American politics needed to give more attention to understanding religion’s influence (Wald and Smidt 1993). Kellstedt, Wald, and Leege sought and gained improved measurement of religion in the NES, the U.S. General Social Survey (GSS), and the Gallup Poll, including new questions and design features “intended to assess the utility of different conceptions of religion” (Wald and Smidt, 1993, 27). They did so by asking “respondents about their religious upbringing, probing more deeply about contemporary denominational attachment, exploring multiple denominational affiliation and attendance, assessing religious identity among persons who are not involved in organized religion, eliciting reactions to a checklist of personal and church traits, measuring other forms of both institutional and noninstitutional religious participation, and soliciting information about political themes encountered in church” (Wald and Smidt, 1993, 27).

Recent surveys of voter behavior have gathered data on frequency of worship attendance in addition to religious affiliation and a ‘God Gap’ has emerged that shows “the ‘politics of behaving and belonging’ has become one of the important ways that religion is connected to politics” (Green, 2007, 168). Expressed as voting patterns, the God Gap shows a division in political party affiliation based on levels of religious devotion that are measured by service attendance. Those voters who attend more services are more likely to vote Republican while

those who attend fewer services are more likely to vote Democratic. While the data also shows diversity of political affiliation within religious traditions, the sense that has emerged and come to dominate the public debate portrays political divisions between traditions. Most study has focused on Christians, who are the largest religious group in the United States by a wide margin (Pew Research Center, 2022). Conservative Evangelical Protestants and pro-life Catholics are the traditions most associated with the Republican Party while groups considered less devout, ranging from Mainline Protestants to self-described non-religious, are most associated with the Democratic Party (Green, 2007; Sullivan, 2008). Perceived and discussed in this way, religious faith has contributed to the polarization of political discourse and heightened a sense of religion as, at best, unhelpful in the political context (Green, 2007; Leege, 1993). As religious faith has maintained its presence in the political arena since the late twentieth century, religious diversity and centrism have increased as well, asserting the need for a less dichotomous understanding of faith (Domke and Coe, 2008). Understanding religious faith as a multi-dimensional influence that spreads fully across a growing spectrum of religious options would better reflect the American electorate and could better serve the public debate (McGraw, 2003). According to David Leege, director of the Program for Research on Religion, Church, and Society at the University of Notre Dame, “In this culturally diverse society, religion can be a force that alternatively unifies and tears asunder, so we ought to know something about it” (Leege, 1993, 5).

#### Subsection 2: Framing Candidate Faith

While religion has not proven to be a major determining factor in the final narrowing stages of the voting process (as represented by the ‘funnel’ concept of vote choice described by Campbell et al.), it has deep roots in factors of socio-economic and social status that define political identities – for voter and candidate alike – and shape the public discourse (Putnam and

Campbell, 2010). Understanding how religion is treated in the media thus contributes to a more complete understanding of the cultural context that influences political identity and debate.

Identifying and analyzing the frames present in media coverage of candidate faith provide a way to examine media's contribution to the cultural perception of religion and the resulting public discourse. As central organizing ideas for news content, frames influence the terms of public debate. Journalists determine which issues and details to include and emphasize as part of their routine production of the news (Tankard, 2001). Essentially, journalists determine frames and so "set the bounds of discourse" (Entman, 1993, 54) through their norms of newsworthiness. In addition, placement, repetition, and association with familiar cultural symbols also influence news salience, which as an element of news framing determines the extent to which audiences notice, remember, and find meaning in the information they consume (Entman, 1993). Framing thus "promote[s] a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" (Entman, 1993, 52).

Convinced that frames exert political power, politicians compete with each other and with journalists to determine how news is framed (Entman, 1989; Entman, 1993; Riker, 1986). As it relates to covering candidate attributes, such as their religious faith, framing research has shown that levels of salience vary depending on how attributes are presented (Maher, 2001). By focusing on frames used in coverage of candidate faith, this study characterizes and discusses the boundaries "that mark out the territory that religion occupies in American journalism" (Silk, 1995, 55). It thus expands the understanding of the coverage of candidate faith in presidential politics beyond the reductionist 'horse race' frame (discussed below) that has been examined extensively in framing literature (Williams, 2011).

### Subsection 3: Horse Race Frame in Campaign Coverage

Despite perennial appeals for campaigns and their coverage to focus on issues and support substantive debate of policy solutions, key work in the field by many scholars suggests that the notion of elections as a horse race is the dominant media frame. Candidates are viewed as entrants, the consultants and staff as jockeys, and the electorate as bettors (Williams, 2011). The horse race frame serves journalists by organizing campaign developments into readily reportable comparisons between candidates based on strategic advantage or position in the polls (Broh, 1980). The horse race also attracts readers with its unlimited opportunities for updates in the standings among or between candidates. Over the last twenty-five years, voters have sought horse race coverage at increasing rates, preferring the reporting of competitive relationships over hard news at approximately twice the rate by 2004 (Broh, 1980; Iyengar, Norpath and Hann, 2004; Patterson, 1993). Despite its reader popularity and accessibility for the journalist, the downside of the horse race frame is its failure to assure attention is allocated to topics according to their actual importance. Scandalous information or embarrassing moments often shift the horse race numbers more substantially than does a policy statement or debate no matter how weighty the issue (Broh, 1980; Iyengar, Norpoth, and Hahn, 2004). The commercial appeal of the horse race coverage heightens the challenge for journalists to produce the more complex issue-oriented news characterized by scholars as serious journalism. The overall appeal and prominence of sound bites in coverage also heighten the challenge of developing complete arguments in the campaign context (Iyengar, Norpath, and Hahn, 2004; Rinke, 2016). Treatment of religion in campaign coverage reflects the horse race dominance with religious faith seldom appearing in primary or general election coverage unless religious faith emerges as a factor in the competition.

Patterns of coverage over multiple campaign cycles include long introductory features once the likely standard bearers have been chosen through the primaries. Often in expanded coverage leading up to and during party conventions, multiple profiles appear, including more discussion of the candidate's religious identity without necessarily offering in-depth insight into the candidate's beliefs and practices. Regardless of the attention given to candidate religion in these contexts, coverage returns to the horse race frame when the campaigns return to action after the conventions (Williams, 2011). News becomes all about the daily actions that bear on a candidate's odds of winning as opposed to coverage of extensive policy approaches that have less immediate audience appeal. The repetitive horse race updates generate complaints from campaigns, readers, and journalists alike but the yield in terms of audience is too steady for the approach to be abandoned (Iyengar, Norpath, and Hahn, 2004). Religion is one specific victim of the horse race, but it should be noted that the horse-race focus is corrosive to civic debate in general. In addition to a specific examination of the coverage of religion, this dissertation will also address the broader problem of restrictive framing and conventions in election coverage in the media.

#### Subsection 4: Horse Race Frame and the God Gap

Especially since the 1980s, reporting on religion only as it affects the horse race has led to a pervasive treatment of religion in campaign coverage that can be characterized by the God Gap (as discussed above). Those identified as highly religious are expected to vote Republican most of the time, while those identified as less religious are expected to vote Democratic. The God Gap understanding derives from polling based on the ethno-religious definition of religion, which focuses on individual affiliation with faith tradition. While affiliation reflects the elements of belonging and practice, it neglects the reality that religion also embodies *belief*, and depth of

faith cannot be identified by affiliation (Smidt, 2010, Green, 2007). Beyond connecting people to particular communities or segments of society, religious faith also functions as “an inner mechanism that may shape political thinking and decision-making” (Smidt et. al., 2010, 8). Media coverage of religion in political campaigns has remained tied primarily to the ethno-religious or affiliation-based perspective even as the decades since the 1980s have witnessed a theological restructuring that has multiplied the ways an individual’s belief may inform his or her political behavior (Davidson, 1991; Williams, 1991; Wuthnow, 1988). Even as conservative Christian churches and parachurch organizations were emerging politically as part of the Religious Right in the 1980s, individuals within those conservative faith traditions were exploring more progressive applications of their faith. Simultaneously, more conservative members of traditionally more progressive mainline Protestant churches found themselves wholly identified with partisan positions that did not reflect their beliefs (Domke and Coe, 2008; Smidt et al, 2010). Essentially, by discussing faith only in terms of affiliation and impact on the horse race, the media have “poured America’s complicated mix of faith perspectives into the nation’s two-party system” in a way that encourages dichotomous views of the relationship between faith and politics (Green, 2007, 44).

In the resulting discourse, Republicans have “basked in the self-proclaimed monopoly on religious values and people of faith,” and have “proclaimed themselves guardians of traditional mores and protectors of the place of religion in the public sphere” (Weiss, 2010, 2). Some religious Republicans have even unabashedly converted the meaning of GOP from Grand Ole Party to God’s Own Party (Williams, 2010). Meanwhile, Democrats have been less inclined to make religious rhetoric central to their campaigns despite significant devotion characterizing the religious lives of many of their candidates and supporters (Weiss, 2010).

## Subsection 5: What's at Stake in the Coverage of Religion in Politics

Roberts and Gross argue that a more consistent “injection of substantial faith talk into campaign rhetoric” (Roberts and Gross, 2010, 89) could change the nature of the public debate by demonstrating the potential for faith-based rationale from multiple political perspectives. Arguing that coverage since the 1980s has ceded to the Republicans “a chokehold on faith and values” and allowed the idea of a Christian America to dominate the narrative, Roberts and Gross suggest that the result has been a souring of the electorate on “politics in general and on the political use of religious expression” (Roberts and Gross, 2010, 89). At a time when growing religious diversity could yield a more dynamic marketplace of ideas in which no single perspective dominates, political coverage of religious faith remains largely confined to a God Gap dynamic (Berlinerblau, 2008; Wuthnow, 2005). Discussion of faith is limited to identifying labels and the potential for in-depth discussion disappears (Berlinerblau, 2012). Effectively, the dichotomous treatment of religious faith in presidential campaigns converts the Constitutional separation of church and state into a separation of the religious and the religiously informed *from* public life. The resulting unfamiliarity, mistrust, and accusation that too often characterize public discussion of faith-based issues demonstrate the need for more evenhandedness and accuracy in the discussion and portrayal of all faith perspectives (Nussbaum, 2003; Berlinerblau, 2012).

Given both the pervasiveness of religion in American culture and the codified divide between the institutions of church and state, it is hardly surprising that the relationship between religion and politics in this democracy is challenging to define. Religious groups seek to influence elections and policy in varied ways depending on their teachings and values. Candidates discuss the influence of religion in their lives and on their policies in widely divergent ways as well, depending on the extent and nature of their religious commitments. The

consistent reality that emerges in the relationship between religion and American elections is that religion – whether of the voter or the candidate – has a minimal impact on the voters’ decision-making, but the religious characteristics of candidate and voter alike remain factors that campaigns must manage effectively. Religion thus maintains a place in American political campaigns that merits understanding. In addition, during elections there may be enough coverage of religion in the political context to allow for meaningful examination that may yield insights of value beyond election seasons.

Inadequate attention to and understanding of religion ultimately undermines the nation’s liberty of conscience tradition, which respects the freedom of every individual to pursue life according to his or her convictions. Without vigilance to treat all religions or faith approaches equally, in-groups and out-groups tend to emerge, creating hierarchical structures in the political community, with some members gaining dominance and others being relegated to second-class status. In this context, access and engagement in the public can become unequal, weakening the democratic quality of the public discourse (Nussbaum, 2008). In recent decades, this type of discourse has yielded a dominant image of American religion as increasingly polarized and defined by a few strident voices (Prior, 2007; Sullivan, 2008). For example, this phenomenon is seen in the rise of Trump.

### *Section 3: Religious Faith’s Integral Place in American Political Discourse*

#### Subsection 1: Religion Perseveres in the Public Square

Examination of religion’s place in America’s public square today regularly invokes discussion about religion’s role in the nation’s earliest days. Conflicting views abound regarding the relationship between religion and the founding of American democracy, but no version of the story can wholly negate religion as a factor in the development of American culture and politics



(Hecló, 2007). Even as many colonists sought material wealth and escape from debt when they settled in the New World, many others sought religious freedom and escape from religious persecution (Butler et al, 2011; Lambert, 2008). As varied beliefs and levels of religious devotion accompanied the varied motivations for migration, debate about the place of religion in democratic society essentially embedded itself as a defining element in American culture (Murrin, 1990). Though when compared to today's range, the religious diversity in Colonial America spread across a relatively narrow spectrum, the idea of accommodating religious diversity to any degree set America apart from its European forebears. Protestant Christianity dominated in terms of American religious practice, and Christian principles were argued explicitly alongside Enlightenment ideals throughout the Constitutional Convention (Areshidze, 2016). Nonetheless, the United States never established a national church, and no single understanding of faith ever gained official status (Gaustad and Schmidt, 2002). The principal architects of the Constitution differed in their personal views on faith, but they agreed that religion was an inescapable cultural force. The founders determined that the best interests of the new nation would be served by giving both religion and government the freedom to operate without interference from the other. The combination of their varied religious perspectives and shared democratic values produced the First Amendment with its two religion clauses<sup>1</sup> (Wilson, 1990). Faith mattered in the founding of this nation, and it continues to matter despite expectations that its presence would diminish over time, primarily based on the understanding of secularization as an inevitable companion to modernization (Guth and Green, 1993; Leege, 1993).

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<sup>1</sup> "Congress shall make no law (A) respecting an establishment of religion, or (B) prohibiting the free exercise thereof"

## Subsection 2: Principal Architects

Identifying God in a non-sectarian way as the “Great Author of every public and private good” (Munoz, 2004, 8) and believing that “’tis substantially true that virtue or morality is a necessary spring to good government” (Munoz, 2004, 6), George Washington set forth a two-fold approach to the relationship between religion and the state. First, “on matters that do not involve the essential interests of the state or duties of good citizenship, the state should stay quiet” (Munoz, 2009, 14). Specifically, the state should not dictate tenets of any religion, proscribe modes of worship, or base any rights or privileges on religious affiliation (Munoz 2009, Noll, 1990; Smith, 2012). Second, “on matters involving the essential interests of the state or duties of citizenship, the state has no obligation to respect religious dissention” (Munoz, 2004,14). For Washington, the second issue referred specifically to the conscientious objection of the Quakers who refused to fight with the Revolutionary forces. Although Washington generally respected their refusal to fight, he felt no obligation to do so, and he urged those responsible for commandeering land for use by the army to seize Quaker property where possible to give them the chance to contribute to the cause (Munoz, 2004).

John Adams argued that the new nation needed to “balance the freedom of many private religions with the establishment of one public Christian religion” (Witte, 2004, 25). Credited with originating the “wall of separation” metaphor for the church-state relationship in the United States, Thomas Jefferson viewed religion as a strong motivator for both good citizenship and public service, and he considered protecting freedom of religion to be the government’s primary directive in terms of religious faith (Buckley, 2012). James Madison, among the most personally devout of the founders, sought strict separation of government and religion to protect the church (Dreisbach, 2009; Munoz, 2012; Smith 2015).

### Subsection 3: Religion and Founding Ideals

The founders also incorporated explicitly Christian theological perspectives along with the Enlightenment “belief in human progress through the systematic application of reason” (Wald and Calhoun-Brown, 2018, 61) to conceive of such essential political ideas as social contract and limited government. Specifically, Puritanism’s understanding of covenant theology as well as its “stern view of humanity” (Wald and Calhoun-Brown, 2018, 61) influenced both the fight for independence and the nature of government that was eventually established. Puritanism’s understanding that God related to people based on covenants countered the New Testament idea that the proper relationship to any legitimate authority was submission. Puritanism thus fortified colonial resistance when the English sovereign broke his promises. Deliberations regarding how to create a government that would escape the corruptions that had characterized Old World regimes also explicitly incorporated the Christian idea of human depravity or sinfulness. Operating with a readily shared assumption that humans generally could not be trusted with power, the architects of the American political system “divided authority among three branches, giving each leverage to use against the other” (Wald and Calhoun-Brown, 2018, 49). Although some retrospectives have overstated the influence of Christianity as the exclusive influence in America’s founding, overcorrection to exclude the impact of religious faith is also out of balance (Lambert, 2010; Noll, 1990; Wald and Calhoun-Brown, 2018; Whitehead and Stayskal, 2004).

### Section 4: Distinction Between Faith and Religion

In both protecting religious freedom and rejecting church establishment, founders incorporated into this country’s political texture a value for faith as distinguished from affiliation with organized religion. Apart from the specific principles that define religious beliefs, faith

represents a willingness to think beyond what one can see and experience directly to define the possible (Fowler et al., 2014). Both imperfectly and distinctively, this nation has operated within the tensions that inevitably define a society seeking to respect and acknowledge diverse perspectives even on the interpretation of foundational ideas. It requires belief in something beyond the visible or tangible to engage in such a process as it is full of conflict, re-evaluation, and risk. Faith, therefore, arguably contributes in a meaningful way to the health and endurance of American democracy (Gushee, 2008). Former President Jimmy Carter describes the contribution of faith in American public arena as follows:

Having genuine faith in something or someone almost always means we will have a positive reciprocal action or a tangible response. We live by faith, always with trust in other people and in mutual causes or values that we adopt, such as equal status of people, the principles of democracy, the shared benefits of justice and adherence to common laws. These kinds of principles can be understood and honored by expressing them in inspired language, like the American Bill of Rights, the Ten Commandments, and the Sermon on the Mount. Through them we strive to comprehend and to improve ourselves and the world in which we live. Many of us associate reliance on deity with the maintenance of an ideal structure of human relations. Interpersonal faith is the foundation for love and hope (Carter, 2018, 32).

Recognizing the subtleties and depth that define the faith perspectives of potential leaders has value beyond determining how their religious affiliation serves them in the electoral horse race. Exploring whether and how faith is reflected in American elections requires a workable definition of *faith* as opposed to *religion*. Religion is a particular belief system seeking to express a philosophy of life to attend to issues of life and death, and to regard the transcendent. Religion is also generally affiliated with a particular institution or tradition (Hoover, 1998). Different religions rely on different sources of authority to assert different views on the existence, nature, and expectations of the deity, deities, or other forms of authority identified with each religion. For millennia, institutions have grown up around belief systems, generating wide-ranging social

and cultural expressions of religion. These institutional expressions of religion create contexts within which religious people can develop and practice faith according to their individual level of belief and commitment, but religious institutions are not the only contexts in which faith is developed or practiced (Wuthnow, 2005). Over the last half century, thanks to the well-amplified and assertive voices of Evangelical Christians in both religious and political arenas, the predominant public understanding and usage of faith in the United States, could be characterized as follows: “Believing in [the Christian] God, and in what Christ has done for us to make our salvation possible—and then committing ourselves to Him” (Graham, 2018).

Theologians from varied religious perspectives, however, explore the meaning of faith more broadly and offer an understanding less connected with the doctrinal markers of any single religion. Jewish theologian and philosopher Abraham J. Heschel differentiates faith itself from the mere expression of faith. While faith’s expression can be described as an “affirmation of specific belief,” “a conviction,” or “a definite judgment,” faith, itself involves “staking one’s whole life on the truth of an invisible reality” that offers insights into “ultimate meaning” (Heschel, 1976, 87). Invisibility of faith’s object requires the person of faith to “abstain from intellectual arrogance and spurns the triumph of the merely obvious. One who lives by faith realizes that life takes place under wide horizons that range beyond the span of an individual life or even the life of a nation or a generation or even an era” (Heschel, 1976, 87).

Commenting on the New Testament description of faith as “the assurance of things hoped for; proof of things not seen” (Hebrews 11, *World English Bible*), Protestant theologian Walter Brueggemann characterizes faith as the willingness to engage in relationship with the transcendent. He argues that this openness to something beyond the seen world emerges as more elemental to faith than does specific substantive teaching about that relationship (Brueggemann,

2002). Further, Protestant theologian Paul Tillich argues that “Man is driven toward faith by the awareness of the infinite to which he belongs but which he does not own like a possession” (Tillich, 2001, 10). Tillich defines faith as “the state of being ultimately concerned” and describes the “dynamics of faith as the dynamics of man’s (sic) ultimate concern” (Tillich, 2001, 1). Further, “faith is more than trust even in the most sacred authority. It is participation in the subject of one’s ultimate concern with one’s whole being” (Tillich, 2001, 37-38). Further, according to Tillich, the depth of faith is determined by the extent of surrender to the subject of ultimate concern: The nature and impact of faith are determined by the character or content of that subject of ultimate concern. Faith is a free, centered act of the whole personality, and in this sense faith and freedom are the same. Both the rational and non-rational are transcended. Faith cannot exist without a content toward which it is directed, and in true faith, the ultimate concern is about the truly ultimate. In contrast, in idolatrous faith, preliminary, finite realities are elevated to the level of ultimacy (Tillich, 2001).

Echoing and perhaps simplifying Tillich, theologian Harvey Cox defines faith as “deep-seated confidence” and explains, “We place our faith only in something that is vital for the way we live.” Cox also argues that as it emerged during the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, Christianity sought to launch a new Age of Faith, focusing on freedom, healing, and compassion; embracing hope; and continuing the work Jesus had started. Over the next 200 years, a clerical class emerged to document and codify the *right* way to continue Jesus’ work, causing the Age of Belief to subsume the Age of Faith. Arguably, the historic transition to the Age of Belief reflects how difficult it can be for either individuals or the society at large to accept the concept and value of faith without circumscribing its object and expression (Cox, 2009).

Finally, examining the cross-sections of faith in Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic, and Christian traditions, Wilfred Canton Smith argues that faith is “an orientation of personality to oneself, to one’s neighbor, and to the universe...It is a quality of the person and not of [a particular] system...At its best it has taken the form of serenity and courage and loyalty and service and quiet confidence, and joy, which enable one to feel at home in the universe and to find meaning in the world and in one’s own life...no matter what may happen to oneself at the level of the immediate event” (Smith, 1979, 12).

In terms of the relevance between faith and candidate qualification or appeal, leadership research shows that while the actual source of the higher power may be secondary, the presence or absence of the grounding faith matters in terms of authenticity and integrity. The spiritual is not “a sufficient determinant of effective leadership,” but it has proven to be an essential component that decision-makers ignore “at their peril” (Strack et al 2002). When choosing political leaders, voter options range across multiple spectrums as political competitors differ not only in their policy approaches, but also in their moral conceptions. As American philosopher Thomas Nagel asserts, “They differ over what is good and bad in human life, and what kind of equal respect or consideration we owe each other” (Nagel, 1987, 216). A political contest reflects not only a given candidate’s interests, expertise, and commitments, but also a candidate’s values (Nagel, 1987). Religious faith is often viewed as an indicator of personal virtue and so matters to voters trying to gauge candidate character and desirability. In addition, understanding a candidate’s relationship to faith beyond religious affiliation can offer valuable insights into their trustworthiness to govern. According to Evangelical ethicist Michael Cromartie, “No matter how a candidate identifies him or herself religiously, there will be times when, if elected, he or she

will feel the tension between faith and duty as a public official ... [Voters are legitimately] interested in how the candidate would resolve that tension” (Cromartie, 2005, 82).

Articulate support for understanding the role of faith in American politics and culture also comes from voices more associated with liberal values both classical and American. Norman Lear, writer, producer, director, and founder of People for the American Way is identified, among other things, as a strong counter voice to conservative Evangelicals and their claims to define the meaning of civic virtue and American values for everyone. Without contesting the labels given him by Evangelical leaders, such as “atheistic,” “anti-religious,” and “Mr. Secular Humanist” (Marty, 1988,1), Lear still considers religious faith a relevant component of human society that merits attention and free expression in all its forms. Lear says, “I am hoping you will help shine a light on the mounting religious fervor of our times to help us understand not just the creeds and faith rivalries that divide us, but that rich capacity for religious experience that unites us, to nurture the desire we all possess for some invisible means of support and to deliver to one another the way the universe delivers to us” (Silk, 1995, 146). In addition, philosopher and sociologist Jurgen Habermas found himself reassessing his long-held defense of Enlightenment liberalism following the terrorist attacks of 9/11 (Areshidze, 2017). Judging “the religious impulse to be ingrained in human nature,” Habermas has now asserted that “liberalism should not cut itself off from the important resources of spiritual explanation, afforded by religion” (Areshidze, 2016, 13). The goal is not the “injection of religious convictions into the public debate” but the recognition of “religious contributions as producing tensions within liberalism that are destined to continue to challenge its cultural and moral norms” (Areshidze, 2016, 14).



### Section 5: Evolution of Faith in Electoral Life

The expression of religion in American campaigns has varied throughout the nation's history, but the religious identity and practice of American presidential candidates has never been absent from American campaign coverage. In the 1796 campaign to replace Washington, Federalist Vice President Adams and his Republican Secretary of State Jefferson used "handbills, pamphlets, and articles in party newspapers" to "denounce," "disparage," and "denigrate" one another on a range of issues including their personal religious practices. With Adams viewed as the "presumed heir" in 1796, that campaign lacked the intensity of the next election in which the first transition of power between parties became a real possibility. Jefferson's alleged atheism was a point of attack in 1796, but in the 1800 election the differences in the candidates' views on religion emerged as a more crucial part of the public debate. The prominence of religion in elections has diminished as the nature and place of religion in society has changed, but the religious debate that emerged in 1800 established a dynamic in the relationship between religion and politics that continues to be recognizable in the American political arena today (Larson, 2007).

Federalists and Republicans alike argued in pamphlets and party papers that their candidate's view of Christianity was the true expression of faith and showed their candidate to be the one whose character qualified him to be president. Both Adams and Jefferson identified themselves as Christian. Adams attended conventional Congregational services and supported the idea of an established church. Jefferson publicly espoused his own version of Christianity, which included his own version of the Bible and his belief in multiple origins for different human races. Republicans charged that Adams was too inclined to monarchy and attacked his support of the traditional church as part of their overall effort to expose his taste for authoritarian

government. Federalists targeted Jefferson's religious ideas more directly and aggressively, hoping that his beliefs would discredit him with the voters. Although he did not demand a change of approach, Adams did question it, asking, "What does this have to do with the public?" He also later wondered if overemphasis on Jefferson's religion may have cost him the election (Larson, 2007).

Religion next emerged significantly in presidential campaigns following the 1830's wave of immigration that brought significant numbers of Roman Catholics from Western Europe. To that point Protestant churches had outnumbered Catholic churches ten to one, with the nation's small Catholic population residing primarily in Maryland and Pennsylvania. (Prothero, 2005, Menendez, 2011). Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Republican-leaning papers and magazines pointed out connections between Catholics and the Democratic Party, including the charge by *Harper's Weekly* in 1876 that "the Vatican directs the policy of the ruling section of the Democratic Party" (Menendez, 2011). By 1908, the acceptability of attacks on Catholics and their supporters received a significant blow from outgoing Republican president Theodore Roosevelt (President Condemns, 1908). Still, voter concerns that a Catholic candidate would answer to the pope remained until after World War II when the threat of so-called godless Communism in the Soviet Union and China increased the appeal of a broad-based faith in a God who would stand with and protect those nations that promoted the godly values of freedom and democracy (Rozell and Whitney, 2007).

By the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, retrospectives of presidential campaigns proliferated, offering insights into journalists' perspectives on religion in presidential campaigns. Generally, where religion might impact a candidate's standing in the horse race, journalists would attend to it in some depth. Otherwise, coverage of a candidate's religion remained largely limited to early

campaign profile features (Balz, 2010; Balz and Kafer, 2013; Crouse, 1974; Germond and Witcover, 1985; Mears, 2013; White, 1960; White, 1982; Witcover, 1977).

### Section 6: Evolution of God Gap: Reagan to Obama

Although it has not proven to be a primary influence in voter decision-making, religious faith remains an element that can contribute to or detract from a candidate's overall appeal, making the candidate's narrative of personal faith a campaign essential (Berlinerblau, 2008). Those narratives differ significantly, and their uses and influence vary by campaign. This study focuses on the newspaper coverage of candidate faith narratives in the 2012 and 2016 U.S. presidential elections. Those narratives, which will be detailed in later chapters along with the coverage they received, emerged in an era of religious voter engagement that began to evolve out of Ronald Reagan's first campaign in 1980. Reagan convinced Evangelicals and other conservative Christian voters that they belonged in the Republican party rather than in the Democratic party with its liberal intellectuals and skeptics. By the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, voting patterns showed that church attenders and religiously motivated voters were more likely to vote Republican, creating the so-called God Gap in voter behavior and requiring campaigns to appeal to Evangelical voters (Smidt et al, 2010).

Examining how winning candidates from Reagan to Barack Obama expressed and incorporated faith in their campaigns offers insights regarding when and how the God Gap emerged to define the religious-political environment and set the contexts in which the 2012 and 2016 elections occurred. Following is a brief overview of those candidates' religious faiths, which are detailed further in Chapter 3: The God Gap in American Politics. Reagan's personable style enabled him to win over deeply religious voters even though he spoke in only broad terms about his faith, never clearly articulating his beliefs. (Brown, 2011; Germond and Witcover,

1985; Kengor, 2012). Reagan's successor, George H.W. Bush, was more deeply religious than Reagan, but also less comfortable talking about faith in public and using it as a campaign tool. Although the state of the economy contributed significantly to Bush's failure to win re-election in 1992, his inability to excite Evangelical voters played a role as well. (Balmer, 2008; Dart and Allen, 1993; Williams, 2010). Throughout his political career, Bill Clinton benefited by his ability to speak fluently to multiple religious communities, but the question of whether his incomparable political gifts were truly rooted in a sincere faith remained unresolved throughout his public career (Linder, 1996; Penning, 2007; Rozell and Whitney, 2007; Yancey, 1994). George W. Bush, who identified himself as a born-again Christian, initially enjoyed a warm reception from Evangelical voters, but he eventually faced vocal opposition from Christian conservatives who questioned whether they had "been fooled by Bush's profession of faith into supporting a man who did not in his heart back their agenda" (Kengor, 2005; Larson, 2007; Rozell and Whitney, 2007; Wilcox, 2018). In 2008, the Obama campaign consciously sought to narrow – if only slightly -- the God Gap (Kantor, 2008), but before his campaign could focus on their religious grassroots strategy, Obama had to navigate the public's reaction to the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, who had been Obama's pastor since 1992 at the Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago<sup>2</sup> (Obama, 2008; Powell, 2008). An additional persistent issue for Obama was the rumor that he was a Muslim (Kantor, 2008). Obama's church-by-church strategy successfully shifted a small percentage of Evangelical votes and offered hope that intentional efforts could reach across the God Gap in elections (Fowler et al., 1995; Smidt et al, 2010; Weiss, 2010; Zelizer, 2018).

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<sup>2</sup> As a Civil Rights activist and community organizer, Rev. Jeremiah Wright was known for his inflammatory sermons, often charging the media with racism, and calling the American government a terrorist organization. After attempting unsuccessfully to minimize the issue, Obama put his rhetorical skills to work with a speech in Hickory, North Carolina, and sought both to separate himself from Wright and to elevate the conversation (Obama, 2008).

### Section 7: Expression of the God Gap in the 2012 and 2016 Campaigns

In the 2012 and 2016 elections, the role and discussion of candidate faith differed from the 2008 election, but common elements emerged including the presence of the God Gap. In addition, decisions regarding whether and how to talk about religious faith challenged the campaigns of the more devout candidate in each election and arguably influenced both election outcomes. In the **2012 election**, neither campaign initiated as much discussion of faith as Obama had in 2008, but religion emerged for different reasons in varying ways on the two sides. By the time Obama ran for re-election in 2012, he had taken positions, including support for same-sex marriage and a birth control mandate in health care reform, that had disappointed a meaningful portion of the Evangelical voters who had responded to his first campaign. This reality simultaneously lowered the profile of faith in Obama's second campaign and helped define the profile of faith in the Romney campaign (Haggerty 2012).

In 2012, "People of Faith for Obama" offered "an online home to bring people of many different faiths together through shared values and a commitment to tolerance" (Join People of Faith). The site identified President Obama as "a committed Christian," who "believes that people of all faiths and beliefs have an important place in American public life." Including a devotional reflection related to the campaign and containing Obama's 2012 remarks to the National Prayer Breakfast, the site manifests a less dynamic presence for faith in the reelection effort than in the initial 2008 campaign. Despite the decreased strategic focus on religious voters in the campaign, Obama continued to express his commitment to and perspective on the importance of faith in both his personal life and public role. Explaining the place of faith in his life in an interview with *Cathedral Age*, the magazine of the Washington National Cathedral,

Obama said, “first and foremost, my Christian faith gives me a perspective and security that I don’t think I would have otherwise: That I am loved. That, at the end of the day, God is in control—and my main responsibility is to love God with all of my heart, soul, and mind, and to love my neighbor as myself” (*Cathedral Age*, 2012). Offering his perspective on the place of faith in public life, Obama added, “First, faith has always provided a moral framework and vocabulary for this country to come to terms with its most pressing challenges...Second, faith motivates people to do incredibly compassionate and good work that helps our nation thrive” (*Cathedral Age*, 2012).

In the Romney campaign, an August 2012 television ad articulated the approach to religion that emerged, asserting that “President Obama used his health care plan to declare war on religion” (Claassen, 2015, 1). By calling out Obama as against religion, Romney sought to boost the traditional God Gap that made a Republican the obvious choice for the religiously devout. Even as he engaged in his “war on religion” attacks, Romney kept his own religious affiliation out of the conversation for most of the campaign. His reluctance reflected his inclination to avoid reminding religious voters that while he was devout, he was also Mormon as opposed to Evangelical (Hagerty, 2012). He had portrayed himself as deeply religious to win Evangelical support for his nomination, but once he became the Republican candidate, the specifics of his Mormon faith received little attention. For example, when *Cathedral Age* asked him the same set of questions it asked Obama, Romney never identified himself as a Mormon. Rather, he explained, “Faith is integral to my life. I have served as a lay pastor in my church.” On the place of faith in public life, Romney said, “A political leader’s faith can tell us a great deal or nothing. So much depends on what lies behind that faith. And so much depends on deeds, not words. Perhaps the most important question to ask a person of faith who seeks a political

office is whether he or she shares these American values: the equality of humankind, the obligation to serve one another, and a steadfast commitment to liberty. They are not unique to any one denomination” (*Cathedral Age*, 2012).

Although the political media discussed Romney’s religion approximately twice as much as it did Obama’s, over a third of Romney’s coverage focused on the horse-race angle, exploring how his Mormon affiliation would impact the race (Cooperman, Mitchell, and Holcomb, 2012). By election day, approximately two-thirds of U.S adults said they knew Romney was a Mormon, but 82 percent of Americans said they had learned “very little” or “nothing at all” about Mormonism through the campaign (Cooperman, Mitchell, and Holcom, 2012). Romney ultimately benefited from the God Gap, drawing the voters identified as deeply religious, but in the large swing states Obama maintained enough support to win the election. In a late campaign effort to attract voters, Romney opened up more personally about his faith. The limited positive response he received led some analysts to question whether he might have missed the opportunity to normalize his faith in a way that would have enabled him to use it more as an asset and less as a potential liability to handle with care (Williams, 2011).

In **2016**, the God Gap emerged again even as the words and actions of Republican Trump raised questions throughout the campaign about whether highly religious constituencies would stay with him (Balmer, 2015; Edsall, 2016). Pollsters and pundits repeatedly proclaimed it unlikely that the religiously devout could ultimately cast their votes for this Republican, but the electorate eventually proved them wrong. Trump’s multiple divorces, public affairs, crude language, and history of supporting abortion caused many Evangelicals to look elsewhere for a Republican to support for the nomination. Other candidates, including former U.S. Senator Rick Santorum, U.S. Senator Marco Rubio, U.S. Senator Ted Cruz, Texas Gov. Rick Perry, Ohio Gov.

John Kasich, former U.S. Representative Michelle Bachman, former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, and Dr. Ben Carson, all articulated positions and levels of religious commitment that appeared to make any one of them a more appealing candidate for religious Republican voters. Still, no one could sustain a campaign against Trump's populist appeal and Evangelicals in large measure made their way over time to support Trump (Mitchell, 2016; Wilcox, 2018).

When asked how he could justify his support of Trump, Rev. Jerry Falwell, Jr., son of Religious Right Founder Jerry Falwell, Sr., quoted his father's explanation of his support for Ronald Reagan in 1980. Falwell, Jr. said, "When [Falwell, Sr.] walked into the voting booth, he wasn't electing a Sunday school teacher or a pastor or even a president who shared his theological beliefs; he was electing the president of the United States with the talents, abilities and experience required to lead a nation" (Rozell, 2018, 1). For others, the decision came down to the importance of the open Supreme Court seat and possibility of losing a conservative vote there if Democrats took the White House (Rozell, 2018).

Whatever motivated Evangelicals to support Trump, it had little to do with Trump's own religious beliefs or his campaign's systematic effort to persuade them. While he did promise to work against legal protection for abortion, he also acknowledged publicly that he rarely attended religious services and he made repeated speaking errors that exposed his lack of familiarity with the basics of the Christian faith. For example, at Liberty University, he referred to the book of the Bible known as "Second Corinthians" as "Two Corinthians," drawing laughter from the students (Rozell, 2018).

Trump's error was one that his general election opponent would not have made because of her well-ingrained knowledge of the Christian scriptures developed over a lifetime of commitment to the Methodist faith. When Hillary Clinton talked about her faith during the



campaign, she demonstrated a well-thought-out perspective on the role of faith as a guide for policy and as motivation for public service (Kenger, 2008). Despite her well-developed religious identity and devotion to faith, Clinton could not ultimately win over the Evangelical vote. In fact, for a segment of the highly religious electorate, their election of Trump expressed their strong opposition to Clinton more than their comfort with or support for Trump. Rather than ever seeing Clinton as a faith-based politician, conservative Evangelicals devalued her not only because she was a woman, but a liberal feminist with a pro-choice stance that disqualified her from consideration for public office. Some Clinton supporters, including Evangelical theologian Tony Campolo, tried to direct the attention of Evangelicals to Clinton's commitment to driving down the number of abortions performed through her work on labor and wage reforms that would eliminate the economic difficulties that motivated many to choose abortion. Evangelicals still largely rejected her based on her pro-choice position (Rozell, 2018; Woods, 2016). Even among those who acknowledged at least some sincerity and depth in her public discussions of faith, Clinton's position on abortion was at best incomprehensible. Many heard it as an expression of cognitive dissonance that they could not understand, reflecting a decision-making approach they could not trust (Kenger, 2008). Interestingly, the clear cognitive dissonance evident in the Trump campaign did not seem to draw the same highly negative response.

### Section 8: Research Questions

By examining the treatment of religious faith in presidential campaigns and the coverage it receives, this study will seek to contribute to the broad question of how well the media fulfills its democratic responsibilities to support quality dialogue across a wide range of positions and perspectives. More specifically, this study will seek to analyze the extent to which media coverage in the last two presidential campaigns has intensified the politically polarized

perception of religious faith that has characterized the public debate in presidential campaigns since the election of Reagan in 1980. To clarify the relationship between religious faith and campaign coverage in the 2012 and 2016 presidential campaigns, this study will seek to answer the following research questions:

**RQ1:** How do presidential candidates define their approach to faith during the campaign?

**RQ 2:** What frames emerge in the coverage of candidate faith?

**RQ 3:** Does the God Gap frame continue to dominate campaign coverage of religious faith, or does coding of both campaign and media content find a greater diversity and complexity of the expression and coverage of faith?

### *Section 9: Methods: Historical and Content Analysis*

This study will characterize how each candidate in the 2012 and 2016 general elections represented his or her perspective on faith and examine how the media coverage reflected those representations. In this way, the study will both examine how candidates construct the characterization of their faith as well as how journalists portray the faith of candidates.

Using campaign websites, this study shows that religion has little presence in official campaign materials (WaybackMachine 2012a; WaybackMachine 2012 d; WaybackMachine 2106a; WaybackMachine, 2016b) although biographies, campaign biographies, and media profiles make it possible to identify relevant potentially relevant frames and construct a faith profile of each of the four final candidates to clarify his or her religious affiliations, beliefs, and practices as well as his or her understanding of the role of faith in both personal and professional life (Startt and Sloan, 1989). Content analysis of faith-related campaign coverage in three national newspapers will identify the frames that emerge in the coverage of each candidate's faith and examine how the presence of those frames compares across parties and elections. While the analysis of the material on the candidates' constructions of their faith profiles will be

primarily qualitative in nature, the analysis of the journalism coverage will combine both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Using quantitative content analysis, such as the number of mentions based on keyword searches relating to faith, the study will assess the amount of attention given religious faith for each candidate and compare the amount of coverage each candidate's faith received across multiple sources. The coding will also include other key elements in the story, the sources quoted, whether the candidate is quoted directly, and whether the candidate must share focus with the other candidate and/or other actors. Based on the understanding that the allocation of space and other resources in a newspaper relates to a given topic's significance (Althiede, 1996; McCombs, Shaw, and Weaver, 1997), the quantitative analysis will weigh the influence of each candidate's faith as represented in campaign coverage and as compared to the relevance of faith within each campaign.

Identifying frames relating to candidate faith in campaign coverage will rely on an empirical approach to increase the potential for analysis and comparison across media and over time. Coded elements will include the following: language and terms used in the lead and throughout the text to refer to each candidate's beliefs and practice; the selection of sources; and the selection of quotes (Tankard, 2001).

In addition to the use of quantitative content analysis to identify frames, qualitative content analysis enables the discovery of underlying meanings and patterns of relationships through the non-numerical examination and interpretation of observations (Babbie, 2005; Hatton, 2005). This study will employ qualitative content analysis to explore the tone, themes, and discourse that reflect the frames used by the media to characterize faith in each campaign. By defining frames and examining if and how they change depending on campaign and publication, this study will reflect on cultural implications and social attitudes relating to religion as well as

the relationship between religion and politics in American presidential campaigns. Through qualitative analysis, this study will also seek to explore the extent to which newspaper coverage retains the same level of complexity and nuance represented in candidate discussions of his/her religious faith.

The three newspapers selected for content analysis are *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today*. All three papers have national circulations with well-established political reporting staffs whose extensive election coverage not only reaches substantial audiences directly, but also influences the coverage provided in other news outlets (Xu, 2013; Warren, 2016). Also, while there is overlap among the readership represented by the three papers, each paper also appeals to relatively distinctive audiences, reflecting a range of priorities and perspectives that may yield interesting differences on analysis. Characterized as the “nation’s most influential elite newspaper” (Xu, 2013,2417), *The New York Times* has daily circulation of over half a million and reaches over 9 million readers (Readers of *The New York Times*, 2017). The *Times* leads the nation’s coverage of presidential elections, making its inclusion essential to this study (Dardis, 2006). Even as its coverage is typically less in-depth than the others in the study, *USA Today* brings a wholly national scope, escaping any regional or local bias with it a daily readership of over 3 million (Dardis, 2006). *The Wall Street Journal* has the nation’s largest paid circulation with over 2 million subscribers. Although it is a business-focused daily, the *Journal* has substantial campaign coverage, and it has steadily expanded its coverage of culture and lifestyle over the past decade (Top 15 US Newspapers, 2018; *Wall Street Journal*-News, 2017). It would be considered to reach a more politically conservative audience than the *Times* (AllSides, 2022).

It should be noted that television news, especially with its reach and the power of visuals, is a key component of U.S. election campaigns. However, given the difficulty of retrieving the relevant sample of broadcast news as well as the challenges of coding visual material, this project will use national newspapers as the indicator of the direction and nature of important national election coverage. At the same time, it should be acknowledged that there is likely to be so little discussion of candidates' faith on broadcast news that it would make relying on broadcast content for this dissertation problematic.

### Section 10: Conclusions

Often dismissed as an inconsequential factor in voter behavior and mistrusted as an influence in the public square, religious faith has maintained a presence in American society, culture, and politics that makes understanding its influence critical to understanding the U.S. voter. Religion has not and will not displace party identity and economic factors as major determinants of voter decision making. At the same time, in the 2012 and 2016 presidential elections, religious faith presented itself in varied ways that suggest deep and important elements in both candidates and voters that have been overlooked. Each campaign faced a different version of the same challenge to present its candidate's religious identity in a way that neither overplayed nor underplayed the reality of faith in the candidate's life and that neither underestimated nor overwhelmed the interest of faith in the electorate (Domke and Coe, 2008). Getting the religious appeal right may not shift the polls by double digits, but failure to do so may negatively affect other aspects of a candidate's appeal. For example, the 2012 Romney campaign decision to limit focus on Romney's Mormonism and make him appear as much like an Evangelical as possible may have denied the campaign opportunities to focus on aspects of Romney's leadership commitment and abilities that emerged when more information about his

work as a church leader became public. Decisions about how to present candidates from a religious perspective can be complex, requiring sensitivity, creativity, and vigilance to get the initial message right and then to maintain its presentation throughout the campaign with the appropriate tone and emphasis. In some cases, however, it takes the nerve to defy norms and depart from expected behavior as did Trump in 2016. Campaigns should escape formulaic thinking to incorporate the candidate's approach to religion effectively. It merits asking if the political media may need to depart their standard treatments of religion to reflect those campaign efforts well.

Looking ahead, as religious diversity continues to increase, the need to communicate across religious differences rises as well. Christian dominance continues to characterize the American religious landscape, but that dominance is decreasing year by year. The religiously unaffiliated or so-called "nones" represent the fast-growing group and the numbers of people practicing non-Christian religions are growing at a slower, though significant, rate as well. Within the unaffiliated, the numbers of those who identify as agnostics or atheists continues to grow, reaching 30 percent of the "nones" by 2014 (Wormald, 2015). Changing religious demographics require developing a more fully pluralistic way of thinking and talking in the public arena. According to religious historian George Marsden, "What is needed in America is recognition by both religious and nonreligious people that the days are past when any one group religious or nonreligious, can dictate a comprehensive public policy they will prevail for the whole of the people," (Marsden, 1990, 277). Fellow religious scholar Martin Marty describes the state of religion in the United States as an increasingly "frightful mess" for which he gives "two cheers" and quotes Madison from the *Federalist Papers* to explain his thoughts, "Security for civil rights must be the same as that for religious rights; it consists in the one case in a

multiplicity of interests and in the other in a multiplicity of sects” (Marty, 1988, 1). Successfully functioning as an increasingly pluralist society requires adopting mutual respect as the unifying value. Because the ultimate focus of religious faith is invisible, it is possible both to hold strong beliefs and to recognize that no single institution has absolute claim to the embodiment of final truth (Hutchison, 2003). Returning to the civic context, to help promote public engagement that recognizes the legitimacy and voice of the nation’s varied religious faiths, the media could exercise and offer greater religious literacy in its reporting (Hoover, 1998). Regularly identifying and explaining the fine distinctions that exist even among religious expressions in a single tradition could help transform the public perception of religion from its current dichotomous monoliths into a much more varied and continuous whole that includes a thriving middle ground (Wuthnow, 1994). The demanding pace of campaign reporting and, of course, the persistent appeal of the horse race updates make providing more in-depth coverage difficult to justify and achieve. At the same time, even slight changes in the culture and practice of campaign journalism could contribute to a meaningful improvement in the quality of public discourse where religion is involved (Hoover, 1998).

Examining the coverage of religious belief in campaigns also provides a lens through which to look at the media’s approach to complex issues in general. For example, on difficult policy issues, do the media pursue the sources and details to assure full understanding of the nuanced differences represented by each candidate? Or do they follow the pattern seen in coverage of faith and defer to available, familiar frames that can reliably produce popular articles, but may neglect aspects of the story that could enhance the quality of public debate? Based on the findings that emerge from both quantitative and qualitative content analysis of

religious faith in presidential campaign coverage, this study will both identify exemplary coverage and to explore possibilities for change where warranted.



## Chapter 2: Covering Religion: It's Complicated

### Section 1: Introduction

Covering religious faith effectively in presidential elections requires understanding the role religion plays in politics in general and particularly in the United States. An accurate reflection of the nation's religious composition in the public debate requires expanding beyond the God Gap frame to incorporate the more complex and subtle connections that exist between all religiously devout voters and their political behavior (Green, 2007). Journalists who seek to cover religion's place in presidential elections need to recognize and accurately reflect how the array of religions now present in American culture differ in what they believe and how they relate to the public square. Throughout American history the public expression of religion has grown increasingly diverse and moved back and forth across the religious and political spectra. The current expression of the relationship between politics and religion in the United States, that is heavily dominated by Evangelical Protestant voices in support of conservative political perspectives, began to take shape in the late 1970s.

By the 1980s, a mix of conservative religious voices, now known as the Christian Right, emerged in the political discourse, claiming they would restore America's "traditional moral foundation" (McGraw, 2003, 5) by articulating the belief that the nation's ideals were primarily, if not exclusively, rooted in Judeo-Christian beliefs (Fea, 2016; McGraw 2003; Smidt, 2010; Winston, 2007). The Christian Right vigorously and persistently promoted their understanding of Biblically based values as the essential underpinning for the survival of American society, and this deliberate entwining of American ideals and Christian Right beliefs came to be increasingly associated with the political right (Hoover, 2002; Hunter, 1992; Mc Graw, 2003; Wuthnow, 1998).

By the time Reagan won reelection in 1984, conservative Christians had consolidated their political positions as conservative Republicans, and throughout subsequent presidential elections they have dominated the media coverage of religion in politics with the so-called God Gap frame. According to the God Gap perspective, the more religiously devout a voter is the more likely that voter is to be religiously conservative, politically conservative, and inclined to vote Republican (Domke and Coe, 2010; Hoover, 2002; Hunter, 1992; Winston, 2007; Wuthnow, 1998). Although voter behavior data shows that those who attend religious services most often are most likely to identify as conservative Republicans (Kellstedt and Wald, 1993; Leege, 1993; Smidt, 2010), confining the discussion of religion in American politics to the God Gap perspective neglects the reality that diversity characterizes religious practice in America and religious voters populate the entire political spectrum with varied expressions of faith. Because religious traditions can yield varied worldviews and a range of commitment levels, there is value in gaining a more complete and precise understanding of voters' religious perspectives than has been reflected in the traditional approach to studying American voting behavior (Berger, 2016; Eck, 2006; Eck, 2009; Eck, 2017; Green, 2007; Gushee, 2008; Sullivan, 2008).

Both political parties currently “grapple with faith dynamics” (Waldman, 2004, 2), and religiously significant issues vary by both religious and political perspectives (Smidt, 2010; Sullivan, 2008; Winston, 2007). To evaluate the ongoing dominance of the God Gap frame and to consider the potential for expanding the treatment of religion in this pluralistic democracy, this study examines the framing of religion in the 2012 and 2016 presidential elections. Ultimately, the goal is to equip all citizens to participate in a public debate that better reflects the varied beliefs and perspectives that characterize the electorate's commitments and beliefs (Butler, Wacker, Balmer, 2008; Domke and Coe, 2010).

Perhaps lending insight to the appeal of the God Gap frame is the fact that acknowledging and reflecting the nation's more pluralistic reality requires both appreciating the varied aspects of pluralism itself and making sense of the array of differences that characterize American religious expression – even among those rooted in a single religious tradition. Defined as “the acceptance and encouragement of diversity (Hutchison, 2003, 1), pluralism represents both a founding and constantly evolving value in the discussion of religion's place in American public life. The U.S. Constitution's religion clauses originally spoke into a social context in which many religions existed, including those of indigenous Americans and enslaved Africans, but the pluralism to which the founders spoke most consciously represented the varied traditions that came with the largely Christian European settlers. Some colonies established churches before the American Revolution, but once the nation was formed through its ratification of the Constitution and Bill of Rights, no single church or religion was ever nationally established (McGraw, 2003; Ragosta, 2013; Waldman, 2009).

Even without the establishment of a national church, Protestantism emerged as the most pervasive religion practiced by the population and referenced by its leaders. Within the dominant Protestant population, a form of pluralism emerged as multiple denominations have divided and re-divided across the Protestant theological spectrum, expressing the ongoing development of significant differences among practicing Protestants in their understandings of the Christian faith and the role religion should play in the broader society. By the 21st century, White Evangelicals or Conservative Christians comprised 51 percent; Mainline or Progressive Protestants comprised 26 percent, and Black Protestants comprised 18 percent (Pier, 2010; Putnam and Campbell, 2004; Smidt, 2010) of the Christian faith in America. The pervasiveness of the God Gap perspective in the public debate suggests a significant reliance by journalists on the God Gap

frame as a workable tool for discussing religion, but it results in an incomplete understanding of the presence and role of faith in American politics (Winston, 2007). Much as the Horse Race frame has dominated election coverage in recent decades both because of its ease of use for the media and its appeal to the audience (Broh, 1980; Williams, 2011), the God Gap frame enables journalists to incorporate the religious element without having to explore and include more complex considerations of faith expressions and their influence on the policy positions candidates and voters hold (Classen, 2015; Smidt, 2010; Sullivan, 2008; Waldman, 2009). It also reflects the reality that, more than progressives and moderates, conservative Christians have assertively characterized the way that faith should be integrated into public life, offering a clear perspective for reporters to include in their coverage (Winston, 2007). While God Gap coverage captures an aspect of the interaction of conservative Christians in presidential politics, the exclusive or predominant use of the frame suggests a journalistic tendency to treat American religion as a story with a singular perspective or thread (Putnam and Campbell, 2010; Waldman, 2010; Winston, 2007).

Although Protestantism has maintained a commanding presence and influence in American society since the nation's founding, the United States has proven to be a culture that is willing and able to accommodate the growth of religious diversity as immigration patterns have led to a steady expansion of religious pluralism throughout the nation's history (Eck, 2001). Although their numbers were relatively small, and they have experienced marginalization and discrimination to varying degrees as the nation has evolved, Catholics and Jews have been represented in this nation's population since its founding and have considered their religious freedom protected by the U.S. Constitution even when the practice of individuals and

communities failed to live up to those ideals (Barton, 2011; Gunn and Witte, 2013; Hecló et al., 2009).

More recently, over the past several decades, the populations of Hindus, Buddhists, and in particular Muslims, have not only expanded in numbers but have more visibly contributed their cultural identities as part of the American experience. Communities of these religions have grown up across the country, gaining notable presence as they have established congregations and built facilities to gather and worship. The growth and influence of Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and other religions will likely continue in the United States. The increase in religious diversity will certainly require more in-depth knowledge and understanding of different religious traditions, but non-Christian religions still represent less than 10 percent of the American population, with Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists each representing about 1 percent of the population, and Jewish Americans representing about two percent (Cox, 2017; Eck, 2001; Pew Research Center, 2015). Meanwhile, even as their overall share of the population has declined since 2007, Protestants still dominate the American religious landscape, representing approximately 70 percent of the U.S. population (Cox, 2017; Pew Research Center, 2015).

### *Section 2: Covering Religion in Presidential Elections*

Like most voters and the groups, they join, religious individuals and organizations retain a level of political interest and engagement year in and year out that reflects their values and priorities. In presidential elections, the political interests and actions of religious individuals and entities draw the attention of the broader public in a more pronounced way (Marshall et al, 2009). Faith perspectives of presidential candidates and potential voters are of varying levels of interest in each campaign, yielding a sufficient increase in the quantity of religion coverage to allow for useful analysis of patterns of coverage (Domke and Coe, 2010). As discussed above,

the potential universe of faith or religion-related news is extensive and complex. Journalists, who are operating within time and resource limitations, make choices that enable them to produce accurate articles that will interest the intended audience in the time available. Specifically, as it relates to religion, journalists must determine to what extent they will cover the faith of the candidates; to what extent they will discuss the impact of candidate faith on voters; and to what extent they will discuss the religious identity of the voters whose support candidates are seeking to win. Once journalists determine broad parameters in terms of the amount of attention religion merits in the coverage, they operate within professionally and organizationally established norms to produce a final product that can be completed accurately within time and resource constraints (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996). Journalists must make regular decisions that classify and define events (Gans, 2004; Patterson, 2005; Shoemaker and Reese, 1996) to impose meaning on what would otherwise be a “buzzing jumble of facts” (Patterson, 2005, 193). For each news cycle journalists gather observations and interview sources to produce “the necessary supply of suitable news” (Gans, 2004, 83) that will be presented in simple and dramatic ways to attract and retain the largest possible audience (Gans, 2004; Shoemaker and Reese, 1996). As a result of the production process, media professionals direct audience attention in particular ways, affecting what details they notice, how they understand and remember an issue, and how they decide to respond (Patterson, 2005; Entman, 1993). Whether consciously or not, journalists generate frames that show what they see as relevant in the topic at hand (Chang and Druckman, 2007).

### Section 3: Framing Origins and Applications

Originating out of psychologists Kahneman and Tversky’s study of the decision-making process, the framing of an issue or problem emerged as an essential first phase of decision-making with even slight changes in the framing of information altering the final choice

significantly (Iyengar, 1994; Kahneman and Tversky, 1982; Shah et al, 2002; Tversky and Kahneman, 1981). The framing of outcomes also affects attitudes and decision-making. When the same outcome is framed in terms of losses that may be incurred, it generates a stronger response than when the same outcome is stated in terms of the gains it might create (Iyengar, 2005; Kahneman and Tversky, 1982; Tversky and Kahneman, 1982).

Kahneman and Tversky define framing as “selecting and highlighting some features of reality while omitting others” (Kahneman and Tversky, 2013, 270). Entman elaborates on the definition, stating that “to frame is to select some aspects of perceived reality and make them more salient in communicating text in such a way as to promote a particular problem, definition moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (Entman, 1993, 52). As a theoretical basis for studying media, framing has emerged in combination with other concepts, including agenda setting and priming (Scheufele, 1999). McCombs, Shaw, and Weaver characterize framing as second-level agenda setting or attribute agenda setting. While agenda setting considers the relationship between topics discussed in the media and topics considered important by the public, second-level agenda setting considers how people discuss and interact with media content (Macombs, 2005).

Defining priming as the ability of news sources to set criteria people use to evaluate leaders, Iyengar incorporates priming as an aspect of media framing, especially in the coverage of politics. Iyengar characterizes media frames as “contextual clues” (Iyengar, 1994, 11) that influence opinions, judgements, and ultimately decision outcomes. Iyengar also distinguished two types of frames and differentiated the impact each type of frame has on the audiences, with the possibilities ranging between concrete episodic thinking and more abstract thematic consideration (Iyengar, 1994). Tankard argues that framing can either elevate or eliminate voices

in coverage and so favor a particular side in a debate without explicitly stating a position. Framing can also define terms in ways that determine both the depth to which an issue is explored and the extent to which one position or another appears favorably. Deciding how to frame coverage can be an important choice for a journalist as frames can set the tone and context for essential discourse without the audience recognizing that any shaping of the debate has taken place (Iyengar, 1994). In addition, because they set the context in which information is presented, frames influence the references and memories drawn upon for comparison and evaluation of the new information. Frames thus determine the weight audiences give the information presented (Binder, Childers, and Johnson, 2014; Chong and Druckman 2007a; Chong and Druckman 2007b).

#### Section 4: Framing as a Journalistic Tool

Because they constantly must decide which perspective to take, which facts to emphasize, and which sources to use, framing offers journalists a means of streamlining their process for defining and supporting stories at the pace the industry and its organizations require (Boydston et al, 2013; Gamson and Modigliani, 1989; Iyengar, 1993). Characterized as an “interpretive package that gives meaning to an issue” (Gitlin, 1989, 7), a media frame serves as an organizing structure within a news article, bringing focus to the central idea, emphasizing certain elements, and cuing the audience to the most relevant aspects of the news event being covered (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989). Salience involves making a “piece of information more noticeable, meaningful or memorable to the audience,” (Entman, 1993, 53), and an increase in salience increases the likelihood that the audience will discern meaning in the information and choose to process and remember it (Fiske, Kenny, and Taylor, 1982; Taylor and Fiske, 1978). Cues of



saliency include placement, repetition, and association with culturally familiar symbols (Entman, 1993).

Frames enable journalists “to identify and classify information” (Gitlin, 1980), so that they can quickly articulate the “essence of issues and controversies” (Gamson and Madigliani, 1987) to produce packages of information that audiences can receive and consume in a timely manner (Entman, 1993; Gitlin, 1980). Journalists create and reuse frames by choosing which aspects of an event to emphasize and make more prominent, accessible, and memorable in the text (Entman, 1993). These routine choices translate into saliency (Entman, 1993) that when repeated over time “systematically affect the way news is both presented and received” (Tewksbury and Powers, 1995). Journalists value frames for the structure they provide for making sense of information (Gans, 1979; Shoemaker and Resse, 1996). They treat frames as “largely unspoken and unacknowledged means of organizing the world” (Gitlin, 1980, 7).

As frames help journalists “turn... meaningless and non-recognizable happenings into discernible events” (Tuchman, 1986, 5), those same frames help audiences make sense of and interpret the substantial flow of information they receive through the media and elsewhere (Pan and Kosicki, 1993). By covering particular stories, using particular sources, and writing from particular news angles, journalists build “bridge[s] between social and cultural realms and everyday life and decision-making” (Friedland, L. A. and Mengbai, 1996, 13). In the process, they also construct a reality that informs how people think about and respond to significant issues (D’Angelo and Lombard, 2008; Wagner and Gruszczynski, 2016). Inevitably, because of the parameters that define the news production process, alternative perspectives and sources can be excluded from coverage. Such exclusion may be justifiable in individual stories, but over time news stories accumulate to produce a larger picture of the nation and society (Gans, 2004). When

the exclusion of legitimate alternative perspectives is not recognized and corrected, framing can privilege one perspective over another, change the images associated with the issue, and lead the audience to opinions and understandings based on an incomplete representation of the topic (Druckman 2004; Druckman, 2001; Nelson and Kinder, 1996). When the God Gap frame dominates coverage in elections, a single view of religion and the way it should relate to the public sphere dominates even though the culture embodies multiple perspectives on religion's place from both within and without the nation's many religious traditions. Narrowing the treatment of faith in presidential campaigns to the God Gap frame reflects the most recent trend in a long tradition of framing religion and its place in politics through this nation's history (Rohlinger and Quadagno, 2009; Smidt et al, 2010).

#### *Section 5: History of Religion in American Politics and Culture*

Although the nation's founders rejected the establishment of a national church and rooted the authority of the government in the will of the people as opposed to divine right, Protestantism has permeated and influenced the nation's culture and discourse throughout American history. Early press coverage framed American political life matter-of-factly as "an expression of divine providence" (Noll, 1980; Wald, 2014), and the dominant frame of the United States as a Protestant nation has persisted even as the type of coverage religion received has evolved (Eck, 2001). The discussion of faith's role in America's society and politics has shifted between hard news and human-interest stories depending on the public status of religion at the time (Winston, 2007). Since the early 19th century, the growth of science, technology, education, affluence, and a generally more secular way of life have challenged the presumption of religious faith as a factor in the public debate. Religious observance and influence have become more privatized,

and many observers have expected to see the place and presence of religion continue to decrease significantly over time (Wald, 2014; Wuthnow, 1988).

Contrary to expectations, however, religion maintains a relevant place in American culture, and Protestant religion has maintained a fairly constant level of media coverage since the late 19th century (Orwig, 1999). Changes have occurred in the way religion has found expression in the public sphere. Those changes have been reflected in the framing that religion has received, with a notable change occurring in the mid-1980s and remaining in place through today (Winston, 2007). Revivalism throughout the 19th century made dramatic conversions and morality the frame of religious coverage as reflected in the Temperance Movement and in the Moral Wars of the 1840s. After Penny Press papers discovered how much profit the front-page coverage of crime could generate, Christian newspapers, including the *Christian Examiner* and *Religious Miscellany*, spoke out against such coverage in the New York Herald calling it “loathsome and disgusting” because the stories amounted to “a systematic schooling of the uninitiated into the vile mysteries of sin” (Crosby, 1845, 393). In the early 20th century’s Progressive Era, the Social Gospel emerged as a Christian expression of social activism and reform, and the frame of religion in society came to be more about helping those in need and improving the lives of all. With the fears of invasion and annihilation that accompanied World War II and remained present throughout the Cold War, a broad sense that personal faith mattered emerged again to dominate the view of religion. President Dwight Eisenhower exemplified and reinforced this idea with his assertion that “America makes no sense without a deeply held faith in God—and I don’t care what it is” (Djupe and Olson, 2003, 148).

In the late 1950s and in the 1960s, the emergence of the Civil Rights Movement expanded the footprint for coverage of religious-based social reform as it grew into a mass social

movement led by multiple African American preachers, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. most prominently. Although the movement made legal, social, and cultural gains in reducing racial discrimination, the assassination of Dr. King and others left a vacuum of leadership and voice, so that the space created by the Civil Rights Movement for this religious-based moral, social, and political debate went unfilled for several years. Moral crises, including the Vietnam War, emerged through the years, but no debate fit the religion-based public discourse frame that the Civil Rights Movement had filled (Winston, 2007). The frame shifted and was finally filled again in the 1980s when conservative Evangelical theologians, including John Neuhaus and Jerry Falwell, boldly entered the political discourse. They espoused their beliefs that “Christianity should have direct bearing on governance and life” (Winston, 2007, 970), and the correct version of Christianity was Bible-based, conservative Evangelicalism (Neuhaus, 1984; Winston, 2007).

Despite their dominance as the face and voice of religion in American politics in recent years, conservative Christians have not felt acknowledged and understood by the media. Rather, religious leaders have complained of their portrayal even as they have continued to take advantage of their exposure to promote their political positions and their view of the world (Hoover, 2002). Conservative Christians have been allowed to characterize correct faith expression as Evangelical in nature to the exclusion of others’ deeply held beliefs despite the reality that the United States is a secular democracy that protects a plurality of religious beliefs and practices (Hoover, 2002; Silk, 2000). This study examines media frames to clarify how religion was covered in the 2012 and 2016 elections, and to explore what that coverage reveals about the role candidate faith plays in presidential campaigns. By examining the amount and nature of coverage each candidate receives in each election, this study determines the extent to which patterns of coverage repeat themselves from election to election. It also enables

comparison of coverage between political parties and makes it possible to determine the extent to which the nature and extent of coverage varies by newspaper. The 2012 and 2016 elections provide an opportunity to compare how depth of personal faith affects coverage across party lines as the most religious candidate in 2012 is Republican, and the most religious in 2016 is Democratic. Those two elections also offer the opportunity to explore coverage within a single party over two elections of two candidates who differ dramatically in their relationship to personal faith. More directly, the coverage of these two elections offers interesting insights as in 2012 Romney struggles throughout his campaign to generate enthusiasm and robust support among Evangelical voters while in 2016, campaign observers struggle to explain the level of support Trump sustains among that same segment of the electorate.

#### Section 6: Media Frame Analysis

Analyzing media frames requires a means of systematic identification and characterization of the relevant cues as they appear in the media. The use of language, the choice of sources, the treatment of quotations, and the inclusion and exclusion of relevant information build frames through which news is viewed or consumed (Shah et al., 2002). Other framing devices include metaphors, headlines, leads, and concluding paragraphs (Gamson and Mogdigliano, 1989; Tankard, 2001). All these factors can be identified and analyzed in broad terms of syntactic, thematic, and rhetorical structures. The elements of newsworthiness represented in the collection of newspaper articles can also be examined. Syntactic analysis identifies patterns in the use of words and phrases. Thematic analysis examines causal statements and connections between observations and quoted sources. Rhetorical analysis identifies stylistic choices in the writing and in all aspects of presentation, identifying elements of newsworthiness that illuminate questions of a given topic's priority and importance (Pan and Kosicki, 1993).

Whichever approach or approaches are used to identify and characterize frames in coverage, frames can play determinative roles in the public discourse by emphasizing certain values and facts over others (Nelson et al, 1997), and thereby affecting “problem definitions, causal interpretations, moral evaluations and treatment recommendations” (Entman, 1993, 5).

### Section 7: Political Communications Theory

Although religion has not proven to be a major determining factor in the final narrowing stages of the voting process (as represented by the ‘funnel’ concept of vote choice described by Campbell et al.), it has deep roots in factors of socio-economic and social status that define political identities – for voter and candidate alike – and shape the public discourse (Putnam and Campbell, 2010). Because religion, which can be variously conceived and measured, “contributes fundamentally to the belief systems of Americans” (Wald and Smidt, 1993, 44), it merits more comprehensive examination in studies of the American electorate (Leege, 1993).

According to established political communication theory, coverage of religion in political campaigns has minimal effect on the final stages of voter decision-making (Converse and Markus, 1993). Nonetheless, the framing of religion in media coverage affects the nature and meaning of public discourse in both long-term and short-term ways (Schaufule, 1999). In fact, politicians recognize the potential influence of frames on the public debate enough to compete with each other and with journalists to establish news frames and so determine how particular aspects of a campaign are described and discussed (Entman, 1989; Riker, 1986; Tankard, 2001). Over the course of an election cycle, the media “set frames of reference that readers and viewers use to discuss public events” (Tuchman, 1978, p. ix). Over the longer term, the media influences the structures and schema people develop over time to process and analyze the information that forms their political identities and perspectives. The effects of media framing on both voters and

the overall political discourse can thus be examined from a social constructivist perspective, which recognizes media as one of many factors that voters rely on to determine their images of reality. (McQuail, 1994; Neumann, et. al, 1992).

Understanding the American electorate more fully requires a more complete analysis of the treatment religion receives in the context of political campaigns. Throughout the same history in which the American media's relationship with elections has evolved, religion has also changed as a relevant element of political discourse. Additional studies of voter behavior have recognized religion's influence on the political socialization and political decision-making process of many Americans (Leege, 1993; Kellstedt and Wald, 1993).

Any examination of influences on the American electorate operates within the context of voter behavior studies, which for many decades have prompted political scientists to minimize the influence of both religion and media coverage of campaigns on voter behavior. Even within the narrow parameters of potential influence set by voter behavior theory, the study of the media and the individual frames that emerge in campaign coverage offers insights regarding the information voters have access to and how they process it when they are evaluating candidates throughout the elections (Scheufele, 1999). Before shifting the focus of this study to framing as a means of exploring both how media might affect voters and how media have handled religion in recent campaigns (deVreese, 2005), here follows a brief review of voter behavior research as it relates to media coverage of religion in campaigns.

#### *Section 8: Religion and the Stable Influence of Partisan Identification*

In their 1952 study of the American electorate, based on the National Election Survey (NES), University of Michigan researchers Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes identified attitude toward party as the primary influence on voter behavior with a "funnel of causality"

illustrating the relationship among all influences. With ultimate voting choice at the narrow tip of the funnel, sociological background characteristics, such as race, ethnicity, and religious affiliation, have a foundational influence at the mouth, or starting place, of the funnel. From there the funnel narrows through education and occupation to arrive at the funnel's narrowing stages of party affiliation, campaign events, campaign coverage, conversations with voter's family, and finally the vote itself (Converse and Markus, 1993). Subsequent studies of voter behavior have explored alternative influences on voter behavior, but the significance of partisan identity has largely held up over time. In the 1970s, the Rational Voter model emphasized the role of issues, ultimately suggesting issues may have been "submerged" in the initial Michigan model as opposed to issues being as thoroughly disconnected from party identity as initially indicated (Benjamin and Shapiro, 1992). Revisiting their long-term panel linkage model in 1976, Converse and Markus found that although more voters were identifying as Independent, at the individual-level the strength of party identification for 1972-1976 represented "nearly a carbon copy from the 1956-1960 panel" (Converse and Markus, 1993, 77). Even as they predicted the decline of party identification resulting based on its failure to transfer between generations, Nie, Verba, and Petrocik (1993) echoed Converse and Markus' finding that although fewer people identified themselves with parties, those who made that commitment stayed rooted in their party identification regardless of the choices of the people around them. In a 2000 study, Bartels identified the Nie, Verba, and Petrocik's "decline" as the low point of a cycle that between 1952 and 1996 saw partisan identification increase from 24 percent of the electorate to 31 percent, with pure Independents declining from 16 percent to 9 percent (Bartels, 2000). As of 2012, NES numbers showed similar trends with the number of strong partisans increasing since 1996. Meanwhile, the percentages for weak partisans declined, and the combined Independents and



leaning-Independents remained constant (Bartels, 2000; Carsey, 2006). Although issues, such as increasing polarity within and between parties, continue to expose vulnerabilities to the long-term health and sustainability of today's political parties, the place of partisan identity in the American system remains essential (Green, Palmquist, and Shickler, 2002). As Zaller put it, "Political parties though given up for dead by many political analysts are still the most important vehicle by which Americans relate in politics and hold the government accountable" (2001, 253).

With the endurance of political parties re-affirming the stability of partisan identity and its influence on voter behavior, the 'Michigan Model' has maintained dominance as a primary understanding of voter behavior. While recognizing the role of partisan identity in voter decision making, scholars of religious politics have sought to increase the attention voter religious involvement receives and to improve the way voter religion is measured in the NES, the General Social Survey (GSS), and the Gallup Poll (Leege, Kellstedt, and Wald, 1990). Leege, Kellstedt, and Wald argued that "the NES largely equated 'religiosity with church attendance'" (1990, 1) and failed to reflect "the inherent complexity of religious attachment in modern society" (1990, 21).

Not only do a larger proportion of Americans voluntarily associate with churches, synagogues, and other religious assemblies than with any other single type of institution, but religious organizations also prove to be contexts within which worldviews form and develop (Leege, 1993). Although characterized by early social theorists as settings for hierarchical inequities, social control, and a relatively uniform view of the world (Glock, 1972), religious groups have demonstrated the potential for any one religious tradition to produce varied perspectives and approaches in terms of political and social activity. Within multiple faiths, divisions tend to fall broadly into categories of more individualistic versus more community-

oriented approach to faith. Typically, those inclined to a more individualistic emphasis find in religion justification for preserving the status quo while those with a more community-focused approach find in the same religion a call for change (Leege, 1993, Leege and Kellstedt, 1993), with these distinctions translating into political attitudes and behavior (Davidson, 1975). The more individualistic view prioritizes the need for personal salvation based on a deviant view of human nature and a judgmental image of God. Divine favor requires strong faith and principled action, and such beliefs tend to coincide with conservative attitudes on social and social welfare issues (McDaniel, 2016). The more communal or community-focused view finds in faith a “divine mandate to combat inequalities” (McDaniel, 2016, 288) and evaluate the behavior of individuals and institutions in terms of social implications and societal accountability (Davidson, 1975). Related political views tend to be more liberal (McDaniel, 2016). This brief review of key differences among U.S. religion groups highlights the inadequacy of the ‘God Gap’ model in capturing the broad sweep of American religious views and activities.

In addition to the broad divides common within most religious traditions, there are also varied levels of commitment and intensity among those who identify themselves within a given faith. Efforts to improve the measurement of religious identity and involvement include identifying and labeling those levels as affiliation, doctrinal markers, and religious movement identification (Woodberry et al., 2012). In measuring religious engagement, self-designation constitutes an affiliation without regard for the extent of practice or belief. Holding to doctrinal markers means the respondent affirms essential tenants and commitment to the faith’s objectives without distinguishing between oneself and those who practice the faith differently (Kellstedt et al, 1998; Green et al., 1998). Identification with a religious movement means the respondent has an intensity of belief and practice that views any distinctions from the practices and beliefs of

others as indications of a superior expression of the faith (Woodberry, et al, 2016, Woodberry and Smith, 1998, Smidt, 2009). While political leanings among those who identify with a single religious movement tend to be fairly consistent, that consistency decreases among those who hold doctrinal markers and decreases further among those identified only as affiliated with a particular religion (Woodberry et al, 2012; Woodberry and Smith, 1998).

Failure to expand on the “Michigan Model” risked leaving a large portion of the American electorate poorly represented in the discussion (Wald and Smidt, 1993). After the Christian Right emerged and influenced presidential elections throughout the 1980s, the NES agreed to focus one of its periodic pilot studies on the development of additional questions on religion. The goal was to ask for more than the most general affiliation. The original survey asked only if a respondent was a “Protestant, Catholic, Jew, None, or Other,” and the only expansion in terms of religion had occurred in 1960 when it was possible to ask what family of Protestants a respondent belonged to. The changes allowed for designation such as Baptist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Episcopalian, etc., but none of the many denominations within each Protestant category were captured (Kellstedt and Guth, 2013). In the questions added in 1989, Kellstedt, Wald, and Leege sought “to assess the utility of different conceptions of religion” to an NES Pilot Study (Wald and Smidt, 1993, 27, Leege, Kellstedt, and Wald, 1990). The new questions collected more detail about denomination, about belief, and about practice by asking questions focused on prayer frequency, importance of religion, attendance at religious services, and belief in the Bible. The questions added in 1989 remain a part of the survey. (Kellstedt and Guth, 2013; Leege, Kellstedt, and Wald, 1990).

### Section 9: Media Framing in the Context of Voter Behavior Theory

According to voter behavior theory, media campaign coverage – like religion-- has little influence on a voter in the final stages of decision making (Campbell et al.). Nonetheless, campaign coverage remains a source of information that affects voter evaluation of candidates and arguably influences candidate choice (Campbell, Monson, and Green, 2009). Campaigns have proven to be influential in close elections such as 2016, and it is difficult to demonstrate opinion change as a result of media exposure over the short period represented by a political campaign (Bartels, 1993; Campbell, 2008). Bartels argues, however, that the limited evidence of persuasion points to the strength of pre-existing opinions as opposed to the absence of any media effect. In addition, media messages during a campaign do not differ sufficiently from existing opinions to allow for measurable change. Finally, even without access to the original opinion formation process, Bartels asserts “the most natural supposition is that...opinion formation prior to the campaign season...was heavily dependent on media exposure” (Bartels, 1993, 275). Bartels thus seeks to shift the perspective on media effect in elections to a longer term. More aggressively, Iyengar and Simon argue that campaigns and the media they generate matter more than traditionally recognized both because the perceived dominance of partisanship in political decision-making rests on inadequate methods and because the impact of campaign media reaches beyond the persuasion process (Iyengar and Simon, 2000). Challenging the original Michigan study, Iyengar and Simon argue weakness in the reliance on self-reported exposure to campaign communication because “most people have notoriously weak memories for past events, especially when the event in question concerns an encounter with a particular political campaign (e.g., see Bradburn et al, 1987, Peirce and Lovich, 1982)” (Iyengar and Simon, 2000, 151). Iyengar and Simon offer the resonance model as an approach for expanding on the

understandings offered by traditional voter behavior theory. According to the resonance model, the influence of campaign messages – whether through media or ads – works in “concert with voters prevailing predisposition and sentiments” (Iyengar and Simon, 2000, 158). Voters’ partisanship thus becomes interactive with information provided through campaign coverage as a factor in voter decisions. (Iyengar and Simon, 2000). These theorists aside, events in 2016 demonstrated how a close election and a disruptive populist candidate can challenge traditional models that rely on traditional notions of partisan identification.

Media frames in campaign coverage have proven to be among the elements that interact with individual dispositions and with accumulated social and cultural influences to affect choices (McCombs and Ghanem, 2001). Capella and Jamieson expand on the idea of frames’ presenting information in a certain way with the sense of frames also “activating knowledge” that “stimulates stocks of cultural and moral values” (Capella and Jamieson, 1997, 47) already present in the sub-consciousness of the audience member. Frames thus trigger responses to the information covered in a way that determines how the new information fits with the information already there. Depending on the elements that are highlighted in a frame, audiences define problems, diagnose causes, construct arguments, and decide on moral responses (Entman, 1993; Gamson, 1992). Specifically, in terms of the coverage of candidate faith, Campbell, Monson, and Green argue that media framing affects how information about candidate religion enters the public discourse, how voters assess the appeal of candidates, and how citizens make their voting decisions (Campbell, Monson, and Green, 2009).

### Section 10: Conclusion

The God Gap frame has dominated the treatment of faith in political elections though the final decades of the 20th century and in the early years of the 21st century (Green, 2007). Before

moving on to examine the coverage of the 2012 and 2016 elections to determine the extent to which the God Gap dominates the framing of those elections, it is worthwhile to examine thoroughly how religion, politics, and media have intersected over the course of American history. The next chapter explores in-depth the interplay and evolution of those relationships.

## Chapter 3: The God Gap in American Politics

### Section 1: Introduction

Religion has always pervaded American politics, but the roles religion has played have shifted over time. This reflects both changes in religious expression and growth in religious diversity amidst ongoing social change. For the media to give their audience an accurate understanding of the complexities that characterize the interplay of religion and politics in this pluralistic democracy, coverage needs to capture and articulate the varied political approaches that can emerge from the different beliefs and perspectives that fill the nation's religious landscape. It also needs to recognize that the way religion influences or relates to policy perspectives has changed over time and will likely continue to change going forward. Instead, in recent years, the media have generally discussed religion in politics through a single crude lens such as the God Gap that identifies the religious voice in the public conversation with a single expression of religious faith. This approach makes it possible to incorporate religion in the coverage without having to address the widespread, enduring, and diverse role of religious faith in American life and politics. The gaps in coverage are particularly acute during election campaigns.

A look back at historic inflection points where religion, politics, and media have converged reveals how religion's place and influence have shifted over time in the political arena and offers the opportunity to examine the role that the media of the day played in covering and clarifying the nature and significance of those shifts. This discussion will consider the development of the relationship between religion and American politics from the nation's founding through the growth of Catholicism during the waves of immigration in the 1830s to the emergence of the Social Gospel. This discussion highlights how the Social Gospel and Senator George McGovern played a notable – even surprising – role in prompting the development of the

Culture Wars dynamic and the return of Evangelicals to the public square. McGovern rooted his support for morally progressive positions, including opposition to war, homosexual rights, and racial equality in his Christian faith. He thus awakened the political inclinations of Christians who considered his progressive positions to be immoral and essentially brought to life the Culture Wars values and dynamics that have come to be identified with Evangelicals' political activism. Out of the Culture War dynamic, the God Gap emerged over the last four decades and has become a predominant frame in the coverage of religion in the political context. Examining major shifts in the roles religion has played in American political history shows that faith-based movements have emerged across the political spectrum and come from various theological perspectives. History also shows it is common for a single perspective to captivate the public arena for a period, but no one voice, or perspective takes over permanently as the only right approach to infusing religion into public policy. Rather, voices emerge to contribute ideas and compete in the public marketplace. Recognizing how religion's place in politics has changed over time can support and enable the discovery of ways for the media to help the public debate move forward from the current dominance of the God Gap and escape its reification as the only way to understand and relate to religion in American public life.

Throughout significant periods of history, religion, politics, and the media have essentially run on parallel paths reflecting a broad-based acceptance of traditional moral values based on a generally shared sense of the compatibility between American religious practice and democratic principles. Until well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, religion would most often emerge as a significant factor in presidential elections only when the religious identity of the candidate diverged from the norm of white Protestantism that reflected the predominant religious identity of the electorate (Layman, 2001). During the 1960s, however, cultural changes led to the



emergence of alternative ideas about the expression of religious faith in the public arena. The translation of faith into policy positions departed from its long-held understanding as support for traditional morality across the political spectrum. Less traditional values, such as opposition to war and equal rights for all people regardless of gender, race, or sexual orientation, began to gain expression as faith-based positions.

Divisions among religious voters over the meaning of faith when applied to public policy thus became an enduring part of the public debate. By the 1972 election, the religious identity of presidential candidates began to have to share space with questions about how the religious faith of a given candidate influenced his or (rarely) her political positions. The discussion of the details and political implications of candidate faith has endured and expanded over the course of successive elections, challenging journalists to examine and clarify the often-nuanced differences among candidates in terms of their practice and political application of religious faith. This study will explore the extent to which the 2012 and 2016 presidential elections reflect further development in the media's attention to and discussion of religious faith's more complex presence in the public debate. This chapter will examine in detail the evolution of the current context in which religion, politics, and media interact.

### *Section 2: Inflection Points*

Throughout American political history inflection points have emerged in presidential elections where the interaction between religion and politics has risen above the routine acknowledgement of the candidate's religious identity to command more public attention and call for more extensive media coverage. From the 19<sup>th</sup> century into the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, those inflection points have primarily reflected the electorate's response to the possibility of electing a leader from outside the Protestant mainstream despite the U.S. Constitution's rejection of an

established church and of any religious test for elected office. The first such emergence of religion and politics into the public debate could be seen in the 1800 Adams-Jefferson election when the Adams campaign attempted to use Jefferson's unorthodox practice of Christianity against him. Voters seemed to uphold the Constitutional positions on religion despite the predominance of traditional Protestantism in the population (Larson, 2007).

In the 1830s, the wave of Roman Catholic immigration from Western Europe prompted another inflection point as anti-Catholic hostility arose and took the form of the Know Nothing (Menendez, 2011; Prothero, 2005). In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the emergence of Protestant Fundamentalism led to attacks on Unitarian presidential candidate Howard Taft in which he was maligned as an "infidel" because of his religious beliefs. President Theodore Roosevelt responded to the religious attacks on Taft with a press statement that was published in *The New York Times*, saying, "If there is one thing for which we stand in this country, it is for complete religious freedom, and it is an emphatic negation of this right to cross-examine him on his religious views before being willing to support him for office" (Menendez, 2011; President Condemns, 1908).

Anti-Catholicism re-emerged in the 1920s as the Ku Klux Klan escalated their activities in response to the flow of immigration from Eastern Europe, undermining the presidential campaign of Catholic New York Governor Alfred E. Smith in 1928. Smith repeatedly proclaimed his loyalty to America and called on voters to resist religious intolerance. Smith has been credited as a "catalyst for religio-political acceptance" (Wald and Calhoun-Brown, 2014, 311), but he had more than religious intolerance to overcome. While other factors including his opposition to prohibition and his association with the famed Tammany Hall corruption did not help, the nation's economic prosperity likely played the greatest role in the nation's

unwillingness to replace outgoing Republican Calvin Coolidge with a Democrat (Boller, 2004). Smith's Republican opponent and the ultimate winner, Herbert Hoover, even conceded, "General Prosperity was on my side" (Boller, 2004, 227). Smith won only 40.8 percent of the vote, handing Hoover a landslide victory (Menendez, 2011; Noll, 1990; Troy, 1990).

After World War II, President Harry Truman committed American troops to fight communist forces in Korea, asserting, "We are on the right track, and we will win – because I think God is on our side in this enterprise (Marty, 1986, 120)," but it was President Dwight D. Eisenhower who brought significant public vitality to the intertwining of belief in God and patriotism as the key to winning the Cold War waged against the Soviet Union and Communist China (Marty, 1986). A moderate Baptist, himself, President Harry Truman believed a person's faith was a private matter and embraced ecumenicism in the political context (Lambert, 2008; Smith, 2015) as a means of building an international coalition against communism (Fowler et al., 2014; Spalding, 2007). From his inauguration forward, Truman articulated his belief that "God meant for the United States to be a beacon of liberty and to hold out the same right for others" (Spalding, 2007, 110).

Baptized as a Presbyterian in the White House and comfortable with a broad definition of religion, President Dwight D. Eisenhower amplified Truman's message, viewing his presidency in large part as a "crusade" [against] "godless communism" (Marty, 1986, 296). Instead of opposing McCarthyism or fighting for civil rights, Eisenhower invested his moral energy in avoiding nuclear war and finding paths to international peace. Eisenhower made use of the media to encourage people to find a faith that worked for them and would enable them to stand firm against the threats represented by the Cold War (Cornett, 2011; Holl, 2007). He articulated an explicit connection between some expressions of faith and American democracy in speeches

supporting the American Legion's Back to God campaign, saying, "Recognition of the Supreme Being is the first and most basic expression of Americanism. Without God, there could be no American form of government, nor an American way of life" (Marty, 1986, 296).

Eisenhower was also famously quoted in *The New York Times*, saying, "Our form of government makes no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith, and I don't care what it is" (Kenneth and Post, 1953). Though he has been maligned for this comment as vacuous, Eisenhower actually demonstrated a good understanding of the American religious landscape in the following portion of his comment that is often omitted, "With us of course it is the Judeo-Christian concept, but it must be a religion with all men (sic) created equal" (Kenneth and Post, 1953). Although he was hardly calling for a global pluralism, Eisenhower's openness to legitimate faith reaching beyond the Protestant spectrum suggests that he recognized and perhaps helped lead to the next major point of inflection between politics and religion with the election of a Roman Catholic to the presidency. Eisenhower's more open sense of acceptable religion may also have contributed to the broadened discussion of religious faith's impact on policy positions that emerged in the decade following that landmark election (Cornett, 2011; Fowler et al., 2014; Holl, 2007; Noll, 1990).

In his 1960 campaign for the White House, Catholic Senator John F. Kennedy made strategic use of the media, including on the issue of candidate faith. In a straightforward move, Kennedy articulated his "absolute" commitment to the separation of church and state in a well-publicized speech to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association on September 12, 1960. A bit more behind the scenes, the Kennedy campaign also allegedly facilitated the release of anti-Catholic flyers and brochures early in the nominating process and made it appear to come from the camp of opponent Hubert Humphrey (Carty et al., 2018, White, 1982). The goal was to

establish early the idea that opposing Kennedy on religious grounds was unseemly and to, thereby, pre-empt any such plans on the part of any opponent (Carty et al., 2018; Espinosa, 2009; White, 1982). Following the election of Kennedy, the religious identity of candidates has remained a part of American campaign conversations, but the social upheaval of the 1960s generated another inflection point that manifested a significant shift in the way that religion and politics interacted.

In the 1972 election, the Democratic candidate, McGovern, asserted morally progressive positions, including opposition to war, homosexual rights, and racial equality, as the expression of his understanding of Christian faith. He thus challenged the traditional understanding of Christian morality in the public arena, which in both parties had largely held to respecting the authority of government, especially in foreign affairs, and supporting the traditional family. McGovern's candidacy articulated a new expression of the relationship between religious faith and the Democratic party. In the process his campaign awoke opposition from conservative Evangelical Protestants who had largely departed the public sphere in the 1920s following embarrassment over the 1925 Scopes Trial <sup>3</sup>( Layman, 2001; Marty, 1986). The coverage of the trial discredited not only Bryan but also the intellectual credibility of conservative religion as a whole, leading Evangelicals to depart the public arena and adopt a separatist approach to culture (Layman, 2001; Marty, 1986).

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<sup>3</sup> In the Scopes trial, biblical literalists successfully stopped Tennessee high school teacher John Scopes from discussing evolution in the classroom based largely on the testimony of William Jennings Bryon, repeated Democratic presidential candidate and well-known defender of conservative religion. Subsequent newspaper reporting exposed Bryan's testimony as saying little more than "The Bible state it; it must be so" (Maddux, 2013, 490; New York Times, July 21, 1925, 1).

After decades of focusing on individual conversion as their route to influencing culture, Evangelicals responded to McGovern's 1972 campaign by re-entering the public arena to defend culture from a shift toward McGovern's more progressive morality, which they perceived as a turn toward godlessness that would corrupt and ultimately destroy the nation (Layman, 2001; Marty, 1986). The Evangelicals' re-entry into politics had a dramatic impact that represented a major inflection point in the historical relationship between religion and politics. The nation continues to operate within the political context created by this shift. Evangelicals brought with them a determination to fight for their definition of the proper Christian understanding of cultural issues, and their engagement brought into the public debate "competing moral visions" (Hunter, 1991, 4) that came to be characterized as the Culture Wars. Evangelicals have thus shifted the primary focus of debate about religion in politics from the question of religious identity to the question of whose political positions reflect Biblical values most correctly (Hunter, 1991; Layman, 2001; Marty, 1991). With this shift Evangelicals gained more than a voice in the political arena. They demonstrated their comfort with dogmatic assertions about the right way for religious faith to affect public policy – as opposed to offering their views as one of many legitimate perspectives to debate – and so gave unequivocal declarations of their beliefs a forceful presence in the public debate (Domke and Coe, 2008; Green, 2007; Hunter, 1997; McGraw, 2003).

Evangelicals have come to be strongly identified with the Culture Wars dynamic, but McGovern's presidential campaign arguably generated that approach to public debate. McGovern can thus be said both to have prompted Evangelicals to re-enter the political arena and to have given them a framework within which to make sense of their renewed public engagement. (Hunter, 1987; Hunter, 1991). It was not until the 1980 election cycle that the

Culture Wars dynamic became clearly identifiable, but McGovern's appeal to faith as a basis for his progressive moral positions began to re-activate Evangelicals. McGovern's positions also prompted an immediate response from the Nixon re-election campaign in regions where religion was considered to have significant influence. Specifically, in seeking to attract Democratic voters in the traditionally more religious South, Nixon used religious language to promise that a Nixon administration would never allow the country to lose the "moral values" and "respect for character" that are rooted in "religious devotion" (Dochuk, 2011, 332).

In 1976, while serving as the Democratic governor of Georgia, Carter began to emerge as a viable candidate for president. Both politically and religiously, Carter was more moderate than McGovern and generated broader support. Politically, Carter had led an effort to nominate "anyone but McGovern" in 1972 because Carter opposed McGovern's anti-war position and saw his whole political agenda as representing the liberal extreme of the party. Religiously, McGovern and Carter shared a passionate commitment to their Christian faith and a conviction that their faith should guide their politics. McGovern, however, talked primarily of the influence of faith on systems and institutions while Carter talked more personally about his beliefs. Describing himself as "born again," teaching Sunday School regularly, and acknowledging that he sought God's guidance through personal prayer, Carter initially appealed to Evangelicals as one of them.

At the same time, however, Carter's open religiosity in the political context came with multiple potential downsides that chief campaign strategists Hamilton Jordan was known to refer to as the "weirdo factor" (Berkowitz, 2005, 108). For most Americans, attending a Sunday service – preferably at a Protestant church – was considered the appropriate level of religious expression for the president (Berkowitz, 2005; Jordan, 1972). Once Carter identified himself as a

“born again” Christian, non-Evangelicals across the country had to be reassured that his beliefs did not mean that he would rely on hearing God’s voice to make his governing decisions or that he would expect everyone abide by the strict behavioral and moral standards his Southern Baptist Church required (Witcover, 1977). In the election, Carter’s genuineness outweighed concerns about any excessive religiosity, and he won over an electorate weary of the deceptions and disappointments of Watergate (Balmer, 2014; Briggs, 1976; Walz, 2007). Once in office, however, Carter proved an unsatisfactory political ally for Evangelicals—initially because he did not show any particular commitment to appointing Evangelicals to his administration and ultimately because he refused to support the Evangelical effort to maintain tax protection for religious schools (Balmer, 2010; Freeman, 2005).

It was Republican Reagan in the 1980 campaign, who capitalized more fully on the political potential of Evangelicals as the voting bloc that emerged as the Christian Right. Reagan’s election thus solidified the change in the dynamics that characterized interaction between religion and politics in presidential elections that McGovern had initiated. Reagan had a Christian background, but he offered little public expression of his faith (Kengor, 2004). Reagan influenced the interplay of religion and politics by actively seeking to draw the Christian Right to the Republican party. He sought to convince Evangelical voters that he shared their faith-based values and would pursue their cultural objectives of ending legal abortion and protecting traditional family values.

Perhaps the most famous expression of his campaign’s outreach to Evangelicals was the speech he gave on religious freedom to The Religious Roundtable National Affairs Briefing in Dallas (Sawyer, 1980). After acclaiming that “religious America [was] awakening” and “giving new energy and new direction to our public life, Reagan told his audience, “I know that you



can't endorse me, but I only brought that up because I want you to know that I endorse you and what you're doing (Reagan, 1980). Reagan convinced Evangelical voters to make the Republican party their political home to the extent that within Evangelical churches self-identification as a Democrat became cause for questioning the authenticity and depth of a person's faith (Bass, 2002; Sullivan, 2008).

The connection between people who consider themselves deeply religious and the Republican party has now endured over multiple decades, and the Democrats who have won the White House in those years have never won a majority of Evangelicals but have won over a highly valued portion of the Evangelical vote with expressions of faith that Evangelicals have been convinced would lead those candidates to right positions and actions on cultural issues, including abortion and same sex marriage (Green 2007; Smidt 2010). Raised in a Southern Baptist town and trained in a Jesuit university, Bill Clinton combined a genuine depth of religious knowledge with his considerable political skill (Balmer, 2008; Penning, 2012) to win 23 percent of the Evangelical vote in 1992 and 34 percent in 1996 (Morin and Brossard, 1996). By the time Democrat Obama ran in 2008, self-identified Evangelical Bush had held office for eight years, and the dynamic that characterized the interaction of religion and politics in presidential elections had come to be identified as the God Gap.

The first Obama campaign made a concerted effort to assure Evangelical voters that his faith could be trusted – that he was neither a Muslim nor a racially motivated radical – and that he could be trusted to listen to them and their policy concerns (Casey and McCurry, 2019; Hollander, 2018; Willard, 2014). As anticipated, Obama's efforts attracted only 24 percent of the Evangelical vote, but even that small bump over Clinton's 1992 numbers was viewed as a meaningful contribution to his electoral success (Casey and McCurry, 2019; Smidt, 2010).

In the next two elections, the dynamics related to candidate faith varied again. In 2012, while the God Gap frame remained in place, emphasis returned to the question of religious identity when the Republicans nominated Romney, who is a Mormon (Williams, 2011). Romney's Mormonism raised strategy questions throughout the campaign as Romney and his staff struggled to determine whether and how to present the non-traditional faith that was central to the candidate's life, including his approach to and qualifications for leadership (Perry, 2015).

The 2016 election revisited the dynamics of the 1980 election with the Democratic candidate holding a deep well-developed personal faith but losing to a Republican whose personal religious faith is less clearly defined in the public (Kengor, 2017; Rozell and Wilcox, 2017). This study will examine the coverage of the 2012 and 2016 presidential elections to analyze the extent to which the media recognizes the presence of the God Gap perspective, explains its origins, clarifies its significance, and explores any alternative ways of interpreting the relationship between religion and presidential election politics. The 2012 election also provides the opportunity to examine public response to and the media's treatment of a candidate who is strongly committed to the non-traditional faith of Mormonism.

### *Section 3: Religion's Inescapable Presence in American Political History*

For America's founders, religion was a social reality that had to be addressed in the nation's founding documents because of its proven potential both to support and damage the nation. The founders believed religion could promote individual virtue that could help make democratic self-governance possible, but they also knew—based on European experience—that religion could generate abuses of power by religious institutions and disruption of civic life by religious factions. Recognition of religion's social power and persistence led to the U.S. Constitution's commitment to prevent the establishment of a national church and to protect each

individual's "free exercise of religion, according to the dictates of conscience" (*The Constitution of the United States of America*, Article 1, Section 16). The religious culture that grew out of these commitments has broadened significantly over time from the multi-denominational white Protestantism that dominated the American Colonies to a religious mosaic (Wuthnow, 1988; Eck, 2001) that has been characterized in recent years as a "vast textured pluralism" (McGraw and Meachem, 2005) although the election of a president who practices any faith other than Christianity has yet to occur (Espinosa, 2009; Sandstrom, 2021). Although the nature of religion has changed significantly since this nation's earliest days, its founders anticipated correctly that religion would maintain an influential place in society and culture. By understanding the varied roles religion has played throughout American political history, journalists and other observers can provide background and context that enhances the public's ability to assess and respond to contemporary dynamics of religion and politics (Fleming, 2019).

#### Section 4: Evolution of the Electorate's Views on Candidate Faith

Widening expressions of diversity have consistently defined the religious reality in this country, but a notable level of uniformity has defined the electorate's attitude regarding the religious faith of political candidates. Even as humanism and secularism have displaced religion's influence throughout much of the world American voters have persistently shown a preference for candidates who express religious commitment that voters consider to be genuine and within the contemporary definition of the religious "mainstream"<sup>4</sup> (Siebald, 2007). Through the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, at least 70 percent of the electorate expressed agreement with

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<sup>4</sup> While no formal definition of acceptable religious perspectives has ever made its way into American politics, the definition of an acceptable "mainstream" has existed and expanded over time (Marty, Volume 3, 1996).

the statement “It is important that the president should have strong religious beliefs” (Smidt, 2010, 32). In conjunction with actual election results since 1980, such statistics raise questions regarding how voters define “strong religious beliefs” and how they perceive the expressions of faith offered by candidates in each election. In particular Reagan in 1980 and Trump in 2016 proved much more successful attracting Evangelical voters than did their opponents –Carter and Hillary Clinton, respectively, -- both of whom were known to be more personally devoted to their religious beliefs and practice (Balmer, 2014; Kengor, 2007). Reagan and Trump’s appeal to Evangelical voters suggests that for candidates to satisfy voters’ standard for “strong religious beliefs” they need to show commitment to the Evangelical political agenda, including appointing judges who will ultimately repeal legalized abortion, which became a reality with the 1973 Roe V. Wade decision (Dochuk, 2007; Kellestedt et al, 2007).

Public arguments over the correct understanding and role of religious faith have characterized interactions on religion from this nation’s earliest electoral history. President Adams’ 1800 campaign for re-election included attacks on opponent Jefferson’s embrace of an unconventional, self-defined version of Christianity. The Adams-Jefferson contest included the use of each candidate’s personal faith as an indicator of character, incorporated assertions by each candidate that his was the correct interpretation of Christianity and demonstrated the double-edged potential of religion as a campaign tactic. Even as Adams’ campaign sought to discredit Jefferson by highlighting his unconventional religious beliefs in pamphlets and broadsides, Adams himself questioned the approach, and he eventually wondered if an overemphasis on religion had cost him the election (Larson, 2007; Smidt, 2010).

While the 1800 election suggests the electorate’s openness to candidates with varied interpretations of Protestant Christianity, it took over a century for other traditions to experience

political success at the highest levels – even as diversity of religion among the electorate increased rapidly (Espinosa, 2009; Larson, 2007; Sandstrom, 2021). When waves of immigration in the 1830s brought significant numbers of Roman Catholics from Western Europe into the American population, fears emerged that the Pope would influence American policy if Catholics became officeholders, and an organized resistance emerged. By the 1850s, a group of Anti-Catholic extremists formed the Know-Nothing party, so named because it began as a clandestine movement about which members were to say they “knew nothing” if asked about the group’s activities. The party and its efforts to smear any candidate with any connection to Catholicism (Hamilton, 1954; Hennessey, 1990) were short lived as President Abraham Lincoln denounced the Know Nothings in the 1860s (Handy, 1990, Wolf, 1963). Still, voter discomfort with the election of Catholics to high office remained a political reality until Kennedy, an Irish Catholic, won the presidency in 1960 (Carty, 2007; Casey, 2009; Espinosa, 2009).

The eventual acceptance of a Roman Catholic as a suitable candidate for the presidency reflected not only the rise of Catholicism’s social status but also the value of a campaign strategy that took on the question of candidate religion preemptively and perhaps a bit cagily (Carty, 2007; Casey, 2009; Espinosa, 2009). Subsequent Catholic candidates have run without facing the level of concern about papal influence that Kennedy had to address (Campbell, 2007; Weiss, 2010). The 2000 Democratic vice-presidential candidacy of an Orthodox Jew, Senator Joseph Lieberman, also met with little if any negative reaction, suggesting a broadening in the electorate’s sense of what constituted acceptable faith for a presidential or vice-presidential candidate (Cohen, 2005). The 2004 candidacy of Catholic John Kerry also raised no questions of the acceptability of a Catholic president although Kerry’s support of abortion caused the Catholic Church to challenge Kerry’s acceptability as a congregant (Campbell, 2007). Throughout the

2020 election, Catholic Joseph Biden referred to his faith as a source of strength during the campaign. He generated discussions about the appropriate role of the Catholic Church in American public life, but his candidacy did not reawaken sweeping concerns about Vatican control of his administration (Berkley Center for Religion, 2021).

### *Section 5: Shifts in Religion's Influence on the Electorate*

While the electorate has over time simultaneously demonstrated both a desire for candidates to show some type of commitment to religious belief and a growing openness regarding which religions were considered acceptable for candidates to practice, the electorate has also always been divided in the effect that religion has had on voters' political identity and behavior. The nature of those divisions from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century into the late 20<sup>th</sup> century was predominantly characterized as an ethnoreligious model with religious affiliation playing a primary role in the translation of religious perspectives into political connections. Social changes in the 1960s led to the emergence of a Culture Wars model in which belief and depth of commitment began to drive political differences and create divisions within instead of primarily between religious traditions (Layman, 2001). As it has gained influence, the Culture Wars model has also given rise to the God Gap frame for discussion of religion in the political campaigns. The God Gap characterizes Republicans as more religious and Democrats as less so (Green, 2007; Rosenstiel, 2013).

#### Subsection 1: Ethnoreligious Model

The God Gap reflects a transition over time to a Culture Wars model from the ethnoreligious model that characterized identifiable connections between voters' religious affiliation and their political identity and behavior that began to emerge in the 1820s. While each

ethnoreligious group had its own social character, history, and theology, they could be categorized broadly as either liturgical or pietists. The liturgical groups, including the Episcopalians, Roman Catholics, Lutherans, had more ritualistic services with more creed-based expressions of faith. They believed the highest good would come from majoritarian rule in a non-exploitative society with a government that gave no undue favors to any religion. They also believed “God’s kingdom was otherworldly, and God would restore the fallen world in his own good time and in his own mighty power” (Swieranga, 2007, 150). Politically, liturgical groups typically sought to eliminate social and political inequality, believed in limited government rooted in individual autonomy, and, therefore, tended to be Democrats. The Pietist groups, including Baptists, Methodists, Disciples, Congregationalists, and Quakers, stressed living a Biblical faith, focusing on individual conversion and moral behavior as they sought to Christianize America. They believed that the return of the Messiah was imminent and that they could speed its occurrence through evangelism and societal reform. The Pietists leaned toward the Whig party, which was more paternalistic and legalistic (Swieranga, 2007).

Over time, the ethnoreligious configuration shifted so that by the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the dominant mainline Protestant churches, including Episcopalians, Protestants, and Methodists, leaned more toward the Republican party while religious minorities, including Roman Catholics, Jews, Evangelical Protestants, and Black Protestants aligned more with the Democratic party (Smidt, 2010, 43). Even as the specific connections between parties and religious traditions changed through the years, the ethno religious structure remained constant until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century with voters’ political choices being strongly influenced by their church or religious affiliation, and with political divisions falling primarily between and not within religious communities (Noll, 1992; Wacker and Balmer, 2011; Williams, 2008; Wuthnow, 1988). The

influence of religious affiliation on political identity and behavior is generally tied to two major factors: 1) the influence of religious leaders and 2) the importance of social groups in filtering the flow of political information and shaping individual political attitudes (Layman, 2001). The members who were most committed to the religious community would most strongly reflect the political views with which the community was associated, but even those less involved in the religious community still held to the group's policy values and attitudes to the extent they felt they credibly could as a means of maintaining an attachment to their cultural identities. The great degree of social integration within and social isolation between religious traditions explains the development and endurance of ethno religious politics (Kleppner, 1979; Layman, 2001, 65). The social and cultural upheaval of the 1960s contributed to theological and political divisions within religious traditions. Religions and denominations split over interpretations of scripture and tradition that reflected greater or lesser openness to adapting to modern culture. As a result, religious perspectives on social issues multiplied, and the way religions related to political parties changed. Instead of having different religions or denominations being associated with different parties, but generally sharing traditionalist views on moral and cultural issues, religions and denominations began to differ over moral and cultural issues, reflecting various degrees of orthodoxy (Layman, 2001).

#### Subsection 2: Culture Wars Model

The moral and cultural issues that gained salience and began to drive new social and political divisions in the 1960s had been present as political issues from at least the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but the public debate had focused more on social welfare and foreign policy because most citizens at that time shared traditionalist views on moral and cultural issues, including the emotionally potent issues of abortion, homosexual rights, women's rights, and



school prayer (Layman, 2001). Social changes in the 1960s, however, began a redefinition of cultural and political values and laid the groundwork for societal divisions that have become known as the Culture Wars (Hunter, 1991). Lines of divisions came to be characterized as orthodox versus progressive, and generated divisions within -- instead of only between -- religious traditions and denominations (Hunter, 1991; Layman, 2001).

The conflict over moral and cultural issues gained prominence in the political arena due at least in part to multiple shifts in the population's religious demographics that occurred throughout the 1960s and 1970s. At the same time that moderate Protestant churches were experiencing a decline in membership (Sherkat and Ellison, 1999), religious liberals and secularists were growing in number and cultural influence. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, non-Christian religions began to appear as Western expansion drew Chinese and Japanese immigrants who brought a mixture of Buddhist, Taoist, and Confucian traditions. The final decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw this diversification continue at an exponential rate with varied expressions of non-Christian religions appearing, and the ranks of Middle Eastern, Asian, and African immigrants continuing to grow. The face of Christianity also changed with the arrival and growth of "large Latino, Filipino, and Vietnamese Catholic communities; Chinese, Haitian, and Brazilian Pentecostals, and Korean Presbyterians" (Eck, 2001, 24). The language of "Christian America" remains common in the public square, and Christians remain the largest religious group, but the mass migrations of recent decades have meant that the Christian share of the United States population has declined significantly (Eck, 2001; Pew Research Center, 2015; Prothero, 2006).

Over the same period, Protestant conservatism has grown, and the expansion of liberal and secular influence in the public arena arguably "forced those on the conservative side to come

out of political hiding and mobilize themselves for cultural and political battle (Layman, 2001, 34). By the mid-1970s, a significant new political constituency had appeared, ready to defend “Christian values” (Guth, 1996, 12). The differentiation between conservatives who hold to the absolute truth of religious teaching and liberals who allow for more accommodation to contemporary culture has been recognizable to some extent in most eras, but this divide came to characterize American public religion more pervasively in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century (Wald, 2014; Wuthnow, 1988).

Even as studies indicate fewer people would identify themselves as religious or very religious (Lipka, 2015, November 4; Pew Research Center, 2015), through the 20<sup>th</sup> Century most Americans expressed a belief in some form of God and recognized at least a symbolic value in religion (Cooperman and Smith, 2016; Lipka, 2015, May 13; Smith, 2017). Into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the liberal–conservative divide maintains a significant presence in American Christianity, but the place of religion may be undergoing a major shift as the number of religiously unaffiliated adults has increased consistently since 2007. In 2008, approximately 17 percent of U.S. adults considered themselves “nones,”; in 2016, approximately 30 percent of U.S. adults considered themselves “nones,” and in 2021, approximately 29 percent of U.S. adults considered themselves “nones” (Smith, 2021). The religiously uninterested have always made up a part of the American population, but the past decade has seen an unprecedented growth in their numbers. Religiously unaffiliated adults in the U.S. currently outnumber both Catholics and mainline Protestants. The “nones” are second in size only to Evangelical Protestants among major religious groups in the United States (Lipka, 2015, May 12; Lipka, 2015, May 13; Smith, 2021). The “nones” are predominantly Millennial adults as the younger generation are proving less likely than older Americans to identify with religious groups. The inclination of Millennials to identify as “none”

reflects in part a loss of interest in religion among some members of the younger adult generation. At the same time, however, Millennials' comfort with identifying themselves as “nones” also reflects a changing perspective on religion. They are increasingly comfortable with defining faith practice for themselves and not having to be affiliated with a particular religion to be people of faith (Lipka, 2015, May 12; Lipka, 2015, May 13).

Self-identification as a religious “none” does not necessarily represent a lack of religious belief. Rather, Millennials who have expressed low, medium, and high levels of commitment to faith have all shown an increased inclination over prior generations to identify as religiously unaffiliated (Copperman and Smith, 2006; Lipka, 2015, May 13). In terms of understanding the relationship between religion and the public arena, Millennials seem to beckon back to Eisenhower’s urging for people to have faith in a transcendent power without focusing on the specifics of religious belief (Holl, 2007; Kenneth and Post, 1953). The Culture Wars model of battling to assert the Biblically correct understanding of cultural issues generates a different type of public debate than the broader understanding of religious faith (Fiorina, 2011; Hunter, 1987; Hunter and Wolfe, 2006). According to 20<sup>th</sup> century Protestant theologian Paul Tillich, “Man is driven toward faith by the awareness of the infinite to which he belongs but which he does not own like a possession” (Tillich, 2001, 10). Tillich defines faith as “the state of being ultimately concerned” and describes the “dynamics of faith as the dynamics of man’s (sic) ultimate concern” (Tillich, 2001, 1). Further, “faith is more than trust even in the most sacred authority. It is participation in the subject of one’s ultimate concern with one’s whole being” (Tillich, 2001, 37-38). If the current disinclination of the Millennial generation to affiliate with any religion remains as they enter adulthood, the landscape of American religion will likely change dramatically in the upcoming decades. As Millennials form and express new attitudes toward

religion, the policy preferences that emerge out of their beliefs will likely drive changes going forward in the place and expression of faith in the public square. For now, however, a significant portion of the American public continues to see religion as a relevant social and political factor. Understanding the role religion has played in the American government and in American presidential elections thus merits examination. (Fox, 2012).

### Section 6: Emergence and Evolution of the God Gap (1960-Present)

In the 2004 presidential election between Evangelical President Bush and Roman Catholic Senator John Kerry, the media first used the God Gap label to identify the religious dynamics of American politics (Layman, 2001; Smidt, 2010). That dynamic, however, reflected a reality that had been evolving since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. It began to take a shape that could be recognized as the basis for today's dynamics in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and the dynamic emerged fully in the 1980 election, functioning over multiple elections before being named in 2004 (Balmer, 2014; Smidt, 2010). The God Gap describes voter behavior as it relates to religious observance, based on polling results that show more religiously observant voters to be more likely to vote Republican and less-to-non-observant voters more likely to vote Democratic (Classen, 2015; Domke and Coe, 2007; Green, 2007; Rosenstiel, 2013).

#### Subsection 1: Evangelicals in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century

Now characterized predominantly by the God Gap and the Culture Wars model it reflects, the relationship between Evangelicalism and the broader culture has reflected changes over time in the ways that Evangelicals sought to influence society with their Biblical beliefs (Hunter and Wolfe, 2006; Williams, 2002; Wuthnow, 1998). In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Second Great Awakening propelled many Evangelicals to join and develop voluntary associations committed

to social reform. Evangelicalism thus became a significant social force at the same time the market economy was emerging, and political parties were expanding to incorporate broader sectors of the public. Although not necessarily the majority, many early 19<sup>th</sup> century voters chose their political association based on the extent to which a party fit with their religious concerns (Kellstedt, et al., 2007; Swierenga, 2007). Even from those early days, there were differing perspectives within the Evangelical community on the way that religious belief should influence public policy and political engagement. A strain of progressive Evangelicals, primarily in the Northern states, sought to apply Biblical principles of love and justice to improve lives and address social ills, including through the abolition of slavery, the reform of prisons, and even the pursuit of equal rights for women (Balmer, 2014; Carwardine, 1993). At the same time there were a significant portion of Evangelicals, identified theologically as Pre-millennials<sup>5</sup>, who held strongly to beliefs that the end of the world, including the return of Jesus Christ to rule the earth, was imminent. The Pre-millennial theological perspective made social concerns secondary at best to the priority of leading people to personal salvation for eternity through the repentance of personal sin and conversion to Christian faith through what has become known as a “born again” experience. In addition, the Civil War led to divisions within denominations. Southern churches rejected social reform, focusing more inward and prioritizing personal piety while Northern churches sought to create a more hospitable world for all citizens through both personal virtue

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<sup>5</sup> Distinct from the Millennials who were born between 1980 and 1994, and comprise Generation Y, pre-millennialism in the theological context refers to beliefs regarding the sequencing of key events they believe will occur before the world ends. Theological Pre-millennials believe that Jesus will return to earth before the prophesied thousand-year golden age begins and rule over a millennium of peace. In contrast, theological post-millennials believe Jesus will return at the end of the golden age to culminate a thousand years of blessing (Freedman, 2000).

and public policy changes to economic and social systems on behalf of the socially marginalized (Balmer, 2014; Wacker, 2011).

#### Subsection 2: Evangelicals in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

Moving into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the progressive element of the Evangelical community retained a presence in the church and in society, but theological Pre-millennials, with their skepticism about political engagement, gained significant influence within the Protestant church, leading most Evangelicals to back away from the broader society. In addition, Evangelicals found themselves nationally ridiculed because of the Scopes Trial of 1925<sup>6</sup>, which likely accelerated their retreat, and in some cases full departure, from the public arena (Balmer, 2014; Balmer, 2011, Maddux, 2013). It took until the 1970s and the McGovern campaign for Evangelicalism as a movement to become a recognizable political factor again, but over the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Social Gospel theology and New Deal economic policies generated debate about the place of religion in politics (Lempke, 2017; Marty Volume II, 1991). The religious-based reform efforts that had been driven by Evangelical voluntary associations in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century developed through various stages over the next several years to become part of the Social Gospel Movement, which gained clear definition by the 1920's. Described as an attempt to bring the Kingdom of God to earth through progressive reforms, such as providing welfare to families and helping displaced urban workers, the Social Gospel (Balmer, 2011; Curtis, 1991; Lempke, 2017) “became an important ideological support for the 20<sup>th</sup> century emergence of progressive political culture (Curtis, 1991, xiii).” Based primarily on teachings of Old Testament prophets, the Social Gospel viewed sin as a social rather than an individual

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<sup>6</sup> As noted also above, the courtroom confrontation between evolution theorists and biblical literalists led to a win for the literalists in terms of a legal victory but a loss for them in terms of public opinion.

problem and sought to make holiness a concrete reality rather than an abstract ideal by reforming and restructuring systems and institutions to improve people's lives (Curtis, 1991; Lempke, 2017; Marty, Volume II, 1991). As articulated by Walter Rauschenbusch, a German American pastor and one of the Social Gospel Movements earliest leaders, "Social problems are moral problems on a large scale," and as a "tremendous generator of self-sacrificing action" (Rauschenbusch, 6), religion could play a meaningful role in resolving the social problems that came with industrialization and urbanization (Marty, 1986). Despite its practical objectives, the Social Gospel movement began with very cerebral roots as Rauschenbusch's style was often described as "ponderous" (Lempke, 1994), and his most popular book was a devotional guide, called *For God and His People: Prayers for the Social Awakening*. Rauschenbusch believed and taught that acknowledging the presence of the supernatural in everyday life would change people who would then go out and change the world (Lippy, 1994). Although theologians had begun to argue over the Biblical integrity of Rauschenbusch's teaching, laypeople generally received Social Gospel teaching with casual interest until the 1930s when it became identified with the New Deal and its expansive government policies. Out of the New Deal controversy, economic and cultural divides began to gain definition in the religious community. Theological conservatives began to express support for limited government and laissez-faire economics while theological liberals became associated with the Social Gospel and a willingness for the government to engage extensively in social welfare activities. Socially and culturally, theological conservatives began to charge Social Gospel supporters with moving beyond churchly humanitarianism to embrace godless humanism (Marty, Volume II, 1991; Wuthnow, 2005)

Even as Social Gospel teachings became increasingly controversial within the church as a whole, many Rauschenbusch successors still sought to generate greater activism in Protestant

churches. A prominent example, Henry Emerson Fosdick pastored the Riverside Church in New York in the 1930s and 1940s. Like other Social Gospel preachers, Fosdick found much of his congregation to be more interested in spiritual enrichment through intellectual stimulation than through social activation, but he persisted and expanded his message well beyond the pews of his Upper West Side church by preaching over the radio. In South Dakota, Fosdick's teachings resonated with a young listener, future-Senator George McGovern. Listening to Fosdick, McGovern began to develop a worldview that eventually played a significant role in the development of the God Gap that has come to characterize the religious discourse in American politics today.

Characterized by theologian Martin Marty as “modern Evangelical<sup>7</sup> liberalism personified” (Marty, 1986, 52), Fosdick explicitly refused to affirm the Fundamentals, an 11-volume collection of essays published between 1910 and 1915 that sought largely to defend the authority of the Bible and the God of that Bible against science. Upholding the Fundamentals became the basis for distinction between the more conservative faction of Fundamentalists and the rest of the Protestant Evangelical community (Hunter, 1987; Worthen, 2014). Fosdick called for a practical religion that would result from believers “finding the power of God within [themselves]” (Lippy, 1994, 172). In contrast to the Fundamentalists' concerns that Modernism would dilute and corrupt Protestantism, Fosdick argued that literal attachment to the Biblical text made Christianity timid while “reconciling with modernity would strengthen faith with a new vibrancy” (Lempke, 2017, 22).

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<sup>7</sup> Martin's reference reflects the use of Evangelical as a descriptor of all Protestants at the time of Fosdick. The distinction between Evangelicals as more theological conservative than the mainline Protestants evolved over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.



The son of a Methodist minister raised in remote prairie towns; McGovern was expected to live out an example of upright behavior in the community. His family read a Bible passage together every morning, and he was not allowed to visit roller rinks or movie houses because they were perceived to be places full of temptations to immoral behavior. In terms of belief, however, McGovern's parents encouraged him to develop and trust his own conscience more than they pressed him to choose a particular religious dogma. Growing up during the Great Depression, the future U.S. Senator and presidential candidate developed an understanding of faith that emphasized decency and Christian charity especially toward those facing economic difficulties. Fosdick's teachings reinforced McGovern's early convictions that Christianity could help improve society if Christians put aside superstition to embrace progress and focus on helping people in need (Lempke, 2017).

In later years, McGovern further developed his theological views as a student at Garrett Theological Seminary, one of the nation's more theologically liberal and socially activist Methodist schools (Lempke, 2014). There he studied with theologian Ernest Freemont Tittle, who sought to apply progressive Christian teachings to confront the injustices he identified in the nation's social and economic systems. His teachings relied on the Personalist School beliefs that God was a self-limiting being who expected people of good will to take responsibility for improving the world and that people were up to the task because they could grow toward perfection. In contrast, Fundamentalists believed the doctrine of original sin meant that while individuals might grow toward goodness, it was impossible for society as a whole to make such progress. For Evangelicals, who retained their inclination toward seclusion from society at large, any broader influence that faith might have on society would come through personal conversion,

and the defining and policing of moral behavior rather than through seeking to change social and cultural structures (Hunter, 1991; Worthen, 2013; Wuthnow, 1995).

Although during his education, McGovern's religious and political beliefs may have grown more liberal than many of the people he had grown up with in South Dakota, his reputation as a committed churchman enabled him to return home and find political success. In the 1950s, McGovern brought the South Dakota Democratic party back to life and ran successfully as the Democratic candidate for the U.S. House of Representatives in 1956. He was then elected to the U.S. Senate in 1962 (Lempke, 2017; Morano, 2003).

Throughout his political pursuits, McGovern's religious faith maintained meaningful influence as he sought to help people in difficulty and to challenge political policies and systems that he considered unjust and immoral. In addition to advocating on behalf of migrant workers and the urban poor, McGovern fought for racial equality in the Civil Rights Movement, which gained significant voice and influence under the leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King and other pastors. Paralleling the path along which King's politics evolved, McGovern's combination of religious beliefs and liberal politics led him beyond the fight for civil rights to an outspoken position against the Vietnam War by the early 1970s. McGovern also called for passage of the Equal Rights Amendment, sought reduced penalties for marijuana use, and stood against calls for a national ban on abortion (White, 1973). By embracing the so-called New Politics of the day, McGovern gained strong support from young cultural liberals and was able to win the Democratic nomination for President in 1972. McGovern's nomination injected new ideas about the way religious faith could and should influence policy positions into the public debate. By attracting religious liberals and secularists to support his candidacy, he motivated religious

conservatives to re-enter the public policy arena to counter McGovern social and cultural influence (Layman, 2001).

From the start of McGovern's political career and into the late 1960s, neither party had a significant presence of cultural liberals or a clear leaning toward moral progressivism. Even the liberal distributive programs of the New Deal assumed traditional two-parent families in pursuit of a family wage, and both parties were committed to traditional values without a definable presence of religious orthodoxy in either party. Mainline religion dominated both parties, and Evangelicals remained largely apolitical.

When they began to return to the public arena in the 1970s, Evangelicals became strongly identified with a political strategy based on cultural values and are often characterized as the source of the so-called Culture Wars that have influenced public debate in successive decades. In reality, however, it was cultural liberals who adopted appeals based on cultural values in a strategic attempt to reach beyond traditional Democratic constituencies of culturally conservative Catholics, Southern Whites, and labor unions (Anson, 1972; Knock, 2016; Layman, 2001; Lempke, 2017; White, 1973). McGovern found his faith-driven values to be quite compatible with the liberal wing of the Democratic party in its opposition to the Vietnam War and its appeal for reduced penalties for marijuana use. McGovern also expressed his personal support for legalized abortion even as he supported the Democratic party's call for abortion legislation to be handled at the state level. McGovern's presidential candidacy prompted culturally conservative Democrats to look to the Republican party for a political home, and he helped draw Evangelicals back into the public arena as they heard a call to action in the leftward shift of the Democratic party. Evangelicals rushed back into the public arena to save the country from turning toward godlessness and destroying itself (Anson, 1972; Knock, 2016).

As the Evangelical movement came back to political life, both progressive and conservative Evangelicals sought to influence the public arena. The political rise of Evangelicals identified as the Religious Right and their break with Carter have often been tied to the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision and Carter's support for legal abortion despite his personal opposition to the practice (Balmer, 2014; Pippert, 1978; Walz, 2012). While "neither liberals nor conservatives found Carter's nuanced views on social issues satisfactory" (Freedman, 2005, 237), the disillusionment of Evangelicals with Carter developed throughout his campaign into the first years of his administration. Carter identified himself as a born-again Christian and willingly answered questions about his faith, but he never bought into interest group politics. His unwillingness to state his policy positions based on their compatibility with his Christian beliefs frustrated even the Evangelicals who supported Carter because they wanted a clearer statement of their positions in the public debate (Balmer, 2014; Pippert, 1978).

Once elected, Carter also lost Evangelical support when he failed to show any commitment to appointing Evangelicals to his administration after supporters believed Carter had promised to do so (Freedman, 2005). The ultimate break with Carter came when he refused to support the Evangelical effort to maintain tax-exempt status for private religious schools even though they continued to defend and practice racial segregation as an expression of religious freedom. Since the 1960s, a series of court decisions had resulted in the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) removing and allowing to expire regulations that had served to protect the tax-exempt status of private religious schools despite their ongoing practice of segregation. Because both political parties were on record opposing blatant racial discrimination, IRS Commissioner Joe Kluntz anticipated little if any resistance in 1978 when he sought to take the largely background effort to eliminate any form of tax subsidies for any segregated schools a step further. Kluntz

proposed a requirement that all schools, including the religious schools, that sought to maintain tax-exempt status complete IRS questionnaires about their racial policies and submit verifiable documentation that their admissions policies did not discriminate based on race. Some religious schools, most famously Bob Jones University, a fundamentalist college in South Carolina, objected to having to complete the questionnaires and claimed that they should be allowed to continue to practice segregation and enjoy tax-exempt status because they believed that segregation was mandated in the Bible. Bob Jones and other religious schools that still practiced segregation characterized the IRS actions as an intrusion on their freedom to operate according to their Evangelical beliefs (Balmer, 2014).

The Religious Right – most prominently led by televangelist Jerry Falwell, Evangelical theologian Francis Schaeffer, and co-founder of the Heritage Foundation Paul Weyrich -- formed initially to support Christian sectarian schools that reacted strongly because they felt the IRS actions impeded their efforts to escape trends in public school curricula that offended their beliefs and values. As one supporter put it in one of the 126,000 letters of protest Carter received:

...The several private religious schools with which we are acquainted could in no way be called racist. It is not economically feasible for them to actively and specifically recruit members of minority groups, but they do heartily accept students from such groups. The main reason we favor private Christian schools is that, by and large, the public schools do not adhere to, or even set, acceptable moral and/or academic standards for our children (Freedman, 2005, 239).

The Carter administration never supported the effort of the Christian schools, and the IRS did not back away from its call for formal verifiable statement of non-discrimination to maintain tax exempt status (Balmer, 2014). Another letter argued that the IRS and by extension the Carter administration was promoting destructive secularism in public schools, and New Right direct mail pioneer Richard Viguerie asserted that the IRS had thus “kicked a sleeping dog,” and

“ignited the Religious Right’s involvement in real politics” (Freedman, 2005, 238-239). Although they had not succeeded in their opposition to the IRS, the Religious Right had discovered itself as a political coalition with potential to battle cultural trends they believed would ultimately undermine the nation’s moral foundations. By the time campaigning began for the 1980 presidential election, strategic considerations had brought Religious Right leaders to abortion as the primary issue with which they would identify themselves as they moved into more active political roles. Abortion allowed Evangelicals to define their political emergence as a moral battle that they could define without the ambiguities that emerged in their attempt to protect the tax-exempt status for Christian schools. (Balmer, 2014; Freedman, 2005).

#### *Section 7: The God Gap from Reagan to Obama*

As the Culture Wars dynamic has evolved to dominate the interplay of religion and presidential election politics over the past several decades, the coverage of that dynamic has evolved as well. Insider accounts of campaigns produced by political journalists from 1980 to 2012 offer insights into the presence and coverage of religion in presidential campaigns over the decades in which the God Gap has emerged as a common approach for characterizing religion in elections. The journalists’ perspectives help establish the media context for this study that will use content analysis to examine the newspaper coverage of the interaction of politics and religious faith in the 2012 and 2016 elections. Through quantitative and qualitative content analysis of campaign coverage in three national newspapers, this study will analyze the treatment of religion in more recent presidential campaigns to determine the extent to which journalists continue to rely on the God Gap frame when reporting on religion in presidential politics.

### Subsection 1: Ronald Reagan

Although he had never been known to be particularly religious, as the Republican presidential candidate in 1980, Reagan never hesitated to identify the GOP with moral issues, particularly a pro-life stance on abortion, to attract religious voters. As reporters Germond and Witcover observed, Reagan's personable style enabled him to finesse even the gaffs that came with his friendship with Jerry Falwell, founder of the Moral Majority, to undermine Carter's appeal even to those who shared his faith. Unlike Carter who shared his own faith carefully to avoid any negatives that might come with a perception of his being too religious, Reagan embraced Falwell unequivocally as an ally and never appeared to experience any downside to the association even when related controversies arose. For example, during the campaign, Falwell told a gathering of religious broadcasters that God did not hear the prayers of the Jews. Reagan shrugged off the comment as something he disagreed with his friend on.

Carter repeatedly tried to brand Reagan as anti-Semitic, but Reagan maintained appeal among religious voters, and Carter ended up sounding harsh and obsessive to all voters when he would not let the incident go (Germond and Witcover, 1980).

Considerably less complicated than Carter in the way he expressed his faith, Reagan successfully attracted the Evangelical vote in 1980 and maintained Evangelical support in 1984. Recent analysis suggests that Reagan received more support in terms of votes and support for his tax cuts than he gave in actual accomplishment of Evangelical policy objectives (Hacker and Pierson, 2011). Reagan convinced Evangelicals to stay with him by combining his anti-communism mission with a measure of attention to the Evangelicals' social issues.

Germond and Witcover also found that Reagan managed to deepen his relationship with Evangelicals going into his re-election campaign by inviting religious conservatives into the

platform process. Conservative Christians rewarded this sense of respect with enduring loyalty (Germond and Witcover, 1985).

Reagan thus effectively employed what has been characterized as a “God strategy” to win the White House both times, and by 1982, the Republican party’s single largest group of voters was composed of people who both attended church frequently and were highly educated (Domke and Coe, 2008). By persuading Evangelicals and other conservative Christians that they belonged in the Republican party not in the Democratic party with its liberal intellectual skeptics, Reagan’s presidency opened up and solidified the Culture Wars-based divide among religious voters that had begun to form in the 1972 election. The God Gap thus took identifiable shape by 1988 and continued to develop over succeeding elections and administrations. The God Gap term, however, did not come into common use until Obama sought to close the divide in his first election (Boerboom, 2010; Domke and Coe, 2008; Green, 2007; Putnam and Campbell, 2010).

#### Subsection 2: George H.W. Bush

Despite his own credible faith and a record that suggests he acted more on behalf of the Evangelical social agenda than did Reagan, President George H.W. Bush failed to sustain the advantage Reagan had achieved among conservative Christians. At the same time Bush’s defeat in 1992 after one term may be largely the result of timing – given the state of the economy and the Democratic candidate who emerged to challenge him. (Balmer, 2008; Dart and Allen, 1993).

#### Subsection 3: William J. Clinton

When former Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton emerged to challenge Bush’s reelection in 1992, Clinton’s campaign actively sought to defy Bush the level of Evangelical support that Reagan had enjoyed. Clinton had a varied religious background, ranging from Southern Baptist Sunday School to engaging with Jesuit theologians at Georgetown University. As his political



career developed in Arkansas and onto the national stage, Clinton easily wove religion and politics together in his speeches, interviews, and conversations with voters, but his behavior -- particularly in terms of marital fidelity -- often failed to meet Christian standards. He thus opened himself to enduring questions regarding the nature and authenticity of his faith. Despite the inconsistencies between Clinton's expressions of faith and his actions, he won the support of many religious voters for himself. He was, however, not able to translate that appeal to the Democratic party broadly even when his potential Democratic successor in 2000, Vice President Al Gore, held and expressed a true personal faith that was not complicated by the personal indiscretions that created controversy through Clinton's campaigns as well as his administration (Balmar, 2008; Penning, 2007; Sullivan,2008).

#### Subsection 4: George W. Bush

As a candidate George W. Bush identified himself without qualification as a conservative Evangelical. He sought to present an image he considered subtle and sincere even as he identified Jesus as his favorite philosopher in a political debate. His political opponents sought to frame him as a religious extremist whose alcoholic past and overly religious present made him unfit for office. In terms of policy Bush's positions fell closely in line with his father, George H.W. Bush's. He proposed deregulation of business, supported war in Iraq, and opposed abortion. Although the son was more warmly received by Evangelicals than was his father, George W. Bush's ability to govern was tested by the mid-term loss of a Republican Congress, and he eventually faced vocal opposition from Christian conservatives who questioned whether they had been fooled by Bush's profession of faith into supporting a man who did not in his heart back their agenda" (Larson and Wilcox, 2005). In his 2004 presidential campaign Bush sought to solidify the connection of Evangelicals with the Republican party by identifying the GOP as the

party that would protect traditional family values by opposing same-sex marriage. Bush won 82 percent of the votes cast by people who identified “moral values” as their priority issue, and the Republicans thus reinforced an image of being “friendly” to religion (Putnam, 371, 387-389; Boerboom, 2010, 158; Domke and Coe, 2008, 3; Green, 2007, 701-71).

#### Subsection 5: Barack Obama

Recognizing the significance of the Evangelical voting bloc and questioning the idea that Democrats had nothing to offer the very religious, the 2008 Obama campaign became the first to make a concerted effort to close the God Gap by seeking common ground and common objectives on even the most divisive moral issues. In addition to incorporating the conciliatory message in its mass appeals, the Obama campaign reached out to Evangelicals by going church to church, meeting with interested congregants week after week throughout the country and throughout the campaign (Casey, 2008). Obama’s campaign attempted to narrow the divide between Democrats and Evangelical voters to win the election, but beyond that political reality, the strategy provides a model and demonstrates the potential and value of pushing beyond the God Gap to enable a more nuanced public debate on difficult issues (Markoe, 2013).

Throughout his campaign and presidency, Obama demonstrated a remarkable ability to address complex and difficult issues. The diversity of his ethnic and religious background added addressing his religious identity to the list of his rhetorical challenges. He was the first presidential candidate to have a parent who converted to Islam, which opponents consistently raised to question Obama's patriotism and trustworthiness. He has also faced unique issues as an African American whose religious background included membership in the church of outspoken civil rights activist Jeremiah Wright. In the speech Obama gave addressing his relationship with his controversial former pastor, Obama opted not to defend himself. Instead, he reflected on the

path he envisioned by which the nation could move forward to greater racial and religious harmony<sup>8</sup> (Balz, 2009; Heilemann and Halperin, 2010; Jones and Cox, 2007; Obama, 2008).

Obama's approach with the Wright controversy exemplified what Obama referred to as the politics of articulation that he often relied on to navigate complex and potentially polarizing issues. The Obama campaign's attempt to reach across the God Gap and draw more Evangelical Christians into the Democratic party relied heavily on articulatory rhetoric (Healy, 2008). When he began his run for president, Obama's position on abortion was clearly pro-choice, and he engaged frankly with conservative religious voters both standing by his liberal position and reaching out to congregations, whose faith traditionally guided them to vote pro-life, which most often meant Republican. On moral issues Obama appealed to voters to consider what impact his practice of articulation could have on the nature of the public debate and on the resulting policy. Guided by his progressive/liberal religious ideology and working with progressive Evangelical leaders, Obama sought to shift the conversation about abortion away from the individual rights of either women or the unborn and toward the pursuit of broad social solutions. As opposed to challenging the validity of moral values he did not necessarily hold, Obama sought to reflect the

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<sup>8</sup> Obama addressed his relationship with Wright on March 18, 2008, in "More Perfect Union," which has been described as "one of the most profound meditations on race and the American experience ever spoken to in a formal and public setting by an American (Zelizer, 2018, 264). In his effort to elevate the public conversation and to recognize Wright's contributions as well as his flaws, Obama said in the speech: "The profound mistake of Reverend Wright's sermons is not that he spoke about racism in our society. It's that he spoke as if our society was static; as if no progress had been made; as if this country — a country that has made it possible for one of his own members to run for the highest office in the land and build a coalition of white and black, Latino and Asian, rich and poor, young and old — is still irrevocably bound to a tragic past. But what we know — what we have seen — is that America can change. That is the true genius of this nation. What we have already achieved gives us hope — the audacity to hope — for what we can and must achieve tomorrow" (Obama, 2008).

diversity of religious perspectives held by the electorate and to find a way to a new understanding of abortion that could produce policies on which oppositional groups could agree.

Through articulatory rhetoric, Obama sought to de-link the abortion debate from the sanctity-of-life-versus-choice debate and move it toward a common goal of abortion reduction. In doing so, Obama was seeking not only new thinking about policy possibilities, but also about finding a way for his party to gain viability as a political home for the very religious. An indicator of some level of change in the Democratic party's approach to the issue can be seen in the 2008 Democratic platform as its abortion plank newly included a commitment to support a woman's decision to have a child by ensuring access to and availability of programs for pre- and post-natal health care, parenting skills, income support, and caring adoption programs (Boerboom, 2010; McGillis, 2008; Smidt, 2010). The potential strategic value of Obama's rhetorical shift on abortion is apparent, but with his approach came the potential for a more fundamental change in the way currently divisive moral issues are handled in the public debate. If the narrative of the religious dimension in the public debate were to become about finding common ground on difficult social issues, the role and nature of religion in the public debate could change, and so shift the relationship between religion and partisanship (Smidt, 2010, Putnam and Campbell, 2010). Never expecting to win over a majority of Evangelical voters, the campaign and the candidate sought to narrow the gap between Democrats and Evangelicals, if only slightly. Obama succeeded enough to win 24 percent of the Evangelical vote in 2008, which was 1 percentage point higher than Clinton won in 1992 (Goodstein, 2008; Liu, 2008a).

**Illustration 1: Presidential Vote by Religious Affiliation and Race** (Martínez and Smith, 2016) below **from** Pew Research Center shows the patterns of voting among religious voters

since 2000 and the longer-term context in which Obama was seeking to win some of the Evangelical vote.

*Illustration 1: Presidential Vote by Religious Affiliation and Race*

| <b>Presidential vote by religious affiliation and race</b> |      |      |       |      |       |        |       |        |         |       |                          |
|--|------|------|-------|------|-------|--------|-------|--------|---------|-------|--------------------------|
|  | 2000 |      | 2004  |      | 2008  |        | 2012  |        | 2016    |       | Dem<br>change<br>'12-'16 |
|  | Gore | Bush | Kerry | Bush | Obama | McCain | Obama | Romney | Clinton | Trump |                          |
|  | %    | %    | %     | %    | %     | %      | %     | %      | %       | %     |                          |
| Protestant/other Christian                                 | 42   | 56   | 40    | 59   | 45    | 54     | 42    | 57     | 39      | 58    | -3                       |
| Catholic   | 50   | 47   | 47    | 52   | 54    | 45     | 50    | 48     | 45      | 52    | -5                       |
| White Catholic   | 45   | 52   | 43    | 56   | 47    | 52     | 40    | 59     | 37      | 60    | -3                       |
| Hispanic Catholic  | 65   | 33   | 65    | 33   | 72    | 26     | 75    | 21     | 67      | 26    | -8                       |
| Jewish   | 79   | 19   | 74    | 25   | 78    | 21     | 69    | 30     | 71      | 24    | +2                       |
| Other faiths   | 62   | 28   | 74    | 23   | 73    | 22     | 74    | 23     | 62      | 29    | -12                      |
| Religiously unaffiliated                                   | 61   | 30   | 67    | 31   | 75    | 23     | 70    | 26     | 68      | 26    | -2                       |
| White, born-again/evangelical Christian                    | n/a  | n/a  | 21    | 78   | 24    | 74     | 21    | 78     | 16      | 81    | -5                       |
| Mormon   | n/a  | n/a  | 19    | 80   | n/a   | n/a    | 21    | 78     | 25      | 61    | +4                       |

Note: "Protestant" refers to people who described themselves as "Protestant," "Mormon" or "other Christian" in exit polls; this categorization most closely approximates the exit poll data reported immediately after the election by media sources. The "white, born-again/evangelical Christian" row includes both Protestants and non-Protestants (e.g., Catholics, Mormons, etc.) who self-identify as born-again or evangelical Christians.  
Source: Pew Research Center analysis of exit poll data. 2004 Hispanic Catholic estimates come from aggregated state exit polls conducted by the National Election Pool. Other estimates come from Voter News Service/National Election Pool national exit polls. 2012 data come from reports at NBCnews.com and National Public Radio. 2016 data come from reports at NBCnews.com and CNN.com.

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Section 8: Religion in the 2012 Election

When Obama ran for re-election, the dynamics in the religion debate changed significantly from 2008 because he was running for re-election and because he was running against Romney, whose Mormon faith raised more questions for the Republican electorate than any religious issues Obama faced the second time around. In fact, Obama’s faith hardly made an appearance in the 2012 campaign. In contrast, Romney’s campaign grappled with how to talk about his faith from the earliest primaries through election day. Because he is a devout Mormon and not a traditional Protestant, Romney had to evaluate the value of opening about his deeply held faith against the problem that it was not a mainstream faith and could make voters – especially Evangelical voters—uncomfortable. Over the course of the campaign, Romney’s faith never disappeared as an issue that demanded attention from the campaign staff and generated questions in the campaign coverage.

### Section 9: Religion in the 2016 Election

In the 2016 election between Republican Trump and Democrat Hillary Clinton, the dynamics of the 1980s Reagan-Carter election re-emerged in terms of candidate religion. Clinton, a lifetime devout Methodist, lost the Evangelical vote to Trump, who claimed and demonstrated little personal religious knowledge or commitment. Like Reagan, Trump embraced the Evangelical agenda while Clinton spoke thoughtfully and honestly about the influence her faith had always had and would continue to have on her approach to politics and leadership. Trump, meanwhile, who had been divorced twice and who was previously publicly pro-choice, talked about family values, opposing abortion, and being able to say “Merry Christmas” again in America. Trump thereby won the loyal support of a large segment of the Evangelical vote, which played a meaningful role in his electoral victory in 2016 (Rozell, 2017; Rozell and Wilcox, 2018).

### Section 10: Conclusion and Study

Although Obama was able to win some Evangelical voters in both his elections, he, like Clinton, proved unable to transfer his appeal to another Democrat, suggesting the God Gap remains the defining reality of religion and presidential politics at this time. This study will seek to explore the extent to which media coverage of candidate religion relies on and reinforces the God Gap frame, and the extent to which it presents and explores any alternative understandings of the relationship between religion and American presidential politics.

## Chapter 4: Analyzing the Content of Coverage Related to Religion

### Section 1: Introduction

Using both quantitative and qualitative content analysis, this project examines the extent and nature of coverage that mentions religious faith in three national newspapers during the 2012 and 2016 presidential elections. The quantitative analysis shows that in both elections, the Republicans received more faith-related coverage than did the Democrats. The flow of coverage over the course of the elections shows both common patterns and variations between 2012 and 2016. Coverage in both election years peaked in the early months of each campaign from December to February. The 2012 coverage decreased steadily until August and October when it showed a slight rise but never reached the amount of coverage present at the start of the year (See **Figure 1: Articles Coded by Month-2016**). The 2016 coverage also decreased steadily after February, but it increased to almost peak levels again in July and October (See **Figure 2: Articles Coded by Month – 2016**).

Qualitative analysis showed that the concentration of faith-related coverage in the early month of the campaign reflected the attention Republican candidates' faith received during the early primaries. The coverage of religion in relation to Democrats was generally connected to a policy issue with religious dimensions as opposed to direct coverage of a Democratic candidate's faith.

### Section 2: Newspapers Analyzed

The three national newspapers examined in this study are edited for three different audiences, providing three different voices for analysis. *The New York Times* is edited for the nation's elite thinkers and policymakers, characterized as a leading member of the prestige press,

and identified as one of the nation's newspapers of record; *The Wall Street Journal* is edited for business leaders, and *USA Today* is edited for so-called Middle America, targeting a broad-based general readership who want to stay informed of the day's issues and news (King, 1988; McCartney, 1997).

For all three newspapers, articles for coding were selected from the year leading up to the election through the day following election day, using search terms as follows:

- November 1, 2011-November 7, 2012-Romney OR Obama AND faith
- November 1, 2015- November 9, 2016-Clinton OR Trump AND faith

Based on the newspaper databases available through the University of Maryland Libraries, searches of *The New York Times* and *USA Today* were run using Nexus UNI, and searches of *The Wall Street Journal* were run using the ProQuest database. For each article returned in the search, a PDF file was downloaded and imported into NVivo data analysis software, sorted by newspaper and by month within each paper. Coding and queries that form the basis of data analysis for this study were conducted using NVivo software. The articles referenced in the findings are listed in the Newspaper Articles section of the Bibliography. The articles from the analyzed dataset are noted with "Available at: Faith AND Obama OR Romney" or "Available at Faith AND Trump OR Clinton" reflecting the search terms used to assemble that dataset. Because the articles were accessed through library databases, direct links are not included for the articles analyzed.

In the proposal for this project, the *Washington Post* was also included, based on its status as the "leading newspaper in the nation's capital (Foad, 2007)" and one of the nation's largest papers in terms of circulation (Foad, 2007; Moos, 2019, Mullin, 2016). The same search conducted in the other three papers yielded an initial count of over 200 articles for each year, so



further study in *The Washington Post* could offer substantial additional insight regarding the way that faith is treated in election coverage. Nonetheless, *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today* provided a sufficient range of options for a thorough introduction to the extent and nature of the coverage of faith in presidential elections provided in national newspapers (Foad, 2007; King, 1988; McCartney, 1997).

### Section 3: Units of Analysis

Individual news articles, opinion pieces, and editorials in which the reference to faith means any expression of religious faith are included for analysis. Book reviews, letters to the editor, speech transcripts, and articles on network and cable television news shows were excluded. Also, where the word “faith,” was used outside the religious context, articles were eliminated. Among those excluded usages were the following: “operating in good faith”; Democratic or Republican “article of faith”; “faith” in policies, individuals, or institutions; “full faith and credit.” Units of analysis could come from any section in each paper, with most actually coming from the main news section, identified as Section A, of each paper. Consistent across all three newspapers, the mentions of religious faith in election coverage most often appeared as a few paragraphs in each story rather than being covered as the primary topic of the story. Also consistent in all papers was the fact that candidates were rarely singled out as the only one mentioned in a single article. Even if one candidate was the focus of an article, his or her opponent was most often also mentioned because the story dealt somehow with the election that by definition involved both candidates.

In *USA Today*, for 2012, there are 65 articles, and for 2016, there are 26 articles. In *The Wall Street Journal*, for 2012, there are 122 articles, and for 2016, there are 160 articles. In *The New York Times*, for 2012, there are 271 articles, and for 2016, there are 200. Sorted by months

as detailed in **Figure 1: Articles Coded by Month – 2012** and **Table 1: Articles Coded by Month – 2012**, the flow of coverage shows the highest level of coverage on religious faith in January and February 2012 for all three papers, with the largest number of articles appearing in *The New York Times*, the second in *The Wall Street Journal*, and the smallest number in *USA Today* for both months. In 2016 as detail in Sorted by months as detailed in **Figure 2: Articles Coded by Month – 2016** and **Table 2: Articles Coded by Month – 2016** the highest level of coverage of religious faith appeared in February and July, with the next highest level of coverage appearing in the months of December 2015, September, and October. In February, March, and June 2016, the highest number of articles appeared in *The Wall Street Journal*. In all other months, the highest number appeared in *The New York Times* and the least in *USA Today*.

The total number of articles mentioning religion in relation to the election from 2012 to 2016 decreased in *The New York Times* by 26 percent, increased in *The Wall Street Journal* by 31 percent, and decreased in *USA Today* by 60 percent. Even as they go in opposite directions, the changes in the number of mentions in *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* between 2012 and 2016 can be understood and will be discussed in Chapter Five based on the analysis of the content and reflection on editorial judgements that reflect each publication's target audience. The more dramatic change in the number of relevant mentions in *USA Today* likely reflects the impact of influences outside the editorial process, including multiple business strategies pursued by *USA Today*'s owner Gannett between the two elections to increase circulation and revenues (Beaujon et al., 2014; Edmonds et al., 2017; Moos, 2012). Through an approach called the Butterfly initiative, launched in October 2013, Gannett succeeded in driving *USA Today*'s circulation numbers up by inserting national and international *USA Today* sections into local Gannett papers (Oshiro, 2013). These so-called "butterfly editions" (Mullin, 2018)

were meant to give local papers a “more polished presentation” (Johnston, 2014) and “to generate and free-up resources for more and better local news reporting” (Johnston, 2014). In August 2014 the newspaper division was spun off from the television division into a separate company (Kaufman, 2014), and by September 2014, the newspaper division cut its workforce by 10 percent, including from its newsroom staff (Haughney and De La Merced, 2014). Gannett’s efforts to expand circulation using inserts into increasing numbers of local paper continued into 2016 and included a deliberate commitment to condensing those news insertions into fewer pages. While *USA Today* maintained a sizable presence through an extensive circulation, the methods adopted to maintain that circulation support the sense suggested by the results of searches for this study that the amount of national election news reported in *USA Today* dropped significantly.

#### Section 4: Frames and Coding

Through its coverage of presidential campaigns, the media contributes to the public’s understanding of the nature and role of religious faith in American politics. By focusing on certain aspects of religious faith, media make certain perspectives more salient than others and so affect the content of the public debate (see Chapters Two and Three for literature review). As part of the public debate, religious faith raises a range of issues suggesting multiple possible frames for the media to use when delivering relevant stories to the public. As listed in **Table 3: Frames, Complete List of Major Frames**, eighteen frames were initially identified and defined for this study based on analysis of political and historical literature as well as on a preview of the articles made available through the searches. Both the history of candidate faith as an issue in presidential politics and a sampling of the coverage candidates received in 2012 and 2016 suggest that religious faith could either motivate, boost, or damage a candidate’s chances for

success. The history and examples of coverage also suggest that certain issues related to personal morality and social equality receive coverage in connection to religion as a factor in presidential campaigns.

Understanding the history of American politics requires understanding the multiple ebbs and flows that have characterized the prominence and role of religious faith in the public square throughout the life of the nation. Founders began by acknowledging religious faith as an inescapable part of the culture that should not dominate or define political leadership or governance but would inevitably be present because of the extent to which personal religious faith pervaded the American populace (Muñoz, 2009). The presence of religious faith in the public square has varied in nature and focus over time with the current configuration of the role of religious faith in American politics arguably taking shape in the 1980s with the re-emergence of evangelicals on the political landscape. That re-emergence brought with it questions about the relationship between a political leader's personal faith, his character, and his desirability as an American leader. The language of the culture wars also entered the political dialogue as evangelicals elevated the politics of abortion to make a candidate's position on this issue determinative of the legitimacy of any claims any candidate made to being a person of faith and to any candidate's acceptability to serve as a political leader. Additional issues of policies related to personal morality including marriage equality and other so-called family values defined along political lines became factors for voter decision-making from the culture wars perspective (Balmer, 2008; Hunter, 2001; Noll et al., 2007).

To gain a sense of the amount and nature of coverage candidate faith received as a campaign issue in the 2012 and 2016, multiple sub-frames were created to help track the use of the broader frame "Candidate Faith an Issue in the Campaign." Defined in **Table 3**, the candidate

faith sub-categories included the following: “Candidate faith a basis for critique of a rival candidate”; “Candidate faith a motivating factor for candidacy”; “Candidate Faith a Political Negative”; “Candidate Faith a Political Positive”; “Candidate Faith Discussed as Beliefs”; “Candidate Faith Identified by Religion and/or Denomination”; “Candidate Faith the Basis of Policy Position”; “Candidate Self-expression of Faith.” The “Candidate Commends the Perspective of a Religious Leader” frame also offered a way to capture an expression of a candidate’s faith. Subframes did appear throughout the coverage, but the narrative essentially followed the differences that emerged between political parties when it came to the treatment of “Candidate Faith an Issue in the Campaign.”

To capture the extent to which, coverage reflected policy priorities related to personal morality, multiple “Culture Wars” sub-frames were tracked in this study, including the following: “Abortion,” “Birth Control,” “Death Penalty,” “Family Values,” “Marriage Equality-Gay Marriage.” “Race,” and “Supreme Court.” The presence or absence of each “Culture Wars” frame was determined by the language used. For example, “Family Values” and opposition to “Marriage Equality” may reflect the same policy intentions, and discussion of appointing conservative Supreme Court justices may reflect a strong commitment to outlaw abortion, but the coding of Culture Wars frames reflects only the specific words used. A “Faith Expressed in Social Justice” frame was also created to track the extent to which policy issues related to civil rights and social inequality emerged in relation to faith in the campaign coverage.

In 2012, the nomination of Romney as the Republican candidate required the inclusion of a separate frame to capture efforts to explain Mormonism even though the coverage of Romney’s Mormon faith as an issue for his campaign, for his opponents and for voters was captured

primarily in the multiple expressions included in the sub-categories under “Candidate Faith an Issue in the Campaign.”

In 2016, Republican candidate Trump’s multiple divorces , reputation for extramarital activity, difficulty telling the truth, and manner of speaking characterized by ridicule, mocking, and contempt raised questions for religious voters inclined to support him because of many of his campaign promises, including appointing conservative judges, opposing abortion rights, making it acceptable to say “Merry Christmas” again, and restricting immigration (Galli and Sider, 2020; Thurman and Sider, 2020). The frame “Candidate a Problem for Religious Voters” was added to capture the coverage of the potential conflict Trump’s character and behavior raised for people of faith who agreed with his policies. The sub-category “Trump’s Appeal to Evangelicals” was included to reflect the fact that evangelicals were singled out in the coverage more than any other single faith. Because Trump’s personal faith netted almost no coverage, capturing the response of religious voters to Trump required adding this category as distinct from the “Candidate Faith an Issue in the Campaign” category discussed above.

Also in 2016, Trump’s call for a Muslim ban drove the creation of the frame “Islam a Campaign Issue,” which captured the varied ways that the religion of Islam and its adherents were covered, including discussion of the ban itself as well as coverage that depicted Muslims as terrorists or otherwise as villains because of their faith. Because questions were raised in the 2008 campaign about the possibility that Obama was a Muslim, “Obama a Muslim” was an available code for the 2012 election as well, but the frame did not emerge in the coverage for that election.

Additional frames that captured “Outreach to Religious Voters”, “Endorsement by a Religious Figure”, explanations of “Voter Behavior,” and “Electability v. Personal Faith” reflect

the reality that the true issues in any political campaign are the candidate's electability and the decision each voter makes regarding casting a ballot – will they vote or not, and if they vote, who will they vote for?

Seeking to analyze the extent to which broader questions of relationship between religion and democratic values in American politics found their way into the public debate in the 2012 and 2016 elections, frames were created to capture the treatment of “Religious Freedom – Meaning and Place,” “Pluralism and Tolerance,” “Faith Expressed in Social Justice,” “Compassionate Conservatism,” “Religious-moral dimension of economic policy,” and “Values v. Theology.”

Frames tracking “Religious Perspective Provided” and specifically, “Islamic Perspective Provided,” sought to learn the extent to which coverage explained the perspectives of religious groups to help those outside those faiths to gain insights and perhaps comprehend the motivations and objectives of religious groups engaging in the political process.

Finally, the “God-Gap Explains Religion in the United States” frame was tracked to see if the scholarly assessment that religious faith is relevant to Republican but not Democrat voters finds its way into the public discussion of the election as presented in the media (Smidt et al., 2010).

### *Section 5: Coding and Reliability Test*

In addition to identifying frames present in the coverage, coding differentiated between news and opinion pieces with opinion including both by-lined columns and anonymous editorials. Coding also captured candidates referenced, candidates quoted, other political party or campaign figures quoted, religious figures quoted, and religious faiths referenced.

To test the reliability of the coding scheme, a mix of articles was selected from the results of the 2016 *New York Times* search. Beginning in the first month included in the search, November 2105, the first article of that first month was added to the file to be used for reliability testing. The second article listed in December 2015 was chosen, the third from January 2016, the fourth from February 2016, and so on through the monthly files until twenty-five articles were collected for the test. Coding the selected files independently, the author and a Merrill College colleague coded to an 80 percent correlation. The test demonstrated a satisfactory reliability of the frames as identified and defined.

While all twenty of the codes listed in **Table 3** remained available for coding the full complement of articles, many of the frames did not appear with sufficient frequency for analysis. Of the initial twenty frames originally conceived, eight frames, as highlighted in **Table 3** and listed in **Table 4: Primary Frames Used for Analysis**, appeared in at least five articles in at least two of the three newspapers in both years studied, and those nine frames form the basis of this study. Two exceptions among the nine are the frames, “Mormonism” and “Islam a Campaign Issue,” each of which appear in only one election. Because of Romney’s candidacy, Mormonism is a significant factor only in the 2012 election, and because of domestic terrorist attacks and the threat posed by ISIS, “Islam a Campaign Issue” is a significant factor only in the 2016 election.

Some of the codes intended to capture the nature of candidate faith and religion more broadly could arguably overlap given the nature of religious discourse. In the actual coding process, however, overlap proved to be very limited as the coverage lacked some of the dimensions of faith that were considered likely to appear when the codes were created.



The potential for overlap proved the greatest between the codes “Candidate Faith an Issue” and “Candidate a Problem for Religious Voters.” Again, however, in the course of coding, the “Candidate Faith an Issue” code emerged as the better fit with most of the coverage, but the “Candidate a Problem for Religious Voters” code did serve to capture the dimension that Trump added to the conversation about religious faith in the 2016 campaign.

The code “Candidate a Problem for Religious Voters” appeared in only four articles related to Romney’s Mormonism in 2012, but in the 2016 coverage both candidates Clinton and Trump generated coverage of negative responses from religious voters. Religious voters primarily had a problem with Clinton’s support for abortion and same sex marriage, which was also captured in other codes. The primary reason to keep “Candidate a Problem for Religious Voters” as a separate code was that it made it possible to distinguish the articles in 2016 that explored how Evangelical voters explained or justified their support for Trump whose life hardly reflected their values.

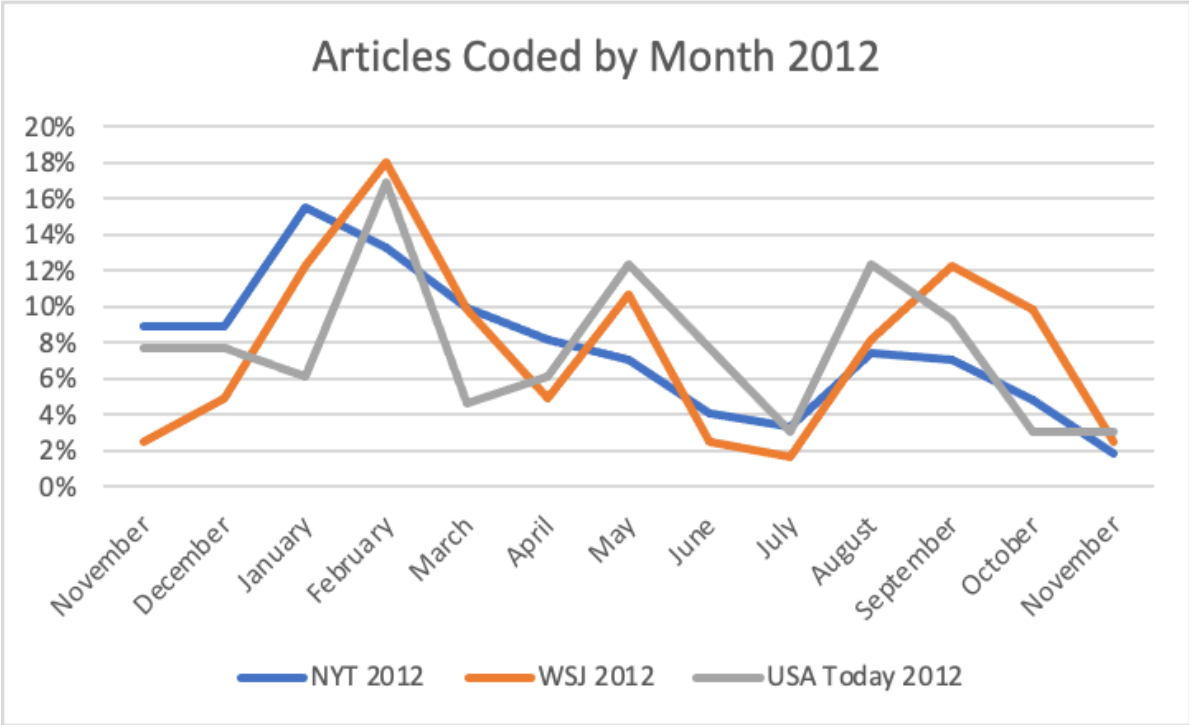


Figure 1: Articles Coded by Month – 2012

Table 1: Articles Coded by Month-2012

| MONTH         | NYT 2012   | WSJ 2012   | USA TODAY 2012 |
|---------------|------------|------------|----------------|
| November      | 24         | 3          | 5              |
| December      | 24         | 6          | 5              |
| January       | 42         | 15         | 4              |
| February      | 36         | 22         | 11             |
| March         | 27         | 12         | 3              |
| April         | 22         | 6          | 4              |
| May           | 19         | 13         | 8              |
| June          | 11         | 3          | 5              |
| July          | 9          | 2          | 2              |
| August        | 20         | 10         | 8              |
| September     | 19         | 15         | 6              |
| October       | 13         | 12         | 2              |
| November      | 5          | 3          | 2              |
| <b>TOTALS</b> | <b>271</b> | <b>122</b> | <b>65</b>      |

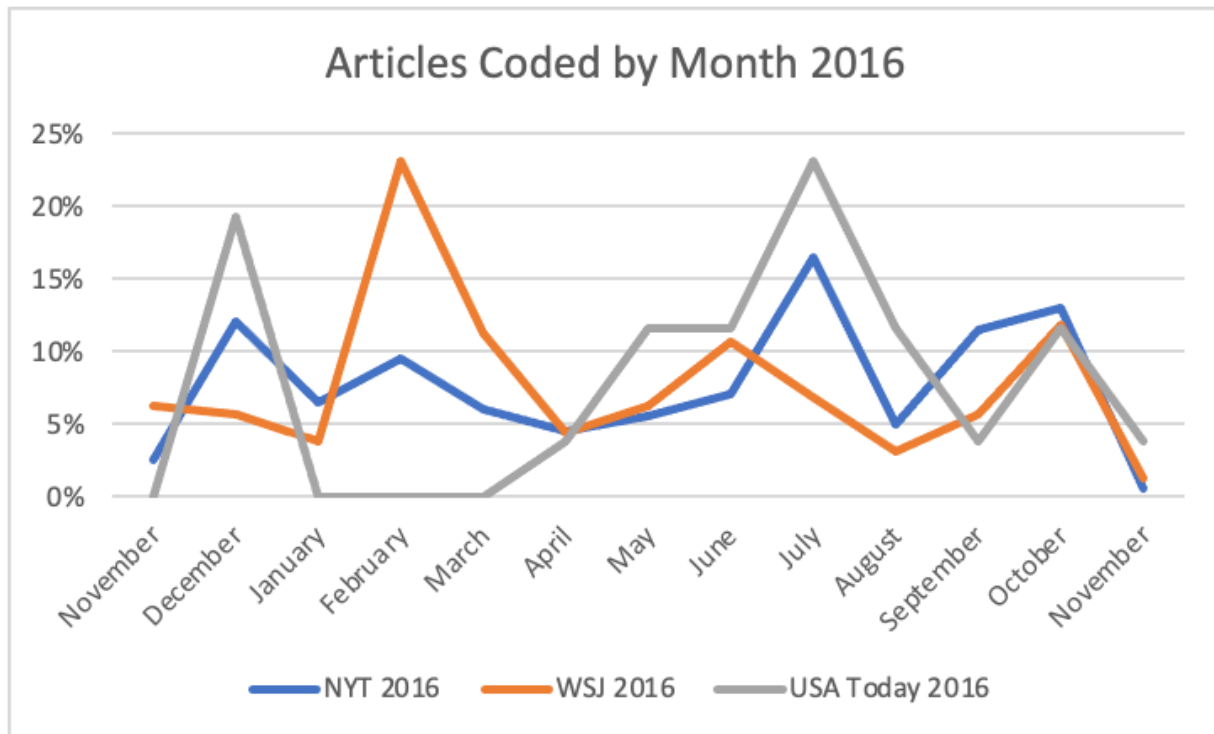


Figure 2: Articles Coded by Month – 2016

Table 2: Articles Coded by Month-2016

| MONTH         | NYT 2016   | WSJ 2016   | USA TODAY 2016 |
|---------------|------------|------------|----------------|
| November      | 5          | 10         | 0              |
| December      | 24         | 9          | 5              |
| January       | 13         | 6          | 0              |
| February      | 19         | 37         | 0              |
| March         | 12         | 18         | 0              |
| April         | 9          | 7          | 1              |
| May           | 11         | 10         | 3              |
| June          | 14         | 17         | 3              |
| July          | 33         | 11         | 6              |
| August        | 10         | 5          | 3              |
| September     | 23         | 9          | 1              |
| October       | 26         | 19         | 3              |
| November      | 1          | 2          | 1              |
| <b>TOTALS</b> | <b>200</b> | <b>160</b> | <b>26</b>      |

**Table 3: Frames, Complete List of Major Frames**

| Frame   | Definition/Explanation  |
|---|---|
| <b>1. Candidate a problem for religious voters</b>            | Religious voters uncomfortable with voting for candidate either because of character or policy positions.   |
| <b>2. Candidate Commends Perspective of Religious Leader</b>  | Candidate speaks positively about the contribution any religious figure has made on society.  |
| <b>3. Candidate Faith an Issue in the Campaign</b>            | Candidate's faith discussed in any way as an aspect of the campaign. (See Table 5 for multiple sub-categories included.)  |
| <b>4. Compassionate Conservatism/ Faith-based initiatives</b> | Specific reference to the way faith was incorporated into politics and discussed in the George W. Bush campaigns and administration.  |
| <b>5. Culture Wars</b>  | Issues of personal morality including abortion, marriage equality, other so-called family values defined along political lines and used as a deciding factor for voter decision-making.                       |
| <b>6. Electability v. Personal faith</b>                      | Discussion of which is more important – electability or personal faith  |
| <b>7. Endorsement by religious group</b>                      | Campaign efforts to gain endorsements and/or religious leaders' or groups' decisions to give or withhold endorsement  |
| <b>8. Faith expressed in social justice</b>                   |   |
| <b>9. God Gap explains religion in US elections</b>           | Explanation that God Gap identifies positive relationship between depth of religious devotion and likelihood to vote Republican   |
| <b>10. Islam a campaign issue</b>                             | Any discussion of Islam in relation to the election. (See Table 5 for multiple sub-categories included.)  |
| <b>11. Mormonism</b>  | Any discussion of the Mormon faith, whether referencing the political identity of a candidate, explaining the details of the faith, or discussing the place of Mormonism on the American religious landscape. |
| <b>12. Outreach to religious voters</b>                       | Any campaign or candidate effort to appeal to or attract voters of any faith.   |
| <b>13. Pluralism and Tolerance</b>                            | <b>Discussion of the idea that religious pluralism and tolerance reflect American values and/or can provide a context within which people can find common ground on social issues and policy directions.</b>  |
| <b>14. Religious freedom - meaning and place</b>              |   |
| <b>15. Religious Perspective Provided</b>                     | Religious leader provides religious perspective on election or policy issue.  |
| <b>16. Religious-moral dimension of economic policy</b>       |   |
| <b>17. Values v. Theology</b>                                 |   |
| <b>18. Voter Behavior</b>                                     | Discussion of candidate faith in relationship to candidate position in the polls, discussing the question of how the candidate's faith affects his or her appeal to voters.                                   |

**Table 4: Primary Frames Used for Analysis**

| Frame   | Definition/Explanation  |
|---|---|
| <b>Candidate a problem for religious voters</b> | Religious voters are uncomfortable with voting for candidate either because of character or policy positions.   |
| <b>Candidate Faith an Issue in the Campaign</b> | Candidate's faith discussed in any way as an aspect of the campaign. (See Table.3 for multiple sub-categories included.)  |
| <b>Culture Wars</b>                             | Issues of personal morality including abortion, marriage equality, other so-called family values defined along political lines and used as a deciding factor for voter decision-making.                       |
| <b>Islam a campaign issue</b>                   | Any discussion of Islam, whether referencing the political identity of a candidate, explaining the details of the faith, or discussing the place of Mormonism on the American religious landscape.            |
| <b>Mormonism</b>                                | Any discussion of the Mormon faith, whether referencing the political identity of a candidate, describing the details of the faith, or discussing the place of Mormonism on the American religious landscape. |
| <b>Outreach to religious voters</b>             | Any campaign or candidate effort to appeal to or attract voters of any faith.   |
| <b>Pluralism and Tolerance</b>                  | Discussion of the idea that religious pluralism and tolerance reflect American values and/or can provide a context within which people can find common ground on social issues and policy directions.         |
| <b>Religious freedom - meaning and place</b>    | Discussion of broader democratic and constitutional values in the consideration of candidate faith and the influence of religion on policy positions.   |
| <b>Voter Behavior</b>                           | Discussion of candidate faith in relationship to candidate position in the polls, discussing the question of how the candidate's faith affects his or her appeal to voters.                                   |

**Table 5: Frames with Sub-categories**

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <b>Candidate a Problem for Religious Voters:</b>   | Religious voters uncomfortable with voting for candidate either because of character or policy positions.  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trump Appeal to Evangelicals</li> </ul>                               | Discussion of Trump appeal to evangelicals despite his apparent contradiction of evangelicals' family values   |
| <b>Candidate Faith an Issue in the Campaign</b>  | Candidate's faith discussed in any way as an aspect of the campaign.   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Candidate faith a basis for critique of a rival candidate</li> </ul>  | Political opponent discusses another candidate's faith in order to question that candidate's religious sincerity and/or qualifications for office.   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Candidate faith a motivating factor for candidacy</li> </ul>          | Candidate explains decision to run as connected in some way to faith.  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Candidate faith a political negative</li> </ul>                       | Candidate and/or campaign addresses issues raised about candidate faith  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Candidate faith a political plus</li> </ul>                           | Candidate and/or campaign present/discuss candidate faith as a reason to vote for candidate.   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Candidate faith discussed as beliefs</li> </ul>                       | Candidate faith discussed as an expression of beliefs  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Candidate Faith identified by religion and/or denomination</li> </ul> | Candidate faith discussion as identification with or membership in a particular religion and/or denomination.  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Candidate faith the basis of policy position</li> </ul>               | Candidate explains any policy position as an expression of/response to/fulfillment of faith expressed in any terms (e.g., belief, practice, denomination, religious identity)                                |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Candidate self-expression of faith</li> </ul>                         | Candidate discusses faith in terms of either belief or denomination for any reason   |
| <b>Culture Wars</b>  | Issues of personal morality including abortion, marriage equality, other so-called family values defined along political lines and used as a deciding factor for voter decision-making.                      |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Abortion</li> </ul>   |  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Birth Control</li> </ul>  |  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Death Penalty</li> </ul>  |  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family Values</li> </ul>  |  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Marriage Equality-Gay Marriage</li> </ul>                             |  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Race</li> </ul>   |  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supreme Court</li> </ul>  |  |
| <b>Islam a campaign issue</b>  |  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Islam related to terrorism</li> </ul>                                 | Islamic faith discussed by any candidate as a cause for suspicion of terrorist and/or criminal connections.  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Muslim Ban</li> </ul>   | Islamic faith is discussed by any candidate as a reason to be excluded from this country.  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Muslims demonized</li> </ul>  |  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Obama a Muslim</b></li> </ul>                                      | Any discussion of Obama being a Muslim although he is not.   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Islamic perspective provided</li> </ul>                               | Any attempt to understand the Islamic faith and its relationship to politics in America  |
| <b>Pluralism and Tolerance</b>   | <b>Discussion of the idea that religious pluralism and tolerance reflect American values and/or can provide a context within which people can find common ground on social issues and policy directions.</b> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intolerance a negative value</li> </ul>                               |  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intolerance acceptable</li> </ul>                                     |  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pluralism/tolerance/ common ground values to be embraced</li> </ul>   |  |
| <b>Religious freedom - meaning and place</b>   |  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Church-state separation</b></li> </ul>                             |  |

## Chapter 5: Candidate Faith in the 2012 Presidential Election

### Section 1: Introduction

In the 2012 presidential election, newspapers covered the faith of Democrats differently than they covered the faith of Republicans, and actually being a person of credible faith yielded minimal attention in campaign coverage. This study examined a total of 345 articles for the 2012 election, including 176 from *The New York Times*, 105 from *The Wall Street Journal*, and 64 from *USA Today*. Coding the candidates, religions, and frames referenced in each article allowed for comparison of the religion-related coverage that the papers provided and the candidates received.

### Section 2: Presence of Religion in Campaign Materials

Examination of campaign websites using the Wayback Machine showed minimal if any presence of candidate faith or any other discussion of religion in the campaign materials of both general election candidates. Each campaign had a candidate biography tab on the campaign website, and neither biography included any reference to either candidate's faith (Wayback Machine, 2012a; Wayback Machine, 2012d). Issues on both sites focused on the economy, job creation, healthcare, taxes, education, and energy. Again, neither site referenced religion among the issues discussed (Wayback Machine, 2012b; Wayback Machine, 2012c).

The Romney site included tabs for news clips and blogs. There were 81 pages of news clips with four items on each page, and 107 pages of blogs with four items on each. Out of the 324 news clips, only one referenced Romney's Mormonism and argued the Evangelicals should vote for Romney (French, 2011), and one cited Romney's support of Catholic employers in their opposition to Obama's birth control mandate (Sonmez, 2012). Out of the 428 blogs posted, one

supported him as a defender of religious freedom (Glendon, 2012b), and another articulated his “Pro-Life Pledge (Romney, 2011).” The Obama campaign site included no such collection of news clips or blogs (WaybackMachine, 2012c; WaybackMachine, 2012d).

### Section 3: Quantitative Content Analysis

Quantitative content analysis shows how the amount of coverage of multiple religions varied by paper and how the coverage of the most predominant religions ebbed and flowed over the months of the campaign. Quantitative analysis also shows which frames dominated the coverage in each paper and how those frames varied by religion covered. Because the coding for this project captured each candidate mentioned in a story and election coverage generally mentions multiple candidates even when the focus of the article is on a single candidate, it is not possible for quantitative content analysis to capture the variation of religion-related coverage by candidate. The qualitative analysis that follows below examines those distinctions.

As illustrated in **Figure 3: Religion Referenced by Paper – 2012** and **Table 6: Religion Referenced by Paper – 2012**, three religions, Catholicism, Evangelicalism, and Mormonism, dominated religion-related coverage in the 2012 election.

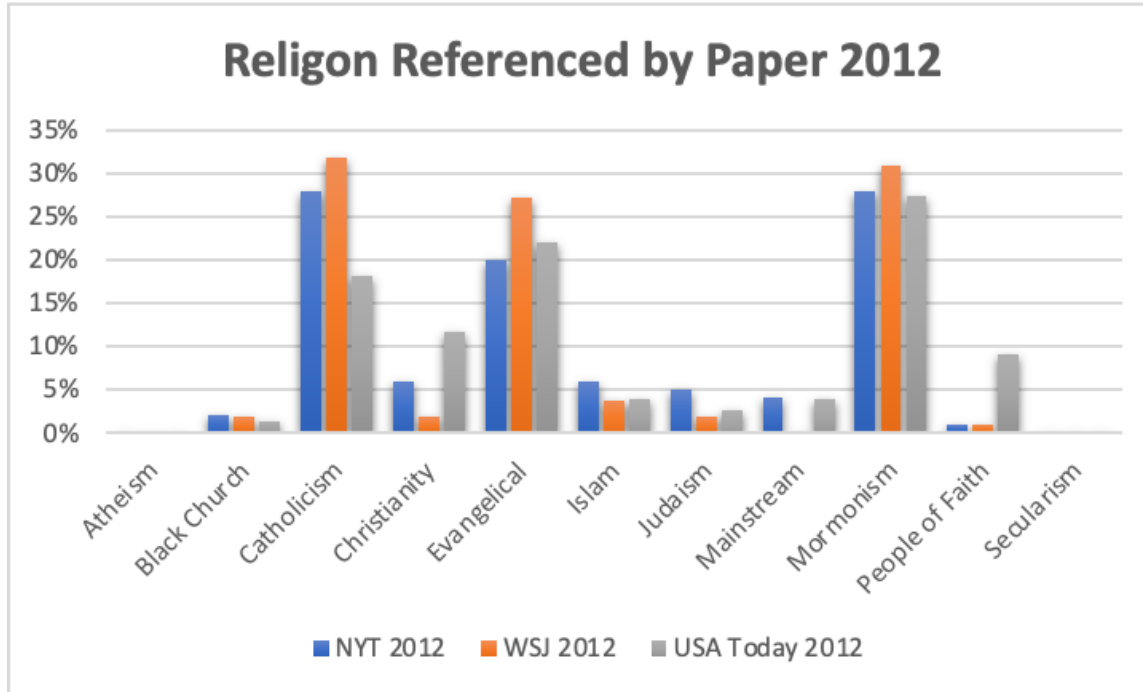


Figure 3: Religion Referenced by Paper – 2012

Table 6: Religion Referenced by Paper – 2012

|                 | NYT 2012 | WSJ 2012 | USA Today 2012 |
|-----------------|----------|----------|----------------|
| Atheism         | 0        | 0        | 0              |
| Black Church    | 8        | 3        | 1              |
| Catholicism     | 60       | 38       | 15             |
| Christianity    | 15       | 5        | 6              |
| Evangelical     | 54       | 36       | 19             |
| Islam           | 13       | 5        | 4              |
| Judaism         | 9        | 2        | 3              |
| Mainstream      | 8        | 0        | 3              |
| Mormonism       | 58       | 32       | 21             |
| People of Faith | 3        | 1        | 7              |
| Secularism      | 0        | 0        | 0              |
| Totals by Paper | 228      | 122      | 79             |



As detailed in **Figure 4: Religion Referenced by Month- 2012** and **Table 7: Religion Referenced by Month – 2012**, the quantity of coverage each religion received each month shows that the pattern of coverage for Catholicism differed from the other two.

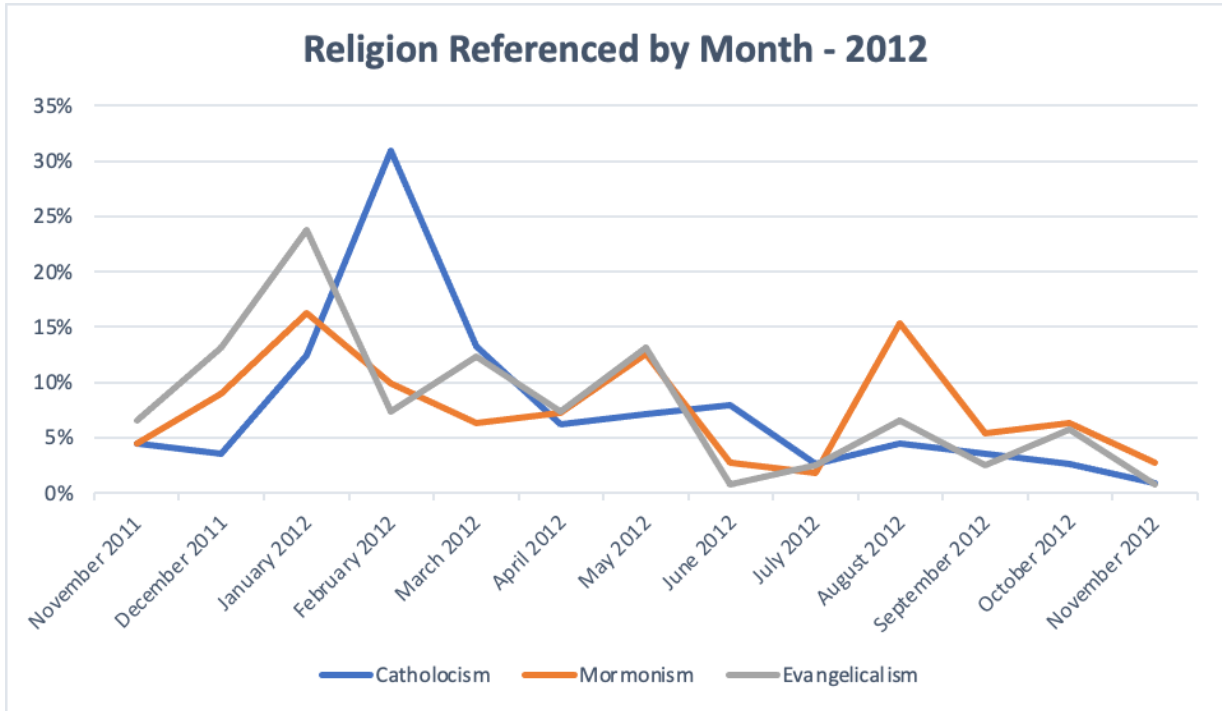


Figure 4: Religion Referenced by Month-2012

Table 7: Religion Referenced by Month-2012

| MONTH         | NYT 2012   | WSJ 2012   | USA TODAY 2012 |
|---------------|------------|------------|----------------|
| November      | 24         | 3          | 5              |
| December      | 24         | 6          | 5              |
| January       | 42         | 15         | 4              |
| February      | 36         | 22         | 11             |
| March         | 27         | 12         | 3              |
| April         | 22         | 6          | 4              |
| May           | 19         | 13         | 8              |
| June          | 11         | 3          | 5              |
| July          | 9          | 2          | 2              |
| August        | 20         | 10         | 8              |
| September     | 19         | 15         | 6              |
| October       | 13         | 12         | 2              |
| November      | 5          | 3          | 2              |
| <b>TOTALS</b> | <b>271</b> | <b>122</b> | <b>65</b>      |

Catholicism’s coverage peaked in the early months of 2012 and then decreased throughout the rest of the election. Coverage of Evangelicalism and Mormonism also reached

their highest levels in terms of number of references in the early months of 2012. Coverage of both religions dipped significantly from May to July, but the coverage of Mormonism and Evangelicalism increased again to varied extents in late summer. Qualitative analysis of the coverage shows that Catholicism's presence relates to an Obama administration birth control policy that became a campaign issue because of its timing. Meanwhile Mormonism and Evangelicalism appear primarily in stories related to the personal faith of Republican candidates and Republican efforts to win religious voters.

Some articles in the campaign coverage focused entirely on religion-related issues such as the faith of a candidate, efforts to reach religious voters, or reactions of church leaders to an aspect of the campaign. A significant portion of the religion-related coverage, however, appeared in the body of a story that focused on broader campaign issues, such as campaign strategies or the standing of a given candidate in the polls. The coding process identified frames of religion-related coverage whether it was the main subject of a story or was introduced as an additional topic further down in the coverage. The coding process also incorporated news stories, editorials, and columns as religion-related coverage for analysis, and the qualitative analysis in the following section explores differences that emerged in the news and opinion coverage. As noted in Figures 5-8 (**Figure 5: Frame Totals-2012 (All Papers)**; **Table 8: Frame Totals-2012 (All Papers)**; **Figure 6: Frames 2012- *The New York Times***; **Figure 7: Frames 2012- *The Wall Street Journal***; and **Figure 8: Frames 2012- *USA Today***) below, the most common frames captured in the coverage across all three papers were "Candidate Faith as an Issue," "Culture Wars," "Outreach to Religion Voters," "Religious Freedom," and "Voter Behavior." Qualitative analysis shows that the "Religious Freedom" relates primarily to the Obama campaign because

the Catholic Church called the birth control policy that became a campaign issue a violation of religious freedom. The other three frames appeared most often in coverage of Republicans.

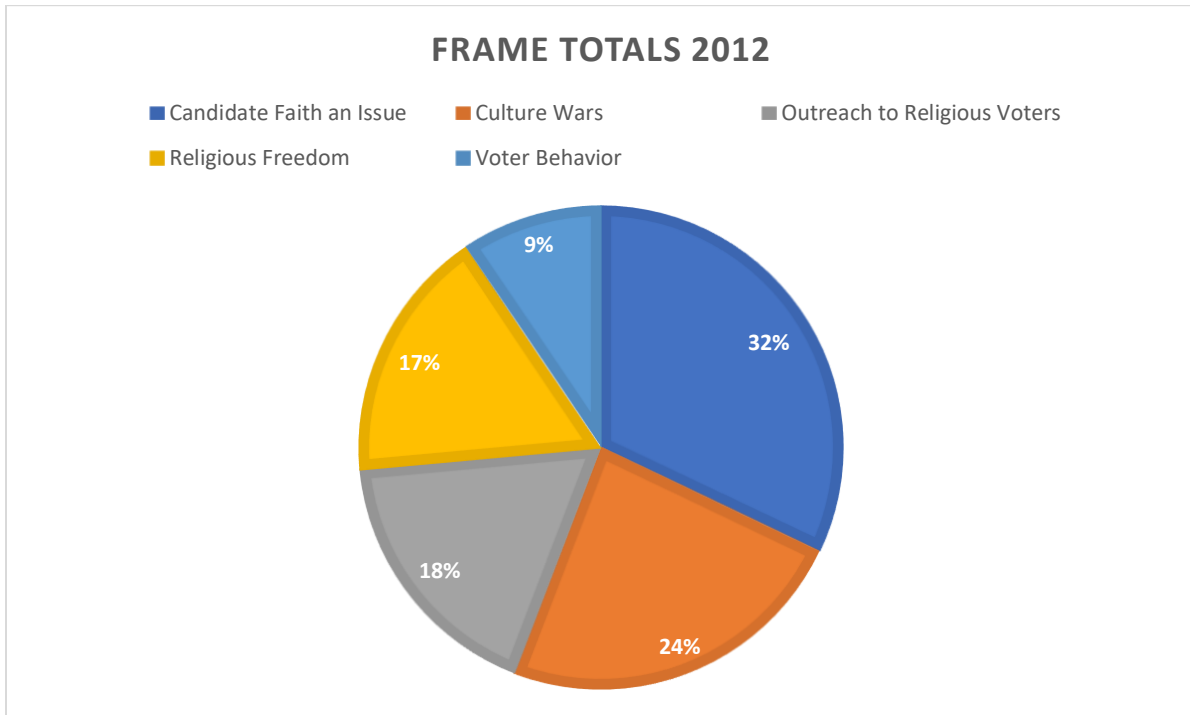


Figure 5 Frame Totals 2012 (All Papers)

Table 8: Frame Totals 2012 (All Papers)

|                          | Candidate Faith an Issue | Culture Wars | Outreach to Religious Voters | Religious Freedom | Voter Behavior | Totals by Outlet |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------|------------------------------|-------------------|----------------|------------------|
| New York Times 2012      | 75                       | 64           | 42                           | 31                | 13             | 225              |
| Wall Street Journal 2012 | 40                       | 22           | 34                           | 34                | 23             | 153              |
| USA TODAY 2012           | 28                       | 20           | 3                            | 11                | 6              | 68               |
| <b>FRAME TOTALS</b>      | 143                      | 106          | 79                           | 76                | 42             | 446              |

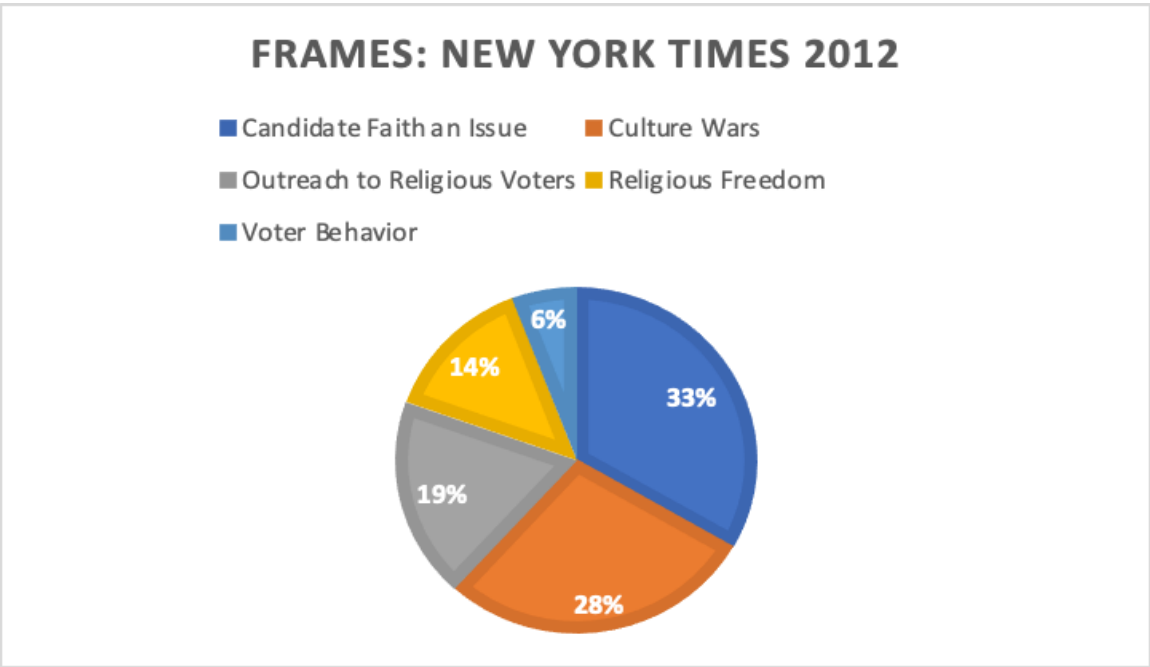


Figure 6: Frames 2012-The New York Times

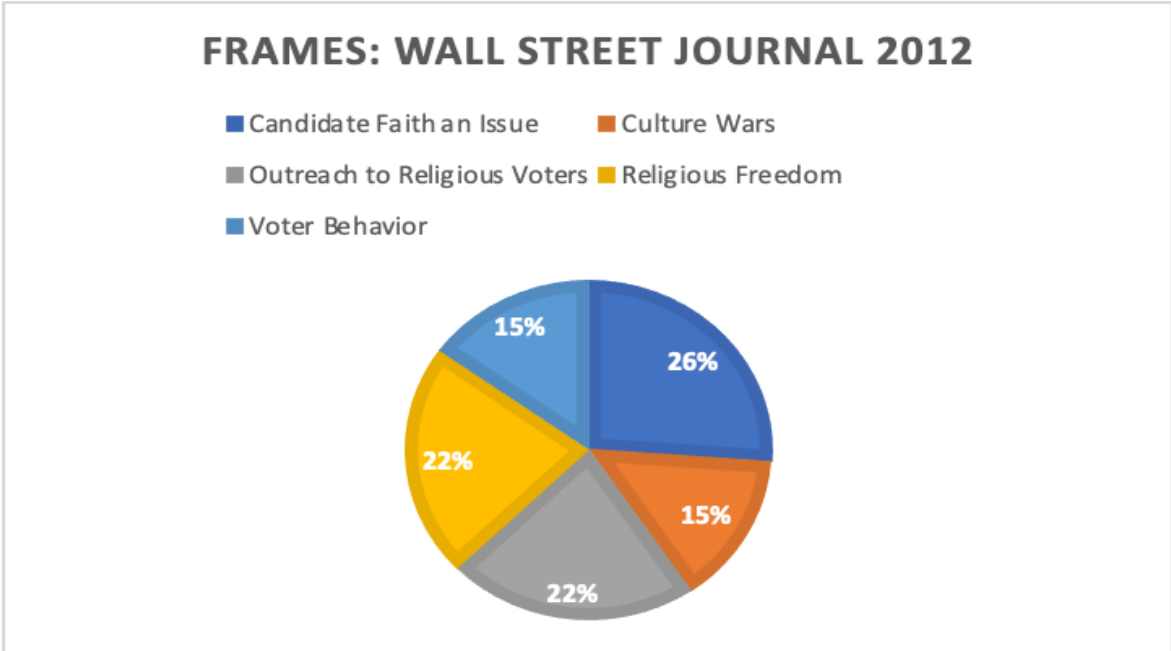
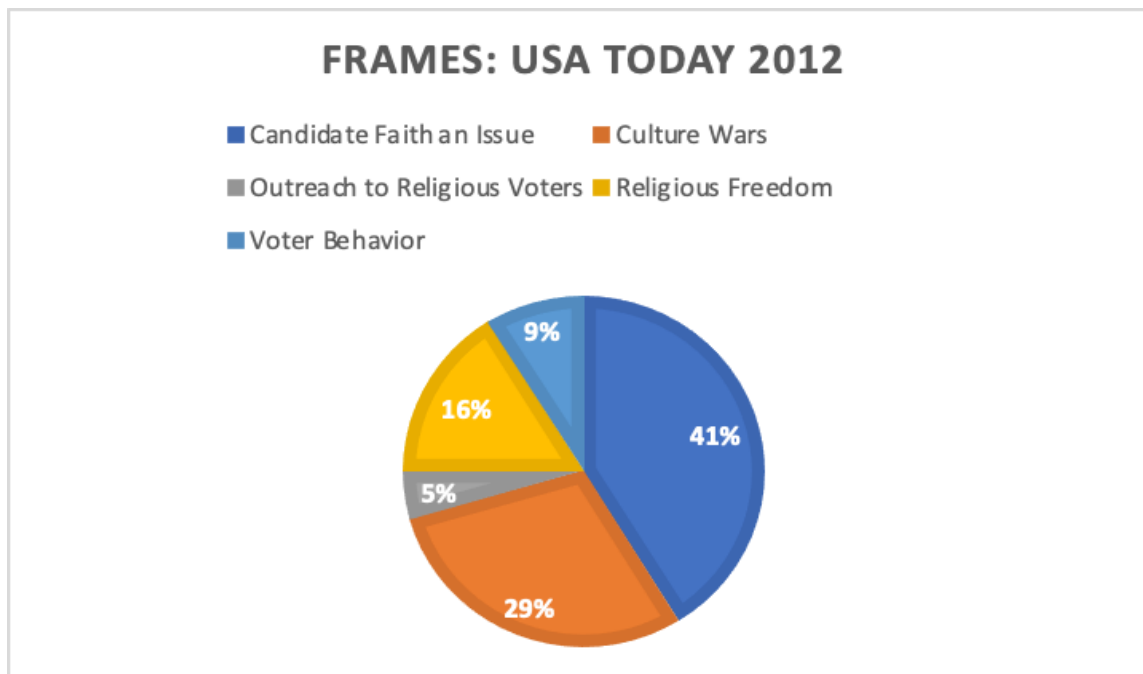


Figure 7: Frames 2012-Wall Street Journal



*Figure 8: Frames 2012- USA Today*

As reflected in **Figure 9: Frames by Religion 2012** and **Table 9: Frames by Religion 2012** below, examining the relationship between the most common frames and the three dominant religions in the 2012 coverage shows that the “Candidate Faith as an Issue” frame appeared most often in stories that discussed Mormonism, suggesting that Romney’s Mormon faith was a major point of discussion in the coverage of his campaign. As noted above, the “Religious Freedom” frames appeared most often in relation to Catholicism in stories about Catholic bishops’ opposition to an Obama birth control policy. Catholicism also appeared most in stories with a “Culture Wars” frame, raising questions of whether that coverage also focused on the Obama policy or if it reflected Catholics’ engagement on Culture Wars issues more broadly in the campaign. Evangelicalism appeared substantially across multiple frames, including “Candidate Faith an Issue,” “Culture Wars,” “Outreach to Religious Voters,” and “Voter Behavior.” The qualitative content analysis reported in the next section of this chapter

explores the patterns revealed and the questions raised by the quantitative content analysis of the 2012 campaign coverage related to religion.

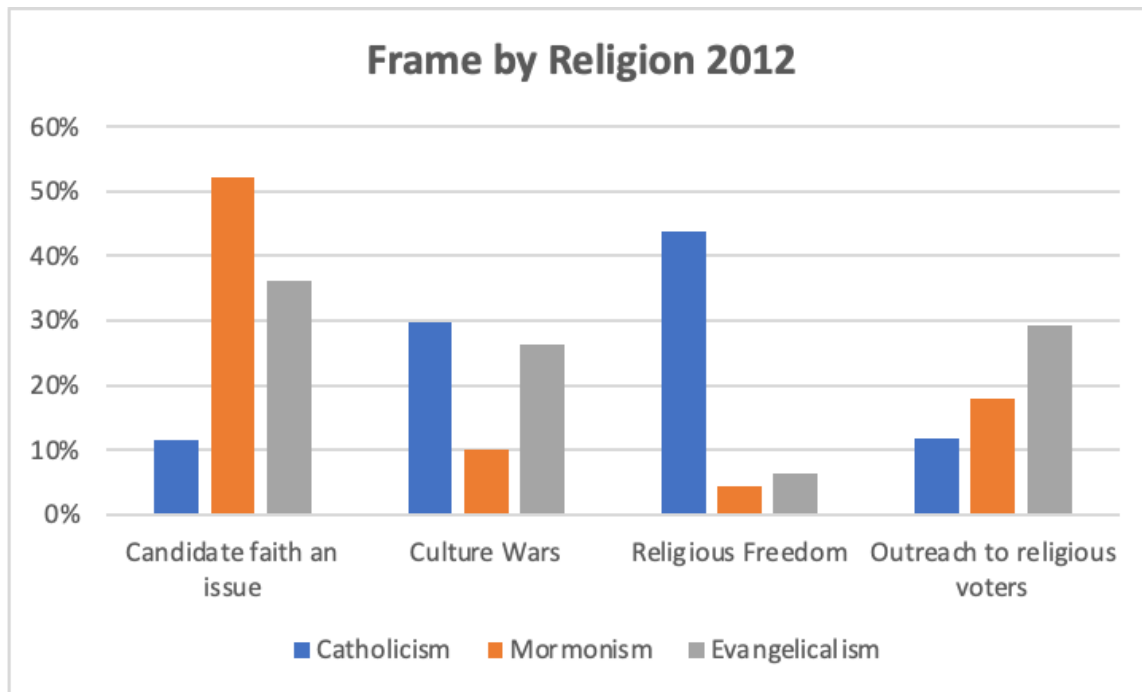


Figure 9: Frames by Religion – 2012

Table 9: Frames by Religion- 2012

|                              | Catholicism | Mormonism | Evangelicalism | Totals |
|------------------------------|-------------|-----------|----------------|--------|
| Candidate faith an Issue     | 21          | 95        | 66             | 182    |
| Culture Wars                 | 43          | 14        | 46             | 103    |
| Outreach to religious voters | 17          | 25        | 51             | 93     |
| Religious Freedom            | 63          | 6         | 11             | 80     |
| Voter Behavior               | 10          | 9         | 31             | 50     |
| Totals                       | 154         | 149       | 206            | 508    |

The patterns of coverage that emerge most clearly in the quantitative analysis show that the faith of Republicans differs as a campaign issue from the faith of Democrats. Coding for the “Candidate Faith an Issue” frame included the sub-frames “Candidate Faith a Political Positive” and “Candidate Faith a Political Negative.” Approximately 75 percent of the “Candidate Faith an Issue” coverage related to Mormonism fell into the “Candidate Faith a Political Negative” sub-category and appeared from the beginning of the campaign cycle through election day. While references to the possibility that Mormonism could be a political positive also appeared in stories

throughout the year, most of the stories related to Mormonism presented it as a problem. The consistency of the negative frame in the coverage suggests a relentlessness to the challenge Romney faced in the campaign based on his Mormon faith.

About 65 percent of the coverage related to Evangelicalism also fell into the “Candidate Faith a Negative.” In the primary months headlines of those stories focus on Evangelical candidates for the Republican nomination raising questions about Romney’s faith, and in later months the articles focus on Romney attempting to overcome misgivings of Evangelical voters. The 20 percent of coverage related to Evangelicalism that fell into the “Candidate Faith a Political Positive” appeared in the early months of 2012 and focused on Evangelical Republican primary candidates talking about their faith, especially in Iowa and South Carolina, where Evangelical voters represented significant voting blocs.

Given the presence of multiple Evangelical candidates and Mormon Romney in the Republican presidential contest in 2012, quantitative analysis of the coverage of Mormonism and Evangelicalism begins to unfold a multi-dimensional narrative of faith as a factor for Republicans running for president. In contrast, Mainline Protestantism, the faith of incumbent and Democratic candidate Obama, received only 14 references across all three papers throughout the year. A brief review shows that Obama’s name never appeared in the headlines of those stories while “Romney” appeared twice; “Mormon” appeared twice, and “Republican” appeared once. Quantitative analysis thus suggests that the God Gap continues to pervade press coverage of religion in presidential politics, in the sense that the religious faith of Republican candidates merits coverage throughout the campaign while the faith of Democratic candidates can go almost without mention and literally without a headline over the same period. Obama’s status as the incumbent may explain the absence of attention to his faith, but his church membership and his

relationship with his outspoken pastor generated controversy and extensive coverage in 2008<sup>9</sup> (Fowler et al., 2014; Smith, 2015). The absence of attention to an issue that previously threatened Obama's viability as a candidate further supports the idea that candidate faith is an intrinsic part of a Republican candidacy while it surfaces sporadically as a news item for Democratic candidates.

#### Section 4: Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative content analysis of the coverage of the 2012 presidential election in three national newspapers -- *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today* -- shows how the treatment of candidate faith varied by party and how little coverage a candidate's deep religious devotion received. In addition, while the three papers covered comparable content using similar frames for both candidates, the emphasis and tone of the coverage vary notably among the three papers. In 2012, both general election candidates identified themselves as men of faith, but the candidate's faith emerged as a dominant and relatively negative frame for only one of them- Republican Romney. Evangelical Republican candidates sought to win voters based on the religious beliefs they held. Romney fielded questions from within his campaign about how best to handle his Mormonism and from outside the campaign about how his Mormonism impacted his desirability as a candidate and his acceptability as a president. Comparing the coverage of the three dominant religions as they unfolded through the months of the campaign showed that

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<sup>9</sup> When he began his 2008 pursuit of the presidency, Barack Obama was a member of Trinity United Church, headed by Rev. Jeremiah Wright. Obama appreciated Wright's focus on social justice, but Obama ultimately had to remove himself from Trinity's membership rolls when clips of Wright delivering inflammatory, anti-American government sermons appeared online (Fowler et al., 2014; Smith, 2015)



coverage of religion in presidential campaigns could range from policy discussion to unrelenting personal scrutiny.

President Obama, the 2012 Democratic candidate, drew coverage related to religion only in the early months of the campaign when he engaged in a policy debate over birth control that was of particular concern to the Roman Catholic Church. Once the policy was instituted, it received limited and sporadic coverage as varied entities brought suits to court, but the policy disappeared as a campaign issue months before the general election in all three papers. In contrast, the subject of candidate faith maintained a constant presence throughout the coverage of the Republican campaign. In the early Republican primaries, successive candidates emerged as potential frontrunners, based on their expression of faith and their potential to win the support of religious, particularly Evangelical, voters.

Romney, the eventual 2012 Republican candidate, drew coverage related to his faith from the announcement of his candidacy through the day before the election. Romney's lifelong devotion to his religion never gained traction in the coverage as a positive leadership credential. Instead, voter wariness about Romney's Mormon religion as well as questions about his level of commitment to politically conservative values and policies dominated the coverage. The constant questioning about the acceptability of both Romney's faith and his politics persisted throughout the election coverage and suggested that even religious voters seek and care more about power than faith. Even accounting for uneasiness with the Mormon faith, the coverage suggests that the coverage of religion in politics is dictated not by a discussion of faith, but by 'horse race' politics as dictated by one faction of the Christian church.

Grouping articles by the religion that each referenced revealed that the coverage of Catholicism was linked to Obama while the coverage of Mormonism and Evangelicalism was

linked to Romney throughout the election, and to Romney and other Republican candidates during the primaries. Reading through the articles grouped by religion showed that different frames emerged for each political party while faith-based narratives varied by candidate. The coverage related to Catholicism fell primarily under the “Religious Freedom - Meaning and Place” frame as Obama had to address charges that he had undermined freedom of religion for the Catholic Church and other Catholic employers when his administration instituted a mandate for all health insurance plans to cover contraception (Pear, 2011). In contrast, Romney dealt primarily with questions regarding how he should handle his Mormon faith in his campaign, and that coverage fell primarily under the “Campaign Faith an Issue” frame (Goodstein, 2011b; Zeleny, 2012). Coverage of other Republican candidates also fell under the “Campaign Faith an Issue” frame as they discussed their faith to appeal to Evangelical voters in the early primaries (Zeleny and Shear, 2012).

#### *Section 5: Coverage of Religion in the Democratic Campaign*

In the final months of 2011, the Obama administration initiated a birth control mandate that upset Catholic Church leaders and injected religion into the campaign coverage as those Catholic leaders voiced their discontent with the birth control policy in the early months of 2012. The birth control storyline began in August 2011 when Secretary of Health and Human Services Kathleen Sebelius announced a new rule under the Affordable Care Act that would require all health care plans to provide contraceptives for women without charging any deductible or copay (Dfitzgerald, 2019). Policymakers had anticipated resistance from the Roman Catholic Church, which argued that the mandate violated the religious freedom of the Catholic church and other religious employers who objected to providing birth control on moral and religious grounds (NYT Editorial Board, 2011). Obama met with Archbishop Timothy M. Dolan of New York, the

president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, in November 2011, in hopes of finding a compromise that would reassure the Catholic Church without undermining the desired reach of the mandate. Dolan left the meeting with a sense that the White House would consider a broad exemption to the rule that would apply not to only churches, but also to universities, hospitals, clinics, and other entities associated with religious organizations (Pear, 2011).

When it occurred, Obama's meeting with Dolan received limited coverage. No mention of the meeting appeared in *The Wall Street Journal*. In *The New York Times* one article covered the largely negative reaction of Democrats in Congress to the Catholic church's appeal for the expanded exemption (Pear, 2011), and one editorial urged Obama to resist the church's proposal (NYT Editorial Board, 2011). In *USA Today*, one column called for the birth control mandate to be scrapped altogether (Grossman, 2012c).

As his re-election campaign began to gear up in January and February 2012, the Obama administration moved away from supporting a broad exemption. The Catholic Church held its position at the forefront of the opposition while other religious organizations and Republican presidential candidates added their voices to the fight (Pear, 2012). Extending the policy debate into the new year elevated it as a campaign issue, which required Obama "to weigh competing claims of Catholic leaders and advocates for women's rights" (Pear 2012).

As the conflict unfolded, multiple stories appeared in both *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* from January through July, with a concentration in February. Spottier coverage in *USA Today* followed a similar storyline but reflected the appearance of fewer articles overall in that paper. A "Religious Freedom" frame dominated the articles on the mandate as the coverage reflected the Roman Catholic leaders' argument that Obama's birth control policy violated their religious freedom by requiring Catholic employers to violate their beliefs. Across

the three papers coverage included common facts and shared the “Religious Freedom” frame, but the tone of coverage varied among the papers.

Subsection 1: *The New York Times* Coverage of Obama Birth Control Mandate

In its coverage of the birth control mandate, *The New York Times* primarily focused on the administration’s actions, its explanations for the policy, the proposed compromises that emerged along the way, and the status of the public debate driven by the Catholic Church. References to the policy’s impact on the presidential election appeared in the coverage, but never dominated. After the final compromise was settled in June, policy opponents turned to the courts to try to impede its implementation, and even the limited references to the birth control mandate as a campaign issue disappeared.

Over the months of public debate, *The New York Times* coverage shows that Obama never publicly answered the Catholic Church’s charges in religious terms even though Catholic leaders persistently characterized the birth control mandate as an attack on the church.

For example, Dolan said, “We are called to be very active, very informed, and very involved in politics. It is a freedom of religion battle. It is not about contraception. It is not about women's health. We're talking about an unwarranted, unprecedented, radical intrusion [into] a church's ability to teach, serve and sanctify on its own” (Stelloh and Newman, 2012).

Sister Mary Ann Walsh, a spokeswoman for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops also asserted, “We can't just lie down and die and let religious freedom go” (Goodstein, 2012a).

Regardless of how intense the Catholic attacks became, Obama and his spokespeople offered scientific justifications for the provision. Sibelius asserted, “Scientists have abundant evidence that birth control has significant health benefits for women, and it is documented to

significantly reduce health costs” (Pear 2012). The administration and the campaign also cited Institute of Medicine conclusions that “birth control is not just a convenience but is medically necessary to ensure women's health and well-being” (Grady, 2012).

In one compromise offer, Obama proposed giving “church-affiliated organizations one additional year -- until Aug. 1, 2013 – to comply with the requirement [while] other employers and insurers [had to] comply by ... Aug. 1” (Pear 2012). Catholic Church leaders were unimpressed, and Dolan responded, “In effect, the president is saying we have a year to figure out how to violate our consciences. We're unable to live with this” (Pear 2012).

Eventually, the administration adopted a compromise that allowed insurance companies to provide the benefits that the Church found problematic directly to the employee rather than through the religious employer’s plan. The news coverage that related the compromise to the campaign explained Obama’s motivation as a response to long-standing liberal Catholic allies as opposed to giving in to loud opponents (Cooper and Goodstein, 2012; Goodstein, 2012a). The coverage also anticipated a Republican response that would use the birth control controversy to feed the idea that Obama’s scientific defense of his policy contradicted religious belief as follows:

The administration's rule has now run headlong into a dispute over values as Republican presidential contenders compete for the most conservative voters. In an election season that features Newt Gingrich and Rick Santorum, who have stressed their Catholic faith, scientific thinking on the medical benefits of birth control has clashed with deeply held religious and cultural beliefs (Grady 2012).

However, Republican engagement on the birth control controversy proved to be minimal as the compromise was settled before the party conventions turned attention to the general election campaign. Coverage of the mandate became a disparate collection of suits going to court rather than a national policy controversy (Grady, 2012).

## Subsection 2: *The Wall Street Journal* Coverage of Obama Birth Control Mandate

While *The Wall Street Journal* news coverage of the birth control mandate reported the same policy details and efforts at compromise that were included in *The New York Times*, there were differences. In *The Wall Street Journal*, the potential impact on Obama's campaign had greater prominence and that aspect of the coverage received coverage over a longer period than in *The New York Times*. Specifically, *The Wall Street Journal* coverage focused more on the animosity the policy was generating between Obama and the Catholic left, who were characterized as having given the president "vital cover" in the previous election (McGurn 2012a). *The Wall Street Journal* articulated the potential cost of the conflict for Obama's re-election, saying, "The fight risks turning off Catholic voters – who helped put President Barack Obama in the White House – in the run-up to November's election. Over the weekend, some priests blasted the decision while addressing their congregations during mass" (Radnofsky, 2012). *The Wall Street Journal* also called attention to headlines published elsewhere in the media such as "War on the Catholic Church," noting that they stemmed from "a Health and Human Services mandate that forces every employer to provide employees with health coverage that not only covers birth control and sterilization, but makes them free" (McGurn, 2012a). Further, while *The New York Times* quoted Archbishop Dalton throughout its coverage of the mandate, *The Wall Street Journal* published a letter from Archbishop Dalton as an op-ed in which he laid out his argument in detail, charging that that the mandate violated constitutional protection of religious liberty by requiring "that religious institutions and individuals violate their own moral teaching in their health plans" (Dalton, 2012). Dalton's letter also criticized the Obama administration for ignoring the church's appeals after appearing to listen and consider them (Dalton, 2012).

The coverage further developed a sense of betrayal from the Catholic bishops that could have had an enduring impact on Obama's campaign as follows:

President Obama telephoned Archbishop Dolan...to tell him of the decision, said a spokesperson from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. The pair had discussed the issue during a November meeting, during which the archbishop "got the message that they could work together," said the spokeswoman, Sister Mary Walsh.

The issue was likely to form the "backdrop to future relations," she said. "It's too big to ignore...the elephant tramping around in the sanctuary" (Radnofsky, 2012).

While its news coverage focused extensively on the potential political cost of the birth control mandate, *The Wall Street Journal* coverage included below also provided useful insight about the voting behavior of Catholic parishioners, who do not represent a unified voting bloc. Despite this acknowledgement that bishops did not fully reflect the perspectives of their congregants, subsequent coverage continued to report the bishops' complaints as the predominant Catholic perspective.

Catholic voters have been roughly equally divided between Republican and Democratic presidential candidates in recent years, opting for Al Gore over George W. Bush in 2000, George W. Bush over John Kerry in 2004, and Mr. Obama in 2008, according to exit-polling data collected by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life.

James Salt, executive director of Catholics United, a group supportive of health-care overhaul law, said the contraception debate "is an issue that rank-and-file or pew-sitting Catholics aren't spending a lot of time thinking about." But he said he expected the bishops to maintain vocal opposition to the decision, keeping the controversy alive during the 2012 campaign.

"This has the potential to be a major distraction for Catholic voters," he said (Radnofsky, 2012).

In addition to the extensive news coverage of the mandate's potential political harm, multiple *Wall Street Journal* columnists expounded on the campaign impact of the policy and intensified a sense the paper valued the opportunity to challenge Obama's standing in the

election. Columnist Peggy Noonan amplified the sense of the mandate as a strategic blunder, calling it “a move that might have cost him the election” (Noonan, 2012a). Noonan also charged that the compromise was just a pause in the impact on religious institutions because legislation could still pass requiring that religious employers cover birth control or face a fine. She closed with, “A fine on faith. Who thought they would see that in America” (Noonan, 2012b)? In her final column on the issue, Noonan called the mandate an example of how “Mr. Obama has become bad at politics,” explaining, “Anyone who is good at politics does not pick a fight with the Catholic Church during a presidential year. Really you just don’t. Because there’s about 75 million Catholics in America, and the half of them who go to church will get mad. The other half won’t like it either” (Noonan, 2012).

Other columns expanded on the idea that the mandate showed Obama to be “at war with the Catholic Church” and returned to the sense of betrayal developed in the January coverage by recalling that in 2008 Obama was “a candidate who professed to be welcoming to people of faith in a way no Democrat had been in decades.” As a result, “he now faces a much more skeptical Catholic public – which happens to be concentrated in key battleground states such as Michigan, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Wisconsin” (McGurn, 2012b). Overall, the treatment of Catholic leaders’ perspective equating to the view of Catholic people reflects a common tendency of media coverage of religion to capture only part of the story.

After the policy compromise was implemented and suits against the policy began to emerge, *The Wall Street Journal* editorial board acclaimed the lawsuit as historic and reiterated the idea that the mandate represented a betrayal by Obama of his party’s long-standing allies as follows:

Once upon a time the political left viewed Catholics and especially the bishops as their allies in using government to create more equal opportunity and redistribute



income. But today's Democratic Party puts a higher cultural value on sexual politics and expanded reproductive freedom. We trust the courts will instruct the Administration that the Constitution still puts religious liberty first (WSJ Editorial Board, 2012a).

In contrast to *The New York Times*, which articulated Obama's science and medicine-based justification for his policy and described the ultimate compromise as a response to his liberal Catholic supporters, *The Wall Street Journal* more often portrayed Obama as willing to betray religious allies and repeatedly characterized his policies as anti-religious.

### Subsection 3: *USA Today* Coverage of Obama Birth Control Mandate

*USA Today* included significantly less coverage of the Obama mandate than either of the other two papers, and its news coverage leaned more toward the political cost while its editorials assessed the policy and its impact a bit more evenhandedly. The first news article in 2012 on the pursuit of a compromise characterized it as part of the Obama administration's ongoing effort "to calm the growing election-year firestorm that erupted since the [mandate] was announced" (Werner, 2012). Further reporting stated that the effort to "accommodate" the church failed to appease "the church, congressional Republicans or GOP candidates trying to take his job next year," and projected that the issue would endure as a problem for the Obama campaign, saying, [Catholics'] "continued anger over a requirement that nearly all employers offer free insurance coverage for contraception - - even with changes Obama announced Friday for faith-based institutions that object on religious grounds - guarantees that the issue will percolate throughout the presidential election season" (Grossman, 2012e).

While the news coverage treated the Obama mandate as a problem for his re-election campaign, *USA Today* editors characterized the ultimate compromise positively in an editorial

that called it “a smart strategic retreat...on a combustible issue” and what Obama “should have done in the first place” to show “a little goodwill and bias toward religious freedom” (*USA Today* Editorial Board, 2012a). In the paper’s final treatment of the mandate, a *USA Today* editorial critiqued both sides for “overreach” in the “continuing battle between the Obama administration and the Catholic Church over birth control,” and called for a “rewind” to gain perspective on the discussion because “along the way, the fight turned into one more overheated political battle. One side calls it a war on Catholics: the other calls it a war on women. In fact, it is a war on reason” (*USA Today* Editorial Board, 2012b).

#### Section 6: Coverage of Religion in the Republican Campaign

While there were ebbs and flows over the months of the Republican campaign in terms of the quantity and intensity of election coverage that religion received, the importance of attracting and motivating Evangelical voters dominated the narrative. Throughout the primaries, candidates who identified themselves either as Evangelical or as conservative Catholics adopted straightforward strategies of asserting their faith to appeal to Evangelical voters who were seeking a candidate who understood and shared their religious values and who would stand with them on Culture Wars issues, especially against abortion rights and against gay marriage. Meanwhile, for Romney, the Mormon faith that had defined and grounded him throughout his life complicated his attempt to reach out to Evangelical voters during the entire campaign. The “Candidate Faith as a Campaign Issue” and “Outreach to Religious Voters” dominated the coverage of religion related to Romney and other Republican candidates during the primaries. Even after Romney won the nomination, coverage discussed Romney’s faith most often as a negative to be overcome among Evangelical voters, sometimes as a potential positive to help reveal Romney’s relatability, and rarely as a positive to be taken advantage of among a few

religious groups. The need to overcome discomfort and skepticism related to Romney's faith pervaded election coverage from primary season through election day, and examination of that coverage reveals a conflicted sense about how to view Romney's religion not only among potential voters, but also from within the campaign itself (Peter, 2012; Zeleny, 2012). As with the coverage of Obama, the coverage of Romney and other Republicans during the primaries reflected a common narrative with variations across papers in emphasis and tone. *The New York Times* coverage, and the limited coverage in *USA Today*, explored both candidate faith and Evangelical voter response while *The Wall Street Journal* coverage set any discussion of candidate faith within stories that led only with the perspective and response of Evangelical voters.

#### Subsection 1: *The New York Times* Coverage of Republican Campaigns

From the earliest days of the Republican campaign through election day, concern about Romney's ability to win the support of Evangelical voters for the nomination as well as his ability to motivate them to vote in the general election dominated *The New York Times* coverage of Romney's faith (Goodstein, 2011b). A Pew poll released in November 2011 showed that about 20 percent of white Evangelical Republicans voters resisted Romney because they didn't see Mormonism as Christian (Goodstein, 2011b).

Campaign analysts still argued that the Mormon stigma was not "significant enough to impede Mr. Romney's run for president" (Goodstein, 2011b). Rather, analysts projected that, "Mitt Romney's Mormon faith will most likely cost him support in the primaries, but even Republicans with reservations about his religion would rally to his side in a general election against President Obama" (Goodstein, 2011b). Suggesting such analysis may not fully grasp the impact Romney's Mormonism would have on his electability, religion scholar Randall Balmer

discouraged “any underestimation of Evangelicals’ misgivings about Mormonism and suggested Mormons needed to address Evangelicals’ identification of Mormonism as a cult or a religion defined by strange or even sinister practices” (Oppenheimer, 2012). Mormon scholar and political commentator Joanna Brooks echoed Balmer’s perspective, saying that she had “long encountered anti-Mormon sentiment among Evangelicals” (Oppenheimer, 2012). Brooks also noted that many Christian Sunday school curricula and other publications that “make Mormons look fringe and suspect” (Oppenheimer, 2012).

Romney, therefore, entered the campaign conflicted about whether and how to include his faith in the campaign conversation. Suggesting that his campaign decided that openness about his faith made strategic sense, Romney sat for an interview with campaign reporters in December 2011 that ranged from light-hearted questions about Romney’s response to the *Book of Mormon* Broadway show to his serious assessment of how his faith both helped and hurt his campaign. After acknowledging some voters would dismiss him outright because he was a Mormon, Romney asserted, "I think the great majority of voters would like a person of faith to lead the country. I think, however, that most people don't decide who they're going to vote for based on the religion that they happen to be a member of. But there will be some for whom that's an issue, and I won't get those votes in some cases. I think that's the minority, particularly in primary states where a lot of people come and vote” (Parker and Zeleny, 2012).

As primary campaigns heated up, however, Evangelical and conservative Catholic candidates, including Perry, Bachman, Santorum, and Gingrich “aggressively court[ed] Evangelicals” (Zeleny and Shear, 2011), both by highlighting their own religious identities and by feeding the discomfort of Evangelical voters with Romney’s Mormonism. In a national ad campaign, Perry characterized himself as “Not ashamed to admit I am a Christian” (Oppel, 2011,

Peters, 2011). Bachman asserted herself as the “complete package who would fight for “faith, marriage, and protection of life from conception to natural death “(Saulny, 2012). To explain why he had become “more deeply religious” and so strongly opposed to abortion that he became known as “one of Washington’s most outspoken cultural warriors,” Santorum shared the story of his son Gabriel, who died in 1996 just two hours before being born at 20 weeks (Stolberg, 2012). Perry sought to overcome his stumbles in early debates by sharing his faith journey with campaign audiences. He recalled “walking down the aisle of my church and giving my heart to Jesus Christ when I was 14 years old.” He also sought to show voters how his faith guided his political engagement, by recounting the story of when he stood “up for the Ten Commandments on the grounds of our Capitol in Texas (Oppel, 2012a). Gingrich particularly used the discomfort of voters with Romney’s faith as a strategy to attract Evangelical voters in South Carolina and Florida (Rutenberg and Seelye, 2012). Perry, Bachman, and Santorum also used social media to “amplify their voice” (Preston, 2011) among Evangelicals. Perry even added geo-location mobile advertising to target Christian students with his message as his focus shifted from jobs to faith and values (Preston, 2011; Shear, 2011).

With Evangelical candidates intensifying the use of their religion in campaign strategies and the substantial presence of Evangelical populations in the early primary states of Iowa and South Carolina, *The New York Times* coverage portrayed Romney’s effort to win Evangelical votes as a steep uphill battle in which Romney risked alienating religious voters whether he chose to talk more freely about his faith or chose to stay away from the subject. (Parker, 2011). *The New York Times* coverage quoted Evangelical leaders such as Rev. Franklin Graham, son of Rev. Billy Graham, whose comments below bolstered the idea that Evangelical voters would focus more on the fact that Mormonism is not a traditional Protestant religion, and less on the

depth of Romney's religious commitment, his character, and the public service his faith motivated. Graham predicted that Evangelical voters would struggle to support a Romney candidacy because of his faith.

It's going to be difficult for Romney as a Mormon with the Evangelical community. For most Christians, Mormonism is an issue, and he has a hurdle here that he's going to have to jump over and navigate around if he can (Rutenberg, 2012).

Over the months of the primary season, *The New York Times* coverage included theological discussions of the Mormon faith, including explanations of Evangelicals' issues with the faith (Goodstein, 2012d), and explanations of the history and beliefs of Mormonism that characterized it as "a distinctive religion," but "not an apostate one" (Kovaleski, 2012). By March, Santorum, a conservative Catholic with strong appeal among Evangelicals, was the strongest remaining challenger to Romney in the Republican primary. *The New York Times* election news coverage explored why Romney's Mormonism did not disqualify him with Catholic voters. Quoting Villanova University political scientist Catherine E. Wilson, the coverage explained, "There is no Catholic vote, per se. They mirror the general population, with progressives, moderates, and conservatives. And Santorum is winning the conservatives" (Seelye, 2012). Again, the varied perspectives of Catholic voters appear in the coverage but recognizing and explaining this level of complexity among religious voters does not emerge to characterize the coverage of religion in the campaign.

As Romney ended the month of March with a stronghold on the Republican nomination, questions remained about how to enhance his warmth and personal appeal as he moved toward the general election. His faith complicated the task of sharing positive aspects of Romney's humanity with the public as explained below:

While friends and fellow Mormons give accounts of his generosity, Mr. Romney tends not to volunteer them. It is tricky, of course; talking about his family's charitable foundation could remind voters of just how rich he is (an estimated net worth of \$200 million), while mentioning his lay counseling of fellow Mormons would draw attention to his faith, about which many evangelical Christian voters are wary (Parker, 2012).

With Santorum's departure from the race in April, the Romney campaign chose the May graduation address at Liberty University --founded by Evangelical leader Jerry Falwell -- as the opportunity for Romney to define common ground in terms of values and worldview between himself and the Evangelical voters he was still trying to win over and reassure. Because Obama had come out recently in support of same sex marriage, Romney began by asserting, "American values may become topics of democratic debate from time to time. So, it is today with the enduring institution of marriage. Marriage is a relationship between one man and one woman" (Parker, 2012e). Celebrating the significance of Constitutional protection of religion, he said, "Religious liberty is the first freedom in our Constitution. And whether the cause is justice for the persecuted, compassion for the needy and the sick, or mercy for the child waiting to be born, there is no greater force for good in the nation than Christian conscience in action" (Parker, 2012e). Although his selection as speaker upset Liberty students, "who expressed mistrust of Romney's Mormon faith" (Parker, 2012e), Romney earned strong praise from Evangelical leaders he had been actively courting since April. Tony Perkins of the Family Research Council said, "I don't think he could have improved on the speech," and Gary Bauer of the Christian advocacy group American values said, "I thought it was a home run, and so will most voters" (Parker, 2012e).

Despite earning positive feedback among Evangelical leaders in May, Romney still entered the Republican Convention in August trying to convince Evangelicals to go out and vote for him in November. Coverage a week ahead of the convention reported that Romney advisors

were “scripting a program for the Republican National Convention that they say they hope will accomplish something a year of campaigning has failed to do – paint a full and revealing portrait of who Mitt Romney is” (Peters, 2012). For the first time, on the Sunday before the convention, Romney invited reporters to attend church with him, and on the night, he spoke to the convention, “a member of the Mormon Church will deliver the invocation” (Peters, 2012). Throughout the convention planners scheduled friends and Romney children to speak to help dispel perceptions that Romney is “stiff, aloof, and distant” (Peters, 2012). The goal was to embrace rather than shying away from Romney’s faith. Planners considered their approach double-edged at best as they knew Romney’s religion “might alienate Evangelicals and other conservatives” (Peters, 2012). Romney’s staff still hoped “that his faith ultimately will be seen as a sign of strength of character, and his time as bishop as an example of his willingness to serve when called” (Peters, 2012).

The reporting on these preparations for the convention provided the clearest look available to this point on the candidate’s thinking and the campaign’s behind-the-scenes wrestling with how to approach Romney’s Mormonism (Kantor, 2012c). The coverage explicitly described it as “a topic that he usually avoids speaking about beyond the most general terms” (Peters, 2012). It also characterized Romney’s faith as “a question that has long divided his campaign staff” (Peters, 2012), with some campaign staff asserting that the topic was “off-limits” (Peters, 2012) and that he should “shy away from” (Peters, 2012) it. “But in the end, they decided to confront it head on” (Peters, 2012).

At the convention friends from the family’s church talked about how Romney had helped them when they were in need” (Kantor, 2012c; Zeleny and Rutenberg, 2012a). Convention coverage also focused on Romney’s five sons who had previously been “asked by advisers to



take a lower profile” (Stolberg and Parker, 2012). The eldest son, Craig, introduced Hispanic leaders on the convention stage while the other brothers gave interviews and met with donors (Stolberg and Parker, 2012). The sons talked about their weekly routine with Saturday chores including housework and yard work. Sunday was “for church” although when son Tagg was 14, he was allowed to choose to go to a Sunday birthday party despite his parents’ discomfort with the idea. The boys also talked about the Mormon custom of “family nights” on Mondays complete with games and stories, usually wrapped around a moral lesson. Tagg Romney explained, “Sometimes it was how to deal with bullies if you're getting bullied at school. Sometimes it was a story about Daniel in the lion's den. When we were little, they would have us act it out” (Stolberg and Parker, 2012).

Anticipating Romney’s formal acceptance speech as part of his opening up about his faith, campaign strategist Eric Fehrstrom told reporters ahead of time that Romney would “testify about how faith has guided his life (Kantor, 2012c),” and coverage of Romney’s speech reported that he talked about “his Mormon faith, a subject he rarely raises during the campaign” (Zeleny, 2012). The 37-minute speech included only one paragraph in which Romney talked about Mormonism, saying, “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” (NYT Editorial Board, 2012d). That this mention merited coverage as a departure from Romney’s typical treatment of his faith arguably reiterates how thoroughly this central aspect of life was excluded from Romney’s campaign message and attempts to appeal to voters.

The *New York Times* coverage in the weeks between the convention and election day show that the campaign remained focused on boosting Romney’s appeal to Evangelical voters.

One story detailed the hiring of Ralph Reed, who was known as the architect “of an Evangelical turnout apparatus that is credited with “helping re-elect President George W. Bush in 2004” (Becker, 2012). Reed had since lost his reputation among conservative Christians because he did consulting work for lobbyist Jack Abramoff, who was discredited in an influence-peddling scandal. Reed thus welcomed the invitation Republican Party “luminaries” (Becker, 2012) extended for him to “unleash a sophisticated, micro-targeted get-out-the-Evangelical-vote operation that he believes could nudge open a margin of victory” for Romney (Becker, 2012). Reed’s job was to convince voters that their dislike of Obama’s policies exceeded their mistrust of Romney’s Mormonism (Becker, 2012). Another article reported on Romney’s defense of his senior campaign strategist Stuart Stevens, who reportedly “rankled” (Rutenberg and Parker, 2012) significant supporters because he convinced Romney not to talk more about his personal life – including his Mormon faith -- regardless of any other advice he received. Romney consistently replied, “I trust Stuart” when his family and friends urged him to share more of himself (Rutenberg and Parker, 2012). Apart from the effectiveness of Reed’s efforts or Stevens’ approach, the idea that Romney’s faith was a political negative that the campaign needed to address continued to dominate the framing of the coverage of Romney and his faith until days before the election.

In fact, on the Sunday before the election, *The New York Times* reported on a one-hour special hosted by conservative pundit Glen Beck, also a Mormon. “Does Mitt Romney's Mormonism make him too scary or weird to be elected to president of the United States?” Beck asked his audience (Chozick, 2012). Beck then took calls, answering questions and seeking to debunk myths, such as polygamy, which he insisted “was seen as a ‘perversion in the modern

church” (Chozick, 2012). More broadly, he tried to convince his audience that, “It's not weird to be a Mormon, and it's not weird to be president if you're Mormon” (Chozick, 2012).

The rest of the story, however, went on to remind readers of a 2012 Pew survey that reported about a third of American adults do not see Mormons as Christians and to quote Evangelical leaders and scholars who articulated the concerns Evangelicals have about electing a Mormon. At the same time those leaders and scholars tried to encourage voters to support Romney, suggesting it is possible to support him “politically and not religiously” (Chozick, 2012). The extended portion of the story included below incorporates the voices of several Evangelical leaders and shows how that sector of the Christian church wrestled with Romney’s candidacy on multiple levels. Some Evangelicals recognized Romney’s decency and sought to adopt common underlying values as they had with Mormons elected to less elevated positions, but they remained wary of the normalizing impact electing a Mormon president could have on American culture. Others put aside previously stated objections to Mormonism to throw full support behind Romney. By reporting the variety of perspectives present among Evangelical leaders, this coverage provided insights into the complexities Romney faced because of his faith and helped explain why those challenges endured from start to finish of the campaign (Chozick, 2012). The following quote is extensive, but merits review in its entirety as it shows how varied perspectives can be even within the Evangelical community. It also exemplifies the media’s capacity to expand the discussion of complex issues related to faith.

Russell D. Moore, dean of the School of Theology at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, said, “It's sad to see so many Christians confusing Mormon politics or American nationalism with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.”

Mr. Fischer said of the complicated relationship between evangelical Christians and Mormons that "Evangelicals appreciate what Glenn Beck has done in refocusing attention on the values of our founding fathers," but “that doesn't mean evangelicals regard him as a Christian.”

The Romney campaign has faced similar hurdles and has tried to reach out to Evangelicals by focusing on conservative issues like opposition to abortion and same-sex marriage, rather than on Mr. Romney's own religious beliefs.

“I think when people of other faiths decide to focus more on common values and less on common theology, they can get quite comfortable with Mitt Romney,” said Mark DeMoss, an evangelical Christian, and a senior adviser to Mr. Romney.

The focus on issues rather than religious outreach has been a relief to some Evangelical leaders. "I'm frankly surprised and relieved that I don't see a movement of evangelicals who are waiting to claim Mitt Romney as a brother in Christ," Mr. Moore said in an interview. “He's won over Evangelicals politically, not religiously.”

The reluctance to embrace Mormonism was reflected in a Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life survey, released Jan. 12, that found that about a third of adults in the United States said Mormonism was not a Christian faith, and 17 percent said they did not know.

Until last month, the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association's Website listed Mormonism as a “cult” along with Scientology and Jehovah's Witnesses. That characterization was taken off the Website last month around the time that Mr. Graham endorsed Mr. Romney. The Rev. Franklin Graham, chief executive of his father's association, said the characterization had been added by a staff member and should never have been on the site.

In an interview, Franklin Graham said Mr. Romney's opposition to same-sex marriage trumped any concerns over his faith. “We have to remember we're not voting for a pastor in chief,” he said.

David Neff, editor in chief of *Christianity Today*, said that while evangelical Christians have no problem with Mormon politicians like Senators Harry Reid of Nevada and Orrin D. Hatch of Utah, a Mormon president would “mainstream a religion they'd like to keep marginalized.”

That fear of making Mormonism mainstream is perhaps the biggest difference between evangelicals' willingness to accept a Mormon TV pundit who shares their views, as opposed to a Mormon presidential candidate.

“There's a difference between a public figure like Glenn Beck and someone who could be the president of the United States,” said John C. Green, the author of *The Faith Factor: How Religion Influences American Elections*. “Many evangelicals believe this country was founded by Christian leaders. It's important that the person in the White House be positive about Christianity, if not a devout Christian himself” (Chozick, 2012).

## Subsection 2: *The Wall Street Journal* Coverage of Republican Campaigns

While *The Wall Street Journal* also framed Romney's faith as a campaign issue, its coverage spent less time than did the other two papers exploring Romney's faith as a separate topic, whether to understand the faith itself or to discuss its potential impact on Romney's candidacy. Rarely did the discussion of Romney's faith lead a story. Rather, almost any such discussion appeared either at the end of a story reporting primary results or as part of a broader story about Evangelical voters who mistrusted "Romney's bona fides on social issues" and "still harbor[ed] skepticism about" Mormonism. (King and O'Connor, 2012). *The Wall Street Journal* election coverage that dealt with religion in the Republican election presented and reiterated the fact that Evangelical voters were important, but in the 2012 election they were not consolidating influence behind a single candidate either to decide the primary or to build momentum toward the general election (Hook, 2012). Although the coverage reported that Evangelical voters were seeking a candidate to coalesce behind in 2012 as they had behind former governor of Arkansas Mike Huckabee in 2008 (Hook, 2012), Republicans entered the 2012 election aware of the advantage popular incumbent Obama enjoyed in the polls from the start of the campaign. It is arguable that skepticism about Romney's ability to overcome his poor starting position, as the familiar horse race frame would have characterized it, may have contributed to the Evangelical voters' disinclination to solidify support behind him (Pew Research Center, 2012; Pew Research Center, 2020). Evangelicals' enduring support of Trump in 2016 at least raises the possibility that Evangelicals may have resolved their discomfort with Romney's Mormonism and supported him more enthusiastically had they believed he could win. *The Wall Street Journal* election coverage focused on Iowa Evangelicals in anticipation of the January 3 Iowa Caucuses, reporting that "many Iowa Republicans are frustrated with their options" because they wanted "someone

with strong faith values and executive abilities, but they don't see themselves in any of the candidates" (Belkin and O'Connor, 2012). Pollster Ann Selzer explained that many fewer Evangelical Christians were planning to attend the caucuses because they saw no unifying candidate. In contrast in 2008, Baptist pastor and former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee had invigorated Evangelical voters who gave him a nine-percentage point victory over Romney (Belkin and O'Connor, 2). *The Wall Street Journal* election coverage described the Evangelical vote as "fractured" (King, O'Connor, 2011), and "crucial" (King and O'Connor, 2011) in Iowa where Evangelical pastors were trying to galvanize Evangelical voters behind one of the top three social conservative candidates, who were Bachman, Perry, and Santorum. The pastors hoped to repeat their 2008 success "when a coalition of Christian conservatives helped catapult Mike Huckabee to a surprise victory in the Iowa caucuses" (King and O'Connor, 2011). Despite the pastors' efforts all three candidates continued to campaign aggressively for the Evangelical vote, and, according to Des Moines pastor Jeff Mullen, left the field "so spread with so many to pick from, that it's going to be very hard to beat Mitt Romney" (King and O'Connor, 2011). Santorum had surged in recent polls and had seen discomfort with his Catholicism ease, but some voters raised issues with some of the votes he cast while in the U.S. Senate (King and O'Connor, 2011). Bachman surrogates plugged her as the only candidate "who had the qualifications for office as 'found in the Bible'" (King and O'Connor, 2011). Perry pursued the Evangelical vote by shifting from his pro-jobs message (King and O'Connor, 2011) to warning voters that Obama was "waging 'war on religion'" (Yadron, 2011). By the end of December, Santorum emerged as the top-choice among Evangelical voters, but no candidate ever matched the level of enthusiasm Huckabee generated in 2008 (O'Connor, 2011). Santorum's eventual win in Iowa was an indication that the "religious right" (Land, 2012), composed of Roman Catholic

and Evangelical social conservatives, continues to thrive in American politics (Land, 2012; Mullins and King, 2012).

Coverage of the South Carolina primary reported that the Santorum, Bachman, and Perry campaigns joined Gingrich's campaign in its active attempts to capitalize on Evangelical skepticism of Mormonism to gain ground among South Carolina primary voters, 60 percent of whom were Evangelicals (Bauerlein and McWhirter, 2012; King and Hook, 2012; McWhirter et al., 2012) South Carolina Evangelical voters proved to be more comfortable with Gingrich than with any other candidate as he finished first with 40 percent of the vote (Grossman, 2012a). Also, coverage that looked ahead to Nevada mentioned that "7.5 percent of Nevada's Republican electorate is Mormons, but Mormons accounted for more than one-quarter of caucus-goers," several paragraphs into a story about the state's caucus format and the strategy of all participating candidates (Berzon and Hook, 2012).

*The Wall Street Journal* coverage of Michigan primary results included brief mentions of Romney's faith as a factor but those mentions appeared close to the end of the story. An article that analyzed Romney's struggles in Michigan, where he grew up, noted in the 14<sup>th</sup> of 17 paragraphs that in Arizona Romney benefited by the fact that "4 percent of [the state's population] share[d] his Mormon faith – twice the national average" (Nicholas and Wall, 2012). The article that broke down the performance of Romney and Gingrich in Nevada included the following also 14 paragraphs into a 17-paragraph story noting the positive impact of Romney's faith on the contest:

Mr. Romney has been viewed as the unquestioned frontrunner in the Silver State since the race began early last year. Mr. Romney practices the Mormon faith and Mormons accounted for roughly a quarter of the turnout Saturday, according to entrance polls. His perch was so safe that Messrs. Paul and Santorum watched the results from Minnesota and Colorado, respectively (O'Connor and Carlton, 2012).

In a rare example, *The Wall Street Journal* election news coverage headlined Mormonism in a story entitled “Election 2012: Romney’s Faith Shrinks as a Factor” (Nelson, 2012). The story explained that, in contrast to 2008, Romney’s faith had already proven to be “far from a deal-breaker” in this election and although he had struggled to win over Evangelical voters in some primaries, “his religion may start to fade from view as he continues to build a daunting lead in the delegate count while arguing that he is the best candidate to take on the president” (Nelson, 2012).

The coverage also focused on Southern states in anticipation of the March 6 Super Tuesday primary. Highlighting Tennessee, the coverage noted that two of every three Republican primary voters described themselves as Evangelical, and one in five Tennessee voters called Mormon faith a cult. As a result, analysts expected the state to serve as a primary bellwether of Romney’s ability to win the Southern vote. Santorum ended up winning 37 percent of the vote while Romney won 28 percent (O’Connor and Murray, 2012). In Georgia, also an Evangelical-heavy state, favorite son Gingrich came in first with 47 percent; Romney came in second with 26 percent, and Santorum came in third with 19 percent. The Georgia results suggested Romney had gained some traction among Evangelical voters (Williamson, 2012). Once Santorum dropped out of the race, *The Wall Street Journal* Coverage reported that Romney followed up that announcement by reaching out to Tony Perkins and other Evangelical leaders (O’Connor and Hook, 2012).

In its coverage of Romney’s Liberty University speech, *The Wall Street Journal* leaned more toward a “Culture Wars’ frame as it led with “Mitt Romney waded back into the fight over gay marriage on Saturday” after “Obama reignited a long-dormant fight over gay marriage by endorsing the right of gay people to marry” (O’Conner, 2012a). In the fourth paragraph the story



noted that “Romney used the commencement speech to present himself as a man of deep Christian faith” (O’Conner, 2012a) before returning to his opposition to gay marriage as an example of his views on the intersection of religion and politics (O’Conner, 2012a). The “Candidate Faith an Issue” frame appeared in the final paragraphs of the story as it explained, “The selection of Mr. Romney, a Mormon, as the commencement speaker generated consternation on the Liberty campus, in part because many Evangelicals don’t consider Mormonism a Christian faith” (O’Conner, 2012a). The story noted further that Romney “mentioned his Mormon religion only obliquely, emphasizing what he had in common with his audience” (O’Conner, 2012a) and “painted himself as a champion of religious freedom who said the U.S. owes its strength in the world to its ‘Judeo-Christian tradition, with its vision of the goodness and possibilities of every life’” (O’Conner, 2012a). A follow-up article reported that “Evangelical leaders praised” Romney’s effort “to reassure Christians who harbor doubts about his Mormon faith and the depth of his conservative convictions” (O’Conner, 2012b). The article also noted that “Romney tried to quell any lingering unease among Christian conservatives about Mormonism by stressing their shared view of the world – without uttering the word ‘Mormon’ once” (O’Conner, 2012b).

Also, in May, *The Wall Street Journal* published results of a *Wall Street Journal/NBC* News poll that explored bias among Americans and represented perhaps the paper’s most extensive discussion of Mormonism as a factor that Romney needed to overcome. Pollsters said that Americans are generally “reluctant to admit they harbor biases against particular groups, so it was “notable “that “the Mormon question [represented] ‘a significant cross-current’ in segments of the electorate” (Meckler, 2012). A total of 27 percent of all respondents said that having a “Mormon as president would raise concern” for themselves and their family or for

people in their neighborhood or for people they work with (Meckler, 2012). “Among Evangelical Christians, one in three expressed concerns” about having a Mormon president, and “concerns about a Mormon president were higher than for a woman, Hispanic or African American president, but not as high as the 41 percent who said a gay president would raise concerns” (Meckler, 2012). As if to suggest that the issue of Romney’s faith might fade as the general election ramped up, the article closed with the sentence, “Obama campaign senior strategist David Axelrod said Sunday Mr. Romney’s faith ‘is not fair game’ in the campaign” (Meckler, 2012).

Anticipating the last day of the Republican convention *The Wall Street Journal* headlined Romney’s faith with a story on the last day of the convention, with the headline “Convention Journal – Religion Mormon Faith to Take the Stage” (Nelson and O'Connor, 2012). The article noted that “Romney has held his religion close, seldom mentioning his Mormon faith,” and anticipated his convention speech saying, “his beliefs will be front and center as he accepts the GOP presidential nomination” (Nelson and O'Connor, 2012). It went on to say that the Mormon’s Church’s six million U.S. members “still face a lack of understanding about their Christian faith” despite Romney’s campaign because he “hasn’t been inclined to offer much insight” (Nelson and O'Connor, 2012). Quoting Romney’s nephew, the article offered the explanation that “He’s just a private person. He safeguards things that are personal,” and noted that the Romneys had invited reporters to join them for a Sunday service earlier that week (Nelson and O'Connor, 2012). The article continued with fellow Mormon Republican Sen. Orrin Hatch of Utah, dismissing Romney’s religion as an issue in this campaign and reported that he had left behind concerns about Mormonism being a cult by seldom addressing religion in the campaign (Nelson and O'Connor, 2012). The article concluded with multiple indications that

Romney's faith remained a political negative that he had to overcome. Polls that showed Romney still lagged in support among Evangelical Christians, with only 55 percent of them saying they had "very positive or somewhat positive feelings about" Romney while "among all Republicans, 74 percent had positive feelings" (Nelson and O'Connor, 2012). In addition, "Ralph Reed, founder of the Faith and Freedom Coalition, acknowledged that some Evangelical voters may shun Mr. Romney because of his faith" (Nelson and O'Connor, 2012). Reed attempted to minimize the impact of those voters saying they primarily lived in heavily Republican states, such as Arkansas, Oklahoma, and South Carolina (Nelson and O'Connor, 2012).

As in *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* coverage between the convention and election day focused on Romney campaign efforts to encourage Evangelicals to cast their votes for Romney. In particular, Romney campaigned in Ohio to energize Evangelical voters to turnout in that key battleground state (Nelson et al., 2012). The coverage characterized campaign efforts to turn out Ohio Evangelicals for Romney at higher-than-expected rates as attempting to "reveal a secret voting bloc" that could deliver him the margin of victory he needed (Henninger, 2012).

Also, as in *The New York Times* coverage, the final coverage in *The Wall Street Journal* of Romney's final efforts to win the Evangelical win reiterated that fact that Romney's religion had been a problem throughout his campaign, saying, "When Mitt Romney's 2012 candidacy was gaining traction in the primaries, the conventional wisdom instantly conveyed that the Evangelical vote, skeptical of Mormonism, would sink him" (Henninger, 2012). Just by stating the facts, the coverage suggested how unrelenting the issue of Romney's faith remained among voters expected to support the Republican candidate.

### Subsection 3: *USA Today* Coverage of Republican Campaigns

In its coverage of religion in the Republican presidential campaign, *USA Today* (Grossman, 2012d, Grossman, 2012e) focused little on the primaries, but gave Mormonism more attention as both a faith and a political issue than did *The Wall Street Journal*.

In multiple stories in the early months of the campaign, *USA Today* coverage explored recent polls on Evangelicals' perspective on Mormonism. It reported on a Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) poll that showed that 49 percent of Evangelical voters did not consider Mormonism to be Christian and that many referred to it as a cult (Moore, 2012). It also reported on the Pew Survey entitled "Mormons in America: Certain in Their Beliefs but Uncertain of Their Place in Society," quoting Mormon historian and Pew survey advisor Matthew Bowman, who said, "People think we are weird, and we're made fun of." Despite grappling with their place in American culture and making up only 2 percent of the U.S. population, Mormons "were optimistic about moving into the cultural mainstream" as the campaign season got under way, and they believed "the nation [was] ready for a Mormon president. (Grossman, 2012b).

Early in the campaign *USA Today* coverage explored why Mormons' optimism about gaining greater public acceptance may not prove to be a realistic perspective. The column quoted extensively below argued that Americans' suspicions of and misgivings about Mormonism could be rooted in incomplete information about the faith.

Mormons are unfamiliar to many. There are 6 million, adults and children, accounting for fewer than 2% of the U.S. population, and 76% live in just a handful of Western states.

Outspoken evangelical pastors, such as Robert Jeffress of First Baptist Dallas, call Mormonism a "cult," saying followers aren't Christians. Are, too! Mormons say. They just center their faith on a different understanding of God, Christ, Scripture, and salvation than Catholics or Protestants. Even so, Christian private schools and homeschooling associations specify in their statement of faith that the Bible is the only Scripture, thereby excluding Mormons, who add three more holy books.

Unlike Judaism, Mormonism is not a faith commonly studied in comparative religion classes. When Mormons show up in history books, it's generally limited to a saga of persecution (they were driven from the Midwest to Utah in the 19th century) and legal conflicts over polygamy. Polygamy was banned by the church in 1890. But many Americans are schooled by the fundamentalist Mormon splinter groups pictured in *Big Love* and *Sister Wives* on cable TV and in crime headlines, such as the August trial and conviction of polygamist leader Warren Jeffs (Grossman, 2012f).

In its coverage of Romney's speeches at Liberty University and at the Republican National Convention, *USA Today's* coverage of religion in the Republican presidential campaign offered narratives closer to those presented in the other two papers. *USA Today* referred to the Liberty University speech as Romney's opportunity "to speak directly to those in the conservative base who harbored doubts about his conservative credentials and his Mormon faith" (Kucinich, 2012a). More than either other outlet, *USA Today* added historical context coverage by expanding on Romney's 2007 speech that "was compared to the one given by John Kennedy about Roman Catholicism in 1960" and noting that "some in the Christian church make a mistake not to reiterate that message now" (Kucinich, 2012c). As Charles Dunn, government professor at the Christian school Regent University, put it, "Romney needs a Mormon moment like Kennedy had a Catholic moment to put that issue to rest. Timing is everything. The timing wasn't right back then" (Kucinich, 2012). Nonetheless, Dunn added "in the end [Christian voters] have to go with him" (Kucinich, 2012a).

In its coverage of the Republican Convention, *USA Today* reflected the other two newspapers in this study as it discussed the Romney campaign's decision to talk more about religion at the convention to help warm up Romney's public image. The editorial noted that by "maintaining a genial tone, Romney effectively humanized himself, opening up about his faith and family" (*USA Today* Editorial Board, 2012c). Again, his "opening up about faith included

two sentences in which he mentioned that he grew up in a Mormon family and then dismissed it as less important to most people than how he did in sports (*USA Today* Editorial Board, 2012c). He did talk more extensively about his family, so the description is accurate, but it is worth noting that all three papers described his brief comments as “opening up about his faith” (Kantor, 2012c; Nelson and O'Connor, 2012; *USA Today* Editorial Board, 2012c; Zeleny, 2012).

More than either of the other papers, *USA Today* incorporated the significance of Romney’s choice of a Catholic running mate, U.S. Representative Paul Ryan, into the overall coverage of Romney’s faith. The discussion of the Romney-Ryan ticket focused first on the fact that this was the first ticket since 1860 that did not include a Protestant,<sup>10</sup> quoting religious scholars who described the ticket as “well in line with today's wider, less brand-specific Christian culture” (Grossman, 2012d). It also asserted it was no longer possible to “assume when people speak of American values, they're speaking in terms of Protestants who dominated American religious and public life" since the nation's founding” (Grossman, 2012d). Following nine paragraphs exploring the shift in American religious trends, the coverage turned to the fact that Romney’s Mormonism could be problematic for Evangelical voters while, as a conservative Catholic, Ryan might help close that gap (Grossman, 2012d). Duke Divinity School professor Grant Wacker concluded the article suggesting that ticket might mean that the religion of a candidate no longer matters “as long as he claims one It would be much more significant if the candidates had no faith or called themselves agnostics or unbelievers. That is still unimaginable in the USA today," he added (Grossman, 2012d).

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<sup>10</sup> Abraham Lincoln, who belonged to no church, chose Unitarian Sen. Hannibal Hamlin as his running mate (Grossman, 2012b).

In the weeks following the convention, unlike the other two papers, *USA Today* did not cover final Republican efforts to turn out the Evangelical vote. Instead, *USA Today* returned to its pattern from the start of the campaign by offering additional insight into Mormonism, itself, by running a single column by a Mormon scholar that referenced a Brookings Institute report released in May that showed 82 percent of Americans know little about Mormonism. While the piece noted there were oddities and issues in Mormon history, it argued that in lacking any knowledge of Mormonism, voters didn't know that the Mormon beliefs emphasize "patriotism, civic duty, and morality in government – American government in particular" and that those beliefs over time have produced "champions of the American vision...such as such as J.W. Marriott Jr. of the hotel chain and David Neeleman of JetBlue" (Mansfield, 2012). While the author noted such beliefs meant Romney's faith *could* help him lead and thus increase his desirability as a candidate, the author concluded that voters should at least know that this unfamiliar faith "instills devotion to country" as they determine his desirability for office (Mansfield, 2012).

Even as it provided relatively little coverage of religion as it related to the Republican campaign, *USA Today* still offered insights regarding Mormonism that were not published in the more substantial coverage in the other two national newspapers. This suggests that *USA Today* viewed its role of covering religion in elections somewhat differently from *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*. Rather than focusing almost solely on the tactics of attracting or alienating the traditional Conservative Christian voting bloc, *USA Today* arguably was attempting to perform a broader civic role in informing the public of the nature of Mormonism so that voters could make their own assessments of the candidate.

## Section 7: Conclusions

Republicans and Democrats alike leave candidate faith out of official campaign materials, but religion-related newspaper coverage in the 2012 presidential election shows that parties differed significantly in the actual presence of faith in their campaigns. For Republicans in 2012, candidate faith played an integral role throughout the campaign as candidates competed for the support of Evangelical voters. For Democrats, candidate faith may emerge as an issue as it did for Obama with Wright in 2008, but it might also essentially disappear from the conversation as it did in 2012.

In 2012 Romney's depth of commitment to his faith never came into question. No one challenged the idea that he devoted his life to a faith that drove him to personal compassion and public service. Nonetheless, because that faith was Mormonism, Romney first had to fend off questions about his non-traditional faith raised by other Republican candidates. During the primaries those candidates sought to win Evangelical voters by presenting themselves as Evangelicals or as conservative Catholics who shared Evangelicals' perspectives. Even though he managed to win the nomination, Romney never escaped questions about his ability to win Evangelical support and motivate them to go to the polls based on the discomfort many Evangelicals felt about the Mormon faith.

The campaign itself wrestled repeatedly with whether and how to incorporate Romney's faith into his appeal to voters. At times Romney spoke directly to Evangelical voters about shared values attempting to assure them that they could trust him to lead the nation. At other times the campaign urged Romney and his surrogates to talk more about how he practiced his faith and how it shaped his life to humanize Romney and overcome perceptions that he was stiff and distant. While the nature of the conversation about Romney faith varied over the months of



campaign coverage, it never dropped out of the coverage entirely, and it never settled into a consistent message. Questions about the acceptability of a Mormon president did not dominate the conversation, but they persisted throughout the election cycle, and they raised concerns about a potential dampening effect on Evangelical turnout. In the weeks leading up to election day, Romney hired an Evangelical lobbyist to help him motivate Evangelicals to come out and vote. Ultimately, the coverage of Romney reveals a relentlessness to questions about his faith. The campaign never settled on an approach, and the voters never seemed to resolve their issues. Granted, Romney was running against a popular incumbent, and Republican supporters may have been skeptical of his ability to win under any circumstances. If Republicans had believed he could win, they may have found a way to make Romney's faith acceptable or at least inconsequential. There is no way to know whether a different Democratic opponent may have prompted a different approach and yielded a different result in relation to Romney's faith. Campaign coverage does, however, make it clear that the faith that grounds and guides Romney's life persisted as a problem throughout his pursuit of the presidency.

In contrast to how integral candidate faith is in the coverage of Republicans running for president, the religion-related coverage that focuses on Obama in 2012 is almost entirely tied to a policy issue and suggests little interest on the part of Democratic voters on the religious faith of Democratic candidates. The dynamics that characterize the coverage of faith in the 2012 election provide an intriguing context from which to examine the coverage of faith in 2016 when the Republican candidate was not a person of deep faith, but the Democratic candidate was.

## Chapter 6: Candidate Faith in the 2016 Coverage

### Section 1: Introduction

Newspaper coverage of the 2016 election showed that by running his campaign as a reality television character rather than as a politician, Trump obscured the story the national news media was telling about Trump's connection with Evangelical voters that proved central in the election. Bombast displaced debate as Trump repeatedly mocked his political opponents, argued with a global religious leader, and invited intolerant ideas into the public conversation by ostracizing, stereotyping, and promoting harsh policies against adherents of a religion from outside the American mainstream. Even when the media attempted to explore contradictions inherent in Evangelicals' support of Trump, because of his lifestyle and minimal commitment to any practice of faith, his unorthodox-to-outrageous comments distracted from and drowned out that conversation.

During the primaries, other Republican candidates employed the common campaign approach of highlighting their Evangelical or conservative Catholic faiths to attract Evangelical voters, especially in early contests. Trump essentially overwhelmed those efforts by saying and doing things, such as getting into a verbal showdown with Pope Francis, that captured headlines, confounded Trump's Republican competition, and awakened support among voters who delighted in Trump's defiance of existing political norms and who seemed to care little about how his personal life and character measured up to any religious values (Detrow, 2016). In the general election, Democrat Clinton talked in some campaign appearances about her lifelong Methodist faith and its influence on her career. She also introduced explicitly religious language and ideals in a campaign ad launched after the convention (Freedman, 2016b). Nonetheless, in

the campaign coverage, Trump managed to drown out Clinton's steady presentation of this grounding aspect of her life by throwing out the unfounded idea that her faith was unknown and in question (Haberman, 2016).

To understand more fully the extent and nature of coverage religion and candidate faith received in the 2016 election, this study examined a total of 274 articles for the 2016 election, including 162 from *The New York Times*, 84 from *The Wall Street Journal*, and 28 from *USA Today*<sup>11</sup>. This chapter focuses on the coverage in *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* although interesting insights also emerged in the qualitative analysis of the limited number of articles from *USA Today*. As in 2012, coding the candidates, religions, and frames referenced in each article from 2016 allowed for quantitative and qualitative analysis of the religion-related coverage that the candidates received in these outlets.

### Section 2: Presence of Religion in Campaign Materials 2016

Examination of campaign websites using the WayBack Machine showed limited attention to candidate faith or any other discussion of religion in the campaign materials of both general election candidates. Each campaign had a candidate biography on the campaign website. The website for 2016 Republican candidate Trump introduces him as “the very definition of the American success story, continually setting the standards of excellence in business, real estate, and entertainment” (WayBack Machine, 2016a). Subsequent paragraphs detail his activities on social media, a list of major real estate properties, and his awards as a co producer of the reality shows, *The Apprentice* and *The Celebrity Apprentice*. There is no reference to personal faith, and

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<sup>11</sup> As detailed in Chapter Four, beginning in 2013 Gannet sought to increase *USA Today*'s circulation numbers by creating condensed national news sections that could be inserted in local papers across the nation. That strategy continued in 2016 and likely explains the significant drop in the amount of *USA Today* coverage available for this study (Mullin, 2018; Johnston, 2014).

the only personal reference in the biography said he was “born in Queens, New York, currently married to Melanie Trump, father to Donald Trump Jr., Ivanka, Eric, Tiffany and Barron, and the proud grandfather of seven” (WayBack Machine, 2016a).

On the website for 2016 Democratic candidate Clinton’s presidential campaign, an illustrated biographical timeline included about 30 segments, beginning with her birthdate, and concluding with her selection of U.S. Senator Tim Kaine as her vice-presidential running mate (WayBack Machine, 2016b). One of the segments focused on her years growing up in Park Ridge, Illinois said:

She was raised a Methodist and her mom taught Sunday school. She took the teachings of the church to heart:

‘Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can.

When her youth minister took Hillary to see Martin Luther King Jr. speak in Chicago, it helped spark her lifelong passion for social justice (Anon, 2016b).

The rest of the timeline followed her through her undergraduate years at Wellesley College and Yale Law School, through Arkansas as the wife of eventual governor and then President Bill Clinton, through her years in the U.S. Senate and as Secretary of State before she ran for president. The timeline also highlighted her work as a health care and human rights activist. No further reference to faith appeared on the site (WayBack Machine, 2016b).

### *Section 3: Quantitative Content Analysis of the 2016 Election*

Compared to 2012, quantitative content analysis of the 2016 coverage shows a shift in the predominant religions covered. As reflected in **Figure 10: Religion Referenced by Paper – 2016** and **Table 10: Religion Referenced by Paper – 2016**, Mormonism disappeared, and

Islam emerged alongside Evangelicalism and Catholicism as one of the three religions that received the most references in the campaign coverage.

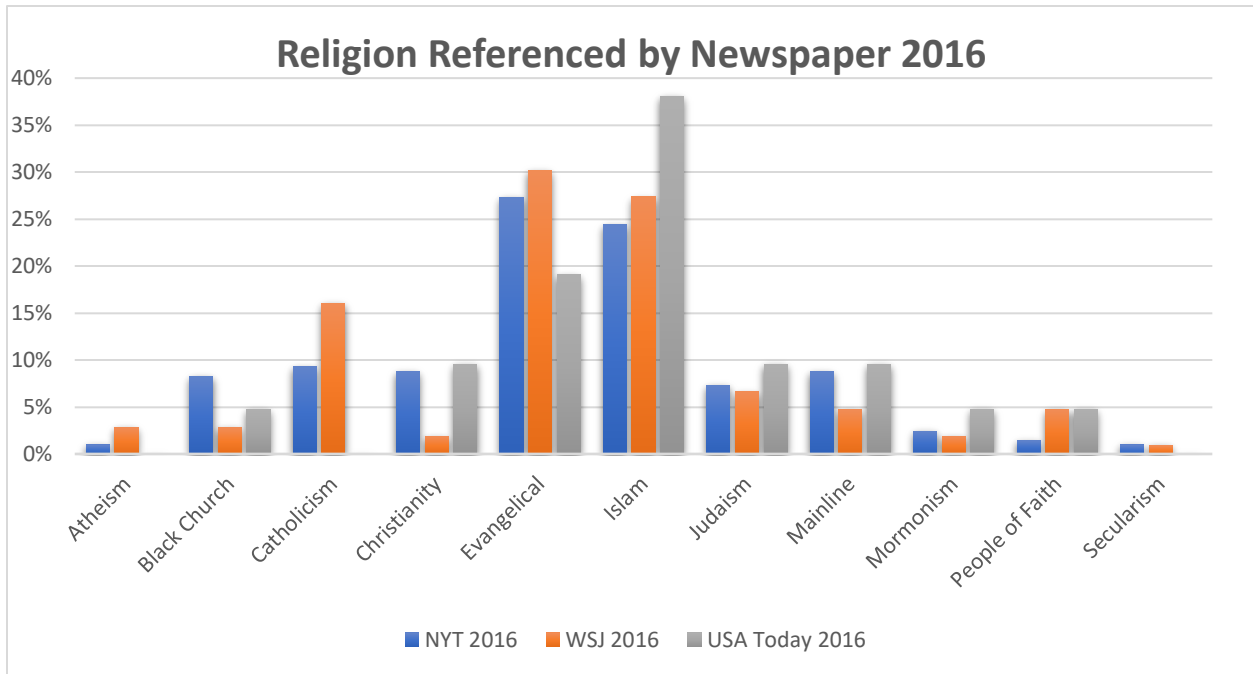


Figure 10: Religion Referenced by Paper – 2016

Table 10: Religion Referenced by Paper – 2016

|                 | NYT 2016 | WSJ 2016 | USA Today 2016 | Total by Faith |
|-----------------|----------|----------|----------------|----------------|
| Atheism         | 2        | 3        | 0              | 5              |
| Black Church    | 17       | 3        | 1              | 21             |
| Catholicism     | 19       | 17       | 0              | 36             |
| Christianity    | 18       | 2        | 2              | 22             |
| Evangelical     | 56       | 32       | 4              | 92             |
| Islam           | 50       | 29       | 8              | 87             |
| Judaism         | 15       | 7        | 2              | 24             |
| Mainline        | 18       | 5        | 2              | 25             |
| Mormonism       | 5        | 2        | 1              | 8              |
| People of Faith | 3        | 5        | 1              | 9              |
| Secularism      | 2        | 1        | 0              | 3              |
| Totals by Paper | 205      | 106      | 21             | 332            |

The flow of coverage that all three of those religions received from month to month reached their highest peaks in the early months of the campaign with lower peaks in coverage

later in the year. As detailed below several frames repeated the dominance, they had in the 2012 coverage. In addition, “Islam as a Campaign Issue” emerged as a prominent frame reflecting the increased presences of Islam in the coverage. As noted in relation to the 2012 study, the coding for this project captured each candidate mentioned in a story, and election coverage generally mentions multiple candidates even when the focus of the article is on a single candidate. It is, therefore, not possible for quantitative content analysis to clearly capture the variation of religion-related coverage by candidate. The qualitative analysis that follows examines those distinctions.

Islam emerged as a presence in the campaign while Mormonism essentially disappeared with the departure of Mitt Romney from the presidential race. Judaism also appeared more often than in the 2012 election coverage, but most of that coverage appeared in articles focused on Islam. Evangelicalism and Catholicism were dominant again in the 2016 campaign coverage, although qualitative analysis shows that campaign issues related to each religion changed significantly from 2012. Mainline Protestantism also had a greater presence in 2016 than in 2012, suggesting the possibility that United Methodist Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton may have received more coverage of her faith than Democratic candidate Obama received in 2012.

As reflected in **Figure 11: Religion Referenced by month – 2016** and **Table 11: Religion Referenced by Month – 2016**, the coverage of Islam peaked in December 2015 with 19 references. Coverage of Islam continued with five or fewer references in subsequent months. Because neither major party had a Muslim candidate contending for the nomination, the increased attention to Islam in 2016 points to factors outside the campaign driving up public

attention to Islam. Qualitative analysis of the coverage shows that the increased attention grew out of fear of extremists rather than interest in the faith.

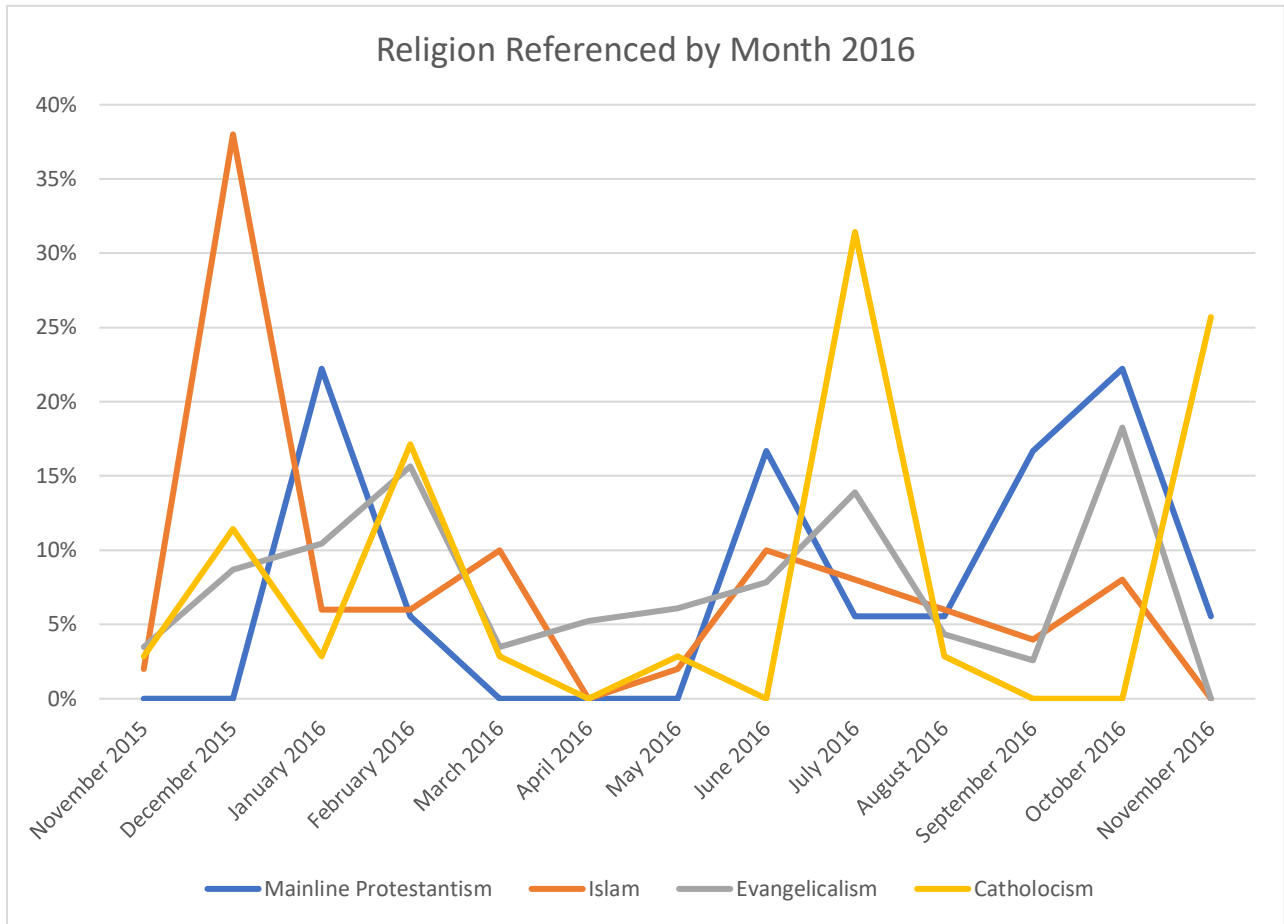


Figure 11: Religion Referenced by Month – 2016

Table 11: Religion References by Month – 2016

|                | Mainline Protestantism | Islam | Evangelicalism | Catholicism |
|----------------|------------------------|-------|----------------|-------------|
| November 2015  | 0                      | 1     | 4              | 1           |
| December 2015  | 0                      | 19    | 10             | 4           |
| January 2016   | 4                      | 3     | 12             | 1           |
| February 2016  | 1                      | 3     | 18             | 6           |
| March 2016     | 0                      | 5     | 4              | 1           |
| April 2016     | 0                      | 0     | 6              | 0           |
| May 2016       | 0                      | 1     | 7              | 1           |
| June 2016      | 3                      | 5     | 9              | 0           |
| July 2016      | 1                      | 4     | 16             | 11          |
| August 2016    | 1                      | 3     | 5              | 1           |
| September 2016 | 3                      | 2     | 3              | 0           |
| October 2016   | 4                      | 4     | 21             | 0           |
| November 2016  | 1                      | 0     | 0              | 9           |
| TOTALS         | 18                     | 50    | 115            | 35          |

The coverage that Evangelicals received in 2016 repeats the pattern seen in 2012 with references increasing from December 2015 to January 2016 and peaking in February 2016. The repeated pattern of coverage suggests that the faith of Republican candidates again received extensive coverage during the primary period. The coverage of Evangelicalism in 2016 followed a pattern similar to 2012 with two smaller peaks later in the year – one as the nomination process ended in June and another following party conventions in August. Evangelicalism enjoyed a greater level of coverage in 2016 from September through election day than in 2012, when Mormonism received the most coverage.

The coverage of Mainline Protestantism followed a pattern like the coverage of Evangelicalism, peaking in the early months of the year and then having increased coverage again in early summer and in the weeks leading up to the election. The pattern suggests that as a United Methodist Democratic candidate who did discuss her faith, Clinton may have received some coverage as primaries got underway, once her nomination was official, and again after the convention (Meckler et al, 2016). At the same time, the number of references to Mainline Protestantism only totaled 18 for the campaign cycle while references to Evangelicalism totaled 115. This differential suggests that little had changed since 2012 when the faith of Democratic candidates received rare and limited attention.

As in 2012, the mention of religion often only appeared in the news when linked to a controversy. The presence of Catholicism in the coverage early in the year relates primarily to the critical public exchange between Pope Francis and Trump, while the presence later in the campaign reflects the fact that both vice presidential candidates had some connection to the



Catholic Church. Republican former Indiana Gov. Mike Pence was born into a Catholic family before converting to Evangelicalism, and Democrat Kaine is a lifelong Catholic (Martin, 2016b).

Following the same methodology as the 2012 election news content, the coding process for the 2016 coverage identified frames of religion-related coverage whether it was the main subject of a story or was introduced as an additional topic further down in the coverage. The coding process also incorporated news stories, editorials, and columns as religion-related coverage for quantitative analysis, while the qualitative analysis in the following section explores differences that emerged in the news and opinion coverage.

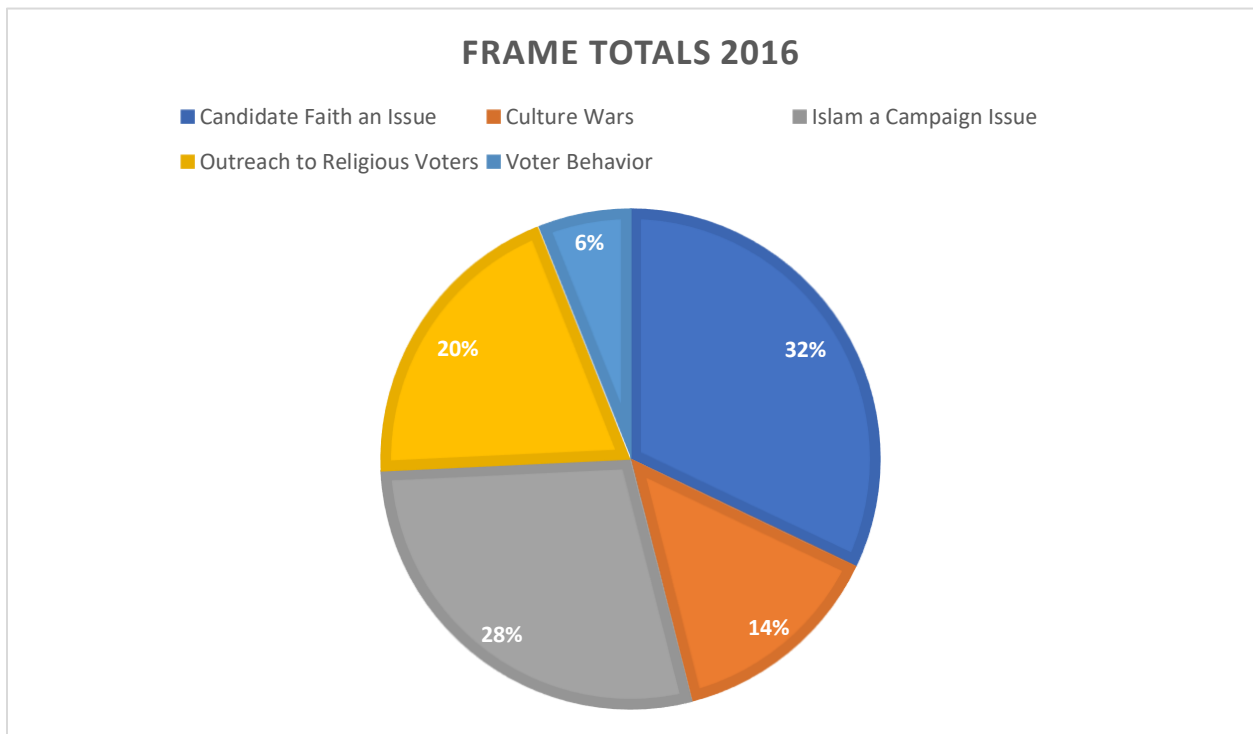


Figure 12: Frame Totals 2016 (All Papers)

Table 12: Frames 2016 (All Papers)

|                     | Candidate Faith an Issue | Culture Wars | Islam a Campaign Issue | Outreach to Religious Voters | Voter Behavior | Totals by Outlet |
|---------------------|--------------------------|--------------|------------------------|------------------------------|----------------|------------------|
| New York Times      | 66                       | 29           | 45                     | 46                           | 11             | 218              |
| Wall Street Journal | 37                       | 19           | 20                     | 21                           | 8              | 113              |
| USA Today           | 14                       | 3            | 6                      | 5                            | 3              | 34               |
| <b>FRAME TOTALS</b> | <b>117</b>               | <b>51</b>    | <b>71</b>              | <b>72</b>                    | <b>22</b>      | <b>365</b>       |

As noted in Figures 12-15 and Table 12 (**Figure 12: Frames 2016 (All Papers); Table 12: Frames 2016 (All Papers); Figure 13: Frames 2016-The New York Times; Figure 14: Frames 2016-The Wall Street Journal; and Figure 15: Frames 2016-USA Today**), the most common frames captured in the coverage of religion across all three papers were “Candidate Faith as an Issue,” “Culture Wars,” “Islam a Campaign Issue,” “Outreach to Religious Voters,” and “Voter Behavior.”

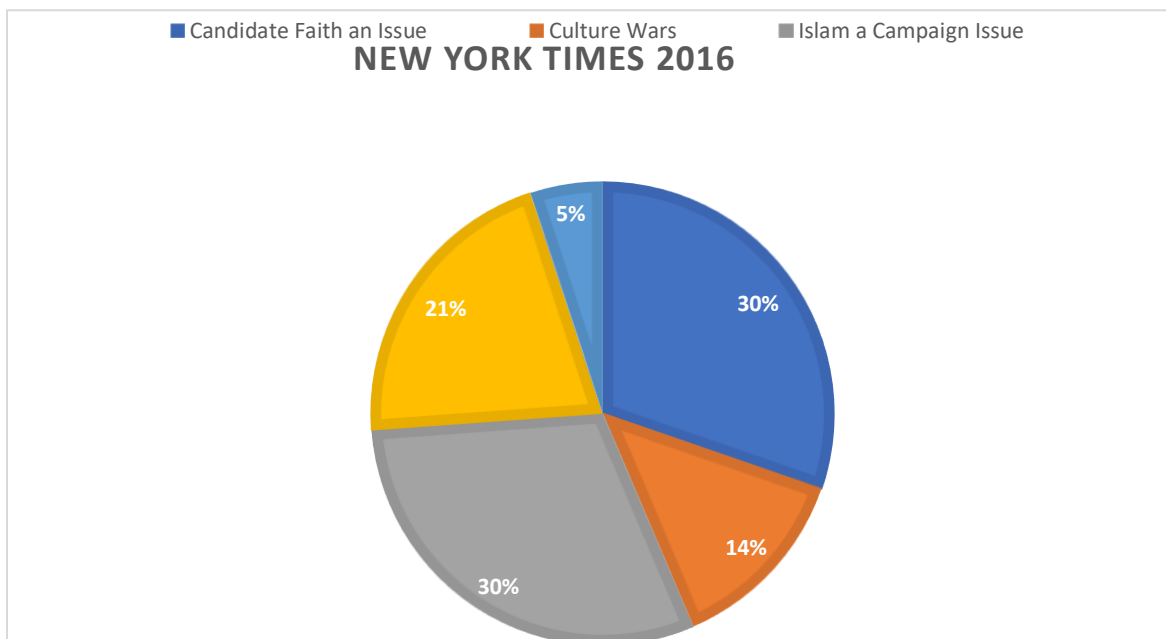


Figure 13: Frames New York Times-2016

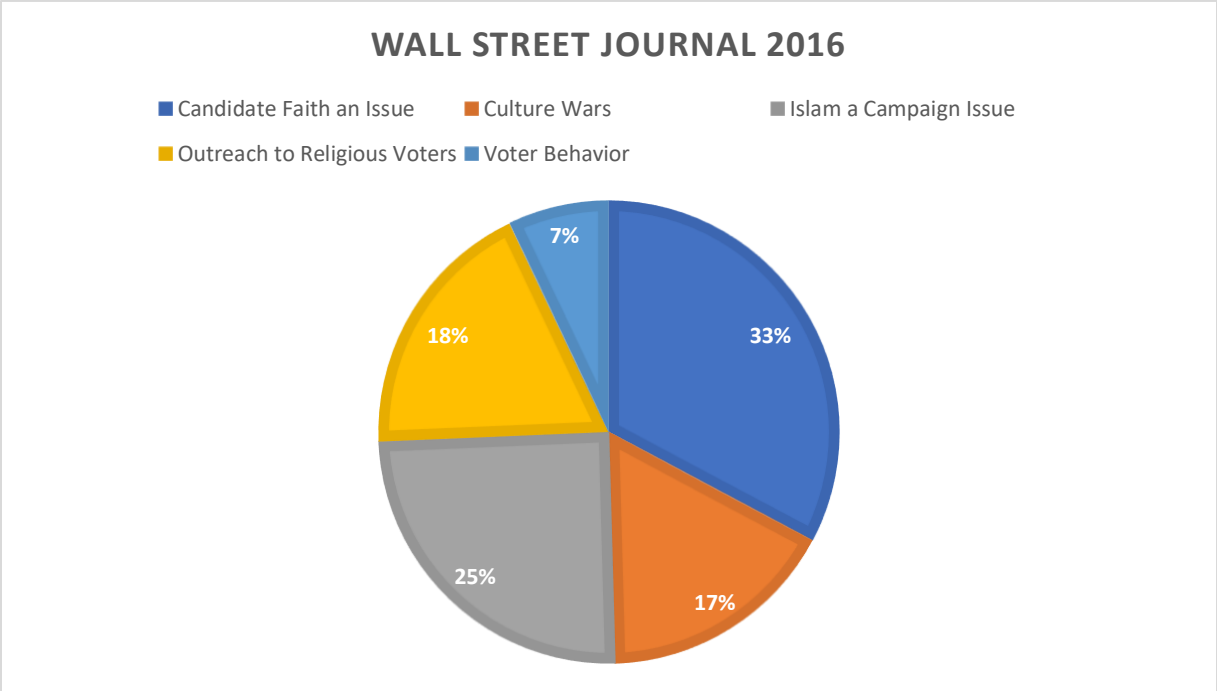


Figure 14: Frames Wall Street Journal-2016

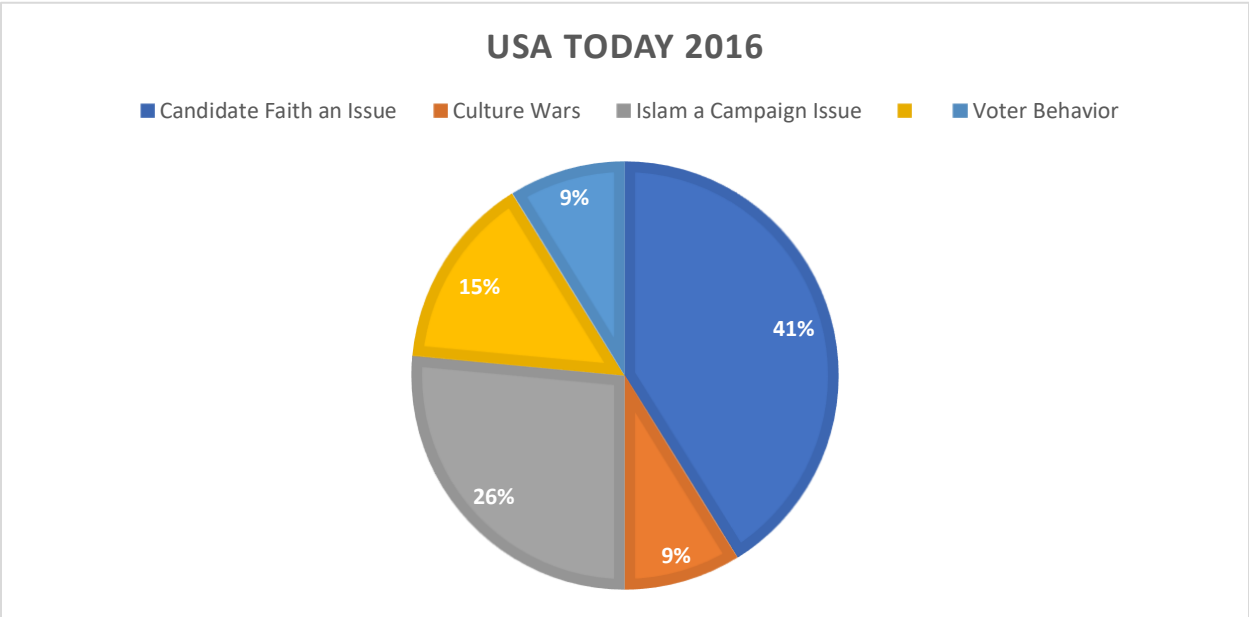
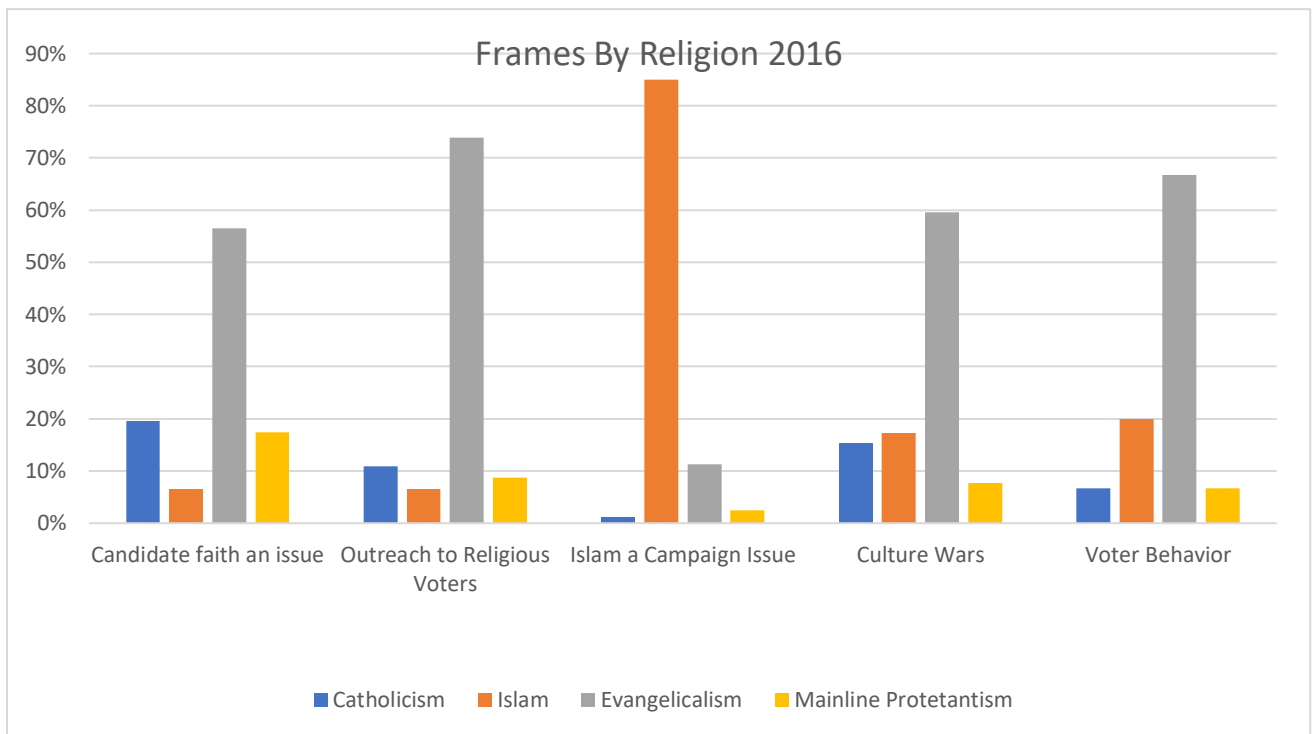


Figure 15: Frames USA Today-2016

As **Figure 16: Frames by Religion 2016** and **Table 13: Frames by Religion 2016**, shows, Evangelicalism dominates the four of the five frames that appear most often in the religion-related coverage in 2016. Because neither of the major Democratic candidates, Clinton and Bernie Sanders, characterize themselves as Evangelical, the predominance of Evangelicalism in the coverage reinforces the God Gap idea that religious faith is a topic that pertains more to Republicans than to Democrats (Meckler et al, 2016). The presence of Catholicism in the frames primarily reflects the fact noted above that both Trump and Clinton chose vice presidential candidates with some connection to the Catholic Church.



*Figure 16: Frames by Religion-2016*

*Table 13: Frames by Religion 2016*

|                                     | Catholicism | Islam     | Evangelicalism | Mainline Protestantism |
|-------------------------------------|-------------|-----------|----------------|------------------------|
| <b>Candidate faith an issue</b>     | <b>18</b>   | <b>6</b>  | <b>52</b>      | <b>16</b>              |
| <b>Outreach to Religious Voters</b> | <b>5</b>    | <b>3</b>  | <b>34</b>      | <b>4</b>               |
| <b>Islam a Campaign Issue</b>       | <b>1</b>    | <b>68</b> | <b>9</b>       | <b>2</b>               |
| <b>Culture Wars</b>                 | <b>8</b>    | <b>9</b>  | <b>31</b>      | <b>4</b>               |
| <b>Voter Behavior</b>               | <b>1</b>    | <b>3</b>  | <b>10</b>      | <b>1</b>               |
| <b>Totals</b>                       | <b>33</b>   | <b>89</b> | <b>136</b>     | <b>27</b>              |

The “Islam as a Campaign Issue” stands out as a frame that refers almost exclusively to Islam in its coverage, and Islam appears to a minimal extent in other frames. This dynamic reflects the reality that Trump portrayed Islam as a religion dominated by extremists and terrorists who threatened American’s lives and their way of life. The qualitative content analysis reported in the next section of this chapter explores the patterns revealed and the questions raised by the quantitative content analysis of the 2016 campaign coverage related to religion.

#### *Section 4: Qualitative Content Analysis of the 2016 Election*

Qualitative analysis of the 2016 coverage shows the ‘political’ conversation about presidential candidates continued to focus on personality rather than policy or even broader ideology, and as in 2012, candidate’s deep religious faith had little positive impact on the coverage that candidate received. At the same time, this research found significant differences in the political context of the 2016 election coverage, particularly a heightened concern about the threat of Islamic fundamentalist terrorism by ISIS emphasized by the Trump campaign. Again, as in 2012, while the three papers covered comparable content using similar frames, the emphasis and tone of the coverage varied among the papers.

#### *Section 5: Coverage of Islam in the 2016 Election*

Increased attention to Islam in the 2016 campaign grew out of an evolution of public concerns about ISIS since 2012 and specifically by the December 2015 shooting that killed 14 people in San Bernardino, California, as well as the June 2016 shooting that killed 49 people in a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida (Glenn et al., 2016). Trump responded to the December attack with a call for “total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering” the United States (Taylor, 2015). Along with intense disapproval at the denigration of an entire faith group, Trump’s

proposal generated bi-partisan debate in the early months of 2016 about how to respond to the ISIS threat and more broadly how to view and refer to Islam in order fulfill the U.S.

Constitution's commitment to religious liberty without neglecting legitimate security issues.

#### Subsection 1: *The New York Times* Coverage

Even before the ISIS-motivated domestic terror attack in San Bernardino in December, most Republican candidates had expressed some form of anti-Muslim sentiment as they launched their presidential campaigns. They were responding to recent polls that showed negative views of Muslims had increased by about 18 percent since 2001 and demonstrating how far their party had shifted from the perspective that President George W. Bush promoted in the wake of the 9/11 attacks (Hashan, 2015). Standing with imams and other Islamic community leaders at his side less than a week after the attacks, Bush told the American public, "The face of terror is not the true faith of Islam. Islam is peace." In the months that followed, he often said. "Our war is against evil, not against Islam" (Hashan, 2015, Haberman and Eder, 2015).

Even New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie who had previously pushed back against what he called "anti-Muslim 'crazies' and their 'crap' about Shariah law" (Goldberg, 2011), failed to speak out against Trump's calls to monitor Muslims (Burns, 2015). Others followed the lead of Trump who repeated his unsubstantiated claim that "thousands and thousands" of Muslims in Jersey City celebrated the fall of the Twin Towers" and promised he "would certainly implement' a federal database to register America's estimated three million-plus Muslims. Trump also asserted he would not rule out asking Muslim-Americans to carry a special form of ID noting their faith. Former neurosurgeon Carson compared Syrian refugees to "rabid dogs" and said no Muslim should be "allowed to run for president because Islam was 'inconsistent' with the Constitution. Former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush said, "he would prefer to give asylum to Christian,

rather than Muslim, refugees;” Rubio of Florida, said “he’d close not only mosques, but Muslim cafes and diners, too” (Hasan, 2015).

Senator Rand Paul of Kentucky called for “heightened scrutiny of Muslim immigrants” (Hashan, 2015); Cruz identified Shariah law as “an enormous problem” (Hashan, 2015); in the United States; the former governor of Arkansas Mike Huckabee called Islam “a religion that promotes the most murderous mayhem on the planet,” (Hashan, 2015); and Kasich “has proposed a federal agency to spread ‘Judeo-Christian Western values’” (Hashan, 2015).

Following the December attack, Trump converted his calls for Muslim registration and identification into a statement “calling for a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States until our country’s representatives can figure out what the hell is going on” (Martin, 2015). Reactions emerged from elected officials on both sides of the aisle and from voters, seeming to verify Trump’s political instinct, as the discussion of Islam as a campaign issue maintained a presence throughout the election year (Harris, 2016).

Even among his rivals who had echoed Trump’s anti-Muslim sentiments earlier in the year, Trump’s ban idea spurred swift, critical responses. Bush called Trump “unhinged”; Rubio called the ban “offensive and outlandish”; and Kasich described the policy statement as “more of the outrageous divisiveness that characterizes his every breath and another reason why he is entirely unsuited to lead the United States” (Rappeport, 2015b). Carson supported the idea of registering and monitoring every visitor who entered the country but objected to “being selective on one’s religion” (Healy and Barbaro, 2015).

Meanwhile, Cruz, who at the time had overtaken Trump in Iowa offered a more measured response, saying simply, “Well, that, that is not my policy,” and went on to explain that he had called for a moratorium on refugees from countries where the Islamic State or Al Qaeda control

significant territory (Rappeport, 2015b). In a speech to his supporters, Cruz suggested that his “gingerly” and “restrained” response to Trump was rooted in a strategy that saw Trump “bending the race in Mr. Cruz’s direction” by taking a “machete through the brush for Mr. Cruz, allowing him to rise quietly despite his own reputation for bombast, while Mr. Trump absorbs the scrutiny a front-runner attracts and eventually peters out” (Flegenheimer and Martin, 2016).

The message from the Democratic side was completely different. President Obama dismissed the idea of a Muslim ban, saying, “Americans do not want to start treating Muslim-Americans differently based on their religion” (Nelson, 2016). Clinton called the idea “reprehensible, prejudiced and divisive,” and publicly questioned what it would “mean for a nation founded on religious freedom” to ban Muslims from entering the country because of their faith (Healy and Barbaro, 2015, Chozick, 2016). The Clinton campaign attempted to capitalize on the negative impact of Trump’s “serial disparagements of Muslims, Mexicans, immigrants, disabled people, African-American protesters, and women, with a campaign ad entitled “Love and Kindness.” The ad showed Clinton embracing individuals of varied ethnic backgrounds and sought to position Clinton as the candidate living out and leading with religion’s principle of love (Freedman, 2016b).

Campaign organizers also took aim at Trump’s demonizing of Muslims as a political vulnerability by inviting Muslim American Khizr Khan to speak at the Democratic National Convention. Khan, whose son joined the Army after 9/11 and was killed in Iraq, challenged Trump on behalf of “patriotic American Muslims” everywhere. “You have sacrificed nothing,” Khan said, his wife standing silently beside him, “and no one.” Organizers hoped to drive a sort



of dare, essentially asking, “Are these people not American enough for you, Mr. Trump?” (Healy and Chozick, 2016).

While politicians from both parties expressed disapproval for the idea of a Muslim ban, polls showed that many voters were not appalled by the idea. A Public Religion Research Institute poll conducted before the San Bernardino attack showed that 56 percent of Americans agreed that “the values of Islam are at odds with American values.” A later YouGov poll showed that “58 percent of Americans viewed Islam unfavorably, just 17 percent viewed it favorably” (Douthat, 2015).

As its reporters covered the news of Trump’s call for a Muslim ban and the reaction of politicians and voters, *New York Times* columnists considered what the debate was revealing about the true state of religious freedom in American society and culture. Pondering how devout Muslims should understand their place in America, columnist Ross Douthat reflected on the fact that all ancient faiths have struggled to reconcile themselves to modern life, having to navigate the poles of separatism and dissolution as they seek both to live faithfully and prove themselves to be compatible with democracy. Douthat concluded that Evangelicalism and Mormonism offer the best models for Islam to follow, saying:

In [the] landscape of options, the clearest model for Islam's transition to modernity might lie in American evangelicalism -- like Islam a missionary faith, like Islam decentralized and intensely scripture-oriented, and like Islam a tradition that often assumes an organic link between the theological and political.

Of course, American evangelicals are often particularly hostile to Islam -- as they are to Mormonism, which also offers an interesting model for modernizing Muslims.

But this is less an irony than a form of recognition: An Islam that set aside the sword without abandoning its fervor would be working in the same mission

territory, Western and global, where Evangelicals and Mormons presently compete and clash (Douthat, 2015).

In a more politically focused column, Nicholas Confessore notes that Trump's "proposed ban on Muslim immigration appeared to do nothing but help at the polls, even as rivals objected with varying degrees of outrage." Confessore acknowledges that Trump has connected with people who may legitimately feel their grievances have gone unheard in recent decades, but warns that at the same time, "Trump has also opened the door to assertions of white identity and resentment in a way not seen so broadly in American culture in over half a century, according to those who track patterns of racial tension and antagonism in American life" (Confessore, 2015).

The *New York Times* editorial board described the force that feeds and propels Trump as "bigger than he is, and toxic." The editorial also warned that even though no votes had been cast yet, Trump had already done damage to the country by "twisting America's message of tolerance and welcome," and "playing the politics of nativism and fear." Charging that "the racism behind the agenda of the right wing on immigrants and foreigners has long been plain as day," the editorial asserted that Trump's remarks made the rejection of his candidacy if he won the nomination the only option (NYT Editorial Board, 2015).

#### Subsection 2: *The Wall Street Journal* Coverage

As in *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* coverage of the Muslim ban focused on the reactions of elected officials and voters, but *The Wall Street Journal* coverage included a political assessment of the strategic value or damage of the move, which was not present in *The New York Times*.

*The Wall Street Journal* coverage added the voices of House Speaker Paul Ryan, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, Republican senators Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, and Jeff Flake of Arizona to the condemnation of the Trump proposal to ban Muslims. McConnell

said a ban would be “completely inconsistent with American values.” Ryan went further saying, “What was proposed yesterday is not what this party stands for, and more important, it’s not what this country stands for. Not only are there many Muslims serving in our armed forces dying for this country, there are Muslims serving right here in the House working everyday day to uphold and defend the Constitution.” Graham charged that Trump “had gone from making absurd comments to being downright dangerous with his bombastic rhetoric” (Epstein, 2016), and Flake turned to a more pragmatic assessment of Trump’s policy. Flake warned that the “party’s chances next November would be doomed if GOP presidential candidates don’t condemn Mr. Trump for his comments about immigrants, Muslims, and other minorities. It’s an electoral disaster waiting to happen,” he said (Epstein and Nicholas, 2015).

*The Wall Street Journal* coverage included interviews with Republican voters that confirmed and helped explain polls that showed Trump's ban proposal did not trouble those voters. For example, Trump supporter, Al Baldasaro of New Hampshire, said that establishment Republicans “don’t like Trump because he tells it like it is. I am not prejudiced against Muslims, but until we can straighten them out and know who’s who and who is coming into our country, we have to stop immigration” (Epstein, 2015). This demonstrates that there was (limited) discussion in the paper about both the subtler points of religious ideology and the dangers of religious-based hatred.

*The Wall Street Journal* coverage also reported on the differences between Clinton and Trump in their views of Islam and its relationship to terrorism. They reported that Clinton believed that the “current wave of violent extremism represents a perversion of Islam” and that “the overwhelming majority of Muslims here and abroad are ‘peaceful people’ who reject this ideology” (Galston, 2016). Meanwhile, they wrote that Trump “believes that what he calls

radical Islamic terrorism is an intensification of Islam rather than a distortion of it” and “that Islam is more likely than other faiths to encourage violence among its adherents” (Galston, 2016).

The rest of the coverage of the Islam ban considered the political impact of Trump’s proposal with the first column on the issue calling it “a political masterstroke, in large part because of the overwrought reactions it has prompted from Democrats, Republicans and the media alike” (Taranto, 2015). Another column commended Trump’s “lack of political correctness in a dangerous world,” calling it an improvement over Obama talking down to the American people about intolerance even though Trump’s policy may have been “too seat-of-the-pants” and in need of toughening up (McGurn, 2015).

Within the Republican party, some stood with Trump and some against on the Muslim ban, but there were also divisions among people who opposed the ban. Some of those against the ban feared that if the party raised concerns too aggressively, Trump would leave the party, run as an independent, and assure a Democratic win. Steve Schleffer, Republican National Committeeman and head of Iowa Faith and Freedom Coalition said that growing anxiety about Obama’s response to attacks in Paris and San Bernardino was pushing voters toward Trump. Such concerns made the Muslim proposal more acceptable (Epstein, 2015).

#### Section 6: Coverage of Faith in the Democratic Party

Although limited in comparison to the amount of coverage Republican candidates’ faith received as they pursued the Evangelical vote, *The New York Times* coverage captured a sense that Clinton’s faith held a meaningful place in her life and in her campaign. *The Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today* showed less interest in reporting on Clinton’s discussion of her faith but did include some mentions in their coverage. *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*

coverage also included news analysis pieces that reflected on the presence of religious faith in the Democratic Party and added interesting dimensions to the public debate on the nature and role of religion in American politics.

#### Subsection 1: *The New York Times* Coverage of Hillary Clinton

In multiple campaign appearances in January, Clinton surprised audiences by speaking apparently spontaneously about her faith. In Indianola, Iowa, Clinton told a rally audience that the teachings of John Wesley, a founder of the Methodist religion, had inspired her to seek the presidency and had given her the strength to keep getting up in the face of life's many setbacks. At Mount Zion Baptist Church in Cedar Rapids, she talked about "the core of Christ's message," and in Knoxville, Tennessee, Clinton responded to a question about her religious outlook directly and extensively, saying, "I am a person of faith. I am a Christian. I am a Methodist. My study of the Bible, my many conversations with people of faith, has led me to believe the most important commandment is to love your neighbor as yourself, and that is what I think we are commanded by Christ to do" (Chozick, 2016e).

Although Clinton's early openness about her faith registered as a newsworthy departure from her approach in previous campaigns, the topic only re-appeared in the campaign coverage in June in response to Trump's assertion to a group of Evangelicals in New York that "[W]e don't know anything about Hillary in terms of religion. Now, she's been in the public eye for years, and yet there's no—there's nothing out there." The Clinton campaign responded with a statement from Deborah Fikes, who had been executive advisor to the World Evangelical Alliance, that said Clinton was "known as Sister Hillary by organizations she worked with" and "is embraced by many Evangelical sister churches as a trustworthy and respected political leader because she lives the Golden Rule in her private life and in her public policies" (Corrales, 2016).

The article also repeated the coverage from the January coverage of her discussions of her faith in Iowa and Tennessee with the added note that “her support of Planned Parenthood and of abortion rights, however, clashes with the views of many socially conservative Christians.” (Corrales, 2016). Additional reporting noted that Clinton told an audience in Raleigh, N.C., that Trump was trying “to distract voters from his lack of substance or policy depth. That’s even why he’s attacking my faith,” she said. “Sigh” (Haberman, 2016).

In July, convention coverage mentioned Clinton’s faith in its largely positive review of her acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention, saying she “radiated confidence, from her pungent delivery and easy laugh to the unusually expressive ways she shifted her tone and delighted in her own best lines.” The article went on to characterize her reference to faith as part of her effort to let the audience get to know her better, saying, “And after 25 years in a sometimes-brutal national spotlight, Mrs. Clinton tried to explain who she is and what drives her – from her Methodist faith to her passion for government policy that could mean all the difference for people” (Healy and Chozick, 2016).

In August, attention turned to the new campaign ad noted above as a response to Trump’s maligning of multiple populations. Entitled “Love and Kindness,” the ad also sought “to soften the perception that she was untrustworthy and unlikable,” with images of Clinton in a series of warm embraces playing as background music referenced a cappella gospel, and text ran across the bottom of the screen repeating the words of Methodist Church founder John Wesley that Clinton included on her campaign website and quoted often.<sup>12</sup> Media analysts recognized that the campaign was thus attempting to create a “kinder and gentler” perception of the candidate by

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<sup>12</sup> “Do all the good we can, in all the ways we can, for all the people we can...let’s support each other” (Freedman, 2016b).

incorporating a sense of Clinton's faith with the idea that the values of "hope, kindness, and love" had a central place in American politics (Freedman, 2016b).

Clinton's ad also represented movement of the Democratic party into new territory by incorporating explicit God language into the campaign. Freedman described the ad as giving "voice to the religious principle of love -- an explicitly Christian concept that is espoused by most monotheistic faiths -- as the root of liberal policies" (2016b) He also argued that the ad and all the "spiritual language that has been a part" of Clinton's campaign represented a "shift from the rhetorical norms of the last 40 years"(2016b) in the way Democrats talked about religion in presidential elections (Freedman, 2016b).

In September, Clinton continued to incorporate spiritual values and even religious practice in her message as she told the National Baptist Convention in Kansas City that the nation needed a president who would "pray with you and pray for you." She continued, "Our greatest leaders are often the most humble because they recognize both the awesome responsibilities of power and the frailty of human action" (Chozick, 2016e). Also in September, the coverage characterized Clinton's performance in the final debate with as "at ease" as she presented herself as both a "faith-driven public servant" and a shrewd politician adept at the "maneuvering required to become the first woman to capture the Democratic nomination for president" (Chozick, 2106b). Throughout the final days of the campaign, Clinton sought to maintain a "more positive message through high-minded speeches about Mrs. Clinton's faith, career, and public service aims," but she continued to see Trump gain on her in the polls. While *The New York Times* news coverage showed that Clinton's faith maintained a presence in her campaign message without devoting extensive coverage to the subject, the paper also published

multiple columns in the final months of the election that explored what Clinton's faith showed about the relationship between religious faith and the Democratic Party.

In the final weeks before the election, Molly Worthen, professor of North American religious and intellectual history, asserted that "religion helps explain why Mrs. Clinton has struggled to unite the Democratic base" because the religious revival, which she argued is ongoing in the Democratic party, "is divided against itself now as it was in the civil rights movement" (Worthen, 2016). She explained further:

This revival's more moderate leaders can't corral the young radicals who want revolution and who reject not just the Democratic nominee, but the basic assumptions of modern politics. The clash goes deeper than policy or strategy. It is a theological rift: Is religion founded in submission to unchanging principles or is it a protean revolutionary force, a tool of self-empowerment?" (Worthen, 2016).

#### Subsection 2: *The Wall Street Journal* Coverage

Reference to Clinton's faith did not appear in *The Wall Street Journal* campaign coverage until June when Trump questioned Clinton's faith before a group of New York Evangelicals. The exchange was limited to one paragraph in the middle of a 15-paragraph story. It followed several other examples of Trump's attacks on Clinton, such as "[H]er policies destabilized the Middle East," and "Hillary Clinton has perfected the politics of personal profit and even theft" (Reinhard and Nicholas, 2016). *The Wall Street Journal's* attention to Trump's attack on Clinton's faith and her response was limited to the following:

Mrs. Clinton included several references to her Methodist faith in her speech, a day after Mr. Trump told a group of social conservatives that "we don't know anything about anything about Hillary in terms of religion." "All he can do is try to distract us. That's even why he's attacking my faith," she said (Reinhard and Nicholas, 2016).

Thus, even though Clinton crafted distinct and constant messages about her faith, the most visible coverage of her faith appeared only in response to baseless attacks by Trump,



underlining what Patterson (2016) found in his study of the 2016 coverage as driven by Trump's personality rather than Clinton's professional campaigning (Patterson, 2016).

Describing Clinton's campaign as "heavy on attacks against Donald Trump," *The Wall Street Journal* covered Clinton's speech to the National Baptist Convention in Kansas City, as part of an effort to "telegraph a message" and one of a "series of speeches aimed at defining her vision for the presidency." Again, attention to Clinton's faith was limited to one paragraph - this time three paragraphs into a 17-paragraph story. The coverage noted that "On Thursday, the Democratic nominee spoke about faith at the National Convention, quoting her as follows, "Today, for a few minutes, I want to leave aside the politics and do something that doesn't always come naturally to a Midwestern Methodist. That is to talk about my own faith, how it led to a life of service, and how it will guide me as president" (Meckler et al., 2021).

Despite its relative inattention to Clinton's faith throughout the campaign, in September, *The Wall Street Journal* published a column by former *Newsweek* religion editor Kenneth Woodward, in which he detailed his Methodist upbringing and discussed the Methodist Church's long extensive, and distinctive history with the U.S. government. Woodward also assessed the place of religion in the 2016 election. He characterized Clinton's status among religious candidates and argued that the Democrats were the "more religious political party" (Woodward, 2016). As he put it:

Although religion is not an issue in this year's presidential election, Hillary Clinton is by far the more religious candidate. What's more hers is the more religious political party – even though atheists, agnostics, and other religiously nonaffiliated Americans (the "Nones") now represent the largest bloc, replacing African Americans, within the Democratic Party. To understand this seeming paradox, we first have to recognize that since its transformation in 1972 under Methodist politician, George McGovern, the Democratic Party has advanced a righteous politics that mirrors the political righteousness of the United Methodist Church...

Methodists have been zealous monitors of America. Morals since the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when, as historian Nathan O. Hatch has written, Methodist operated “the most extensive national institution other than the federal government...

In sum, many of today’s Nones have retained the Methodists’ ethos of righteous politics while jettisoning the beliefs, behavior and belonging that made righteous Methodist Methodists in the first place. Many Jews and Roman Catholics can and do find in progressive Democratic politics aspects of their own social-justice traditions.

But the emergence of Nones shows us that anyone can think and act like righteous Methodists just by being a liberal Democrat (Woodward, 2016).

### Subsection 3: *USA Today* Coverage of Hillary Clinton

In its only coverage of Clinton’s faith, *USA Today* reported on the Democratic National Convention and characterized the discussion of her faith convention speeches as an effort “to raise public trust following Trump's attacks and release of hacked [Democratic National] Committee emails showing the party favored Clinton over Bernie Sanders” (Przybyla, 2016b). Further, it quoted Melanne Verveer, Clinton's former chief of staff, who remained a close confidante. Verveer said that Clinton’s Methodist faith was “very significant” and talked about an “influential youth minister who encouraged her to focus on the underserved, including arranging for her to babysit the children of migrant workers while they picked vegetables.” Verveer also explained that “learning about her mother's mistreatment as an orphan was formative” for Clinton. “Out of that has sprung some, if not much of, Hillary's commitment to children and what they are owed and deserved” Verveer said (Przybyla, 2016b).

Coverage of Clinton’s acceptance speech briefly mentioned her reference to faith as part of a story that discussed Chelsea Clinton’s speech as well, saying: “She also stressed the importance of her Methodist faith, as well as her early work going door-to-door on behalf of

children with disabilities in Massachusetts. No one gets through life alone. We have to look out for each other and lift each other up" (Przybyla, 2016a).

### Section 7: Coverage of Candidate Faith in Republican Primaries

As in 2012, discussions of Republican candidates' faith appeared most often in campaign coverage during the 2016 primaries as candidates competed for the Evangelical vote. The tone of coverage in 2016, though, is noticeably different from the tone of coverage in 2012. In 2012, candidates competed with each presenting themselves as the best option, but the flow of the coverage made it seem almost as if candidates emerged sequentially to take their turn to try to win over Evangelical voters and replace Romney as the front runner. The 2016 coverage showed the candidates attacking each other more in general and each other's faith in particular, attempting to grab the focus and momentum as they fought for the Evangelical voter. Extensive coverage of the candidate's exchanges in *The New York Times* showed distinctive approaches among campaigns as they sought to appeal to Evangelical voters. The *Wall Street Journal* coverage was limited, focusing primarily on the Cruz campaign, and *USA Today* included no news coverage focused on the faith of Republican candidates, likely reflecting the overall reduction of coverage in the paper as opposed to any major shift in perspective. Reading the 2016 coverage of faith – especially in the Trump campaign coverage-- in the Republican primaries in *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* felt like watching a broadcast in which the camera was jerking back and forth because the operator couldn't determine where to focus in order to capture the most important action. Arguably, that sense of chaos reflected the disbelief and deep anxieties of party and political leaders over the possibility of nominating and eventually electing Trump. It also reflects that Trump had discovered a new and more powerful playbook that broke the norms on traditional campaign messaging and rules. Meanwhile,

coverage of Evangelical voters offers explanations that help illuminate why and how the election proceeded as it did.

Subsection 1: *The New York Times* Coverage

*The New York Times* coverage of Republican primaries showed Carson and senators Rubio and Cruz as the candidates who most intentionally incorporated their religious faith into their campaign messages although approaches varied noticeably among the candidates. Meanwhile, the coverage of Trump showed that he was determined to win the Evangelical vote although his expressions of faith and attempts to connect with audiences based on faith were limited and arguably the least effective aspects of his campaign.

Subsection 2: *The New York Times* Coverage of Ben Carson

Carson enjoyed early support from Evangelical voters based on his personal story of emerging from a single-parent home to become a world-renowned neurosurgeon. Carson spoke frequently of his Seventh Day Adventist faith, describing it as central and foundational to his life. Carson's appeal faded, however, when the scrutiny that generally accompanies presidential campaigns led to questions about inconsistencies in various retelling of stories from Carson's past. Most prominently, details of when it happened and exactly who did what shifted around in the story about an angry young Carson being saved by a belt buckle from killing a friend by stabbing him in the abdomen. While the discrepancies never rose to the level of fully disputing Carson's story, they undermined his standing as a candidate of faith and high character. They also opened him up to mocking and attacks from other candidates as well as from the broader culture. (Eder, 2015, Haberman and Healy, 2016). Carson responded to the resulting setback in his support among Evangelicals by scheduling an "Evangelical Rollout" in South Carolina, where "a number of pastors [would] announce their endorsement for the campaign." He also

announced the addition of a “special faith advisor” to his team with the hiring of Johnnie Moore, an author, Fox News contributor, and former campus pastor at Liberty University. Moore advised “the campaign on its outreach to Christian voters across the country” (Corrales, 2015). Despite his efforts, Carson’s support declined steadily from its high point in November 2015 of 32 percent among Evangelical voters, and Carson left the presidential race on March 4, 2016 (Corrales, 2015). As he left the race, Carson issued a statement that re-asserted faith as his primary reason for running and suggested that religious voters could play a significant role in the 2016 election as follows:

Nothing is more important to me than my personal faith, and it is my faith that motivated me to be involved in the political process to begin with. I believe Christians in this country can easily determine the next president of the United States and all other national and local leaders, should they simply show up at the polls (Rappeport et al., 2016).

### Subsection 3: *The New York Times* Coverage of Marco Rubio

As the campaign began to gear up, political analysts expected a competitive battle between Rubio and Cruz for the Evangelical vote and, thus, for the Republican nomination. Projections overestimated Rubio’s staying power in part because even though he talked comfortably about his faith, Evangelical voters expressed discomfort with his position on same-sex marriage. Characterized as “going out of his way to extol his own faith,” Rubio spoke openly with religious leaders in Iowa “about his relationship with Jesus. He described what he had learned from studying the Bible, especially the Apostle Peter, and spoke of the importance of self-sacrifice as illustrated in the story of Abraham” (Flegenheimer and Kaplan, 2015). But Rubio could not fully convince his audience that they could trust him to hear their concerns and represent their values. Des Moines pastor Mike Demastus explained that his concern came from the fact that Rubio accepted support from New York financier Paul Singer, a high-profile

contributor to efforts to legalize same-sex marriage. As Demastus put it, “These guys give some money, and they expect something in return,” the pastor, Mike Demastus, said later in an interview. “If Rubio is in the Oval Office, Mike Demastus could not call and get through. But Paul Singer could. That's what I know” (Peters, 2015). Rubio ended up third in the Iowa Caucuses and second in the South Carolina primary, but he could not generate the support he needed to compete going forward so he dropped out of the race on March 15 (Flegenheimer and Kaplan, 2015).

#### Subsection 4: *The New York Times* Coverage of Ted Cruz

Compared to Carson and Rubio, Cruz was significantly more organized and systematic in his approach to competing for the Evangelical vote, and the faith-related coverage his campaign received was more extensive. Looking back to a speech Cruz’s father gave at Liberty University in 2013, coverage suggests that Cruz actively began his cultivation of the Evangelical vote well before he gave his own speech at Liberty to officially launch his 2016 presidential campaign. On Nov. 13, 2013, Rafael Cruz, a pastor, and the father of Ted Cruz, compared then-President Obama’s Washington to Fidel Castro’s Havana and told the audience, “God is saying to you: “Vote for righteous people” (Draper, 2016).

Sixteen months later, on March 23, 2015, Ted Cruz took the stage to become the first candidate to launch a presidential campaign at the university. *The New York Times*’ coverage of the event suggests that Cruz might have been referencing and expounding on his father’s exhortation with the words: “Today, roughly half of born-again Christians aren't voting. They're staying home. Imagine instead millions of people of faith all across America coming out to the polls and voting our values” (Draper, 2016). While no such connection was confirmed, the Cruz campaign acknowledged that it chose Liberty as its campaign launch site as part of a careful

calculus as they recognized that of the 22 states casting primary votes between February 1 and March 5, 2016, 11 had a Republican electorate that was at least 50 percent Evangelical. In Iowa alone, 60 percent of Republican caucus goers identified as Evangelical. The Cruz campaign discovered, however, that “voters were largely unaware of the Tea Party firebrand’s religious faith” (Draper, 2016). Cruz knew that persuading the Evangelical “voting bloc to coalesce around him” essentially would be key to his ability to compete for the nomination, and he told them they should choose him because he was one of the “righteous people” his father had talked about. He also knew he would have to convince voters he was the best option from a field that included multiple people whose faith was part of their identity and appeal, including Carson and Rubio (Draper, 2016).

Cruz’s efforts proved successful in his ability to win the endorsement of national Evangelical leader Dobson and in the Iowa Caucus results, which gave Cruz 27.6 percent of the vote while Trump received 24.3 percent, and Rubio received 23.1 percent. At the same time, by setting himself as a candidate whose righteousness should motivate Evangelical voters to choose him, he may also have inspired tougher coverage of some of his campaign gaffes. In his first attempt to keep a misstep from undermining his carefully constructed connection to Evangelicals, Cruz chose the conservative Christian Bob Jones University as the place where he would take questions about his campaign’s hiring of a porn star for an attack on Rubio’s immigration policies. Describing Cruz as “coy” in his response, the coverage quoted him saying, “It happened that one of the actresses had a more colorful film history than we were aware.” The campaign had already pulled the ad, and Cruz moved on to a rally on campus where he sought to remind his audience that he had a record of supporting their interests and values. He reminded them of an earlier rally he had attended there to celebrate “religious liberty,” and he warned,

“[W]e get this election wrong, and our constitutional rights will be lost for a generation” (Flegenheimer, 2016).

In another gaffe that ran counter to Cruz’s righteous image, Cruz had to fire his campaign communications director for posting to social media a video suggesting that Rubio had “belittled the Bible.” Cruz told reporters “[E]ven if it was true, we are not a campaign that is going to question the faith of another candidate.” Coverage of Cruz’s response went on to recall comments Cruz supporters had made the previous month in Iowa that “mocked and dismissed Donald Trump’s professed Christianity” (Bruni, 2016). Three days after Cruz addressed the Rubio incident, Cruz came in third in the South Carolina primary with 22.3 percent of the vote. Trump won with 32.3 percent, and Rubio came in second with 22.3 percent (Martin and Burns, 2016).

Cruz continued to campaign aggressively on “conservative purity” and “religious faith” even into New York, New England, and other parts of the country where his message “could be a difficult fit” (Bruni, 2016). Unable to overcome Trump’s lead, Cruz left the race on May 3, 2016 (Bruni, 2016).

#### Subsection 5: *The New York Times* Coverage of Donald Trump

From the start of his campaign, Trump enjoyed solid support from Evangelical voters and, like Cruz, Rubio, and Carson, sought to maintain and improve his position with that voting bloc. Coverage of Trump’s campaign shows that, unlike his competitors, Trump’s efforts to win those voters had less to do with Trump trying to convince anyone of his faithfulness and more to do with his seeking endorsements of religious leaders and discrediting the faith of others.

Coverage in late 2015 showed that Trump faced criticism for stoking racial tension by suggesting that a Black Lives Matter activist who was beaten at a Trump rally may have



deserved it. Trying to address his need to appeal to African Americans and Evangelicals, Trump scheduled a news conference with a group of African American pastors, where, Trump claimed, the group would endorse him. The group replied that although they were willing to listen to him, they were not ready to endorse him. Trump canceled the news conference and held a private meeting instead after which he called an impromptu news conference, where none of the pastors offered a formal endorsement (Rappeport, 2015a).

Such a public misstep, given the complaints of racism directed at him, might have led a more conventional candidate to proceed carefully with any actions or comments that might risk any appearance of racism. Instead, Trump soon jumped in without hesitation to mock and insult Carson, the only African American in the field, when he faced questions about the veracity of some details in his memoir. First, Trump “compared Carson to a ‘child molester’ in a nationally televised interview” (Haberman and Healy, 2016). Then at a rally in Iowa, Trump “asked for someone to come try to stab him in the abdomen, twisting his own belt buckle as if to prove that Carson's account of having knifed a friend, as a wild-tempered youth, had to have been a lie” (Haberman and Healy, 2016). Trump also insulted a portion of the Iowa electorate by saying voters “would be ‘stupid’ to believe in Carson” (Haberman and Healy, 2016). Further, Trump repeatedly questioned the legitimacy of Carson’s Seventh Day Adventist faith. In Iowa, Trump asked in a public setting whether the state’s voters “could see themselves supporting” Carson because of his faith. In Florida, Trump offered himself as the more acceptable person of faith: “I’m Presbyterian. Boy, that's down the middle of the road, folks, in all fairness” ... “I mean, Seventh-day Adventist, I don't know about” (Rappeport, 2015c).

Although he had insulted Iowa voters and “only sporadically employed” the “shows of faith” considered “basic parts of the job of running for president” in a state where candidate faith

was of particular importance, Trump never counted himself out of winning the caucuses. Backstage at a rally the day before the caucuses, he said, “It's crunch time, folks. I mean, I want to win Iowa. I really want to win it” (Haberman, 2016).

Trump’s determined effort yielded second place for him in Iowa, but perhaps more importantly for the long-term success of the campaign, he won former vice-presidential candidate and Tea Party icon Sarah Palin’s endorsement, which some conservatives said would serve “as a particularly effective shield against Cruz” and his well-developed campaign for Evangelical voters. Reed, the chairman of the Faith and Freedom Coalition explained the value of the Palin endorsement as follows: “Palin's brand among Evangelicals is as gold as the faucets in Trump Tower. Endorsements alone don't guarantee victory, but Palin's embrace of Trump may turn the fight over the evangelical vote into a war for the soul of the party” (Rappeport and Haberman, 2016).

Trump also received the endorsement of Jerry Falwell, Jr., then-president of Liberty University and son of the founder of the Moral Majority, in January after Trump spoke at the university. The fact that Trump was on his third marriage and inclined to boast about sexual conquests made Trump an unlikely match for Evangelicals, prompting some Liberty students to object publicly to the invitation for Trump to speak (Corosanti, 2016a). In addition, Trump’s speech at Liberty further confounded observers who thought Evangelical voters were seeking a candidate who shared their faith. Trump demonstrated a remarkable lack of knowledge of the Bible – or perhaps an insulting lack of preparation -- when he talked about “Two Corinthians,” when referring to a New Testament book that is called “Second Corinthians” by people “with

any biblical fluency.” Instead of yielding a backlash from Evangelicals, Trump left Liberty with Falwell’s endorsement (Bruni, 2016).

Further demonstrating his indifference to political and cultural norms as well as his willingness to defy conventions for political gain, Trump responded to criticism he received from Pope Francis about his immigration policy by attacking the Pope. The Pope *had* said that Trump was “not Christian” because he proposed deportations and a wall with Mexico. Instead of seeing any value in a response that respected the Pope’s position even if he disagreed, Trump shot back that Francis’ criticisms were “disgraceful,” “unbelievable,” and the result of the Mexican government having “hoodwinked the pope into criticizing” Trump (Healy, 2016). While Trump saw the move as “a way to galvanize Republicans who worry about border security and appeal to evangelical voters who regard Francis as too liberal,” the exchange generated mixed reactions between members of the Republican party and several South Carolina political analysts (Healy, 2016). Reflecting many in the Republican Party, who thought taking on Pope Francis could only hurt Trump, Edward Rollins, a former political adviser to President Ronald Reagan and other Republicans, said, “Trump can take on former presidents, governors, senators, fellow candidates, and the media, but I think he should just take a pass on arguing with the pope on what makes a better Christian. It’s a fight Trump can’t win. And shouldn’t try” (Healy, 2016).

Arguing that the attack on the Pope wouldn’t hurt Trump, Scott H. Huffmon, a professor of political science at Winthrop University in South Carolina, said, “A lot of Southern evangelicals have looked hard at Trump and said, ‘I wish he wasn’t potty-mouthed, I wish he wasn’t thrice-married, but I believe he is going to fight for my Christian way of life,’ and having

a strong fighter is important. And the kind of people who like the pope for some of his social views aren't likely to be Trump voters anyway” (Healy, 2016).

Despite the volatility and controversy that characterized Trump’s campaign, reporting from as early as January 2016 showed that Evangelical voters did not share the discomfort Republican Party leaders persistently expressed about Trump. Polls and interviews expressed a level of openness to and support for Trump among the people who would ultimately decide the election – the voters. A *New York Times*/CBS poll showed Trump dominated the primary field with 42 percent of the Evangelical vote, and Cruz was second with 25 percent. Buford Arning, a retired building supply executive in Statesville, N.C., explained that while he seeks to live “a faith-filled life,” “he does not demand piety of his preferred presidential candidate, Donald J. Trump.” Arning said he saw Trump as “a Christian man,” and while “Trump may not be as spiritually minded as former Gov. Mike Huckabee of Arkansas, who was a Southern Baptist preacher, Trump’s “values are very much the same” (Haberman and Kaplan, 2016). Arning also pushed aside the facts that Trump had been married three times and was “fond of swearing from the stage at rallies by saying, ‘his personal life is saintlike compared to Bill Clinton’s”” (Haberman and Kaplan, 2016).

Interviews with Evangelicals from 16 states in several regions outside the Northeast found that Trump supporters felt they could trust him and that he expressed what they were feeling. Explanations of how they could support him despite his lifestyle, included such comments as, “his heart [is] in the right place,” “his intentions for the country [are] pure,” “he alone [is] capable of delivering to a troubled country salvation in the here and now” (Haberman and Kaplan, 2016). The coverage went on as detailed in the next paragraph below to show that Evangelical voters were warming to Trump and finding ways to justify his often-unsettling

words as well as his apparent lack of any spiritual interest or commitment. Although these attitudes were gaining ground among voters, religion-related coverage of the election spent little time or space acknowledging this reality and incorporating it into election analysis.

Some interviewees saw Trump as “a decent man who simply wanted to get things done” and that mattered more than what he believed. For example, “Charles E. Henderson, 61, a disabled veteran from Lexington, Ky., who grew up attending a Nazarene church, said “Spirituality is a big issue, but we need somebody who's strong. Lots of times the preachers and everything, they have a tendency to be just a little bit weak.” Craig Wright, 69, from Goldthwaite, Tex., said Trump could be trusted because he did not “deny God’s existence. None of us know if there really is a God, you just hope there is. If he was an avowed atheist, then I would know he was crazy” (Haberman and Kaplan, 2016).

Other interviewees also expressed wariness of Trump, as did Deryck Mullady, a 34-year-old from Cincinnati, who said Trump had said things that were “totally against what Jesus taught and what we read in the Bible.” Likewise, 83-year-old retired nurse Margaret Chapman from Sierra Vista, Arizona, said “Just from his past life, he didn't seem very godly. I can't see that he has really changed, but maybe he has” (Haberman and Kaplan, 2016).

Even given the concerns raised in some interviews, the voices of Evangelical voters make it clear that Trump was winning over people with something other than the standard campaign approach of convincing voters that he shared their faith in a traditional way. From the early weeks of the primary season, some Evangelical voters were viewing Trump in ways that were different from how Trump was viewed by the leaders of the party and political observers, who

considered Trump an unacceptable candidate who likely would not survive the campaign season (Haberman and Kaplan, 2016).

#### Subsection 1: *The Wall Street Journal* Coverage

*The Wall Street Journal's* coverage of candidate faith in the 2016 Republican primaries focused primarily on the Cruz campaign, with limited coverage of Carson, Kasich, Rubio, and even Trump although he was referenced as the front runner. The faith-based coverage of Rubio and Trump was limited only to their responses to two incidents that required Cruz to apologize.

#### Subsection 2: *The Wall Street Journal* Coverage of Ben Carson

The only reference to Carson's faith appeared in a summary of how the Republican candidate followed up on the Iowa debate, which included questions about inconsistencies in Carson's life story. Carson went to Liberty University where he made a speech about his faith. As jockeying for position continued in the Republican party, Carson told the friendly audience at Liberty that he believed he was guided into the presidential race by God (Nelson et al., 2016).

#### Subsection 3: *The Wall Street Journal* Coverage of John Kasich

A brief article on Kasich's attempt to gain ground in the campaign noted that he characterized Trump as someone "lacking depth to survive" and characterized himself as "someone who merged traditional conservative economics with the social gospel." Kasich thus meant to present himself as a candidate who promoted policies that allowed both capitalism and compassion to thrive. He challenged "Republicans to show sympathy for people who are not like them, especially poor and minorities." Kasich urged his "critics to read Matthew 25 where Jesus tells his followers to help 'the least of these brothers.'" He also pointed to his record, saying "the record is loud and clear about who I am and what I believe and what my values are and the

conservative nature of how I've solved problems" (Rago, 2015). In addition to Kasich's language of faith to describe his policies, some of his critiques also used religious language, calling his tone "self-righteous" and describing him as "prone to "moral censure" and to "weaponizing his faith as if his critics are blaspheming" (Rago, 2015).

#### Subsection 4: *The Wall Street Journal* Coverage of Ted Cruz

The more extended coverage early front runner Cruz received as compared to other candidates in *The Wall Street Journal* added dimensions and details that did not appear in *The New York Times* faith-related coverage. Coverage of the results in Iowa caucuses suggested that Cruz deserved credit for "drawing thousands of dormant Evangelicals" out to vote and raised hope that his campaign might succeed to a comparable extent in New Hampshire, "where religious candidates often "fizzle", reflecting New England's "long history of ambivalence about religion." The Cruz campaign turned to the churches in New Hampshire and created a network of 200 pastors as they recognized that even a small increase in the Evangelical vote could make a difference in a state where religious voters have not typically had a major influence (Levitz, 2016; Levitz and Haddon, 2016).

In his campaign speeches around New Hampshire, Cruz "promised to defeat the establishment and stand against Washington," which meant he would "defend Judeo-Christian values on which the country was built" and "restore the last best hope for mankind, that shining city on a hill, that is the United States of America" (Rago, 2016). Cruz also called on voters to pray for the country based on Bible verse 2 Chronicles 7: 14, which says: "If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their

wicked ways, then I will hear their prayers and forgive their sins, and I will heal their land” (Rago, 2016).

After spending significant effort establishing himself as the candidate most deserving of the Evangelical vote, Cruz faced accusations of unfair campaigning and had to make two public apologies over the course of a few weeks. In the days after the Iowa caucuses, Cruz had to apologize to Carson because Cruz volunteers in Iowa had incorrectly announced that Carson, who was competitive with Cruz for the Evangelical voter, had dropped out of the race. Even after Cruz had moved on to campaign in Nevada, the inappropriate remarks his campaign made about Rubio before the South Carolina primary followed. Cruz had to fire his communications director and apologize for a social media posting that “wrongly implied Rubio made a derisive comment about the Bible” (Epstein and Tau, 2106). Rubio responded by attacking Cruz and his aides, calling them “stretchers of the truth,” and saying, “It’s every single day something comes out of the Cruz campaign that’s deceptive and untrue” (Epstein and Tau, 2106). Trump responded to the Rubio incident by tweeting about both the Rubio and the Carson incident: “Ted Cruz has now apologized to Marco Rubio and Ben Carson for fraud and dirty tricks. No wonder he has lost the Evangelical support” (Epstein and Tau, 2106).

Although Cruz’ apology had included a promise not to attack any other candidate’s faith, he was soon heard at a rally mocking Trumping by “alluding to the gaffe” Trump made by attributing “a Bible passage to ‘Two Corinthians’ instead of ‘Second Corinthians’” in a speech he gave at Liberty. In his rally speech, Cruz began as if he was telling a joke that went “Two



Corinthians walked into a bar...” Cruz then stopped himself and said, “I’m sorry. That was mean” (Hook and Dawsey, 2016b).

### Section 8: Coverage of Republican Candidate Faith in the General Election

When Cruz departed the presidential race in May, and Trump became the unofficial nominee, news coverage of faith in campaign coverage reduced significantly, appearing only in *The New York Times*. Multiple op-ed columns or clearly labeled opinion pieces with named authors also appeared in all three papers in the months between Trump’s nomination and election exploring the relationship between Trump and the Evangelicals.

#### Subsection 1: *The New York Times* Coverage of Donald Trump

In one of the few stories that sought to explain Trump’s appeal based on his faith was a magazine feature that characterized Trump as “impious” but not “rejecting faith.” Rather, he “channeled the tension that makes Scripture endure, the desire, the wanting that gives rise to the closest analogue to Trumpism: the prosperity gospel, the American religion of winning.” With his thinking rooted in the “Christian business conservatism” taught by Norman Vincent Peale, author of the 1952 best seller, *The Power of Positive Thinking*, “Trump essentially lives by the Peale tautology of applied Christianity that says, “The man who assumes success tends already to have success.” Trump viewed his followers as people who wanted what he had, and he spoke out of the ethos of the prosperity gospel “to persuade people that his victories can be theirs - - that the greatness of Trump is the means of making America great again” (Sharlet, 2016).

The remaining faith-related news coverage of Trump basically followed more Evangelical voters and leaders as they made their way into the Trump camp. As polls showed increasing numbers of Evangelical voters supporting Trump, Reed suggested that many

Evangelical voters wanted to believe that Trump had grown more conservative and religious, saying, “They love a convert. That’s what their faith is all about” (Peters, 2016). A final news story appeared in June after “James Dobson, founder of Focus on the Family and one of the nation’s more prominent social conservatives,” told a large meeting of Christian conservatives in New York that Trump had “recently accepted a relationship with Christ” and was now “a baby Christian” (Gabriel and Luo, 2016).

Dobson went on to urge Christians to take it easy on Trump for inevitable slip-ups to come. “You gotta cut him some slack,” Dobson said. “He didn't grow up like we did” (Gabriel and Luo, 2016).

#### Subsection 2: *The New York Times* Columns on Donald Trump

In June, after Cruz left the race, multiple columns sought to explain how Trump succeeded among Evangelicals, what it meant, and why it mattered. Columnist Bruni explained Trump’s success in the context of Cruz’s failure as he departed the race. Bruni argued in the extended passage below that Cruz “played footsie” with Trump for too long and asserted that “the tension between contradictory Cruzes is what ultimately did him in.”

[Cruz] routinely excoriated other politicians for self-centeredness while repeatedly hogging center stage. He trashed the establishment and wore its rejection of him as a badge of honor only until it stopped rejecting him... At that point he did dizzy cartwheels over every prominent endorsement that came his way. He took great pride in an adversarial relationship with the media, decreeing us irrelevant, until he went in hunt of a fresh excuse for losing to Trump and decided over the last few days that it was all our fault. He purported to be more high-minded than his peers but pettily mocked Michelle Obama for urging schoolchildren to eat leafy greens.” Finally, Bruni asked, ‘where was the humility that a Christian faith as frequently proclaimed as his should encompass?’ (2016).

Columnist and author Sarah Posner argued that Trump’s nomination meant the religious right would have to examine itself to determine how its members “supported, enabled, or

acquiesced to Trump. His success means religious and political leaders must figure out how a religious movement entangled itself in partisan politics and ended up being marginalized by the party it embraced” (Poshner, 2016). Elaborating on how that political entanglement had corrupted the Evangelical community of faith, she said:

Deliberately or not, Mr. Trump may be the perfect candidate for an Evangelical subculture that has increasingly become enamored with the prosperity, or health and wealth, gospel. In trying to build a singular religious faction that agreed on some core issues (like abortion), the Republican Party has courted that subculture, even though many evangelicals consider prosperity theology to be heretical. Mr. Trump acts more like a televangelist than an evangelical (Poshner, 2016).

J.D. Vance, author of *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*, argued that Trump had capitalized on the church becoming more political than spiritual. He explained that “a Christianity constantly looking for political answers to moral and spiritual problems gives believers an excuse to blame other people when they should be looking in the mirror” (Vance, 2016). Further:

In the white working class, there are far too many wolves: heroin, broken families, joblessness and, more often than we'd like to believe, abusive and neglectful parents. Confronted with those forces, we need, most of all, a faith that provides the things my faith gave to me: introspection, moral guidance, and social support. Yet the most important institution in our lives, if it exists at all, encourages us to point a finger at faceless elites in Washington. It encourages us to further withdraw from our communities and country, even as we need to do the opposite.

It's hardly surprising that into that vacuum has stepped Donald J. Trump. For many, he is the only thing left that offers camaraderie, community, and a sense of purpose. Predictably, Mr. Trump fared best among evangelicals who rarely attended church.

Mr. Trump, like too much of the church, offers little more than an excuse to project complex problems onto simple villains. Yet the white working class needs neither more finger-pointing nor more fiery sermons. What it needs is the same thing I needed many years ago: a reassurance that God does indeed love us, and a church that demonstrates that love to a broken community (Vance, 2016).

### Subsection 3: *The Wall Street Journal* Coverage of Donald Trump

In a single article about candidate faith that appeared in *The Wall Street Journal* after Cruz left the race, Reed explored the Trump-Evangelical link. He explained that significant Trump support came from “white voters without a college degree, especially blue-collar Evangelicals,” who had been disillusioned in the past by “Republicans promising to appoint judicial conservatives to the Supreme Court, only to see Republican-appointed majority on the court uphold *Roe v. Wade* and redefine marriage.” They were also “tired of a party that seeks their votes but often treated their concerns as a liability.” Unlike candidates they had supported in the past, Reed argued, “Mr. Trump may not worship at the same church or share the theology of most Evangelicals, but he is a voice and vehicle for the disenchantment they feel toward Washington, and their yearning for a strong leader to transform it. Republicans would be wise to figure out how to harness this force in a positive—and winning—direction before it runs them over” (Reed, 2016).

### Subsection 4: *USA Today* Coverage of Donald Trump

A *USA Today* column in the final weeks of the election featured liberal Evangelical leader and founder of *Sojourners* magazine James Wallis contending that “most American Evangelicals do not support Trump” and that many Evangelical Christians had become “victims of a sort of identity theft, as the national conversation conflates them with a narrow demographic of mostly older, politically conservative whites” (Wallis, 2016). He explained further:

The term ‘Evangelical’ has become political shorthand for white political conservatives who profess to be evangelicals and vote overwhelmingly for Republican political candidates, based almost solely on their opposition to abortion and gay marriage.

This characterization erases the voices of tens of millions of Americans who fit the theological definition of Evangelical, but who do not support such a narrow

definition of 'moral issues' and clearly do not support Trump or his bigotry. These Evangelicals are African American, Latino, Asian-American, Native-American, and white. They are younger and older, and they are women and men...

Concern for the vulnerable is at the heart of Jesus' life-changing and earth-shattering call. This historic moment, in which a diverse new evangelical generation confronts the immoral bigotry of the Trump campaign, is an opportunity to reclaim the true "evangelical" identity going forward. And that will indeed be good news for us all (Wallis, 2016).

### Section 9: Conclusions

The 2016 election coverage captured and explained Trump and the Trump phenomenon as it developed, but the chaos Trump injected into the campaign along with the anxiety and denial he generated among political leaders and analysts made it hard to hear the story emerging from the Evangelical community. In 2012 Evangelical voters resisted giving Romney their full support in part due to his faith, and despite the character and leadership his long practice of that faith had produced in his life. In contrast, in 2016, Evangelical voters embraced Trump whose words and lifestyle essentially defied the values those voters claimed were based on their faith. While the religion-related campaign coverage shows political leaders and analysts wrestling to understand how Trump could be acceptable to Evangelical voters, it also captures without exploring in depth the fact that those voters were becoming increasingly supportive of Trump's candidacy. In both 2012 and 2016, Evangelical voters proved to be an unpredictable voting bloc whose motivations for political involvement appear to have less to do with moral leadership and more to do with gaining power, particularly in the courts.

Misgiving and ambivalence characterized Evangelical attitudes reported toward Romney in the 2012 coverage through election day. In 2016, religion-related coverage of Evangelical voter attitudes showed an openness to Trump that grew over time. He saw a particular smoothing

of the way with those voters in June when Evangelical leader Dobson urged voters to be patient with Trump because he was new to the faith (Gabriel and Luo, 2016). Dobson had long been a major voice in the call for change on the courts, especially on the Supreme Court, in order to overturn abortion rights established in *Roe v. Wade* (Lagfitt, 2004). Although Dobson's support for Trump didn't coincide exactly, it did follow Trump's release in May 2016 of the list from which he would nominate judges through which he sought to "quell any concerns that he would not select conservative jurists (Rappeport and Savage, 2016). Over subsequent months and through election day, Trump sustained support among Evangelical voters even after the release in October of the "Access Hollywood" video that recorded Trump bragging "in vulgar terms about kissing, groping and trying to have sex with women" (Fahrenthold, 2016).

In his pursuit of Evangelical voters, Trump showed no inclination toward moral leadership. Rather, he played on people's fears and promoted religion and race-based discrimination. He also made no apologies for a lifestyle that included multiple marriages, multiple accusations of sexual harassment, and crass public references to women (Sullivan, 2020). Still, he won the support of a significant portion of the Evangelical voting bloc that has characterized its political engagement as a commitment to redeeming American culture from the moral demise they see in legalized abortion and support of same sex marriage (Denker, 2019; Fitzgerald, 2017; Whitehead and Perry, 2020). While defying political norms and violating moral standards, Trump exceeded all electoral expectations and defeated Clinton, a highly qualified woman with meaningful political experience and a deep, long-term commitment to her religious faith. Trump thus broke all the rules and reinforced the message that a candidate's strong personal faith brings virtually no advantage in a presidential contest. Coverage of religion in the campaign in which he participated discussed some of the faith-related issues and contradictions

Trump represented. The coverage also noted efforts in the final weeks of the Clinton campaign to incorporate explicitly religious language and ideals into her message. Religion had a presence throughout the campaign, but overall, the coverage captured only a partial picture of the presence and role of faith in American elections.

## Chapter 7: Conclusions

### Section 1: Introduction

Republicans and Democrats today differ in the way they relate to religious faith in the political arena. Faith is more present in Republican campaigns than in Democratic ones regardless of a candidate's actual religious commitment. The newspaper coverage of faith in the 2012 and 2016 presidential campaigns reflects these differences in the amount and nature of faith-focused coverage each candidate received, but the election coverage of faith fails to explore and explain these differences. Instead of helping voters understand variations in the nature, practice, and expression of faith across the political spectrum, the coverage narrows the definition of faith and reinforces the idea that Republicans are more likely to be people of faith than are Democrats. In recent campaigns, the public conversation about faith has contributed to the polarization of national politics by defaulting to the perspective of a single religious voting bloc about how faith should influence the political arena and failing to give the multiple faith perspectives represented in the campaigns and in the electorate comparable attention.

Coverage of religion in the 2012 presidential campaign in *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today* consistently reinforced the idea that candidate faith mattered to Republican voters but did not merit coverage for the Democratic candidate. Throughout the primaries several Republican candidates pitched themselves as people of faith who shared Evangelical voters' beliefs and values, and, therefore, deserved their vote. Meanwhile Romney wrestled throughout the primaries and the general election with whether and how to discuss his non-traditional Mormon faith. Religion maintained a presence throughout the months of the campaign, but the same narrative essentially repeated itself throughout the year without driving the conversation about faith any deeper than the fact that Evangelical voters struggled with



whether they would support Romney in part because of his Mormon faith. Meanwhile, Obama's personal faith essentially never came up in the campaign coverage, and the only substantial discussion of religion related to the Democratic campaign focused on an Obama birth control policy that generated protests from leaders in the Catholic Church.

With the presence of Trump in the 2016 campaign, religion-related coverage added a discordant tone with anti-Muslim attacks and an admonition for the Pope, but the campaign coverage in the same three newspapers still repeated the pattern of giving the faith of Republican candidates significantly more coverage than the faith of Democratic candidates. Again, many Republican candidates made their personal faith central in their appeals to Evangelical voters during the primaries while religious faith received little to no attention in the Democratic primaries even though Clinton identified her Methodist faith as a guiding force in her life of public service. Trump's success among Evangelical voters also raised questions in the public debate because of his lack of personal religious practice and a lifestyle that did not reflect Evangelical values. Religious faith thus had a distinctive presence in the 2016 campaign, but the coverage still failed to clarify the underlying dynamics and explore the pervasive influence of faith in American culture and politics. The level of attention religion receives in campaign coverage essentially serves to inoculate the media against criticism for excluding faith from the public conversation, but it does not delve into faith-related issues in a way that facilitates constructive exchange among varied perspectives.

More rigorous reporting on faith in election coverage could strengthen the public's grasp on the essential role religious pluralism plays in undergirding liberal democracy by reminding all voters that whether rooted in religious teaching, derived out of rational thought, or just promoted as the most practical approach, beliefs and values can and do play an important role in U.S.

politics. The U.S. Constitution still protects the freedoms that every citizen shares to believe as they choose, to seek policies and social changes based on their beliefs, and to vote for the leaders they prefer. The media could equip all voters to function more effectively in a political context that is meant to value open debate and produce well-informed voters who understand that election victories and policy influence require winning the majority and often living with compromise. In a society that values religious freedom, the media should participate in reminding the public that this is a secular pluralistic nation and not a Christian or Judeo-Christian one even though Protestantism has functioned as a de facto national faith through much of American history. No single faith perspective dominates or holds the upper hand as the “right” perspective although some have greater presence and acceptance in the broader culture. Rather, every policy approach enters the marketplace of ideas with the requirement and right to fight for public support and compete for the votes needed to turn a proposal into law or to succeed in an election. Media coverage needs to include a more complete understanding of the religious composition of the electorate, a more in-depth discussion of the place of pluralism in American values, and a more explicit recognition of the harm religion-based polarization causes in the political system and in society.

### *Section 2: Issues with Current Coverage of Faith in the Context of Elections*

To achieve a more thorough treatment of religious faith in election coverage, political journalists need to overcome a discomfort with the subject of faith that has a sustained history in the profession. As multiple Pulitzer Prize winner Jim Hoagland put it, “By instinct and training, we journalists are skeptics about religious activists. Editors reinforce reporters’ instincts to treat religion politely but suspiciously” (Marshall et al., 2009, 4). That polite suspicion has translated into superficial coverage that repeats itself over the course of campaigns and appears with

minimal variation across different newspapers. Hoagland goes on to suggest that there is a dichotomy between religion and journalism that justifies the lack of in-depth coverage faith receives: “Ours is a secular trade honoring information more than faith,” Hoagland said. While Hoagland’s comment may reflect legitimately the fact that faith relates to the transcendent and people of faith may talk about things, they believe without seeing, it neglects

the array of sources that exist to explain the beliefs and practices of most religious faiths. Primary and secondary sources abound on most religions present in American culture, as do religious leaders and participants. A wealth of resources offers extensive information about religion and religions in America for anyone who chooses to examine and/or interview them, yet these ideas and voices are rarely heard or seen in the U.S. media. Former CNN political analyst Bill Schneider echoed Hoagland’s sense that journalism and religion do not necessarily mix well, saying, “On the national level, the press is one of the most secular institutions in American society. It just doesn’t get religion or any idea that flows from religious conviction” (Marshall and Gilbert, 2009, 3-4). Schneider added the idea that the press meant no harm, but religion or faith was just something the press could not grasp. “The press is not necessarily contemptuous of religion. It’s just uncomprehending,” Schneider said (Marshall and Gilbert, 2009, 3-4).

Religion in America is a complex subject that has changed significantly over time. It is also multi-dimensional with several different religions with varying sects and denominations within those religions. And those differences in belief and perspective translate into different perspectives on public policy and political engagement. Understanding and writing well about faith in America demands that reporters invest time and effort to gain background knowledge and develop sources -- not unlike learning the inner workings of Congress, the labyrinth of the Pentagon, or the exhausting eccentricities of the campaign trail. To push faith aside as a topic

that lacks information and that exceeds journalists' ability to comprehend is to suggest that it is not a subject that merits being taken seriously. Religion is an enduring and integral part of American political culture that voters need to understand accurately within the context of American democratic values. As with any other type of journalism, effective reporting on faith requires setting aside assumptions, researching the beliefs, history, status of the religion or religions covered, and learning how to approach people within different religions in a way that encourages them to open up and offer information and insights (Liévano, 2019; Marshall and Gilbert, 2009). As the research in this dissertation demonstrates, journalists are failing to do this in covering religion during election campaigns.

### *Section 3: Religious Differences Between Political Parties*

Allowing religion to remain an unfamiliar arena only sustains the idea that it is also unwelcoming and perhaps incomprehensible. At the same time, faith invariably emerges during presidential campaigns to demand attention in both predictable and unpredictable ways in different elections. When political reporters enter demanding campaign seasons without solid background on the religious issues that are likely to require coverage during the current election, those reporters end up relying on simplifications that make it possible to publish stories that are essentially 'accurate' but lacking in the contextualization audiences could use to fully understand the meaning and significance of faith in the presidential contest. For example, in election coverage America's varied religious spectrum is often characterized as a "basic religious split...between the 'religious' from all traditions and the 'less religious' or even 'secular' with religiosity translating to frequency of religious observance" (Marshall and Gilbert, 2009,89). In recent years, polls have shown that frequent churchgoers have preferred Republicans, while those who attended less often gravitated to the Democrats (Marshall and Gilbert, 2009). In the

past three decades, conservative political and religious leaders have repeated and promoted the idea that Democrats simply aren't religious. These ideas are found echoed in campaign coverage although they are far from accurate. Those leaders have also villainized liberals as prepared to attack people of faith and eliminate Christian traditions, including Christmas and traditional marriage (Sullivan, 2008). More Democrats than Republicans *have* identified themselves in recent years as Atheists or religiously unaffiliated, but by adopting and repeating the idea that this differential means that faith has little to no place among Democrats, the media oversimplifies the issue and, more worryingly, misinforms the public about a critical issue.

Polls do show that a larger percentage of Republicans than Democrats self-identify as Christians, but religion is still prominent among Democratic voters. Pew study figures show that 52 percent of Democrats still self-identify as Christians as compared to 79 percent of Republicans. Both figures represent a decline since 2012 with the percentage of unaffiliated growing in both parties although more substantially among Democrats with 38 percent unaffiliated compared to 15 percent unaffiliated among Republicans. Also, polls also show that equating a lack of service attendance with a lack of belief misinterprets the presence of faith in the population. While 28 percent of U.S. adults who attend religious services only a few times a year or less say that it is because they are not believers, a larger percentage – 38 percent—say they do not attend services because they practice their faith in different ways. Also, “about seven in ten of those who do not attend services regularly identify with a religion, and most say religion is ‘very’ or ‘somewhat’ important in their lives” (Pew Research Center, 2018, August 1).

Although one would never realize this from the small amount of coverage religion garners in the mainstream press, with almost 90 percent of Americans expressing belief in some kind of higher power (Fahmy, 2018).

While the statistics still support the sense that presence and practice of faith differs between parties, the numbers also suggest that differences are more nuanced than coverage can capture by relying on frequency of church attendance as a measure of seriousness about faith. If journalists are going to provide citizens with verified facts set understandably in context to provide a forum for open, informed public debate, coverage needs to include an accurate picture of all groups represented. Ignoring or misrepresenting citizens on any part of the political spectrum has “the effect of disenfranchising them” (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2021, 69). Coverage also needs to present news proportionately to avoid inflating, minimizing, or misconstruing stories related to any community (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2021).

When the public conversation about faith characterizes voters and candidates in stark categories, such as “religious,” “less religious,” or “secular,” it contributes to a polarized electorate in which a single strongly held point of political division defines all political engagement. In the context of faith in the public arena, religious convictions translated into policy positions tend to create a sense of ultimate consequences tied to winning or losing the policy debate. Such intensity tends to erase any willingness to bargain and make compromise difficult if not impossible. Conflict and division will never disappear from politics. Rather, the political arena provides a place where meaningful divisions and conflicts can be addressed and resolved to the extent possible to enable a diverse society to function and thrive. Understanding and respecting differences while looking for common ground on which to make some forward progress reflects the ideals of pluralistic politics in which opponents on one issue might be allies on another (Campbell, 2016). Realistically, in the current political environment, pluralism “understood as the acceptance and encouragement of diversity is a fighting word for participants in contemporary culture wars” (Hutchison, 2003, 1). Culture war issues, including abortion,

same sex marriage, and transgender rights, are among the most contentious issues in American politics today, and all have religious connections. For decades now these issues have generated public debates in which opponents have questioned and insulted each other's morality, undermining the likelihood that they can pull together and find ways to cooperate on other issues (Hutchison, 2003, McGraw, 2010). Without suggesting that any side needs to hold its values any less strongly, pluralistic politics offer an approach that allows for all voices to be heard on even the most strident issues. Likewise, religious pluralism provides a framework within which multiple faiths can operate in the same arena, respecting each other's right to be there without drawing any conclusions regarding each religion's teachings and practices as long as those teachings and practices do not defy or conflict with liberal democratic values (Campbell, 2016; McGraw, 2010). In particular, we need to move beyond covering religion essentially only in the context of 'Culture Wars' and only through framing the religious context as the 'moral majority' versus 'the rest.' As the survey results cited above suggest, American citizens have extensive and varied relationships to faith, and bringing those perspectives to political conversations would deeply enrich pluralistic society.

#### *Section 4: Religious Pluralism's Place in American History and Culture: It's Complicated*

Adding another element to the challenge journalists face in reconciling the place of faith in political coverage, the relationship between religion and liberal democracy is both central and paradoxical. As Wheaton College professor of politics Bryan McGraw put it, "liberalism has both relied on religious ideals to buttress its claims about human freedom and equality, and treated [religion] as a threatening force, ready to upend political peace for the demands of faith" (McGraw, 2010, 1). American founders recognized this complexity when they sought "to create a civic space that would not be dominated by their own faith or any other" (McGraw and

Formicola, 2005, 37-38). Leaders, including Madison and Jefferson opposed state support for a single religion out of religious conviction. Baptist founder of Rhode Island Roger Williams did the same. Madison and Jefferson claimed to honor the freedom God ordained for all humans by promoting freedom for any form of religion. They also recognized that freedom of religion also meant freedom from religion of any sort. They fought for non-establishment of religion based on the corruption and authoritarian inclinations they had seen in Europe and even in American colonial history when the state was infused with a single religious moral perspective. The actions of Catholic Church during the Inquisition and the persecutions carried out by the Massachusetts Bay Colony theocracy represented a few of the examples that American founders sought not to follow. Williams, who fled religious intolerance in Massachusetts, argued that people of faith would benefit by a government that “neither intrude[d] on religious faith nor [was] intruded upon by religious institutions” (McGraw and Formicola, 2005, 35). He also called on religious citizens to realize that “our civic debates and our religious debates are both important and are both public, but they are distinct, and they draw on distinct sources of authority” (McGraw and Formicola, 2005, 35). While some colonies did establish official churches and dominant faiths varied by state, the U.S. Constitution ultimately established the understanding of religion’s place in the new nation as an expression of natural law assumptions that God considered all humans to be free and equal and did not practice coercion. Freedom of conscience and its expression in speech thus gained the status of inalienable rights among American citizens. While retrospectively the early American population appears homogeneous by comparison to today’s population, factions emerged from the nation’s earliest days, and civic stability required learning to navigate conflicting perspectives effectively (French, 2020; McGraw, 2003; Reichley, 2002).



As religious diversity has multiplied throughout the waves of immigration that have marked the centuries of American history, so have the challenges of facilitating engagement of multiple religious perspectives in the public arena. Although founding ideals articulate pluralism, most of the population has identified as Protestant since the nation's founding. Throughout much of the nation's history, political parties identified with denominations and different theological beliefs. Yet, the idea that one party was more religious than the other emerged only in the last half century. In the 1980s, the religious right visibly entered the political arena representing theologically conservative churches now referred to as Evangelicals in support of Republican Ronald Reagan because of his promise to restrict abortion rights. The religious right brought with it assertions that this was a Christian or perhaps Judeo-Christian nation and that conservative Christian political perspectives reflected absolute truth and divine wisdom as well as the founders' intentions. The religious right thus came to characterize opponents as not just as wrong on law and policy, but as a threat to the nation as well as lesser in the eyes of an Evangelical God. While political participants from both sides of the aisle have rhetorically challenged each other's legitimacy throughout America's political history, the coverage the religious right has received in recent decades has produced a polarized image of American religion dominated by a few strident voices (French, 2020; McGraw and Formicola, 2005).

#### *Section 5: Improving Incorporation of Religion in Election Coverage*

Even though Evangelical voices and candidates have received substantial attention in political reporting in recent years, people of faith from both the political right and left find the coverage inadequate and incomplete. As a result, the coverage entrenches groups in dichotomous debates instead of equipping them to engage in well-informed exchanges that incorporate the varied political perspectives that populate the nation's religious landscape. Democratic people of

faith appear rarely and feel invisible and unheard. Meanwhile many Republican people of faith feel more ostracized than represented in the coverage they receive. Despite extensive discussions of Evangelical candidates and positions in recent campaigns, Evangelical voters still feel that “American Christianity is under siege” (Denker, 2019, 10) and that Evangelicals are treated as a cultural oddity or outlier rather than as legitimate participants in the election debate (Denker, 2019; FitzGerald, 2017; French, 2020).

Listening and learning what makes people of faith unhappy with the coverage they receive may offer useful insights for journalists but satisfying people of faith is not the goal or obligation of journalism. Rather, the goal is to provide accurate information that informs the voters. The more important objective of improving coverage of religion in American election lies in the need to embrace and preserve the religious pluralism that Barbara McGraw, director of the Center for Engaged Religious Pluralism at St. Mary’s College of California, refers to as “America’s sacred ground” (McGraw, 2003). Pluralism recognizes that in democracy, domination is not the point. Rather, democracy succeeds and endures when minority as well as majority voices know they are being heard in a political process that can be trusted to pursue – if always imperfectly – the best interests of the nation as a whole (McGraw, 2003; French, 2020).

For journalism to help broaden and deepen the engagement of religious voices in the political arena, journalistic culture needs to wrestle with its own episodic nature and find approaches that equip and enable journalists to move beyond the industry’s common disinclinations toward and misgivings about covering faith. Undeniably, daily news cycles demand fresh stories that “attract and hold audiences for advertisers” (Jamieson and Campbell, 1992, 4). Journalists, therefore, are compelled to focus on the latest events and developments,

often at the expense of in-depth stories that could more effectively support the public debate with greater substance and diversity of perspective (Patterson, 1999).

Despite the commercial realities that have long both influenced and enabled daily coverage, the media can also facilitate constructive public conversations so that engaged citizens can learn more about issues than just the talking points of the loudest voices in the debate. Granted, lengthy stories that cover the broad spectrum of policy perspectives on any issue will likely never dominate newspaper front pages or the top of news sites during a presidential campaign or otherwise. Nonetheless, the media has proven itself capable at times of helping improve the political discourse by giving the American public a forum in which to work through its sense of itself and move beyond even deep differences toward constructive policy solutions (Rosen, 2000).

For this sort of commitment to characterize conversations that include religious faith in the public arena, changes need to occur at the levels of journalism education, management, and practice. Studies through the end of the twentieth century showed that few undergraduate journalism programs offer courses on religion journalism or incorporate any discussion about covering religious faith in newswriting and reporting classes (Buddenbaum, 1998). Arguably, adding religion as a routine part of journalism curricula across the country could be a constructive first step toward more dynamic coverage of faith-related issues. The simple presence of faith as an area of potential study and professional specialization could ease the discomfort and resistance that often define the response to religion in the newsroom. Further, the classroom exploration of questions related to religion in American culture and how to cover it could equip journalists to incorporate the discussion of religious perspectives into coverage more routinely and in a manner that reflects journalistic standards of accuracy and fairness

(Gormly, 1999; Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2021; Marshall and Gilbert, 2009, Walsh, 1996). For example, more attention to religion in journalism education programs could help journalists recognize that it is possible to inform the public about religious beliefs and faith-based political perspectives without having to agree with any of those beliefs or to suggest that any religious perspective is more legitimate than any other.

Translating more complete attention to religion from the classroom to the newsroom would require commitment from top-level editors to strengthen the coverage by devoting resources to hire and develop reporters with the expertise needed to cultivate sources and develop storylines that reflect this nation's varied religious landscape. Management could also encourage collaboration between political and religion reporters to produce more multi-dimensional coverage of faith during campaigns and more extensive coverage of the relationship between faith and the public square outside of election cycles. To fulfill the objectives of educational and editorial changes, journalists would need to enhance their development and use of sources in the religion arena. Like any other beat, effective coverage of religion requires finding and sustaining relationships with people who can help reporters recognize significant stories, explain subtle differences in beliefs and traditions, and eliminate stereotypes in the coverage (Fumea, 2002, Wiley, 1996).

The demographics and nature of American religion have changed over time and will continue to do so as will the interaction between faith and politics over time. What will not change is the presence of religion as a complex element of American culture that influences the way people view and interact with fellow citizens and with society as a whole. Religion will also always be a subject that awakens deep personal responses from at least a portion of the media audience. The complexity of faith and the potential intensity of audience reaction may heighten

journalists' wariness or reduce their interest in exploring and covering faith issues in greater depth. Faith is not the only complex issue that journalists must navigate although in recent elections American journalists demonstrated little ability to engage extensively with the coverage of faith despite its widespread importance in American society. Nonetheless, through sound reporting that digs into the details of different faiths and develops robust sources in multiple faith contexts, journalists can enhance the knowledge different groups have of one another and so support and foster a healthier public conversation.

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