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# THE RISE OF RELIGIOUS CONSERVATISM IN THE U.S. SINCE THE PRESIDENCY OF DONALD TRUMP

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**Abstract**

It has long been understood that there is something peculiar, even paradoxical, about Western conservatism. In America, particularly after the adoption of the U.S. Constitution, religious and moral conditions were instead shaped by the separation of church and state and even by religious pluralism. Two research questions are then coined to answer the phenomenon of religion and politics: 1) How has religious conservatism differed between Trump's presidency and his predecessors? (2001-2016); 2) To what degree has U.S. social legitimacy changed through Trump's approach of religious conservatism? By utilising a qualitative approach sourced from secondary data, the research finds crucial role of Christian evangelical support for Trump's triumphed victor. Analyzing with a narrative data analysis alongside the theoretical approach of religious conservatism and constructivism, we realize there is an interesting relation between faith and politics in the American voting system, which are further stipulated by the underlying arguments that we portray in this article: 1) that Trump facilitated more religious conservatives through a socially constructed approach, and 2) that this approach of conservatism has further led to the decline of U.S. social and political legitimacy due to the massive social issues that happened.

**Keywords:** Religious, Conservatism, Politics, Election

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## INTRODUCTION

### Background

The United States' Republican Party has become one of embodiments that display how significant religion and conservatism play in its politics. In U.S. contemporary politics, many highly religious individuals are inclined towards more conservative political positions, hence creating organic connections between religion and conservative politics.[1] Moreover, with 61% of Republicans being conservative and 50% being highly religious,[2] we perceive a pattern there is a tendency for this Party to possess more "conservative cultural stances, opposition to change, Republican self-identification, and conservative self-identification",[3] Thus, this creates a spectrum of division between the conservative Republicans and the secular liberal Democrats, further indicating a contrasting moral basis of both the American community and its political identities[4] [5]

The immense role of religious conservatives dates back to the early presidencies of the United States, where more than half the presidents had an affiliation of the Republican Party. Evidently, the rise of the religious right-wing leaders were closely tied to the emergence of religious organizations in the late 1970s.[6] The election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 further became the main reason that religious conservatives hold such substantial power. Having common antipathies towards communism also became the supporting factor of why religious conservatives and Republican presidents are very closely bound by their certain constructive views of morality[7]

Following the 2016 presidential

[1] A. Malka, Y. Lelkes, S.K. Srivastava, A.F. Cohen & D. Miller, "The Association of Religiosity and Political Conservatism: The Role of Political Engagement." *Political Psychology,* Vol. 33 No. 2 (2012): 275-299. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9221.2012.00875.x

[2] B.F. Newport (2021, June 12), "How Many Highly Religious Conservative Republicans Are There?" *Gallup.com,* https://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/182210/highly-religious-conservative-republicans.aspx

[3] A. Malka, Y. Lelkes, S.K. Srivastava, A.F. Cohen & D. Miller (2012), "The Association of Religiosity and Political Conservatism," 293.

[4] Ibid.

[5] J.T. O'Brien & E. Abdelhadi, "Re-examining Restructuring: Racialization, Religious Conservatism and Political Leanings in Contemporary American Life." *Soxial Forces,* Vol. 99 No. 2 (2020): 474-503, https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/soaa029

[6] A. Abramowitz, *The Great Alignment: Race, Party Transformantion, and the Rise of Donald Trump* (Yale University Press, 2018)

[7] D.R. Williams, "Reagan. In *Oxford University Press eBooks*" Oxford University Press (2010): 187-212, https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195340846.003.0009

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election of Donald Trump, many scholars have recognised the crucial role of Christian evangelical support for his triumphed victory.[8] Smith[9] has established there to be a form of "mutual dependency" to have been formed in the midst of the election. Many evangelical admirers remain supportive of Trump's approaches due to his consistency to include Christian values in every presidential policies and decrees. Additionally, Haynes[10] classifies that the electoral relationship between Donald Trump and the Christian evangelicals were more based on a quid pro quo approach, and that transactional politics between conservatives and leaders from the Republican Party continue to "find themselves forced into alliance" (para. 14) – to avoid the belief of committing sin by not voting on the more religious leader. Here, we realize there is an interesting relation between faith and politics in the American voting system.[11]

However, this translates differently, towards the more liberal and secular Democrats who believe the role of religion to be fading in the contemporary issues of the U.S. For instance, Barack Obama created an infamous hostility towards faith during his administration–providing a new law for abortion and health care plans for contraceptives and sterilizations, which are a violation of deep religious convictions.[12] Obama relied on more rational commitment approaches rather than doctrinal affirmation and religious beliefs, which created a plethora of religious divisions within domestic and even foreign policies between his legislative and executive staffs. Thus, creating these so-called "cultural wars" through the secularization of religion.[13]

Seeing the significant role of religious

[8] J. Haynes, "Donald Trump, the Christian Right and COVID-19: The Politics of Religious Freedom." *Laws* Vol. 10 No. 1 (2021), https://doi.org/10.3390/laws10010006

[9] D. Smith, "Extreme Abortion Laws Shine Light on Trump's Courting of Religious Rights." *The Guardian* (2021, January 6). https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/may/13/donald-trump-evangelical-christians-republicans-abortion-supreme-court

[10] J. Haynes, "Donald Trump, the Christian Right and COVID-19: The Politics of Religious Freedom." *Laws* Vol. 10 No. 1 (2021)

[11] A.T. Walker, "Understanding Why Religious Conservatives Would Vote for Trump." *National Review (2020, February 10)*, https://www.nationalreview.com/2020/02/2020-election-religious-conservatives-trump-voters/

[12] B.B. Hagerty, "Has Obama Waged A War On Religion?" *NPR* (2012, January 8), Understanding Why Religious Conservatives Would Vote for Trump. National Review. https://www.nationalreview.com/2020/02/2020-election-religious-conservatives-trump-voters/

[13] J.L. Guth, *Obama, Religious Politics and the Culture Wars* (Furman University, 2011), https://www.furman.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Obama-Religion-and-Culture-Wars.pdf

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conservatives in U.S. politics, as well as its heterogeneous impacts towards the Republican and Democrat Parties, we recognize the interesting connection between religious actors and Trump's presidency specifically. By comparing his administration with his predecessors, we may be able to determine the effects of religious conservatism towards domestic policy-making, as well as its implications towards social and political legitimacy from international perspectives. Thus, the underlying arguments that we wish to portray in this article is: 1) that Trump facilitated more religious conservatives through a socially constructed approach, and 2) that this approach of conservatism has further led to the decline of U.S. social and political legitimacy due to the massive social issues that happened.

**Research Questions**

To analyze the various aspects of this topic, a few research questions can be formulated to bring limitations to the context of this research:

1. How has religious conservatism differed between Trump's presidency and his predecessors? (2001-2016)
2. To what degree has U.S. social legitimacy changed through Trump's approach of religious conservatism?

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

**Religious Conservatism**

The separation of the church and the state has become a long historical tradition in the Western political sentiments, especially after the Era of Enlightenment[14] Nevertheless, there is an underlying rise between the overlapping values of religion and politics that emerge in modern society, particularly in the United States. This is seen through the religious leaders from the Republican Parties that portray a more politically conservative more driven by order and traditions. This overall framework can be conceptualized as 'religious conservatism.'[15] This form of conservatism is also considered as an ideology that associates orthodox worldviews, opposes efforts to change social conventions and holds strong

[14] J. Fox & S. Sandler, *Bringing Religion into International Relations.* In *Palgrave Macmillan US eBooks* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), https://doi.org/10.1057/9781403981127

[15] J.B. Hirsh, M.D. Walberg & J.B. Peterson, "Spiritual Liberals and Religious Conservatives." *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, Vol. 4 No. 1 (2013): 14-20, https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550612444138

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towards traditional practices that may build an infallible guide for stability in society.[16] Additionally, religious conservatism can be described as an ideology that emphasizes priority on the preservation of religious-based systems, institutions and laws in what is perceived to be their primary traditional function and form.[17] Moreover, in the U.S. particularly, it categorizes itself into the sphere of Christian fundamentalism, which builds up its democratic construct as a working 'Christian democracy'–a political ideology that conforms religion with modernity and liberal democracy, while concurrently attempting to align certain social justice views according to past traditional Christian values.[18] [19] Here, the Christian fundamentalists are often referred to as the 'religious right' or the 'Christian Right', and further affiliated with a conservative-based ideology. For further context, the Christian Right is not a party or organization of any such, however it is a partnership of individuals that unite with the common perspective that most American Christian foundations are currently being fatally marginalized by the secular world and that it has become a prominent reason to attempt to reverse this trend.[20]

In the Concise Guide, Concise Guide to Conservatism, by Russell Kirk, Kirk lays out ten characteristics of conservative thought.[21]

1. "Men and nations are governed by moral laws; and those laws have their origin in a wisdom that is more than human—in divine justice" (2) Kirk made clear that "Christianity prescribes no especial form of politics" (9). At the same time, he believed that conservatism

[16] O.A. Young, R. Willer & D. Keltner, ""Thou shalt not kill": Religious fundamentalism, conservatism, and rule-based moral processing." *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality,* Vol. 5 No. 2 (2013): 110–115, https://doi.org/10.1037/a0032262

[17] P. Viereck, K. Minogue, T. Ball & R. Dagger, "Conservatism | History, Intellectual Foundations, & Examples". *Encyclopedia Britannica (2023, April 28),* https://www.britannica.com/topic/conservatism

[18] K. Grabow, *Christian Democracy: Principles and Policy-making ; Handbook for the European and International Cooperation of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung* (Berlin: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2011)

[19] O.A. Young, R. Willer & D. Keltner, ""Thou shalt not kill": Religious fundamentalism, conservatism, and rule-based moral processing." *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*

[20] J. Haynes, "Donald Trump, the Christian Right and COVID-19: The Politics of Religious Freedom."

[21] Kevin DeYoung, " What Is Conservatism?" *Clearly Reformed*, last modified January 26, 2021, https://clearlyreformed.org/what-is-conservatism/, quoted in Russel Kirk, *Concise Guide to Conservatism* (Regnery Gateway, 2019)

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was built on a religious foundation and that religion in the modern world was largely defended by conservative people (9). "The conservative believes that the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom" (10)

2. "Variety and diversity are the characteristics of a high civilization. Uniformity and absolute equality are the death of all real vigor and freedom in existence" (2-3). In rejecting absolute equality, Kirk did not mean equal treatment under the law, but an equal outcome enforced by the state.
3. "Justice means that every man and every woman have the right to what is their own—to the things best suited to their own nature, to the rewards of their ability and integrity, to their property, and their personality" (3). Society, said Kirk, is a partnership in which all have equal rights but not all have equal things.
4. "Property and freedom are inseparably connected: economic leveling is not economic progress" (3). Kirk argues that the three fundamental rights in the Anglo-American tradition have been life, liberty, and property (what Thomas Jefferson described more expansively as "the pursuit of happiness"). If there were no private property, we would not all be rich together; we would all be poor together (56-57). Private property is not only a good in itself; it is also a means to culture and freedom. The role of the state is to protect man's property, not to allocate it. For his part, the virtuous citizen understands that property comes with duties, and by our property and possessions we ought to serve God and serve our fellow men (60).

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5. "Power is full of danger; therefore, the good state is one in which power is checked and balanced, restricted by sound constitutions and customs" (3-4). Kirk is not anti-authority, nor even anti-government. He considers government "a necessary good" provided it is just, balanced, and restricted. Men with power cannot be trusted, so ambition must be made to counteract ambition.
6. "The past is a great storehouse of wisdom; as Burke said, 'The individual is foolish, but the species is wise'" (4). The conservative knows he was not born yesterday. He is eager to listen to the "democracy of the dead." The conservative does not idealize the past, but he believes that we will be wiser if we listen to the wise men and women of the past.
7. "Modern society urgently needs true community: and true community is a world away from collectivism" (4). Conservatives are public-spirited. They believe in doing one's duty to town and country, to his business and to his church, to his school and to his union, to his civic association and to his charitable fund (44). In genuine community, decisions are made locally wherever possible, and philanthropy and neighborliness are voluntary virtues.
8. "In the affairs of nations, the American conservative feels that his country ought to set an example to the world, but ought not to try to remake the world in its image" (5). Kirk is less interested in a specific foreign policy than in a general inclination that urges America to be virtuous, without necessarily being interventionist.

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9. "Men and women are not perfectible, conservatives know; and neither are political institutions. We cannot make heaven on earth, though we may make a hell" (5). Human nature is not malleable. We must deal with people as they are, not as we wish them to be. This means, as Kirk says elsewhere, "politics is the art of the possible, not the art of the ideal."
10. "Change and reform, conservatives are convinced, are not identical: moral and political innovation can be destructive as well as beneficial" (5-6). The conservative does not believe in change for the sake of change. He is not eager for revolution. He does not believe in the abstract cult of progress. When in doubt, permanence should be favored over progress. Choose what is old and tried, even if it is imperfect, before what is new untried. Conservatives prefer the devil they know to the devil they don't know.

Despite the widely employed usage of the term 'religious conservatism' globally, identifying the actual term can be classified into two methods of definition: denominationally and operationally. Denominationally, many scholars would assume conservatism into the sphere of the evangelicals and fundamentalists, similar to the conceptions in the U.S. Additionally, they then categorize even further into more specific denominations of the 'white'. These include the ideas of 'white Evangelicals', 'white Evangelical Protestants', or 'white conservative Protestants'. However, this does not mean that a person holding religious conservatism has to specifically attend a fundamentalist or orthodoxical church, as one's belief might differ from others. Meanwhile, operationally, Republicans are usually categorized into this spectrum of ideology, especially those who believe religion to be an obtrusive part of their lives. Here, there lies a separating line between Republicans and Democrats,

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especially in specific religious values during election processes, such as but not limited to: the legalization of abortion, the obligations of daily school prayers, and the freedom of the LGBT-Q+ community.[22]

**Constructivism**

In simple terms, the theory of constructivism is the belief that most aspects of international relations are shaped by ideational factors such as ideas, norms and values, as opposed to material structures.[23] Central to this theoretical framework is Alexander Wendt, the scholar who famously systemized our understanding of constructivism, in which he states that the core assumption of constructivism regarding anarchy is constructed by state or 'what states makes of it', and not a pre-established fact as realists and liberalists would like to believe.[24] Wendt's understanding differs from how the major theoretical debates at the time of the writing of his book, neorealism and neoliberalism, would perceive anarchy. According to neorealists, anarchy – the lack of a central power in international order, are what make states be in a constant state of war (Waltz, 2010). While neoliberalists argue that the state of anarchy is why states will always cooperate.[25]

Constructivism also emerged as a contender against the classical theories of international relations during the end of the Cold War as it sought to explain the evolution of the bipolar system after the second World War and its self-destruction as the Cold War ended.[26] The main scholars who have contributed towards the constructivist discourse are, but not limited to, Alexander Wendt, Martha Finnemore and Friedrich Kratochwil by which each individual spotlighted different key elements of constructivism which help enrich our understanding of the theory. Alexander Wendt, often regarded as the founding father of constructivism, focused his work on the ways in which social

[22] J. Knuckey, "Religious Conservatives, the Republican Party and Evolving Party Coalitions in the United States." *Party Politics (1999)*, https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068899005004004

[23] S. Burchill, A. Linklater, J. Donnelly, T. Nardin, M. Paterson, C. Reus-Smith, … & A. Sajed, *Theories of International Relations* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022)

[24] A. Wendt, "Anarchy is what states make of it: the social construction of power politics." *International organization*, Vol. 46 No. 2 (1992), 391-425.

[25] R.O. Keohane & J.S. Nye, *Power and interdependence: world politics in transition* (Boston, Little and Brown, 1977).

[26] S. Burchill, A. Linklater, J. Donnelly, T. Nardin, M. Paterson, C. Reus-Smith, … & A. Sajed, *Theories of International Relations*

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structures and norms shape state behavior in international relations, as established above. He stated that interactions between states and other players are what creates the global system, as opposed to believing that the global system is inherently anarchic in nature. His further theory posits that states are social actors who participate in shared behaviors and conventions, and not just self-interested actors.[27]

In contrast, Martha Finnemore's work focuses more specifically on the role of norms in international relations. Finnemore argues that norms play a crucial role in shaping state behavior and decision-making. She exemplified this process through norms such as sovereignty, human rights, and non-proliferation that have become institutionalized in international society and one that have also influenced state behavior.[28] Moreover, on top of norms, Friedrich Kratochwil offered further perspective about the role of language and communication in constructing social reality. He argues on top of being a tool for communication, language is also a fundamental part of how individuals create and interpret rules and norms, and how then these rules and norms shape social behavior.[29] Overall, the works produced by these three key actors can be seen as complementary to one another with Wendt providing the constructivist understanding of anarchy, which lay a foundational framework for Finnemore's emphasis on norms on influencing state behaviors and perhaps, on a more micro-level, Kratochwil's work regarding how individuals understanding of rules and norms construct social behaviors.

## METHODOLOGY

This research utilizes a qualitiative approach to elaborate its contents through the data collection of secondary data such as but not limited to: books, journal articles, and online news articles, to showcase a wide range variety of sources to ensure an objective perspective of analysis. In terms of analytical methods, this research conducts its analysis through a narrative data analysis and descriptive method of research and elaboration to answer the "how" and "what" aspect of the research

[27] A. Wendt, "Social Theory of International Politics." *Cambridge University Press,* Vol. 67 (1999)

[28] M. Finnemore, "National Interests in International Society." *Cornel University Press* (1996)

[29] F.V. Kratochwil, "Rules, Norms, and Decisions: On the Conditions of Practical and Legal Reasoning in International Relations and Domestic Affairs." *Cambridge University Press,* No. 2 (1991)

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questions.

## ANALYSIS

### Trump's Administration

#### *The Role of Religious Conservatives in Trump's Victory*

Similar to his past Republican predecessors, the Trump administration had its prodigious amount of religious support. The 45th president of the U.S. has left no room to exclude talks about God and has continuously consulted, even prayed with his rigorous group of evangelical advisors[30] This further assisted in facilitating his victory in the presidential election by winning with 79% to 16% against Clinton during the 2016 National Election Pool Exit Survey.[31] To understand the underlying reason Trump held his reliance on the religious conservative evangelicals, we would have to understand the demographics of the United States itself.

*Religiosity and Ideology Among Republicans and Republican-Leaning Independents*

| | % |
|---|---|
| Conservative, highly religious | 34 |
| Conservative, moderately religious | 15 |
| Conservative, not religious | 10 |
| Moderate/Liberal, highly religious | 14 |
| Moderate/Liberal, moderately religious | 12 |
| Moderate/Liberal, not religious | 12 |

Jan. 2-March 26, 2015

Figure 1. Religiosity and Ideology Among Republicans and Republican-Leaning Independents.[32]

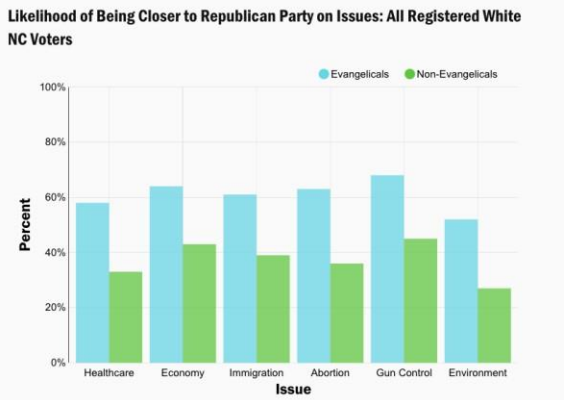



Figure 2. Likelihood of Being Closer to the Republican Party on Issues: All Registered White North Carolina Voters.

According to a 2014 Pew Research Center study, approximately 1 of 4 American adults are registered to an evangelical church, thereby displaying that

[30] J. Jenkins, "How has religion played a role in Donald Trump's presidency?" *America Magazine* (2020, August 24), https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2020/08/24/religion-donald-trump-presidency

[31] J. Husser, "Why Trump is Reliant on White Evangelicals." *Brookings* (2020, March 9), https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2020/04/06/why-trump-is-reliant-on-white-evangelicals/

[32] Frank Newport, "How Many Highly Religious Conservative Republicans Are There?" The Christian Post (2015), https://www.christianpost.com/news/how-many-highly-religious-conservative-republicans-are-there.html, quoted in Frank Newport, "Religiosity and Ideology Among Republicans and Republican-Leaning Independents." *GALLUP* (2015).

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evangelicals prove to be the most common religious group in the U.S.[33] Additionally in 2016, 26% of voters classified themselves as white evangelists. Figure 1 also portrays the dispersed nature of the various religious beliefs and political stances of individuals, where conservative and highly religious people still account for a bulking 34%. Nevertheless, combining the entirety of the conservative citizens, the number of support would accumulate up to 59%, as conservatives and evangelical supporters tend to vote for the Republican party. As shown in Figure 2, a survey in North Carolina further demonstrates the marginal difference between evangelical religious conservatives and non-evangelicals in their choice of party during the election votings. Across all six issues being measured, the possibility of voting for the Republican Party is higher by an average of 24-points if one is evangelical, as there is a likelihood that the voter feels a proximity of religious closeness to the party.[34] [35] Considering this, religion proves to become an effective tool to mobilize people's votes and affect voting turnouts.[36] Thus, we recognize the imperative agenda for Trump to gain the support of these religious communities to create legitimacy of his presidential status.

However, the commonalities between conservatives and Trump's religious approaches were not the only factors for his victory. After 9/11, the emergence of terrorism continued its prolongation, which arose as a threat on U.S. social culture and national security.[37] Because of this, the people had developed a sense of Islamophobia, viewing Muslims as cultural enemies and outsiders. A higher risk issue arose when refugee entry had further increased in the United States, creating this moral construct of people to associate immigrants with terrorism.[38] The rise of Islam benefitted Trump during his election, as many of his policies had mitigated much fear that the public had, especially his

[33] Pew Research Centre, "Detailed Tables on the Evangelical Electorate." In *Pew Research Center* (2014), https://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/12/2016/03/FT_16.03.14.EvangelicalVote2.pdf

[34] D. Miller, "The mystery of evangelical Trump support?" *Constellations*, Vol. 26 No. 1 (2019): 43–58,. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8675.12351

[35] J. Husser, "Why Trump is Reliant on White Evangelicals." *Brookings* (2020, March 9)

[36] J. Fox & S. Sandler, "Bringing Religion into International Relations." In *Palgrave Macmillan US eBooks* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), https://doi.org/10.1057/9781403981127

[37] Ibid.

[38] A. Whitehead, S.L, Perry & J. Baker, "Make America Christian Again: Christian Nationalism and Voting for Donald Trump in the 2016 Presidential Election." *Sociology of Religion*, Vol. 79 No. 2 (2018): 147–171, https://doi.org/10.1093/socrel/srx070

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stance on illegal immigration–often mentioned in the rhetoric of the border wall with Mexico–as well as his particular vision of creating a national religious identity through Christian nationalism.[39]

***The Negative Political and Racial Divide***

Despite succeeding in gathering masses, utilizing religion in policy-making had created a growing gap in society, hence questioning the extent of democracy implementation during Trump's administration. With the diverse coexisting social and cultural conditions evident in the U.S., ideological divergence created many concerns towards the pluralistic character of the state.[40] Thus, this created a unique form of interest-group model under Trump, which not only limited individual freedom compared to Democrat leaders, but also sustained a model of religious foundation which differed to the stereotypical rational and value-free American interest-group model of democracy.[41] Here, we shall focus upon the two leading issues and ramifications that became a concern: the growing gap between the Republican and Democrat Parties and the racial divide between the pluralistic civil society.

First, on the basis of the concept of identity and Wuthnow's idea of restructuring religion, we recognize that the widened gap of the political party division was mainly because of differences in ideological beliefs.[42] During Trump's presidency, even the evangelical supporters had been evenly split into conservatives and liberals. Due to Trump's strong beliefs in Christian values, the conservatives grew stronger in terms of rooted-tradition, where they developed a "doctrinal conservatism and right-leaning politics" (p. 476). Moreover, Trump's major policies of banning abortion, limiting sexuality, gender rights, and racial inequality have created a greater divide amongst supporting parties.[43]

[39] P.S. Gorski, "Why Evangelicals Voted for Trump: A Critical Cultural Sociology." *American Journal of Cultural Sociology*, Vol. 5 No. 3 (2017): 338–354,. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41290-017-0043-9

[40] J.T. O'Brien & E. Abdelhadi, "Re-examining Restructuring: Racialization, Religious Conservatism and Political Leanings in Contemporary American Life."

[41] S.M. Thomas, "The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Relations: The Struggle for the Soul of the Twenty-First Century." *Palgrave Macmillan*, 1st ed. (2004).

[42] W.C. Roof & R. Wuthnow, "The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II." *Review of Religious Research* (1989), https://doi.org/10.2307/3511305

[43] J.T. O'Brien & E. Abdelhadi, "Re-examining Restructuring: Racialization, Religious Conservatism and Political Leanings in Contemporary American Life."

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Thus, questioning the true definition of liberal democracy image that the U.S. has always been trying to build.

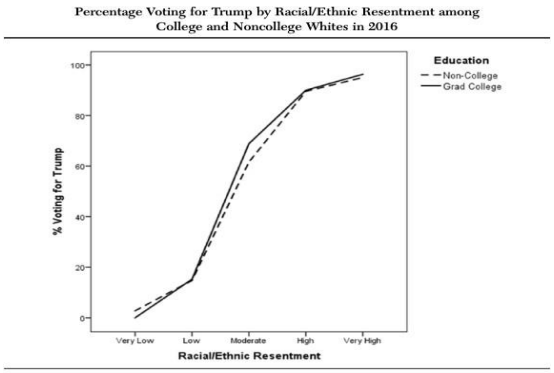



Figure 3. Percentage Voting for Trump by Racial/Ethnic Resentment among College and Noncollege Whites in 2016.[44]

the passing of laws such as the 'Defense of Marriage act', now became more precarious in the way that they perform on their religious freedom since they're aware that the Trump administration as a potential ally in defending those rights.[45] These groups, during the Trump era, believe that they can practice their faith and live according to their values without fear of retribution or legal consequences due to a sense of security the administration provided.

Another key difference lies within their reaction towards each administrations' immigration policy. Although both administrations' immigration policies were faulty to an extent, ones that were enacted during Trump's presidency was notably more controversial, namely the 'Muslim Ban' which was passed on early in his time at the white house. Trump's presidency would mark the beginning of a more hostile and aggressive policy compared to Obama's. During his first 90 days in office, Trump authorized the infamous 'Muslim Ban' where travel was banned for 90 days from six predominantly Muslim countries Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen, and despite blowbacks from all aspects of domestic and international society, the order would extend and include 8 more countries over the course of the next few years.[46] Trump has always painted the rationale behind such executive orders as to protect American soil from 'foreign

[44] A.L. Abramowitz & J. McCoy, "United States: Racial Resentment, Negative Partisanship, and Polarization in Trump's America." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 681 No. 1 (2019): 137–156, https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716218811309

[45] wh.gov, "President Donald J. Trump Stands Up For Religious Freedom In The United States." Trump White House (2018), https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trump-stands-religious-freedom-united-states/

[46] Immigration and Ethnic History Society. (2019), "Muslim Travel Ban." *Immigration History* (2019), https://immigrationhistory.org/item/muslim-travel-ban/

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terrorism',[47] which are inconsistent since terrorists may enter from any country, and not just from the few majority Muslim countries that were officially banned from coming to the U.S. In response, religious conservatives tended to support the administration's efforts to restrict immigration and increase border security.

These kinds of discriminatory policies, along with his style of leadership that is often inflammatory, outspoken and riddled with divisive language makes for a poor political climate as reflected by the deepening split between Republicans and Democrats over core political values and issues compared to before he took office.[48] Overall, the shift of perspective of religious conservative from relatively moderate from the Obama era to borderline extreme during Trump's presidency can be explained through the non-material facts of the phenomenon. Trump, implementing Christian values into presidential policies and decrees has mobilized support from the Evangelical community, moreover his use inflammatory and divisive language has made for a more hostile fanbase – this further supports the constructivist idea that the role of language lies in constructing social reality, and not just limited to its use a communicative tool.[49]

**International Implications**

The international implications of religious conservatism in the United States during the Trump era were far-reaching and its significance echoed in three major areas: LGBTQ+ rights, climate change and foreign policy. As affirmed in earlier illustrations, religious conservatives are generally traditional when discussing LGBTQ+ issues, meaning they either choose to wholly ignore it or be vocally against the cause. Religious conservatives tend to be opposed to issues pertaining to the liberation of LGBTQ+ rights, such as same-sex marriage, due to their biblical-based views of marriage that marriage should be a union between a man and a

[47] M.D. Shear & H. Cooper, "Trump Bars Refugees and Citizens of 7 Muslim Countries." *The New York Times* (2017, January 28), https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/27/us/politics/trump-syrian-refugees.html

[48] Ted Van Green, "Republicans and Democrats alike say it's stressful to talk politics with people who disagree." *Pew Research Centre* (2021), https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/11/23/republicans-and-democrats-alike-say-its-stressful-to-talk-politics-with-people-who-disagree/

[49] F.V. Kratochwil, "Rules, Norms, and Decisions: On the Conditions of Practical and Legal Reasoning in International Relations and Domestic Affairs."

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woman.[50] To reflect the sentiment of his large Evangelical supporters, the Trump administration has rolled back LGBTQ+ rights which has resulted in a rift with other countries.

For instance, the administration's decision to ban transgender people from serving in the military in 2017 was criticized by allies such as the United Kingdom, who allows transgender people to serve freely and openly. Quoted from a written electronic statement by a commander in the U.K. Maritime Forces Rear Admiral Alex Burton, "I am so glad we are not going this way"[51] to show dissatisfaction towards a rather backwards decision. Moreover, the administration's efforts to limit access to abortion and birth control had implications for women's rights around the world – as the U.S. is one of the leading countries in reproductive healthcare and rights, a pushback in the U.S. would mean a push back for countries around the world too.[52]

In the aspect of climate change, the United States as the world's second largest emitter of greenhouse gasses have the responsibility to contribute more towards achieving the goal set by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) which is to limit the temperature increase on Earth to be between 1.5-2°C pre-industrial levels.[53] The Trump administration's overall rejection of climate science led to the subsequent rollback of environmental regulations, specifically the U.S.' decision to withdraw from the Paris Climate Change Agreement in 2017.[54] This could be seen as a victory for religious conservatives who believe in the supremacy of human beings over the natural world, but ultimately it will detrimentally affect the ongoing

[50] Debra L. DeLaet and Rachel Paine Caufield, "Gay Marriage as a Religious Right: Reframing the Legal Debate over Gay Marriage in the United States." *The University of Chicago Press Journal*, Vol. 40 No. 3 (2008), https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/abs/10.1057/palgrave.polity.2300103

[51] BBC News, "UK Military Chiefs Praise Transgender Troops." *BBC News* (2017, July 26), https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-40733701

[52] R. Treisman, (2022, June 29). "The End of Roe Has Implications for Abortion Rights Around the Globe." *NPR* (2022, June 29), https://www.npr.org/2022/06/29/1107656228/the-end-of-roe-has-implications-for-abortion-rights-around-the-globe

[53] "The Paris Agreement." *The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change* (2015), https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement#:~:text=To%20limit%20global%20warming%20to%201.5°C%2C%20greenhouse%20gas,and%20decline%2043%25%20by%202030.

[54] "UNFCCC Statement on the US Decision to Withdraw from Paris Agreement." *The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change* (2017), https://unfccc.int/news/unfccc-statement-on-the-us-decision-to-withdraw-from-paris-agreement

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international efforts to address climate change and protect the planet in which the U.S. has been a leader.[55]

Finally, former President Donald Trump's administration's support of religious conservatism had implications for its foreign policy, particularly in the Middle East. Its support of Israel has led the U.S. to decide to move its embassy to Jerusalem,[56] which was seen as a victory for religious conservatives who support Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state. According to data conducted in 2015, an overwhelming amount of Evangelicals Republicans want the U.S. to lean towards Israel instead of Palestine.[57] To add on, the administration's efforts to restrict immigration, as illustrated in the Muslim ban earlier in the paper, were often framed in terms of protecting American values and preserving the country's Christian heritage.[58]

In sum, the Trump administration's support and attempt to appeal to his substantial Evangelical support base has resulted in questionable laws and policies being passed. From the transgender military ban, the limiting of women's reproductive rights, the rollback of the U.S. membership in the UNFCCC, its pro-Israeli stance, all the way to the discriminatory immigration policies – all have not resulted in a favorable image on the world stage. It is particularly interesting also to note that the issues mentioned above are of liberal values such as equality, individual liberty, human rights, toleration, autonomy, bodily integrity, pluralism and consent. Given that the United States was the first nation to be founded on the liberal ideas from Enlightenment-age philosophers, it is quite contradictory that this is the route it chose to take.[59]

## CONCLUSION

[55] C.T. Parker & C. Karlsson, "The UN climate change negotiations and the role of the United States: assessing American leadership from Copenhagen to Paris." *Environmental Politics*, Vol. 27 No. 3 (2018): 519–540, https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2018.1442388

[56] S. Farrell, "Why is the U.S. moving its embassy to Jerusalem?" *U.S.* (2018, May 7), https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-israel-diplomacy-jerusalem-explai-idUSKBN1I811N

[57] Sadat Chair Poll, "Evangelical Republicans Favor Pro-Israel Policies at Odds with Majority of Americans." *University of Maryland* (2015), https://bsos.umd.edu/featured-content/sadat-chair-poll-evangelical-republicans-favor-pro-israel-policies-odds-majority

[58] W.D. Francois, "The Muslim Ban May Be Unconstitutional, But It's Not Un-American." *Religion Dispatches* (2018, June 7), https://religiondispatches.org/the-muslim-ban-may-be-unconstitutional-but-its-not-un-american/

[59] S. Sawyer & W.J. Novak, "Emancipation and the Creation of Modern Liberal States in America and France." *JSTOR* (2013, December), https://www.jstor.org/stable/26062097

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Recognizing how important the Trump's administration was towards the rise of religious conservatism in the U.S., we would like to reiterate the concept of "mutual dependency"[60] being evident. The utilization of religion in transactional politics has not only created a multitude of human rights marginalizations and cultural wars, but have further tainted the image of the United States as the pioneer of liberal democracy.[61] [62] [63] By corroborating the concepts of religious conservatism and constructivism, the analysis brings forth a new perspective in terms of understanding the socially-created structure under an Evangelical conservative framework. Moreover, it enables the study to compare the contradictory issues of human rights violations and religious beliefs that have been criticized by the international community, especially on the phenomena of LGBT-Q+ and abortion.[64] [65] Thus, the study has found a comparative paragon that differentiated Trump's administration to facilitate religious conservatism and how it translates into its international image of legitimacy.

Firstly, the study discovered a different approach towards conservatism during Trump's administration. The number of evangelical conservatives seemed to have emerged and been more aggressive during Trump's reign, seeing his Christian-approach in policy-making decisions. The evidence is supported by Kratochwil's (1991)[66] conception of using religion to construct social reality, shown through Trump's divisive language in reacting to the issues of terrorism, immigrants, homosexuality, and other secular issues. Evangelicals became more prominent, knowing Trump became a potential ally in supporting their beliefs.[67] Nonetheless, the

[60] D. Smith, "Extreme Abortion Laws Shine Light on Trump's Courting of Religious Rights." *The Guardian* (2021, January 6), https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/may/13/donald-trump-evangelical-christians-republicans-abortion-supreme-court

[61] W.C. Roof & R. Wuthnow, "The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II." *Review of Religious Research* (1989), https://doi.org/10.2307/3511305

[62] J.L. Guth, *Obama, Religious Politics and the Culture Wars*

[63] J. Haynes, "Donald Trump, the Christian Right and COVID-19: The Politics of Religious Freedom."

[64] M. Finnemore, "National Interests in International Society."

[65] J. Knuckey, "Religious Conservatives, the Republican Party and Evolving Party Coalitions in the United States."

[66] F.V. Kratochwil, "Rules, Norms, and Decisions: On the Conditions of Practical and Legal Reasoning in International Relations and Domestic Affairs."

[67] Michael Dimock, "An examination of the 2016 electorate, based on validated voters." *Pew Research Centre* (2018), https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2018/12/13/18-striking-findings-from-2018/

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Obama and Trump regimes differed not only in the social construct of policies, but also in the outcomes of the said values. Trump's term resulted in political and racial divide, causing the contradictory creation of the usual American interest-model group for civil society.[6869] Thus, creating a borderline between the Democrats and Republicans due to ideological divergence, as well as restructuring conservatism towards the response on race and Islamic religion.

Secondly, we recognize that the U.S., under Trump's presidency has taken the wrong direction and approaches in all the three key issues of LGBT-Q+ rights, climate change and foreign policy based on religious conservatism. Remembering the liberal reputation of the U.S. after the Enlightenment age, the Trump administration has attempted to shorten the gap between religion and secular development. However, it has backfired in terms of the socio-political welfare of the people. Thus, creating a series of violent riots that lessen the social legitimacy of the U.S. in the eyes of the international community. The U.S. is no longer perceived as the poster child for liberal democratic values that it had once promoted, as it completely disregards the plurality of its civil society that becomes one of the key aspects of raising state legitimacy.[70] [71]

In retrospect to these arguments, we realize that religion is still evidently a part of the U.S. identity, especially in the debates between the Republican and Democrat parties and supporters. We believe that despite the negative outcomes of Trump's presidency, we believe that he succeeded in bringing light and control to the conservative parties, who contribute for almost half of the U.S. population. Ultimately, religion holds a significant form of soft power[72] that can be utilized to gain voters favor and even foreign policy building, as seen from Trump's election and international policies with the Middle

[68] S.M. Thomas, "The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Relations: The Struggle for the Soul of the Twenty-First Century."

[69] J.T. O'Brien & E. Abdelhadi, "Re-examining Restructuring: Racialization, Religious Conservatism and Political Leanings in Contemporary American Life."

[70] S.M. Thomas, "The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Relations: The Struggle for the Soul of the Twenty-First Century."

[71] J. Fox & S. Sandler, "Bringing Religion into International Relations."

[72] S.M. Thomas, "The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Relations: The Struggle for the Soul of the Twenty-First Century."

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## RECOMMENDATION

For future implications and research, primary data could be utilized to show the realistic and pragmatic perspective happening in the field. Furthermore, the authors hope that this framework of analysis could be somewhat applied to other government systems, to showcase the dynamic and intercorrelated influence religion has in national politics.

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