

Religion in American Presidential Campaigns, 1952–2016: Applying a New Framework for Understanding Candidate Communication

CHRISTOPHER B. CHAPP
Department of Political Science
St. Olaf College

KEVIN COE 
Department of Communication
University of Utah

The content and impact of religious communication in politics has been a topic of increasing public and scholarly interest in recent years. To provide a foundation for future research in this area, the present study theorizes five broad factors—historical trajectory, party expectations, audience religiosity, candidate attributes, and opponent strategy—that may help explain why political candidates use religious language. We employ this framework in a large-scale computer-assisted content analysis of U.S. presidential campaign speeches from 1952 to 2016. Findings reveal that the Reagan shift observed in prior research was driven specifically by God language, that the “God gap” between Democrats and Republicans is modest and topic-specific, and that audience characteristics are crucial in explaining candidates’ religious communication.

Keywords: politics, campaign communication, religious communication, God gap, narrowcasting.

INTRODUCTION

In 1972, Richard Nixon was seeking reelection as U.S. president. Facing South Dakota Senator George McGovern in what would eventually become a landslide victory for Nixon, the incumbent president talked about many things over the course of the campaign—especially his plan to end the Vietnam War and the opening of formal relations with China. One thing Nixon rarely talked about, however, was God. Over the course of his campaign, Nixon mentioned God in just 16 percent of his speeches. When all was said and done, Nixon had employed less religious language than any other television-era presidential candidate. Contrast these rhetorical choices with those made by another Republican president who, roughly a decade later, would also coast to reelection. Ronald Reagan, facing Minnesota Senator Walter Mondale in 1984, mentioned God in 95 percent of his speeches. Over the course of that campaign—often remembered for its famous “Morning in America” political ads—Reagan’s use of religious language reached a high that is still unmatched in modern presidential campaign history.

Such striking variation in the religious communication of U.S. politicians has garnered considerable attention of late. As the 2016 presidential campaign unfolded, for instance, 40 percent of Americans reported feeling that there was “too little” expression of religious faith and prayer by political leaders, while another 27 percent felt there was “too much” (Pew Research Center 2016). Scholars, too, have taken note. Over the course of the past decade alone, a rapidly growing body of research has examined the content (e.g., Coe and Chenoweth 2013; Domke and Coe 2010; Kaylor 2011; Kradel 2008) and important effects (e.g., Albertson 2015; Calfano and Djupe 2009; Chapp 2012; Weber and Thornton 2012) of political invocations of religious faith. This newer scholarship has been built upon a handful of foundational studies that, decades ago,

Correspondence should be addressed to Christopher Chapp, Department of Political Science, St. Olaf College, MN 55057. E-Mail: chapp@stolaf.edu

underscored the prominent and complex role that public displays of religion play in American political culture (e.g., Bellah 1967, 1975; Hart 2005/1977).

The present study forwards this growing literature in three key ways. First, we analyze a larger sample of speeches than has any other quantitative analysis to date. Drawing on a computer-assisted content analysis of nearly 2,800 speeches across the past 17 presidential campaigns, our data provide an uncommonly expansive view of candidate discourse. Taking such a broad view is especially needed in the context of campaign communication, where the intricacies of any given campaign often create unusual patterns. Second, whereas much of the extant literature examines only one or two indicators of religious language, we employ Coe and Chenoweth's (2013) detailed six-part typology of Christian discourse, which permits us a more nuanced look at the variety of religious language present in political discourse.¹ Finally, so that our analysis might provide a framework for future scholarship, we theorize five broad factors—historical trajectory, party expectations, audience religiosity, candidate attributes, and opponent strategy—that might help explain why candidates employ religious language. Taken together, these features provide a needed complement to a rapidly growing area of research.

Theoretical Background

Religious Communication and American Politics

Religion and politics continually intersect in the U.S., engendering what sociologist Robert Bellah long ago labeled American civil religion. Bellah, borrowing a phrase from Jean-Jacques Rousseau, defined civil religion as “a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals” through which a society “interprets its historical experience in light of transcendent reality” (Bellah 1967:4; 1975:3). Civil religion has many facets, some of which are predominately about the nation (as opposed to religion) and others that are steeped in religious—especially Christian—tradition (Chapp 2012; Domke and Coe 2010). Regardless, the norm of American civil religion dictates that politicians of all stripes regularly include religious themes in their public communication, ranging from the typical speech signoff of “God Bless America” (which became standard during the Reagan era) to detailed explanations or defenses of one's own faith (as, for example, John Kennedy offered during his famous speech to the Houston Ministerial Association in 1960). Presidents and presidential hopefuls have a particularly strong impulse to employ such language, as they often come to serve as “the high priest of the national faith” (Hart 2005:34).

Scholars have recently paid considerable attention to politicians' religious discourse, and with good reason: Such language has important implications for how key segments of the U.S. citizenry engage in political life. Indeed, several recent studies have demonstrated that political candidates can invoke religious themes as an advantageous “signal” to certain voters. For example, Calfano and Djupe (2009; see also Djupe and Calfano 2013) undertook an experiment in which students were asked to evaluate hypothetical candidates, some of whom employed subtle religious statements drawn from Republican Party rhetoric. Those students who identified as evangelicals understood this “code” and viewed the candidate who employed it more favorably than did other participants. In a similar experiment using a representative sample of adults, Weber and Thornton (2012) found that subtle religious cues embedded in campaign ads were able to influence candidate preference by priming “religious traditionalism,” an effect that was reduced when additional (secular) information was provided. More recently, Albertson (2015; see also Albertson 2011) employed two national samples to demonstrate experimentally that “multivocal” religious appeals (i.e., those understood by the religious in-group but not by others) can increase candidate favorability among those who understand them. In sum, the available evidence indicates that

¹Coe and Chenoweth's (2013) typology-building analysis focused on presidential discourse since 1980.

candidates' religious rhetoric, carefully deployed, can encourage certain religiously inclined citizens to view those candidates more favorably.

Much of the research on the content of religious communication in politics has focused on the presidency. Some of this work employs qualitative methods to highlight similarities and differences across presidencies (e.g., Hart 2005; Roof 2009). A smaller but rapidly expanding body of scholarship has tracked, via quantitative measures, changes in presidents' religious communication over time (e.g., Bailey and Lindholm 2003; Domke and Coe 2010; Kradel 2008; Shogan 2006). We opt to focus herein on presidential campaign discourse because that considerably expands the sample of politicians (including both presidents and losing candidates) and because the religious communication that happens in an election context would seem to have the most opportunity to generate politically consequential effects.

Within the research that has focused specifically on presidential candidates, two studies warrant particular mention. Kaylor's (2011) book offers an extensive qualitative analysis of presidential candidates from 1976 to 2008. Kaylor argues that presidential candidates are now expected to regularly express their religious faith publicly—what he dubs the “confessional political style”—and that they do so in ways that tend to be testimonial, partisan, and sectarian. Chapp's (2012) book is similarly extensive. It focuses on how religious communication in politics invokes shared identity and emotion, chronicling these features historically via qualitative analysis and then tracking them since 1980 via computer-assisted content analysis. Chapp also employs both experiments and surveys to demonstrate the effects of these themes, concluding that religious rhetoric is “electorally consequential and culturally significant, with important implications for how we interpret American political representation” (p. 16).

Religious Communication in Political Campaigns: A Conceptual Framework

The current body of scholarship provides needed insight into the content and effects of political candidates' religious communication. As yet, however, this research includes no overarching conceptual framework that might help to interpret broad trends in religious communication and explain why political candidates employ religious communication in the fashion that they do. With this in mind, we theorize five broad factors that might regularly influence the extent and kind of religious language that politicians employ.

The first of these factors is *historical trajectory*. By this we mean the broad, if unsteady, over-time changes that sometimes characterize political speech. Consider, as one prominent example, the U.S. presidency. Scholars have found that over the past several decades presidential discourse has grown less complex (Lim 2008), more morally charged (Shogan 2006), and more likely to position the president as one with the American people (Teten 2003). In the case of religion, such large-scale changes defy easy categorization. Whereas it was once theorized that the secularization of society was a somewhat steady and almost inevitable process (e.g., Martin 1978; for a review, see Swatos and Christiano 1999), current thinking generally disputes this view. There are still vigorous and (in many places) growing religious communities, ample evidence of what has been called “desecularization” (Berger 1999; see also Swatos and Olson 2000; Warner 2010). Translating this thinking into the context of religious discourse leads us to expect not steady change over time but rather periodic shifts. One possibility for such variation is what we call the “Reagan shift.” Several recent studies have demonstrated a noticeable uptick in presidents' religious language beginning with the presidency of Ronald Reagan (e.g., Domke and Coe 2010; Hogue 2012; Kradel 2008). While this purported uptick in religious language may seem at odds with declining religious adherence, it is possible that as distinct religious communities decline in numbers, specific appeals to these groups become all the more potent. The scope of our data will permit the fullest test to date of this possibility.

A second factor that might influence religious language is *party expectations*. It is well established that, since at least the presidency of Ronald Reagan, Republicans have typically had greater success than Democrats in courting voters whose Christian faith is central to their political

views (Domke and Coe 2010; Kellstedt et al. 2007)—a phenomenon that is often referred to as the “God gap” (Burke 2006). This successful courtship was aided by—and, ultimately, contributed to—a willingness among Republican presidents to emphasize religious themes in their public communications (Hogue 2012). Indeed, research has shown that the greater the proportion of mainline and evangelical Protestants in a president’s electoral coalition, the higher the likelihood that his major addresses will employ religious rhetoric (Kradel 2008). Consistent with this idea, several studies have indicated that Democrat Bill Clinton was lower on certain measures of religious language than were Republicans Reagan, George H. W. Bush, and George W. Bush (e.g., Domke and Coe 2010; Kradel 2008; Shogan 2006). And yet, the very existence of such a “God gap” might sometimes compel Democrats to emphasize their faith, lest they be perceived as religiously deficient. Along these lines, some recent evidence suggests that, when presidents speak to religious audiences, party differences are not strong predictors of the degree of religious rhetoric used (Coe, Domke, and Schmidt 2015). With these competing possibilities in mind, we consider whether party has been a consistent predictor of religious language in candidate discourse over the past six decades.

Third, we explore *audience religiosity* as a potential driver of religious communication in political campaigns. It is no secret that speakers carefully adapt their language to fit the expectations of a given audience. This truth is a fundamental principle of the study of rhetoric dating to at least Aristotle, and it remains true today. Nevertheless, religion in politics is a particularly interesting domain in which to study the contours of this possibility. Religion is, for many people, deeply connected to the sacred and thus the foundation of their most sincerely held beliefs. In this respect, religious language would seem to be less subject to strategic alteration than would language about many other political positions. At the same time, religion as an audience characteristic is often easily observable in the political sphere. Unlike many other audience characteristics—say, level of education or attitudes about a given policy—when a politician addresses a religious organization s/he can be fairly certain that religious language will be well received by that audience. Religion thus provides a relatively clean test for scholars interested in better understanding strategic political communication. The expectation that audience religiosity might influence communication has some recent empirical support. Examining stump speeches from the 2012 presidential campaign, Coe and Chapp (2017) found that candidates “narrowcast” religious messages to align with the religious composition of the target audience (though candidates’ ability to narrowcast is constrained by a number of factors). The present study provides a test of this finding across multiple campaigns.

Fourth, it seems likely that *candidate attributes* will matter. Candidate attributes account for the particular inclinations and habits that every political candidate is sure to have. Based on their personal religious history (including the denomination they were raised in, the regularity of their church attendance, etc.), their comfort with public expressions of faith, and their weighing of strategic considerations, different candidates might travel different paths with respect to religious language. In 1999, for instance, presidential hopeful George W. Bush garnered headlines—in what came to be called his “Christ moment”—when, in very personal terms, he identified Christ as the political philosopher who had most influenced him. As an evangelical Christian, this kind of rhetoric was consistent with Bush’s religious sentiments and served as “something of a coming out” (Rosin 1999:para. 4) for his willingness to communicate his faith on the national stage. Eight years later, Barack Obama’s public expressions of faith were influenced by his fondness for theologian Reinhold Niebuhr (Holder and Josephson 2012). At the same time, Obama found himself having to defend his religious commitments after video surfaced of his pastor, Jeremiah Wright, criticizing the United States. In this moment, Obama had to do what many politicians must do during campaigns: weigh their own religious inclinations against serious strategic considerations (see Coe 2018).

Finally, we consider whether *opponent strategy* might sway a candidate’s rhetorical choices. Specifically, if one candidate is heavily emphasizing religion, the other candidate might feel

compelled to do so as well. This expectation can be tied to the concept of “campaign dialogue.” Campaign dialogue has primarily been studied by examining the extent to which candidates take stances on the same issue positions as their opponents. Drawing on theories of issue ownership, Simon (2002) argues that (despite the normative appeal of hearing contrasting issue positions) candidates have relatively little incentive to engage with their opponent on their home turf. Others argue that issue convergence is considerably more common, and that factors such as electoral competitiveness incentivize greater convergence (Kaplan, Park, and Ridout 2006). The study of religious discourse offers a unique opportunity to broaden this literature on campaign dialogue because such discourse is not an issue position *per se* but rather a manner of self-presentation that potentially confers electoral advantages. The present study can thus offer exploratory insights into whether candidates are responsive to their opponents’ stylistic choices, independent of any particular issue position. In any given presidential election, certain exigencies might demand some degree of religious language from candidates. For example, in the 2004 election numerous states had ballot measures pertaining to same-sex marriage. President George W. Bush regularly cast this issue in religious terms, meaning his challenger, Senator John Kerry, may have been likely to touch upon such terms whether he was inclined to or not.

These five factors, then—historical trajectory, party expectations, audience religiosity, candidate attributes, and opponent strategy—provide a conceptual framework through which overarching trends in candidates’ religious communication might be better understood.

METHOD

Our goal in this study is to provide the broadest examination to date of religious language in campaign communication. Toward this end, our analysis includes the stump speeches of every major party candidate in presidential elections since 1952—the earliest date for which we were able to access speeches. Stump speeches have two key advantages for our purposes. First, their format has remained largely unchanged over the years, allowing us to make meaningful comparisons over time. Second, stump speeches are usually delivered to loyal partisan crowds and contain standard elements repeated with great regularity over the course of the campaign. Given this, any variation that is present in candidates’ religious communication during stump speeches should be particularly meaningful.

Collecting a comprehensive list of stump speeches required drawing on several sources. We obtained speeches from 1952 to 1996 from the Annenberg Pew Archive of Presidential Campaign Discourse. However, this archive does not contain speeches from Goldwater’s 1964 campaign, so we identified what we believe to be the most comprehensive set of Goldwater stump speeches in existence (from the Arizona Historical Foundation’s Goldwater Collection at Arizona State University) and transcribed them by hand. Speeches from 2000 to 2016 were obtained by performing exhaustive searches of newswire transcription services such as States News Service and CQ Transcriptions, which provide transcriptions of public events for media outlets. These archives were then supplemented with data made available at the American Presidency Project’s “Election Documents” archive. Finally, to ensure we did not miss any key speeches before religious audiences, we reached out to several religious groups that hosted presidential candidates in past elections. These efforts did not yield records of any additional speeches, which we take as a good indicator of the comprehensiveness of our search. In all, this collection procedure returned 2,797 speeches across the past 17 presidential elections.

Speeches were analyzed using Coe and Chenoweth’s (2013) typology, which identifies six categories of Christian discourse common in presidential communication: God (e.g., the Almighty, the Creator), the Bible (e.g., the Gospel, book of Job), physical manifestations of religion (e.g., church, crucifix), metaphysical manifestations of religion (e.g., blessings, heaven), nonleader religious figures (e.g., Christians, Catholics), and religious figures in leadership positions (e.g.,

pastor, priest). The Coe and Chenoweth typology was developed for, and employed in, computer-assisted content analysis (the same manner in which we apply it here), but has the advantage of having also been tested via interactive human coding, for which validity was 99.3 percent. That is, Coe and Chenoweth found the computer and the human coder applied the typology categories in the same way 99.3 percent of the time—giving us confidence that our application of the typology will produce valid measures.

To apply the typology, we used the computer program Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC; see Pennebaker, Francis, and Booth 2007).² LIWC is widely used in analysis of political messages, and has been used previously to track religious language in political discourse (e.g., Chapp 2012; Coe and Chapp 2017). The program counts the frequency with which words in each assigned category appear in a speech, and divides by the total word count for the speech. Thus, this process produced six discrete religious communication variables for each speech in our sample.

RESULTS

We approach our data in two ways. First, we run several univariate tests to individually examine each of the five factors that we have theorized to help explain candidates' religious communication. We then run multivariate tests—specifically, a series of three-level linear regressions—to better illustrate how these explanatory factors relate to one another and to relevant contextual factors.

Univariate Tests

Our first interest is in the historical trajectory of religious language in candidate speeches. To begin, it is worth noting that religious language has been a remarkably steady part of candidate stump speeches since 1952. In our sample, 88 percent of the speeches included at least some mention of religion, with 61 percent including a reference to God *per se*. To begin to understand the distribution of these references over time, Figure 1 maps, by decade, each of the six categories of religious language. Of the six themes, only metaphysical manifestations ended up substantially lower than where it began—and its path in getting there was not especially steady. In contrast, one theme—God—had a clear upward trajectory for several decades, before dipping somewhat in the 2010s. And indeed, comparing the pre-Reagan period to the period from Reagan forward reveals that God discourse nearly doubled in the latter, from a score of .046 to .077, $t(df = 2,795) = 9.39$, $p < .001$. God discourse also became a steadier presence after the Reagan shift. Prior to Reagan's 1980 campaign, roughly 44 percent of speeches included at least one reference to God. Since that time, roughly 81 percent of speeches mentioned God, $\chi^2(df = 1) = 398.01$, $p < .001$. These findings, then, provide an important clarification about the Reagan shift. If Reagan's influence in presidential discourse occurred across a range of religious themes (see Domke and Coe 2010), in campaign discourse it was limited strictly to increasing God references.

Second, we consider the possibility that party expectations have led to a “God gap” between the parties, such that the Republicans have employed more religious language than have Democrats. Broadly, this turns out to be the case: Republicans' total volume of religious discourse over the past six decades has been higher than Democrats', $t(df = 2,795) = 3.042$, $p < .01$. Another way of exploring this is to consider changes over time. Figure 2 does this, mapping total religiosity separately for Democratic and Republican candidates in each of the

²To fit Coe and Chenoweth's (2013) typology to LIWC, we made slight modifications that included removing a small number of multiword phrases.

Figure 1
Religious communication by decade

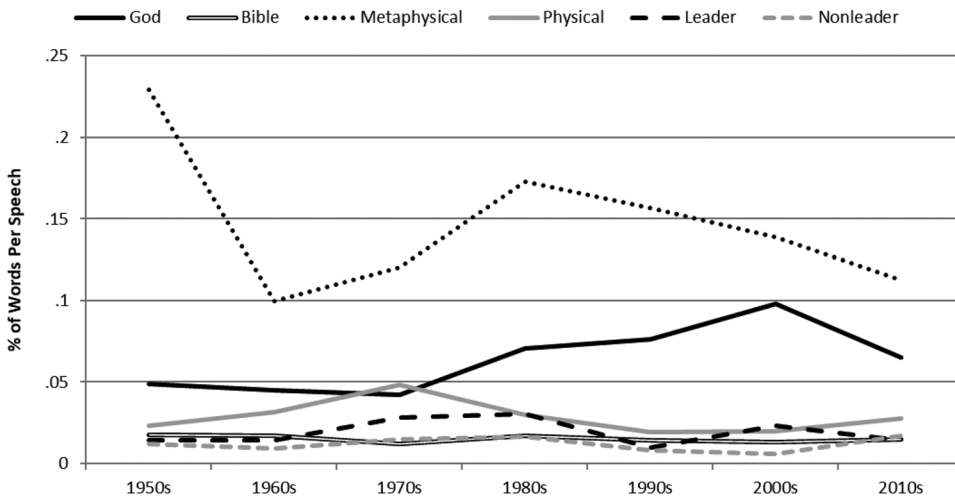
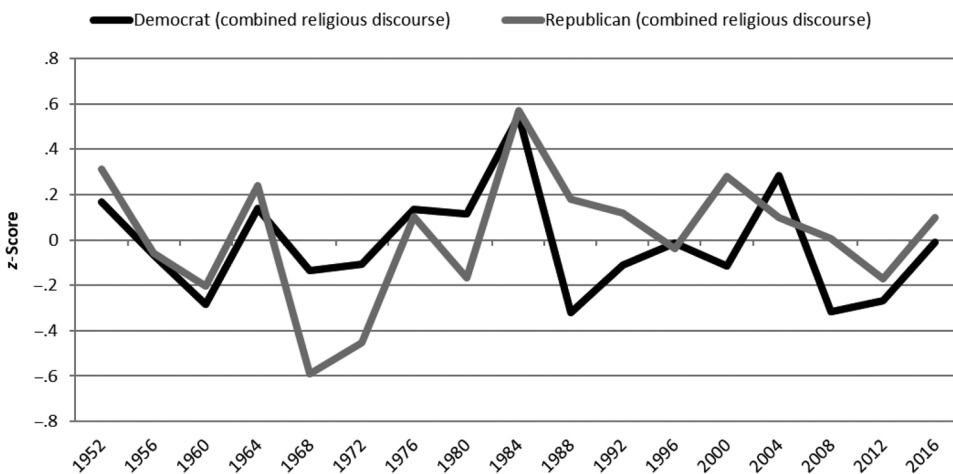


Figure 2
Religious communication by party and election year



17 elections considered here. This shows that Republicans’ heightened religiosity has been a fairly steady, if not overwhelming, feature of presidential campaigns. In 11 of the 17 campaigns (65 percent), the Republican candidate used more religious language. The primary exception was the period from 1968 to 1980, when the Democratic candidate led for four cycles in a row. Splitting out the six religious themes provides further nuances into by-party usage. For two of the themes—Biblical references and leaders—there were no significant differences between the two parties. For two other themes, Democrats had modestly higher scores: physical manifestations, $t(df = 2,795) = 1.92, p < .10$, and nonleaders, $t(df = 2795) = 2.71, p < .05$. In the remaining two cases, Republicans exceeded Democrats: God, $t(df = 2,795) = 2.58, p < .01$, and metaphysical manifestations, $t(df = 2,795) = 6.04, p < .001$. Party expectations, then, do help to explain overall patterns of candidates’ religious discourse.

Our third interest was audience religiosity. If presidential candidates are thinking strategically about their language choices, it follows that they would employ higher levels of religious discourse

when speaking to religious audiences. To test this possibility, we isolated in our sample those speeches ($n = 80$; roughly 3 percent of all campaign speeches) in which candidates spoke at religious sites (e.g., churches, religious schools) or to an audience with an explicitly religious orientation (e.g., the Catholic Educational Association, the Christian Coalition). Comparing presidents' language in these speeches to their language in other speeches reveals that presidents did massively increase their religious language based on audience religiosity, from a score of .25 to 1.17, $t(df = 2,795) = 8.00, p < .001$. Substantively, this means that candidates used religious language in their speeches to religious audiences at a rate 4.5 times higher than conventional stump speeches. This proved to be a remarkably robust finding, holding across every one of the six categories.

Remarkably, while the parties tend to get support from very different religious constituencies, they actually respond to religious audiences in a relatively consistent manner. Both Republican and Democratic candidates responded to religious audiences by increasing their rate of religious language across each of the six categories, with the largest increase coming in the metaphysical category. This similarity is especially interesting given that the religious audiences chosen by the candidates were themselves quite different (for example, Democrats visited more sites where they were likely to engage with African American protestants, while Republicans spoke before more audiences likely to be composed of white evangelicals). All of this reinforces two points: First, candidate invocations of faith are not strictly reflections of their own underlying beliefs. Rather, they also reflect strategic consideration about audience receptivity to particular religious messages. Second, despite differences in the religious coalitions of the parties, neither party owns a particular script for religious communication.

Our fourth interest was in how candidate attributes might influence religious discourse. To explore such variation, Table 1 breaks out each candidate along three metrics. The first is a z -score that shows how many standard deviations above or below the combined mean each candidate varied. The second and third metrics are also z -scores, these revealing on which theme the candidate was farthest above (favored theme) and below (disfavored theme) the overall mean for that theme. The table drives home the importance of understanding religious rhetoric in terms of its component dimensions, rather than only as a single category. Whereas some candidates (like Jimmy Carter and George W. Bush) gained a "reputation" for their personal piety, no single candidate scored above the mean along all six dimensions. That is to say, even the most religious candidates did not strongly emphasize every aspect of public religiosity. Only one candidate, Richard Nixon, scored below the mean on every dimension. Thus, it is usually a mistake to characterize some candidates as entirely more or less religious in their public remarks. A more accurate interpretation is that candidates emphasize, or deemphasize, certain religious themes.

Table 1 also underscores that there is not a steady temporal trend in religious discourse, and that partisan differences are not fully deterministic of candidate rhetoric. In other words, it supports an examination of how candidates' personal backgrounds (e.g., denomination, participation in religious life) can influence the religious themes they choose to emphasize. The cases of John Kennedy and Mitt Romney are illustrative. Both of these candidates belonged to religious denominations (Catholicism and Mormonism, respectively) that were, at the time of their campaigns, viewed with skepticism—and, in some cases, even outright hostility—by large portions of the American public. In each case, the candidates were below average in their use of religious language (Kennedy especially so), and both particularly disfavored talking about the metaphysical manifestations of Christianity—represented by terms such as pray, heaven, hell, angel, faith, and amen. Their hesitance to talk in these terms may well reflect a strategy to downplay the more spiritual aspects of their faith, lest they raise questions they would prefer not to have to answer. In contrast, an evangelical candidate such as George W. Bush would be more likely to benefit from speaking explicitly as a member of his religious community—as he did in his aforementioned "Christ moment."

Finally, we consider whether presidential candidates respond to the religious self-presentation of their campaign opponents. Returning to Figure 2, we can see that Republican and Democratic

Table 1: Candidates' use of religious language

Candidate	Total Religious Language	Favored Theme	Disfavored Theme
Stevenson	.105	Metaphysical (.214)	God (−.064)
Eisenhower	.262	Metaphysical (.650)	God (−.184)
Kennedy	−.282	Nonleader (.016)	Metaphysical (−.411)
Nixon	−.327	Physical (−.074)	God (−.361)
Johnson	.134	God (.343)	Metaphysical (−.036)
Goldwater	.262	God (.459)	Leader (−.093)
Humphrey	−.134	Bible (.178)	God (−.239)
McGovern	−.109	Nonleader (.243)	Metaphysical (−.201)
Carter	.121	God (.208)	Metaphysical (−.063)
Ford	.102	Leader (.360)	Bible (−.150)
Reagan	.261	God (.310)	Physical (−.056)
Mondale	.547	Metaphysical (.699)	God (−.198)
GHW Bush	.134	God (.284)	Nonleader (−.161)
Dukakis	−.319	Bible (.175)	God (−.377)
WJ Clinton	−.055	God (.153)	Bible (−.159)
Dole	−.024	Bible (.317)	Leader (−.228)
Gore	−.114	God (.086)	Metaphysical (−.197)
GW Bush	.146	God (.511)	Nonleader (−.072)
Kerry	.283	God (.574)	Bible (−.059)
Obama	−.285	God (.086)	Metaphysical (−.260)
McCain	.007	God (.697)	Physical (−.200)
Romney	−.172	God (.261)	Metaphysical (−.444)
HR Clinton	−.010	Nonleader (.208)	God (−.101)
Trump	.055	Nonleader (.259)	Physical (−.064)

Note: All numbers are z-scores.

candidates' overall religiosity tends to mirror their opponents' religiosity quite closely ($r = .53$, $n = 17$, $p < .05$). This suggests that, at least at a superficial level, candidates listen to their opponents and respond accordingly. Two cases stand out. In 1968, as Vietnam War protests and the struggle for civil rights dominated the national imagination, both Hubert Humphrey and Richard Nixon used an uncommonly low volume of religious discourse. For Nixon, this was in character—as president, he was among the most infrequent users of religious language (Domke and Coe 2010)—but was even lower than his two other campaigns (1960 and 1972). Given Nixon's tendencies, Humphrey likely felt little need to emphasize religion.

On the other end of the spectrum is the 1984 campaign. This campaign—the first after Reagan's success in speaking the language of newly mobilized conservative Christians in 1980—was truly stunning in just how far it deviated from the campaign norm. It seems likely that Walter Mondale, knowing Reagan would stress faith, sought to do so as well. But here, considering the six individual themes is instructive. Across all the campaigns, a significant correlation exists for only one of the six themes (metaphysical), suggesting that “campaign dialogue” in the religious communication context does not necessarily bring about a direct exchange of substantive ideas. The 1984 campaign illustrates this finding. Reagan employed soaring “God” rhetoric across his speeches, making civil religion-like claims that “God . . . made us and . . . has blessed us more than any people have ever been blessed here on this Earth.” Mondale responded with lower-than-average God rhetoric, and instead embraced metaphysical, leader, and nonleader rhetoric. For example, he would regularly argue that “[Republicans] want control over your most personal and religious choices. I am a Methodist preacher's kid. My wife is a Presbyterian daughter. I believe

in prayer, but I believe that should be personal.” In sum, candidates appear to respond to the religious communication of their opponents, but tend to do so in ways that play to their particular strengths.

Multivariate Tests

To evaluate the combined relationship between the aforementioned variables and religious discourse, we specify a three-level linear model, treating each speech as “nested” in distinct candidate- and year-level factors. Specifically, we regress each of the religious variables on two speech-level variables (a dummy variable indicating whether or not the speech was addressed to a religious audience, and—to offer a contrast via an audience measure that is theoretically secular—a dummy variable for convention speeches), one candidate-level variable (higher score = GOP), and several year-level variables. At the year level, we include a dummy variable for post-1980 campaigns in order to evaluate the Reagan shift hypothesis. We also examine several year-level variables to evaluate the relationship between the religious campaign environment and religious rhetoric. Doing so needs some explanation, because measuring the religious composition of the electorate at any given point in time requires building indices from survey instruments that have been measured imperfectly and inconsistently over time. We use data from the American National Election Study (ANES), which has been administered in every election since 1952. The items used to measure religion have changed a good deal in this time. Measures of religious tradition, for example, have become considerably more nuanced. Fortunately, one item—worship attendance—has been asked in a relatively consistent manner across the entire time series. Although the response options have changed over time, the ANES has always included a single response category for nonattendance. We adopt this item—the percentage of (weighted) survey respondents not attending worship services—as our main indicator of the religious environment. Given that the ANES also measures party identification, we are also able to estimate in a given year the relative size of the partisan religious gap (i.e., the relative Democratic advantage among nonattenders). Each of these religious environment variables, along with an interaction between Democratic nonattender advantage and party, is included in the final model in Table 2. Because of concerns about collinearity between “nonattendance” and the “Reagan shift,” we model each rhetoric variable with and without the post-1980 dummy variable.

The most robust finding is that audience matters. Across all 12 models, the religiosity of the audience has a strong positive relationship with religious rhetoric. This helps clarify Coe and Chapp’s (2017) finding that candidates in the 2012 election modified their rhetoric to narrowcast to religious audiences; apparently what was true in 2012 is representative of a broader phenomenon. All else equal, candidates are careful to deploy religious language to friendly audiences. Notably, convention speeches also had elevated levels of God, Bible, and metaphysical rhetoric. Given that the convention speech genre is a broadcast as opposed to a narrowcast, the incentives for invoking religion are different in this context than in lower-profile speeches to a religious audience. Hart (2000) characterizes convention acceptance speeches as “rhetorical hybrid[s], strangely suspended between the pontifications of inaugural oratory and the quotidian promises of the campaign trail” (p. 106) with the power to reach “into the nation’s sacred lexicon (Patriotic and Religious terms) and touch . . . on its sacred truths” (p. 108). It follows, then, that convention speeches—with a national audience and much of the majesty of an inaugural address—might draw on some of the more abstract aspects of religious language.

None of the other variables were significant predictors, but a few tentative insights can nonetheless be gleaned from the table. First, in contrast to the audience variables, the partisan motivations for religious rhetoric are less clear. Republicans may be slightly more likely to use abstract religious language—like references to God and metaphysical concepts. More conclusively, the models indicate that insofar as partisan differences exist, they are likely not a response to the increasingly tight relationship between religious “nones” and the Democratic Party. The

Table 2: Multivariate analysis of religious discourse

	God				Bible			
	(A)		(B)		(A)		(B)	
	Coeff.	Std. Error	Coeff.	Std. Error	Coeff.	Std. Error	Coeff.	Std. Error
(Intercept)	-.0132	(.0279)	-.0029	(.0300)	.0209**	(.0048)	.0222**	(.0050)
Religious audience	.1165**	(.0094)	.1165**	(.0094)	.0391**	(.0040)	.039**	(.0040)
Convention	.0402**	(.0140)	.0403**	(.0140)	.0204**	(.0060)	.0204**	(.0059)
Party	.0283	(.0153)	.0273	(.0159)	-.0018	(.0029)	-.0019	(.0027)
Nonattendance	.0019	(.0010)	.0006	(.0150)	-.0002	(.0002)	-.0004	(.0002)
"None advantage"	.0017	(.0041)	.0025	(.0043)	-.0004	(.0008)	-.0004	(.0008)
Party*Advantage	-.0031	(.0020)	-.0029	(.0021)	.0004	(.0004)	.0005	(.0004)
Post-1980	—	—	.0311	(.0249)	—	—	.0032	(.0005)
AIC	—	-5,885.758	—	-5,879.679	—	-10,663.46	—	-10,653.05
	Leader				Nonleader			
	(A)		(B)		(A)		(B)	
	Coeff.	Std. Error	Coeff.	Std. Error	Coeff.	Std. Error	Coeff.	Std. Error
(Intercept)	.0099	(.0100)	.0103	(.0100)	.0189*	(.0066)	.0197*	(.0069)
Religious audience	.1389**	(.0069)	.1389**	(.0069)	.1591**	(.0065)	.1591**	(.0065)
Convention	.0023	(.0104)	.0024	(.0104)	.0048	(.0097)	.0048	(.0097)
Party	.0045	(.0051)	.0045	(.0051)	-.0069	(.0039)	-.007	(.0039)
Nonattendance	.0002	(.0004)	.0001	(.0007)	-.0003	(.0002)	-.0004	(.0004)
"None advantage"	-.0001	(.0016)	.000001	(.0017)	.0005	(.0011)	.0005	(.0011)
Party*Advantage	-.0007	(.0007)	-.0007	(.0007)	.0004	(.0006)	.0004	(.0006)
Post-1980	—	—	.0012	(.0124)	—	—	.0018	(.0068)
AIC	—	-7,571.734	—	-7,562.766	—	-7,976.724	—	-7,966.625

(Continued)

Table 2: Continued

	Physical				Metaphysical			
	(A)		(B)		(A)		(B)	
	Coeff.	Std. Error	Coeff.	Std. Error	Coeff.	Std. Error	Coeff.	Std. Error
(Intercept)	.0395 ^{***}	(.0125)	.0305 [*]	(.0133)	.093	(.0497)	.122 [*]	(.0521)
Religious audience	.1161 ^{***}	(.0094)	.1164 ^{***}	(.0094)	.3769 ^{***}	(.0189)	.3768 ^{***}	(.0019)
Convention	.0107	(.0140)	.0106	(.0140)	.1091 ^{***}	(.0283)	.1093 ^{***}	(.0028)
Party	-.0067	(.0072)	-.0052	(.0077)	.041	(.0246)	.0389	(.0248)
Nonattendance	-.0002	(.0005)	.0009	(.0007)	-.0006	(.0021)	-.0045	(.0031)
"None advantage"	-.0013	(.0020)	-.0019	(.0020)	.0021	(.0076)	.0048	(.0076)
Party*Advantage	.0006	(.0010)	.0004	(.0011)	-.0023	(.0033)	-.002	(.0033)
Post-1980	—	—	-.0234	(.0113)	—	—	.0881	(.0530)
AIC	—	-5,921.605	—	-5,916.153	—	-1,972.59	—	-1,969.25

Note: Results from multilevel models for six religious discourse variables, treating speeches as nested in candidate and year. *p*-Values estimated with lmerTest in R using Satterthwaite's method.

p* < .05, *p* < .01

interaction term is slight across every model, indicating that if the parties have diverged at all in their religious language, they are not doing so to better reflect the desires of their constituencies. Interestingly, the “nonattendance” variable in the “God” model is positive, indicating that, consistent with Figure 1, we observe more God rhetoric as the electorate grows more secular. We suspect that God rhetoric is banal enough that both parties can use it without running a risk of alienating secular voters.

Second, while the Reagan shift variable proves statistically insignificant with multivariate controls in place, the results underscore the utility of a nuanced understanding of religious discourse. Specifically, all else equal, the use of physical religious language has decreased in the post-Reagan era, whereas the use of metaphysical and God language has increased. Post-Reagan religious campaigning is not characterized by a simple increase in religious language, but rather by a qualitative shift in how candidates publicly display religiosity—a movement from the concrete to the abstract.

Taking the results of the univariate and multivariate tests together, we can conclude that audience composition is the dominant force driving candidates’ use of religious communication. In front of religious audiences and on the biggest stages, candidates rely more heavily on religious messaging. Both sets of tests help illustrate this finding. A few other findings that were suggested in the univariate tests were only hinted at in the multivariate tests. Party appears to play some role in religious communication, with Republicans drawn more to abstract expressions of faith and Democrats drawn more to concrete ones. These patterns are perhaps reflective of the coalitional nature of the Democratic Party and the ideological basis of the GOP (Grossman and Hopkins 2016), though this is only speculative. In addition, to the extent that the Reagan shift influenced candidates’ religious communication, it did so primarily through a shift in the kind of religious language that was most common. Beneath all of the patterns, of course, lies the potential influence of candidate attributes and opponent strategy, with presidential hopefuls finding a religious voice that suits their own background and the impulses of the moment.

DISCUSSION

This study proposed a new conceptual framework for understanding political candidates’ religious communication and applied that framework to six decades worth of presidential stump speeches. Several points warrant discussion.

First, these data provide insight into the historical trajectory of religious communication in presidential campaigns. Religious language has been a regular feature of political communication and, consistent with the rethinking of secularization theory (e.g., Berger 1999; Swatos and Olson 2000; Warner 2010), ebbs and flows over time in ways that defy simple categorization. The most consistent trend observed here with respect to historical trajectory is that Ronald Reagan and subsequent candidates increased the presence of God (but not more concrete religious forms) in campaign discourse relative to their predecessors. This is an important clarification for past research that has documented a Reagan shift (e.g., Domke and Coe 2010; Hogue 2012; Kradel 2008) in presidential communication. In the context of campaigns, at least, this shift has been based on the most general and symbolic variety of religious communication. Moreover, to the extent that this finding weakens in the multivariate tests, it suggests that the Reagan shift has partially been managed by choosing appropriate religious venues.

This reality raises an important question about the nature of modern religious discourse. If rich and varied discussion of religion is being sought, the modern campaign appears no more likely to supply it than those that came before. Renowned theologian Richard John Neuhaus (1984) bemoaned what he viewed as a public square “naked” with the absence of faith. One wonders if Neuhaus would be pleased with the increase in God language in the Reagan forward era. On the one hand, this variety of abstract symbolism does insert an obvious form of religion

into the public square. No reasonable person who hears a presidential candidate thank God is going to dispute the religiosity of the statement itself. But when such invocations become forms of *ritual* communication (see Rothenbuhler 1998), they may grow so standardized that the actual religious import of the message is dulled. The perfunctory signoff of “God Bless America” may be such a case. In dulling the religious content of God references, it seems possible that there may be a spreading effect that makes any kind of religious reference seem to be just another aspect of a familiar political script. If so, modern candidate communication may illustrate something of a paradox: more God, less religion.

Second, our findings provide needed insight into the possibility of a “God gap” in campaign communication (see Burke 2006). At a surface level, we can say that Republicans have exceeded Democrats in the use of religious language. This pattern has a modest time component, with Democrats outpacing Republicans for a four-election cycle running through 1980. But what adds useful nuance to the general trends is the variation that exists in specific categories of religious discourse. In particular, Republicans especially exceeded Democrats in God language and metaphysical language (e.g., heaven, blessing, pray)—although the relationship is modest in the multivariate models. These specific styles of religious language tend toward the abstract (see Coe and Chenoweth 2013), and might therefore have particular value as general signals of religious devotion among the Republican Party’s base. And, indeed, signals of this type might call to mind symbols that are more central to the faith traditions (e.g., evangelicalism) that make up a larger proportion of this base. But it bears noting also that the *perception* of a “God gap” may go beyond the specifics of language. For example, Republicans’ close ties to vocal and well-organized religious organizations likely enhances the perception that they would speak in terms favorable to those groups, whether they are actually more likely to or not. In this respect, Democrats might be in a perpetual state of catch-up: Even when their language roughly parallels their Republican opponents, it may not be registered as quite equivalent.

Third, our findings provide the broadest test to date of the strategic elements of candidates’ religious communication. Religious communication appears to be highly calculated—politicians’ substantially elevate every type of religious communication when speaking to religious audiences. In many respects, this is an obvious point. After all, political communication is understood to be a strategic response to a particular set of circumstances. But that is exactly what makes this finding so striking: It casts religious communication as just like all the other forms of political communication. Far from a purely spiritual impulse, religious communication in politics is very much political; that is, it is employed as a tool to ingratiate a politician with audiences. This finding confirms, with a much broader data set, what Coe and Chapp (2017) found in the context of a single election. Naturally, this finding raises the question of pandering: Are politicians employing religious language only to garner votes? We do not attempt to unlock the black-box of presidential sincerity here, so instead approach this question at the level of political performance. Whether sincere or not, one thing U.S. presidential candidates are doing is, in effect, auditioning for the role of “the high priest of the national faith” (Hart 2005:34). For this reason, it is also striking that the convention speech has come to embody the religious character of an inaugural address (Hart 2000). The fact that presidents would enact this role most demonstratively in front of the audiences—and in the forums—that most value it strikes us as consistent with the expectations of electoral politics.

Our findings also help shed needed light on the fact that the idiosyncrasies of specific candidates and specific campaigns play a considerable role in shaping religious communication. Some candidates largely avoided discussions of faith, while others embraced it. But even among those who embraced it, certain themes played a more substantial role than did others. And it was rare for a candidate whose opponent was emphasizing or deemphasizing faith to take a completely different tack. These findings underscore just how necessary it is for studies of religious communication to disaggregate religious language into its component parts. Indeed, in the above analyses the aggregated religiosity scores sometimes told a story different from (and,

in many ways, simpler than) the story revealed in the specific themes. We would go so far as to say that studies that employ only a single broad measure of communicative religiosity might misread the realities of religious language that they are hoping to document.

More broadly, it bears noting that the causes of the ebb and flow of religious discourse in presidential campaigns defy a singular explanation. Each of the five factors identified in our conceptual framework matter in their own unique way—as do, our multivariate analyses suggest, certain external factors. For example, both parties, in their own way, have attempted to respond to the heightened political power that religious conservatives have exerted in the post-Reagan era. In this pattern, we can see quite a clear illustration of the broad power of political mobilization, even when it occurs among a subset of the populace that is closely aligned with just one of the two major parties. That is, the mobilization of religious conservatives encouraged candidates in the Republican Party to communicate in more explicitly religious terms. But because, as we have argued here, opponent strategy affects a campaign, Democratic candidates have also felt a strategic impulse to elevate their religious messaging. Time will tell if the growing proportion of nontraditionally religious constituents among the Democratic base will change this equation—and, if it does, if Republicans ultimately adjust their rhetoric accordingly.

Finally, these findings have broader implications for the study of campaigns and their oft-debated impact on the mass public. Experimental research has documented the cross-cutting effects of religious cues on the mass public. There is no universally appealing religious message. Instead, specific types of cues resonate with specific segments of the electorate (Albertson 2015; Chapp 2012; McLaughlin and Wise 2014). The strength of the religious audience variable suggests that at some level candidates understand this. However, observational studies like the present one suggest that candidates may not have the freedom to craft any religious image they wish. Despite strong evidence of strategic behavior, candidates nevertheless have pronounced individual differences in religious campaign style. These differences are likely grounded in, and also limited by, religious conviction—but also by the “brand” a candidate has curated over their career, which is also somewhat dependent on the specific trait-based expectations of the public (Hayes 2005). All this to say, candidates are certainly strategic actors when it comes to religious language and may seek to persuade voters by the religious language they choose. But their ability to implement such a strategy will likely be constrained by many factors, some of which depend on the prior attitudes of the very people they are hoping to persuade.

Naturally, this study had some limitations. Our use of computer-assisted content analysis allowed us to generate precise content measures across a large sample, but necessarily sacrificed some of the detail possible in human coding. For example, a human can identify contextual inaccuracies (e.g., a term that is religious in general but not so in a specific usage) that a computer cannot, and can also better gauge the import of some religious terms’ varied connotations. Our use of computer coding scheme that has undergone a human-coded validity check (see Coe and Chenoweth 2013) decreases the likelihood of contextual inaccuracies, but we still sacrificed some nuance in grasping specific connotations. Future research that employs qualitative methods would provide a useful complement to the quantitative baseline we have provided here. In addition, consistent with the typology we employed, our focus was strictly on Christian language. Although this accounts for the vast majority of religious language in U.S. political speech, future research would benefit from also considering the use of non-Christian religious language. For example, it seems likely that recent presidential candidates would be more likely than past candidates to communicate about non-Christian faiths (especially Islam), and these trends warrant attention. Finally, our focus was strictly on the presidential campaign context. Future research would benefit from exploring the extent to which the trends identified here hold true in other campaign contexts, where there might be less of an audience expectation of public religiosity. These limitations notwithstanding, the framework and analysis provided in the present study should help build this important area of scholarship.

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