

Voting For The Future:

An exploration of views and developments around religion and the US elections



About this whitepaper

Religion played a significant role in the 2016 election, with the majority of white evangelicals voting for Donald Trump. During our round table discussion on the topic of Voting For The Future, we explored the influence of religion on the recent 2020 election. For instance, what was the role of Catholicism in this election, with Joe Biden being a Catholic himself? And how has Trump's administration strengthened or weakened evangelicals' support? Besides these developments in the US, we have also considered the effects on Europe's politics and religion.

This whitepaper is based on the outcomes of our virtual round table meeting. Several articles were written as an inspiration for the round table discussion, before the election took place. We would like to acknowledge the authors of these articles, the round table report, and the introduction to this whitepaper: Prof. dr. Matthias Smalbrugge, Zoë Tuithof, Elizabeth Dixon, Ghila Amati, Muhammad Faisal Khalil, and Joshua Amiel Marasigan.

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A low-angle, upward-looking photograph of several tall skyscrapers in a city, reaching towards a cloudy sky. The buildings are made of glass and steel, with various architectural styles. The sky is a pale blue with soft, white clouds. The overall mood is one of modernity and urban density.

Voting For The Future: Introduction

“These elections were a magnifying glass allowing us to see how different religious tendencies created a landscape that suddenly became visible”

Voting For The Future: Introduction

Matthias Smalbrugge

Hyperboles regarding these elections have been very frequent: these were the most important elections we have ever had. Sure, they are very important, but language, media coverage as well as rumours, they have all had their share in creating this hyperbole. Meanwhile, the elections themselves are over and we found ourselves back in a kind of twilight zone. The incumbent president is not willing to concede and suggests that the elections are not over yet. The *translatio imperii* is suddenly stuck in the middle of the process and in that sense, the hyperbole may be justified.

If the *translatio imperii* is stuck in the middle of the process, how is it when it comes to the *translatio studii*? Are we keeping pace with political and societal developments? In particular when it comes to the role of religion in such complicated processes as the American elections? Of course, Europeans are outsiders and the US will turn more and more to Asia instead of sticking to the traditional stronghold that Europe once was. However, phenomena such as the role of religion do strongly affect European faith communities and its transformative aspects will certainly not leave us indifferent. Religion knows of no boundaries and its international dynamic guarantees an influence that can hardly be overestimated.

Sometimes, these dynamics become very visible and that indeed is the case with these elections. Religion played a significant role, sometimes difficult to be separated from a mere political point of view. In that

sense, these elections were a magnifying glass allowing us to see how different religious tendencies created a landscape that suddenly became visible (though contours were, of course, visible for a long time).

That is the reason EARS wanted to organize this round table. A kind of *translatio studii* comparable to the *translatio imperii*, hoping not to get stuck in the middle of the process.

Voting For The Future: Report



“American pastors wonder: what can I say from the pulpit when my flock is listening to Fox News?”

Voting For The Future: Report

Introduction

Religion plays a significant role in American politics. One might argue, however, that it is also the other way round: politics change the role of religion. In such a case, religion no longer functions as a confessional adherence, but mainly as an ideological position. The polarisation one can observe in the US, is a divide supported by religious traditions. Taking such a political stance implies an infringement of the separation between state and church. Regardless of the outcome of the US elections, this transformation is one that seems here to stay and that will influence the concept of religion not only in the US, but likely also in Europe. What exactly is happening here? And can churches still contribute to countering the widening social gap in this situation?

Politics and religion: ideologically void?

American religion is moving towards the geopolitical sphere. Apparently, there is some kind of self-evident connection between a political program and what a Christian voter should vote for. However, a domination of political concerns over religious ones occurs. Political identity seems to become more important than religious identity and citizens seem less concerned with their religion than before. Religious legacy is now contested in the public sphere. This has everything to do with the misuse of religion by politics. There seems to be a revival of Christian politics that is not associated with Christianity, but rather with identity politics. Politics that attracts Christians is taking on less of a religious character in itself. The so-called 'Catholic vote' for example was, unexpectedly, in favour of

Trump in 2016. This time around, it is highly divided. Not all Catholics voted Biden, a Catholic himself.

Today, in general, churches try to be non-political. Nevertheless, it seems that churches have lost their ability to build the intermediate structures that hold communities together. It is a delicate time for both democracy and churches.

A broad religious identity for the nation is widely promoted by politicians. Politics is making claims to religious heritage without implementing a truly religious agenda. This is a shift that is relatively new. Thus, American pastors wonder: what can I say from the pulpit when my flock is listening to Fox News? Religion is losing its confessional content: it is becoming more and more political. Hence, the difference between religion and politics is fading. Exemplifying this is Pope Francis, who is highly politicised and speaks out on migration issues and LGBTQ+ discussions. The pope has a progressive and ethical stance regarding these matters. Thus, in the US, bishops have become vocal about their disdain for Francis, because they do not relate to his ethical standpoints. Some US bishops have become visibly and vocally anti-pope Francis. This is only one example by which we observe that religion and politics are blurring. Making a distinction between the two becomes increasingly difficult. Especially when both politics and religion have become ideologically empty. What remains is a vacuity left by both politics and religion that have become void. This vacuity makes way for polarisation, dividing the nation.

Voting For The Future: Report

A common narrative to battle polarisation

The US is a divided country. Polarisation started to emerge a long time ago. Trump only fueled and escalated the divide that was already there. He moved from a cultural war to the brink of a civil war. His supporters believe that they themselves are the 'real' Americans. Besides, populism now is a populism of the less organised. There is no doubt that social media are playing a major role, exacerbating differences. Social media enable those who would otherwise not reach a large audience and have their voices and opinions heard. Facebook and Twitter are created on the basis of algorithms, creating echo chambers that enhance one's already established opinions. This widens the divide and increases radicalisation. What is lacking, is a common narrative.

Polarisation impedes the idea of a common narrative. Half the population might not accept such a narrative due to this polarisation. The US is a political community; not a country based on shared cultural values. However, though such a narrative is lacking, there still remain some fragments of what once was a shared narrative. This goes in particular for the principle 'we the people'. There is this idea that a top-down narrative cannot function. The elite is imposing a narrative many do not accept. Rather, the narrative must come from the people themselves. Thus, the US should rely more on these grassroots movements where common narratives are established. Grassroots movements are rather popular and can create sympathy as is the case with the Black Lives Matter movement. It is a kind of Christian, or post-Christian, aspiration to create a society based on equality. However, it is necessary to underline that

'we the people' also poses a threat. When anyone is able to establish a new narrative, so is the fascist. We need to take into consideration who is managing the narrative when we do not want to listen to the elites.

A separated society, state and church

There is a major difference between the electoral systems in the US and Europe. Four years ago, Trump came out of nowhere and the Republicans were not in favour of him. Still, he won the whole party, and took over the entire system after that. In the European voting system it is much more difficult for populism to gain ground, as there are more parties and it is easier to exclude extremists from the government. How a democracy is organised is a rather large piece of the puzzle. In Europe, the system is often - and has proved to be - more powerful than individual populist figures.[1] In Germany for example, the state has invested in educating religious elites, both Catholic and Muslim leaders, at universities. This is what they call Bildung, or civilising religions. In Geneva, training is offered to imams as well. Through this training, the government tries to involve the imams in Western culture and encourage them to critically reflect on religious readings. The canton of Geneva is determined to bring unseen, underground communities to the fore, so that they facilitate dialogue. This is an essential starting point in fighting polarisation and radicalisation. Its fundament is mutual respect. This again, is different from the French model of laïcité. It is a model that separates church and state in a way that respects the freedom of religion but that tries to prevent a political role of any religion. Hence, the French are forbidden

Voting For The Future: Report

to wear a headscarf to public institutions. No sign of religious affiliation can be shown. One may wonder: does this model preserve the freedom of each and every citizen?

The separation of church and state comes in multiple shapes and sizes. The US, for example, is officially separating church and state. Nevertheless, all presidents proclaim: “God bless America.” It has had so many different expressions conforming to national realities. Therefore, we could argue that the separation of church and state is a shifting reality, a complex matter we adjust and adjust to. There is not one strict model for having a separation of state and religion. What matters most is the dialogue between church, state, and society. To coexist peacefully and to learn from each other, countering the increasing polarisation and bridging the divide.

Our opponents are not our enemies

This may partially be a task of scholars of religion. However, the results of scholarly research in this domain are difficult to apply to a broader public. In addition to this, scholars have to be aware of the fact that they themselves are also considered to have particular convictions, implying that they contribute, even if they do not want to do so, to the increasing polarisation. The only way out seems to be to analyse as best as possible the complexity of societal processes, e.g. the process of polarisation. Admittedly, this demands an interdisciplinary approach in which religion is considered to be one aspect of our multifaceted society. It is precisely this complexity scholars have

always sought to understand and it is this plurality and multiformity that is one of the main aspects of our post-modern society. Dealing with this societal plurality is not only the task of politicians but also of scholars. As religion is one of the best-known examples of plurality and transformation, scholars of religion should take their share of dealing with our fascinating society.

“The US is officially separating church and state.
Nevertheless, all presidents proclaim:
‘God bless America.’”

Appendix: Inspiration for the round table meeting





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The role of Catholicism in the 2020 election



“Although the Fratelli Tutti is not an overt criticism of Trump, it does put the American Catholic bishops who have openly criticised Biden in a peculiar position”

The role of Catholicism in the 2020 election

Elizabeth Dixon

Joe Biden is the fourth Catholic to be nominated for a major party presidential ticket and the only Catholic vice president in U.S. history. It took the United States 172 years from the time of its founding to elect its first Catholic president: John F. Kennedy. Since that historic moment, there has only been one other Catholic presidential nominee, John Kerry (2004). Needless to say, a win for Biden – an Irish Catholic – would be a monumental moment in American history and for Catholic representation. However, a lot has happened in the last 60 years since Kennedy was elected. Biden has not faced the anti-Catholic bigotry Kennedy endured, but neither are his fellow American Catholics still overwhelmingly Democrat.[1] [2] [3] Furthermore, Kennedy had significant Catholic support in part because he was the first major candidate Catholics could claim as their own. However, in comparison to their share of the U.S. population, Catholics are now overrepresented on Capitol Hill and in the Supreme Court.[4] All this to say, it is unclear what effect - if any - Biden's Catholicism will truly have on the election outcome.

From Kennedy to Biden

Biden's approach to governing – separating the secular sphere from the sacred sphere – is “straight out of the Kennedy lineage.”[5] These fellow Irish Catholics have both distanced themselves from the pontiff [6] [7] and have been quite open about ascribing to a more cultural Catholic faith.[8] [9] [10] However, the campaign challenges they have each experienced, and the questions they have fielded over their personal faiths could not be more different. Kennedy faced “resistance and

outright anti-Catholic bigotry” from both conservative Protestant pastors and within his own party.[11] [12] The Protestant pastors argued that a Roman Catholic president would always “be more loyal to the Vatican because the fate of his eternal soul was at stake.” [13] Catholics in the 1950s and 60s were also still “easy to distinguish from their wealthier white Protestant counterparts,” as they were still predominantly immigrants.[14] Needless to say, there was also a decidedly xenophobic prong to their argument that Catholics were simply too “weird, foreign, dirty, [and] oddly ritualistic” to lead.[15] Conversely, Biden is in good company of fellow prominent Catholic leaders and public figures. His faith is a “highly visible part of his political persona,” and he carries a rosary at all times.[16] He also regularly incorporates his faith in his speeches.[17] [18] This is largely because, unlike Kennedy, his concern is not that voters would see him as too religious or too Catholic. Rather, he wants to ensure America - particularly the conservative Catholics and evangelicals who voted for Trump in 2016 - knows that he is religious enough to win their vote.[19]

This difference is a product of yet another shift. In Kennedy's time, religion was more publicly present, for instance in daily prayers in public schools, higher church attendance, etc. Thus, there was no need for politicians to identify as Christians because Protestantism was considered “America's default faith.” [20] However, religion has since lost its 1950s and 60s prominence, something conservatives greatly lament.[21] Consequently, to appeal to this base, contemporary politicians make their faith a prominent characteristic to assure this subgroup they are a remnant of this bygone era.

The role of Catholicism in the 2020 election

A 'Catholic voting bloc'?

These campaign differences are products of a much larger shift in the American electorate, the economic and social status of American Catholics, and the Catholic faith. When Kennedy successfully took on America's anti-Catholic bias, he did more than successfully break the WASP[22] "stranglehold on the White House." [23] Kennedy's win aided in shifting the American perception of Catholics from one of suspicion to allyship. [24] Right-wing protestants no longer saw Catholics as the enemy, but rather as recruits for their broad pan-Christian movement that sought to defend their decreasingly popular conservative ideals of family and society. [25] [26] Simultaneously, American Catholics were changing in status and conviction. In 1960, Kennedy claimed 70% - 83% of Catholic voters. [27] As predominantly poor immigrants, many Catholic voters had strong beliefs on social justice and wage equality. [28] In part because of the very social policies they advocated for, the group slowly joined the middle class and assimilated into American life. [29] As later generations became more indistinguishable from their conservative Protestant counterparts, they abandoned their parents' party and voted Republican. [30] [31] These shifts have all manifested into hurdles Biden must now overcome if he is to win in November.

American Catholics account for 23% of all voters nationally, but they are far from being a monolithic, cohesive voting group. [32] [33] Like Biden, there are liberal-leaning Catholics who adhere to a localised faith; they are not beholden to church leadership, they keep their religious beliefs separate from their civic interests, and their faith's primary purpose is to offer "solace in moments of anxiety or grief." [34] [35] However,

there is also a notable percentage of conservative adherents who, like several vocal members of the Catholic hierarchy, feel that Biden is not Catholic enough. [36] This is the subgroup that has denied him communion on multiple occasions [37], and the group of adherents he is now fighting to win over from Trump's base with targeted, religious messaging. [38] [39] [40]

Abortion – A battle of two Catholicisms?

With the recent passing of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, there has been significant discussion focused on the issue many consider to be the most divisive among religious voters: abortion. The late Justice Ginsburg was a vocal women's rights advocate and considered the liberal stronghold of the Supreme Court. Republicans are now keen to fill her seat with an individual many consider to be Justice Ginsburg's political opposite – Judge Amy Coney Barret. Judge Barret's devout Catholic beliefs are of particular concern to Democrats, as she has a clear pro-life record. The ongoing debate surrounding her nomination has subsequently forced the Biden campaign to address the issue they have largely avoided in their appeals to more conservative Catholic and evangelical voters.

Biden's voting record on abortion rights has been considered "erratic." [41] As a young senator, he was vocal about his religious opposition, but said he wrestled with the extent to which he could impose those beliefs on others. [42] As time has passed, Biden has become a strong supporter of a woman's right to choose. [43] However, Biden's stance might not be as problematic for religious

The role of Catholicism in the 2020 election

voters, specifically Catholics, as some fear. This is largely because religious identity is not as straightforward as it seems.[44] Though many American Catholics would claim to believe that they have a responsibility to defend the dignity of individuals, they are not consistent in how they “interpret this responsibility.”[45] Needless to say, while there are certainly vocal pro-life Catholics, 53% of Catholics do not support the hierarchy’s position that abortion is “intrinsically evil.”[46] Further, 51% believe abortion should be legal in all or most cases.[47]

The shock waves

Though the election of a Catholic president is quite monumental for the US, how this will affect the global Catholic population is largely understudied. What we do know is that American Catholics occupy a middle ground faith in comparison to Catholics in other parts of the world. Generally speaking, they are more religious than their European counterparts, but less than Latin America believers.[48] Needless to say, as the moderates they are likely not posed to take the direction of the denomination in one way or another. Just recently Pope Francis published the Fratelli Tutti in which he talks about his opposition to the types of populism and nationalism that Trump typifies.[49] While this is far from an official endorsement of Biden, perhaps the pope’s statements are representative of how Europeans and others around the world feel about the US election – anyone but Trump. They are not concerned or maybe even knowledgeable that Biden is Catholic, but many do want to see the current president out of office. Further, though the Fratelli Tutti is not an overt criticism of Trump, it does put

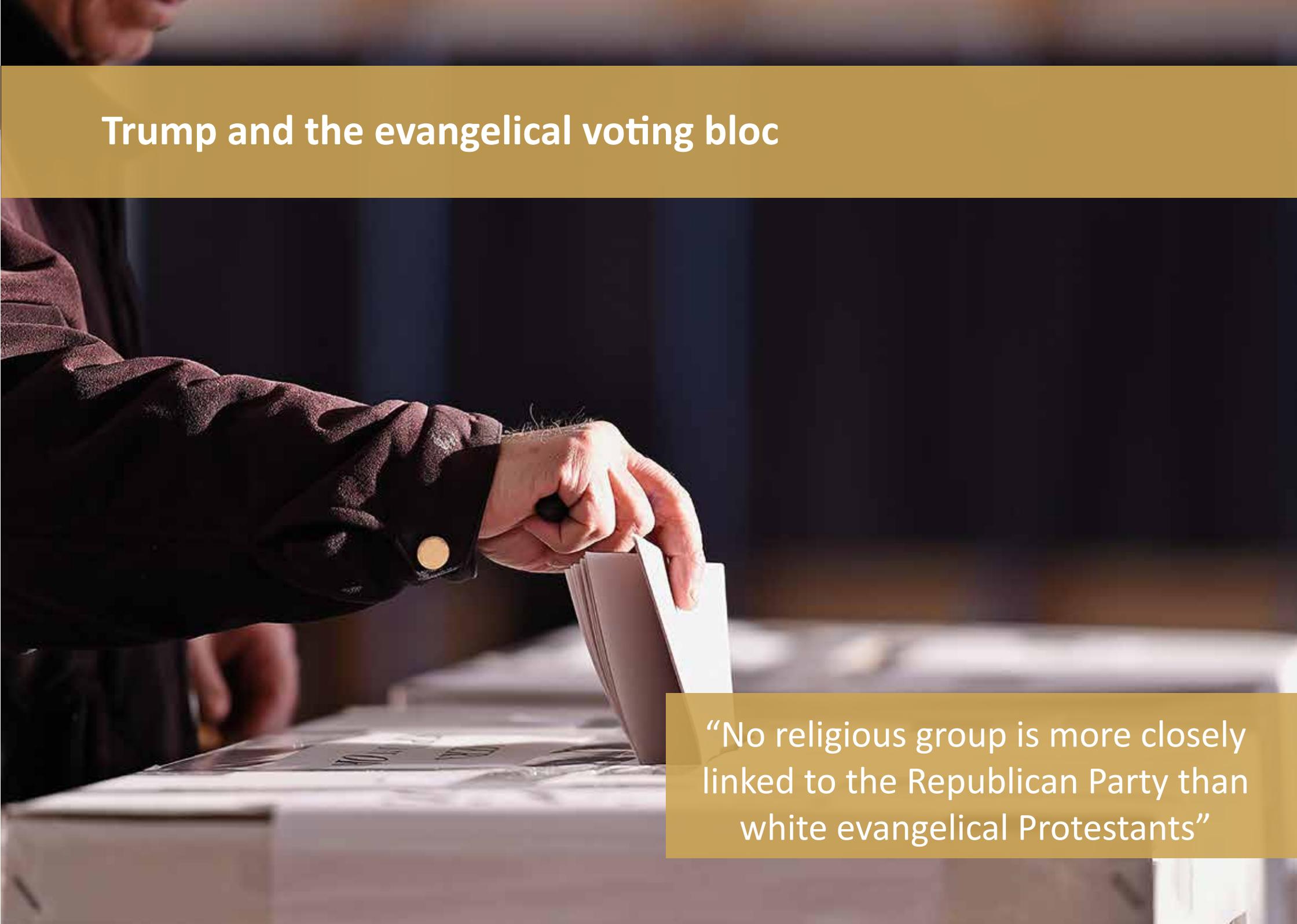
the American Catholic bishops who have openly criticised Biden in a peculiar position.

Only time will tell

Political gurus, campaign leaders, and pollsters alike can analyse the impact of religious identity and Catholicism on the upcoming election for hours on end, but ultimately nothing will be conclusive until the ballots are in. As discussed, American Catholics have evolved, politically, socially, and economically. Maybe they will play a major role in deciding this election, and the ‘Catholic vote’ will be to the 2020 election what the ‘evangelical voting bloc’ was to 2016. Or perhaps, they “have earned the right to no distinction, the privilege of blending seamlessly into the social and political landscape of the United States.”[50]

“Europeans and others around the world are not concerned or maybe even knowledgeable that Biden is Catholic, but many do want to see the current president out of office.”

Trump and the evangelical voting bloc

A close-up photograph of a person's hands, wearing a dark jacket with a yellow button, placing a white ballot into a ballot box. The background is blurred, showing other ballot boxes and a person's hand in the distance.

“No religious group is more closely linked to the Republican Party than white evangelical Protestants”

Trump and the evangelical voting bloc

Ghila Amati

The religious identity of voters is of particular interest in the 2020 election cycle in the United States. This is partly because Trump's opponent, Joe Biden, is a Roman Catholic.[1] [2] Another factor that might increase the impact of religion on this election is Trump's running mate, vice president, and well-known evangelical Mike Pence, who since the 2016 elections has served as a bridge of sorts between Trump and conservative evangelicals.[3] The central role of religion in this campaign is also underlined by the fact that both Biden and Trump have appointed campaign coordinators that are supposed to target faith communities.[4]

In the 2016 election, evangelical voters had a fundamental role in Trump's election as president. A Pew Research report estimated that this support has not vanished in the present elections. The report in fact estimated that 82% of white evangelicals would vote for Trump over Biden.[5] [6] [7] This percentage is higher than during the 2016 election, when the Pew Research Center survey found that 77% of white evangelical Protestant voters backed Trump.[8] Evangelicals that seem most likely to vote for Trump are white evangelical Protestants, a group that is strongly religious and mostly Republican. According to the PRRI (Public Religion Research Institute): "No religious group is more closely linked to the Republican Party than white evangelical Protestants." [9]

Anti-Trump religious groups

There is still a small section of evangelicals (25%) who are neither white nor conservative. This group - together with a small group of white

evangelicals (15%) - is progressive and tends to vote for Democrats. [10] Another evangelical group to oppose Trump are the 'Red Letter Christians.' This group focuses on social justice and therefore tends to see its values more actualised in the political left.[11]

Why is Donald Trump so successful among evangelicals?

Throughout Trump's presidency, Trump's administration has taken a series of actions to increase its popularity among evangelicals. According to a Pew Research Survey conducted in February 2020, Americans "are most likely to say the administration has helped evangelical Christians and that it has hurt Muslims." [12] Among white protestant evangelicals themselves, most feel that the Trump administration has had a positive impact on the issues that interest them. About six in ten (59%) state that the administration has helped evangelicals, while only 7% say it has hurt them.[13] Some evangelical Christians in the US believe that God has chosen Trump "to advance the kingdom of God on Earth." These beliefs are confirmed by many important religious evangelical leaders who have often compared Trump to King Cyrus, who was destined by God to save the nation of Israel from exile in Babylon.[14]

Three main themes of Trump's administration had a strong impact on evangelicals' support: the relocation of the American embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem; the pro-life and abortion issue; and the LGBTQ issue. [15] [16] [17] [18]

Trump and the evangelical voting bloc

“The moving of the embassy was very controversial and was met with opposition both in the Middle East and in Washington”

The embassy in Jerusalem

Although Jerusalem has been the capital of Israel since its declaration of independence in 1948, many states around the world still do not recognise it as Israel’s capital. Objectors of the recognition of Jerusalem as a capital argue that such a move would hinder any future peace negotiations between Palestinians and Israel, and could cause a new surge of violence in the conflicted region. Nevertheless, Trump officially recognised Jerusalem as Israel’s capital in December 2017, and the new offices and facilities were moved in May 2018. This was a very controversial move and was met with opposition both in the Middle East and in Washington. As a result of Trump’s decision, the Palestinians - who claim East Jerusalem to be their own capital - cut their relations with Washington.[19] [20]

In August 2020, Trump said that he decided to recognise Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and to move the American embassy there for the evangelicals. He also added that, paradoxically, the evangelicals were more enthusiastic about this decision than the Jews themselves, and he stated: “You know, it’s amazing with that — the evangelicals are more excited by that than Jewish people.”[21] [22] The move of the embassy was important to many conservative evangelicals as they attach a prophetic value to Jerusalem. According to this prophecy, Jerusalem will play an important role during the end-times events. The Jews

need to first experience a religious rebirth in Jerusalem and rebuild their temple. This will bring a number of catastrophic events that will culminate in the Battle of Armageddon, the last war of humanity. This war will convince the Jews to finally accept Jesus, will bring the return of Jesus’ glory and God’s kingdom, and will bring a thousand-year reign of peace.[23] [24]

Pro-life and abortion

In general, Trump has expressed support for banning abortion almost entirely, except for cases of rape, incest, or danger to the mother’s life.[25] In January 2020, Trump was the first president to participate in the March for Life. In past years, Republican presidents opposing abortion merely sent video messages or delegats to speak in their place at the march.[26]

To the crowds of religious school groups and the anti-abortion activists who attended the march, President Trump said: “Unborn children have never had a stronger defender in the White House.” He also added, referring to the next elections, that “the far left is actively working to erase our God-given rights,” and that it wants to “silence Americans who believe in the sanctity of life.”[27] In the same week, the Trump administration also announced that it will deny federal money to California if it will not eliminate the requirement for private insurers to cover abortions.[28] [29]

LGBTQ

Trump’s administration approach towards the LGBTQ community is more complicated. Trump and his administration are divided between their attempt to satisfy their evangelical voters and their need for

Trump and the evangelical voting bloc

LGBTQ voting support. The GIAAD (Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) said that “Minutes after Donald Trump was sworn into office” in 2017, “any mention of the LGBTQ community was erased from White House, Department of State, and Department of Labor websites.”[30] GIAAD also reported that throughout the first three years of Trump’s presidency, his administration made over 130 anti-LGBTQ political attacks.[31] [32] [33] [34] Evangelicals seem to focus most on the first aspect of Trump’s approach to LGBTQ. On the other hand, the president’s 2020 campaign is targeting LGBTQ voters in order to gain their electoral support.[35] As a result, Richard Grenell, former director of national intelligence, was named senior adviser of the LGBTQ campaign.[36] Additionally, the Log Cabin Republicans, a powerful and big LGBTQ Republican organisation, has opened a multimedia platform “OUTspoken,”[37] to publish pro-Trump content. In the first video published by the platform, Grenell is filmed saying that Trump is: “the most pro-gay president in American history.” The Washington Post has responded to this video arguing it is “absurd.”[38]

The pragmatism of Trump’s approach and the evangelicals’ approval
Trump’s approach to the election seems rather pragmatic. In the 2016 elections, throughout his presidency, and in his current campaign, Trump seems to have been using religion as a means to attract voters, especially evangelicals. Nevertheless, it seems that when he wants to gain the support of other groups, such as the LGBTQ community, he is willing to renounce religious ideals in order to attract those voters. It is therefore fascinating that evangelical voters still prefer to vote for Trump, even though his politics seem to be strongly pragmatic and his personal

life does not completely conform to evangelical values.[39] It seems that Trump’s actions are more valuable to evangelicals than Trump’s personal life and opinions. The alliance with conservative Catholics also supports the fact that for evangelicals, actual politics is sometimes more important than religious belief. Donald Trump’s recent nomination of Amy Coney Barrett, a devout Catholic, to the Supreme Court[40] underlines the strong impact of this alliance.[41] As social conservative activist Bob Vander Plaats said: “Trump doesn’t always display the fruits of the spirit. But the scripture taught us to judge a person by their actions as well.”[42]

Why do evangelicals close an eye on Trump’s private life?

Washington Post Journalist Elizabeth Bruenig brings about different theories that attempt to explain evangelical voters’ connection to Trump, despite his doubtful personal life. According to Bruenig, some simply argue that evangelicals have always been “hypocrites” since they require a moral behaviour from their opponents, which they do not expect the politicians they support to comply with. Another possibility is that evangelicals - despite the many evidence to the contrary - are naive and were convinced by Trump’s campaign that depicted him as a believer in God. Lastly, and maybe most plausibly, it could be argued that evangelicals merely want a “champion to fight the culture wars, even if he didn’t share their vision of the good life.”[43] This need for a champion must be understood in the context of the inability of evangelicals to make a difference in American politics in the last 50 years.[44]

A large crowd of people is gathered for a protest or demonstration. In the foreground, a person with long dark hair, wearing a dark green jacket, is seen from behind, holding a large cardboard sign high above their head with both hands. The sign has the words "WE NEED" on the top line and "A CHANGE" on the bottom line, both written in large, bold, black, hand-painted letters. The background is filled with many other people, some looking towards the camera and others looking away, creating a sense of a large-scale event. The scene is outdoors on a bright day.

Partisan polarisation in the US and religion in Europe

“If the US incumbent’s use of religion prevails, then the divide between the US and the EU may widen on key issues”

Partisan polarisation in the US and religion in Europe

Muhammad Faisal Khalil

The partisan polarisation in the US, between Donald Trump's Republican Party and Joe Biden's Democratic Party, has transformed the US elections into an event that will significantly influence life beyond the US itself. Beyond the American continent, Europe is set to be affected by the outcomes of this election. Climate change, the future of NATO, foreign policy particularly towards China and Russia, and internal trade are all set to be shaped by who leads the US over the next four years. Another key arena of influence is religious life in Europe. As the past four years have demonstrated, the state of politics in the US does inform particular religious developments across the Atlantic.

Shining bright in right-wing Europe

In one way, the developments resulting from the US elections may lead to similar developments in Europe. Taken this way, the US's partisan polarisation is acting as a yardstick for polarisations within Europe. A key aspect of this is the relationship between right-wing populism and religion in Europe and the US. Right-wing populists in both the US and Europe have pursued the ideological use of Christianity, often against religious minorities such as Muslims, to chime well with public opinion at a time of great uncertainty, instability, and insecurity. As argued by German historian Sylvia Taschka, "Trump's America shines bright for Europe's radical New Right." [1] While not popular in Europe in the same way as his predecessor President Barack Obama, Donald Trump has found a foothold across the Atlantic: he has become a heroic figure for

many groups in Europe's far-right. "With Trump, the pride of a whole population has awoken ... Their hope is captured in one sentence 'Make America Great Again,'" said Martin Sellner, the leader of Austria's Identitarian Movement, in 2016. "The 'Trump Wall' already acts like a mystical symbol of self-preservation and the survival of a culture." [2]

"Unlike the European political tradition of Christian democracy, Biden is also likely to promote the tradition of American secularism"

Another four years of Republican control would demonstrate to many such groups the value of right-wing populism generally and Islamophobia specifically to win more votes. [3] In terms of policy, this could have significant impact, ranging from setting restrictions on religious life under the new "culture ban" to exclude Muslims all-together under the claim that Muslims' religious and cultural attributes make them either unacceptable as neighbours or incommensurate with assimilating to Europe's native norms and values. [4] Joe Biden's arrival may stem the confidence and implications of Europe's right-wing politics. Biden, who the political theorist Carlo Invernizzi Accetti calls a Christian Democrat, is predicted to take a path away from Donald Trump's far-right nationalism, while also eschewing Bernie Sanders's democratic socialism. [5] But unlike the European political tradition of Christian democracy, Biden is also likely to promote the tradition of American secularism. American secularism's "wall of separation"

Partisan polarisation in the US and religion in Europe

between politics and religion is less likely to mobilise Europe's right-wing politics and its ideological appropriation of Christianity.[6]

“Uninhabitable hell”

In another way, the US election result may galvanise religious activism and independent action in Europe. Climate protests are one example. The American rejection of the Paris Agreement and its unravelling of domestic rules set to control vehicle emissions, methane, and other greenhouse gases could see the US alone pump nearly 2 billion extra tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere by 2035.[7] For many people, including the Christian faithful, the stakes are too high. The world may become an “uninhabitable hell”.[8] Christian activists have, therefore, increasingly taken up climate protest. “As Christians, we should be prepared to make any sacrifice necessary to serve and protect God's creation,” says one activist.[9] This time of protest, marked dramatically by Extinction Rebellion, an emergent movement seeking rapid action to stop global warming, has also mobilised organisations such as the Christian Climate Action. Its members, mostly retirees and students, see an increasingly active role in trying to curb climate change as an inevitable outcome of their faith: “For me, it's the first verse of the Bible that hits home: If God created all that is, what does it mean for us to be destroying it?” says a Christian Climate Change protester. “For us to be participating in its destruction is sacrilegious — not something believing Christians should be doing.”[10] The fact that the Church of England's General Synod voted last year to disinvest from fossil fuel companies that fail to meet the Paris climate

agreement[11] speaks of the relationship between religion and climate change. Indeed, faith groups from Jewish, Buddhist, Muslim, and other faiths around Europe and the world, have also joined protests, as moral and spiritual action against human-driven climate change. Ironically, the imperatives of climate change have also been exploited by Europe's right-wing populists, such as the unprecedented coalition government in Austria between the Conservative People's Party (ÖVP) and the Green Party.[12] Political scientist Benjamin Opratko warns that the “greenwashed rightwing project” is not one that Europe needs.[13] While recognising the need for the Green Party to prevent the right-wing FPÖ from re-entering the government and to deliver on climate promises, Opratko argues that the coalition programme to “protect both the climate and the borders” is “climate apartheid”: it will lead to inhumane policies against Muslims, and empower anti-immigration within the European Union (EU) and its nation-states.[14]

**“Biden's campaign “for the soul of America”
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Partisan polarisation in the US and religion in Europe

How will the story turn?

The relationship between the US and Europe is not straightforward and even unpredictable. Events, however, on either side do arguably have a bearing on both. How the story of the US's partisan polarisation turns during the US election is, therefore, being observed and followed closely by Europeans, including those engaged in Europe's religious life. The mobilisation of partisan politics within Europe and humane action against human-driven climate change are only one of many stakes that depend on what will happen on the 3rd of November, 2020. They also reflect the larger role religion plays in determining what Europe and the US are to each other. If the US incumbent's use of religion prevails, then the divide between the US and the EU may widen on key issues, not only climate change but also issues such as abortion and gender identity. This may also divide Europe from within. While Western Europe may struggle with influences of religiously-informed right-wing politics, their Eastern European neighbors may more fluently accept the language of nationalism and religion that the US is pitching to its people and the Western World.[15]

Religion may also bridge the divide between Europe and the US. Although a devout Catholic, Biden's 'Americanised' version of European political conservatism may use religion in a way that helps to not only restore some national unity in the US, but also overcome the divisive politics and rhetoric currently alienating many European leaders from the US. Biden's campaign "for the soul of America" may prioritise - albeit in an idealised way - mutual civility and an integrated order not only within the US but also with Europe.[16]

The rise of militant Christianity in the United States



“Can religion be an instrument to express ambiguities and find unity in diversity?”

The rise of militant Christianity in the United States

Ghila Amati and Joshua Amiel Marasigan

“God bless America”: Christian nationalism in the United States

The popular phrases “God bless America” and “One Nation under God” are still common expressions among both politicians and evangelical pastors in the United States.[1] Moreover, since the electoral victory of President Donald Trump in 2016, a rise in conservative rhetoric and a nationalism that is intertwined with evangelical Christianity has become more noticeable than ever.[2] What is also evident, is a heightening of discrimination against people of colour and sexual minorities[3] in the name of the battle for America’s culture and - according to evangelicals - the battle for America’s soul.

This increasing polarisation, authoritarianism, and discrimination brings up the following questions: What does being “one nation under God” truly mean, and who gets to define it? Who invokes the prayer “God bless America”, and towards whom is this “blessing” directed?

Defining alt-right Christianity

In an academic conference hosted by Georgetown University on the topic of the alt-right Christian phenomenon in the United States, Jerome Copulsky pointed out that alt-right Christianity hinges on protectionist identity politics.[4] The protection of “American” and “Christian” culture from threats such as liberals, sexual minorities, immigrants, and other identities has become a rallying point and a fundamental aspect of alt-right evangelicalism. However, Copulsky continues, there is not a set and clear definition of the “alt-right” phenomenon. In general, the expression “alt-right Christianity”

describes attitudes and behaviors that develop as a response to threats to tradition. Another common characteristic of alt-right behaviour is the desire to reinforce distinctions and separation, an “us versus them” mentality that responds to the growing integration of diverse identities and globalisation. Finally, the appeal to traditional “Western Judaeo-Christian” ideals is also present in alt-right rhetoric and is utilised by Donald Trump to garner support, especially in the so-called “Bible-Belt” states.[5]

On the other hand, Copulsky adds that even the political left is guilty of some of the same sins of alt-right Christianity, for instance when it expresses its desire to return to “pre-Christian ideals”, or when it attempts to enforce a culture that is hostile to all kinds of religion or religious notions. In fact, the temptation to hinge on universal utopian ideals and on identity politics - Copulsky continues - is the root of the increasingly widening polarisation in the United States, and arguably the rest of the world. Authoritarianism, therefore, becomes the simplest solution to enforce these universal utopian visions.[6]

Religious foundations of evangelical alt-right rhetoric

Martyn Whittock underlines Donald Trump’s reliance on evangelical Christianity to assert his authority and to “make America great again” and argues that there is a religious foundation to the nationalistic and autocratic rhetoric of the Trump administration. In Whittock’s words: “While Trump is no Puritan, his appeal to evangelicals has seventeenth-century roots. It draws on a deep story of American exceptionalism, providential calling, elimination of the ‘alien other’ [...] apocalyptic confidence of being the fulfilment of history and gate-keeper to the

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fulfilment of biblical prophecy. We might call these ‘foundational phenomena’ and they reverberate with Puritan resonances.”[7] As we can see in this quote, Whittock argues that at the source of Christian nationalism we can find the Puritan settlers’ ideology. The Puritans aimed to convert the natives and claimed the American land was God’s land. This missiological ideal became the instrument of the ‘colonisation’ of the Americas, and introduced a literalist reading of the Christian Scriptures.

The origins of theocratic tendencies - according to Whittock - can also be attributed to the Puritanical ideals. They are founded upon the belief that God meant for the settlers to colonise the Americas, which were seen as the “New Israel.” These theocratic tendencies are therefore a fundamental aspect of the evangelical alt-right support for Donald Trump, who has advocated to build a wall to keep out those who do not belong to the land, and has called for divine favour through going back to moral righteousness according to scriptures.[8]

“Donald Trump promised to preserve “American values”, according to him including immigration restrictions, and opposition to same-sex marriage and abortion rights”

Authoritarian tendencies: its relationship with right-wing rhetoric

According to journalist Amanda Taub, the view of an authoritarian God who favours and rewards those who obey, and punishes those who do not respect the norm and express dissent, is related to the rise of

authoritarianism in the United States. The fear of the foreigner and the morally-deviant - grounded in the desire for self-preservation which can only be achieved through Divine favour - is, according to Taub, the driving force behind the current authoritarian tendencies in the United States.[9] Moreover, political scientist Karen Stenner[10] has argued that people who support authoritarian rule are usually triggered by fast-changing norms, and increasing diversity of race or belief. In an effort to protect themselves from these cultural changes, these people support leaders and movements who promise to preserve “authentic values.” This explains the likelihood of evangelicals to support Donald Trump when he promised to preserve “American values”, according to him including immigration restrictions, and opposition to same-sex marriage and abortion rights. The increasing diversity of opinions on these hot-button issues threatens “traditional” values of American Christianity and triggers the protectionist and right-wing authoritarian tendencies of some believers, thereby furthering the polarisation of American society.

Can religion also be a source of unity and dialogue?

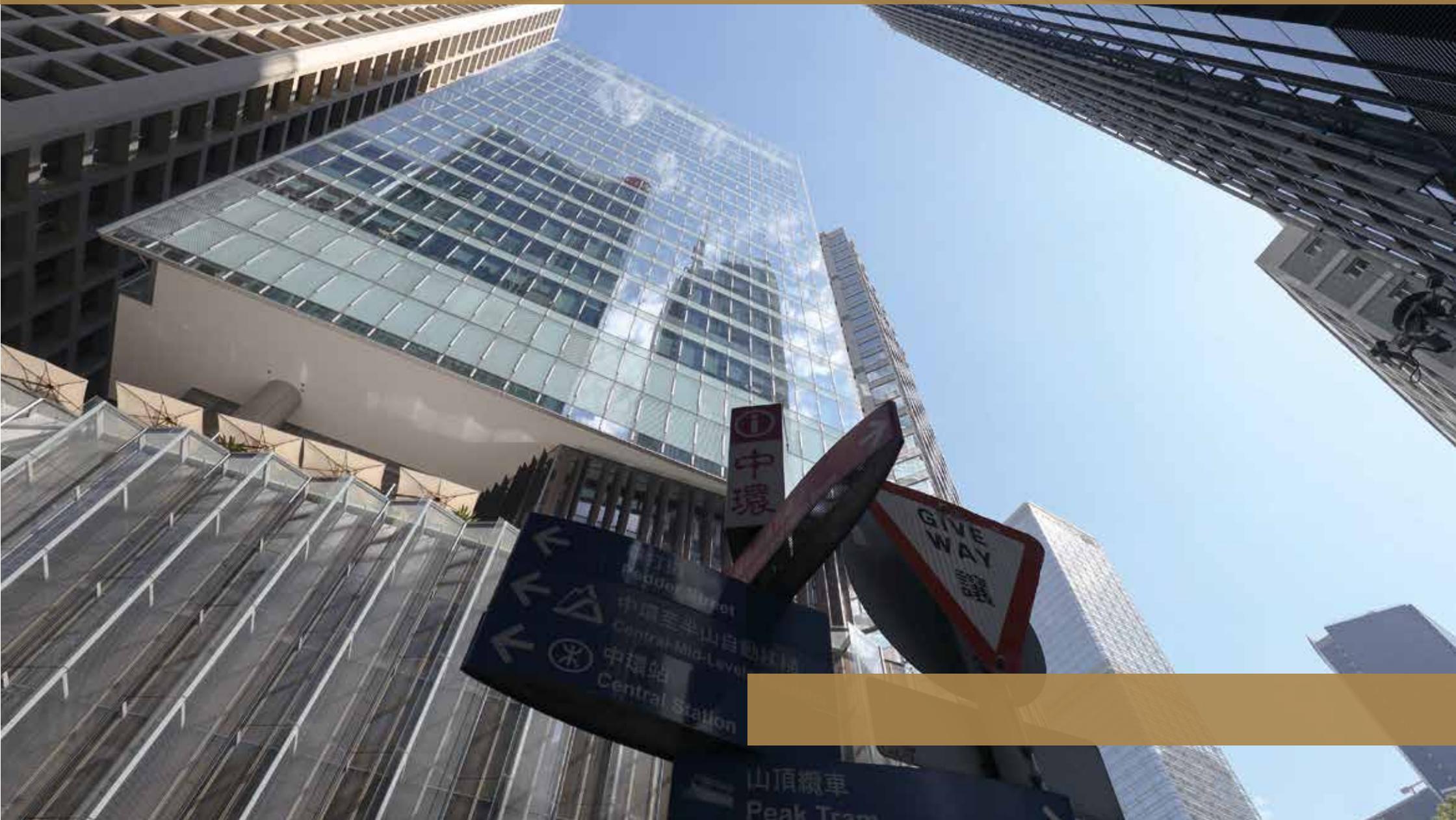
President Trump has attended a number of publicly televised Sunday church services and performed gestures appealing to the religious spirit of evangelicals.[11] [12] He even held a Bible outside a church near the White House right after a Black Lives Matter demonstration was dispersed in the area.[13] These images portray how intertwined evangelical Christianity is with American political engagement, especially when a powerful political figure is performing religious gestures to appeal to the sensibilities of the Christian majority. It is also indicative of how religion can be used to draw political lines and divide people.

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Performing religious gestures to appeal to religious sensibilities for political ends is not new. Yet one must ask if religion can also be an instrument to express ambiguities and find unity in diversity, and not just an instrument of violence, or - in our case - of authoritarianism. There are, for example, Christians, who back racial minorities and LGBTQ+ people.[14] James Martin, an American Jesuit priest, is very vocal in his support for sexual minorities. However, he is also wary of ad hominem comments on his Facebook page, coming from both sides of the debate on sexual morality.[15] Another example is the 'Center for Prophetic Imagination' whose advocacy for economic justice and freedom from discrimination is based on Catholic liberation theology.[16] Guthrie Graves-Fitzsimmons also witnesses alternative Christian voices as a religion contributor to CNN, an LGBTQ+ and environmental advocate, and a deacon to his local Baptist Church. [17] In their opinion, Christianity should give a voice to those who are disenfranchised and marginalised, and one should no longer see the religious other as a threat.

“In their opinion, Christianity should give a voice to those who are disenfranchised and marginalised, and one should no longer see the religious other as a threat”

Notes



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Report

1. With few exceptions. One might think in particular of Hitler who rose to power in a democratic system.

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2. [Biden campaign launches Catholic voter outreach initiative](#)
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4. Ibid
5. [White evangelical approval of Trump slips, but eight-in-ten say they would vote for him](#)
6. [Why Trump is reliant on white evangelicals](#)
7. [This Election, Evangelical Supporters Have More Faith in Trump](#)
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12. [More Americans say Trump administration has helped evangelicals than other groups](#)
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