**A Review of Literature on The Effects of Discussing Religion In A Political Campaign**

GOVT 310: Introduction to Political Research

By Allie Zuliani

The relationship between religion and politics has always existed in the United States and the proper perimeters of this relationship have long been debated. The United States was founded on the principles of religious freedom and the separation of church and state. References to God and religion have always been considered a normal part of American politics, and religion has always been a predictor of political attitudes (Weber and Thornton 2012) (Denton 2005).

Every President since the country’s founding has been a Christian, and skepticism towards non-Christians in that role continues to this day. In 1960 when John F. Kennedy sought the Presidency, his Catholicism was a point of concern for many voters. Similarly in 2004 when George W. Bush ran for reelection against John Kerry, a catholic, religion played a major role in the campaign - but not for the reason that the candidates were of differing denominations (Denton 2005). The contention between denominations of Christianity in politics has fizzled out only to be replaced by a tension between other major religions like Judaism and Islam (Weber and Thornton 2012). The tension in 2004 arose when Kerry appeared not catholic enough and voters criticized him for invoking his religion only when politically convenient (Denton 2005).

We have long seen candidates invoke religion into their campaigns and use subtle religious cues to appeal to voters. Both Weber and Thornton (2012), as well as Calfano and Djupe (2008), found this present in candidate’s rhetoric as well as the advertisements they created. Calfano and Djupe suggested Republicans use a sort of religious code strewn about their political speeches that appeal to evangelicals while still not alienating less religious voters (2008). Clifford and Gaskins had similar findings, reporting that both Republicans and Democrats benefit from invoking religion into their campaign rhetoric (2015). They found the only group that did not show increased favorability were secular liberals, and while they may not be as happy about a candidate appealing to religion they showed no signs of abandoning a candidate due to their religious references. More specifically, Clifford and Gaskins found that the reason for increased favorability of candidates who invoke religion is because voters tend to see them as more moral and trustworthy (2015). Both Clifford and Gaskins (2015) and Calfano and Djupe concluded that invoking religion in a campaign has in general helped candidates win over voters without pushing any away (2008).

Clifford and Gaskins’ 2015 study, *Trust Me, I Believe In God*, as well as Schafer and Shaw’s 2009 study, *Trends: Tolerance In The United States,* showed Americans to be seemingly unwilling to vote for an atheist, specifically because they found them to be less moral than religious candidates. In a March 2007 Newsweek Poll utilized in Clifford and Gaskins’s (2015) study, only 30% of people said they would vote for an atheist. Schafer and Shaw found 52% of Americans to have an unfavorable view of atheists (2009). Polls from this study done between 1998 and 2007 showed a range of 48-53% of voters saying they would not vote for a well qualified atheist candidate (2009).

The term atheist invokes a lot of emotion, imagery, and frankly negative connotations. Gervais (2011) found fascinating results when studying anti-atheist prejudice in America reporting that “American respondents rated Atheists as the group that least shares their vision for America” and most would not approve of their child marrying an atheist (544). These views fall exactly in line with the findings of Clifford and Gaskins (2015) and Schaefer and Shaw (2009) who found Americans unwilling to vote for an atheist candidate. Atheists do fall into the broader category of non-religious people, however, and the research on this group as a whole is more sparse. The data for nonreligious people is a bit more friendly. Carr (2018) found that only 25% of Americans say it is important for a candidate to have strong religious beliefs and almost half of respondents reported saying it is not important a candidate shares their own beliefs. This data supports Clifford and Gaskins’s findings that the political environment seems to be improving for non-religious candidates (2015).

Based on this research as well as history itself we know nonreligious candidates typically struggle with election. There has only ever been one member of Congress to be openly atheist (Clifford and Gaskins 2015). However, there seems to be hope for non-religious candidates looking to run for office. The non-religious are one of the fastest-growing groups in America (Cliffords and Gaskins 2015) and Gervais (2011) showed that unlike with other groups, the more atheists there are the more prejudice against them is reduced. Additionally, Clifford and Gaskins found the younger generations of Americans are more willing to vote for an atheist adding to the seemingly positive future for non-religious candidates (2015).

The most common designs utilized in these studies have been broad surveys of Americans. Examining the results of these surveys as a whole clearly lays the groundwork for how discussing religion within political campaigns affects their outcomes. We know how invoking religious rhetoric in a presidential campaign helps candidates win votes and almost never turns people away from the candidate. We also know historically Americans are unwilling to vote for atheists candidates, who would obviously not discuss religion throughout their campaigns. However, with the number of non-religious people growing and more Americans responding that they do not need candidates to share their religious beliefs, I believe there is room for new research on discussing religion within political campaigns. Approaching these questions from the opposite direction, I hypothesize that a candidate that does not discuss religion could be successful at winning election today. In comparing candidates, those who do not discuss religion as a part of their campaign will be just as likely to receive votes as those candidates who do discuss religion in their campaign.

Works Cited

Calfano, Brian Robert, and Paul A. Djupe. “God Talk: Religious Cues and Electoral Support.” Political Research Quarterly 62, no. 2 (June 2009): 329–39. doi:10.1177/1065912908319605.

Carr, Nicole. "Voters Ready for Nonreligious Candidates." *The Humanist,* Nov, 2018, 10-11, <http://proxyau.wrlc.org/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/2139011686?accountid=8285>.

Clifford, Scott, and Ben Gaskins. “Trust Me, I Believe in God: Candidate Religiousness as a Signal of Trustworthiness.” American Politics Research 44, no. 6 (November 2016): 1066–97. doi:10.1177/1532673X15608939.

Denton, Robert E. “Religion and the 2004 Presidential Campaign.” *American Behavioral Scientist* 49, no. 1 (2005): 11–31. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764205279401>.

Gervais, Will M. “Finding the Faithless: Perceived Atheist Prevalence Reduces Anti-Atheist Prejudice.” Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin 37, no. 4 (April 2011): 543–56. doi:10.1177/0146167211399583.

Schafer, Chelsea E., and Greg M. Shaw. "Trends: Tolerance in the United States." *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 73, no. 2 (2009): 404-31. Accessed March 5, 2020. [www.jstor.org/stable/25548089](http://www.jstor.org/stable/25548089).

Weber, Christopher, and Matthew Thornton. "Courting Christians: How Political Candidates Prime Religious Considerations in Campaign Ads." *The Journal of Politics* 74, no. 2 (2012): 400-13. Accessed March 5, 2020. doi:10.1017/s0022381611001617.