



# “Our Lady of Perpetual Exemption”

An analysis on the roles played by leaders of evangelical 501(c)(3)'s in mobilizing the white evangelical voting bloc to support Donald Trump in the 2016 Republican Presidential Primary race.

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## Abstract

How did Donald Trump win over the majority the evangelical voting during the 2016 Republican Primary? Given that evangelical voters comprise of a fourth the total electorate, appealing to issue positions are crucial for any Republican nominee. There is a mutually reinforcing relationship between elites within the evangelical movement and Republican party. As this relationship has evolved over the past 40 years, questions of religion and political partisanship have intensified.

Trump's decision to work with Paula White, a popular televangelist, "Prosperity Gospel" preacher, and outsider to the established evangelical political spheres, raised questions particularly about provisions set in the Johnson Amendment that prohibit active clergy from participating in election-related activities. This study finds that the political activities of the evangelical leaders who endorsed Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential primary sent a signal to their respective adherents and other local clergies to trust, advocate, and mobilize around him. However, I found little support in campaign contributions for Trump at the evangelical mass level. Finally, evangelicals who attended church "regularly" were more likely to support Ted Cruz instead of Trump.

This suggests that Trump resonated more with the "nontraditional" evangelicals voter base instead of that of the Christian Right. Regardless if it was in compliance with the Johnson Amendment, the political actions of clerically-active evangelical figures serves as a social cue that shapes their congregants' political behavior.

## Introduction

- Conventional wisdom holds that **evangelical voters are more effectively mobilized to elect Republican nominees during general elections than they are in mobilizing to nominate an evangelical or religiously devout candidate during the primary. This did not happen in the 2016 election.** Evangelical voters instead, propelled **Donald Trump, political outsider with questionable morals**, to winning the nomination over Christian Right favorite, Ted Cruz: an experienced politician, raised in the evangelical faith, that has remained unwavering in his pro-life and pro-religious liberty opinions throughout his time in Senate. **Despite his religious short-comings and previously sustained indifference towards Christianity, the plurality of evangelical voters during the primary considered Trump to be their political savior** who would champion the wants and needs of the Christian Right. This trend continued and grew throughout the general election, culminating with 81% of all white evangelical voters casting ballots for Trump in 2016, comprising 26% of the national electorate
- Trump's victory of the evangelical voting bloc is thanks to his spiritual advisor and longtime friend, Paula White. Although it is not uncommon for presidential candidates to work with a religious or spiritual advisor, Trump's decision to work with White was met with significant concern from not only both Democrats and Republicans, but other evangelicals as well. **Paula White is a "prosperity gospel" preacher:** the belief that God wants his followers to rich and that poverty is caused by one's lack of faith. This practice is frowned up on by many within the Christian Right and has been called **"heretical" by evangelical fore father, Billy Graham.**
- One of the policies that both White and Trump championed was the repeal of the **Johnson Amendment**, which bars 501(c)(3) groups from making political endorsements and partaking in election related activities. Although it appears that preachers like Paula White were both active politically in the Trump campaign and within their own religious organizations, **their public involvement in an election served as a social cue for their followers to place their support, trust, votes and tithes in Donald Trump.**

## Methods and Materials

The data for the current study comes from the American National Election Survey (ANES), from 2008, 2012, 2016.

Three separate graphs will be made.

- Figure 1:** Time trends in political contributions from evangelical and mainline protestant voters from 2008 to 2016.
  - Dependent Variable: Identifying as "mainline protestant" or a "born-again" Christian?
  - Independent Variable: Did the respondent contributed to a political campaign during their surveyed election cycle?
  - Controls: Protestant denomination, year
- Figure 2:** Republican Primary Vote Distribution, by Born-Again and Mainline Protestant Christians (2016)
  - Dependent Variable: Identifying as "mainline protestant" or a "born-again" Christian?
  - Independent variable: Primary election voice choice
  - Control: protestant denomination
- Figure 3:** Born-Again, Republican Primary Vote Distribution for Trump and Cruz, by Church Attendance Frequency (2016)
  - Dependent Variable: Identifying as "mainline protestant" or a "born-again" Christian?
  - Independent variable: Primary election voice choice
  - Control: church attendance frequency

## Results

- H<sub>1</sub>:** *There will be rise in the percentage of born-again/evangelical respondents who report contributing money to a political campaign or candidate from 2008, 2012, to 2016.*
  - Across all three years for both born again and mainline protestant rate of respondents who stated "yes," that they had contributed to a political candidate during the past year was relatively small.
  - Figure 1: display that from 2008 to 2012, there was a steep increase in the amount of born-again and mainline protestant respondents' political contributions, but a decrease in the amount of contributions given to a candidate from 2012 to 2016 amongst born-again respondents, dropping from 11.80% to 11.1%.
  - Fail to reject the null hypothesis**
- H<sub>2</sub>:** *Born-again/evangelical voters, who regularly attend church, voted for Donald Trump during the Republican primary election at a lower rate than born-again/evangelical voters, who irregularly attend church.*
  - Figure 2: displays the mean proportions –after removing missing data— of 2016 Primary Vote Distribution amongst born-again and mainline protestant voters. → As expected, Evangelical voters as a whole were showed more support for Donald Trump in the primary
  - Figure 3: when isolating the born-again vote and controlling for religious attendance, Ted Cruz has the majority of the born-again/evangelical vote distribution. **Reject null hypothesis.**

Figure 1: Percent Change of Electoral Candidate Contributions Amongst Protestant Christians (2008-2016)

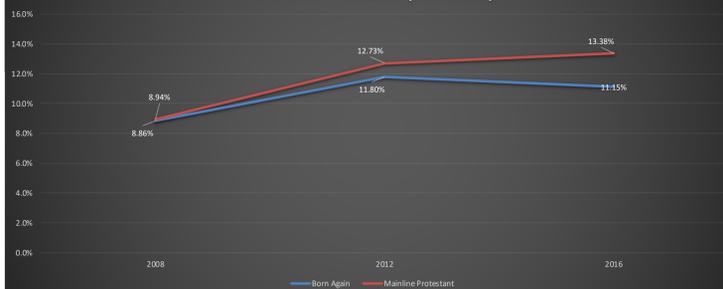
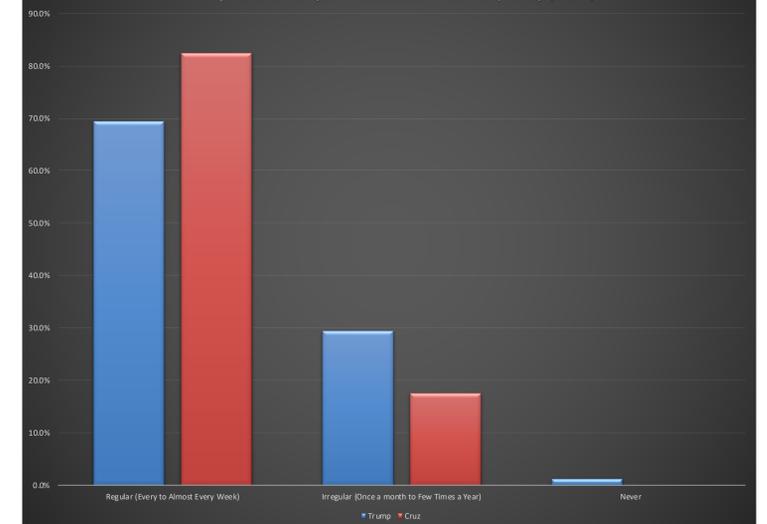


Figure 3: Born-Again Christians, Republican Primary Vote Distribution for Trump and Cruz, by Church Attendance Frequency (2016)



## Discussion

These findings show that while Trump relied on, surrounded himself with prosperity gospel preachers, it did not incentivize more born-again respondents to contribute to a political candidate in 2016. This suggests that Trump's veneration of personal wealth and glory, and the unprecedented access had to the Trump campaign, it may have felt unnecessary for more born-again Christians to contribute to the Trump campaign. In addition to his, it's important to note that not every born-again Christian is a Trump supporter, and some may have contributed to the campaigns of other Republican primary candidates, or even to the Clinton campaign, or chose to not give in 2016 due to personal preference.

Beginning with the 2016 election, there was increased involvement of evangelical elites into the influential circles of the religious right, who were previously unwelcomed or uninterested in politics. These outsiders were high ranking members within the fringe evangelical movements known to be less politically active and were close colleagues with Paula White (Peters and Dias 2019). Many fringe evangelicals were known for their popular televangelist programs. The early expressions of support for Donald Trump's Republican nomination bid from leaders within the televangelist fringes, provided his campaign, early on in the primary race, with thousands of evangelical supporters that would not have been naturally inclined to support him otherwise.

## Conclusions

- Trump's appeal with fringe movement and irregular church attending evangelicals is representative of a shift in Republican party politics.
  - Could point to religion becoming less of a requirement for Republican candidates in the 2020 election.
- Heavy involvement of evangelical clergy, as seen in 2016, in partisan politics had an impact whom followers chose to support, distribution is based on church attendance.
  - "traditional," regular church attending, evangelicals were more likely to support Ted Cruz. Supported Trump to due his appeals to "protect religious liberty"
- The term "evangelical" itself, is ever-changing
  - Future social science studies should either encompass evangelical fringe movements such as "Charismatic-Pentecostalism" when measuring religion and politics or, create and analyze as a separate variable with as much consideration as "born-again" or "evangelical"

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