

Christianity, Candidates, and Coding: How Evangelicalism Affects Campaigning

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Abstract

When we look at Senatorial candidate's campaign websites, we see a stark contrast in the amount of Christian rhetoric that is used. This raises the question: Why do some political candidates use more religious rhetoric than others? I theorize that, due to evangelical Christians' political and community involvement, the amount of explicit religious rhetoric used by a candidate has a positive correlation with the percentage of evangelicals among the electorate. Furthermore, I theorize the absence of evangelicals among the electorate will increase a candidate's use of coded, rather than explicit, religious rhetoric. I test my claims by collecting data on religious rhetoric from the websites of all 2022 Senate candidates. This yielded partial support for my theoretical claims, as candidates increase their use of both explicit and coded rhetoric when campaigning to evangelically dense areas. More research is needed to closely examine these findings and others in the analysis.

1. Introduction

When we look at the campaign websites of 2022 Senate candidates, there is quite a stark contrast in the total amount of religious rhetoric that is used. Katie Britt, a senatorial candidate from Alabama, used a total of 28 Christian words or phrases on her campaign site. Britt goes to great lengths to display her Christianity, utilizing phrasing such as:

As a Christian, wife, and mother, I am 100%, unapologetically pro-life because of my faith and deeply-held family values. However, my belief in the science also reinforces my unwavering views on the issue, as there is no doubt that life begins at conception. Every life is a sacred gift from God, and I am passionately committed to protecting the unborn¹.

It is difficult to read more than a few sentences on Britt's webpage without coming upon another mention of her religious beliefs. Mark Meuser, a candidate for Senate from California, on the other hand, only employed such language twice on his website. Both candidates are Republicans, and neither are incumbents. On the surface, there does not appear to be much difference between these candidates. So why does the rhetoric on their campaign websites vary to such a degree?

American politicians use a myriad of campaign strategies to win elections. A candidate's platform could be built on hope, fear, change, preserving the status quo, or countless other possibilities. Whatever the strategy, the intent is more often than not meant to emotionally affect potential voters. For good or for ill, it is difficult to pinpoint a more emotionally charged topic than religion. Whether an individual considers themselves a person of faith or not, the topic of theology, especially when intertwined with government, is likely to induce strong reactions. However, despite its useful emotional potential, not all candidates choose to include faith as a major ingredient in their campaigns. Further, those that do tend to use varying amounts of religious rhetoric. So, this leads to my question: why do some candidates use more religious rhetoric than others in their campaigns?

This question is particularly relevant in today's political climate. Representatives such as Marjorie Taylor Greene and Lauren Boebert, along with President Trump, are adamant that the United States was founded to be a Christian nation. Furthermore, the repeal of *Roe v. Wade* has induced many to argue that Christian nationalism is affecting the direction of our country. This debate over the separation of church and state as expressed in the establishment clause of the Constitution has remained one of the most polarizing topics since early in our nation's history.

To better understand these dynamics, I start from the premise that politicians wish to be elected. To do so they need the support of the largest portion of the electorate. Campaigning religiously to secular voters would not be effective. Furthermore, history has shown that politicians are generally unafraid to compromise ideals in the pursuit of election. It would therefore be remarkable if numerous politicians avoid the topic of religion out of a sense of moral duty. However, it would not be difficult to imagine candidates basing the amount of religious rhetoric they use on the level of support it may garner.

So, with that in mind, I argue that differences in the electorate by state may be helpful in explaining variation in religious rhetoric by candidates. More specifically, I expect evangelical Christianity among the population to heavily influence the amount of Christian rhetoric that is used by those running for office. I argue that states with high levels of evangelicals can expect their candidates to use more explicitly Christian rhetoric. Conversely, states with little evangelicalism among the electorate will see more indirect and subtle Christian rhetoric from their candidates. I test these hypotheses by collecting data from the campaign sites of 2022 Senate candidates. I find support for my first hypothesis as there is a positive correlation between the evangelical percentage among the electorate and the amount of explicitly Christian rhetoric used by a candidate. I do not, however, find support for my second hypothesis since a positive correlation was also found between evangelicalism among the population and the amount of indirect Christian rhetoric used by candidates. I also control for a number of factors that can influence rhetorical strategy, many of which have a measurable effect and some of which defy my initial expectations.

In what follows, I review the existing literature concerning religiosity, politicians, and rhetoric before laying out my theoretical claims. Based on these claims, I articulate two hypotheses, which I test by collecting data from campaign sites and conducting regression analysis. I conclude with my results, as well as my suggestions for future research on this subject.

2. Literature Review

Many researchers have studied the use of religious rhetoric in American politics. A large amount of this research explores the use of religious framing, building off more general work in issue framing. Issue framing, which entails the strategic presentation of an issue in a manner that is most likely to garner the desired opinion from persons or groups, has long been seen as a prevalent method used in political persuasion². More recently, scholars have argued that framing is effective in changing not only the opinion of voters on specific issues but also in changing the level of importance placed on the issue³.

For instance, the public's opinion on abortion, an extremely controversial topic in American politics, is dependent on how it is framed. Citizens place a high level of importance on abortion when they consider it a women's rights issue or a religious matter. Additionally, research has shown framing the issue religiously evokes opposition to abortion, while framing it as a woman's right gains support⁴. This suggests that religiously framing issues in a selective manner can be particularly beneficial to politicians.

Scholars have, in particular, researched the effectiveness of politicians' use of coded religious language. Calfano and Djupe's research⁵ found that political candidates can discreetly cue the support of Evangelical Christians. By using coded language that is common parlance in Evangelical denominations, but not easily recognizable by outsiders, politicians can gain the support of this key voting bloc while avoiding campaign promises that risk alienation of other key demographics. While there has been general agreement on the effectiveness of cueing the support of Christians, there is some disagreement on the finer points. Weber and Thornton⁶ found denomination to be less important than the level of orthodoxy of the voter. Their research found a candidate's use of religious cues, such as the phrase "sanctity of life", activates traditionalist Christian support across a variety of denominations. While there is less research exploring the use of overt religious language by candidates, some scholars have tried to examine it. Turek⁷ took a case study approach, exploring the evolution of George W. Bush's religious rhetoric over the course of his political career. Her research found that Bush's use of religious rhetoric was sparse early in his political career. As his career evolved, so did his explicit religiosity. By the end of his gubernatorial career, Bush referenced his Christian faith quite often, a practice that continued into his presidency.

These past researchers have made it clear that religious rhetoric can be utilized by politicians to gain support. This includes both coded and overt rhetoric. However, there is an absence of scholarly material exploring the conditions under which coded language is used by candidates over the use of explicit religious language. This leaves a noticeable gap in the research on the subject. I fill this gap in the literature by exploring how rhetorical political strategies change by geography and religiosity of voters. Furthermore, most of the extant research primarily investigates the role of religiosity in Republican campaigns, while ignoring its use by Democratic candidates^{8,9} (Olson and Warber 2008; Turek 2014; Green and Guth 1988). It is difficult to understand the role of religion in American politics without investigating both of the major political parties. In my research, I remedy this oversight by examining both Republican and Democratic candidates.

3. Theory

When considering candidates' use of religious rhetoric, it is necessary to understand their motivations, as well as the motivations of the electorate. I assume that candidates are primarily motivated by election or reelection. While they are also concerned with enacting their preferred policy, without gaining office, this is a moot point and therefore secondary. Building from this, I assume that candidates will strategically use their platform and rhetoric to attempt to gain office. It would stand to reason that their electoral goals would best be achieved by attracting the maximum number of supporters while alienating the fewest amount of voters. Meanwhile, I assume that voters desire the election of a candidate whose policies are closest to their own preferences. However, I expect these preferences and values to vary by location.

U.S. states vary in their level of religiosity, and I argue that this affects candidate strategy and rhetoric. There are states that may be largely secular, while others hold a diverse religious population. Then there are areas of the country which are primarily Christian. Members of many Christian denominations can be politically active.

Evangelicals, in particular, boast a high level of political engagement among members¹⁰. They tend to rally around issues such as abortion, the “traditional” family vs. marriage equality, and the separation of church and state. This level of engagement demands attention from politicians. In areas with higher concentrations of evangelicals, churches serve as the center of the community. Citizens are more likely to attend service every week and attend church social functions regularly. This is where their social network is predominantly built. Many evangelicals consider their Christian identity to be their primary identifier. Given the pervasiveness of religion in everyday life, even voters in these states who do not consider themselves to be religious, or who subscribe to other faiths, are regularly exposed to evangelical words and actions because of how intertwined the church is with the community.

Thus, candidates in such states can reasonably predict that the evangelical voting bloc will expect certain policies from them. Consequently, candidates in largely evangelical states are strongly incentivized to use overtly religious language while campaigning to signal their willingness to cater to this powerful voting bloc. Furthermore, since more secular citizens and those with alternative religious affiliations are used to being exposed to evangelical rhetoric, there is less risk that they will be driven away by such candidate strategies. As such, I can expect that:

H1: Candidates running in highly evangelical states are more likely to use explicit religious language than other candidates.

Meanwhile, candidates in other states with more diverse, secular, or alternative Christian backgrounds require a different strategy. While church life may still be important for some people in these areas, it is likely to play a less pivotal role in their day-to-day life. The church is not the primary organization in the community. With a religiously diverse electorate, using clear religious rhetoric is not practical and can backfire. Further, candidates are unable to effectively appeal to every spiritual background. However, there are still politically active evangelical voters in these states and candidates do not want to alienate them. Instead, they want to mobilize them. Thus, I argue that a more subtle approach is necessary. Without the daily exposure to the religious speech that is ever present in evangelical states, non-evangelicals may react negatively to overt Christian rhetoric. On the other hand, less exposure to evangelical ideology makes it less likely that they will recognize indirect religious references targeted at evangelical voters. Therefore, candidates in these states are thus incentivized to use more subtle Christian rhetoric that will not alienate non-evangelical voters but will signal to and activate evangelicals, rather than using overt Christian rhetoric. Given this, I hypothesize that:

H2: Candidates in less evangelical states are more likely to use coded Christian rhetoric than candidates in evangelically dense states.

4. Empirics

These hypotheses were tested quantitatively using data on all candidates running for the United States Senate in 2022. I collected data on 71 candidates, from 43 different states across the nation. My unit of analysis is the candidate, including both incumbents and challengers. For simplicity, I only studied Republican and Democratic candidates. Since I am only interested in candidates who are viable, independent and 3rd party candidates were not relevant to this study.

For the purposes of this study, religious rhetoric, whether it be explicit or coded, is synonymous with Christian rhetoric, as Christianity is the modal religion in the United States. For Hypothesis 1, my dependent variable is a candidate’s use of explicit religious rhetoric. I used a list of 15 commonly used words that directly refer to or invoke images of the Christian faith. These rhetorical devices would signal the candidate’s religiosity to Christians and non-Christians alike. Examples include, “God”, “Jesus”, “sacred”, and “bible”. For Hypothesis 2, my dependent variable is coded religious rhetoric. Coded religious language, in this context, refers to words or phrases that do not directly refer to Christianity. However, due to their common usage among Christians, using such phraseology signals a candidate’s religiosity. Examples include: “pro-family”, a phrase that is commonly used to refer to the traditional nuclear family, “values”, which, in the right context, refers to traditional Judeo-Christian or conservative values, and “beacon”, which is used among Christians to refer to setting a Christian example. I developed my list of explicit and coded rhetoric by building on pre-existing research as well as reading candidate statements. For the complete list of explicit and coded religious rhetoric used in this study see Table A1. To collect this data, I personally read through

the campaign website for each candidate for the U.S. Senate while counting the number of instances of explicit and coded religious rhetoric that were used. These counts serve as the measures of my dependent variables.

Figure 1. Religious Rhetoric

Explicit	Coded
Christian (Context dependent)	Faith (Context dependent)
Sanctity of Life	Family Values
Pro-Life	American Dream
Sacred	Steward
God	Pro-Family
Church	Pro-Child
First Amendment	Beacon
Bible	Israel (Context Dependent)
Prayer	Values (Context Dependent)
Jesus	Gender Identity (Context Dependent)
Christ	Traditional
Right to Life	City on a Hill
Lord	Cornerstone
Judeo-Christian Values	Dignity (Context Dependent)
Any Bible Verses	Islam (Context Dependent)
	Blessings

Most of these websites had large sections detailing the candidate’s positions on each major issue. While this is where the majority of the religious rhetoric could be found, other sections occasionally contained such language. Therefore, it was necessary to read the entire site. Republican candidate Katie Britt of Alabama used the most explicit rhetoric on her campaign site, with 18 instances. Thirty-four candidates did not use any explicit religious rhetoric, however. Therefore, the minimum value is 0. The average candidate used explicit rhetoric 1.94 times. Concerning coded religious rhetoric, James Lankford, the Republican incumbent from Oklahoma, had 33 instances, which is the maximum value. Twenty-eight of the candidates did not use any coded language, so 0 is the minimum value. The average candidate used coded language 2.5 times on their campaign site.

My independent variable for both hypotheses is the percentage of the population that is evangelical Christian in a senatorial candidate’s state. I single out evangelicals because of their high level of political involvement as well as religiosity. This information was gathered from a study done by Pew Research Center and is accessible on their website. Kentucky and Alabama are both 49% evangelical, which is the maximum value. Utah, on the other hand, is only 7% evangelical, the minimum value. The average state is made up of 26.95% evangelicals.

I control for five factors that could potentially affect the amount of explicit and coded religious language used by political candidates. All five are dummy variables. I include a variable for the party of the candidate. Conservatives’ views on issues like abortion and LGBTQ+ rights are often in sync with the beliefs of many Christian denominations. Therefore, it is possible that a Republican candidate may seek to cater their message to religious voters in particular. Alternatively, Democratic candidates may wish to use religious rhetoric in an attempt to attract

Christian voters despite their conflicting political views. The thirty-six Republican candidates are coded as 1, while the 35 remaining Democrats are coded as 0. For similar reasons, I control for the projected likelihood a seat has of being won by the Republican candidate according to the Cook Political Report. I coded a seat as a 1 if it is projected to be taken by a Republican, and 0 if it is not. This controls for the possibility that candidates in Republican-leaning districts may seek to attract conservative Christians with religious rhetoric. Thirty-nine of the candidates are in running in Republican-leaning races while the remaining 32 candidates are running in states that are either toss-ups or Democrat-leaning. Similarly, I include a control variable for whether each Senatorial candidate is running in a true toss-up race or not. I code races as 1 for toss-up and 0 otherwise. According to the Cook Political Report, only 6 candidates are in toss-up races while the remaining 65 are not. Next, I code for whether the candidate is an incumbent or not. There are a number of ways incumbency could affect a candidate's use of religious rhetoric. Having the incumbent advantage may make a Christian candidate so confident that they do not feel the need to code or curb their religious language. A secular incumbent may use little to no such language for similar reasons. A challenger may feel a greater need to cater their message to the audience. I code 1 for the 28 incumbents and 0 for the 43 challengers or candidates running for an open seat. Finally, I include a control for whether each candidate identifies as Christian. A political candidate's religiosity may carry over into their campaign. Therefore, it is conceivable that a Christian candidate will be more likely to use Christian religious rhetoric. I code 1 for the 57 candidates that are openly Christian, and 0 for the 14 candidates that are either not Christian or decline to disclose their religious affiliation. Most candidates disclose this information on their campaign sites.

5. Analysis & Results

To test Hypothesis 1, I conducted a regression analysis. I included the dependent variable, which is the number of explicitly religious words or phrases used by each candidate, as well as my independent variable, the percentage of the electorate in each state that are evangelical Christian. Additionally, I included all 5 of my control variables in the regression. The results can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Explicit Rhetoric Results

Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error	P-value
% Evangelical	0.13	0.04	0.001
Christian Candidate	-0.49	1.08	0.65
Republican Candidate	3.32	0.77	< 0.05
Incumbent	-0.64	0.77	0.41
Republican State	-0.99	0.99	0.32
Toss Up State	-0.49	1.51	0.75
Y-intercept	-2.09	1.25	0.1
R-Squared = 0.329	Obs.=70		

As my hypothesis predicts, the evangelical coefficient is positive, as well as statistically significant. The coefficients for Christian Candidates and Republican State are surprisingly negative. Other controls behave as predicted.

The coefficient on my independent variable, the percentage of the state that is evangelical, is 0.13. Since I hypothesized a positive correlation with my dependent variable, this supports my hypothesis. The coefficient suggests that a candidate will use an additional 0.13 explicitly religious words or phrases for every evangelical percentage point of their state. At first glance this does not appear to be a significant increase. However, the average candidate only used explicit rhetoric 1.94 times, while the number of evangelicals in each state varies widely, from 7% to 49%. Therefore, a 10% difference in a state's evangelicalism is quite plausible. This would result in a candidate using ± 1.3 explicitly religious words or phrases, which is more than half of the average. With that in mind, I consider this effect to be substantively significant. Additionally, the p-value of 0.001 indicates that the effect is also statistically significant at the 95% confidence interval.

The control for whether or not a candidate was Christian did not behave as expected. The coefficient is -0.49. This suggests a Christian candidate will use an average of almost half a word or phrase less than their non-Christian counterparts. This is a fairly large effect considering the average use of explicit rhetoric. However, the effect is not statistically significant and therefore requires more study. The candidate party has a coefficient of 3.32, which implies that a Republican will use far more explicitly religious phrases than Democrats. This is quite a large effect, approaching twice the average usage. The effect is also statistically significant. The control for incumbency gives a coefficient of -0.64. So, we can expect incumbents to use significantly less explicit rhetoric than challengers. The p-value, 0.41, does not show this effect to be statistically significant. The coefficient for the Republican State control is -0.99. This negative correlation defied expectations, suggesting that a candidate in a state projected to be taken by a Republican senator will use almost one fewer explicit words or phrases. This is a large number in comparison to the mean usage, especially considering its unexpected sign. The p-value, 0.32, is well outside the range of statistical significance, however. Finally, the toss-up State variable had a coefficient of -0.49. This negative correlation suggests that senatorial candidates in toss-up states will use 0.49 less explicit religious statements on average. Since this is approximately 25% of the average usage, I consider this a large effect. The p-value is 0.75, so the effect is once again not statistically significant.

I evaluate Hypothesis 2 using regression analysis as well. Here, the dependent variable is the use of coded religious rhetoric. I once again include my independent variable, the percentage of the evangelical electorate in each state, as well as all control variables. These results can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2. Coded Rhetoric Results

Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error	P-value
% Evangelical	0.14	0.06	0.01
Christian Candidate	0.05	1.52	0.97
Republican Candidate	2.14	1.07	0.05
Incumbent	0.59	1.08	0.59
Republican State	-0.03	1.39	0.98
Toss Up State	0.7	2.12	0.74
Y-intercept	-2.8	1.74	0.11
R-Squared = 0.177	Obs.= 70		

Contrary to my hypothesis, the evangelical coefficient is negative. Surprisingly, the Republican State effect is also negative. While all other control variables have correlations in the predicted direction, Republican State and Christian Candidate have very small effects.

The coefficient for the independent variable, evangelical Christian percentage of a state's electorate is 0.14. I expected a negative correlation, so this does not support my hypothesis. For every one percent rise in evangelicalism, a candidate can be expected to use 0.14 instances more of coded religious language. I consider this to be a substantively large effect. However, candidates used coded Christian rhetoric an average of 2.5 times on their websites, which is more frequent than explicitly religious rhetoric. Therefore, it is not as substantial as Hypothesis 1's results. The p-value of 0.01 is less than 0.05 and is therefore statistically significant. The results taken together, suggest that candidates in more evangelical states are more likely to use both explicit and coded religious rhetoric more than do other candidates.

In this model, the Christian candidate control has a coefficient of 0.05. While this positive correlation is consistent with expectations, the effect is quite small. This is only 2% of the average candidate's use of coded Christian language. Furthermore, with a p-value of 0.97, it lies well outside of the range of statistical significance. The control for the candidate party behaves as expected and has a coefficient of 2.14. This is a quite large effect which reveals that a Republican candidate can be expected to use 2 more coded religious words or phrases than other candidates. With a p-value of 0.05, this control is statistically significant at the 95% confidence interval. The incumbency

control has a coefficient of 0.59. Incumbents can be expected to use an average of 0.59 more coded religious statements than other candidates. When compared to the average usage, this is moderately substantive. This is an interesting effect when compared to the negative correlation present with incumbents and explicit rhetoric. The p-value, 0.59, does not show statistical significance. The Republican state control had a negative correlation with evangelical percentage. This control once again defied my expectations. However, with a coefficient of -0.03, the effect was far from substantive. Nor are the effects statistically significant, as shown by the p-value, 0.98. The control for toss up states has a coefficient of 0.7. This is substantive in relation to the average candidate's use of coded Christian rhetoric. Since I thought a toss-up race could have either a positive or negative correlation, this is not surprising. With a p-value of 0.74, this control's effect is not statistically significant.

6. Conclusion

Throughout the analysis, I found partial support for my theoretical claims. I expected a political candidate's use of explicitly Christian rhetoric to rise as the percentage of the electorate that is evangelically Christian increased. The data collected supported this expectation. However, I also expected candidates to use more coded religious rhetoric as a state's evangelical Christian population decreased. My research suggests the opposite to be true. I found a positive correlation between a Senate candidate's use of coded Christian rhetoric and a state's evangelical population. So, I conclude that a political candidate can be expected to use both explicit and coded religious rhetoric more frequently as the percentage of evangelical Christians in an area increases.

Furthermore, some of the control variables yielded unexpected results. As shown in my results, a Christian candidate can be expected to use less explicitly Christian words or phrases. Additionally, Republican candidates can be expected to use more explicit and coded rhetoric than Democrats and independents. Both results are quite puzzling. Of slightly less concern, but nonetheless interesting, is the incumbent control. The data showed that incumbents can be expected to use less explicit, but more coded rhetoric than challengers. All of these results deserve more research and should be examined further in the future.

There were also some limitations to my research. My list of explicit and coded rhetoric was non-comprehensive. While the words and phrases I included are commonly used by politicians as a way to cue their support of Christians, there are many others that I did not include. I was simply unable to put in the time and effort needed to consider every possibility. Perhaps a future researcher will be better equipped to accomplish this task. Additionally, I did not search for religious rhetoric in alternate forms of candidate communication. Examining a candidate's political ads, speeches, and press releases would have been helpful to give a clearer picture. Furthermore, the differing sizes of the campaign websites were not accounted for. Some candidates had a very large website with much of their platform included. Others only had a homepage with very little information. In retrospect, the proportion of the amount of rhetoric used to the size of the website would have been relevant. Again, perhaps a researcher with more resources at their disposal can take these factors into account in the future.

Further, one state, in particular, may skew my results. Utah was the state with the smallest percentage of evangelicalism, 7%. However, this is an area that is known for having a large Mormon population. While Mormonism is not included under the term "evangelical", they have strong beliefs that could potentially affect their politics and, by extension, campaigning. Perhaps accounting for this would be useful.

I would not make any policy suggestions based on the information learned through my study. It is difficult to regulate how and when a candidate uses religious rhetoric without impeding free speech. However, informing the public of why a candidate uses religious rhetoric would be a positive step. If voters learned that non-Christians and conservatives use less explicitly Christian rhetoric, the true intentions behind this rhetoric may become more apparent.

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