

Religious “Threat” in Contemporary Presidential Elections

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Abstract

Recent presidential elections have drawn attention to the role religion plays in shaping how Americans vote and highlighted the political relevance of white evangelical Christians, an important group within the Republicans' base of supporters. Evangelicals see themselves as in tension with a secular society, which affects their political behavior. Drawing on the venerable racial threat literature, I show evidence that evangelicals respond to "religious threat." The more secularists in their community, the more likely white evangelical Christians were to vote for Republican presidential candidates in 2000 and 1996. These results hold for two distinct ways of identifying white evangelicals, using community data at different levels of aggregation. However, secularists do not appear to respond to the presence of evangelicals in their environment.

American politics is increasingly divided along religious or cultural lines (Layman 2001; Kohut et al. 2000; Campbell 2002; Bolce and Maio 1999). In particular, white evangelical Christians¹ have become a formidable force in American politics, and an important group within the Republicans' base of supporters (Wilcox 1996; Green, Rozell, and Wilcox 2003). If analysts wish to make sense of the cultural divide in American presidential elections, evangelicals' emergence on the political landscape compels an understanding of their political and social attitudes. Drawing on the racial threat literature, this paper examines an important aspect of evangelicals' belief system: the tension they have with a secular society that they feel conflicts with their values. Many studies have found that white voters feel "threatened" by the presence of African-Americans in their community, and consequently become more likely to vote for racially conservative candidates as the proportion of blacks in their community rises. In this paper, I test whether evangelicals are similarly threatened by the presence of secularists—people who do not have a religious affiliation—in their social environment. In 2000, were white evangelical Christians more likely to vote for George W. Bush, who regularly used evangelical-sounding language on the stump, when they were surrounded by members of their community with a secular worldview? And, if so, is that same effect relationship observed in the 1996 presidential election, when the Republican nominee did not overtly employ religious language? Conversely, in either election were secularists threatened by the presence of evangelicals in their community?

In addition to advancing our understanding of the role religion plays in American elections, this paper also adds to the general theory regarding group conflict and the "threat effect" specifically. It examines which elements, if any, of the group threat literature apply to religion, and therefore can be generalized beyond the social identities—primarily race and to a lesser degree ethnicity—that have thus far been the focus of extant research.

Generating Hypotheses

Having been first articulated by Key (1949) in his magisterial study of politics in the Southern United States, the group threat effect has a venerable history in political science. Numerous studies have found that whites are more likely to vote for racially conservative candidates as the percentage of African Americans in their community rises—before, during, and after the civil rights era (Matthews and Prothro 1963; Blalock 1967; Schoenberger and Segal 1971; Wright 1977; Giles and Buckner 1993; Giles and Hertz 1994; Glaser 1994, 2003). However, almost from its beginning the racial threat literature has met with criticism. Critics have long argued that Key's original empirical findings, and those that followed in their wake, are not the result of a general threat mechanism but are instead rooted in deep-seated cultural norms idiosyncratic to the Southern U.S. (Pettigrew and Campbell 1960; Voss 1996, 1996; Voss 2001; Sadow 1996). Indeed, the debate over group threat as applied to voting echoes themes in an even larger social psychological literature on the consequences of mingling among social groups. One camp subscribes to the group conflict hypothesis—physical proximity leads to conflict (Blalock 1967). Following in the wake of Allport's (1954) foundational work on the subject, another school of thought holds that contact among different social groups fosters acceptance, tolerance, and harmony—the contact hypothesis. This is the hypothesized causal mechanism invoked to explain results, drawn largely from studies beyond the Southern United States, which suggest that whites are more likely to endorse racial liberalism and/or vote for black candidates as the concentration of African Americans within their social environment increases (Carsey 1995; Kinder and Mendelberg 1995; Sigelman and Welch 1993).

Given these conflicting results, one analytical approach to test the validity of the threat hypothesis has been its extension to social identities other than race. In looking beyond race, however, this literature has generally not looked very far, as the focus has most often been on Latino ethnicity, an identity that is a close analog to race (and, in fact, is often mistakenly referred to as a racial category). Within this body of research, the verdict has been mixed, as

research in different contexts finding evidence for both the contact and conflict hypotheses (Alvarez and Butterfield 2000; Hood and Morris 2000; Tolbert and Hero 1996; Taylor 1998; Quillian 1995; Lublin and Voss 2002).

This paper adds to the literature on the interplay between voters' preferences and their social context by examining a very different type of social identity than has been the case thus far--religious affiliation. Religion constitutes a good test of whether the threat effect, and its underlying logic of group conflict, is generalizable beyond race and ethnicity. In some respects it resembles race and ethnicity in that it too is a social identity with political relevance. Religious beliefs can shape political preferences, while membership in a religious organization builds social networks with others who share those beliefs, often serving to reinforce churchgoers' preferences (Huckfeldt, Plutzer, and Sprague 1993; Wald, Owen, and Hill 1988). On the other hand, however, religion is clearly not as salient a social marker as ethnicity and, especially, race. While members of different religious traditions hold varying opinions on many policy questions, (Kohut et al. 2000; Layman 2001; Legee and Kellstedt 1993) such differences do not always compare in significance to the racial divide in American public opinion (Kinder and Sanders 1996).

Even though it is not typically cited in the extensive literature on group conflict, existing evidence suggests that "religious threat" has appeared before, specifically during the 1960 presidential election. At the time, there was a palpable social tension between Catholics and Protestants, which permeated the 1960 election season because of John F. Kennedy's Catholicism. Many supporters of Richard Nixon fanned the flames of anti-Catholicism by questioning Kennedy's fitness for office on the grounds of his religious affiliation. A careful reading of Converse et al's (1966) empirical analysis of the 1960 election reveals that Protestants were more likely to vote for Nixon in communities where Catholics were congregated, analogous to the way that white voters in the South had been shown to react to the presence of African

Americans in their community. Gilbert (1993) adds more specificity to the Converse et al findings, by showing that mainline Protestants were more likely to support Nixon in counties with a greater density of Catholics. Gilbert also takes the analysis a step further, and shows that religious conflict in 1960 was a two way street: Catholics were more likely to support Kennedy in communities where Protestants had a greater share of the population.

1960 was not the first time that religious tensions characterized a presidential election. Only thirty-two years before, Democratic nominee Al Smith faced virulent anti-Catholicism as he campaigned for the presidency, losing in a landslide to Herbert Hoover. And still further back in time, the ethnocultural school of American history has highlighted the religious conflict that characterized American politics in the nineteenth century (Formisano 1971, 1994; Gienapp 1987; Jensen 1971, 1983; Kleppner 1970, 1987; Howe 1991). In an essay reviewing the ethnocultural literature, Richard McCormick notes that this school views politics through the lens of “negative reference group antagonisms, conflicts of custom and life-style, and differences in religious values and world views” (1974, 352), all of which are consistent with the group conflict hypothesis. While ethnocultural historians have not explored the specific question of whether the voting behavior of religious groups is affected by having a minority status (which in any case would be difficult to test given the lack of individual-level data in the relevant period), the general themes of this literature are nonetheless consistent with the assumptions motivating the literature on the group threat effect. In light of the historical evidence suggesting that the American political landscape has long been characterized by religiously-grounded conflict, uncovering an analogous threat effect in recent elections would suggest that this is an enduring feature of politics in the United States.

If there were a religious threat effect operating in contemporary American elections, who would we expect to be threatened and by whom? The tension between Catholics and Protestants has largely faded away, as evidenced by the fact that John Kerry’s Catholicism was barely an

issue in his candidacy for the presidency in 2004. Instead, I submit that white evangelical Christians are a group for whom a sense of threat is likely to be operative. Over roughly the last thirty years, evangelicals have carved out a cultural niche that parallels but is nonetheless divergent from the secular mainstream, complete with schools, publishing houses, bookstores, motion pictures, recording stars, television and radio networks and the like (Smith 1998).² Evangelicals thus have self-awareness as a socially cohesive and politically relevant group. That this group might consider itself threatened seems at least plausible given that an important element of evangelicalism is tension with a secular society that evangelicals perceive as antithetical to their values. Scholars of evangelicalism stress that it is a religious movement defined by its sense of distinctiveness. In the words of Christian Smith, a careful observer of the American evangelical movement:

American evangelicalism, we contend, is strong not because it is shielded against, but because it is--or at least perceives itself to be--embattled with forces that seem to oppose or threaten it. Indeed, evangelicalism, we suggest, *thrives* on distinction, engagement, tension, conflict, and threat. Without these, evangelicalism would lose its identity and purpose and grow languid and aimless. . . [T]he evangelical movement's vitality is not a product of its protected isolation from but of its vigorous engagement with pluralistic modernity. (Smith 1998, 98)

Note how Smith stresses that the evangelical movement is defined by conflict and threat.

Admittedly, the perceived tension evangelicals have with secular society need not be only a function of geographic proximity to secularists, as is presumed by the application of group conflict theory. Evangelicals' sense of cultural embattlement is likely exacerbated by what they perceive as a popular culture, communicated through mass media outlets, that rejects their values. Nonetheless, other evidence about the appearance of so-called "culture war" issues on local political agendas suggests that the specific mix of groups within a community can trigger a sense of threat among religious conservatives, spurring their political mobilization (Woliver 1999). This paper tests whether a similar feeling of conflict triggered by communities' social complexion affects evangelicals' voting behavior in presidential elections. It is important to

stress that the analysis at hand is not designed to test every potential means through which evangelicals might perceive themselves as in conflict with secular society, but only whether geographic proximity to secularists triggers such a response. If the group threat effect as observed for race also applies to evangelical Christians, as I hypothesize it does, we should expect to see that evangelicals are more likely to vote for Republican candidates in communities where there is a greater proportion of people who do not affiliate with a religion, who for the purposes of this discussion will be labeled “secularists.”³

One election in which it seems especially likely that we would observe group threat among evangelicals is the presidential contest of 2000, when George W. Bush was the GOP standard-bearer. While the past twenty-five years have seen the Republican party incorporate evangelical voters into its coalition, the candidacy of George W. Bush represents a turning point for America’s evangelical movement. Unlike his predecessors, including his own father, Bush is not only seen as sympathetic to evangelicals, he is widely identified as an evangelical himself.⁴ Muddying the water for the analysis of the 2000 vote, however, is the fact that Bush was not the only candidate who wore his religion on his sleeve during that year’s presidential campaign, as both Al Gore and, especially, his running mate Joe Lieberman discussed religion openly and frequently. The consequence of the attention paid to religion by Gore and Lieberman is unclear. It could be that it neutralized Bush’s appeal to evangelicals, or at least minimized any sense of threat that they felt. However, it might also have resulted in a heightened salience for religion in general, exacerbating evangelicals’ feeling that they are in tension with secular society.

Because of Bush’s evangelical bona fides, and the salience of religion more generally in the campaign, the analysis includes the 2000 election. It will also test the general applicability of any inferences drawn from the 2000 election by including an analogous examination of the 1996 vote. The 1996 election continued a long-term trend of white evangelicals identifying with the Republican party, and so the political environment of 1996 is much like 2000. However, the

1996 and 2000 nominees differed significantly. Unlike George W. Bush, Bob Dole did not regularly invoke religion on the campaign trail, let alone evangelicalism specifically, but as the Republican nominee for the presidency he was nonetheless the standard-bearer of the culturally conservative party.⁵ Furthermore, Bill Clinton also employed religious language on the campaign trail, exhibiting a personal familiarity with evangelicalism born of his Southern Baptist roots. In other words, the 1996 vote allows us to test whether any “religious threat” effect observed in 2000 is a function of Bush’s *personal* background as an evangelical Christian, or whether it is simply owing to the *general* affinity between evangelical Christians and the Republican party.

While the discussion to this point has focused on evangelicals’ potential reaction to the presence of secularists, it is also possible that secularists feel threatened by evangelicals. The analysis thus tests whether secularists were more likely to vote Democratic in communities with a greater concentration of evangelicals. On the one hand, because the Democratic party is increasingly the home of voters inclined to a secular worldview (Layman 2001), we might expect secularists to become more likely to vote for the Democratic ticket as they feel threatened by the concentration of evangelicals in their community. On the other hand, since Clinton, Gore, and Lieberman took pains to emphasize their religiosity it could also be that secularists did not feel a sense of shared identity with the Democratic ticket the way evangelicals have embraced the Republican party, negating any potential effect for religious context. Further diminishing our expectations that a group threat effect operates among secularists is the fact that, unlike evangelicals, secularists do not generally constitute a cohesive, self-identified group that has been organized for political activity.

Testing the Hypotheses

In order to test for the threat effect, I use two different but complementary measurement strategies. Both employ the National Election Studies for individual-level data on voting. The

first method entails appending data describing the religious context of each respondent's county to the NES.⁶ County-level data on religious affiliation has been compiled from the Glenmary Research Center's *Religious Congregations and Membership In the United States 2000*, the most comprehensive accounting of religious membership in the United States (Glenmary Research Center 2002), while other county-level data derive from the 2000 *County and City Data Book* (U.S Department of Commerce 2003). While counties are quite large geographically and/or in terms of population, they are nonetheless a reasonable approximation of an individual's mid-range social context, which is why they have been used extensively in previous research (Putnam 1966; Wright 1977; Huckfeldt 1979; Voss 1996). The disadvantage of the county-level analysis is that it must rely on noisy data. The Glenmary Research Center's county-level tabulations are estimates at best, as they are collected through a survey of religious denominations, some of which choose not to participate in the study. Of the participating denominations, some keep more accurate records than others. The study's denominational focus also means that it underrepresents non-denominational churches (a growing segment of the religious marketplace). Furthermore, the Glenmary tally cannot account for people who live in one county and belong to a church in another. While these data are admittedly imperfect, the decennial Glenmary studies nonetheless represent the most comprehensive accounting of religious affiliation nationwide, and for all their flaws still provide a reasonably accurate picture of America's religious landscape.⁷

The county-level analysis is supplemented with a model that uses aggregate measures calculated from the individual-level data collected in the NES. The small number of NES respondents in any given county precludes the possibility of using counties as the level of aggregation. Instead, I have calculated state-level measures using data derived from the 1990-2000 National Election Studies. This particular time-frame has been chosen because the NES revamped its religion measures beginning with the 1990 study. While a decade is a relatively long stretch of time, there is no reason to think that the religious composition of a state would

change appreciably over that period, suggesting that combining ten years' worth of data is a reasonable strategy, not unlike the compilation of state-level ideology measures (Erikson, Wright, and McIver 1993). Assembling a decade's worth of NES surveys produces a total of 10,954 cases in 34 states with usable data; no state with fewer than 75 cases is included, while the larger states have 800 to 1,000 observations.⁸ On average, the state-level aggregate measures are calculated using roughly 300 cases per state. Aggregated measures of this sort have at least one major advantage over the Glenmary data, namely that one can calculate an aggregate-level measure for any individual-level item that appears in the NES. For example, it is possible to estimate the percentage of secularists in a state using precisely the same definition of secularist as in the individual-level NES data. There is no free lunch, though, as the state-level aggregated measures require the assumption that the state is a relevant geographic unit for the threat effect to operate, while most of the threat literature has examined the effect of communities smaller in scale.⁹

In sum, both the county- and state-level data have strengths to complement the weaknesses of the other. Given their flaws, perhaps skepticism is warranted about conclusions drawn from a single one. But to find consistent results across both data sources would suggest that we have detected a genuine signal amidst all the noise.

The analysis rests on properly identifying evangelical Christians, a challenge because evangelicalism is a subgroup within Protestantism and thus not confined within a particular denomination. To categorize evangelical Christians, I borrow the classification system developed by Steensland and his colleagues (2000), which shares much common ground with a similar system described in publications by Kellstedt et al (1996).¹⁰ This method groups denominations into a set of discrete religious traditions, including white evangelical Christians. In the 2000 NES, 25 percent of the non-black population reported affiliating with an evangelical denomination.¹¹ For the county-level analysis, denominations included in the Glenmary data

have been similarly classified as belonging to the evangelical tradition by the American Religion Data Archive (see the appendix for details).

I define secularism as *the absence of a religious affiliation*. At the individual level, secularists are coded as respondents who (a) report that they “never” attend religious services (“apart from occasional weddings, baptisms, or funerals”); and (b) when pressed, say that they do not think of themselves as “part of a particular church or denomination.”¹² In other words, respondents must explicitly reject any religious affiliation to be classified as a secularist. Using this measure, 14 percent of respondents to the NES are secularists. At the county level, the proportion of secularists is operationalized as the percentage of the total population without a religious affiliation.¹³ I acknowledge that secularism might also be defined more restrictively, and include only those respondents who overtly deny any influence of religion on their lives, but the appropriate measures to operationalize secularism in this way are found in neither the NES nor the Glenmary data. I would expect a more stringent definition of secularism to sharpen the patterns reported here.

The group conflict effect is tested with interaction terms. The first is *Evangelical X % Secularists (County)*. A positive coefficient indicates that, as the percentage of secularists rises, evangelical Christians become more likely to vote for Bush. To test whether secularists respond to the presence of evangelicals in their environment, the model also interacts *Secularist* with the percentage of evangelicals within a county. If secularists feel threatened by the presence of evangelicals, and respond by voting Democratic, this interaction term will be negative. Of course, variables describing the two individual components of each interaction term are also included in the model.

In addition to the interactions, the model includes a series of control variables.¹⁴ These include party identification, long recognized as the most reliable predictor of the presidential vote in recent years (Campbell et al. 1960; Miller and Shanks 1996; Bartels 2000; Green,

Palmquist, and Shickler 2002), and frequency of church attendance, a much-discussed predictor of the presidential vote (Kohut et al. 2000). The real test of any hypothesized influence on vote choice is whether it has an impact even when controlling for partisanship, while controlling for church attendance allows us to focus on evangelicals' religious affiliation per se, and not conflate it with the frequency of participation in worship services.

Other individual-level control variables are age, gender, and education level, all of which are plausibly related to vote choice, religious adherence, or both. The model also controls for characteristics of the county, in order to isolate the influence of the county's religious context. These include the percentage of African Americans in a county and its level of urbanization. To be sure that any observed effects are not simply due to the partisan environment within a county, the model also includes the Republican percentage of the vote in the previous presidential election. The model also includes three regional control variables, owing to variation in the nation's religious composition—one for the Southern states, where evangelicalism is most common, and one each for the New England and Pacific states, which are often characterized as especially secular parts of the country. Because the dependent variable is coded dichotomously, with the vote for a Republican candidate coded as 1, logistic regression is the estimator. The use of county-level data introduces the potential for heteroskedasticity, since having multiple respondents within a single county can distort the standard errors of a standard regression model. To correct for this non-independence of observations the model employs robust standard errors, accounting for potential clustering at the county level (Huber/White correction). This means cases are assumed to be independent across counties but not necessarily within them. Owing to the distinctive political history of the Black Church (Harris 1999), the model is limited to non-African American respondents, in order to avoid conflating the effects of race with those of religion.¹⁵

Columns 1 and 2 of Table 1 displays the results for 2000 and 1996 respectively. In 2000, we see that the interaction term between Evangelical and the percentage of secularists within a community is positive and has a p value that achieves statistical significance by any conventional threshold ($p < .05$)--meaning that as the density of secularists increases, evangelicals become more likely to vote for Bush. However, secularists do not respond to the proportion of evangelicals, as the coefficient for *Secularist X % Evangelicals* is swamped by the size of its standard error. In 1996, we see that the interaction between Evangelical and % Secularist (county) is positive, but misses the conventional threshold for statistical significance ($p=0.11$). Again, secularists do not respond to the percentage of evangelicals in their community.

Evidence for a “religious threat effect” among evangelicals is thus suggestive in 1996 and more convincing in 2000. In both elections, evangelicals were more likely to support Bush where secularists have a greater share of the population, which is consistent with the hypothesis that the political salience of being an evangelical Christian is greater in more secular environments because of the tension evangelical Christians feel with secular society. Secularists, however, were unaffected by the presence of evangelicals in their community in either election.

While the preceding evidence is probative, enough uncertainty plagues the data used in the county-level models to leave reasonable doubt. The Glenmary data are not exhaustive, and so we cannot be sure that every evangelical denomination has been counted, nor that the percentage of secularists in a county fully reflects religious non-adherence. And even if the count of secularists is reasonably accurate, the criterion for classification remains imprecise, since not formally belonging to a church is not necessarily the same as rejecting a religious affiliation, just as being listed on a church’s rolls does not necessarily mean one subscribes to that faith in any meaningful way. Similarly, the system of classification by religious tradition lacks precision, given the inevitable ambiguities in trying to determine whether someone is an evangelical on the basis of denominational affiliation alone. In fact, under this system of religious classification

George W. Bush himself would probably not be identified as an evangelical since his formal denominational affiliation is with the United Methodists, who are generally grouped under the mainline Protestant category.

To provide another perspective, I turn to the state-level measures aggregated from within the NES. In these data, % *Secularists* is operationalized as the percentage of NES respondents within each state who are classified as secularists, ensuring consistency across both the individual and state-level measures. Also, evangelicals are not identified by grouping denominations together. Since a hallmark of the evangelical tradition is a belief in the need to be “born again,” a term that also connotes a sense of identify with the evangelical movement, I rely on a question that asks: “Would you call yourself a born-again Christian, that is, have you personally had a conversion experience related to Jesus Christ?” Those who answer yes (a group that would presumably include George W. Bush) are coded as evangelicals.¹⁶ This individual-level item is then used to generate an estimate of the percentage of born-again Christians within a state, ranging from a low of 7 percent in Alaska (with Massachusetts next at 11 percent) to a high of 68 percent in Louisiana (with Alabama just below, at 66 percent). As in the model with county-level data, interaction terms are employed: *Born Again X % Secularist* and *Secularist X % Born Again*. If the state-level data replicate the results at the county level, the coefficient for the former term will be positive, while *Secularist X % Born Again* will be null. The model also includes the same array of controls, although now the contextual variables describe the respondent’s state, not county.¹⁷ Robust standard errors have again been estimated, with clustering by state.

As shown in Columns 3 and 4 of Table 1, the state-level model is consistent with the analysis of the county-level data. In both 2000 and 1996, the more born-again Christians were surrounded by secularists, the more likely they were to vote for the Republican candidate ($p > .05$). Secularists, however, are unmoved by the presence of born-again Christians. While the

coefficients for *Secularist X % Born Again* are negative in both models, in both cases they are far from statistical significance.

Figures 1A and 1B convert the logit coefficients for the models of both the 2000 and 1996 vote into predicted probabilities of casting a ballot for either Bush or Dole. All control variables have been set to their mean or modal values (which means that party identification is set to “independent”). In both figures, the solid line displays the results of the county-level model, the increase in the probability of an evangelical voting for Bush as the proportion of secularists in her county increases. The dotted line does the same, but shows the increasing likelihood of a born-again Christian voting for Bush as the proportion of secularists in her state rises. Because the absolute percentage of secularists in counties and states differ substantially (remember that they are estimated using two different methods), they have been standardized to percentiles. Thus, to take Figure 1A as an example, when the proportion of secularists in a county is at its 5th percentile, the probability of an evangelical Christian voting for Bush is about 0.6; when the proportion of secularists in the state is at its 5th percentile, a born-again Christian has a 0.5 probability of having cast a ballot for Bush. The similarity between the two slopes is striking, as both models show an almost identical rise in the probability of a Bush vote as the proportion of secularists (whether in the county or the state) increases from the 5th to the 95th percentile. Figure 1B displays predicted probabilities of a Dole vote for both evangelicals and born-again Christians as the proportion of secularists in either the county or state increases (because, at $p=0.11$, the interaction term in the county-level model was close to the standard threshold for statistical significance, it is displayed here). As in 2000, the two lines share a similar slope, although because in 1996 Dole fared worse than Bush did in 2000, the probabilities are lower at every point.

We see evidence that just as the racial threat literature shows whites responding to the presence of blacks, evangelicals respond to the presence of secularists—suggesting that their

presidential vote is at least partly motivated by “religious threat.” Importantly, this threat effect operates even when we account for partisanship and religious practice. Conversely, these data do not show secularists responding in a parallel fashion to the proportion of evangelicals in their community. The non-effect for secularists is likely because evangelicals are a self-aware, cohesive, politically-organized group, and are the target of mobilization efforts by Republican campaigns, while secularists do not constitute an identifiable group and are generally not the subject of campaign appeals. We see similarities between 1996 and 2000, which suggests that the evangelical response to living in a secular environment is not owing specifically to the evangelicalism of George W. Bush, but is instead a more general phenomenon. On the other hand, the fact that the results are slightly less robust across the two 1996 models implies that the religious threat effect operated to a greater extent in 2000 than in 1996. But these data cannot tell us whether the difference between the two elections is because of Bush’s evangelical background or some other aspect of the campaign (like, for example, the fact that 2000 was a much closer race than 1996).

Conclusion

The above analysis teaches us both about the role of religion in presidential elections, and the applicability of group threat as a general, recurring phenomenon. Increasingly, understanding presidential elections requires understanding the role of culture, religion, and “moral values.” To that end, both popular and scholarly accounts have highlighted the prominence of white evangelical Protestants in the Republican coalition. However, the evidence presented here demonstrates that evangelicals are not monolithic in their support for Republican candidates. Rather, their tendency to vote Republican varies according to their social context. In both 2000 and 1996 evangelical Christians were spurred to vote for the GOP ticket in communities with a greater share of secularists. This conclusion holds with two different sources of contextual data, each with complementary strengths and weaknesses. The fact that evidence

for the threat effect is found in both 2000 and 1996—one election in which the Republican nominee was generally identified as an evangelical and the other where he was not--suggests that George W. Bush's own evangelicalism did not, in and of itself, *cause* or awaken a sense of group identification among evangelicals. Rather, perhaps we should think of Bush's willingness to associate himself with the evangelical wing of Protestantism as an *effect* of evangelicals' self-identification as a politically salient group within the electorate; likewise, his selection as the Republican nominee was no doubt helped by his evangelical background.

Looking to the future, in our polarized social and political climate it is likely that the religious threat effect observed in 1996 and 2000 will persist. American evangelicalism, in the words of Christian Smith, is “embattled and thriving,” and evangelicals are well-entrenched in the Republican party apparatus. We can thus expect to see GOP candidates continue their mobilization of this constituency with messages designed to heighten their sense of embattlement, stressing issues like abortion, gay marriage, euthanasia, stem-cell research, and the permissibility of religious expression in public schools and buildings.

In addition to informing us about the role of religion in specific presidential elections, these results support the general development of the group threat literature—grounded as it is in the assumption that friction results when social groups are in proximity to one another. I must underscore that the results reported here are preliminary at best, limited as they are by crude measures at relatively high levels of aggregation. For example, they cannot speak to such questions as the effects of inter-religious mingling within individuals' social networks, or whether similar effects are observed in elections below the presidential level. Nor do they examine other factors contributing to evangelicals' sense of cultural embattlement, like messages received from the media or religious leaders. And it should also be noted that, as with all research on contextual effects (including the racial threat literature), we can not rule out the possibility that these results are due, at least in part, to self-selection—perhaps evangelicals who

choose to live in secular environments have different political preferences than those ensconced in more heavily evangelical communities.

Notwithstanding these caveats, the fact that we observe a clear pattern of results even with unrefined data suggests that this study offers an important insight into the general applicability of the theory of group conflict, and adds to the literature which has expanded research on the question beyond race. While that literature, when taken as a whole, has been equivocal regarding whether the theory of group conflict has political relevance for social identities other than race, here we have evidence that group conflict theory applies to religion. When placed alongside the evidence regarding an analogous effect in the 1960 election, and the ethnocultural historians' chronicling of religious tensions in earlier periods of American history, they suggest that religious-based conflict is a long-standing feature of U.S. politics. What has changed in recent years is the nature of the conflict. In the nineteenth century, the tension was between "pietistic" and "liturgical" denominations (Jensen 1971). In 1928 and 1960, there was friction between Catholics and Protestants. In contemporary elections the religious conflict in American politics has shifted again, as now we see evangelicals reacting to what they perceive as a hostile secular culture. These initial findings suggest further avenues for future research, in other elections, at other levels of analysis, in both the past and the future. The recurring importance of religion in American elections, as evidenced once again in 2004, suggests that this will continue to be a fruitful area of research.

¹ Throughout this paper, the term “white evangelical Christians” is used to denote a group known by various names in both the popular media and academic literature: conservative Protestants, evangelical Protestants, and born-again Christians. For convenience, I sometimes use the short-hand term “evangelicals” to mean white evangelical Christians.

² In this respect, they are comparable to American Catholics in 1960. At that time, Catholics had also developed a set of cultural and educational institutions, which deepened their distinguishing beliefs and practices and fostered a strong sense of group identity (Finke and Stark 1992).

³ I choose not to use the term “secular humanist” because of its negative connotation. Given the way the measure is operationalized a more technically accurate but less intuitive term might be “religious non-adherents.”

⁴ A number of popular books deal with Bush’s religious beliefs and public professions of his faith (Aikman 2004; Mansfield 2003). An excellent exposition can also be found in a television documentary produced by the Public Broadcasting Service’s *Frontline*, “The Jesus Factor” (2004).

⁵ It should be noted, though, that his wife, Elizabeth, has long been identified as an evangelical Christian, and was once a frequent speaker at evangelical rallies.

⁶ The county of each respondent is not included in the public release version of the 2000 NES. These data were made available to the author through a restricted data license from the ICPSR.

⁷ Note that this analysis rests on the assumption that the religious composition of counties and states remains static over the short term. The county-level data were collected in the late 1990s, while the state-level aggregates include data over the period spanning from 1990 to 2000.

⁸ Note that these numbers are slightly smaller for the “born again Christian” item, as it was not asked in 1994.

⁹ There are, however, exceptions. Quillian’s (1995) piece on anti-immigrant attitudes in Europe uses the nation as the contextual unit, while one of Glaser’s (2003) experiments uses American states as the reference point.

¹⁰ In the systems developed by Steensland et al and Kellstedt et al, and employed by Layman, non-denominational Christians are coded as evangelicals if they have a high level of religious involvement. I have opted to use the denominational classification only, in order to keep the individual-level measures as consistent as possible with the county-level data (where there are no behavioral measures). I thus code Christians who attend a non-denominational church as evangelicals. This certainly introduces noise into the analysis, biasing the model against my hypothesis, since some proportion of people who attend a non-denominational church are not properly classified as evangelicals. See the online appendix for a complete list of the denominations classified as falling within the white evangelical tradition: <http://journalofpolitics.org>

¹¹ Because the models exclude African Americans, these descriptive statistics do the same.

¹² This is the order in which these items appear on the NES questionnaire.

¹³ Glenmary reports “adherents” for all denominations, which is defined as adults and children who are affiliated with the denomination. For some denominations, Glenmary also reports the number of “members,” by which is meant adherents who have full membership status, usually participation in an age-specific rite (like baptism or confirmation). Adherents is the appropriate count when the total population is the denominator. The percentage of secularists, or “non-adherents,” in a county is calculated by subtracting the percentage of adherents from 100.

¹⁴ Details about coding can be found in the online appendix: <http://journalofpolitics.org>

¹⁵ The substantive results do not change if African Americans are included in the model (whether race is controlled or not).

¹⁶ The overlap between evangelicals as classified by the denominational system and the question about being born-again is considerable but not complete: 70 percent of people classified as evangelicals on the basis of their denominational affiliation report being born again.

¹⁷ Note that the denominational controls, mainline Protestant and Catholic, have been dropped, since born-again Christian is a trans-denominational label (30 percent of mainline Protestants report being born again, along with 13 percent of Catholics). Also, the demographic variables describing each state are taken from U.S. Census data. The election returns are as reported in *America Votes* (Elections Research Center 1997).

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Table 1. Vote Choice in the 2000 and 1996 Presidential Elections
 Results from logistic regression. Vote for Republican candidate = 1.

	<i>2000 County Data (1)</i>	<i>1996 County Data (3)</i>	<i>2000 State Data (2)</i>	<i>1996 State Data (4)</i>
<i>Threat Variables</i>				
Evangelical X % Secularist	0.048* (0.022)	0.022 (0.014)		
Born Again X % Secularist			0.074* (0.034)	0.050* (0.020)
Secularist X % Evangelical	0.054 (0.047)	-0.037 (0.048)		
Secularist X % Born Again			-0.014 (0.025)	-0.050 (0.038)
<i>Individual-level Variables</i>				
Evangelical Christian	-1.355 (1.176)	-0.710 (0.754)		
Born Again Christian			-0.786 (0.551)	-0.725* (0.328)
Secularist	-0.193 (0.838)	1.520 (0.872)	0.516 (0.904)	1.947 (1.154)
% Secularist	-0.028 (0.016)	0.006 (0.009)	-0.037 (0.034)	0.016 (0.031)
% Evangelical	-0.016 (0.015)	0.019 (0.015)		
% Born Again			0.005 (0.017)	0.020 (0.013)
Church Attendance	0.178* (0.082)	0.315* (0.073)	0.214* (0.096)	0.312* (0.085)
Mainline Protestant	-0.194 (0.489)	0.462 (0.291)		
Catholic	0.189 (0.506)	0.679 (0.386)		
Party Identification	1.148* (0.080)	1.021* (0.067)	1.132* (0.092)	1.014* (0.065)

Female	-0.272 (0.222)	-0.470* (0.224)	-0.464* (0.183)	-0.458* (0.227)
Age	0.001 (0.009)	0.011* (0.006)	-0.005 (0.011)	0.010 (0.007)
Education	-0.087 (0.102)	0.098 (0.062)	-0.192 (0.133)	0.092 (0.064)
<i>Contextual Variables</i>				
% GOP Vote in Previous Election	0.018 (0.034)	-0.309 (1.223)	-0.009 (0.027)	0.004 (0.036)
% African American	0.478 (1.318)	-0.083 (1.552)	-1.204 (2.541)	0.020 (0.019)
% Urban	-0.680 (0.688)	0.139 (0.574)	-0.139 (1.184)	0.002 (0.009)
Southern State	0.675 (0.456)	-0.167 (0.278)	0.605 (0.391)	-0.321 (0.263)
New England State	0.007 (0.465)	-0.412 (0.519)	-0.002 (0.495)	0.141 (0.386)
Pacific State	-0.919 (0.525)	-0.673 (0.391)	-1.051 (0.546)	-0.917 (0.512)
Constant	-2.321 (1.949)	-5.454* (1.231)	-1.512 (2.145)	-5.643* (1.654)
Observations	982	1015	923	988
Pseudo R-squared	0.54	0.50	0.53	0.50

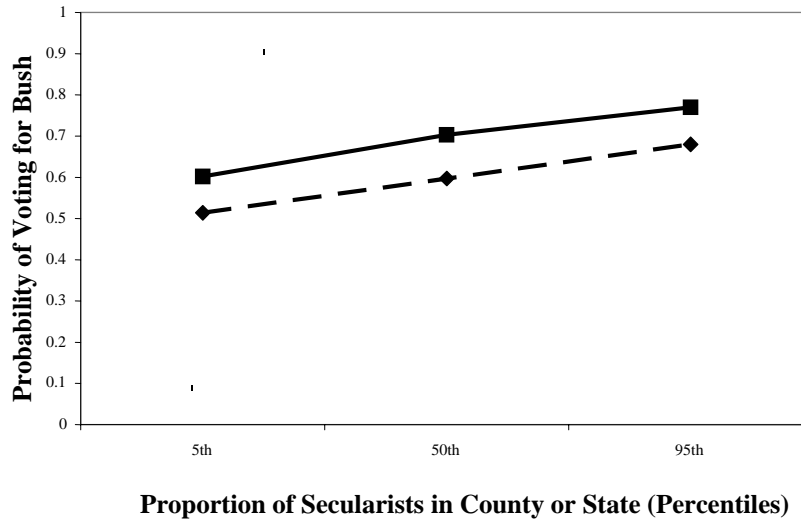
Robust standard errors in parentheses, with clustering by county (columns 1 and 2) or state (columns 3 and 4). African Americans omitted from the model. In columns 1 and 2, contextual data describes a respondent's county, while in columns 3 and 4 they describe the respondent's state. See the text of the paper for details on how the county and state-level variables have been operationalized.

* $p < 0.05$

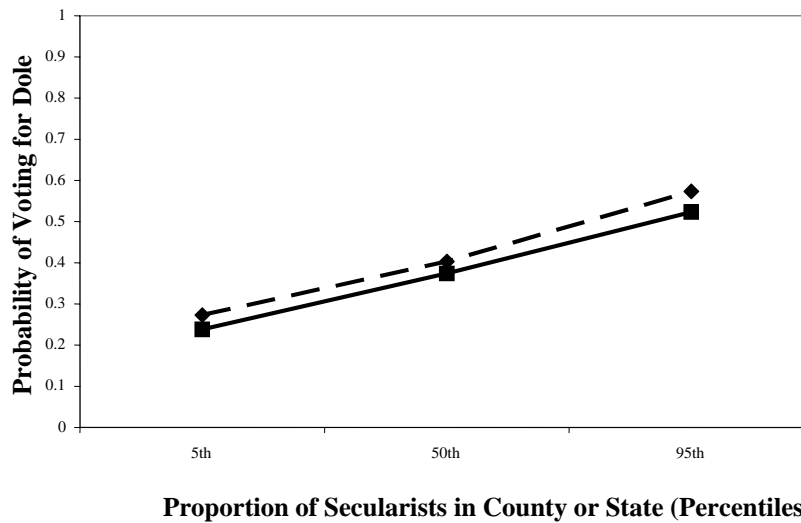
Source: National Election Studies

Figure 1. Evangelicals' Response to the Presence of Secularists in 2000 and 1996

1A. 2000 Presidential Election



1B. 1996 Presidential Election



- County Model (Affiliated with Evangelical denomination)
- ◆— State Model (Self-described born again Christian)

Probability of an independent voting for the Republican candidate, as calculated from results in Table 1. All control variables set to their means (continuous variables) or modal categories (categorical variables).