EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper details religious voting patterns in the 2018 midterm elections and first two years of the Trump presidency with a particular eye toward any perceivable shifts in the white evangelical vote since 2016. It also looks for signs of an emerging progressive religious vote. Ultimately, it attempts to discern what will be relevant in the religious voter landscape in the 2020 presidential election.

RELIGIOUS VOTERS IN 2016 AND 2018: UNDERSTANDING PATTERNS AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE FOR 2020
Claudia Winkler and Shaun Casey
The 2016 presidential election saw two of history’s most unpopular candidates competing for votes for the country’s highest office.¹ While no one expected conservative religious voters to flock to Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton, it was also unclear in the lead up to the election how they would react to thrice-married serial philanderer Donald Trump. Exit polls revealed that Trump not only garnered the support of Protestants and white Catholics at or above the level of the previous four Republican candidates (though he received notably less of the Mormon vote), but he also surpassed prior candidates in his percentage of the white born-again or evangelical Christian vote.² In the 2018 midterm elections, after two years of a controversial presidency, the question again arose: How would the Republican Party, under the influence of Trumpism, fare among religious voters? This paper details religious voting patterns in the 2018 midterm elections and first two years of the Trump presidency with a particular eye toward any perceivable shifts in the white evangelical vote since 2016. It also looks for signs of an emerging progressive religious vote. Ultimately, it attempts to discern what will be relevant in the religious voter landscape in the 2020 presidential election.

2016 AND 2018 ELECTION POLLING DATA

Voting Patterns of Possible Consequence in 2020

According to the Pew Research Center’s analysis of national exit polls for the 2018 midterm elections, there was “considerable continuity” in the voting patterns of most religious groups. White evangelical or born-again Christians voted 75 percent in favor of Republican candidates, while 70 percent of religiously unaffiliated voters voted for Democratic candidates—percentages which are consistent with both the 2016 presidential election and the 2006, 2010, and 2014 midterms.³⁴ A few shifts in voting patterns are, however, of note, particularly among Jewish and Catholic voters.⁵ While the majority of Jewish voters have consistently voted in favor of Democratic candidates across presidential and midterm elections since 2000 (never dipping below 66 percent in favor of Democrats), the 2012 and 2016 presidential elections saw a relative low in percentage of votes for Democrats (see Figure 2). Similarly, the 2014 midterms saw a low of 66 percent voting in favor of Democratic candidates, but in the 2018 midterms Jewish support for Democratic candidates rose again to 79 percent.⁶ This could be viewed as a sign that Jewish support for the Democratic candidate in the 2020 presidential election will surge relative to the 2016 election.

![Figure 1](image-url)

In 2018 midterms, most white evangelical Christians continued to support Republican candidates; most religious ‘nones’ continued to back Democrats

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% who voted for ___ candidate for Congress in their district</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2014</th>
<th>2018</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Protestant/other Christian</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other faiths</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religiously unaffiliated</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

White, born-again/evangelical Christian

Note: Data on Jewish voters in 2010 are not included due to insufficient sample size.

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Similarly, in the 2010 and 2014 midterm elections, Catholic voters preferred Republican candidates by an almost 10-point margin but in 2018 swung back to favor Democratic candidates by a slim one-percent margin (see Figure 1).⁷ These changes can, at least in part, be explained by a higher turnout of Catholic Latino voters,⁸ coupled with demographic shifts in the Catholic Church toward a growing percentage of Hispanic Catholics.⁹ While the 2018 midterms did not see a return to 2006 election levels of Catholic support for Democratic candidates, this change in voting patterns could be significant in the 2020 presidential election. Looking at the exit poll data from presidential and midterm elections side by side, the 2006 midterm election high in Catholic support of Democratic candidates was followed by a peak in Catholic support of Democratic candidate Barack Obama in the 2008 presidential election (including a relative rise in both white and Hispanic Catholic votes for the Democratic candidate over the previous two presidential elections). It therefore seems reasonable that the 2018 midterm shift in favor of Democrats may also see a parallel in the 2020 presidential elections.

Also of note is the Mormon vote. While two-thirds of Mormon voters cast ballots for Republicans in the 2018 midterm elections, Trump himself has fared rather poorly among Mormon voters, garnering the lowest Mormon vote in a presidential election since 1992.¹⁰ His approval rating in late 2018 still lagged behind Mormons’ overall approval rating of the GOP,¹² and as recently as March 2019 was still hovering around 50 percent, with Mormon women in particular expressing their disapproval.¹³ Left with the choice between Trump and a Democratic candidate, it is almost certain that a strong majority of Mormons will support Trump based on past polling data, but a 2020 Republican primary challenger or possibly a conservative-leaning third-party candidate could measurably affect Mormon support for Trump in 2020.

**Voter Turnout**

A central consideration in religious voting patterns is voter turnout among the various groups. While white evangelicals make up only 15.3 percent of the U.S. population, in the

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**Presidential vote by religious affiliation and race**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Protestant/other Christian</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Catholic</td>
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<td>52</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic Catholic</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>75</td>
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<td>74</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>78</td>
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<td>69</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>+2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other faiths</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>-12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religiously unaffiliated</td>
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<td>30</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>-2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White, born-again/evangelical Christian</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mormon</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>+4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: “Protestant” refers to people who describe themselves as “Protestant,” “Mormon” or “other Christian” in exit polls; this categorization most closely approximates the exit poll data reported immediately after the election by media sources. The “white, born-again/evangelical Christian” row includes both Protestants and non-Protestants (e.g., Catholics, Mormons, etc.) who self-identify as born-again or evangelical Christians.


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While two-thirds of Mormon voters cast ballots for Republicans in the 2018 midterm elections, Trump himself has fared rather poorly among Mormon voters, garnering the lowest Mormon vote in a presidential election since 1992.
2018 midterm election, exit polls showed that they made up 26 percent of all voters—a rate they have been holding steady at since roughly 2008. This disproportionate share of voters relative to the total size of the white evangelical population suggests that while the number of white evangelicals may be shrinking, they remain an influential voting block that candidates would be wise to court.

It is worth noting that some scholars explain this discrepancy not as a sign of greater enthusiasm or mobilization among white evangelicals, but as a result of mainline Protestants and Catholics (who are not counted as part of the 15.3 percent of white evangelicals in the U.S. population) self-designating as evangelical or born-again Christians on exit poll surveys.

While voter contact by religious groups has historically been typical among white evangelicals and black Protestants and effective in increasing voter turnout, the 2018 midterm elections, which saw historical highs in voter turnout, were marked by more diverse religious get-out-the-vote efforts, including an effort by Faith in Florida to arrange for bus transportation of Hispanic and Latino church congregants to polling locations, a Hillel International (Foundation for Jewish Campus Life) nonpartisan campaign called MitzVote, and a Council on American-Islamic Relations-supported website dedicated to increasing Muslim turnout called Muslims GOTV. Motivated in large part by a moral objection to Trump’s policy agenda concerning immigration, LGBTQ rights, access to health care, and racial and other social justice issues, there are signs that a religious left is emerging and mobilizing clergy to push progressive agendas and boost voter turnout in the 2020 elections.

**Key Issues Among White Evangelical Voters and Implications for 2020**

Some of these same issues motivating the religious left—notably, immigration—appear to also be key concerns of white evangelical voters. According to commentary posted by the Martin Marty Center for the Public Understanding of Religion, the popularly cited issues of Supreme Court nominees and stances on abortion did not factor nearly as prominently in the list of key voting issues in the 2016 presidential elections as often suggested by media and other political commentators. (However, Supreme Court nominees were the top concern for both parties in the 2018 midterms, likely because of the Brett Kavanaugh nomination in the immediate lead up to the election.) Instead, issues like immigration, along with terrorism/national security and the economy, were high on the list of key concerns in 2016. This, when seen in combination with Trump’s conduct in his private and business life, coarse rhetoric, and lack of publicly demonstrated religious conviction, suggests that white evangelicals may not be motivated to vote on the basis of traditional, conservative religious convictions (such as views on abortion and LGBTQ rights, and a corresponding concern for Supreme Court justices)—or at least not on those issues per se. In a pre-presidential-election article in 2016, the Atlantic posited that Trump’s success has demonstrated that the conventional mode of thinking about white evangelical voters as ‘values voters’ is no longer helpful, if it ever was. The Trump revelation is that white evangelicals have become ‘nostalgia voters:’ a culturally and economically disaffected group that is anxious to hold onto a white, conservative Christian culture that is passing from the scene.

Indeed, this cultural disaffection was captured in a Pew survey published in July 2016 with the headline “Evangelicals increasingly say it’s becoming harder for them in America.” In two years between 2014 and 2016, the share of survey participants who felt it had become more difficult to be an

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_Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs_ | 4
evangelical Christian in the United States grew from 34 percent to 41 percent. Pew cited likely causes for this feeling as a growth in the number of religious “nones” and the spread of social acceptance of homosexuality, along with other culture war issues. Some scholars, like John Fea, author of *Believe Me*, contend that this culture of fear and anxiety around race, secularization, and modernity is nothing new, but rather has deep historical roots in the white evangelical tradition. According to Fea, the 2016 presidential election,

while certainly unique and unprecedented in American history, is also the latest manifestation of a long-standing evangelical approach to public life. This political playbook was written in the 1970s and drew heavily from an even longer history of white evangelical fear. It is a playbook characterized by attempts to ‘win back’ or ‘restore the culture.’ It is a playbook grounded in a highly problematic interpretation of the relationship between Christianity and the American founding. It is a playbook that too often gravitates toward nativism, xenophobia, racism, intolerance, and an unbiblical view of American exceptionalism. It is a playbook that divides rather than unites.

### 2020 Campaign Strategies

**Trump and White Evangelical Engagement**

To be sure, Trump’s pro-life stance on abortion and nomination of conservative-leaning Supreme Court justices allows him to maintain his white evangelical support, but his popularity over other candidates in 2016 likely lies in his exploitation of the existential threat white evangelicals seem to feel as a result of shifting demographics and culture along with waning social influence and economic power. Trump uses this culture war-turned-racial anxiety to his advantage, pushing anti-immigration policies and stoking racial resentments, which is met with strong support from white evangelicals. His intense focus on the U.S. southern border in the lead up to 2020 suggests that he will continue pushing these issues to fire up his base.

At the same time, Trump has and continues to court religious conservatives through explicit engagement with religion and, in particular, culture war issues. During his 2016 campaign, Trump formed an evangelical advisory board to provide advice on which issues are important to evangelicals and other people of faith. The group includes several prominent Christian leaders, including Johnnie Moore, who runs the KAIROS Company, a PR and consulting firm for leaders who want to appeal to faith-based audiences. While Trump has on a few occasions run into conflict with some members of the board, he has certainly also made public statements and taken executive action on members’ key issues. In addition to nominating Neil Gorsuch and Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court, both of whom are conservative-leaning judges, Trump has pushed the religious freedom agenda, particularly as it appeals to Christian conservatives. In 2017, Trump signed an executive order to protect religious liberty, and the Justice Department subsequently issued new guidance aimed at giving religious groups and individuals broad protections to express their beliefs when they come into conflict with government regulations. Trump also pushed for Turkey to free American pastor Andrew Brunson, whose case was taken up in early 2018.

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Looking at Trump’s rhetoric at 2019 rallies, he will continue courting white evangelicals in 2020 with the same tactics he has used up to this point. In speeches, Trump touts his record of nominating Gorsuch and Kavanaugh and moving the American embassy to Jerusalem, emphasizes the importance of religious liberty, and calls attention to Democrats’ pro-choice stances. Importantly, he plays into the narrative of American culture being in jeopardy, often juxtaposing a religious “we” with a threatening other (in the form of immigrants, African-American NFL protesters, etc.).

We believe in the American Constitution and the American rule of law. We believe in the dignity of work in the sanctity of life. We believe that faith and family, not government and bureaucracy, are the true American way. We believe in religious liberty, the right to free speech and the right to keep and bear arms. We believe that children should be taught to love our country, to honor our history, to be proud, to be happy, to love and always to respect our great American flag. And we believe in the words and always will, we are not changing it, they want us to change a lot of things it’s not happening of our national motto in God we trust. In God we trust. These are traditions, customs and principles that bind us together as citizens, as neighbors, as patriots. (Rally in Grand Rapids, Michigan).

And we’ve come for safety, for sovereignty, and for the sacred rights given to us by the hand of almighty God. We are one united movement, one united people, and one United States of America. And together, with the proud and incredible and great people of the State of Texas, we will make America wealthy again. We will make America strong again. We will make America safe again, and we will make America great again. (Rally in El Paso, Texas).

Polls suggest that this tactic remains effective for Trump, who continues to enjoy the support of nearly seven in 10 white evangelical Protestants.

**Democratic Engagement with Religion**

Based on recent polls, Democrats stand little chance of pulling any sizeable segment of white evangelical voters away from Trump, but there is some movement at the margins of this group, and the overall trend among religious voters may be in Democrats’ favor. According to a Pew poll, white evangelical Protestant approval of the way Trump is handling his job as president has fallen from 78 percent just after taking office in February 2017 to 69 percent in January 2019 (with sizable fluctuations up and down over the course of the first two years). The same survey reveals that while overall Catholic support for Trump has remained steady at under 50 percent since February 2017 (most recently 36 percent in January 2019), his approval has dropped significantly from early 2017 to early 2019 among white Mass-attending Catholics. Additionally, a mid-2018 poll conducted by PRRI and the *Atlantic* revealed that white evangelicals were the only outlier when asked if the country was going in the right direction or was off track. A majority of white

The primary question then is, will presidential candidates—particularly Democratic hopefuls, but also possible Republican primary challengers—seize on some of these shifts among religious voters and, if so, how?
evangelicals said it was going in the right direction, while the majority of all other religious groups said the United States was on the wrong track.⁴¹

There clearly seems to be a sizeable portion of religious Americans who would be open to Trump alternatives and to whom religiously grounded, morally oriented policies and actions would appeal.⁴² Although the presence of an emerging religious left is purely anecdotal at this point, some experts believe that a clear sense of faith and values could be an asset to a Democratic candidate in 2020.⁴³ While no Democratic presidential hopeful has, as of yet, formed the kind of faith advisory committee seen on the Trump team, several candidates have been quite open about their faith. Pete Buttigieg,⁴⁴ Kamala Harris,⁴⁵ Kristin Gillibrand,⁴⁶ Elizabeth Warren, Corey Booker,⁴⁷ and Marianne Williamson,⁴⁸ among other candidates, have been vocal about the role of faith in their lives and political careers, with several more candidates couching their policy positions in moral terms.⁴⁹

THE FUTURE OF RELIGION IN THE 2020 ELECTIONS: FURTHER RESEARCH

As demonstrated above, the 2018 midterm elections and first two years of the Trump presidency saw some significant movement among key religious voting constituencies that could play a role in the 2020 presidential elections. Jewish voters came out much stronger in favor of Democratic candidates than in the 2014 midterms, there was a sizeable shift among Catholics away from Republican candidates, and progressive religious groups seemed to be leading stronger voter turnout efforts. Meanwhile, white evangelical support for Trump, while still very strong, has also seen some decline since he first took office and may suggest an opportunity for other candidates to pull away some voters at the margins. Trump’s current strategy suggests that he will double down on his core issue of immigration and continue to make appeals to a restoration of white Christian culture in order to maintain the support of his fairly solid base. The primary question then is, will presidential candidates—particularly Democratic hopefuls, but also possible Republican primary challengers—seize on some of these shifts among religious voters and, if so, how?

A few key areas stand out as being of particular relevance to religious constituencies in the future, as Trump’s positions and policies complicate, thwart, or actively threaten the work of religious institutions on these issues. They include:

• Refugee resettlement efforts
• Efforts to support and extend the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival (commonly known as DACA)
• Universal health care for all
• Other racial, economic, and social justice efforts

Understanding how candidates frame these issues, especially for religious voters, and how religious voters ultimately cast their ballots in 2020 will be of great interest in determining if one can speak of a rising religious left. Scholarly efforts to interview candidates in order to discuss their religious backgrounds and their religious voter engagement strategies, as well as more robust coverage of religion on the Democratic campaign trail in particular, would serve to capture valuable qualitative data that could inform future studies of the role of religion in American public life across the political spectrum.

Smith and Martinez, "How the Faithful Voted.


To view these data, see Smith and Martinez, "How the Faithful Voted.

Podrebarac Sciuap and Smith, "How Religious Groups Voted.

Silk, "End of America’s Protestant Political Majority.


"Mormons Support GOP," CNBC.


John Fea, Believe Me: The Evangelical Road to Donald Trump (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2018), 6-7.


32 Philip Schwadel and Gregory A. Smith, “Evangelical approval of Trump remains high, but other religious groups are less supportive,” Pew Research Center, March 19, 2019, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/03/18/evangelical-approval-of-trump-remains-high-but-other-religious-groups-are-less-supportive/


38 Philip Schwadel and Gregory A. Smith, “Evangelical approval of Trump remains high, but other religious groups are less supportive,” Pew Research Center, March 19, 2019, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/03/18/evangelical-approval-of-trump-remains-high-but-other-religious-groups-are-less-supportive/.

39 Ibid.


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The Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs at Georgetown University seeks a more just and peaceful world by deepening knowledge and solving problems at the intersection of religion and global affairs through research, teaching, and engaging multiple publics.

Two premises guide the center’s work: that a comprehensive examination of religion and norms is critical to address complex global challenges, and that the open engagement of religious and cultural traditions with one another can promote peace. To this end, the center engages students, scholars, policymakers, and practitioners in analysis of and dialogue on critical issues in order to increase the public understanding of religion.

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