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## RELIGIOUS MESSAGES: THEMES IN RELIGIOUS LEFT AND RIGHT PUBLICATIONS DURING THE OBAMA AND TRUMP ADMINISTRATIONS

### Abstract

Both the religious left and right make calls for followers to put faith into action. Priorities for action are affected by social and political realities. This paper examines themes conveyed by two distinct religious publications before and after the 2016 election. Both publications are published by organizations that wish to put faith into action. The method relies on the content analysis of one thousand nine hundred forty-three articles from *Sojourners* and *Evangelicals* during the Obama and Trump presidencies. While the results show differing emphases for each publication, emphases for each shifted after the 2016 election. Articles in *Sojourners*, a left-leaning publication with an interfaith readership, directly responded to presidential policy. Criticism of President Trump became a common theme. Articles in *Evangelicals*, a right leaning publication with diverse evangelical readership, in contrast, avoided controversial current events and did not directly discuss presidents, presidential policy, nor governments during either presidency; instead focusing on the challenge of pastoral work and civility after the 2016 election. Moreover, in both magazines, articles during the presidential administration conflicting more with the organization's values, resulted in a wider range of themes, suggesting that opposition provides more opportunity to clarify and emphasize values and priorities.

**Keywords:** religious left, religious right, themes, Obama presidency, Trump presidency, United States

### Introduction

The United States maintains a diverse religious landscape. The Pew Research Center's Religious Landscape Study measures affiliation for over ninety-nine Christian denominations as well as for Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, other world religions and other faiths. Over seventy-seven percent of Americans claim a religious affiliation making religion a salient element in American culture for not only the religious majority but also for the non-religious.<sup>2</sup>

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2 "Religious Landscape Survey", Pew Research Center, available at: <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/> (accessed

The relationship between church and state is a complicated one in the United States. While the Constitution safeguards the free exercise of religion and prohibits the establishment of religion, there is much debate about the interpretation of these clauses. Nevertheless, in the United States, regardless of the establishment clause, there is a tendency to view religion as valuable. The Constitution does not view religion and non-religion as equal.<sup>3</sup> Since the Constitution provides special protections for religion, it allows religion a key opportunity for public action. Of course, many religious leaders choose to stay away from political discourse and focus on otherworldly goals, in part because of tax exempt status restrictions that prevent religious organizations from overt political activity.<sup>4</sup> Religious leaders who do respond to public policy can take different approaches. Congregations are remarkably diverse in their opinions and world views. When applying religious beliefs to public action in America, for example, religious leaders must contend with conflicting conceptions of what it means to be American. Do leaders promote the idea of America as progressing toward a brighter future or do they believe that the country is now in decline? In addition, religious leaders who apply faith to public action must weigh religious convictions against pragmatism when dealing with religious partners that may hold conflicting viewpoints especially in today's political environment. While religious cues about policy positions have been shown to affect political attitudes and voting behavior; it is important to note that political proselytization by religious leaders can have unintended consequences. The use of overt religious cues can alienate the audience.<sup>5</sup> Religious leaders are likely aware of this.

It is reasonable to assume that social and political realities affect the translation of values into action. Through an examination of magazine articles by religious elites from the left and right, specifically from organizations that wish to put faith into action, this study examines the themes that were addressed by two distinct left and right organizations across two contrasting presidential administrations. Three questions along with six corresponding hypotheses guide the analysis:

1. *What issues were most relevant to these distinct religious organizations during the Obama and Trump presidencies?*

H1a: Presidential administration affects which social issues are presented in each publication.

H1b: Left leaning publication reflects the moral perfectionist narrative: that America is progressing toward a brighter future.

H1c: Right leaning publication reflects the conservative decline narrative: that

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October 20, 2022).

3 Steven H. Shiffrin, *The Religious Left and Church State Relations*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 2009.

4 Mary A. Hofmann, *The Politics of Religion and Taxation: Keeping Church and State Separate*, *Journal of Management Policy & Practice*, Vol. 22, No. 2, 2021, pp. 31–43.

5 Todd Adkins, Geoffrey C. Layman, David E. Campbell and John C. Green, Religious Group Cues and Citizen Policy Attitudes in the United States, *Politics and Religion*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 2013, pp. 235–263; Bryan McLaughlin and David Wise, Cueing God: Religious Cues and Voter Support, *Politics and Religion*, Vol. 7, No. 2, 2014, pp. 366–394; Ruth A. Braunstein, Theory of Political Backlash: Assessing the Religious Right's Effects on the Religious Field, *Sociology of Religion*, Vol. 83, No. 3, 2022, pp. 293–323.

America is in a period of decline.

2. *Do religious publications of action centered religious organizations make exclusivist appeals?*

H2a: Left leaning religious publications of action-oriented organizations do not make exclusivist appeals.

H2b: Right leaning religious publications of action-oriented organizations do not make exclusivist appeals.

3. *Do periods of alignment or non-alignment with presidential administrations provide more opportunity for religious publications to express social values and priorities?*

H3a: Left leaning publications will include articles on a wider range of themes during the Trump administration than during the Obama administration.

H3b: Right leaning publications will include articles on a wider range of themes during the Obama administration than during the Trump administration.

The results show that presidential administration affected the themes presented in each magazine. New themes were introduced and the frequency of previous themes changed in each magazine across administrations. H1a was supported. Interestingly, while *Sojourners* consistently included themes in line with the moral perfectionist narrative, *Evangelicals* did not consistently reflect the conservative decline narrative. The themes of poverty as well as immigrant and refugee support were evident across both administrations in accordance with the National Association of Evangelicals' World Relief ministry. H1b was supported. H1c was not supported. The results also showed that neither the articles in *Sojourners* nor *Evangelicals* made exclusivist appeals. H2a and H2b were supported. Moreover, a wider range of topics dominated in both magazines during the administration with policies that ran counter to the organizations' stated values. The evidence supports that the less aligned presidency provided more opportunities to express and clarify values and goals in each case. H3a and H3b were supported.

## Literature review

The relationship between religious affiliation and political affiliation and behavior have been studied extensively.<sup>6</sup> The religious left and right are recognized as religious-political divisions in the United States today.<sup>7</sup> Wuthnow (1988) documented the reorganization of American religion into liberal and conservative positions af-

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6 Jennifer Glass, Why Aren't We Paying More Attention? Religion and Politics in Everyday Life, *Sociology of Religion*, Vol. 80, No. 1, 2019, pp. 9-27; Angela F. McCarthy, Laura Olson and James C. Garland, Religious Right, Religious Left, Both or Neither? Understanding Religious-Political Identification, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 58, No. 3, 2019, pp. 547-69; Kenneth Wald and Allison Calhoun Brown, *Religion and Politics in the United States*, 5th Edition, Rowman & Littlefield, Maryland, 2014.

7 Ruth Braunstein, Todd Nicholas Fuist and Rhys H. Williams, Religion and Progressive Politics in the United States, *Sociology Compass*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 2019.

ter the 1960s. Since then, liberal or conservative stance has become more important than denominational or faith tradition in reference to political and social attitudes.<sup>8</sup>

The religious left has a history of more than a century of advocacy for justice including the social gospel movement in the early 20th century, the Catholic Worker movement in the 1930s and the civil rights movement.<sup>9</sup> While still influential, it is argued to be less politically instrumental today.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, faith-based community organizations continue to actively address progressively aligned issues such as poverty, economic inequality, healthcare and criminal justice.<sup>11</sup> The religious left includes a wide range of religious groups including Jews, Catholics, mainline Protestants, African American denominations, a minority of white evangelicals, as well as followers of other religious traditions.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, estimates of Americans belonging to the religious left are difficult to establish due to the diversity of membership.<sup>13</sup>

The religious right, in contrast, rose in influence in the 1970's promoting traditional moral values focusing on the social issues of abortion and sexuality and now has the potential to shape electoral outcomes.<sup>14</sup> Even though the religious right may appeal to people with broadly Protestant, Catholic, Mormon and Jewish beliefs, the movement centers around white conservative evangelical religious groups.<sup>15</sup>

Movements among religious conservatives as well as religious liberals are presently acting to influence Christian voters.<sup>16</sup> Generally, the religious right has received more academic attention; and, currently, political mobilization on the right exceeds that of the left.<sup>17</sup> However, recently the growth of the political mobilization of the left has increased with Black Protestant congregations experiencing a strong surge since 2012.<sup>18</sup>

Nevertheless, even when religious organizations endeavor to put their faith into action, there are limits on their influence over political beliefs and behaviors.

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- 8 Robert Wuthnow, *Saving America? Faith-based Services and the Future of Civil Society*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 1988.
- 9 Christopher H. Evans, *The Kingdom is Always but Coming: A Life of Walter Rauschenbusch*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 2004; Mark Zwick and Louise Zwick, *The Catholic Worker Movement: Intellectual and Spiritual Origins*, Paulist Press, New York, 2005; Aldon D. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change*, Free Press, New York, 1984.
- 10 Joseph O. Baker and Gerardo Marti, Is the Religious Left Resurgent?, *Sociology of Religion*, Vol. 81, No. 2, 2020, pp. 131–41.
- 11 *Religion and Progressive Activism: New Stories About Faith and Politics*, Ruth Braunstein, Todd Nicholas Fuist, and Rhys H. Williams (eds.), New York University Press, New York, 2017, pp. 33–34.
- 12 Braunstein Ruth, Todd Nicholas Fuist and Rhys H. Williams, Religion and Progressive Politics in the United States. . . p.4; John Green, "Assessing a More Prominent 'Religious Left'", Pew Research Center, available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2008/06/05/assessing-a-more-prominent-religious-left/> (accessed October 20, 2022).
- 13 Frank Newport, "The Religious Left has a Numbers Problem", *Gallup: Polling Matters*, June 4, 2019, Washington, D.C.
- 14 Angela F. McCarthy, Laura Olson and James C. Garland, Religious Right, Religious Left, Both or Neither? Understanding Religious-Political Identification. . . ; See also: Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2010.
- 15 Clyde Wilcox and Carin Robinson, *Onward Christian Soldiers?: The Religious Right in American Politics*, 4th Edition, Routledge, Boulder, 2011.
- 16 Daniel Bush, "Religious Liberals Want to Change What it Means to be a Religious Voter", *PBS News Hour*, July 8, 2019; Andrew W. Walker, "Understanding Why Religious Conservatives Would Vote for Trump", *National Review*, February 10, 2020.
- 17 *Religion and Progressive Activism*. . .
- 18 Kraig Beyerlein and Mark Chaves, The Political Mobilization of America's Congregations, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 59, No. 4, 2020, pp. 663–674.

Group identity, including religious group identity, is tied to and helps shape political identity and behavior.<sup>19</sup> However, this is especially true for individuals who are not interested in politics and with little knowledge about political issues.<sup>20</sup> When individuals are familiar with policy issues and have established opinions, group identity is less influential on their political opinions and elite cues are less likely to have sway.<sup>21</sup> According to Druckman et al (2010), a cue is a piece of information that permits individuals to make inferences without much information. Frames can be considered a type of cue and can be very influential in shaping opinions. Authors can address topics within different frames. For example, immigration can be described in terms of the benefits to the economy, or alternately, on taxpayer funded benefits for immigrants. A framing effect results when an author or speaker describes an event or topic with a particular focus, leading to readers' attitude change.<sup>22</sup>

Furthermore, the relationship between group identification and political influence may be changing. Wattenberg (2019) argues that there has been an increase in the percentage of individuals with firmly held belief systems based on their deeper knowledge of public policy and that this is reflected in increasing political polarization. Complicating the picture even more, while Republicans were thought more likely than Democrats to be ideologues before the 2016 election, supporters of Donald Trump are less likely to be ideologues. In contrast, interest in Bernie Sanders shifted his supporters to more ideological thinking.<sup>23</sup> If ideological commitment, knowledge and polarization are increasing, the patterns of behavior between elites and non-elites may be changing as well. This is true for the interaction between religious elites and non-elites as well. Overt religious cues can be divisive.<sup>24</sup> The audience of religious media tends to be highly religious.<sup>25</sup> It is reasonable to assume that readers will have established religious beliefs. Therefore, high levels of political knowledge among religious readers, especially if all readers are not unified on policy positions, make the presentation of political topics precarious for religious leaders since readers may become disaffected.

19 Arthur H. Miller, Christopher Wlezien, and Anne Hildreth, A Reference Group Theory of Partisan Coalitions, *The Journal of Politics* Vol. 53, No. 4, 1991, pp. 1134–1149.

20 Angus Campbell, Philip E. Converse, Warren E. Miller and Donald E. Stokes, *The American Voter*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1960; Philip E. Converse, The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics (1964), *Critical Review*, Vol. 18, No. 1-3, 2006, pp. 1-74.

21 James N. Druckman, Cari Lynn Hennessy, Kristi St. Charles and Jonathan Webber, Competing Rhetoric Over Time: Frames Versus Cues, *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 72, No. 1, 2010, pp. 136–148; Stephen P. Nicholson, Dominating Cues and the Limits of Elite Influence, *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 73, No. 4, 2011, pp. 1165–77.

22 Druckman James N, Cari Lynn Hennessy, Kristi St. Charles, and Jonathan Webber, Competing Rhetoric Over Time: Frames Versus Cues. . . pp. 136-137; Alice H. Eagly & Shelly Chaiken, *The Psychology of Attitudes*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers, Fort Worth, 1993; Derek Rucker and Richard E. Petty, Increasing the Effectiveness of Communications to Consumers: Recommendations Based on Elaboration Likelihood and Attitude Certainty Perspectives, *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, Vol. 25, No. 1, 2006, pp. 39–52.

23 Martin P. Wattenberg, "The Changing Nature of Mass Belief Systems: The Rise of Concept Ideologues & Policy Wonks", *UC Irvine: Center for the Study of Democracy*, Irvine, 2019.

24 Bryan McLaughlin and David Wise, Cueing God: Religious Cues and Voter Support, *Politics and Religion*, Vol.7, No. 2, 2014, pp. 366-394.

25 Stewart M. Hoover, The Religious Television Audience: A Matter of Significance, or Size?, *Review of Religious Research*, Vol. 29, No. 2, 1987, pp. 135–151; Judith M. Buddenbaum, Characteristics and Media-Related Needs of the Audience for Religious TV, *Journalism Quarterly*, Vol. 58, No. 2, 1981, 266–272.

This creates a dilemma for religious organizations that wish to put faith into action, especially since religious actors can play important roles in resisting policy and in organizing across race, class and religious difference.<sup>26</sup> One solution is to apply faith to uncontested goals but this is rarely simple. World views and goals differ within and across religious groups. For instance, at least two competing national mythologies are prominent in the United States as evidenced in the 2016 presidential election.<sup>27</sup> These mythologies incorporate arguments about cultural change and are reflected in the world views of the religious left and right. On the one hand, leaders within the progressive religious movement often express what Braunstein terms the moral perfection narrative. In this version of America's story, America is a never-ending moral and sacred project. The conception of the American people is understood in diverse terms and includes the poor, immigrants, people of color and religious minorities.<sup>28</sup> The conservative decline narrative, in contrast, highlights a glorious American past that is now in decline. Although there are different versions of the narrative, generally they call for a return to America's previous perfection.<sup>29</sup> In this narrative, especially looking through the lens of the 2016 election, the American people are portrayed as the forgotten white middle and working classes.<sup>30</sup> It is likely that belief in either America's progress or decline shapes social and political prerogatives. Nevertheless, while these contrasting narratives have been linked to progressive or conservative movements, it is possible that some members within these movements find aspects of both narratives compelling. In addition, it is also possible that religious elites and non-elites differ in their acceptance of these narratives making the selection of uncontested group goals challenging.

Given the diversity of membership in religious organizations along with the variation in world views, values and goals of members, religious leaders must weigh exclusivist ideas against pragmatism when engaging with civil society. Exclusivist ideas may threaten unity especially when the religious community is diverse in opinions on social issues. This is especially true with religious publications since they maintain diverse readerships and readers do not always agree with the authors.<sup>31</sup> Even within the field of evangelicalism, for example, the space is contested with moderate, progressive positions as well as conservative political and theological perspectives.<sup>32</sup> In response to diverse settings, religious leaders adapt their styles of

26 Andrew Arato and Jean L. Cohen, *Civil Society, Populism and Religion*, *Constellations. An International Journal of Critical and Democratic Theory*, Vol. 24, No. 3, 2017, pp. 283-295; Ruth M. Melkonian-Hoover and Lyman A. Kellstedt, "Immigration in the 2000s: Immigration Reform, Executive Orders, and Evangelical Leadership", in: *Evangelicals and Immigration*, Ruth M. Melkonian-Hoover and Lyman A. Kellstedt (eds.), Palgrave Studies in Religion, Politics, and Policy, Palgrave Macmillan Cham, 2019; Jack Delehanty and Michelle Oyakawa, Building a Collective Moral Imaginary Personalist Culture and Social Performance in Faith-Based Community Organizing, *American Journal of Cultural Sociology*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 2018, pp. 266-295.

27 Ruth A. Braunstein, More Perfect Union? Religion, Politics, and Competing Stories of America, *Sociology of Religion*, Vol. 79, No. 2, 2018, pp. 172-95.

28 Ibidem, pp. 185.

29 Philip Gorski, *American Covenant: A History of Civil Religion from the Puritans to the Present*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2017.

30 *Religion and Progressive Activism*, Ruth Braunstein, Todd Nicholas Fuist and Rhys H. Williams (eds.), New York University Press, New York, 2017, p. 185.

31 Joanna Kaftan, Immigration Reform as a Moral Question: Elite and Non-Elite Evangelical Attitudes of Immigration Reform in the U.S.A., *Politics and Religion Journal*, Vol. 8, No.2, 2014, pp.187-211.

32 Wes Markowski, The Public Sociology of Religion, *Sociology of Religion*, Vol. 76, No. 4, 2015, pp. 459-475.

religious expression in public settings for strategic purposes.<sup>33</sup> Markowski et al. (2020) propose that there are four modes of public religion. The secularist mode involves the systematic exclusion of religious expression from the public arena. The generalist pluralist mode welcomes religious reasoning into public debates but holds the expectation that religious actors will welcome viewpoints from other faiths. The particularist pluralist mode involves religious expression in the public arena but assumes that participants will express their particular religious beliefs and policy preferences without toning down language or symbolism. Lastly, the exclusivist mode expects a unitary voice in the public arena, suppressing or not acknowledging the legitimacy of alternative religious perspectives.<sup>34</sup>

Left leaning, denominationally diverse, public, socially active religious organizations, by their inclusive nature, might be assumed not to take exclusivist approaches to social action. In contrast, right leaning, public, socially active religious organizations, might be assumed to take exclusivist approaches. However, this is not assured. Pragmatism can lead to the downplaying of religious expression for conservative religious actors in multifaith settings.<sup>35</sup>

It is important to consider whether pragmatic avoidance of deep difference within a leader's own tradition or across other traditions can be a way to more effectively pursue common goals. The problem of deep difference becomes exacerbated during periods of political polarization. Religious leaders who wish to engage with civil society during periods of national strain must carefully consider what issues to promote. Maintaining unity to achieve common goals necessitates that organizers consider the level of contestation an issue will bring forth. For example, when functioning within presidential administrations, in order to maintain unity, do religious organizers avoid issues that conflict with the supportive presidential administration's positions or policies? Are organizers less concerned about introducing challenging issues during a perceived oppositional administration when the president can serve as a focus for resistance? After all, it can be more advantageous to propose controversial issues during periods of non-alignment with the administration since there is less need to worry about the contestation around them.<sup>36</sup>

While the effect of religious cues and frames on readership is beyond the scope of this paper, an examination of the themes presented by religious elites, lends insight into whether leaders utilize exclusivist or pragmatic appeals. It reveals the topics and values that are cued and that leadership wants to emphasize. It also shows whether supportive or oppositional administrations are more conducive for the presentation of social issues within religious contexts.

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33 Rogers M. Smith, "An Almost Christian Nation? Constitutional Consequences of the Rise of the Religious Right", in: *Evangelicals and Democracy in America Volume One: Religion and Society*, S. G. Brint and J. R. Schroedel (eds.), Russell Sage Foundation, New York, 2009, pp. 329-56.

34 Wes Markowski, Brad R. Fulton and Richard L. Wood, "Secular Evangelicals: Faith-Based Organizing and Four Modes of Public Religion", *Sociology of Religion*, Vol. 81, No. 2, 2020, pp.160-161.

35 *Ibidem*, p. 159.

36 Joanna Kaftan, "Changing the National Past: Re-Creating the Democratic Polish Nation After 1989", *Nations and Nationalism*, Vol. 13, No. 20, 2007, pp. 301-320.

## Methodology

Religious organizations utilize media to spread messages of faith and at times to present religious values as a counterpoint to mainstream culture.<sup>37</sup> In addition, religious associations utilize their own media outlets to introduce or emphasize social and political issues that are important to their leadership. By examining the content of articles published by religious organizations, specifically looking at cues, we can see the religious values that are highlighted; the social and political issues that are important to leadership; and, how these priorities change depending on social and political realities.

This study relies on a content analysis of one thousand nine hundred forty-three articles from two magazines: *Sojourners Magazine* and *Evangelicals* – The Magazine for NAE Members. These two publications were chosen because of their prominence and most importantly because of their organizations' publicized goals are to put faith into action. Given the missions of these magazines, authors are self-selectively more likely to believe that religious beliefs should be applied to social and political settings. Nevertheless, the two organizations are distinct in their origins and visions.<sup>38</sup> While *Sojourners* aligns more closely with left leaning public policy, the National Association of Evangelicals aligns more closely with socially conservative policy.

*Sojourners* has existed since 1971 and contributors come from a range of religious denominations including Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, Native American and other faith traditions. *Sojourners* calls to put faith into action for social justice. According to their website they, "seek to inspire hope and build a movement to transform individuals, communities, the church, and the world" and "continue to grow movements committed to advancing justice and peace."<sup>39</sup> *Sojourners* identifies several areas for direct social action including climate justice, economic justice, immigration, nonviolence and peace, racial justice as well as women and girls. *Sojourners Magazine* publishes eleven issues a year.

The National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), on the other hand, has existed since 1942 and also endeavors to participate in the public sphere. According to their

37 Stewart M. Hoover and Knut Lundby, *Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture*, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2020, p. 20.

38 *Sojourners* was developed by the Sojourners Community in the early 1970's, having its origins from the Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Ohio. Student discussions about faith and political issues, especially the Vietnam war led to the publication of *The Post American*. The community moved to Washington D.C in 1975 and the magazine was renamed *Sojourners*. Initially, the community lived together in common households and created multiple neighborhood ministries. In 1995, Sojourners founded Call to Renewal and joined with other politically and ideologically diverse churches and faith-based organizations to focus on poverty. In 2007, the organizations name converted back to Sojourners with a continuing focus on uniting churches to work toward alleviating poverty. *Sojourners*, Our History, <https://sojo.net/about-us/our-history> (accessed September 26, 2022). *Evangelicals* is a publication of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE). NAE was founded by a group of 147 people meeting in St. Louis, Missouri in 1942 as a "middle way" between the American Council of Christian Churches and the Federal Council of Churches. NAE provides a theological home for close to 40 different denominations, 45,000 churches, with a constituency in the millions. It remains the only institutional structure of American Evangelicals in the 21 century. NAE, Our History, <https://www.nae.org/history/> (accessed September 26, 2022). See also: Peter Heltzel, *Jesus and Justice Evangelicals, Race, and American Politics*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2009; Clyde Wilcox and Carin Robinson, *Onward Christian Soldiers?: The Religious Right in American Politics*, 4th Edition, Routledge, Boulder, 2011.

39 *Sojourners*, available at: <https://sojo.net/about/about-sojourners> (accessed September 26, 2022).

website, they “seek to influence society for justice and righteousness and gather the many voices of evangelicals together to be more effective for Jesus Christ and his cause.”<sup>40</sup> Concerning public policy, the NAE mission statement states, “Evangelicals believe that government is a gift from God for the common good. Good governance creates the conditions in which human beings fulfill their responsibilities as God’s image bearers and as stewards of God’s creation. Government plays an important role in protecting life, preserving freedom, and creating an environment in which families, churches, businesses and other human institutions can thrive.”<sup>41</sup> In addition, NAE provides resources and support for evangelical ministries. NAE lists four areas within their mission statement: church and faith, public policy, Evangelical Chaplains Commission and the World Relief Mission. World Relief has active ministries in the areas of disaster response, child development, maternal and child health, HIV/AIDS, agricultural development, immigrant legal services, microfinance, anti-trafficking and refugee resettlement. NAE publishes three issues a year. Given their differences, direct comparisons of themes between *Sojourners* and *Evangelicals* are unwarranted. Nevertheless, because each is distinct, similarities in patterns of change across administrations can be especially revealing.

To examine changes in magazine content from before and after the 2016 election, this study focuses on all of the articles from 2014 - 2020 in the *Sojourners Magazine* (1,621 articles) and from 2015 - 2020 in *Evangelicals – The Magazine for NAE Members* (322 articles). Articles from 2014 were not available online in *Evangelicals*. The difference in the number of articles from each magazine reflects the difference in the number of articles published. *Sojourners* publishes eleven issues a year with over fifteen articles in each issue. *Evangelicals* publishes three issues a year: Fall, Spring/Summer and Winter, with over seven articles in each issue. The articles from years 2014-2016 are categorized as Obama presidency and those from 2017- 2020 are grouped into the Trump presidency. All articles were read and coded manually by the author focusing on latent content.

The coding scheme was developed from a combination of anticipated themes as well as in vivo coding developed from unanticipated themes appearing in the articles. This study works under the assumption that themes reflect cues given by authors that a topic is relevant or should be prioritized. The initial list of codes included themes examined by Beyerlein and Chavez: immigration, abortion, economic inequality/poverty, LGBTQ; and stressed by Braunstein: cultural change.<sup>42</sup> In addition, several other themes were anticipated at the start of the study: bible verse, social justice, religious belief, religious participation, community, moral foundation, social service, environment, race, call for political engagement, women’s roles and parish costs. A code was also created for endorsement of political candidates. Unanticipated themes include: President Obama, President Trump, criticism

40 NAE: National Association of Evangelicals, available at: <https://www.nae.net/> (accessed September 26, 2022)

41 Ibidem.

42 Craig Beyerlein and Mark Chaves, The Political Mobilization of America’s Congregations, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 59, No. 4, 2020, pp. 663-674; Ruth A. Braunstein, More Perfect Union? Religion, Politics, and Competing Stories of America, *Sociology of Religion*, Vol. 79, No. 2, 2018, pp. 172-195.

of government, criticism of governmental policy, criticism of the president, racial discrimination, “wrong” interpretation of scripture, challenges of religious work, ethnic and racial inclusion, inclusion of Black Evangelical groups, missionary work, religious freedom, religion and law, accountability of politicians, accountability of religious leaders, challenges of pastoral work and violence/unrest. Frames are incorporated directly into the codes. For example, instead of a single code of race, the code of *racial discrimination* was used when an article wrote about racial inequality or discrimination while the code for *racial and ethnic inclusion* was used when the article spoke of the need for inclusion of diverse groups. In addition, the code of *inclusion of Black Evangelical groups* was used when the article argued for the inclusion of Black Evangelical congregations in the organization’s larger membership. Once the full list of codes was developed by reading the articles, each article was read and coded 1 if the theme was present and 0 if the theme was not present. Articles often expressed more than one theme and multiple codes were applied to a single article when relevant. Therefore, percentages will not add to one hundred percent.

## Results

The two distinct national mythologies proposed by Braunstein are evident in the themes put forth by each magazine.<sup>43</sup> However, the moral perfection narrative, including themes such as race, poverty, immigration and social justice, is more obvious in *Sojourners* magazine and is expressed consistently through both administrations. Therefore, H1b is supported. In contrast, the conservative decline narrative was not as clearly evident in *Evangelicals*. While the conservative decline narrative is expressed through articles in *Evangelicals* by reference to changing culture and religious freedom, *Evangelicals* magazine also strongly promoted the themes of poverty and immigration. Therefore, H1c is not supported. It is important to note that alleviating poverty and the World Relief Mission are active ministries within NAE. World Relief, by its very nature, is a transnational mission and does not focus exclusively on the United States.

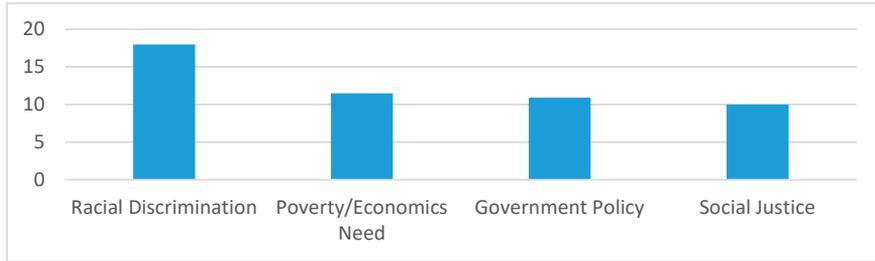
The most common theme in both magazines was bible verse where the article quoted scripture directly (*Sojourners* 32% and *Evangelicals* 20%).<sup>44</sup> Both magazines utilized scripture as a guide for behavior on a topic. *Sojourners* magazine included monthly segments on “Living the Word, Reflections on the Revised Common Lectionary,” by cycle. The magazines wrote about topics beyond the initial coding expectations: immigration, abortion, economic inequality, LGBTQ and cultural change. Abortion (*Sojourners* 1% and *Evangelicals* 7 %) and LGBTQ (*Sojourners* 3% and *Evangelicals* 0%) were not among the most common topics in either magazine. Given the wide range of topics covered by these magazines, the analysis is centered on themes that occurred in ten or more percent of the articles in the magazines. Since bible verse was consistently a common topic in both magazines and across time, it will not be included in the charts. Please see Figure 1: 1a and 1b.

<sup>43</sup> Ibidem.

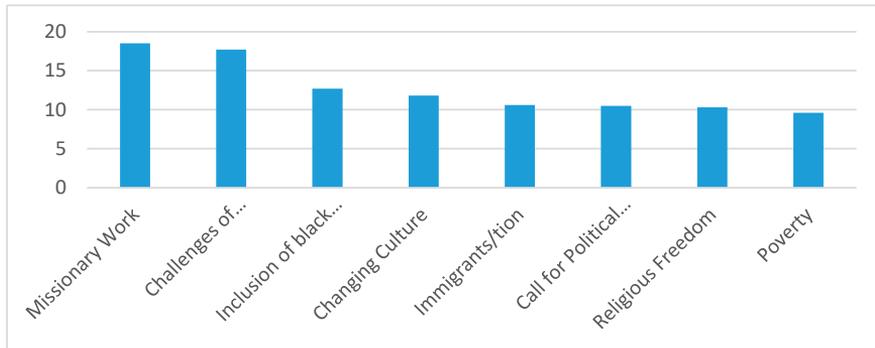
<sup>44</sup> All in-text percentages are rounded to whole numbers.

**Figure 1: Most Common Themes Overall**

**1a Sojourners: Theme in Ten or More**



**1b Evangelicals: Theme in Ten or More Percent of Articles**



The magazines differed in their emphasis of topics. This may in part be due to their different mission statements. The most common themes in *Sojourners* were articles on racial discrimination (18%), poverty (12%), criticisms of federal government policies (11%), and concerns over social justice (10%). Articles about cultural change (1%) were uncommon. *Evangelicals*, in contrast drew more attention to the topics of missionary work (19%), the challenges of pastoral work (18%), need for inclusion of Black Evangelicals (13%), changing culture (12%), immigrants/immigration (11%), calls for political engagement (11%), religious freedom (10%) and poverty (10%). It is important to note that racial discrimination (8%) also appeared in *Evangelicals* but did not reach the 10% cutoff. In contrast, direct criticisms of federal government policies were extremely rare with only two articles referencing refugee resettlement. In line with the World Relief Mission, these articles called for more refugee resettlement in the United States. Similarly, *Sojourners* did not omit the topic of immigrants/immigration (9%). However, the topics of missionary work (5%) and religious freedom (1%) were not common.<sup>45</sup> The following sections look at each magazine separately across the two administrations to examine changes in emphases; to see if the publications were taking pragmatic or exclusivist approaches; and to see whether the strategy changed depending on the administration.

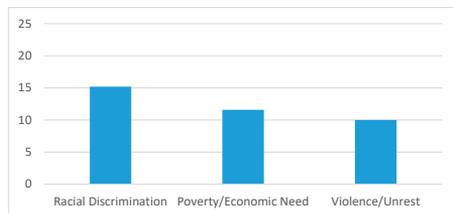
<sup>45</sup> *Sojourners* magazine includes articles on a wider and more diverse range of topics. That is one of the reasons why *Evangelicals* shows more themes in ten or more percent of articles.

## Sojourners Magazine

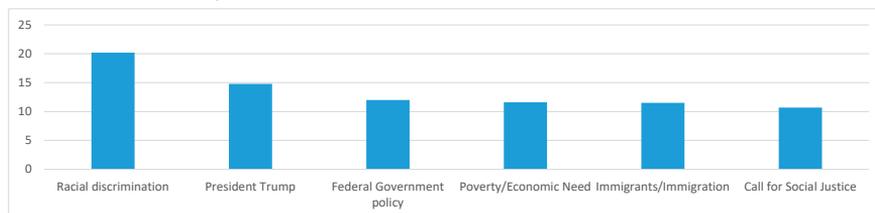
The frequency in the presentation of different social issues changed across presidential administrations. H1a is supported. During the Obama presidency, the themes found in more than ten percent of *Sojourners* articles included racial discrimination (15%), poverty (12%) and violence/unrest (10%). Please see Figure 2a. The period of the Trump presidency, in contrast, introduced themes more specific to the Trump administration's policies. The theme of racial discrimination (20%) increased, continuing as the most common theme. Poverty (12%) also continued to be among the most common themes. However, criticism became more common; specifically, criticism of President Trump (15%) and governmental policy (12%). Immigration (11%) and calls for social justice (11%) also became more common. Themes during both the Obama and Trump administrations are consistent with the moral perfection narrative. Please see Figure 2b. In addition, these results illustrate a wider range of topics emphasized during the Trump administration, a period during which presidential policies and actions ran counter to the group's stated values.<sup>46</sup> H3a is supported.

**Figure 2: *Sojourners* - Most Common Themes by Presidency**

### 2a Obama Presidency



### 2b Trump Presidency



The next section looks specifically at the themes in *Sojourners* that increased and decreased the most between the two presidencies. Looking at the shift in themes within *Sojourners*, while articles before the election were rarely critical of

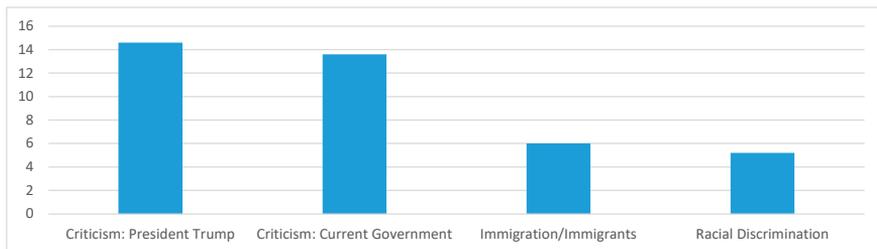
<sup>46</sup> The period of the Trump administration, for example, included immigration policies that ran counter to *Sojourners*' supportive stance for immigrants. In addition, even though the protests associated with police violence emerged separately from any specific policies the administration introduced, President Trump publicly downplayed police violence directed at black Americans. See: *Domenico Montanaro, "America Reckons with Racial Injustice Trump Downplays Police Violence, Deaths of Black Americans, NPR, July 14, 2020. Available at: <https://www.npr.org/sections/live-updates-protests-for-racial-justice/2020/07/14/891144579/trump-says-more-white-people-killed-by-police-violence-than-blacks> (accessed May 5, 2022).*

President Obama (1%), criticism of President Trump (15% increase) was much more common and exhibits the largest shift in themes across the two presidencies. Please see Figure 3a. The number of articles criticizing the current federal government (14% increase), immigration (6% increase) and racial discrimination (5% increase) also grew more than five percent. The articles responded directly to current social and political events.

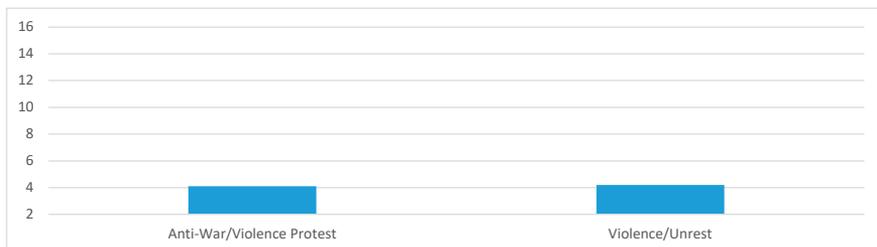
Because of the limitation of space in publications, the increase of certain themes necessitates a decrease in others. Given the broad range of themes covered in *Sojourners*, there was no theme reduced by five or more percent. Looking at only themes with decreases of four or more percent, the themes of violence/unrest (4%) and anti-war protest (4%) decreased the most. Please see Figure 3b. Given the diverse nature of *Sojourner's* readership, the magazine takes a pluralist approach in its choice of themes. There is an expectation that readers will welcome the viewpoints of other faiths. H2a is supported. It is important to note, however, that all of the themes in *Sojourners* across both administrations fit with progressive positions. Moreover, the period of the Trump administration provided a wider range of themes suggesting that the period of the Trump presidency provided more opportunities to elaborate on the organization's values.

**Figure 3: *Sojourners* - Percent Change in Themes Across Presidencies**

**3a Five or More Percent Increase**



**3b Themes with Largest Decrease**



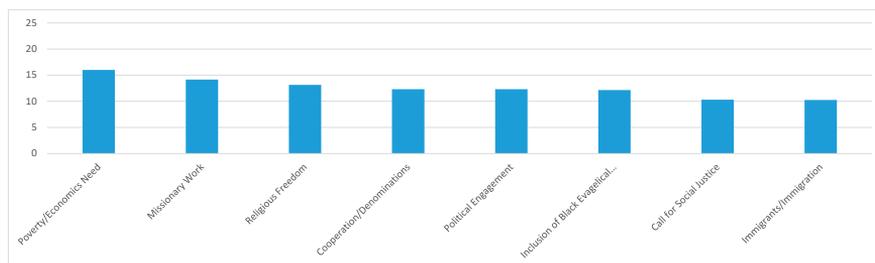
## Evangelicals – The Magazine for NAE Members

Unlike *Sojourners*, *Evangelicals* tended not to directly criticize presidents, policy or governments. Current political events were avoided. Considering all of the articles in *Evangelicals*, President Obama is mentioned only twice in the same magazine (2015), in reference to the Catholic-Evangelical Summit on Overcoming Poverty. He is neither criticized nor lauded. Interestingly, President Trump is also mentioned in only two articles and not in a positive light. One of the two articles discussed the deportation of Iraqi Christians from the U.S. and the other referenced immigration policy and child separation at the U.S. Mexico border.

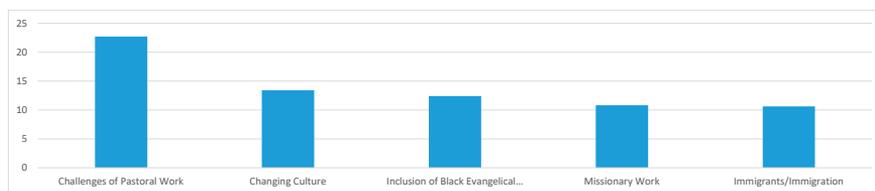
Similar to the difference between the presidential administrations evident in *Sojourners*, *Evangelicals* revealed a wider range of themes appearing in ten percent or more of articles during the Obama administration, the administration with policies that ran counter to the group’s stated values. H3b is supported. In addition, *Evangelicals* included articles calling for cooperation with non-Evangelicals to work toward common goals. The magazine did not make exclusivist appeals. H2b is supported. The most common themes in *Evangelicals* during the Obama Presidency were poverty (16%), missionary work (14%), religious freedom (13%), cooperation with other non-Evangelical denominations (12%), calls for political engagement (12%), inclusion of Black Evangelical groups (12%), calls for social justice (10%) and immigration (10%). During the Trump presidency, articles about the challenges of pastoral work dramatically increased (to 23% from 8%). Articles about changing culture (13%) also increased; and inclusion of Black Evangelical groups (13%), missionary work (11%) and immigration (11%) continued to be dominant themes. Please see Figures 4a and 4b.

**Figure 4: *Evangelicals* - Most Common Theme by Presidency**

### 4a Obama Presidency



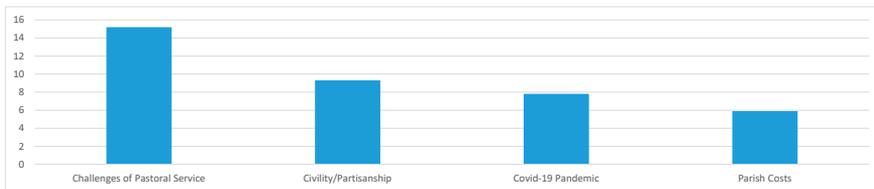
### 4b Trump Presidency



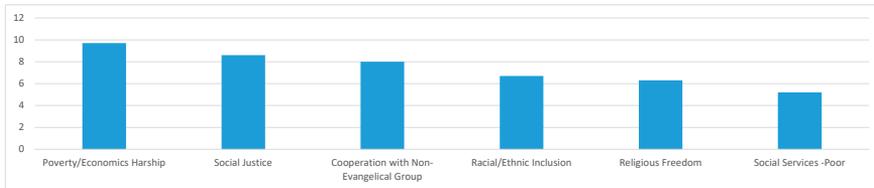
Looking at the themes exhibiting the most change in *Evangelicals*, the challenge of pastoral work appears as the theme with the largest increase across presidencies (15% increase). Another clear increase is in the theme of civility amidst partisanship (9%). There were no articles on this theme during the Obama presidency. Not surprisingly, the Covid-19 pandemic shows an 8% increase since Covid 19 did not exist during the Obama presidency.<sup>47</sup> In addition, the number of articles about the financial cost and burdens of being a pastor increased (6%). These articles detail the financial burdens -student loans, low pay, parish expenses – of pastors and call for NAE members to support their own pastors. Please see Figure 5a.

**Figure 5: *Evangelicals* - Percent Change in Theme Across Presidencies**

**5a Five or More Percent Increase**



**5b Five or More Percent Decrease**



There is a wider range of topics with a five percent or more decrease in *Evangelicals*, possibly due to the formatting limitations of the magazine. The number of articles on the topics of poverty (10% decrease) and calls for social justice (9% decrease) decreased the most. Articles about cooperation with non-evangelical denominations (8% decrease) also decreased as did the number of articles on racial and ethnic inclusion (7% decrease). The number of articles referencing religious freedom also fell (6% decrease). Please see Figure 5b. While solid conclusions cannot be drawn given the wide range of topics exhibited during both administrations, there appears nevertheless, to be a shift to focus on less controversial goals during the Trump presidency in order to reduce contestation. For example, as part of NAE’s mission, providing support for Evangelical ministry is not controversial. Therefore, articles about the challenges of pastoral service can act to unify the magazine’s readership during polarizing periods. It is important to note that articles about pastoral service and parish costs were present before 2016. However, the percentage of these articles increased sharply during the Trump presidency. Given that multiple social justice protests were especially active during the Trump presidency, it is interesting to note that the themes of social justice and racial and ethnic inclusion actually decreased in

<sup>47</sup> Covid 19 also appears in articles in *Sojourners* (4.65%).

*Evangelicals* during this time period. In addition, a wider range of themes dominated during the Obama administration. The Obama administration provided more of an opportunity to clarify shared values. H3b was supported.

### Across Presidency Comparisons

The final table compares significant shifts in themes across the Obama and Trump presidencies within each magazine separately. Comparisons across magazines are unwarranted. Chi-Square values are listed along with Pearson correlations to show the direction of the relationship.<sup>48</sup> The themes of immigration, racial injustice and national identity significantly increased in *Sojourners* during the Trump Presidency.<sup>49</sup> These themes are in line with the moral perfectionist narrative and show an increased effort to express these values during a presidency with actions and policies that strongly conflicted with the organizations stated values. In contrast, within *Evangelicals*, there were significantly fewer articles with themes of cooperation with other denominations, inclusion of Black Evangelical congregations and poverty; and, a significant increase in the themes of challenges of pastoral service and civility amidst partisanship during the Trump presidency. These results suggest that the period of a more aligned, supportive presidency necessitated some degree of avoidance of controversial themes so not to alienate segments of the readership.

**Table 1. Comparison of Themes Within Magazine Across Obama and Trump Presidencies**

Theme	Sojourners		Evangelicals	
	$\chi^2$	Pearson R	$\chi^2$	Pearson R
Cooperation with other denominations	<b>3.523</b>	<b>-.047</b>	<b>7.324**</b>	<b>-.151**</b>
Immigration	<b>17.788***</b>	<b>.105***</b>	<b>.006</b>	<b>.004</b>
Racial injustice	<b>7.065**</b>	<b>.066**</b>	<b>.002</b>	<b>-.003</b>
Inclusion /Black Evangelicals	<b>.488</b>	<b>-.017</b>	<b>8.089</b>	<b>-.158**</b>
Poverty	<b>.001</b>	<b>-.001</b>	<b>7.463</b>	<b>-.152**</b>
National identity	<b>8.492**</b>	<b>.072**</b>	-	-
Challenges of service (pastoral)	<b>.108</b>	<b>.008</b>	<b>11.185***</b>	<b>.186***</b>
Partisanship-civility	-	-	<b>10.465***</b>	<b>.180***</b>

Negative correlations show a decline during the Trump administration.

\*\*p <.01, \*\*\*p<.001

- No cases of this theme were found in the magazine.

48 For a discussion of statistical analysis with binary data see: Zdenek Hubalek, Coefficients of Association and Similarity, Based on Binary (Presence-Absence) Data: An Evaluation, *Biological Reviews*, Vol. 57, No. 4, 1982, pp. 669-689.

49 An article was coded as national identity if the article discussed what defines identity in American.

## Conclusion

Both magazines, *Sojourners* and *Evangelicals*, responded to the social and political environments of the two presidencies. While articles in *Sojourners* consistently reflected values of the moral perfectionist narrative across both presidencies, the conservative decline narrative as well as some aspects of the moral perfection narrative were both evident in *Evangelicals* articles. NAE's stated mission of alleviating poverty and its transnational mission, World Relief Mission, were clearly expressed as goals by authors. Nevertheless, there were fewer articles in *Evangelicals* that conflicted with the conservative decline narrative during the Trump administration. Given the diverse, interfaith readership of *Sojourners*, the magazine took a pluralist approach to the themes it presented, expecting the readership to value diverse viewpoints, within a progressive frame. The complex, contested space of diverse political and theological positions within Evangelicalism, in contrast, placed constraints on what themes could be presented within *Evangelicals* without contestation. In response, *Evangelicals* did not take an exclusivist approach. It included articles about the need for inclusion of Black Evangelical groups and working with non-Evangelical denominations to achieve common goals. In addition, it emphasized more non-controversial issues during the Trump presidency, in fact calling for civility and warning against partisanship.

Interestingly, while both magazines wrote about numerous topics, a wider range of topics dominated both magazines during the administration with policies that ran counter to the organizations' stated values. The evidence supports that the less aligned presidency provided more opportunities to express and clarify values and goals in each case. There are several reasons why this may be so. On the one hand, during a presidency with actions and policies that conflict with a religious organization's values, there is a direct and immediate focus for opposition that provides more of an opportunity to clarify and emphasize values. On the other hand, there is less need to emphasize oppositional themes when the presidency and policy are more aligned with organization's positions. In addition, during a presidency when many of the policies are in line with the organization's values, it may be more difficult to bring up themes that conflict with the more supportive administration. Presenting themes that run counter to the more aligned presidency may disaffect many readers, especially when the readership includes moderate, progressive perspectives as well as conservative social, political and theological positions.

These results are limited by the comparison of only two administrations and two publications, each with distinct mission statements and histories.

Expanding the investigation to a wider time period and to include additional religious publications, including those from organizations that do not focus on action, would add insight into the multiple priorities of religious leaders and how they adapt to social and political realities. In addition, a manifest content analysis of common terms would offer an alternative approach to identifying the priorities of religious organizations. Moreover, expanding the examination to include reactions to religious cues by readers would offer insight into the effectiveness of cues across administrations. Additional research examining the documented messages of religious leaders and the response of readers could uncover future directions of political mobilization on both the religious left and right.

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Џоана Кафтан

## ВЕРСКЕ ПОРУКЕ: ТЕМЕ У ЛЕВИЧАРСКИМ И ДЕСНИЧАРСКИМ ВЕРСКИМ ПУБЛИКАЦИЈАМА ЗА ВРЕМЕ ОБАМИНЕ И ТРАМПОВЕ АДМИНИСТРАЦИЈЕ

### Сажетак

Верска левица и десница траже од својих следбеника да своју веру претворе у акцију. Приоритети тих акција су условњени друштвеним и политичким реалностима. Овај рад истражује теме које су коришћене од стране две важне публикације пре и после избора 2016. године. Обе публикације издају организације које желе да своју веру претворе у акцију. Рад се ослања на анализу садржаја 1.943 чланка који су објављени од стране листова *Sojourners* и *Evangelicals* за време Обамине и Трампове администрације. Иако резултати показује различите фокусе ових публикација, након избора 2016. године они су промењени. Чланци објављени у листу *Sojourner*, левичарском гласилу са верски различитиом читалачком публиком, директно су се тицали председничких политика. Критика председника Трампа постала је уобичајена тема. Са друге стране, чланци објављени у листу *Evangelicals*, десничарски настројеној публикацији намењеној евангелицима, су избегавали контроверзне догађаје и нису се директно тицали председника, политика, или владе. Њихов фокус је, пре свега, био на пасторалном раду након 2016. године. Поред тога, обе публикације које су објављивале чланке који су били у сукобу са вредностима организације резултирали су у широком спектру тема, што наводи на закључак да је опозиција нуди више могућности да се објасне и истакну вредности и приоритети.

**Кључне речи:** верска левица, верска десница, теме, Обама, Трамп, Сједињене Америчке Државе