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## TRUMP, CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM, AND ISSUE POLARIZATION: THE ATTITUDES AND ACTIVISM OF IOWA CLERGY IN THE 2020 CAUCUSES

### Abstract

Prior research has investigated the differences between evangelical Protestant, mainline Protestant, and Catholic clergy in American general elections. We know less about attitudes and activism of clergy in presidential nomination campaigns. This research highlights results from a survey of 480 clergy on candidate support, issues, and political activism in the 2020 Iowa caucuses. A strong Iowa caucus showing often fuels momentum for candidates in the rest of the nomination race, as with Barack Obama in 2008. This 2020 survey covers issues such as immigration, racial justice, health care, and more. I also explore how Iowa clergy think about political activism and views on Christian nationalism. I find that most Democratic-leaning clergy supported center-left candidates in Iowa in 2020. Among Iowa clergy of all parties (including independents), most disapproved of the job Donald Trump was doing as President. A comparison with a 2012 survey reveals increasing polarization of the three clergy groups on political ideology, church-state issues, and racial justice.

**Keywords:** clergy, Iowa caucuses, Christian nationalism, political polarization

### Introduction

In a letter to Baptist Pastor Jeremiah Moore in 1800, Thomas Jefferson argued against involvement of established clergy in government and elections. In making his case for a strict separation of church and state, Jefferson wrote, “the clergy, by getting themselves... ingrafted into the machine of government, have been a very formidable engine against civil and religious rights of man”<sup>2</sup>. Americans today still debate whether Jefferson was right. From the question of

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2 Thomas Jefferson, “Letter to Jeremiah Moore in 1800”, National Archives: The Founders, available at: <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-32-02-0066> (accessed October 24, 2021).

whether the United States was or is a Christian nation<sup>3</sup> to debates over contemporary church-state issues<sup>4</sup>, the role of religious leaders in politics is of enduring interest to scholars.<sup>5</sup>

In light of their teaching roles, prominence in the community, and impact on the lives of parishioners, pastors and priests have been a popular topic of scholarly study, including recent controversies over "Christian nationalism"<sup>6</sup>. Researchers have investigated the different choices made by evangelical Protestant, mainline Protestant, and Catholic clergy in general elections<sup>7</sup>, but we know less about clergy behavior in presidential nominating contests. This process starts in two unlikely, small, mostly-rural states: Iowa and New Hampshire.<sup>8</sup> The Iowa caucus results often feed into momentum for candidates in New Hampshire and the rest of the nomination campaign, as they did for Senator Barack Obama in 2008.<sup>9</sup>

In light of the important role of the Iowa caucuses, I studied the involvement (attitudes, activism, and voting) of Iowa clergy in the 2020 contests. Overall, the Iowa Clergy Survey polled pastors and priests in 20 of the largest denominations in the state (measured by American Religion Data Archives or ARDA)<sup>10</sup>. Together, these religious groups represent 87 percent of all denominational adherents in the state.<sup>11</sup> Survey data were gathered with the same protocol as a study eight years earlier.<sup>12</sup> In total, 480 clergy answered questions about Iowa caucus politics

3 John Fea, *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation?*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2016.

4 Noah Feldman, *Divided By God: America's Church-State Problem and What We Should Do About It*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 2006.

5 Paul A. Djupe and Christopher P. Gilbert, *The Political Influence of Churches*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2008.

6 James L. Guth, Protestant Clergy and Christian Nationalism, *Perspectives in Religious Studies*, Vol. 48, No. 2, 2021, pp. 135-147.

7 Corwin Smidt, *Pulpit and Politics: Clergy in American Politics at the Advent of the Millennium*, Baylor University Press, 2004; Corwin Smidt, *Pastors and Public Life: The Changing Face of American Protestant Clergy*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2016.

8 Elaine Kamarck, *Primary Politics: Everything You Need to Know on How America Nominates Its Presidential Candidates*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, Brookings Institution Press: Washington DC, 2015.

9 Hugh Winebrenner and Dennis J. Goldford, *The Iowa Precinct Caucuses: The Making of a Media Event*, University of Iowa Press, 2010.

10 American Religion Data Archives reports (ARDA, 2010) are at <http://www.thearda.com/rcms2010/>. For comparison, denominations are grouped in three overall traditions: Catholic, mainline Protestant, and evangelical Protestant. The denominations are listed below, ordered by their size in the state of Iowa: Catholic, Mainline Protestant (United Methodist Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Presbyterian Church USA, Reformed Church in America, the United Church of Christ, Disciples of Christ, American Baptist, Episcopal Church USA), and Evangelical Protestant (Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ, Assemblies of God USA, Christian Churches and Churches of Christ, Christian Reformed Church, Evangelical Free Church in America, Southern Baptist Convention, Church of the Nazarene, Vineyard USA, Christian and Missionary Alliance, Baptist General Conference).

11 The data from 2010 were collected by the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies (ASARB) using its definition of adherents: all church members, children, and an estimate of other regular attenders. American Religion Data Archives had the most updated data on Iowa congregations/adherents. To be exact, the 20 denominations sampled in 2020 here represent 87.2 percent of religious adherents in the state of Iowa (or 1,432,684 of 1,642,344 total).

12 Using online or hard copy directories from each denomination (and supplementary research in cases where clergy contact information was hard to find), I used a systematic sampling method to select every other clergy member to receive a survey invitation. In total, 1,221 Iowa clergy received emails informing them about a caucus-related survey. Introductory details were sent a few days before the Survey Monkey link. The first wave of email messages promoting the survey began in early February, and two reminders went out days later to those who had not yet taken a poll. I held drawings for three Amazon gift cards as an

and economic, social, and theological issues, for a strong response rate of 39 percent.<sup>13</sup> I analyzed the respondents for representativeness on demographic measures, using available Iowa data and survey data from 2012. The demographics of this 2020 sample were very similar to these benchmarks.

The analysis proceeds as follows: I first review clergy partisanship, ideology and vote choice in the 2020 Iowa caucus. Then I turn to the way clergy thought about and engaged in political activity leading up to the caucuses, with some interesting comparisons from 2012. Then I consider the issue agendas of these three groups of clergy, their attitudes toward important groups, views about the problems facing their country, as well as where they stood on crucial issues during the 2020 Iowa caucuses. Finally, I report on the much debated issue of Christian nationalism and clerical responses to that phenomenon.

### Partisanship, Ideology, and Voting

A long line of research stresses the importance of partisanship to clergy politics.<sup>14</sup> I asked a number of questions about partisan evaluations, partisanship, and ideology. The first query was about presidential job approval. In February 2020, most Iowa clergy *disapproved* of Trump's job performance, 57 percent to 43 percent overall, a higher disapproval rating than among Iowans in general.<sup>15</sup> More striking was an extremely high *strong disapproval* rate. About half of all Iowa pastors (48 percent) said they "strongly disapproved" of how Trump was doing his job, while supporters were more likely to "somewhat approve" than to "strongly approve."

Catholic, mainline, and evangelical clergy had very different views of the President in early 2020. Only 27 percent of mainline Protestant clergy approved his job performance, and 73 percent disapproved (65 percent *strongly*). Catholic approval for Trump was split almost exactly 50-50. Evangelical pastors were much more positive (78 percent approval), the flip side of their critical attitudes about President Obama in 2012.<sup>16</sup> On partisanship, there was a strong leftward tilt for mainline Protestant pastors: 62 percent are Democrats or independents who lean toward Democrats, and 31 percent are Republicans or Republican lean-

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incentive. The poll was open February 7-25, 2020. See more: Kedron Bardwell, "Pastors, Politics, and the Caucuses: The 2012 Iowa Clergy Survey". Paper presented at the *Iowa Conference of Political Scientists*, Davenport, IA, 2012.

13 The response rates for Catholic priests (49 percent) and mainline Protestant pastors (42 percent) were higher than for evangelical Protestant pastors (28 percent). These response rates compare favorably with current surveys conducted by mail or phone, where response rates today are often well under 10 percent.

14 James L. Guth, John C. Green, Lyman A. Kellstedt, Corwin A. Smidt, and Margaret M. Poloma, *The Bully Pulpit: The Politics of Protestant Clergy*, University Press of Kansas, Lawrence, 1997.

15 "Morning Consult. Tracking Trump: The President's Standing Across America – State Trends", available at: <https://morningconsult.com/tracking-trump-2/> (accessed October 24, 2021).

16 Kedron Bardwell, "Pastors, Politics, and the Caucuses: The 2012 Iowa Clergy Survey". Paper presented at the *Iowa Conference of Political Scientists*, Davenport, IA, 2012.

ing. Iowa's evangelical pastors are nearly all Republican or Republican-leaning (90 percent). Catholic priests fall in the middle: 54 percent are Republican or Republican leaning, while 32 percent affiliate more closely with the Democrats. Overall, about half of clergy lean toward the GOP and half lean toward Democrats, a similar profile to party affiliation among the Iowa public.<sup>17</sup>

Ideology is closely related to party, especially recently with a rise in polarization and identity politics (so-called *ideological sorting* of the two parties). Overall in 2020, 40 percent of Iowa clergy said they were conservative or very conservative, 31 percent said moderate, and 28 percent said liberal or very liberal, but there were fascinating ideological differences *between* the religious traditions. Very few Catholic priests in Iowa self-identify as ideological liberals; most say they are moderate (48 percent) or conservative (41 percent). Iowa's mainline Protestant clergy are center-left: 23 percent are conservative, 35 percent are moderate, and 42 percent are liberal or very liberal. Meanwhile, about 84 percent of evangelical pastors identify as conservative or very conservative.

Sometimes clergy see ideological differences (or gaps) between their ideology and their parishioners' views. In 2020, about a third of Catholic priests believe they are more liberal than congregants they serve. A clergy-congregant gap also emerges in mainline Protestant churches. About 35 percent of mainline Protestant pastors believe they are more liberal than those in the pews, but for evangelical pastors there is no ideological divide with those in the pews: 70 percent say they are ideologically similar to their people, suggesting perhaps more potential for mobilization.

In keeping with record-breaking turnout in recent U.S. elections, the voting enthusiasm (or intention to vote) among clergy was exceptionally high: 91 percent of Catholic priests, 98 percent of mainline Protestants, and 91 percent of evangelicals said they absolutely or probably would vote in November 2020.<sup>18</sup> To get a sense of both enthusiasm and changes in voting intention, I compared self-identified 2016 votes among clergy with their stated voting intention for November 2020. Catholic priests' views on the party vote stayed perfectly stable. Among mainline Protestants, the vote for third parties dropped to near zero in 2020, but support for a generic Democratic presidential candidate rose 10 points. Nearly one quarter of Iowa evangelical pastors say they voted for a third party candidate in 2016, evidence of clear dissatisfaction with the candidates (Clinton and Trump). Support for Trump among evangelicals declined only five points, comparing November 2016 votes to their November 2020 voting intention. Most of the gap is due to lingering undecided, who may have returned "home" to their GOP candidate in the general election.

17 "Party Affiliation among Adults in Iowa: 2014 Religious Landscape Study", Pew Research Center. Available at: <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/state/iowa/party-affiliation/> (accessed October 24, 2021).

18 Fewer than 10 Iowa clergy members in the entire sample (not 10 percent, but 10 total respondents) said they had a 50/50 or lower chance of voting in November 2020.

## Democratic-Leaning Clergy in the Iowa Caucuses<sup>19</sup>

In 2020, of course, the only real contest was in the Iowa Democratic caucuses. One fascinating result in 2020 was a huge rise in enthusiasm of mainline Protestant clergy who are Democrats or lean Democratic: 60 percent voted in the caucuses, a spike of 20 points from 2012. The enthusiasm is understandable in light of a President who was very unpopular with center-left voters and given the wide range of Democratic candidates on offer. The favorite of Democratic clergy was Senator Elizabeth Warren (about 33 percent), followed closely by Pete Buttigieg (at 27 percent) and Senator Amy Klobuchar (22 percent). Joe Biden, the eventual Democratic nominee, came in fourth, with under 10 percent. Senator Bernie Sanders garnered less than five percent of the first-choice votes. All other candidates (Yang, Steyer, Gabbard, Bloomberg, and Bennet) made very little impression on the Democratic clergy in Iowa.

First-choice support varied greatly among our three religious groups. Catholic priests favored the “moderate” candidates – splitting votes between Biden, Buttigieg, and Klobuchar. Elizabeth Warren and Pete Buttigieg were top choices for mainline pastors (each with about 30 percent of the vote). The small number of evangelical voters who lean toward Democrats makes it very hard to generalize much about their preferences.<sup>20</sup> Overall, the Democratic clergy vote in 2020 was a three-way race between Warren, Buttigieg, and Klobuchar.

In U.S. winner-take-all elections, second-choice votes are often irrelevant, but this choice can be important in Iowa, where “realignments” occur after a first *preference vote* in each caucus location. Buttigieg showed a wide appeal among our respondents, and he was the second-choice vote of nearly 36 percent of Iowa clergy. Klobuchar (23 percent) also did very well as an option for voters whose first-choice candidate might not make *viability*, or the 15 percent threshold that candidates need to get nomination delegates in Iowa. Warren was second choice of 16 percent of Democratic clergy, and Biden rounded out the top four with 10 percent support.

## Clergy and Political Activism

One goal of this survey project was to catalogue beliefs and behavior of Iowa’s clergy in terms of political activity. Questions about participation in political activity are especially timely due to recent efforts in the United States by a small

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19 Due to the timing of this poll and no competitive nomination on the Republican side, this 2020 survey focused on the Iowa Democratic caucuses (February 3, 2020). I target caucus-related questions to pastors who self-identified as Democrats or Democratic-leaning independents. Just under one third of Catholics priests identified this way, half of mainline Protestants, and under five percent of evangelicals. The rest of this survey focuses on two types of findings. As such, in this article I will first briefly analyze the caucus candidate preferences of the *Democratic or Democratic-leaning* clergy. Then I move to a more general reporting of political activity, views on Christian nationalism, and views on a range of issues among all Iowa clergy, mainly highlighting the differences among Catholic, mainline, and evangelical subgroups

20 Corwin Smidt, *American Evangelicals Today*, Rowman & Littlefield Press, 2013.

group of conservative clergy (a movement called “Pulpit Freedom Sunday”) to encourage pastors to endorse candidates, even if it violates IRS guidelines and puts a congregation’s non-profit status at risk.<sup>21</sup>

To get at what pastors believe (and what they actually do), I asked two sets of questions about political activity. First, I asked Iowa clergy the following: “*Clergy get involved in public affairs in various ways. Do you approve or disapprove of clergy expressing themselves in these ways?*” As a follow-up, the survey asked: “*In the months leading up to the Iowa caucus, did you express yourself by (insert listed activities here).*” The results are Table 1 below. The numbers in parentheses are percentage-point changes in the response for each clergy group, compared to the 2012 survey.<sup>22</sup>

**Table 1. Clergy Approval of and Engagement in Electoral Activism  
(In percent, with changes from 2012 in parentheses)**

Approve Clergy who:	Mainline	Evangelical	Catholic
Take a stand on a political issue while preaching	41 (+16)	50 (+18)	45 (+13)
Publicly (not while preaching) supporting a candidate	58 (+10)	48 (-10)	29 (+4)
Participating in a rally or protest	73 (+7)	52 (-10)	53 (-11)
Give money to candidates/parties	83 (+11)	63 (-8)	46 (-11)
Urging members to register/vote	88 (+2)	73 (-7)	84 (+4)
Using voter guides to educate congregants	24 (-2)	48 (-4)	69 (-2)
Personal Activity			
While preaching took a stand on a political issue	31 (+17)	35 (+12)	29 (+8)
Publicly (not while preaching) supported a candidate	36 (+13)	28 (-1)	19 (+5)
Participated in a rally or protest	25 (+12)	10 (-7)	17 (+5)
Gave money to candidates/parties	27 (+3)	8 (-4)	14 (+7)
Urged members to register/vote	36 (-7)	29 (-15)	37 (-10)
Used voter guides to educate congregants	4 (+1)	16 (+2)	27 (+3)

Since 2012, we see a surprising shift in how Iowa clergy think about political activity. For example, clergy in 2020 were much more likely to support taking stands on political issues, even via preaching. Support for “issue talk” does not apply to all activity or in all clergy groups. Mainline Protestants are now more comfortable with various types of activism, including explicit support for candidates (though not in the pulpit), rallies and protests, and political donations. A plausible explanation is the concurrent rise of passionate activism in the “re-

21 Bret Hayworth, “Politically Speaking: Cornerstone’s Gordon will speak against Obama on Pulpit Freedom Sunday”, *Sioux City Journal*, October 5, 2019. Available at: [http://siouxcityjournal.com/blogs/politically\\_speaking/politically-speaking-cornerstone-s-gordon-will-speak-against-obama-on/article\\_023b19db-11db-5572-acef-17b22681e61b.html](http://siouxcityjournal.com/blogs/politically_speaking/politically-speaking-cornerstone-s-gordon-will-speak-against-obama-on/article_023b19db-11db-5572-acef-17b22681e61b.html) (accessed October 24, 2021).

22 Kedron Bardwell, “Pastors, Politics, and the Caucuses: The 2012 Iowa Clergy Survey”. Paper presented at the *Iowa Conference of Political Scientists*, Davenport, IA, 2012.



ligious left” recently.<sup>23</sup> Conversely, evangelical pastors (while active on issues) are now *less* likely to say clergy should support candidates, give money to political causes, or go to protests. The contentiousness in churches around Trump’s presidency may be leading pastors to be cautious about politicizing the church. If ideological polarization is a rising problem (as I show later – clergy believe it is), evangelical pastors may be reacting to this trend, by setting a safer distance between their own political positions and explicitly electoral activity. Catholic priests’ views are mixed. They are more likely today to say “issue talk” is fine from the pulpit but less likely to approve attending rallies and protests or giving money to candidates. Priests are more likely to support giving out voter guides, given distribution of such guides by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.<sup>24</sup>

Do Iowa pastors *personally* engage in activism? Here again, we see a rise in clergy comfort in talking about explicitly political issues from the pulpit. Evangelicals participate in issue talk the most, but mainline clergy surpass Catholic priests in activism from the pulpit. Again, mainline Protestant clergy were also more active in 2020 than in 2012 in publicly supporting candidates and participating in rallies or protests. What is fascinating is the drop in in the share of clergy urging their congregants to register and vote. Perhaps rising polarization in the nation and in churches is making within-congregation voter drives more pastorally risky (even if drives are non-partisan).

What issues concerned Iowa pastors in 2020? The survey asked how often Iowa pastors talk about issues while preaching and in congregational education. The top issues that made their way into pastors’ teaching (or educational materials and church education venues) are reported in Table 2. Once again, where this question was asked eight years ago, the percentage change is reported in parentheses.

**Table 2 . Clergy Discussion of Political Issues  
(In percent, with changes from 2012 in parentheses)**

Issue:	Mainline	Evangelical	Catholic
Poverty/Inequality	91	85	94
Racial Justice	86 (+6)	80 (+24)	78 (+15)
Political Polarization	79	70	74
Environment	77 (+0)	46 (+2)	67 (+0)
Immigration	75 (+11)	55 (+23)	80 (-9)
Health Care	56	22	54
Abortion	35 (+7)	91 (+2)	92 (-4)
Pornography	35 (-3)	87 (+0)	78 (+7)

23 For discussion of this trend in the Trump era, see: Jack Jenkins, *American Prophets: The Religious Roots of Progressive Politics and the Ongoing Fight for the Soul of the Country*, Harper One, San Francisco, 2020.

24 “United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship”, available at: <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/> (accessed October 24, 2021).

Poverty and inequality sees a strong focus in all three clergy groups, but on other issues, the religious traditions differ. Catholics and mainline Protestants have stronger concern for health care, the environment, and immigration – issues often cited in educational material from these center-left denominations. Interestingly, racial justice is now a much more important issue for evangelical pastors. Not surprisingly, evangelicals and Catholics were more likely to talk about abortion and “sexual ethics” issues like pornography, in line with church views on those issues. A surprising finding is a decline in Catholic discussion of immigration, while both mainline and evangelical pastors featured this issue *more* in 2020 than in 2012.

Interestingly, not all findings fit group stereotypes: for example, more than 85 percent of evangelical pastors talked about poverty and equality, about half considered the environment, and over half discussed immigration. Overall, Catholic priests were the most likely across-the-board to discuss controversial issues, perhaps because the church itself has clear positions on the issues<sup>25</sup>, even if its parishioners are divided. It may benefit mainline and evangelical churches, as America becomes even more polarized, to look to Catholic priests and parishes for advice on how to manage conflicts. There seems to be a way to set up congregational dialogue and education to engage hot-button political issues, even if those in the pews have conflicting views.

### Attitudes toward Minority Groups

A useful tool to sort out respondents’ beliefs about other religious groups is a so-called favorability rating. I asked Iowa clergy about how they feel about three groups that historically faced discrimination in America: atheists, Mormons, and Muslims. Response options were: *very favorable, somewhat favorable, not sure, somewhat unfavorable, or very unfavorable*. In line with other surveys, atheists are the most disfavored group, among both Catholic priests (31 percent unfavorable, 18 percent favorable) and evangelical clergy (42 percent unfavorable, 21 percent favorable). Mormons get a better shake from Catholic and mainline clergy (a 10-15 point positive over negative favorability rating) than from evangelical pastors (49 percent unfavorable, 20 percent favorable). Views of Muslims are quite positive among Catholic priests (53 percent favorable, 18 percent unfavorable) and mainline clergy (58 percent favorable, 16 percent unfavorable), but very negative among evangelical pastors (48 percent unfavorable, 21 percent favorable). Given the anti-Muslim policies of the Trump administration, these assessments may be important harbingers of attitudes among different religious groups.

To follow up on views of Muslims and other religious/racial minority groups, the survey asked about (1) the construction of new Muslim mosques in Amer-

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<sup>25</sup> Ibidem.



ica, and (2) systemic racism and white privilege. The text of the first question is: *"How would you feel if Muslim-Americans built a mosque in your community?"* The response options include very comfortable, somewhat comfortable, not sure, somewhat uncomfortable, or very uncomfortable. Only about 10 percent of Catholic priests and mainline clergy said they would be very or somewhat uncomfortable with this addition to their community. But one-third of Iowa evangelical pastors said they would be somewhat or very uncomfortable with a new mosque in their area (about 15 percent said very uncomfortable).

In light of the recent attention to issues of racial justice and police misconduct, the survey asked about views on race and discrimination: *"How much do white people benefit from advantages in society that Black people do not have?"* Among Catholic priests, 78 percent say whites benefit from such advantages "a great deal" or "a fair amount." Among mainline pastors, 83 percent agree they benefit at least somewhat from "white privilege". But only half of evangelical pastors agreed and another half insisted that they do not benefit very much (or benefit not at all) from systemic advantages of being white. These results suggest that attitudes on race are very strong contributors to current political polarization along religious lines.

### **America's Most Important Problem**

What issues do Iowa clergy care about the most? The survey asked the famous Gallup question: *"What is the most important problem facing the nation today?"* In the week of the Iowa caucus, polls<sup>26</sup> found four issues dominated U.S. public perceptions of the most important problem: government/poor leadership (27 percent), economics (13 percent), COVID (11 percent), and health care (11 percent). Immigration (eight percent) and unifying the country (six percent) were the only other issues that topped five percent. Do Iowa clergy have different views than the American public? Using open-ended questions and then a content analysis of responses, the two most common words Iowa clergy used to name the nation's problems were "lack of unity" (eight percent) and "division" (six percent). Clearly, the nation's political dysfunction and polarization are on their minds. This compares to the results from 2012 Iowa clergy, where the word "moral" (11 percent) edged out "economy" (10 percent) for the top spot. Eight years ago, "poor" and "poverty" hit nine percent, while "debt" was the only other issue to reach five percent.

The polarization in American political and social life (a lack of national unity) weighs heavily on the hearts and minds of clergy. Among policies, health care, abortion, and climate change (and to a lesser extent poverty or inequality) were said to be the crucial issues facing the country. Looking at phrases used to de-

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26 "Most Important Problem", Gallup News, available at: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1675/most-important-problem.aspx> (accessed October 24, 2021)

tail problems, "work together," "political polarization" and "economic inequality" stood out in this analysis. Among religious themes, "moral," "life," and "God" see many mentions. The name "Donald Trump" was independently listed by several respondents asked about the nation's biggest problem. Next, giving respondents a second choice to name more issues (not shown) drew a wider range of issues and terms: immigration came in as a key policy, and themes of *pessimism* about the nation and its politics stood out ("loss," "lack," "change," "needs," and "system").

Sorting open-ended responses into themes or categories, the most important problem is clear. Nearly 30 percent lament a rise of political polarization. Moral or spiritual decline is a top problem for 19 percent. Abortion or health care are noted by 17 percent combined. Beyond that, clergy pinpoint a mix of policy or personal issues. Donald Trump (or a variation of that) was listed as a most important problem by six percent of Iowa clergy. Next, clergy note issues like poverty or inequality (six percent), failure of the government/leadership (five percent), climate change and environment (four percent), jobs or the economy (three percent) and racial justice or civil rights (two percent). In a big change from 2012, when economics topped the list of problems, economic issues (even including budgets and spending) now get just three percent. Iowa clergy clearly saw 2020 as about leadership (moral and political) and a desperate need to ease political polarization and restore national unity.

The top issue, political polarization, was represented by a number of shared complaints: about Americans' inability to discuss differences with respect for the other side; the tendency to turn opponents into "evil" people, somehow less human than your allies; the massive political divide between groups who refuse to listen to each other; and a disconnection with neighbors, communities, and diverse regions of the United States. Not surprisingly, given their vocation, many Iowa pastors framed the polarization "plague" as having spiritual roots, in hatred for the "other," the absence of civility and respect, and the absence of love for one's neighbor:

Moral and spiritual issues were the second most frequent category. Examples included: breakdown of the family and lack of male leadership and responsibility; disintegration of the family; absence of human decency; a lack of empathy; the decline in the number of "real" disciples of Jesus; an abandonment (neglect, ignorance, repudiation) of the Christian foundations of our nation; and failure to believe in God and the Bible's teachings. We see a range of ways of framing other top national problems. Other clergy mention economic inequality (rich versus poor), recklessness of President Trump, a rise in hatred or scapegoating of immigrants or "the other," idolatry (worship of politics, issues, or candidates), fear mongering in politics, confirmation bias in our viewpoints, declining trust in leaders, apathy, and a lack of critical thinking.

## Views on Major Issues

To learn more about clergy views on policies and issues, the survey presented a set of questions along with a Likert scale with five options (*strongly agree*, *agree*, *not sure*, *disagree*, and *strongly disagree*). What are the major differences between Iowa's Catholic, mainline, and evangelical clergy views on issues? Answers to these questions are shown in Table 3. Where the results differ by more than 5 points from 2012, the change is shown in parentheses.

**Table 3. Clergy Views on Major Issues**  
(Percent who agree or strongly agree, with changes from 2012 in parentheses)

	Mainline	Evangelical	Catholic
I support the death penalty for the most serious crimes	24 (-5)	71 (-15)	13
More environmental protection is needed, even if it raises prices or costs jobs	74 (+13)	33 (+17)	74 (+8)
Sending U.S. troops to Iraq in 2003 was the right decision	18	44 (-14)	21
U.S. gun laws should be more strict than they are today	69	24	62
Sex education in our public schools should teach "abstinence only"	15 (-7)	57 (-12)	49
Transgender people should be able to use the restrooms of their choice	61	7	28
Public schools should teach creationism alongside evolution in biology classes	34	83	33 (+12)
The 'Obamacare' health care reform plan was a good thing	60 (+7)	11	47 (+8)
Illegal immigrants living in the U.S. for many years deserve a "path to citizenship"	81	45	76 (-10)

Views of evangelical pastors on many issues are quite different from those of Catholic and mainline clergy. For example, evangelicals strongly support the death penalty (although a little less than in 2012), while Catholic and mainline clergy oppose the death penalty by huge margins. Death penalty support in the U.S. public overall lies in the middle; Americans are evenly divided, although not that long ago support was two-to-one in favor.<sup>27</sup> Clergy views of the environment are also polarized, but change is happening at the margins. For example, a third of evangelicals now favor environmental regulation (17 points higher than 2012), while three-quarters of Catholic and mainline clergy favor stricter environmental regulation. Dramatic gaps also exist between evangelical pastors and the other clergy on gun rights, education, and health care. About two thirds of the Catholic and mainline clergy believe gun regulations need to be stricter, while 65 percent of evangelical pastors believe that gun laws should not be tightened. More than

27 J. Baxter Oliphant, "Support for Death Penalty Lowest in More Than Four Decades", Pew Research Center, September 29, 2016. Available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/09/29/support-for-death-penalty-lowest-in-more-than-four-decades/> (accessed October 24, 2021).

four out of five evangelical pastors think “creationism” should be taught as a view of human origins (alongside evolution) in public schools; only about a third of Catholic and mainline clergy agree with this position.

On health care, a plurality of Iowa’s Catholic priests and a majority of mainline pastors agree that “Obamacare” reforms were a good thing; indeed the views of these two groups on the reform trended in a positive direction since 2012. Only 11 percent of evangelicals agree this bill was good, fitting with GOP efforts to repeal the bill in recent years. Interestingly, regarding the Iraq War, support by evangelical pastors for the War has declined since 2012.

About half of Catholic priests and evangelical pastors think sex education in schools should be focused on “abstinence only” instead of being comprehensive. Just 15 percent of mainline pastors favor this. Few Catholic or evangelical clergy support the idea of transgender people using bathrooms of their choice, while over 60 percent of mainline pastors support that more progressive position. On immigration, many Iowa clergy favor the “path to citizenship” for undocumented immigrants (about four out of five mainline pastors and three out of four Catholic priests). Interestingly, 45 percent of evangelicals feel the same way, a position that reflects the moderation of the evangelical elites.<sup>28</sup>

Another section of the poll asked clergy about a controversial issue that has sparked intense culture war/ideological battles during the Trump presidency: abortion. In light of the continued partisan and cultural conflict (and upcoming U.S. Supreme Court cases) on abortion, the survey asked: “*Do you think that abortion should be legal in all cases, legal in most cases, illegal in most cases, or illegal in all cases?*” Not a single Catholic or evangelical respondent said abortion should be legal in all cases (21 percent of mainline clergy said so). Overall, about 60 percent of mainline pastors said abortion should be legal in all or most cases; 31 percent said it should be illegal in most cases, and 10 percent said “illegal in all cases.” Among Catholic priests, 57 percent said abortion should be illegal in all cases, and 32 percent said it should be illegal in most cases. This is similar to the rate of opposition to abortion among evangelical pastors (61 percent and 35 percent, respectively).

Catholics and evangelicals are overwhelmingly “pro-life” on abortion, while mainline pastors are the most “pro-choice.” But shifts over time within each group are fascinating. For example, Catholic priests in 2020 are slightly more accepting of abortion than in 2012, with a decent share (11 percent) now saying it should be legal in most cases. Mainline and evangelical clergy are growing farther apart: mainline pastors are nine points more likely than in 2012 to say abortion should be legal in all cases. Meanwhile, evangelical opposition to abortion is hardened, with a rise (by eight percent) in the number saying abortion should be illegal in all cases. For a recent comparison, 19 percent of Iowans say abortion should be

28 “Thinking Biblically about Immigrants and Immigration Reform”, National Association of Evangelicals. Available at: <https://evangelicalimmigrationtable.com/thinkingbiblically/> (accessed October 2, 2021).

legal in all cases, 29 percent legal in most cases, about 30 percent illegal in most cases, and 16 percent illegal in all cases.<sup>29</sup>

Finally, in light of the U.S. House vote to impeach President Trump in late 2019 on the charge that he asked a foreign nation (Ukraine) to interfere in a U.S. election by investigating a political rival (Biden), the survey asked: *"Democrats recently pursued impeaching President Trump for alleged abuse of power. What comes closest to your view of the Trump-Ukraine controversy?"* The options were: Trump should have been impeached and removed from office, Trump acted inappropriately but should not be removed from office, or Trump was correct to ask Ukraine to investigate the Bidens. As with other issues, the answers reveal very sharp divisions among the three clergy groups.

Mainline Protestant pastors (63 percent) say the President should have been removed from office for his actions. Catholic priests are more divided. Half of them believe Trump acted inappropriately, but he should not be removed from office. Smaller numbers say he should have been removed (27 percent) or he did nothing wrong at all in the episode (24 percent). Among evangelical pastors, support for the President was still strong: 42 percent actually said he was correct to ask a foreign nation to investigate Biden. Almost half said it was inappropriate but he should not be removed from office, and only 11 percent said he should have been impeached and removed from office for his behavior.

### Christian Nationalism

Finally, the survey asked a number of questions designed to elicit clergy attitudes on the phenomenon of "Christian nationalism," the subject of much scholarly and journalistic attention in recent years<sup>30</sup>, especially among evangelical elites and voters<sup>31</sup>. In conservative Christian political movements, Christian nationalism contends that America is a chosen nation or a "city upon a hill," to use a historical phrase later adopted in a Ronald Reagan speech.<sup>32</sup> To measure clergy views about this idea, I asked this question: *"Which statement do you see as most accurate? America currently is and always has been a Christian nation, America was but is no longer a Christian nation, or America has never been a Christian nation."*

The results here differ from the 2012 findings, as about 40 percent of evangelical pastors say America has *never* been a Christian nation. Another 40 percent

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29 Nick Coltrain, "Iowa Poll: Iowans' support for legal abortion slips. Des Moines Register", Des Moines Register, March 17, 2020. Available at: <https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/politics/2020/03/17/legal-abortion-support-slips-iowa-poll-finds/5031643002/> (accessed October 24, 2021).

30 Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2020.

31 Daniel Cox, "White Christians Side with Trump", Public Religion Research Institute, September 11, 2016. Available at: <https://www.prr.org/spotlight/religion-vote-presidential-election-2004-2016/> (accessed October 24, 2021).

32 Abram Van Engen, "How American Became a 'City Upon a Hill'", *Humanities*, Vol. 41, No. 1, 2020. National Endowment for the Humanities, available at: <https://www.neh.gov/article/how-america-became-city-upon-hill> (accessed October 24, 2021).

of evangelicals say it was a Christian nation, but it is not anymore. An even larger group of mainline clergy (56 percent) believes America has *never* been a Christian nation. Catholic priests are the most likely to say America is and always has been a Christian nation (29 percent).

To give respondents a chance to explain what they mean by Christian nation, I asked an open-ended question. The written responses provide rich detail on how Iowa clergy think about religion in American history. Iowa clergy views on the Christian nation idea divide into roughly four camps, which I sort on common themes. These four views are: (1) a "Christian Nation or Identity" (Christianity was and is crucial to the U.S. founding and its history), (2) "Reframe the Question" (other issues are more important than this one, or the question itself is challenged), (3) "Legal/Religious Freedom" (a focus on legal rules and lines of separation between church and state), and (4) "Post-Christendom" (the idea that increasing diversity has made Christianity less important to American politics and society today). The first two views are popular with Iowa Catholic and evangelical clergy.<sup>33</sup> The third view (focusing on disestablishment or "separation of church and state") was by far most popular with mainline clergy.

It is interesting to see how clergy frame, in their own words, understanding of Christian nationalism or the intersection of religion and politics in the United States. Verbatim statements under the "Christian Nation or Identity" theme include several ideas: that America was founded on Christian beliefs by Christian people; that America is based on one God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all; that our history has been shaped by Christian teachings and leaders; and that Judeo-Christian ethics or values are vital to our country's founding and are the basis upon which people who now decry Christianity have the freedom to do so.

Other clergy object to the idea of Christian nationalism and "Reframe the Question" of America's assumed religious origins. They argue that nations can't be Christian at all, that Christianity conflated with nationalism and civic morality isn't Christianity, that the question ignores the reality of indigenous groups and their history, and that America is not the new Israel. Similar questions arise among clergy who point to the importance of the American ideal of separation of church and state. These clergy focus on "Legal/Religious Freedom," including beliefs that the Founders were deists, that requirements for citizenship do not include being a Christian, and that the nation was founded on freedom of religion with a Constitution that prescribes separation between church and state.

A final group of clergy highlighted that we are now passing the point as a country where Christian origins are even relevant to political or social debates. Themes under this idea of "Post-Christendom" include the notion that Christianity is not the center of American culture anymore, that we are a post-Christian nation today, and that most people do not go to church or practice their faith.

33 Robert P. Jones, *The End of White Christian America*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 2016.



Other clergy expressed the view that U.S. Christianity was always popular but the church and members never took its commitments seriously, that the church in America may be dying (or be on its way to doing so), and that it is hard to even define what the nation represents in terms of its religious commitments and culture.

To conclude the investigation of Christian nationalism, I asked two questions on the ideal relationship of church and state in America. One asked if clergy agree that government should allow the display of religious symbols in public spaces and buildings (like monuments, artifacts like the Ten Commandments, or public holiday displays). A second asked if government should advocate for Christian values in laws or policies. About 80 percent of both Catholic priests and evangelical pastors agreed the government should allow religious symbols in public spaces. Only 54 percent of mainline clergy were comfortable with this. Similarly, around 70 percent of Catholic and evangelical clergy agreed that our government should advocate for Christian values. Only 33 percent of the (more progressive or inclusive) mainline clergy agreed that Christian values should be a goal in policy making.

## Conclusions

This study provides new insight into the attitudes and activism of clergy in presidential politics, and reveals shifting attitudes of Catholic, mainline, and evangelical clergy in Iowa, a midwestern state that is a crucial part of the path to the American presidency. Compared to a prior survey in 2012, I find increasing denominational polarization on political ideology, on church and state issues, and on racial justice issues. Some of this polarization seems tied to a political moment, including the rise of Donald Trump in remaking GOP politics, and related growth in conservative circles in support for Christian nationalism.

Among Democratic-leaning clergy, most supported candidates along the center-left (Klobuchar and Buttigieg) to left (Warren) ideological spectrum. The eventual winner of the presidential nomination, Joe Biden, who was often framed as a more moderate option, gained little traction in Iowa. Mainline clergy look to be moving to the left<sup>34</sup>, as half of those pastors self-identify as liberals. Conversely, nearly 85 percent of evangelical pastors are conservative or very conservative, creating this polarization gap between evangelicals and the mainline, with Catholic priests landing in the center-right.

Overall, most Iowa clergy *disapproved* of President Trump by a ratio of three-to-two, a higher disapproval rating than the public. The rise of Trump and controversial issues during his tenure sparked new activism: mainline clergy activism skyrocketed in 2020, whether it was in publicly supporting candidates, attending

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34 Jack Jenkins, *American Prophets: The Religious Roots of Progressive Politics and the Ongoing Fight for the Soul of the Country*, Harper One, San Francisco, 2020.

rallies and protests, or donating to political causes. It seems President Trump truly energized the “religious left.” At the same time, the mix of issues clergy talked about changed in 2020. Catholics became more likely to talk about racial justice, mainline pastors noted immigration more than in the past, and evangelical pastors talked more about race and immigration<sup>35</sup> than a decade ago.

Perhaps reflecting this increasing polarization, clergy expressed great concern and a negative set of themes in open-ended questions about the most important national problems. “Division” and “polarization” even outweighed typically important issues like the economy, health care, and abortion. Among the few positives, the most common single theme was a plea to politicians to work together to unite the nation. But unity may be difficult to reach, given a growing divide on Christian nationalism. While mainline clergy focus on a need for separation of church and state, evangelicals favor the view of either a Christian nation/origins or a narrative of *declension*: that America was a Christian nation but lost that (and needs to reclaim it). In the middle, some clergy see America is diversifying, so that the idea of a Christian nation may be less and less relevant as the country (and younger generations) are more secularized.

Overall, many issues that in the past divided evangelical, mainline, and Catholic clergy are still there; the old culture wars have not receded. But as part of the nation becomes more secular and progressive, we are layering on that divide another, newer set of conflicts on personalities and populism (Donald Trump), church and state (Christian nationalism), and new policy questions (gender and racial justice issues). The intense conflict hit a crescendo during two impeachment trials of the President. During those events, as in the underlying conflicts, we see a great divide between mainline, Catholic, and evangelical clergy in America. It remains to be seen if the new polarization is a “perfect storm” aligning transitory events and personalities. Alternatively, we may be witnessing a new realignment in politics around right-wing populism and culture wars tied to fusion of nationalism and religion.

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35 Mark A. Noll, David W. Bebbington and George M. Marsden, *Evangelicals: Who They Have Been, Are Now, and Could Be*, Eerdmans Publishing, Grand Rapids, 2019.

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**Кедрон Бардвел**

## **ТРАМП, ХРИШЋАНСКИ НАЦИОНАЛИЗАМ И ПОЛАРИЗАЦИЈА: СТАВОВИ И АКТИВИЗАМ КЛЕРА ИЗ АЈОВЕ У КОКУСИМА 2020. ГОДИНЕ**

### **Сажетак**

Досадашња истраживања бавила су се разликама између евангелика, протестаната и католика у америчким председничким изборима. Много мање тога знамо када су у питању ставови и активизам свештенства у номинационим кампањама за председника. Овај рад приказује резултате истраживања које се бавило активизмом 480 припадника свештенства у САД по питањима подршке за различите кандидате, појединим питањима и њиховом улогом у изборима у држави Ајова 2020. године. Држава Ајова је посебно важна јер често показује какав ће моментум кандидати имати у даљој трци за номинацију, као рецимо Обама 2008. године. Истраживање које приказујемо бави се великим бројем питања, ка што су имиграција, раса, здравствена брига, и остало. Поред тога, бавим се и питањем шта клер мисли о политичком активизму и хришћанском национализму. Закључио сам да је онај део клера који нагиње ка Демократској партији подржавао кандидате центра и левице у Ајови 2020. Међу клером, већина сматра да Трамп није радио добар посао као председник. У поређењу са истраживањима 2012. године, види се јасна поларизација три највеће групе клера по питању политичке идеологије, односа између државе и цркве, и питања расне правде.

**Кључне речи:** клер, Ајова, хришћански национализам, политичка поларизација