

ABSTRACT

Voting the Bible, The Texan Way: A Comparative Analysis of How Megachurch Pastors Framed the 2016 and 2020 U.S. Presidential Election

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Rooted deep in the southern United States, Texas has played a role in moving the needle in various election outcomes, particularly concerning conservative issues. Stereotyped by many as a conservative and biblically focused state, Texas has become a forerunner in many matters regarding politically conservative candidates. Looking specifically at the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections, Texas led the ‘Bible Belt’ in conversations concerning politics and candidates, including the safety and sanctity of pulpits. Using framing and First Amendment theories, this analysis takes a critical look at how Texas megachurch pastors used framing techniques and their personal opinions to frame campaign topics in their election-day sermons. An analysis of sermons suggests the following tactics were common: using scripture references as metaphors, linking Old Testament traditions to modern practices, and linking God’s favor to political leadership. The number of pastors with large congregations who discussed politics offers a glimpse at the role Texas megachurches play in the framing of U.S. Presidential candidates for

congregants. Future studies might assess the impact of this type of rhetoric on society.

Other studies might assess its impact on how people vote.

Voting the Bible, The Texas Way:
A Comparative Analysis of Megachurches' Framing Techniques
Based off the Presidential 2016 and 2020 Election

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES	vi
LIST OF TABLES	vii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	viii
DEDICATION	x
CHAPTER ONE.....	1
Introduction	1
Religion, Politics and The Media: The Holy Trinity.....	1
CHAPTER TWO.....	4
Literature Review	4
In Texas, We Trust – The Religious and Political Makeup of Texas.....	4
No Other Gods Before Trump – An Understanding of Trump’s Evangelical Push.....	14
The Texas Trump Traitors – Understanding How Texas Almost Turned Blue	18
Understanding The Holy Trinity Through Mass Communication Pedagogy	23
CHAPTER THREE	28
Methodology	28
CHAPTER FOUR	33
Findings and Analysis	33
Demographics of The Pews – Results of Megachurches in Sample.....	33
Bringing Souls to The Polls – Results of Media Samples (YouTube Sermons).....	36
2016 Sermon Sample – Church Number 6.....	40
Sermon Sample – Church Number 40.....	53
CHAPTER FIVE.....	62
Limitations, Future Studies, and Conclusions	62
APPENDIX	65
APPENDIX A	66
Sample of Codebook	66
BIBLIOGRAPHY	70

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 2.1 Illustration created by Marc Burckhardt showing lead pastor Robert Jeffress and President Trump	16
Figure 2.2 Graph representing the main factors why supporters voted for Trump during the Presidential 2016 Election (Pew Research Center, 2016).	18
Figure 2.3 Graph representing the submitted factors for why supporters voted for Trump during the Presidential 2016 Election (Pew Research Center, 2016).	19
Figure 2.4 Graph representing the percentage of registered voters and their voting preferences during the Presidential 2020 Election (Pew Research Center, 2020).	20
Figure 2.5. Voting results divided by county in Texas. Left side shows results of 2020, Right side shows results of 2016.	21
Figure 2.6 Counties with the largest out-of-state residents (Texas Realtors, 2021).	22

LIST OF TABLES

Table 4.1 Results from survey, number of congregation members per megachurch	33
Table 4.2 Results from survey, locations per megachurch.....	34
Table 4.3 Results from survey, types of denominations per megachurch.....	35
Table 4.4 Results from survey, number of churches using YouTube during 2016 and 2020 election timeframes	37
Table 4.5 Results from survey, length of YouTube sermons from 2016 election.....	37
Table 4.6 Results from survey, top key terms on YouTube sermons per 2016 election timeframe	38
Table 4. 7 Results from survey, key terms used in sample church number 6 in 2016	44
Table 4.8 Key Terms used by Pastor at Megachurch number 10 during the 2016 Election	47
Table 4.9 Results from survey, time lengths of sermons per 2020 election.....	50
Table 4.10 Results from survey, top key terms on YouTube sermons per 2020 election timeframe	51
Table 4.11 Results from survey, key terms used in sample church number 40 during 2020 election.	56
Table 4.12 Results from survey, key terms used in sample church sample 35 during 2020 election.	59

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DEDICATION

To my inspiration, Amparo Vallin Sanchez

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Religion, Politics and The Media: The Holy Trinity

Since its conquistador period in the mid-17th century, where Spanish missionaries claimed the vast dry lands, rivers, and coasts of what soon became the Lone Star State, Texas has always had ties to the Christian faith (Texas State Historical Association, 2018). Whether by force or choice, Texas slowly became an established fortress for faith-based movements, including international clergy summoning and congregation revivals making it a landmark for various modern protestant denominations including Presbyterians, Baptists, Southern Baptists, Church of Christ, Episcopalians and Methodists (Texas State Historical Association, 2018). Due to its deep roots within the evangelical church, over time, the state of Texas has established itself as a major contributor and supporter of socially conservative conversations and politics, ultimately claiming itself to become the “buckle” of the metaphoric Bible Belt (Locke, 2017).

Through this, Texas has led the political right toward passing policies that align with biblical principles on topics such as prohibition, abortion, racial segregation, same-sex marriage and female equality (Locke, 2017). In a recent study conducted by the Pew Research Center, nearly 77% of all Texas adults consider themselves Christian believers or followers; with 75% attending a religious service at least once a month (Pew Research Center, 2020). With nearly 22 million adults attending a religious service, it cannot come as a surprise to note that the relationship between church and state is skewed within the

state of Texas (Texas Freedom Network, 2006). Scholars across various disciplines including, but not limited to, religion, politics, and media, have found significant evidence to conclude a great linkage in relationship between church and state. This connection elicits questions regarding the vast influence of the political right, potential limits on religious freedom, and whether members of the clergy are qualified to exploit their personal views upon members of a congregation. Looking specifically into churches that service over 5,000 congregants in one weekend, (Pew Research Center, 2020) analyzed nearly 45 megachurches in this study. Pew (2020) found that the Christian faith has influenced the great majority of the state, regardless of its denomination or physical.

Moving closer to the 20th and 21st century, Texas has made its mark to support politicians and candidates that align with conservative, Republican values. Since 1976, Texas has played a major role in swaying the polls in the Republican Party's favor for candidates such as Ronald Regan, George W. H. Bush, George W. Bush, and Donald Trump – all candidates that fulfilled their biblical views, specifically on abortion (Cleary & Hertzke, 2006). In the 2016 election, Texas led the Bible Belt toward electing former President Donald Trump with 36 electoral votes; twice the number of any southern state including Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana and Mississippi. In an overwhelming wave, more than 80% of white evangelicals voted for Trump in the 2016 election, causing it become the highest turnout for any Republican presidential candidate since former President George W. Bush in the 2004 general election (Bailey, 2019).

Combining reality TV theatrics with his views on the act of abortion, the radical left, previous administrations, and the urgency behind “Making America Great Again,” religiously conservative states like Texas (approximately 226 out of 254 counties)

overwhelmingly rallied for Trump's election into the presidential seat in 2016; allowing him to claim victory (Bailey, 2019).

And then, in the presidential 2020 election, Texas underwent one of its most difficult political seasons; it showed hints of turning purple (Serwer, 2020). With an overwhelming number of voters, both religious and secular, Texas lost two of the largest Republican counties in the Dallas and Fort Worth area, resulting in a total of over 1 million votes for Democratic candidate, Joe Biden (Politico, 2020). With such a turnaround in numbers, Texas was seen becoming fearful of the potential of having its bright red state, the pinnacle fortress of the Bible Belt, turn blue causing a catastrophic quake to their politics and power embedded in their deeply rooted evangelical views.

Using framing and First Amendment theories, this study analyzed sermons selected from each of the 45 megachurches in the sample to answer three questions surrounding the framing techniques used during each election-day Sundaysermon(s), such as key terms, audience reach, and impact, as well as how the First Amendment can be manipulated into spreading incorrect information regarding the election(s).

This study satisfies the researcher's personal yearning to both understand and uncover the scope and breadth in which events such as national presidential elections are framed from the pulpits, specifically in the state of Texas. This study also seeks to highlight the methods in which larger churches frame and utilize their unique, holy power to influence their congregants. While there are some gaps in the literature concerning the association of religion, politics and the media, this study will be seeking to fill in those spaces and create room for future studies concerning the Church and the political south.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

In Texas, We Trust – The Religious and Political Makeup of Texas

In 1630, the first missionary outreach efforts began following the arrival of Fray Juan de Salas, one of the first Spanish missionaries eager to spread the Roman Catholic faith to indigenous tribes (Texas State Historical Association, 2018). Pritchard (1988) describes the historical undertones that were planted long before Texas became a burning red state. Focusing on the colonial religious patterns in 1845 through 1890, Pritchard uses Texas to develop “a comparative framework for analyzing the religious contrasts and correlations between a western state and the rest of the United States” (Pritchard, 1988). She adds that while “the distance between the ‘mythical and the real Texas’ is always large, the religious history of this state is especially susceptible to hyperbole and to the claim of being unique,” (Pritchard, 1988, p.34). Using the story of how the Roman Catholics superseded colonial Texas, Pritchard narrates the shift of Catholicism into protestant reformation. In her article, Pritchard explains how Protestant missionaries from other areas of the United States flooded into the newly independent areas of Texas in 1836, causing organizers from many faiths, including Methodists, Presbyterians, and Baptists to emerge from the bitter religious warfare of the Second Great Awakening, and emphasize human initiative, mass revivals, and moral accountability. In her words, “their success seemed to sweep away Catholic infidelity, and gave Texas an early claim to the title, ‘the buckle of the Bible Belt’” (Pritchard, 1988, p.35). Within her case study,

Pritchard highlights the various ways in which Texas grew into its religious right body. By explaining how Baptists and Methodists fought for the souls of Texans, as well as how their fight led them to the steps of governmental power, Pritchard explains that,

“Highlighting the religiously commonplace and typical, as well as the colorful and unusual, illustrates how frontier and settlement regions fit into the evolving religious history of the United States,” (Pritchard, 1988).

In the book titled *Making the Bible Belt: Texas Prohibitionists and the Politicization of Southern Religion*, author Joseph Locke (2017) takes a historical approach to understanding how “southern religious leaders overcame long-standing anticlerical traditions and built a powerful political movement that injected religion irreversibly into public life” (Locke, 2017, p.34). Explaining how the coined term “Bible Belt” originated in the late 1920s, Locke further explains how politics and religious morals often intersected and conjoined causing a shared commitment of power and scope of religion for states like Texas. Using the prohibition era as a historical basis for his book, Locke casts a wide net of theories as to why the Bible Belt has reconstructed and polarized itself over time as the religious-right causing a transformative movement in American history and politics. Within his book, Locke details the importance behind each landmark made by southern churches including, but not limited to, their increase in church attendance, politicism of the clergy, and internal political influence via religious politicians, judges and business men. By utilizing their pulpits and the scriptures as the foundation for their political activism, Locke unlocks the historical origins behind the religious right and shines a light on the more posing question: how did Texas sneak its way into becoming the buckle of the Bible Belt?

Religious and social science author Robert Wuthnow (year) writes in his latest book, *Rough Country: How Texas Became America's Most Powerful Bible-Belt Stat*, about how early settlers in state became powerful enough to “define evil, fight it, and build institutions in the hope of advancing civilization,” which allowed for religion to play a decisive role (Wuthnow, 2014). Within his research, Wuthnow states that today, more evangelical Protestants live in Texas than in any other state and have influenced every presidential election for 50 years. By mobilizing powerful efforts against abortion and same-sex marriage, Texas religion has always been complicated when viewed alongside more liberal states. Using memoirs, newspapers, oral history, voting records, and surveys, *Rough Country* explains the struggles faced by early settlers and mid-20th century residents including the efforts to care for the sick, combat lynching, provide for the poor, welcome new immigrants, and uphold liberty of conscience. Holding true to its title, Wuthnow uses the metaphor to express the harshness of Texas when its policy met the pulpit, as well as how its story connects to that of the nation.

In an article titled *The Anatomy of Power: Texas and the Religious Right in 2006*, the featured scholars further explain how Texas politics and policies made through a biblical lens caused state and national legislative action on topics such as same-sex marriage and abortion (Texas Freedom Network, 2006), vaccination requirements (Bustillos, 2016), contraception availability (Smith, 2016), and racial equality. In fact, authors like Edward Cleary have pushed the envelope of political, religious discourse in his book *Representing God at the statehouse: Religion and Politics in the American states*, where he explains how the vast “interest in religion and politics at the national level has surged while extensive activity at the state level has gone largely unnoticed,”

(Cleary & Hertzke, 2006, p. 76). Going into further detail about the exponential increase in church-led organizations, clearly states the number of resources and empathize that were being pushed for political governance on biblical topics. Collecting a series of essays that provide a systematic, comparative view of religion and politics at the state level, each essay looks into the lobbying tactics and methods of the church-led organizations and follows them on whether their involvement created change to occur (Cleary & Hertzke, 2006). Using a variety of denominations, Clearly explores “the enormous diversity of interests being represented at the state level,” as well as how “controversial programs and laws continue to divide state governments,” (Cleary & Hertzke, 2006, p.76).

As previously mentioned, Texas is one of the few states that still utilizes its religious voice with a national microphone. Modern theorists and scholars like John Kincaid, David Cullen, and Kyle Wilkison have researched the multi-disciplined sides of this conversation in order to uncover several instances in which Texas is seen as not only the conservative state to convince, but the birthplace of the newly improved radical right. In their latest book *The Texas Right: The Radical Roots of Lone Star Conservatism*, Cullen and Wilkison illuminates on the initial factors that began the movement for Texas to shift toward the far right (Cleary & Hertzke, 2006). By demonstrating how Texas politics foreshadowed the Republican party’s realignment and growing strength of the Bible Belt, Cullen et al. challenges the traditional narrative and emphasizes “the right-wing critique of modern America voiced by, among others, radical conservatives of the state’s Democratic Party, beginning in the 1930s,” (Cleary & Hertzke, 2006, p.77). Defending their argument with historical context, Cullen et al. uses previous parties and

organizations like the Jeffersonian Democrats of 1936, the Texas Regular movement of 1944, the Dixiecrat Party of 1948, the Shivercrats of the 1950s, state members of the John Birch Society, Texas members of Young Americans for Freedom, Reagan Democrats, and the Tea Party, to express how the state evolved from a traditionally bi-partisan state to a radically Republican (Cullen & Wilkison, 2014). Along the same lines, political researchers like Kincaid find their argument for Texas' political alliance in sociological literature. Examining how right-wing social movements have been able to capture a foothold in the Texas state Republican Party, and maintain political support even as their policies and politics, Kincaid analysis the state's Republican Party's internal battles over the past 20 years, including the effects of increase voter turnout in statewide elections, causing an increase in extreme political partisanship. Through an in-depth analysis of historical events via sociological literature, the article "demonstrates the role played by material and symbolic threats in maintaining and increasing support for the Republican Party, even among previously moderate populations," (Kincaid, 2016, p.5).

Texas is no stranger to the 'separation of church and state' conversation. Various scholars including James Edward Wood have also found evidence of how the nation, as a whole, has blurred the lines around the conversation between the separation of church and state. In his book *Church-state relations in the modern world : with historical, national, international, and ecclesiastical documents and an annotated bibliography*, Wood goes into further detail on the multifaceted relations the church has held not only in the United States, but also in other parts of the world (Wood, 1999). As mentioned by Wood, over the years the director of many organizations, who are advocates for the separation of church and state, have been formed across the United States including the

Americans United for Separation of Church and State, a nonprofit organization led by Barry Lynn. While there is clear advocacy for the constant surveillance regarding the separation of church and state, many have questioned whether the intent behind the Church's long-standing opposition is truly based on their religious eagerness to affect government policies with biblical principles or their urgency to keep their financial stability, specifically their tax exemption.

Since the emergence of protestant establishments within the United States, the debate on whether federal taxing should be casted unto religious establishments has become a delicate dance, to say the least. For centuries, clergymen have asked the federal government for potential waivers and taxation forgiveness. Historical petitions like the Senate Misalliances Document No. 14 titled, *Clergymen of Various Denominations in The District of Columbia*, have been documented showing members of the clergy petitioning that the United States' Senate "exempt churches and church-property from taxation," (S. Misdoc.14, 1874); an echo to the act of June 17, 1870, where "houses for divine worship" were given complete property tax immunity (Brennan, 1970). Since this act, churches based in the United States have received an official federal income tax exemption, which included any monetary donations. However, this issue is still divisive. Proponents argue that a tax exemption allows for churches to continue to provide crucial social services and keep the government out of church finances, thus upholding the separation of church and state (Britannica, 2016). According to scholars, this has been a critical act to keep America from becoming a theocracy.

On the other hand, opponents argue that giving churches special tax exemptions violates the separation of church and state that tax exemptions are a privilege, not a right

guaranteed by the constitution. In court cases like *Walz v. Tax Comm'n of the City of New York* (1969), opponents like Frederick Walz have challenges the courts to reverse the act. According to the case, Walz alleged that the exemptions forced him, as a taxpayer, to indirectly contribute to those churches. However, in a 7-to-1 decision, the Court held that the exemptions did not violate the Establishment Clause and mentioned that the purpose of the exemptions was to neither advance nor inhibit religion (397 U.S. 664, 1970). The court went further to state that no one particular church or religious group had been singled out to receive tax exempt status as well as that the tax exemption creates only a “minimal and remote involvement between church and state and far less than taxation of churches,” (397 U.S. 664, 1970) as well as mentioning that the exemption tended to complement and reinforce the desired separation insulating each from the other. Lastly, the court noted that “benevolent neutrality” toward churches and religions was “deeply embedded in the fabric of our national life,” (397 U.S. 664, 1970).

On this ruling, the scholarship seems to agree with a few key points. First, through this exemption, some churches have considered taking advantage of their tax waiver and have sought to push for political reform under their religious principles. This is something that is prohibited under the 1954 Johnson Amendment, which states that churches “are absolutely prohibited from directly or indirectly participating in, or intervening in, any political campaign on behalf of (or in opposition to) any candidate for elective public office,” (IRS, 1954). However, there have been multiple violations to the amendment including presidential vows to repeal it entirely in order to grant churches freedom of religious liberty on politically related speeches. For example, in 2008, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was accused of violating their tax-exemption

clause by supporting the passage of California's Proposition 8, also known as the *Marriage Case*, a ballot initiative outlawing civil marriages for same-sex couples (Proposition 8, 2008). In a back-and-forth public debate, the San Francisco Chronicle quoted Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, stating:

While the tax code has a zero tolerance for endorsements of candidates, the tax code gives wide latitude for churches to engage in discussions of policy matters and moral questions, including when posed as initiatives. (Kuruvila, 2008)

With this quote and judgement call, multiple other churches and pastors began either tiptoeing around the exception clause or outright violating their clause by publicly endorsing political candidates. Head pastors like Robert Jeffress of First Baptist Church of Dallas, were found publicly violating the Johnson Amendment by posting videos of himself endorsing Texas Republican candidate Governor Rick Perry on the church's home website in 2011. This immediately caused a media frenzy to erupt. In an interview with Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, Lynn stated said that when Jeffress posted the endorsement on the church's website, he was offering an endorsement from the church, a violation of IRS rules for tax-exempt organizations like churches, (Merica, 2011).

“The tax code has a zero tolerance policy when it comes to campaigning for candidates,” Lynn said. “If you put something on your church website, it is not enough to put a disclaimer on it.”

However, after sending a letter to the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) accusing Pastor Robert Jeffress of violating the law, it was later found that the IRS choose not to respond. Following suit, in 2017, Trump pushed for further religious freedoms and speech to be

granted to religious establishments and clergymen by signing an executive order on titled *Promoting Free Speech and Religious Liberty*. The executive order reads,

It shall be the policy of the executive branch to vigorously enforce Federal law's robust protections for religious freedom. The Founders envisioned a Nation in which religious voices and views were integral to a vibrant public square, and in which religious people and institutions were free to practice their faith without fear of discrimination or retaliation by the Federal Government. For that reason, the United States Constitution enshrines and protects the fundamental right to religious liberty as Americans' first freedom. Federal law protects the freedom of Americans and their organizations to exercise religion and participate fully in civic life without undue interference by the Federal Government. The executive branch will honor and enforce those protections. [...] In particular, the Secretary of the Treasury shall ensure, to the extent permitted by law, that the Department of the Treasury does not take any adverse action against any individual, house of worship, or other religious organization on the basis that such individual or organization speaks or has spoken about moral or political issues from a religious perspective (82 FR 21675, 2017).

When announcing his order, Trump mentioned that “no one should be censoring sermons or targeting pastors.” While the order did not “totally destroy” the Johnson Amendment in its entirety, it did comply his campaign promise for more religious freedom (Merica, 2011).

And while church taxation exemptions can be seen as a possible factor for why evangelical churches to take advantage of their waiver and thus force themselves into the political sphere, others have found that not all evangelicals, particularly certain denominations, enjoy getting involved in politics. For example, Baptists would rather seek to keep the peace between the separation of church and state, and not involve themselves further.

In an article titled *An Alternative Politics: Texas Baptist Leaders and the Rise of the Christian Right, 1960-1985*, researcher Blake Ellis explains how Texas’ Baptists make up the largest state association of Southern Baptists in the country. Within his

research, Ellis finds that while Baptists are theologically conservative and uniformly uncomfortable with abortion and homosexuality, typically they refrain from aligning themselves with the Christian Right and the Republican Party, as a whole. In some cases, they have even been prompted to hold a strong tradition of supporting the separation of church and state (Ellis, 2011). In many ways, Ellis explains that Texas Baptists are fearful of the backlash against integration and actively seek to be middle-men within the church and state conversation in order to keep their views on racial justice, cultural resentment, and interracial cooperation. Via various programs and organizations, as mentioned by Cleary, Ellis warns analysts interested in understanding Texas' religious makeup to pause and reconsider the complexity of southern evangelicalism, especially when including race (Ellis, 2011).

When considering the racial makeup of the state in comparison to church denominations, the conversation cannot refrain from including the southern Black church. In fact, nearly six percent of the population in Texas attend a historically Black protestant church (Pew Research Center, 2020). In the book, *Politics in the Pews: The Political Mobilization of Black Churches*, author Eric McDaniel demonstrates the Black church's historical significance within the political sphere. From political activism to cultural traditions, McDaniel studied how the church was able to make politics part of its mission (McDaniel, 2009). Whether the church was seen in the heart of equal voting campaigns, lobbying, or protests, McDaniel opens new perspectives on civil rights history as well as how it has affected evangelical politics for the twenty-first century; something we saw evolve in the 2016 and 2020 elections (Martinez & Smith, 2020).

No Other Gods Before Trump – An Understanding of Trump’s Evangelical Push

As Trump mania appeared to surface among evangelicals throughout the 2016 and into 2020 election, media entities like The Atlantic and The New York Times began to study just how the President was able to rally such large numbers. In a feature podcast produced by The Atlantic, reporters began to find historical stories on how evangelicals became right-minded, so to speak. Through political movements harnessed by the Bible Belt, political agendas began to be set in the midst of the Regan presidency (The Atlantic, 2021). Explaining how churches and religiously led political operatives like Ralph Reed were able to push for more religious freedom reforms within the youths, The Atlantic reported (p.2),

Most of these men were white and had deep roots in the South. They wanted to build influence for people like them: largely white Christians from very conservative Protestant churches who felt like they were getting pushed out of public life. They focused on a list of issues, like bringing prayer back to public schools and stopping the spread of pornography. They were angry about what they saw as government overreach, including regulations that denied tax-exempt status to racially segregated private schools. This was Reed’s training ground, both as a political operative and as a young Christian coming up in the religious right (The Atlantic, 2021).

By focusing on the political topics that would directly affect young children and students within the faith, evangelical politicians were able to secure the mindset early on allowing for the Republican seed to be sowed from an early age. Co-founder of the Faith and Freedom Coalition, Reed has continued to support current Republican candidates in his speeches, including during Trump’s re-election campaign in 2019, where he:

“commanded hordes of white evangelical voters from his perch on the candidate’s religious advisory board to trust that the New York businessman would grow the economy, defend religious freedom and dismantle federal protections for abortion, if elected” (Orr, 2019).

Along with his radical speeches, Reed has also published various evangelically-right leaning books including his latest book, *Render to God and Trump*; a reference to the well-known biblical verse, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s,” a common verse that has been used in contemporary politics to justify obedience to government — or in the case of Reed’s book, to Trump. And while Trump was defeated in the 2020 election against Vice President Joe Biden (Politico, 2020), several more books linking Trump to the spiritual realm began to resurface including best sellers like *God and Donald Trump* (Strang, 2017) written Steven Strang; *Jesus Politics: How to Win Back the Soul of America* (Robertson, 2020) written by Phil Robertson; and *Believe Me: The Evangelical Road to Donald Trump* (Fea, 2020) written by John Fea. Amid these, feature articles using religious phrases and terms alongside Trump’s name also began to be produced including most notably Texas Monthly’s cover story, *Trump’s Apostle* as seen in Figure 2.1 (Mooney, 2019).

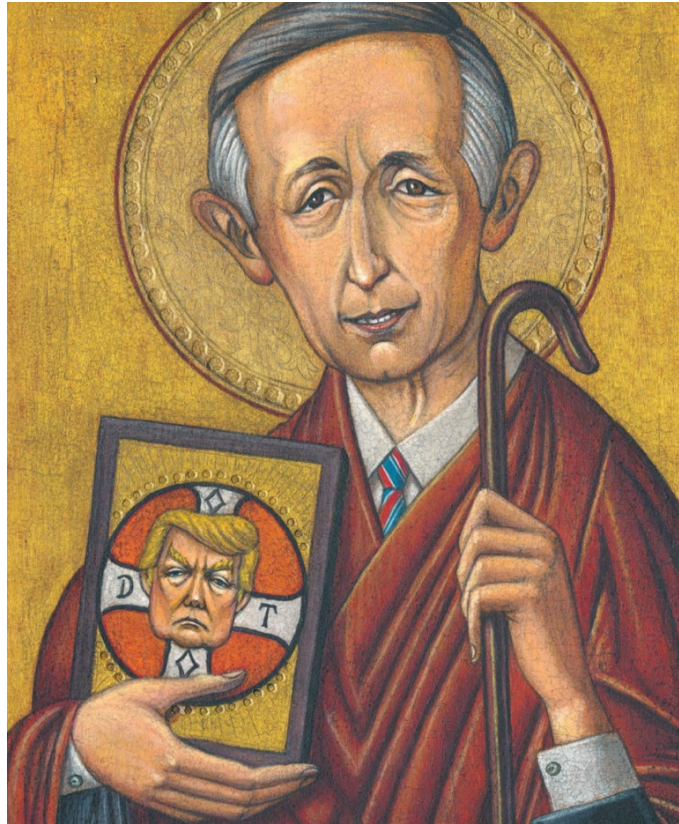


Figure 2.1 Illustration created by Marc Burckhardt showing lead pastor Robert Jeffress and President Trump

In this article, Mooney describes the loyalty the President found within pastors and members of the clergy, especially within Texas megachurches. Writing specifically about one pastor in particular, Robert Jeffress from First Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas, Mooney dives into the reasons behind Jeffress's unconditional embrace of Trump, as well as his framing methods for weaving biblical texts with the current political climate. Known for using biblical texts to support politically charged reforms, as well as producing an original hymn titled "Make America Great Again" (ABC News, 2017) sung by the First Baptist Church choir, Mooney describes Jeffress's and Trump's televised partnership as:

One of the most fascinating symbiotic relationships in modern politics: the pastor gets a national platform for his message and a leader who appoints conservative judges who will in turn restrict access to abortion; the president gets the support of evangelical voters he needs to win reelection, along with an energetic and effective promoter who can explain or excuse all manner of polarizing behavior (Mooney, 2019, p.2).

Within similar efforts conducted by megachurches across the state of Texas, it became no secret that voting Trump equated to for voting on behalf of God's word. In a campaign conducted by Cornerstone Church leader John Hagee titled *Vote the Bible*, Hagee Ministries issued reoccurring statements urging its members to "vote the Bible." Within their official statement, the church stated:

It is time to stop making excuses. We can't talk about how bad things are getting if we don't exercise one of your greatest freedoms, and vote. If you refuse to vote, you give up your right to complain about the state of affairs in these United States! Friends, if you do not use this freedom to defend your freedoms, you will lose your freedom. We will all lose our freedom (Hagee Ministries, 2016).

Adding to this, the church iterated action statements such as:

Stand up, America! Speak up! Our freedom is under fire! Our very foundation is being destroyed from within. We cannot sit by and hope that someone else will make the changes and take a stand on our behalf. God gave each of us the opportunity to use our heads to do what is right. During this election season and vote righteous men and women into office! Children of the Most High God, this is the season to take action. Will you stand with us? Will you share God's love with those around you? Educate your friends and family members on exactly why it is so vital to vote the Bible! We simply must work together to heal the great divide in our country. We cannot continue along this course of absolute destruction. Now is the time to unite. Now is the time to work together and make America great again (Hagee Ministries, 2016).

As several other issued public statements began to be released during the 2016 and into 2020 election, traction for Trump's potential re-election seemed to be full speed ahead – at least, within the White evangelical community.

The Texas Trump Traitors – Understanding How Texas Almost Turned Blue

Understanding Texas' religious makeup and political push is an important factor to consider when looking at the election results of both the 2016 and 2020 elections. As previously mentioned, white, evangelicals fed to the polls at astronomical rates in support for then-Republican candidate, President Donald Trump (Martinez & Smith, 2020). In a feature article written by Christianity Today, 81 percent of white evangelical voters picked Donald Trump in the 2016 election (MacDonald, 2018). While some polls utilize this percentage to categorize the entire landscape of the evangelical community of the nation, surveys have found that multiple factors played a role in his election in 2016 including his stance on terrorism (78%); views on the economy (76%); dislike of Hilary Clinton (67%) and others (See Figure 2.2).

Eight-in-ten Trump supporters cite his views on terrorism as 'major reason' for supporting him

Among voters who back Trump, % who say ____ is a major reason why they support him

	All Trump supporters	White evangelical Protestant	White mainline Protestant	Catholic	Religiously unaffiliated
	%	%	%	%	%
His views on terrorism	78	80	79	82	73
His views on the economy	76	78	80	82	70
Dislike for Hillary Clinton	67	76	68	61	63
His views on immigration	64	66	66	61	65
His leadership ability	59	66	55	62	52
He has not worked in government	47	44	46	55	49
His views on race relations	28	29	25	28	27
He is the Republican nominee	28	38	19	23	13
His personality	18	16	16	21	16

Notes: Based on registered voters. The survey included too few interviews with Trump supporters who are black Protestant to analyze them separately.

Source: Survey conducted Aug. 16-Sept. 12, 2016.

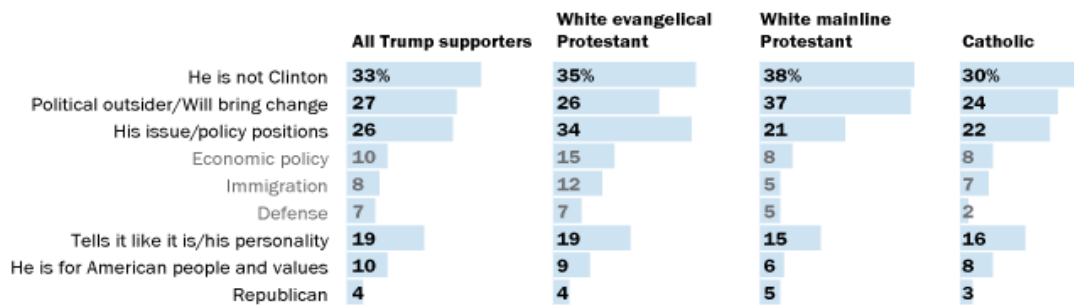
PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Figure 2.2 Graph representing the main factors why supporters voted for Trump during the Presidential 2016 Election (Pew Research Center, 2016).

Similarly, amid other 2016 polls in which evangelical voters were allowed to submit their own claims for their support of Trump, eight out of nine reasons were unrelated to religious topics with the exception of his party affiliation, which was rated the lowest (Smith, 2020).

One-third of white evangelical Trump backers support him because he is not Clinton

In your own words, what is the main reason you support Donald Trump for president?



Notes: Based on registered voters. Open-ended question asked only of those who support/lean toward Trump. Survey included too few interviews with Trump supporters from other religious groups (e.g., black Protestants, religious "nones") to analyze them separately. Total exceeds 100% because multiple responses were permitted. Other responses not shown.

Source: Survey conducted Aug. 16-Sept. 12, 2016.

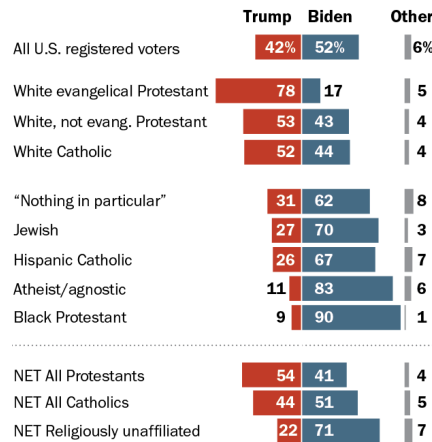
PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Figure 2.3 Graph representing the submitted factors for why supporters voted for Trump during the Presidential 2016 Election (Pew Research Center, 2016).

On the other hand, while the percentage of White evangelical support for Trump only dropped two percent (Smith, 2020), polls have shown a significant increase in non-white evangelicals strolling to the polls. In a 2020 survey, 78% of white evangelicals repeated their vote for Trump, whereas 67% of Hispanic and 90% of Black protestants voted for Biden (See Figure 1.4).

In 2020 election, deep divisions between White Christians and everyone else

% of registered voters who would vote/lean toward voting for ____ if the election were today



Note: Based on registered voters. Those who did not answer are not shown. White and Black adults include those who report being only one race and are not Hispanic. Hispanics are of any race.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Sept. 30-Oct. 5, 2020.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Figure 2.4 Graph representing the percentage of registered voters and their voting preferences during the Presidential 2020 Election (Pew Research Center, 2020).

This table notes how vastly valued the minority; evangelical vote becomes when tied to the re-election of Trump versus Biden. In a study titled *Red to Purple? Changing Demographics and Party Change in Texas*, scholar Juan Huerta and Beatriz Cuartas discuss “the potential for party change in Texas, specifically if a generational replacement and demographic changes are leading to an increase in Democratic identification,” (Huerta & Cuartas, 2021). Using public opinion surveys of Texans and demographic data, as well as generation cohorts and racial factors as key variables, Huerta et al. found that younger cohorts of White Texans are less likely to identify as Republican than older cohorts of whites are most likely. They also found that most, if not all, cohorts of people of color are likely to identify as Democratic. Within their study,

they conclude that this mobilization from Republican to Democratic party lines could potentially cause Texas to become a divided, political state – also known as a ‘purple’ state. Using their study as a lens in which to view the presidential 2020 election versus 2016, polls have also shown a significant increase in formally larger red Texas counties turning blue, specifically Tarrant country which houses the Dallas/Fort Worth metroplex (See Figure 2.5).

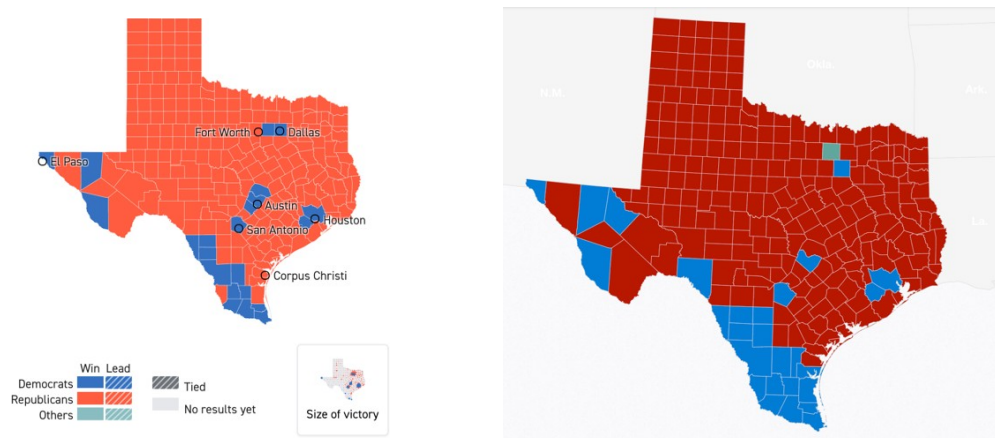


Figure 2.5. Voting results divided by county in Texas. Left side shows results of 2020, Right side shows results of 2016.

According to analysts, various factors have contributed to the growth of this Democratic, or blue, wave. According to the Texas Relocation Report conducted by the Texas Realtors Association, the Lone Star state welcomed nearly 500,000 out-of-state residents including from left-leaning states like California and New York within the past two years (Texas Realtors Association, 2021). Within their report, the majority of these new residents moved into urban counties that have a traditionally left-leaning presence including Bexar, housing the San Antonio area; Harris, housing the Houston area; and Travis, housing the Austin area (See Figure 2.6).

MSA-TO-MSA RELOCATION

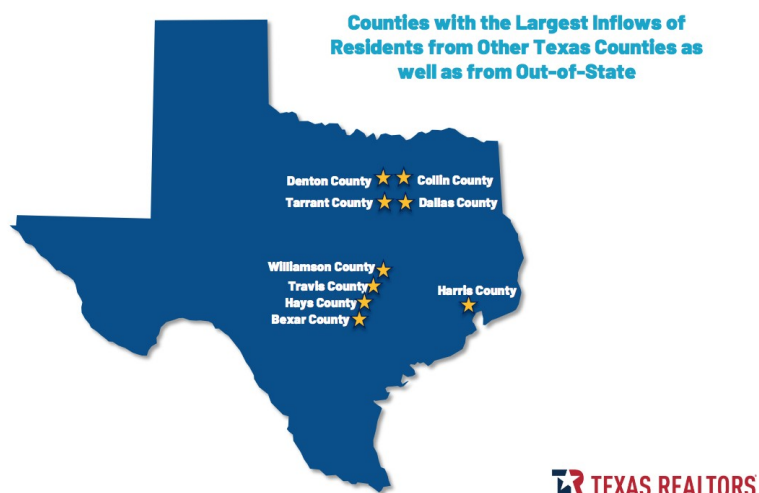


Figure 2.6 Counties with the largest out-of-state residents (Texas Realtors, 2021).

With the influx of the left-minded residents, Texas has felt the pressure of the blue wave (Fowler et al., 2020). In a study conducted by Erika Fowler, Michael Franz, and Travis Ridout, the idea behind a potential blue wave did not gain popularity until the 2018 congressional elections. Using topics such as accessible health care, immigration reforms and raising minimum wages as their opening pitches, interested Texans began to listen while their districts began to sense the possibility of losing seats, and therefore, losing leverage. Hitting headlines across national, state, and local publications for his fanatic blue wave speeches were candidates like Beto O'Rourke, former United States Representative from El Paso's 16th congressional district. Having traveled across the state to nearly all of Texas' 254 counties, reporters have noted not only the power behind hyper-focused Democratic candidates like O'Rourke, but also the state's openness to hear progressive ideas of any kind. In an article published by the Foundation for National

Progress, Tim Murphy states that while O'Rourke lost to Republican giant Senator Ted Cruz, the margins were extremely close (Murphy, 2019). Winning by only 2.6 percent points, analysts have concluded this race as the closest U.S. Senate race in Texas since 1978 – a point that is usually unrecognized by Republicans, but highly publicized as Democrats (Essig et al., 2018).

Understanding The Holy Trinity Through Mass Communication Pedagogy

While complex subjects as politics and religion are typically studied through the lens of social and political science, theories from within the mass communication academic realm can help explain the importance of how others view, understand, and comprehend the messages and information presented to them, specifically audience members.

Framing Theory

Goffman (1974) coined the term “frame” to denote a technique of organization that that enables individuals to “locate, perceive, identify, and label a seemingly infinite number of occurrences into something meaningful” (p. 21). He added that people use similar processes to frame an event—whether it is a drama, dance, newspaper story, political cartoon, or everyday conversation. On the most basic level, people create frames on a daily basis during conversations that reflect judgments made by message creators or framers. In addition, some frames put information in either a positive or negative light, while others involve the simple alternative phrasing of terms. Scholars like, Gitlin (1980) adapted these ideas to media framing, which he claims are a way journalists organize, and package information and events for audiences. News frames serve several related

functions in news texts. Gamson and Lasch (1983) identify interpretive framing packages as containing core frames and framing devices that structure the same issue in different ways. Researchers noted that these ideas or “issue packages” do not infer whether individuals take a pro or con position on a topic, but rather allow for a range of positions concerning a particular issue. Through the usage of framing theory, media messages be used to promote altered, catered and/or gendered views of subjects and information (Burke & Mazzarella, 2008). Using specific forms of language, placement, repetition, and source selection, messages can be altered in order to promote a specific position, opinion, or series of thought. As mentioned in an article titled *A Slightly New Shade of Lipstick: Gendered Mediation in Internet News Stories*, candidates are often framed by the overall media in order to express specific perceived competences and characters politicians. Within their study, media coverage is more likely to include unrelated personal information about the candidate (gender, marital status, children, age, personality and appearance) while simultaneously omitting information related to their status, level of competence, or power (Burke and Mazzarella, 2008). This is especially pertinent to female candidates regardless of their political party (Atkeson, 2008).

In a study conducted by Ardèvol-Abreu, framing theory has experienced a rapid development since the mid-1960s, and has become a multidisciplinary paradigm that allows the holistic study of media effects on individuals and audiences (Ardèvol- Abreu, 2015). Being exclusively perpetuated from the position of the information sender, Ardèvol-Abreu notes that framing theory looks at four key elements of the communication process: the sender, the receiver, the (informative) message, and the culture. While there have been multiple media-related studies focusing on the usage of

framing theory, scholars like Porismita Borah note how framing studies have concentrated more on message design and “unique” frames, instead of improving the systematic examination of the theory (Borah, 2011). Hence, Borah urges researchers to not only utilize framing theory, but to also enhance and strengthen it in the process.

First Amendment Theory

While the idea of the First Amendment tends to be sensationalized in all aspects of the media, religion, and political fields, First Amendment theory often times questions the validity behind the classic American phrase “It’s my right.” Linking this theory to former eclectic theorists like Harry Kalven, Lee Bellinger, Steven Shiffrin, John Locke, Alexander Meiklejohn, and John Milton, Mathew Bunker (2001) outlines the evolvement of First Amendment Theory. In his book titled *Critiquing Free Speech: First Amendment Theory and the Challenge of Interdisciplinarity*, Bunker dissects first amendment theory into four distinct sub theories including Marketplace Theory, which explains how unpopular opinions, that might be false, can be received as true by society; Self-Government Theory, which argued how freedom of speech guaranteed by the First Amendment was the means by which democracy functioned; Checking Value Theory, which emphasizes the role of free speech by checking the abuse of official power; Individual Autonomy Theory, which explains that free speech is an important component of individual liberty, regardless of its products; Dissent Theory, which urges for the protection of dissent in order to maintain social stability; and Tolerance Theory, which urges that the first amendment goes beyond protecting speech. Through these sub theories, first amendment theory is still a developing theory that continues to be utilized in both communication law and media scholarship. As stated in the book, “[First

Amendment Theory] represents an important resource in our constitutional tradition—a resource we ignore at our peril,” (Bunker, 2001, p.37). Through this research, other studies have emerged explaining how the theory has been used and argued since its establishment in law and communication pedagogy. In a study conducted Chris Demaske, First Amendment theory has historically been seen as skeptical by the Supreme Court of the United States. To the court, “the answer to speech people don't like is more speech, not restrictions of speech,” (Demaske, 2019). Within his study, Demaske explains how even First Amendment scholars have echoed this position, and have begun citing situations in which citizens have called for an almost absolutist protection of free speech, now known as a “free speech idolatry.” Categorized as a theory typically used in communication law efforts, First Amendment theory has made great strides to become a legitimate frame of research. Focused on how the First Amendment is used (or abused) within the public realm and questions whether limits should be put in place, especially when false information or hate speech is presented. As mentioned in Demaske’s article, the theory is often times debated and opposed when hard lines on speech, of any kind, are placed for the protection of other vulnerable parties. However, some theorists oppose the notion of having any forms of hard lines drawn and rely on the infamous words of the late U.S. Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, “given the premises of democracy, there is no such thing as too much speech.” In a law review written by David Han, there are a number of fundamental assumptions that underlie the opposed perspective of First Amendment theory. In his study, Han notes the following:

First, there is the assumption that individuals are capable of discerning between true and false information. The logic here is that, just as participants in the traditional product market are capable of distinguishing between high and low value products, participants in the idea market are similarly capable of

distinguishing between true and false news and information. A second, related, assumption is that participants in the idea marketplace place greater value on true news and information than they do on false information. This assumption strikes at the core of what it is the marketplace actually values. A third assumption is that, as late U.S. Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia has stated, "given the premises of democracy, there is no such thing as too much speech." A fourth assumption that underlies the counter speech doctrine is that a sufficient number of those exposed to false information also will be exposed to the countervailing true information. Of course, if the previous assumptions hold true, then this exposure to true and accurate information will have its desired effect in terms of contributing to an informed citizenry. Each of these are contentious assumptions in their own right.

Han also mentions that while economic and technological changes in the media ecosystem have led to conditions that further challenge many of these assumptions, First Amendment theory can be seen in action today. Using the 2016 election as a case study of how fast fake news began to spread in support of President Trump, Phillip Napoli notes that while fake news was defined as fabricated reports and journalism efforts, First Amendment theory was brought into question (Napoli, 2018). Should the theory continue to be researched and applied if the overall consensus still hangs in Justice Scalia's words? In his final conclusions, Napoli states,

When considering the implications of the diminished potency of counter speech for the effective functioning of the marketplace of ideas, the presence of such negative externalities raises the question: should the public be concerned about the possibility of market failure in the marketplace of ideas? And if so, how does market failure in the marketplace of ideas look? The prospect and nature of market failure in the marketplace of ideas has received relatively little discussion, particularly within the context of news and journalism.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

Based on the volumes of information gathered regarding how the religious make-up of Texas has affected the political foundations of the state and Bible Belt; the methods and avenues in which evangelicals have supported former President Trump during both the 2016 and 2020 elections; the potential political possibilities of seeing Texas engulfed by the ‘blue wave’ on the horizon; and the hodgepodge of unique media and mass communication theories that can be implemented into studies dealing with political and religious topics, this study hopes to shed a spotlight on not only the importance of including mass communication research efforts in topics that deal with the religious and political movements within the southern United States, but also to increase the interest of media professionals to take deeper looks into what is actually occurring in the pews and pulpits of the south.

Focused on the framing techniques used by megachurches within the state of Texas during both presidential elections, this study analyzed a series of sermons given to congregants during the 2016-2020 U.S. presidential election campaign to examine the occurrence of themes, phrases, and media channels that related to the presidential election of that year. Through a quick Google search, this study examines a sample of 45 distinguished megachurches from across the state that serviced more than 5,000 congregants in one given weekend. Looking specially into the collected sample size, this study analyzed various sermons during specific election timeframes. For example, during

the presidential 2016 election, election day was Tuesday, November 8. Thus, the researcher collected the YouTube videos on (or slightly before) Sunday, November 6. Similarly, during the 2020 election, election day was Tuesday, November 3. Thus, the obtained media samples were collected for each megachurch on (or slightly before) Sunday, November 1. These dates were selected due to their timeliness, as they were the last Sunday congregants had prior to heading to the polls.

Using framing theory to analyze each video, in accordance to their specific election year, this study seeks to find the possibility of reoccurring (or differing) themes, phrases, vocabulary, and/or nuances from each subject, and compare them to the following presidential election. Along with this, this study also utilized the First Amendment theory to analyze whether each media sample would fit within the limitations of what the First Amendment protects (i.e., was false information presented to the congregation as factual? Was hate speech used to promote a viewpoint?). These theories were used not only to better understand the power of the pulpit, but to answer the following research questions:

R1: What were the top themes were used by megachurches during the 2016 Presidential Election versus the 2020 Presidential Election?

R2: Using framing theory, what types of framing techniques did megachurches useduring these specific election timeframes, and what were the differences?

R3: Based on the themes found and the framing techniques of each obtained subject, how does framing theory and First Amendment theory play a role (if any) within this study?

To answer the study's research questions, the researcher coded each sermon using a codebook created by Moody-Ramirez (2019). Using the study as a reference point, this study used similar questions and answer choices to have a sense of how pastors in our sample framed evangelical churches. Similar to Moody-Ramirez (2019), the researcher assessed each church in the sample, using 10 and 12 questions, the majority of which are single or multiple choice. Some of the questions included pastor's title and gender, whether the sermon was promoted via social media or in a sermon, the location of the church, and the number of views (or likes) on each media sample. In addition, the researcher analyzed each sermon for key terms or phrases. To get an idea of the political nature of each sermon, the researcher selected 36 key terms based on the following four subcategories:

- Politically Right Leaning – Key terms that are typically associated with Republican party agendas and values.
 - Pro-Life
 - Republican ideology
 - Trump
 - #ALM
 - Conservative
 - Right
 - White
- Politically Left Leaning – Key terms that are associated with the Democratic party agendas and values.
 - BLM
 - Democratic ideology
 - Pro-Choice
 - Biden
 - Left
 - Liberal
 - Black
- Politically Neutral Terms – Key terms that are associated with either party.
 - Civil Rights
 - Human Rights
 - Women's Rights

- Immigration
- Abortion
- Gun Rights
- Clinton
- Obama
- Bush
- Non-Political Terms – Key terms are associated with non-political agendas and values.
 - Jesus
 - God
 - Lord
 - Holy Spirit
 - Pray
 - Worship
 - Nation
 - America
 - Church
 - Texas
 - Election
 - Covid

The researcher used an equal number of key terms – from both a conservative and liberal perspective – to help assess whether a sermon favored a particular party. The study also included a large number of neutral and non-political terms to compare whether sermons associated politically leaning terms with neutral terms and why (i.e., associating Trump with Jesus). Next, each sample's answers were calculated, recorded, and compared to the other sermons in the sample from within that specific election timeframe.

For this study, the researcher conducted a Google search for all megachurches in the state of Texas that serviced more than 5,000 congregants. After conducting the search, a total of 45 megachurches were found from across the state, thus resulting in our sample size. After selecting the sample size, the researcher combed through each megachurches' YouTube channel and looked for sermons relating to both elections based off the

timeframes mentioned in chapter three. Collecting over 56 sermons (media samples), the researcher listened and coded each sermon in Qualtrics in order to answer the three research questions outlined in chapter three. Four out of the 56 were transcribed for this study.

We categorized data using techniques outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1990) and Ryan and Bernard (2003b), who suggest using key words in context and word repetitions to discover themes in data. Using the word repetition technique, the author looked for commonly used words and words whose close repetition may indicate strong feelings. Conversely, the keywords in context approach allowed the researcher to choose a range of key terms in phrases and sentences in which they occur. Five or six themes emerged. Toward the end of the data collection, this study cross referenced each sermon in the study sample to gain a holistic view of each election from the viewpoint of the evangelical megachurches in Texas as well as find a correlation between First Amendment and framing theory

CHAPTER FOUR

Findings and Analysis

Demographics of The Pews – Results of Megachurches in Sample

Beginning with an analysis of the demographics of the megachurches in the study's sample, the data indicated that the great majority of megachurches in Texas surpassed the 5,000-congregation member limit set by the study (see Table 4.1). As seen in Table 1.1, 28% of the churches surveyed had between 5,000 and 7,000 members in one weekend service; 16% of surveyed churches serviced between 7,001 and 9,000 members; 3% of surveyed churches serviced between 9,001 and 11,000 members; 16% of surveyed churches serviced between 11,001 and 13,000 members; and 35% surveyed churches serviced more than 13,000 members.

Table 4.1 Results from survey, number of congregation members per megachurch

#	Number of congregation members	Percentage	Frequency
1	5,000 - 7,000	28.57%	16
2	7,001 - 9,000	16.07%	9
3	9,001 - 11,000	3.57%	2
4	11,001 - 13,000	16.07%	9
5	More than 13,000	35.71%	20
	Total	100%	56

Building on this data, 76% of the surveyed churches were located in the largest, most populated cities including the Dallas/Fort Worth and Houston metroplexes (see Table 4.2). Within this percentage, nearly 24 of the 56 churches surveyed were centrally located within the Dallas/Fort Worth area as well as 19 located within the Houston metroplex.

Table 4.2 Results from survey, locations per megachurch

#	Location	Percentage	Frequency
1	Panhandle Plains (i.e. Lubbock area)	1.79%	1
2	Big Bend (i.e. El Paso area)	3.57%	2
3	Hill Country (i.e. Kerrville area)	5.36%	3
4	Prairies and Lakes (i.e. Dallas area)	42.86%	24
5	South Texas Plains (i.e. San Antonio area)	8.93%	5
6	Gulf Coast (i.e. Corpus Christi area)	3.57%	2
7	Piney Woods (i.e. Houston area)	33.93%	19
	Total	100%	56

Considering the vast populations of both cities, the point of these statistics is not to highlight the number of people attending church in these urban cities, but the reach and cultural importance these churches have in the state. By just considering the number of believers attending church within these two metroplex, which hold the largest numbers of

congregation members, the data shows that over 300,000 Texas residents attend church service in one given weekend service.

Within that scope of influence, the data also needed to show what type of doctrine, and therefore religious messages, were shared while thousands of congregation members attending service in Texas. According to the results, 64% of surveyed churches identify as non-denominational, followed by 26% identifying as Baptist; 7% identify as Methodist; and less than 1% identified as Episcopalian (See Table 4.3).

Table 4.3 Results from survey, types of denominations per megachurch

#	Denominations	Percentage	Frequency
1	Methodist	7.14%	4
2	Catholic	0.00%	0
3	Church of Christ	0.00%	0
4	Non-Denom	64.29%	36
5	Lutheran	0.00%	0
6	Episcopalian	1.79%	1
7	Baptist	26.79%	15
	Total	100%	56

These results were interesting considering that no Catholic churches had more than 5,000 congregation members and; therefore, were included in this analysis. Equally interesting was the sheer number of non-denominational identifying churches (64%), especially since denominations such as Baptists, Methodists and Church of Christ are an integral

part of the religious makeup of the state, as stated in the literature review. Nonetheless, these results set up the greater question of how much influence does the Church have on its congregants?

As previously mentioned, nearly 77% of Texas adults consider themselves Christian; with 75% attending a religious service at least once a month (Pew Research Center, 2020). With approximately 22 million adults attending a religious service at least once a month (Texas Freedom Network, 2009), this study hopes to highlight the power and influence the Church holds when events – as large and controversial as a national presidential election – come into play.

Bringing Souls to The Polls – Results of Media Samples (YouTube Sermons)

Much like the ancient times of the Apostle Paul, the internet is the new town square, where ideas, opinions, and news items are shared for patrons to both hear and see. For this study more particularly, the town square is YouTube. Transiting from face-to-face sermons to televangelism movements to live streaming via YouTube, churches are taking the modern approach of reaching hundreds, sometimes thousands, of more congregants via a live streamed service. Of the 56 megachurches in the study sample, 45 of them used YouTube as their preferred method of communicating their stances on politics, pop culture, and national events including both elections. Focusing primarily on the 2016 election, the data showed that 11 churches used YouTube to push out their election-related sermons as compared to the 34 churches in 2020 election; a difference of well over 51% (see Table 4.4)

Table 4.4 Results from survey, number of churches using YouTube during 2016 and 2020 election timeframes

#	Media Sample	Percentage	Frequency
1	YouTube Sermon (2016)	19.64%	11
2	YouTube Sermon (2020)	60.71%	34
3	Other	19.65	-
	Total	100%	56

Amid the 11 churches, the data also found that the 36% of churches only preached on election-related for less than 15 minutes followed by 27% preaching between 26 and 35 minutes (see Table 4.5). This was an interesting find specifically because it suggested that the 2016 election was either briefly mentioned or elongated to fill an entire sermon slot during a traditional 1.5-hour service. Along with this, we also are interested in the 27% of churches that spoke on the election for more than 36 minutes – some for even more than one hour.

Table 4.5 Results from survey, length of YouTube sermons from 2016 election

#	Time length of sermon(s)	Percentage	Frequency
1	Less than 15 min	36.36%	4
2	15 min - 25 min	9.09%	1
3	26 min - 35 min	27.27%	3
4	36 min - 45 min	18.18%	2
5	More than 45 min	9.09%	1
6	No sermon	0.00%	0
	Total	100%	11

This begs the question, what were these sermons about if they took up more than 30 minutes? What type of message was being preached? To answer, the data collected showed the top key terms to be a tie between God and Jesus, with 10.26% each; a tie between election and America, with 8.9% each; pray, with 7.6%; and Trump, with 6% (see Table 4.6).

Table 4.6 Results from survey, top key terms on YouTube sermons per 2016 election timeframe

#	Key Term(s)	Percentage	Frequency
1	Black	0.00%	0
2	BLM	0.00%	0
3	Democratic	1.28%	1
4	Pro-Choice	0.00%	0
5	Biden	0.00%	0
6	Democratic	1.28%	1
7	Left	0.00%	0
8	Liberal	0.00%	0
9	Civil rights	0.00%	0
10	Human rights	0.00%	0
11	Women's rights	1.28%	1
12	immigration	1.28%	1
13	abortion	3.85%	3
14	gun rights	0.00%	0
15	Hilary	2.56%	2
16	Obama	2.56%	2
17	Bush	2.56%	2
18	Pro-Life	3.85%	3
19	Republican	3.85%	3

(Continued)

#	Key Term(s)	Percentage	Frequency
20	Trump	5.13%	4
21	#ALM	0.00%	0
22	Conservative	3.85%	3
23	Right	0.00%	0
24	White	0.00%	0
25	Jesus	10.26%	8
26	God	10.26%	8
27	Lord	6.41%	5
28	Holy Spirit	0.00%	0
29	Pray	7.69%	6
30	Worship	2.56%	2
31	Nation	6.41%	5
32	America	8.97%	7
33	Church	3.85%	3
34	Texas	1.28%	1
35	Election	8.97%	7
36	Covid	0.00%	0
37	37	0.00%	0
	Total	100%	78

Interestingly, other key terms like Holy Spirit did not appear in any sermons along with highly political issues such as civil rights, human rights, and gun rights related to the 2016 election. This was not too shocking since the majority of the social justice issues did gain prominence since the Black Lives Matter movement was only three years old and immigration detainments/rages did not occur until 2017. However, unsurprisingly, terms related to fetal beings including key terms such as abortion (3.8%) and women's rights (1.3%) did appear. This – again – suggests the obsession the church has on any related

topics of abortions. Looking into how these topics were framed during these sermons, this study watched each of the 11 sampled churches to dissect how each of these keyterms were woven into the sermon messages.

*2016 Sermon Sample – Church Number 6
(12,000 Congregants; Corpus Christi; Non-Denominational; 4,202 Views)*

In this sample, the church number 6 immediately framed their sermon's focal point by titling it "Election 2016: The Mess We're In." Giving the viewer a summary of what the following message will entail, the church premised the message with the following statement,

What do you do when you're out of time and out of choices? In this message, Pastor **Bill** Cornelius takes a look at clear Biblical principles that will help you decide how to vote on Election Day.

Beginning the sermon with a limerick,

"They say the two things you should never talk about in public are religion and politics, so you came to a religious place to talk about politics. We're in trouble. You know a friend of mine told me this week that you know politicians are like diapers; they need to be changed out occasionally for the same reason."

After a few laughs from the congregation, the pastor begins to defend this specific message by mentioning that this is his first election-related sermon in over 18 years and even invites them to return next Sunday for a non-political sermon, but not without encouraging the congregation to turn to their person on their right and left and say "you're about to be offended. Just know that right now."

Throughout the entire message, the pastor dives into the sermon by reminding his congregants of their citizenship. First, they are called to be citizens of a holy nation. Second, they are called to be citizens of a worldly nation. Leading with this idea, the pastor ties the basis of democracy on Deuteronomy 1:13-15, which reads

Choose some well-respected men from each tribe who are known for their wisdom and understanding, and I will appoint them as your leaders.

Then you responded, 'Your plan is a good one.' So, I took the wise and respected men you had selected from your tribes and appointed them to serve as judges and officials over you. Some were responsible for a thousand people, some for a hundred, some for fifty, and some for ten.

Using this passage, the sermon continues with urging congregants to go and vote because it is both their duty as citizens of heaven and America. Following this, the sermon outlines the three basic principles in which their congregants should base their vote on.

First, Christians should vote with biblical principles that lead to godly policies. In this point, versus like Deuteronomy 28:1 is used to explain that if we obey God's commands, God will set us above over nations. Linking this versus to the election, the sermon uses the example of how people of Jewish descent are traditionally wealthier than they counterparts.

If you look at the average Jewish person, they are economically clearly set apart above most other people. I'm talking in general. A joke that is oftentimes said in Hollywood and also in New York, where I have a best friend, is that the entertainment industry is run by Jewish lawyers. So is it interesting that most industries, if you go to the top, you have a much higher percentage of people from Israeli descent? Why? Because their ancestors, many of them, have followed the Lord and God is who raised them up [...] So the first thing we see here is something very simple, if you obey my word, I'll bless you.

Second, congregants should look at which part platforms matches the Bible with legislative politics. In this point, versus like Deuteronomy 4:1 and Proverbs 11:14 are used to explain that we should vote for leaders that are wise and under the reign of God. Linking this versus to the election, the sermon uses printed handouts of each party's (Democratic and Republican) platforms and begins to state opinions on a few topics including the economy, immigration, abortion, national security, and the media. When speaking on the topic of economy, the pastor stated,

“Believe what you want to believe. Whether you're Republican or Democrat, I'm not really worried about that but whoever we elect, let's just elect people that don't lie to us. Is that ok? Go vote people that are actually telling us the truth on things. I don't think that's asking too much. You may not like me but don't lie to me. These are things that we don't have to agree on, but just I don't want someone that lies. If corruption is okay then we need to all go apologize the Nixon family right now. Let me give you two examples on both sides of the aisle. First example is one that's in the news currently and that is the Russian uranium deal that was approved through Hillary Clinton and her positions that she once held in the State Department. Basically, it was a quid pro quo. We will allow a Russian deal and we're going to push it through the State Department to make it legal when it was once not. And they did it quietly. And then the people who bought into gave Russia a nice little deposit into the Clinton Global Initiative nonprofit. Last time I checked, that's called collusion and corruption. I don't care what party you vote for, that's the Democrat side. Now talk about the Republican side. There's a reason why the average Republican that's in the establishment hates Donald Trump. I'm not defending all that he has said, but in this one area he said something that is a truth that people don't like that we know is innately true. National Chamber of Commerce as well as many Republican establishment people were very against Donald Trump when he said clearly, we are selling out America by sending our jobs overseas. That's the reason why Republicans oftentimes are the ones who will also not face immigration issues. They're scared.”

When speaking on the topic of immigration, the pastor stated,

“We keep thinking immigration is about compassion. I hate to break it to you; I know that's what they're trying to sell you in the media. It's not guys. It's about money. It's about power. I know the average person coming across the border is going to vote Democrat. On the other side it is about money because Republicans want to do tell you honestly that the higher elite establishment have proven that they have no problem taking your job and replacing you with someone that can pay much cheaper. So, unless you're comfortable not having a job, I suggest you wake up to what's going on in both parties because they have basically been all over trying to defeat Donald Trump because he is the only guy who has said ‘Hey guys, we have a problem. All of our manufacturing jobs are no longer here. They're now around the world elsewhere’ and he's the only guy who said ‘we need to tax all those companies who ship stuff out anything, so that way you getto keep your job. Does that make sense?’”

When speaking on the topic of abortion, the pastor stated,

The Bible is very clear life begins at conception. This is the Democratic party platform on abortion. I'm reading directly from their platform I downloaded. ‘We believe unequivocally like the majority of Americans that every woman should

have access to quality reproductive health care services including safe and legal abortion regardless of where she lives, how much money she makes or how she is insured. We believe that reproductive health is core to women's men's and young people's health and well-being. We will continue to stand up to Republican efforts to defund Planned Parenthood health centers which provide critical health services to millions of people we will continue to oppose and seek to overturn federal and state laws and policies that impede a woman's access to abortion including repealing the Hyde Amendment.' That means your tax dollars are paying to abort babies right now. You need to know that when you pay taxes, you're helping to abort a child. That's according to our law. So, the Democrat Party wants to export abortion services to the world. Why just kill American babies when we can kill world babies? That's what their platform says.

Lastly, Christians should vote for parties that support the protection of Israel. In this point, versus like Genesis 12:3-4 is used explain that we should vote for leaders that wish to protect Israel and its citizens. Linking this versus to the election, the sermon mentions that while Republicans are seeking to establish Israel as an ally, Democrats want to fix the two-state (Israel and Palestine) relationship; something that according to the pastor, "isn't working." Ending the sermon, the pastor concluded with a reminder that we, as citizens of heaven, will give an account to God for our actions, including how we voted in this particular election. Stating that while the pastor's stance might be a minority voice, it is the Church's job to speak on behalf of the Bible.

Within this sample, the framing of the election is quite clear. Congregants are urged to vote using biblical principles or else the future of the nation is at stake. Within this particular sample, over 19 key terms suggesting a highly controversial message filled with a potential opportunity for multiple biases and false information (see Table 4.7).

Table 4.7 Results from survey, key terms used in sample church number 6 in 2016

#	Key Term	Percentage	Frequency
1	Black	0.00%	0
2	BLM	0.00%	0
3	Democratic	4.35%	1
4	Pro-Choice	0.00%	0
5	Biden	0.00%	0
6	Democratic	0.00%	0
7	Left	0.00%	0
8	Liberal	0.00%	0
9	Civil rights	0.00%	0
10	Human rights	0.00%	0
11	Women's rights	4.35%	1
12	immigration	4.35%	1
13	abortion	4.35%	1
14	gun rights	0.00%	0
15	Hilary	4.35%	1
16	Obama	4.35%	1
17	Bush	4.35%	1
18	Pro-Life	4.35%	1
19	Republican	4.35%	1
20	Trump	4.35%	1
21	#ALM	0.00%	0
22	Conservative	4.35%	1
23	Right	0.00%	0
24	White	0.00%	0
25	Jesus	8.70%	2
26	God	4.35%	1

(Continued)

#	Key Term	Percentage	Frequency
27	Lord	8.70%	2
28	Holy Spirit	0.00%	0
29	Pray	8.70%	2
30	Worship	4.35%	1
31	Nation	4.35%	1
32	America	4.35%	1
33	Church	4.35%	1
34	Texas	0.00%	0
35	Election	4.35%	1
36	Covid	0.00%	0
37	37	0.00%	0
	Total	100%	23

From the title of the message to the opening remarks, the sermon framed the election as one of the most crucial moments of our nation’s history. Using framing theory methods such as metaphors, to frame conceptual ideas through comparison to something else (i.e. the impossibility of agreeing with a candidate all the time is equivalent to agreeing with your spouse all the time – unrealistic); stories, to frame a topic via narrative in a vivid and memorable way (i.e. using stories from friends in the media business); traditions, to frame ideas with cultural significance in the mundane (i.e. using Israel’s obedience to God as the model for how the United States nation should operate); slogans, to frame ideas with a catchy phrase to make it more memorable and relatable (i.e. repeating their church’s mission statement); artifacts, to frame how the idea holds meaning via an object (i.e. using versus as part of each political principle); contrasts, to frame how specific ideas differ from others (i.e. reading each party’s platform side-by-side); and spin, to

frame judgement on a specific idea versus another (i.e. reminding congregants that they will have to respond to God on their voting decisions).

Using these framing techniques, the data presents an insider's look into how one church, picked at random, had the capability to use the election as a way to push out Republican ideals and agendas that traditionally are held by Texas evangelicals. With more than 4,000 views, this sermon also showed the power of the church when it comes to the broadcasting of information. Using First Amendment theory, the data caught glimpses of when opinions were transcribed as factual information. In one instance, the pastor mentioned how the media was a perpetrator of fake news. Claiming that Americans are fed un-factual, biased information on a constant basis, could be considered a violation of the First Amendment's stance on "freedom of the press" as well as using "freedom of speech" to spread misinformation to over twelve thousand members.

Through First Amendment and framing theories, this sample presents two main points to consider. First, the Church has a great deal of influence. In this sermon, as well as others, key terms are thrown at viewers without understanding the consequences. In sermons like in sample church number 10, the head pastor led the San Antonio based church in a prayer for Republican candidate Donald Trump and used seven key terms in a sermon that was less than six minutes long (See Table 4.8).

Table 4.8 Key Terms used by Pastor at Megachurch number 10 during the 2016 Election

#	Key Term(s)	Percentage	Frequency
1	Black	0.00%	0
2	BLM	0.00%	0
3	Democratic	0.00%	0
4	Pro-Choice	0.00%	0
5	Biden	0.00%	0
6	Democratic	0.00%	0
7	Left	0.00%	0
8	Liberal	0.00%	0
9	Civil rights	0.00%	0
10	Human rights	0.00%	0
11	Women's rights	0.00%	0
12	immigration	0.00%	0
13	abortion	0.00%	0
14	gun rights	0.00%	0
15	Hilary	0.00%	0
16	Obama	0.00%	0
17	Bush	0.00%	0
18	Pro-Life	0.00%	0
19	Republican	0.00%	0
20	Trump	14.29%	1
21	#ALM	0.00%	0
22	Conservative	0.00%	0
23	Right	0.00%	0
24	White	0.00%	0
25	Jesus	14.29%	1
26	God	14.29%	1

(Continued)

#	Key Term(s)	Percentage	Frequency
27	Lord	14.29%	1
28	Holy Spirit	0.00%	0
29	Pray	0.00%	0
30	Worship	0.00%	0
31	Nation	14.29%	1
32	America	14.29%	1
33	Church	0.00%	0
34	Texas	0.00%	0
35	Election	14.29%	1
36	Covid	0.00%	0
37	37	0.00%	0
	Total	100%	7

If that wasn't enough, the viewership on this particular prayer titled 'Why was Trump elected?' generated over one million views thus far. As stated in this sermon, Texas evangelicals gathered by the masses to vote for Trump during the 2016 election and by seeing how churches used their platform to frame the election (as seen in samples 10 and 6), the election was pushed to the pulpits with an agenda in mind. Voting for Trump in 2016 meant voting for the Bible, and what type of Christian wouldn't want to vote for their source of truth? Second, the church has become a medium for which information is transmitted. Of the 11 churches that utilized YouTube for their election-related messages, over one million congregants were reached during the 2016 election timeframe. With that many listeners, information on the news and topics discussed are often blurred with opinionated ideas. As mentioned in a sermon by sample church number 31 titled "A Prayer for America", falsified information like how America is currently under attack by

Palestine states and by the Christian left by their false prophets. Quoting versus written in the Paul's letters, this sermon used its pulpit to express how voting for the Republican party meant that America would be seen, once again, as a superior authority. This echoes the slogan of President Trump's "Make America Great, Again". Overall, Texas megachurches during the 2016 election pushed for Republican reforms and ideals, as per usual. It wasn't until catastrophic events such as booming social justice movements and a global pandemic that caused a shift to occur from the alter down to the pews in the back of the sanctuary.

Shifting focus to the 2020 election, the data showed an increased spike in churches that used YouTube to push out their election-related. Jumping from 11 churches to 34 churches, messages and key terms used to surround the 2020 election were vastly different, to say the least. For one, within the 34 churches, the data found a significant difference between the lengths of the sermons from 2016 versus 2020. According to the new data, 5.8% of churches preached on election-related for less than 15 minutes as compared 36% in 2016. This was followed by 11.76% preaching between 15 and 25 minutes; 26.4% preaching between 26 and 35 minutes as compared to 27% in 2016; 23.53% preaching between 36 and 45 minutes; and 32.35% preaching for more than 45 minutes, as compared to 9% in 2016. This was an interesting find specifically because it suggested that the 2020 election was spoken about in great lengths as compared to the 2016 election (See Table 4.9).

Table 4.9 Results from survey, time lengths of sermons per 2020 election

#	Time length of sermon(s)	Percentage	Frequency
1	Less than 15 min	5.88%	2
2	15 min - 25 min	11.76%	4
3	26 min - 35 min	26.47%	9
4	36 min - 45 min	23.53%	8
5	More than 45 min	32.35%	11
6	No sermon	0.00%	0
	Total	100%	34

This is of great interest considering the great leap from 2016 to 2020 both in the number of church participation of broadcasting their election-related sermons via YouTube and the amount of time spent talking about each of these elections. While many factors can play a role into why pastors decided to speak for longer periods of time during the 2020 election sermons versus the 2016, a few items could have played a role including the strengthen of the Black Lives Matter movement following the death of George Floyd and Breanna Taylor, the separation of immigrant children at the border, the increase of public shootings, and the global pandemic that caused millions to go out of work and even more millions to pass due to infection. Taking these factors into play, the data found an increase of key terms that were used by these sampled megachurches that dealt with topics besides abortion. According to the data collected, the top key terms used during this presidential election included Jesus, with 11.2% as opposed to 10.26% in 2016; God, with 9.85% as opposed to 10.26%; a tie between election and church, with 7.6% each as opposed to a tie between election and America; pray, with 7.6%; a tie between Lord and pray with 6.9%; and Black with 4.43% (see Table 4.10).

Table 4.10 Results from survey, top key terms on YouTube sermons per2020 election timeframe

#	Key Term(s)	Percentage	Frequency
1	Black	4.43%	9
2	BLM	0.99%	2
3	Democratic	2.46%	5
4	Pro-Choice	0.00%	0
5	Biden	1.48%	3
6	Democratic	0.00%	0
7	Left	1.48%	3
8	Liberal	0.99%	2
9	Civil rights	2.96%	6
10	Human rights	0.49%	1
11	Women's rights	1.48%	3
12	immigration	1.97%	4
13	abortion	1.48%	3
14	gun rights	0.49%	1
15	Hilary	0.00%	0
16	Obama	0.49%	1
17	Bush	0.00%	0
18	Pro-Life	1.48%	3
19	Republican	3.45%	7
20	Trump	2.96%	6
21	#ALM	0.00%	0
22	Conservative	2.96%	6
23	Right	1.48%	3
24	White	1.97%	4
25	Jesus	11.82%	24

(Continued)

#	Key Term(s)	Percentage	Frequency
26	God	9.85%	20
27	Lord	6.90%	14
28	Holy Spirit	1.48%	3
29	Pray	6.90%	14
30	Worship	0.99%	2
31	Nation	4.43%	9
32	America	3.45%	7
33	Church	7.39%	15
34	Texas	1.48%	3
35	Election	7.88%	16
36	Covid	1.97%	4
37	37	0.00%	0
	Total	100%	203

Based on the data collected, the study can predict that because the word Black appeared at all during this particular election timeframe suggests that the social justice movements that occurred outside the church entered into the evangelical conversations – a dramatic contrast to the 2016 election-related messages. Interestingly, Trump’s name dropped from 6% to 2.6% as opposed to other key terms such as civil rights, human rights, women's rights and gun rights that were mentioned and raised for a total of 5.42%. Along the same lines, abortion, known as one of the most heightened key terms shifted from 3.8% to 1.48% – a 2.32% decrease from the previous election year. Did this mean that topic of abortion was no longer the end-all-be-all settler for evangelical voters? Had other topics that dealt with social and civil justice gained prominence in places where they had none? Looking into how these topics were framed during these sermons, this study

watched each of the 45 sampled churches to dissect how each of these new (as well as old) key terms were woven into the sermon messages for the 2020 presidential election.

*Sermon Sample – Church Number 40
(10,200 Congregants; Highland Village; Southern Baptist; 12,000 Views)*

In this sample, the church number 40 immediately framed their sermon's focal point by titling it "Citizens of Earth." Giving the viewer a summary of what the following message will entail, the church premised the message with the following paragraph,

In a time of extreme division and distrust in our society, the people of God have the opportunity to step in and overcome evil with good.

Beginning the sermon with a statement,

I'm just gonna let the air out of the room quickly. My intent today is to instill in you a joyful confidence in Jesus Christ, period. Right? So, when you leave here today, more than I'm interested in the what about's and how about's and what do you do with's, what I am hoping the spirit of God will do to the proclamation of his word is instill in you in the deeper places; a joyful confidence in Jesus Christ because I think, I really believe that if you and I are walking in a joyful confidence in Jesus Christ, the rest of this stuff starts lining up where it should.

After pausing for dramatic effect, the pastor begins to defend this specific message by mentioning that if congregants attended church to hear about what they should do, they came to the wrong place. According to this pastor, the focus will only remain in how to find joy, peace and happiness in today's climate. Opening his message with a graphic that explains the percentage in which Americans trust their elected officials, the church dives into the sermon by asking congregants to raise their hand if they are angry with the way in which things have been. After pointing out statistics that demonstrated the amount of recent anger felt toward the government by the people, the pastor says,

What an opportunity! We were made for this like, people, this is our moment! Let's go. Right? I mean, we were born for this, disciplined for this made for this, created for this and here's what's wild about the moment; like if you think about

the people of God, throughout space and time, we have almost always been under empires that were either indifferent towards us or hostile towards us. I mean you've got this one little sliver of David and then maybe Solomon, maybe, and then the rest of the time we are under terrible leadership, where they're either indifferent to us or hostile or maybe even full-on violent towards us. In fact, even our passage today was written by a man who was robbed by Rome, was beaten and tortured by Rome, was imprisoned by and murdered by Rome. Like he's writing and, before they get him, he gives us the blueprint on how to overthrow it all. I get excited about that.

Continuing with the message, the pastor shifts to reading passages like Romans 12:17-21 and concludes that instead of repaying evil with evil, Christians should serve and help one another with love and mercy. He continues by explaining that Paul, a man once who killed, was healed and helped by someone who showed mercy regardless of his flaws or past dealings. Along with this, the pastor reminds the congregation of who is in control during polarizing times such as the election by stating,

I handle almost every stimulant by powering up, muscling up to get through it, puffing up, using my personality, it's my compulsion. It's how I've been wired. So all of this is God like shaking me because if I want to get something done, I'm like 'Oh you want to fight? I love to fight,' 'Oh, you want to argue? I like some of that.' That's my compulsion and here He's saying 'Don't ever avenge yourself. Don't ever avenge yourself. Vengeance is mine.' See, the point to here in this vignette is God's got it. God's got this because here's what I have to come face-to-face with and I'm going to help you. For all of us, that doesn't work, but it's the only thing that ever has and ever will.

Following a few more passages on how Christians should behave, regardless of their political party, the pastor goes on to state three reasons for how to be a good citizen. First, he states that to be a good citizen, you must do what is good, to which he says,

Like can we talk about how low that bar is? That's not sell all you have and give it to the poor. That's not saying sell all you have and reach unreached people groups. That's saying 'Hey, do good. Just do good. Just don't be a jerk. Hey, could you be friendly and warm and kind to people that you're around?' I mean, come on. Are you serious? Be a good citizen? What does that look like? Just do good. Just do good right.

Reiterating this point, he continues on with versus from prophets like Jeremiah that explain how we must live in our Babylon, but know that it is not our permit home.

Finally, he dives into the election-specific key terms when he states,

There are voices right now that are like ‘Sit this one out. There's no good candidate.’ Look, there's never any good candidates, ever. Don't sit this one out. Vote! Listen, if you knew what a privilege it is to be in a Democratic republic, you'd vote. If you've got to hold your nose and wretch while you fill out that scantron, you vote. If you have to go and take a shower after you're done, you vote. We don't sit this out. What a privilege that's been given to the people of God. I want our voice heard, so vote. If you haven't already, get out there and do that. It's an unbelievable privilege that most of the world can't even imagine. I've got dear friends that say ‘Well, I can't do it, can't support either one.’ I'm like ‘Yeah, both of them make me nauseous, too.’ But, then I plan on building houses and living my second phrase here. So I vote. Participate in the life of the nation. So again, I want to say it again. We are to be involved in the organizational aspects of our country. We are to care about politics although politics has its place and it's not at the center for Christians.

Explaining how disputable factors shouldn't be the reason Christians vote, the sampled church explains that Jesus should be the ultimate factor for which Christians vote; that by voting, we give honor to the Lord for giving us the freedoms we have in our nation and that by voting, we are able to voice our angers and anxieties instead of bottling them up and lashing out. Concluding his message, the head pastor ends with the following directions to the church's congregants,

If you haven't voted already, vote. Hold your nose and fill out your scantron, but don't sit this out. Then, do what is good pay your taxes, seek the welfare of our area and of our nation, and do to others what God has done to you.

Within this sample, the framing of the election is not as clear as the previous. Instead of having congregants urged to vote using biblical principles or else the future of the nation is at stake, congregants are hit with multiple messages, from various megachurches, of compassion and mercy toward their neighbors. Unlike in previous election sermons, the messages seem to use versus that are more aligned to the times of Jesus (New Testament)

rather than the times of the Israelites (Old Testament). Looking specifically at the key terms used for this particular sample, over 11 terms were used during the entirety of the sermon suggesting that the message was still controversial, but perhaps not as much as in previous years, especially compared to 2016 (See Table 4.11).

Table 4.11 Results from survey, key terms used in sample church number 40 during 2020 election.

#	Key Term(s)	Percentage	Frequency
1	Black	0.00%	0
2	BLM	0.00%	0
3	Democratic	9.09%	1
4	Pro-Choice	0.00%	0
5	Biden	0.00%	0
6	Democratic	0.00%	0
7	Left	9.09%	1
8	Liberal	0.00%	0
9	Civil rights	0.00%	0
10	Human rights	0.00%	0
11	Women's rights	0.00%	0
12	immigration	0.00%	0
13	abortion	0.00%	0
14	gun rights	0.00%	0
15	Hillary	0.00%	0
16	Obama	0.00%	0
17	Bush	0.00%	0
18	Pro-Life	0.00%	0
19	Republican	9.09%	1

(Continued)

#	Key Term(s)	Percentage	Frequency
20	Trump	0.00%	0
21	#ALM	0.00%	0
22	Conservative	0.00%	0
23	Right	9.09%	1
24	White	0.00%	0
25	Jesus	9.09%	1
26	God	9.09%	1
27	Lord	9.09%	1
28	Holy Spirit	0.00%	0
29	Pray	9.09%	1
30	Worship	0.00%	0
31	Nation	9.09%	1
32	America	0.00%	0
33	Church	9.09%	1
34	Texas	0.00%	0
35	Election	9.09%	1
36	Covid	0.00%	0
37	37	0.00%	0
	Total	100%	11

From the title of the message to the opening remarks, the sermon framed the election as the event that would make or break what the future might hold in regards to public, social, spiritual and mental health. Using framing theory methods such as stories, to frame a topic via narrative in a vivid and memorable way (i.e., using stories from the Bible to demonstrate kindness and mercy); artifacts, to frame how the idea holds meaning via an object (i.e., using versus as the basis for how Christians should act); and spin, to

frame judgement on a specific idea versus another (i.e., reminding congregants of the privilege of voting, something that has been given to them from God).

Using these framing techniques, the data presents an indication how one church, picked at random, had ability to use the external events and present them into messages relating to the election as a way to push out non-traditional ideals and agendas that traditionally are not held by Texas evangelicals. With more than 12,000 views, this sermon indicates the power of the church when it comes to the issues regarding Christian existence in a politically misinformed and chaotic world.

Considering First Amendment theory, the data offers a glimpse at how pastors framed new messages using previously researched information. As previously mentioned, the pastor mentioned the number of patrons who lost trust of their elected officials versus those who have not. By using this information, the pastor brought in his opinion after presenting the statistics and explaining the data. While some violations of the First Amendment theory can be found in other sampled churches, this particular church chose to refrain from “freedom of press” or “freedom of expression” and relayed their claims using excerpts from the Bible. Throughout the course of his sermon, the election at hand was only mentioned in the latter half of the message. The majority of the first half, included mentions of statistics and verses outlining how frustrated Christians should act in today’s current atmosphere.

However, as previously indicated in the top key terms for this particular election, there were multiple other churches that still chose to frame their messages with Republican-labeled themes. One church in the sample included a 49-minute sermon titled, “How to Vote for President.” Using over 19 key terms from the study sample, the

sermon covered a range of topics from abortion, immigration, racial equality and nuclear warfare (see Table 4.12).

Table 4.12 Results from survey, key terms used in sample church sample 35 during 2020 election.

#	Key Term(s)	Percentage	Frequency
1	Black	5.26%	1
2	BLM	0.00%	0
3	Democratic	0.00%	0
4	Pro-Choice	0.00%	0
5	Biden	0.00%	0
6	Democratic	0.00%	0
7	Left	0.00%	0
8	Liberal	0.00%	0
9	Civil rights	5.26%	1
10	Human rights	0.00%	0
11	Women's rights	5.26%	1
12	immigration	5.26%	1
13	abortion	5.26%	1
14	gun rights	5.26%	1
15	Hilary	0.00%	0
16	Obama	0.00%	0
17	Bush	0.00%	0
18	Pro-Life	5.26%	1
19	Republican	5.26%	1
20	Trump	5.26%	1
21	#ALM	0.00%	0
22	Conservative	5.26%	1

(Continued)

#	Key Term(s)	Percentage	Frequency
23	Right	0.00%	0
24	White	5.26%	1
25	Jesus	5.26%	1
26	God	5.26%	1
27	Lord	5.26%	1
28	Holy Spirit	0.00%	0
29	Pray	5.26%	1
30	Worship	0.00%	0
31	Nation	5.26%	1
32	America	5.26%	1
33	Church	5.26%	1
34	Texas	0.00%	0
35	Election	5.26%	1
36	Covid	0.00%	0
37	37	0.00%	0
	Total	100%	19

Captivating his audiences with jokes and short stories from the late 1960s and 70s, the service ended with the song ‘God Bless America’ to which the head pastor ended with,

We must get in our watchtower. We vote and we try to see as God sees. We get on our watchtower. We see those illusions that are phony that we've been fed. We get on our watchtower. We see the illusion that we as Christians should not speak God's truth in the marketplace. Well, what about the separation of church and state? Do you know what that really is it's not what it's purported to be? It's not. What it is supposedly said to be in this document is that there's no such thing in the constitution as a wall of separation. Jefferson nearly was asked by a group from Danbury, Connecticut and he responded and was to not make an official religion or denomination of the United States. No federal religion. That's what they had in England. That's what that is all about. There was no intention that the church could not speak into the government. You see in all the institutions in Washington, all the biblical phrases, the ten commandments, and it's foolish to say there's a wall between church and state. That is invalid. It's not accurate interpretation by any freedom of imagination. So, here we are America. Our

whole future's on the line. Our whole future's on the line, but we are I believe, an exceptional people. I believe in the exceptionality of America.

Claiming that Americans are taught un-factual, biased information could be considered a violation of the First Amendment's stance on "freedom of speech" since historical misinformation was used to spread agendas that align with the association of conjoining church and state at a federal level to over 23,000 congregation members. Overall, the data suggests that while Texas megachurches during the 2016 election pushed for Republican reforms and ideals, the 2020 election pushed a tad more on the left-sided issues that align with social justice and public health.

As seen in Figure 2.5, the blue wave did not just touch unbelievers, but also churches in the counties where more Democratic residents resided. While the conclusion that churches directly affected the polls is too far of a stretch to make, one might conclude that churches held a great influence on congregants – even if it was just subconsciously.

CHAPTER FIVE

Limitations, Future Studies, and Conclusions

For this particular study, there were a few limitations. Through this study, the data produced questions such as why evangelicals removed themselves from presidential-affiliated conversations, whether churches began commenting on issues that are traditionally non-Republican ideals, and possible reasons as to why Texas – a traditionally red state – almost turned purple. When coding each of the media samples, some of the questions that were asked included the race, ethnicity and gender of the presenter. Within the findings, the data collection found that 89% of the election-related sermons (from both election years) were presented by white, males head pastors. Following those numbers, only 6% of the presenters were female and 27% were Black Americans. While these numbers can be transformed into studies of their own, this was considered a limitation due to the lack of representation on topics as diverse and encompassing as the election.

Another limitation was that the study specifically looked at megachurches that are traditionally found in urban areas. Based on the information suggested in the literature review, the majority of residents that immigrate from Democratic leaning states moved to the most urban cities. Because of this, one of the limitations is that the study only took the largest cities into account. By excluding non-megachurches, the study potentially could have neglected any highly conservative messages, causing the data to slightly

skewed. For future studies, it would be beneficial to compare how rural churches framed the election to the megachurches seen in this study. By combining the two, the studies can give a better interpretation of why the state voted the way it did as well as highlight whether the church has shifted morally or not. Lastly, this study did run into some consistent problems considering that not all 45 churches utilized their messaging platforms in the same way. The inconsistency may have inhibited us from comparing each megachurches' framing techniques from one election to the next. Future studies may include churches from the current sample to capture how they changed (or did not change) over time.

As previously mentioned, frames provide a means through which one can study different aspects of an issue. Entman (1991) asserts that the media has the ability to enlarge an idea, to draw attention to it, or to shrink an idea in order to diminish the coverage of it. Furthermore, Entman (1991) explains that news frames help establish the literal common-sense interpretation of events. This, in turn, allows organizations and policy makers to frame and disseminate certain messages. For example, when two parties represent opposing viewpoints, Similarly, Gamson, Crouteau, Hoynes & Sasson (1992) suggest they become engaged in a frame contest. In such contests, success or failure rests upon whether a person's preferred interpretations gain prominence in media and acceptance by audiences. The factors that influence the longevity of frames, as Gamson and Modigliani (1989) pointed out, are the activities of non-media sponsors of frames, who want to advance frames they find useful; media practices that reflect working norms, routines and values of journalists; and cultural resonance. If frames resonate with larger cultural themes, they increase in appeal.

Overall, this study, as controversial and sacrilegious as it might seem, provides an important addition to the growing body of literature on religion and politics. The Church is all-powerful and often times, places itself into realms of the earth – unholy, unrighteous, and perhaps, unfitting. Just as Martin Luther declared, the Church needs to be constantly studied, constantly monitored and constantly shape shifting so that its message of truth can be appropriately received to those who would like to hear it. Texas is an advocate for the Church, and thus clings to its clergymen to light the way in all areas of government, including how to make decisions on who to select for certain governmental offices. While there is room for future studies (i.e., duplicating the study on smaller, rural churches), this study does produce some valuable findings including, but not limited to, how the church speaks about national events and politics; and whether the Church's public stances on politics cause significant impact in the polls and on its members. As both a Christian, who seeks to find heavenly truth, and a journalist, who strives to write factual truth, this study is the beginning to a series that will continue to view the Church and its efforts, within the United States, through a critical lens.

APPENDIX

APPENDIX A

Sample of Codebook

Q1: What is the name of the church?

Q2: How many congregation members do they serve (during one weekend service)?

- a. 5,000 – 7,000
- b. 7,001 – 9,000
- c. 9,001 – 11,000
- d. 11,001 – 13,000
- e. More than 13,000

Q3: Where are they located?

- a. Panhandle Plains (i.e., Lubbock area)
- b. Big Bend area (i.e., El Paso area)
- c. Hill Country (i.e., Austin area)
- d. Prairies and Lakes (i.e., Dallas area)
- e. South Texas Plains (i.e., San Antonio area)
- f. Gulf Coast (i.e., Corpus Christi area)
- g. Piney Woods (i.e., Houston area)

Q4: What is the church's denomination?

- a. Methodist
- b. Catholic
- c. Church of Christ
- d. Non-Denomination

- e. Lutheran
- f. Episcopalian
- g. Baptist

Q5: What is the item being coded?

- a. YouTube Sermon (2016)
- b. YouTube Sermon (2020)

Q6: For YouTube sermons only: What is the length of the sermon?

- a. Less than 15 min
- b. 15 – 25 min
- c. 26 – 35 min
- d. 36 – 45min
- e. More than 45 min

Q7: For YouTube sermons only: Who was the presenter during this particular sermon?

- a. Head Pastor
- b. Associate Pastor
- c. Pastor's Wife
- d. Congregation Member
- e. Invited Guest
- f. Other

Q8: For YouTube sermons only: What was the gender of the presenter?

- a. Male
- b. Female

Q9: For YouTube sermons only: What was the race/ethnicity of the presenter?

- a. White
- b. Black or African American
- c. American Indian or Alaska Native
- d. Asian
- e. Native Hawaiian
- f. Other

Q10: For YouTube sermons only: What key terms were used during this sermon?

- a. Black
- b. BLM
- c. Democratic
- d. Pro-Choice
- e. Biden
- f. Left
- g. Liberal
- h. Civil Rights
- i. Human Rights
- j. Women's Rights
- k. Immigration
- l. Abortion
- m. Gun Rights
- n. Clinton
- o. Obama
- p. Bush
- q. Pro-Life

- r. Republican
- s. Trump
- t. #ALM
- u. Conservative
- v. Right
- w. White
- x. Jesus
- y. God
- z. Lord
- aa. Holy Spirit
- bb. Pray
- cc. Worship
- dd. Nation
- ee. America
- ff. Church
- gg. Texas
- hh. Election
- ii. Covid

Q14: For YouTube sermons only, how many views did the video have?

- a. Less than 50
- b. 51 – 100
- c. 101 – 200
- d. 201 – 300
- e. More than 300

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