

For God and Country:
Trump, Biden, and Christian Discourse in Presidential Politics

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Abstract

Under the Trump and Biden administrations, issues in civil religion have emerged with increasing relevance in public conversation. Within debates about each president's personal religiosity as well as the role of Christianity in the American presidency, scholarship regarding public religion in the U.S. becomes especially pertinent. This content analysis examines Donald Trump's and Joseph Biden's usages of Christian language, comparing the respective frequencies and contexts of their religious language use. The study finds that both presidents regularly and reliably invoke Christian language in their communication; however, Donald Trump stands out for his unique use of Christian nationalist rhetoric. These findings suggest that public religiosity remains a prevalent facet of presidential communication while functioning as a sociological and cultural phenomenon.

Keywords: presidential communication, Christian discourse, civil religion

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On May 2, 2025, official White House social media accounts posted an AI-generated image of U.S. President Donald Trump dressed as the Pope. The image, which showed Trump wearing traditional white Papal vestments and a large gold crucifix around his neck, came just two weeks after the death of Pope Francis. The post sparked a wave of backlash from some members of the Catholic community, heightened by the fact that days before, Trump had joked to the press that he'd "like to be Pope" (BBC, 2025). The White House, however, maintained that Trump had no intention of mocking the papacy or the Catholic faith. "President Trump flew to Italy to pay his respects to Pope Francis and attend his funeral, and he has been a staunch champion for Catholics and religious liberty," said press secretary Karoline Leavitt (BBC, 2025).

This divisive religious conversation is far from the first of the American presidency's past decade. Trump's first term laid a foundation for him as a champion of religious liberty, with a movement of Christian Nationalism – the belief that America is a nation founded by and for Christians – steadily gaining nationwide attention. Further, former U.S. President Joseph Biden's own religiosity was a subject of discussion, with Democrats and Republicans split on whether Biden discusses his Catholic faith too much, too little, or just the right amount (Pew Research Center, 2021). A debate about whether Biden should be able to receive the Eucharist was also split down party lines, with some conservative Catholics believing his views on abortion should disqualify him from Communion (Pew Research Center, 2021).

While these examples are by no means the only religious debates regarding Trump and Biden's leaderships, they illustrate an evolving conversation about religion in the public role of the U.S. presidency. Though religion has existed in presidential speech throughout American history, these two administrations have brought increased public attention to the intersection of Christianity and national identity. This study expands on this sphere of religious and political

discussion by analyzing Trump and Biden's uses of Christian language within their public discourse, specifically comparing both presidents' application of religious key terms. This analysis aims to illuminate key differences in usage of religious communication between presidents, especially in view of Trump's reputation as a defender of Christian liberty and Biden's highly public religious identity. The study intends to provide new insight into the religious rhetoric of Trump and Biden's major speeches as well as the potential for this rhetoric to either unite or divide the American public. Broadly, this study seeks to evaluate the state of civil religion in an America that is perceived by some to be moving toward a state of greater secularization than ever before.

Significance

Under the Trump and Biden administrations, during which movements such as Christian nationalism and religious deconstruction have brought civil religion into the public eye, scholarship regarding the interaction of religion and politics becomes increasingly relevant. The present study expands on this area of research by examining these two most recent presidencies, a domain in which scholarship has not yet been published. By analyzing the frequency and context in which Christian rhetoric appears in the presidential discourse of these two contrasting administrations, this research offers valuable insights into how religion functions as a tool of political rhetoric. Investigating this intersection of religion and politics in a modern, changing U.S. deepens our understanding of how religious language is not solely a political instrument but also an indicator of the nation's complex relationship with faith, governance, and cultural identity.

In order to contextualize this research, it is key to foster an understanding of U.S. history as it pertains to Christian thought. Scholarship indicates that as a young nation built on Protestant

ideals of work and individual rights, America was susceptible to blurred lines between church and state, especially when religious rhetoric can function as a powerful instrument in garnering the support of specific demographics. In investigation of this relationship, a pattern emerges signifying Christianity's continued but changing presence in the U.S.

Literature Review

Max Weber's seminal work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1930) investigates the ideologies of New England's first European settlers, namely separatist and Puritan Christians seeking land on which they could worship freely. In leaving the Church of England, the settlers were trading the comforts of municipal European living for a harsh farming life on unfamiliar territory. Beyond these worldly sacrifices, Pilgrims had to adjust to a life without the insurance of church assurances, which essentially guaranteed all believers an eternity in Heaven. This comfort stripped, Protestant settlers turned to predestination, the belief that God's divine will determined the individual's afterlife even before their birth.

This removal of church assurances and the accompanying uncertainty of one's own salvation led settlers to arduously pursue grace, which took the form of material wealth. Weber wrote that these tangible markers of success were "indispensable as a sign of election. They are the technical means, not of purchasing salvation, but of getting rid of the fear of damnation" (Weber, 1930, p. 69). In turn, after generations of Protestants peopled the colonies, this divine spirit of hard work to the end of material riches had become a concentratedly U.S. tradition. Individual hard work and worldly success as a sign of God's favor cemented capitalism as an ideology that persists in today's "secular" America, partly due to the deist religious schemas of the founding fathers.

Alexis de Tocqueville claimed in *American Institutions and Their Influence* (1851) that “from the earliest settlement of the emigrants, politics and religion contracted an alliance which has never been dissolved” – namely, that Christianity as a democratic and republican religion resulted in the democratic republic of the United States. The ideal of each man’s own individual liberties, though secular in nature, is itself a product of Protestant thinking; indeed, “the Americans combine the notions of Christianity and of liberty so intimately in their minds, that it is impossible to make them conceive the one without the other” (de Tocqueville, 1851).

De Tocqueville considered the ultimate awakening of the American world to democratic freedom *through* religiosity to be a monumental achievement and a distinct marker of difference between European and American thinking. It was the individual’s duty to God to defend one’s right to freedom of thought against systems of power; this moral schema inevitably influenced the American ethic of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness (Heclo, 2007). This scholarship posits that the presence of Protestant spirit in the construction of American tradition, compounded over two and a half centuries of progress, has inalienable influence on politics, media, and culture worthy of investigation. Essentially, if the leg of religious thought is removed, the foundation of American creed crumbles.

Use of Christianity as a Political Tool

In acknowledgment of the Protestant history of American ideology, examining political rhetoric within the sphere of religiosity is a natural progression of scholarship. Evangelical conservatives are one demographic with exceptional voting power and those most likely to respond to religious cues within political communication. By using a religious “code,” GOP candidates can “avoid broadcasting very conservative issue positions that might alienate more moderate voters” (Calfano & Djupe, 2009, p. 329). Specifically, a code must function as an

intentional communication strategy that appeals to the in-group (in this case, evangelical Christians) while going unnoticed by the out-group. This strategy would allow Republican candidates to reliably garner support from specific conservative demographics while protecting themselves against liberal backlash. Calfano and Djupe's 2009 study assessed the efficacy of such a code of religious cues given by GOP candidates on likely voter support. Inclusions of morality in political talk must appeal to "(1) religion, because Americans are such an exceptionally religious people, and (2) religious groups, which are important organizational nodes for the electorate" (Calfano & Djupe, 2009, p. 329).

As expected, Calfano and Djupe found that White evangelicals were able to accurately identify code-using candidates as Republican and indicate their likely support for those candidates. When asked to rate their likely support for a candidate from 1 to 10 (with 10 signifying that "other things equal, I would vote for him in an election"), the White evangelical participants' ratings increased by an average of 1.31 points *after* the code was used (Calfano & Djupe, 2009). This finding suggests that religious connections, at the very least, shape value systems that in turn impinge on individual political attitudes and party affiliation. The larger conclusion is that religious communities, through their use of common symbols and communication patterns, are capable of influencing the democratic process of the nation.

Changing Roles in Political Talk

In the case of presidential communication, religious talk can be used as a tool with which to shape the collective psyche of American citizens. As chief executive, the president functions as American society's de facto religious leader, and as such, public expressions of religiosity from the president are particularly influential. Scholarship has shown that different presidents have interacted with and utilized religious rhetoric in individually meaningful ways, with

references to God and faith increasing dramatically under Ronald Reagan, who, along with George W. Bush, was more likely than Bill Clinton and George H. W. Bush to express certitude about God's desires for America (Domke & Coe, 2010).

This scholarship ultimately indicates that political figures have a unique ability to utilize religious value systems in order to gain support and influence public perception. However, in the past decade, America has been regarded by some as moving toward greater cultural secularization. Whereas the majority of American adults are still self-reported Christians, their percentage of the population was 12 points lower in 2021 than it was in 2011 (Pew Research Center, 2021). Further, a 2024 Pew Research Center survey found that 80% of U.S. adults believe the role of religion in American life is declining, with 49% of U.S. adults outright believing this is a bad thing. Around half of surveyed U.S. adults believe it is either “very” important or “somewhat” important for the president to have strong religious beliefs – yet only “13% of Americans say they think President Joe Biden is very religious, and just 4% say this about former President Donald Trump” (Pew Research Center, 2024). Despite the fact that few American adults view Trump as deeply religious, two thirds of Republican and right-leaning Independents, as well as 69% of White evangelicals, believe Trump stands up for their religious beliefs (Pew Research Center, 2024). White evangelicals, a majority Republican demographic, also have largely favorable views of Trump at 67%. This opinion likely stems from fears around America’s perceived secularization, as most Christians and Republicans believe secular liberalism has gone too far in removing religious values from public school education (Pew Research Center, 2024). This especially rings true when considering the fact that one fifth of Republicans and right-leaning individuals say the federal government should recognize Christianity as the official religion of the United States – opposed to just 7% of Democrats and

left-leaners (Pew Research Center, 2024). Despite his apparent lack of overt religiosity, Trump appears to have successfully positioned himself as a champion for Christian rights in a nation that is perceived by some to be moving away from God's favor.

In order to determine if the trend of American secularization extended to U.S. presidential communication, Coe and Chenoweth (2013) performed a content analysis of religious talk in presidential discourse, finding that in the post-Reagan era presidents have included more than two Christian terms in their public communications per average day. Additionally, despite predictions that Barack Obama would be less inclined to include religious invocations in public speech, he was "as willing as his predecessors to express Christian themes in contexts where Christianity was a chosen topic of conversation, but he created such contexts less often" (Coe & Chenoweth, 2013, p. 387). These findings imply that greater secularization is unlikely to entirely eradicate public religiosity in the greater American political sphere. In support of this, whereas freedom and liberty are among the most frequently invoked values in presidential communication, these key terms were referenced only about 61% as often as Christian terms in the major addresses Coe (2007) studied. Although noted to be an imperfect comparison between terms, this figure is an important illustration of the prominence of civil religion in presidential communication. Taken together, this scholarship points to (1) a deeply felt embedment of Christian thought in the American political psyche, and (2) a somewhat changing relationship with that religiosity.

These findings also suggest that religious discourse can be utilized as a shaper of the electorate's perception (Calfano & Djupe, 2009), raising Christianity from an individual belief system to a publicly influential phenomenon. Further, between the Reagan era – during which evangelicals gained influence and solidified ties to the Republican Party (Williams, 2010) – and

the Obama era, both the president and the public's interaction with religion has shifted, but not diminished.

Christianity as an Evolving Public Phenomenon

In acknowledging Christianity as larger than a private set of values, it must be viewed as not divorced from politics; rather, religion as a social phenomenon is necessarily political. The evolution of public religiosity is aptly illustrated in presidential inaugural addresses throughout American history. In George Washington's inaugural address, which has been described as containing "the imprint of sermon form" (Jamieson, 1973), religious rhetoric is used to instill confidence in the American future. By highlighting the "propitious smiles of heaven," which he states "can never be expected on a nation that disregards the eternal rules of order and right, which Heaven itself has ordained," Washington invokes God as an endorser of America's new way of governing (Lempres, 2018, p. 11).

Under different presidents and in varying contexts, however, the use of religious talk differed from Washington's precedent. In wartime, presidents invoked ideas of sacrifice and religious predestination; in pursuing domestic policies, they used religious cues to defend their positions (Lempres, 2018). For instance, Abraham Lincoln notably employed religious references in the context of the Civil War. Lincoln's 1865 second inaugural address contained 14 mentions of God, four Biblical quotations, and three invocations of prayer within only 701 words (White, 2006). American historian Ronald C. White describes this address as significant due to its theologically-informed rhetoric of inclusivity and unity in a divided nation, writing, "[Lincoln] used the inclusive word 'both' to affirm the religious sensibilities of Union and Confederate soldiers: *Both* read the same Bible, and pray to the same God." Indeed, the main conflict of the Civil War was ideologically shaped, with both sides operating under a philosophy

of religious nationalism. The North's perspective, informed by evangelical Protestant ideals, believed America was "divinely tasked with advancing God's kingdom through progressive social change" (Gullotta, 2025). Meanwhile, the South envisioned chattel slavery as divinely ordained by Scripture as well as necessary to maintaining a White Christian civilization (Gullotta, 2025). Lincoln's address functions in recognition of this religious schism, framing slavery as an American sin divinely punished by the war. Yet Lincoln refrains from blaming the South for this sin, instead reiterating that both sides of the conflict are equal in God's eyes while also being equally guilty of perpetuating slavery. This rhetoric advances Lincoln's own moral position as a Unionist while simultaneously promoting American unity in a Civil War that was rapidly drawing to a close.

In the current era, Trump has emerged as a politician who seems to perceive his role as predominantly public and is potentially the least religious president in the United States' history (CNN, 2017). However, this did not hinder him from utilizing Christian rhetoric in order to garner voter mobilization, especially among conservative evangelicals.

For instance, immediately after promising to eradicate "radical Islamic terrorism" in his 2017 inaugural address, Trump cited Psalm 133:1: "When you open your heart to patriotism, there is no room for prejudice. The Bible tells us, 'How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity.'" While appearing to follow the precedent of uniting American citizens against a common enemy and under the blessing of God, this statement was rather "explicitly geared towards Trump's policy goals" (Lempres, 2018, p. 77). It also indicated that while the precedent of religiosity as a rhetorical strategy has remained indispensable, the context and intent with which it is invoked has evolved with changing administrations.

One religious evolution notable under the Trump administration was the rise of Christian nationalism, which Miller (2021) believes stems from White Christians' diminishing social and political power. This power crisis is interconnected with the idea that America is inherently a "Christian nation"; however, the "Christian" in Christian nationalism cannot be reduced down to individual religious preference, but rather is "a complex social identity involving multiple social domains (e.g., race, gender, political ideology) and, as such, contests of power" (Miller, 2021). Emboldened by presidential invocations of scripture as a justification for power-seeking, Miller asserted that nationalists have recentered their crusade for a truly Christian America as God's divine will: a potential "second act" of Manifest Destiny.

Perhaps in response to the rise of Christian nationalism under Trump, a movement of "deconstructing" Christianity has gained traction among some Americans (Barna, 2024). By critically dismantling harmful belief systems within church culture (especially evangelicalism), the individual reaffirms their faith with greater strength. Minority populations within church culture, such as LGBTQ+ youth, are especially likely to reckon with effects of religious trauma or other negative psychological effects of non-affirming stances by church authorities (Hollier, 2023). Indeed, the evangelical culture is "replete with voices that teach these non-affirming stances, and while there is a growing number of dissenting voices, the scale and unity of the traditionalist movement prop up the authority of the preacher who shares their views" (Hollier 2023, p. 209). As deconstructors continue to evolve in the public eye, conflict with well-established belief systems is unsurprising, especially within a highly divided public psyche.

In tandem with the analysis of inaugural addresses, these two salient public movements are illustrators of a trend at large. Christianity, which has been established as an inherently public phenomenon, has never inhabited one permanent identity. Whereas religious thought, as detailed

previously, is a deeply rooted element of the American creed, the role of Christianity in the public psyche is as dynamic as the American people themselves. Noted by Stephen Cox (2014) in *American Christianity: The Continuing Revolution*, unpredictable change is one of the few dependable characteristics of Christianity in America. Catholic and Protestant norms, he claims, have evolved continuously over the two centuries of American history, and as such Christianity on the whole must be seen as an ever-changing sociological experience.

Despite the notion that the nation is secularizing, this scholarship evidences that Christianity, as a tenet of American identity, cannot be fully eradicated, only changed. It thus “demands appreciation for itself as a structure that is always visible but always mysteriously shifting its form, a structure that cannot be finished” (Cox, 2014, p. 6). The current study operates on the premise that Christianity is not only a deeply consequential undercurrent in American political thought, but also a sociocultural phenomenon that evolves in each changing era rather than diminishes.

Method

This study expands on previous presidential communication research by extending analysis to the two most recent American presidencies, the Trump and Biden administrations. This analysis of presidential discourse focuses on (a) the frequency of religious talk instances and (b) the contexts in which these instances occur for each president.

This research poses the question: how have recent presidents utilized Christianity in their public discourse, and how does this compare with previous presidential tradition? Broadly, it asks, do these findings indicate that the U.S. is publicly secularizing? In answering these research questions, the study examines the similarities and differences between Trump’s and Biden’s usages of religiosity in public talk, as well as how these two presidents continue and/or

diverge from previous presidential usage. In keeping with past scholarship such as Coe and Chenoweth (2013), Trump's and Biden's usage of public religious talk is expected not to diminish, but rather arise at a roughly equal rate and in similar contexts to their predecessors' usage (Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama).

Sampling

This study focuses on major speeches and addresses given by Trump and Biden during each of their first four-year terms (or slightly earlier in the case of electoral victory speeches). These presidential communications deemed "major" hold notable significance due to political relevance, tradition, and/or high viewership. Twenty-two total communications were ultimately considered "major," consisting of electoral victory speeches, Democratic and Republican National Convention speeches, inaugural addresses, State of the Union addresses, and Oval Office addresses. These were accessed through *Public Papers of the Presidents* (www.americanpresidency.org), an archive of presidential documents hosted by the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Content Analysis

The 24 significant documents were analyzed through the qualitative data software Atlas.ti 25. To conduct the analysis, a codebook of religious key terms was assembled containing four categories: God, Bible, identity, and metaphysical. These four categories were based on Coe and Chenoweth's 2013 codebook and chosen specifically to cover several types of religious language. These broad types include references to a deity (God), quotations from or references to a sacred text (Bible), religious persons or groups (identity), and abstract manifestations of faith or ritual (metaphysical). Within these categories, 38 relevant codes were assembled, however, only half (19) of these codes were found to be actually used in Trump's and Biden's collective

discourse. Additionally, some codes were inductively found and added to the codebook during the process of coding documents.

Table 1. Complete Codebook

Category	Definition	Codes*
God	All references to an individual or spiritual Christian higher power	Christ, <i>Creator</i> , <i>God</i> , Lord, Jesus, <i>Savior</i>
Bible	All references to Biblical topics, characters, or Bible quotations	<i>Angel</i> , baptise, <i>Bible</i> , Biblical, <i>church</i> , cross, disciple, <i>Heaven</i> , <i>Hell</i> , <i>hymn</i> , <i>pray</i> , prophet, sermon, <i>sin</i>
Identity	Labels regarding religious groups or individual leaders	Catholic, <i>Christian</i> , churchgoer, clergy, congregation, evangelical, Lutheran, pastor, <i>preacher</i> , priest, Protestant, <i>saint</i>
Metaphysical	Abstract references to ritual or spiritual manifestations	<i>Amen</i> , <i>bless</i> , <i>faith</i> , <i>holy</i> , <i>sacred</i> , worship

*italicized codes found in analyzed speech

Analysis was conducted on Atlas.ti by manually coding all instances of religious key terms in each document. When a key term was found, e.g. “saint,” the corresponding code was applied to that usage. After coding was completed, Atlas.ti’s Code-Document Analysis tool generated a visualization of which and how many codes were used in each document as well as overall.

Some codes with multiple definitions, e.g. “sacred,” “faith,” were only applied to the text when used by Trump or Biden in an intentionally religious manner. For instance, “We can make our communities safer, our families stronger, our culture richer, our faith deeper...” in Trump’s 2019 State of the Union address was coded as a religious usage of “faith,” as the context operates under the definition of “faith” as “belief and trust in and loyalty to God” (Merriam-Webster,

n.d.). In contrast, “Both sides operated in good faith,” in Biden’s 2 June 2023 Oval Office Address was not coded as a religious usage of “faith,” as this context operates under a definition of “faith” as honesty or sincerity. As such, only terms invoked in a strictly religious context were coded.

All documents were manually analyzed twice in order to eliminate redundancies or missed codings. Additionally, Atlas.ti’s Text Search tool was used to automatically find every instance of keyword usage in all 24 documents. These measures are intended to virtually guarantee accuracy of coding frequency.

Further, the contexts surrounding code uses were examined qualitatively. Repeat contexts of code invocations were compiled per president – for instance, eight usages of “God” in Biden’s communication were employed within contexts of crisis. These context frequencies allowed for deeper qualitative analysis of each president’s individual propensity for religious discourse.

Finally, passages deemed significant to the theme of Christian speech were noted with Atlas.ti’s Quotation tool. These quotations were then compiled separate from codes as notable context to support this analysis.

Results

This study analyzed Trump’s and Biden’s individual and collective usages of religious codes across each coding category and in total. Additionally, the most commonly used codes were individually analyzed.

Code Frequency

In total, Biden used religious codes exactly 115 distinct times across his 13 communications, while Trump used religious codes 100 times across his 11 communications. While Biden’s communication had more individual uses of religious codes than Trump, he only

used 14 total codes, compared to Trump's 16 total codes. "Amen," "hymn," and "saint" were codes exclusively used by Biden. Meanwhile, "Christian," "Heaven," "holy," "Savior," and "sin" were codes exclusively used by Trump. Both presidents' top five most frequently used codes included "God," "bless," "faith," and "pray"; however, Biden's third most used code was "sacred" at 12 uses, while Trump's fifth most used code was "Bible" at four uses.

Code usages across each category were broadly similar for each president, with slight differences in the *God* and *Metaphysical* categories. Biden used codes in the *God* category six times more than Trump; extrapolating from this, Biden was roughly 12% more likely to include a reference to God in his major communications. Indeed, the individual code "God" was the most frequently invoked code with 99 total usages between Trump and Biden. Biden used "God" roughly 15% more with his 53 uses compared to Trump's 46 uses. Within the *Metaphysical* category, Biden again used seven more individual codes than Trump, a roughly 22% increase.

Table 2
Number of Code Usages by Category

President	God	Bible	Identity	Metaphysical	Total
Donald Trump	48	18	2	32	100
Joseph Biden	55	18	3	39	115

Code usage across each type of communication was also analyzed. Trump's four State of the Union addresses contained a total of 51 code usages, with his 2017 address taking the lead with 17 usages. The *God* category was the most frequently invoked category with 20 code usages. Trump's two Republican National Convention speeches followed with 32 total usages, with his 2020 speech containing the most codes at 18. Trump's three Oval Office addresses had a total of nine code usages, followed by his 2017 inaugural address at eight. His 2016 electoral victory speech contained zero code usages.

Comparatively, Biden’s four State of the Union addresses used a total of 34 codes, mostly in the *God* category with 20 uses. His 2023 State of the Union contained the most uses with 14 code usages, 10 of which being the individual “God” code. Biden’s five Oval Office addresses followed with 28 total code uses, with his 2024 address on his withdrawal from the Presidential race taking the lead with nine code uses. Biden’s Democratic National Convention speeches contained 22 code usages, closely followed by his 2021 inaugural address at 20. His 2020 electoral victory speech had the least amount of code uses at 11.

Table 3
Number of Code Usages by Type of Speech

Type of Speech	Donald Trump	Joseph Biden
State of the Union	54	34
D/R National Convention	32	22
Inaugural	8	20
Electoral Victory	0	11
Oval Office Address	28	9

Code Context

In addition to analyzing the frequencies of each presidents’ code usage, the study also analyzed the contexts in which codes were most commonly used. “God” being the most frequently invoked code, it also was used in the most variable contexts. “God” as a code was most frequently used by both presidents in combination with “bless” (i.e. “God bless America”); Biden concurrently used “God” and “bless” 27 times, Trump 18.

Within Biden’s communications, the second most common context of “God” usage was in times of negativity – eight invocations were used in discussions of national crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and three were used to signal disapproval of Trump’s past leadership. Also notable was Biden’s propensity to invoke God to prop up statements of equality, for example, in

his 2021 State of the Union address, “Can our democracy deliver on its promise that all of us — created equal in the image of God — have a chance to lead lives of dignity, respect and possibility?”

Comparatively, Trump’s second most common context of “God” usage was in reference to America. Thirteen of Trump’s “God” codes were used to point to an American national identity of faith in God, for example, “In America, we don’t turn to government to restore our souls – we put our faith in Almighty God” (Republican National Convention, 2020). Trump’s third most common “God” context was in political discussions, such as those regarding abortion, with six discrete usages. Also notable was Trump’s two unique uses of “God” in reference to his own individual salvation after his 2024 assassination attempt. For example, in his 2024 Republican National Convention speech, he stated, “There was blood pouring everywhere, and yet in a certain way I felt very safe because I had God on my side.”

Biden’s other most frequently used codes included “faith” and “sacred.” Notably, each of Biden’s 12 uses of “sacred” were referring to the *sacredness* of American democracy. Five out of Biden’s eight usages of “faith” referred to a secular sense of trust in the promise of America, while two usages explicitly referred to “faiths,” e.g. religions. “Faith” was similarly another of Trump’s most frequently used codes, however, while Biden’s invocations leaned secular, five of Trump’s seven usages referred explicitly to the Christian faith.

These findings imply that while both Biden and Trump reliably invoked religious key terms in political settings, Biden was more likely to emphasize a secular American identity founded on democracy, turning to God for healing in times of crisis, and equality among citizens; in comparison, Trump was more likely to emphasize Christianity as an indicator of America’s true promise and identity, as well as the moral foundation of his political platforms.

Discussion

Within this discourse, quantitative code usage counts remained relatively stable between the two presidents, with Biden demonstrating a slightly higher likelihood to use religious language (albeit applied in a more secular way than in Trump's communication). The most notable difference in religious discourse between the two presidents lay in the contexts and rhetoric of each of their usages.

Joseph Biden

Biden's public identity as a Roman Catholic – only the second-ever Catholic U.S. president after John F. Kennedy – likely correlates with his propensity to include religion in his public communication. During his four-year term, Biden regularly attended Sunday mass, the first president to dependably attend church services since Bill Clinton (Memoli & Lee, 2021). Indeed, even when on the campaign trail, Biden rarely missed services at his Delaware church as well as attending services while traveling (Memoli & Lee, 2021). This individual religious identity mainly manifested in his public communication as references to his own beliefs. Biden's 2021 inaugural address contained the most religious codes of any analyzed communication, with much of its content being overtly religious in nature.

Many centuries ago, Saint Augustine, a saint of my church, wrote that a people was a multitude defined by the common objects of their love. What are the common objects we love that define us as Americans? I think I know. Opportunity. Security. Liberty. Dignity. Respect. Honor. And, yes, the truth. Recent weeks and months have taught us a painful lesson. There is truth and there are lies. Lies told for power and for profit. And each of us has a duty and responsibility, as citizens, as Americans, and especially as leaders –

leaders who have pledged to honor our Constitution and protect our nation — to defend the truth and to defeat the lies.

Here, Biden uses his own personal religious belief to support the idea that he, as an American leader, has the “duty and responsibility” to combat the “lies” of the previous Trump administration. This sentiment echoes the founding ideology of the American creed, namely that man has his own individual responsibility to God to defend human liberties against systems of oppression. This train of thought, indeed, was paramount to the North’s ideology within the era of the American Civil War – that the North was “divinely tasked with advancing God’s kingdom through progressive social change” (Gullotta, 2025).

Similarly to his inaugural address, Biden’s 2020 electoral victory speech contained a significant amount of Christian ideology.

In the last days of the campaign, I’ve been thinking about a hymn that means a lot to me and to my family, particularly my deceased son Beau. It captures the faith that sustains me and which I believe sustains America. And I hope it can provide some comfort and solace to the more than 230,000 families who have lost a loved one to this terrible virus this year. My heart goes out to each and every one of you. Hopefully this hymn gives you solace as well. “And He will raise you up on eagle’s wings / Bear you on the breath of dawn / Make you to shine like the sun, / And hold you in the palm of His Hand.” And now, together — on eagle’s wings — we embark on the work that God and history have called upon us to do.

Within the schema of a divine calling, Biden positions his administration as a natural solution to the division and “lies” of the previous leadership. Further, Biden solidifies his own

virtue as a man of God, being “sustained” by faith and offering that same sustenance to those Americans victimized by the COVID-19 pandemic. This same propensity to bring up religious topics in tandem with contexts of national crisis, such as COVID-19, became characteristic of Biden’s presidential speech. The “God” code was used eight times in such contexts, for instance, in his 2022 State of the Union address: “[COVID-19 is] a God-awful disease.” Biden was also likely to turn to “prayer” in these contexts, e.g. “keep them in our prayers.” In this sense, religion became a source of emotional or spiritual healing within contexts of collective mourning or suffering. This aligns with Biden’s previous personal testimony to the power of his faith in helping him cope with the personal tragedies of losing his first wife, infant daughter, and son Beau (Biden, 2020). As he stated in his 2020 victory speech, “The Bible tells us that to everything there is a season – a time to build, a time to reap, a time to sow. And a time to heal. This is the time to heal in America.”

Perhaps the most notable feature of Biden’s presidential communication was his use of Christian rhetoric to emphasize equality in rights. The “God” code was used five times in this context. Further, just before his electoral victory in November 2020, Biden discussed this idea in an article he wrote for The Christian Post.

My Catholic faith drilled into me a core truth – that every person on earth is equal in rights and dignity, because we are all beloved children of God. We are all created “*imago Dei*” – beautifully, uniquely, in the image of God, with inherent worth. It is the same creed that is at the core of our American experiment and written into our founding documents – that we are all created equal and endowed by our creator with inalienable rights.

This statement echoes Biden's earlier remarks about his duty to God to defend American "truth" against former systems of lies and oppression. Indeed, it is mostly in regard to American creed that Biden utilizes this religious rhetoric, as illustrated in his use of "sacred" solely in reference to democratic ideals. This demonstrates that beyond his willingness to emphasize religion in reference to his own faith, Biden is mainly predisposed to invoke religious language in a secular application to America's democratic promise. This juxtaposition – a deep personal religiosity combined with a tendency to emphasize secular ideals as adjacent to godliness – is characteristic of Biden's presidential communication.

Donald Trump

Trump's personal religious influence is somewhat less clear than Biden's Catholic identity. As a child, Trump was confirmed in his parents' Presbyterian church; however, in a 2020 statement to Religion News Service, Trump self-identified as a non-denominational Christian (Jenkins & Mwaura, 2020). While in office, Trump was not known to regularly attend church outside holiday services at an Episcopal church near his Mar-a-Lago residence. Despite this apparent lack of perceived personal religiousness and in contrast to Biden's secular application of Christian rhetoric, much of Trump's religious speech pointed to America as explicitly Christian in identity. Further, an emphasis on protecting religious liberty was mainly used in reference to specifically Christian liberty, as illustrated in his 2020 State of the Union address.

My administration is also defending religious liberty, and that includes the constitutional right to pray in public schools. In America, we don't punish prayer. We don't tear down crosses. We don't ban symbols of faith. We don't muzzle preachers and pastors. In

America, we celebrate faith, we cherish religion, we lift our voices in prayer, and we raise our sights to the glory of God.

Broadly, this statement affirms that the Trump administration protects religious liberties by refusing to ban religious symbols and celebrating faith. However, despite this seemingly inclusive statement, Trump's only explicit religious reference is to Christian faith: crosses, preachers and pastors, and the glory of God. Further, Trump's use of the collective "our" indicates a common American Christian identity – that in the U.S., *we* as citizens worship God. This use of Christian nationalist language and mention of divisive ideological issues (e.g. banning prayer in public schools) follows Calfano and Djupe's finding that GOP politicians will employ a religious code in order to appeal to specific demographics (Calfano & Djupe, 2009). In this case, the demographic is likely White evangelicals, most of whom are concerned that religion is disappearing from America's public sphere and especially that secular liberalism has gone too far in removing religious values from public school education. By broadcasting his willingness to defend America from the perceived threat of secularization, Trump is able to reliably garner the support of an evangelical voter base and position himself as a champion for Christian rights.

Trump's use of Christian nationalist speech was not solely reserved for references to American identity, but also applied to himself as a leader. In the wake of his 2024 assassination attempt, Trump began using religious language in a self-referential context. As he stated in his 2024 Republican National Convention speech, "I'm not supposed to be here tonight... I stand before you in this arena only by the grace of almighty God." Extending beyond the notion of America as a Christian nation, this rhetoric implies that America is a nation with a leader endorsed by God, and that Trump's survival is evident of his own divine appointment as chief

executive. Notably, this idea diverges from Biden's expressions that American prosperity is derived from the founding fathers' Christian-influenced schema of individual rights to freedom and liberty. In contrast, Trump takes the position that American salvation is a product of Christian practice within the nation's identity, and that his own salvation is ordained by God's will.

Synthesis

Although Biden and Trump's individual uses of codes remained similar in quantity throughout their major communication, each president created diverging contexts in which Christian discourse was utilized. In recognition of Biden's Catholicism, he reliably made reference to his own faith, yet consistently applied religious key terms to secular contexts in which he praised America as a "sacred" nation. This follows the precedent set by Obama, his predecessor, who moved toward a more secular and pluralistic context of religious communication (Coe & Chenoweth, 2013). Contrastingly, Trump's religious communication displays a unique readiness to include Christian nationalist ideology, which likely functions as a response to conservative voters' concerns about public secularization in the U.S. Most notably, Trump has recently displayed a novel self-referential rhetoric which functions to support his position as national leader. These patterns may signify a move toward presidential politics increasingly incorporating Reagan-era religious communication, especially as it pertains to mobilizing White evangelical voters.

In an America divided across deeply felt political and religious lines (Pew Research Center), it is notable to address Biden and Trump's communicative echoes of Civil War-era rhetoric. Both presidents' public communication included elements of Abraham Lincoln's religiously-informed second inaugural address; however, applied in contrasting ways. While

Biden's use of religious codes was noted to be mainly applied to secular contexts, his more overtly Christian speech was often rooted in statements of equality. This pattern parallels Lincoln's overarching narrative of American unity, that is, that each American worships the same God while holding equal responsibility for political divide. While Biden does not recognize all Americans as *worshipping* the same God, he does emphasize all Americans as *equal* in God's eyes; whereas Lincoln called on the North and South to unify, Biden more subtly promotes the ideal of democracy as a sacred philosophy under which all Americans can unite.

In turn, Trump's communication picks up Lincoln's thread of religious nationalism in America. Both Lincoln's and Trump's rhetoric supports the idea of the U.S. being a nation of Christians who worship and pray to the same God, with Trump stating that Americans "raise [their] sights to the glory of God" in his 2020 State of the Union address. Operating under this ideology, Lincoln went as far as to claim that slavery is a divine sin committed by all Christian Americans, and as such, Americans should be united in repentance. Despite the fact that "sin" was a code exclusively used by Trump, this philosophy is not echoed in his communication. Rather, Trump positions a divide in America as between religious liberty and secularization, orienting himself as a champion for religious freedoms against the threat of anti-Christian policy; this is further evidenced in his creation of the "Task Force to Eradicate Anti-Christian Bias" at the Department of Justice (The White House, 2025). In these ways, both Lincoln and Trump conceive of the U.S. as a Christian nation at war over conflicting ideologies. Yet where Lincoln uses the schema of Christian nationalism to unite the country under God, Trump uses it to further a divide between the looming threat of liberal anti-Christian bias and "true" Americans.

Broadly, these findings taken together indicate a deeply-felt current of religious thought within American politics. Although Trump and Biden interact with Christian discourse in

diverging ways, both presidents are following a historically embedded pattern of religious rhetoric in public communication. This implies that, despite the notion that America is moving toward greater secularization (Pew Research Center, 2021), religious discourse remains a profoundly relevant rhetorical tool in presidential communication.

Limitations and Future Research

This content analysis was naturally limited by its scope, as only Trump and Biden's "major" communications were analyzed. Although excluded "minor" communications are likely limited in notability, further analysis would benefit from widening the sample to *all* presidential communications in each term. Examination of this wider sample could illuminate more casual religiosity within day-to-day presidential communications, such as memos, written orders, and news conferences.

Additionally, this study defines public presidential communication as specifically speeches and addresses, which excludes other forms of communication such as social media posts. With regard to Trump, who was a president particularly active on sites such as Twitter, there is a vast sample for possible content analysis. Further research surrounding presidential social media use could provide a deeper understanding of rhetorical patterns within online spaces, which are likely more accessible to a wider global audience.

Finally, a more thorough investigation of presidents' religious backgrounds and whether upbringing correlates with usage of religious discourse could be significant to political and theological scholarship.

Conclusion

Religious and political scholarship regarding America indicates that U.S. civil religion should not be viewed as static or inherently divorced from politics; rather, it must be viewed as a

public sociopolitical phenomenon undergoing constant evolution to better fit a dynamic nation. Accordingly, this study investigates the role of religious discourse within the public communication of the two most recent U.S. presidents with the objective of evaluating the state of civil religion in modern America. Findings indicate that Joseph Biden's individual Catholic religiosity reliably correlates with a propensity to include references to his personal faith in public communication; however, a significant amount of Biden's use of religious language was applied to secular concepts of American identity. Donald Trump's public communication was especially notable due to its inclusion of explicit Christian nationalist rhetoric and defense of religious liberty in America. Trump's communication was additionally unique due to its novel inclusion of self-referential religious language, i.e. referring to himself as "saved by God" after his 2024 assassination attempt. Taken together, these findings indicate that Trump and Biden, in keeping with previous presidential tradition, utilize political religious discourse in individually significant ways. This scholarship also demonstrates the potential for political use of religious rhetoric to shape public perception in order to either divide or unify. Ultimately, these findings indicate that civil religion remains a profoundly embedded aspect of U.S. political identity and, as such, America is subsequently unlikely to be secularizing in the public sphere.

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