

Examining the Political Motivations of Christian Women Following the 2016 Presidential Election

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EXAMINING THE POLITICAL MOTIVATIONS OF CHRISTIAN WOMEN
FOLLOWING THE 2016 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

by

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ABSTRACT
EXAMINING THE POLITICAL MOTIVATIONS OF CHRISTIAN WOMEN
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Julie M. Grace, B.A.

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As research begins and continues to examine the historic nature of the 2016 presidential election, this study aims to understand the political motivations of a specific group of voters – Christian women in two Wisconsin counties that flipped from voting for a Democrat in 2012 to a Republican in 2016. Long-form, qualitative interviews were used to obtain an understanding of the participants' faith, their view on politics, and their thoughts on the 2016 election and President Trump's first year in office. Grounded theory was used as a theoretical framework for this study, and the constant comparative method of analysis was used to interpret the transcribed interview texts. After analyzing the texts for common themes, the following concepts emerged: the role of churches in influencing political attitudes and voting decisions, the participants' general views on current politics, and their thoughts on Trump's election and his first year in office. Notable findings include the distinction made between Trump's personality and his politics, the strengthening of views regarding Trump (whether positive or negative) since the election, and the idea that churches act as social institutions that strengthen political views.

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Chapter 1:

INTRODUCTION AND SETTING UP THE PROBLEM

Background of the Study

In nearly every U.S. election in recent history – from the local to national level – politicians and researchers have categorized voters in an attempt to get a better sense of how they think about issues and candidates, and therefore, how they vote. From gender, socioeconomic status, marital status, education level and age, politicians and pundits regularly group voters together to attempt to predict the outcome of elections. Especially in recent history, one group of voters – the religious vote – has become particularly relevant in these predictions.

Previous research has explored the connection between religion and politics, or how groups of people speak about current politics and political issues. Some scholars have examined this connection from the point of view of politicians and political parties (Butler, 2012; Selby & Jones, 2013; Schnabel, 2013; Hudson, 2008). This line of research observes how political organizations seek to translate religious views and beliefs into votes for certain candidates. For instance, how do politicians effectively communicate or reach out to religious voters? Or, what policies should they adapt to appeal to their voter base? Other researchers have sought to understand the connection between religion and politics through the point of view of the religious voters themselves (Putnam & Campbell, 2010; Harper, 2008; Deckman, 2014). Such studies have examined how religious voters decide whom to vote for and how they justify their voting decisions.

However, sometimes voters (as a whole, or as part of certain groups) surprise pundits, and therefore, the people who follow their predictions. This was largely the case in the 2016 presidential election of Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton, in which Trump won 306 of 538 electoral votes, yet he only won 45.9% of the popular vote, compared to Clinton's 48.0% (NYT Exit Polls, 2016). The nature of the Trump campaign, and the nature of Trump himself – as a billionaire businessman who spoke bluntly, made numerous misogynistic comments, was divorced twice, and was accused of sexual harassment – was unlike any other presidential candidate in recent American history. The campaign also faced many scandals, including allegations of collusion with the Russian government.

It was for these reasons and others that Trump was predicted to lose the 2016 presidential election. On election day, a compilation of major polls indicated that Clinton had a 71.4% chance of winning, compared to Trump's 28.6% (Silver, 2016). Yet, to the surprise of many politicians and pundits, Trump won the electoral vote and therefore, the 2016 election. He also won much of the religious vote, earning 58% of Protestants/other Christians, 52% of Catholics and 81% of White, born-again/evangelical Christians (Smith and Martinez, 2016). In contrast, he earned only 26% of those who identify as religiously unaffiliated and 24% of voters from the Jewish faith (Smith and Martinez, 2016).

In addition to Trump's success with religious voters and other groups, his victory was also largely attributed to many former Obama voters switching their vote to Trump – the Republican candidate (Inglehart and Norris, 2016). According to a Washington Post analysis, of the nearly 700 counties that twice voted for Obama, one-third flipped to support Trump (Uhrmacher, Schaul and Keating, 2016). Additionally, Trump won 194 of

the 207 counties that voted for Obama either in 2008 or 2012 (Urmacher, et al, 2016). As research continues to unpack the results of this historic election, I will examine its nature in this study through a very specific group of voters – Christian women in two counties that flipped from voting twice for Obama in 2008 and 2012 to Trump in 2016.

Statement of the Problem

I chose the demographic of Christian women as the focus of this study largely due to the press coverage of the group during the 2016 campaign. The media often questioned how this demographic could (or would) justify voting for candidate Donald Trump following the sexually aggressive comments he had made in years prior, which were leaked months before the election (Turner, 2016), or the fact that he had been divorced twice before marrying his current wife. Others sought to understand how this group would justify its decision based on moral views on issues like abortion, for example (Owen, 2016), which Trump previously supported prior to running for office, or the frank and sometimes offensive rhetoric about women shared by Trump as a candidate.

To list just a few of the national stories on this topic, in July of 2016, *The Christian Science Monitor* published an article titled, “How Trump has made this election about evangelical women voters.” In October of 2016, *Politico* published an article, titled, “How Long Can Evangelical Women Stay Behind Trump?” Just a month later, *NPR* produced a segment, “Trump Presents Dilemma for Evangelical Women, Once Reliable GOP Voters.” And just a few days after the election, *The Atlantic* wrote, “Why Christians Overwhelmingly Backed Trump.” This press coverage continued in the months after the election and into Trump’s presidency.

To the surprise of many who questioned how this demographic would vote, including myself, exit polls indicated that some Christian women voted for Trump. Although there is a large amount of press coverage that questioned why this demographic voted this way, there is little qualitative research that dives deeper into the political motivations of this group of voters. Therefore, I aim to add to this area of research through long-form, qualitative interviews with Christian women in Wisconsin, a swing state that aided Trump in his victory. This study is therefore important because the subjects comprise a specific yet somewhat understudied demographic.

A strong indicator that this was an understudied demographic is the lack of exit polls and data on its voting patterns. As already stated, Trump won much of the Christian vote. However, that poll – and many others – does not account for Christian women as a separate population. Because this population has received a considerable amount of press coverage, especially recently during the Trump election and presidency, this lack of specific exit poll data is problematic. Out of the few polls examining women voters by religion, the NBC News exit poll was probably the most significant. It found that Trump earned the votes of 78% of conservative women, 53% of white women and 64% of white Protestant women. While this poll does not specifically account for Christian women, it measures a few of their characteristics.

Research Goals

This study is significant for several reasons. First, as previously stated, the participants in this research (Christian women) comprise a specific yet understudied demographic, especially relating to the 2016 presidential election. Second, through this study, I aim to better understand the current relationship between conservative faith

(Christianity) and conservative political ideology (the Republican Party). This connection, according to research (Butler, 2012; Deckman, 2014; Haidt and Graham, 2007; Harper, 2008; Jones, 2016; Putman, 2010; Schnabel, 2013; Wald and Hill, 1988; Williams, 2010), has been developing and strengthening for decades. Although the relationship between Christianity and Republicanism is strongly supported by the literature, there is little up-to-date, qualitative research that explores the intersection of gender (womanhood) with religion (Christianity) and politics.

Furthermore, the geographic location of the interviews adds to the importance of this study. In presidential elections, Wisconsin tends to follow national trends and vote for the winning candidate (Kraus and Weinschenk, 2015). And although the state has had a long-standing clash of political cultures (Kraus, Weinschenk, 2015), the 2016 election disrupted a recent presidential election trend in the state. In every presidential election from 1988 to 2012, Wisconsin voted Democrat. Yet, in 2016 the state flipped, and Trump won Wisconsin by less than one percentage point (NYT, 2017). This shift largely occurred because 22 of the 72 counties in the state flipped from voting Democrat in the 2012 presidential election to Republican in 2016.

Two of these counties – Kenosha and Racine, both in the southeast corner of the state – are the site of the interviews for this study. Because so many pundits, professionals and citizens were surprised by the results of the 2016 presidential election (Gelman & Azari, 2017), focusing on specific areas like these two counties in which voters shifted from previous years is worthwhile. While this material does not account for all the counties or states across the U.S. that flipped in 2016, it does present a small sample from a geographic area that reflects this larger trend.

Finally, I will use grounded theory to determine concepts and constructs that arise from the interview transcripts (Morse and Field, 1985). Applying grounded action to social or organizational issues often helps to identify solutions to both micro (social psychological) and macro (social structural) problems (Simmons & Gregory, 2003). Therefore, a micro understanding of the selected group of 11 women voters will be pursued through this method; yet, a complete macro understanding of all Christian women in the U.S., Wisconsin, or even the selected counties is impossible to attain from the nine interviews analyzed in this study. This study will, however, aim to contribute to the larger body of ongoing research on the 2016 presidential election, the contemporary connection between religion (Christianity) and politics and the effect of gender on voting decisions and opinions on politics and policies.

Preview of Thesis

First, I will discuss relevant themes and concepts related to the discussion of Christian women and politics and the 2016 presidential election, including the historical connection between religion and politics in the United States, the role of churches in predicting voting behavior and the political motivations and other relevant normative political attitudes that might affect how the selected population voted. I will then review selected literature on the 2016 presidential election – an area of research which rapidly grew as this study was being conducted. I will then describe the history of grounded theory, which will serve as the theoretical framework, and the constant comparative method, which will serve as the strategy for analyzing the interview texts. Finally, I will present the findings, that resulted from a summation of the political motivations of the Christian women who participated in this study and implications for future research.

Chapter 2:

REVIEW OF LITERATURE & THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To better understand the political motivations of a group of Christian women in Kenosha and Racine counties and to achieve the research goals stated in the previous chapter, I will explore three concepts from previous literature in this chapter: (1) the connection between religion and politics, (2) the role of the church in influencing or determining political motivations and (3) other normative political attitudes that might affect vote choice, specifically gender. Finally, in this chapter, I will review some of the relevant literature surrounding the 2016 presidential election and the history of grounded theory, the theoretical framework used in this study.

Concept One: Connection Between Religion and Politics

The first concept from previous literature that will be explored is the connection between religion and politics, which researchers have sought to understand in U.S. politics for decades. Some scholars point to the importance of religion in U.S. democracy. In 1922, for instance, American writer Walter Lippmann, who largely defined the contemporary idea of public opinion, called religion a “public philosophy” that is central to American democracy (Lippmann, 1922). Others have pointed to the importance of religion in American democracy arguing that people identify with certain political philosophies “to reduce fear, anxiety, and uncertainty; to avoid change, disruption, and ambiguity, and to explain, order, and justify inequality among groups of individuals” (Jost et. al, 2003, p. 340). And some have even argued that American

democracy was in jeopardy because of an exclusion of religion-based moral values from government (Esbeck, 1985).

However, others have argued that religion does not necessarily add to American democratic values. American philosopher John Rawls warned against the close relationship between religion and politics. Rather than closely connecting these two ideas, he argued that citizens of faith can participate in the public sphere with one condition: that they support their religious positions and actions with appeals to public reason (Selby & Jones, 2013). In other words, religious positions on issues can only be justified if they appeal to all citizens, including those outside of a religious belief.

As decades of research indicate, the role of religion in the American political sphere has been significant, yet also unsteady and fluctuating. Others (Gottschalk, 2006, p. 358) have argued that the United States has been susceptible to “moral combustions” dating back to the religious philosophy of the Puritans, and that moral issues and economic interests, both of which were main issues in the 2016 election, “have never operated on separate tracks” (p. 356). Since then, many factors of U.S. history have contributed to the relationship between voting and moral beliefs. Perhaps most applicable to this study focusing on the 2016 election are the following factors that Gottschalk (2006, p. 359) identified: “the constant need to renegotiate race and gender relations . . . and the country’s periodic bursts of social chaos, often ignited by waves of new immigrants.”

Christianity and the Republican Party. A main sub-theme of research involving politics and religion in the United States is the connection between Christianity and the Republican Party. While many assume that this relationship is centered entirely

on the single, controversial issue of abortion, research indicates that that is not necessarily the case. The evolution of the Christian Right began with the fundamentalist movement of the 1920s (Williams, 2010), and re-emerged as a political force from Supreme Court decisions in the 1970s (Williams, 2010), most notably *Roe v. Wade*, which legalized abortion.

There were three periods in the recent development of the Christian Right, which eventually led to the Christian Coalition as a social movement, and later, the incorporation of those beliefs into the Republican Party platforms (Watson, 1997). First, from 1978 to 1984, leaders sought to bring moral and family issues to mainstream political discussions (Watson, 1997). Reagan's presidency during this period was also important in bolstering the Christian Right coalition (Williams, 2010). Then, from 1985 to 1986, the emerging groups lost much support and receded from politics (Williams, 2010). Finally, by 1987 the Christian Coalition reorganized and focused on a grassroots campaign for the Republican Party, and in 1995 the group announced the *Contract with the American Family* (Williams, 2010), a set of goals which has permeated Republican Party platforms since 2000.

The election of 2000 made clear the success of the Christian Coalition, with religious voters who regularly attended church voting Republican by a two to one margin (Schnabel, 2013, p. 110). Additionally, with the election of Bush and his platform that included elements from the *Contract with the American Family*, the Christian Coalition had officially gained a voice in politics (Schnabel, 2013, p. 109). Since then, national political figures like Sarah Palin, Rick Perry, Rick Santorum, Michele Bachman and Mitt Romney have embraced religious language in political talk and speeches, changing the

“relationship between the Religious Right and the Republican party into a full-fledged marriage” (Butler, 2012, p. 650).

Other figures like John McCain, for example, have incorporated religious testimony into recent speeches and political talk that preserves the nonreligious character of the political process (Selby & Jones, 2013, p. 159). For example, in what became called the “defining speech of his campaign,” McCain presented himself both as the defender of the Republican Party, but also as a person of deep religious conviction (Selby & Jones, 2013). This allowed him to invite both economic and religious conservatives to join the “new Republican majority,” a conservative but “ultimately secular political movement founded on the principles of limited government, personal responsibility, and strong national defense but also imbued with the pride and optimism of the Reagan era” (Selby & Jones, 2013, p. 158). Research also suggests, however, that the connection between Christianity and the Republican Party stems deeper than the rhetoric of a few politicians.

Deeper, Moral Connections. Another sub-theme within this area of research involving faith and politics digs deeper into the connections between conservative faiths and conservative political ideology. This topic of research attempts to understand how these ideologies’ beliefs are connected, rather than why Christians in the U.S. often vote Republican, specifically. Haidt and Graham (2007), for example, argue that there are five psychological foundations of morality and that citizens and cultures or groups (like religious denominations, for example) vary on the degree in which they build virtues on these foundations. The foundations are: (1) harm/care, (2) fairness/reciprocity, (3) in-group/loyalty, (4) authority/respect and (5) purity/sanctity. Political liberals, they argue,

value virtues based on the first two foundations of harm/care and fairness/reciprocity, while political conservatives value virtues based on all five foundations. Therefore, justice, or the fairness/reciprocity foundation, accounts for half of morality for liberals, but it only accounts for one-fifth of morality for conservatives (Haidt and Graham, 2007). This discrepancy, they argue, could lead to political and cultural differences among the two groups, specifically when voting in presidential elections.

Recently, researchers have argued that religious political preferences in American society are better understood as outcomes of political identification, rather than an expression of religious tradition and political mobilization (Hout and Fischer, 2014). Additionally, the relationship between theology and political attitudes is not simple or straightforward because religious perspectives are rarely fully liberal or conservative in their orientation (Wald, Calhoun-Brown, 2014). Further, religious groups are divided on whether views on morality should change with politics and the world (Wald and Calhoun-Brown, 2014).

An Unsteady Relationship? While Christians have largely voted Republican in modern elections, and most of the research and literature support this, other studies argue that this relationship between the conservative right and the Republican Party might be weakening. This is another important sub-theme to consider under the broader theme of religion and politics. For instance, the 2008 book, “Evangelical Does Not Equal Republican . . . or Democrat,” argues that a new breed of Christian evangelicals might be emerging in the U.S. – a group that deeply cares about economic justice, race relations and the environment (Harper, 2008) – issues that are not main focusses of Republican platforms.

Robert Jones, CEO of the Public Religion Institute, argued in his 2016 book “The End of White Christian America” that the shrinking white Christian voter pool would continue to support Republican candidates; however, their loyalty would help the Republican Party less and less in future elections. Jones (2016) points to declining percentages of white Christians as a proportion of the electorate from 1992 to 2014 and the fact that 89% of the 2012 Romney coalition was comprised of Christian voters; plus, the older they were, these voters were also more likely to be Christian or religious (Jones, 2016). Therefore, while Republican leaders might still rely on this group of voters, the fact that it is a shrinking demographic could be problematic for the party in future elections. This take on the relationship between Christianity and the Republican Party will also be considered when analyzing the interview texts for this study. However, it is also important to consider how Christian churches as institutions influence the way that members vote.

Concept Two: Church’s Role in Influencing Political Views

A second main concept relevant to this study is the role of church communities within the political sphere. For instance, one study determined that churches have been found to possess characteristics that make them “fertile ground for the dissemination of common political outlooks” (Wald, Owen, Hill, 1988). One study that looked at the link between theological and political conservatism found that church participation is positively correlated with electoral participation (Wald, et. al, 1988). Because churches are held in such high esteem and their participation is entirely voluntary, messages – including political messages – from the clergy are dutifully and respectfully heard. Additionally, Americans are more likely to choose a church community based on their

political ideology rather than pick a political ideology based on their religious beliefs (Putnam & Campbell, 2010).

Churches as Social Institutions. A main sub-theme within churches roles in influencing politics is the idea that churches largely act as social institutions. Studies have found that churches might not actually influence members' political choices; but rather, people with like-minded political ideologies choose the same churches (Wald, et. all, 1988). This connects to the idea that people describe political participation in terms of social inclusion versus exclusion (Bergstresser et. al, 2015). But even though churches may act as a form of social inclusion, many church members find it difficult to openly admit that their church or clergy affect their political outlooks and motivations (Wald et. all, 1988). This is partly because much of the political influence Americans receive in their churches come from social networks within those congregations (Putnam and Campbell, 2010); and past research indicates that the people we associate with heavily influence our political views (Putnam and Campbell, 2010). Additionally, religiosity has a stronger connection to partisanship among those with a high degree of socializing within their church, or how involved they are in church-related activities or groups (Putnam and Campbell, 2010). As Wald and Calhoun-Brown (2014) note, religious groups may become politically active because they desire congruence between their religious perspectives and public policy preferences. However, research also suggests that political influences might come directly from church leadership, as well.

Issues Discussed from the Pulpit. Additionally, within the concept of churches influencing political views is the fact that many political issues are discussed directly from the pulpit during church services. However, Americans overwhelmingly agree that

clergy should not be involved in political persuasion from the pulpit. Seventy-five % of evangelicals and 85% of mainline Protestants share this opinion (Putnam and Campbell, 2010). Therefore, although politics might not be discussed directly by preachers at the pulpit, political mobilization still occurs through friendship networks at church communities (Putnam and Campbell, 2010) where likeminded people discuss political issues with each other – perhaps after a religious ceremony or through their other involvement in the community.

As indicated, political appeals are seldom made directly by church leaders. However, in a 2006 survey, Pew Research found that nearly 60% of American churchgoers had heard a sermon on abortion, the second most popular topic, after hunger and poverty (Pew Research Center, 2006). For example, while sermons on topics like abortion might not be labeled “political,” they certainly have political relevance for an engaged congregation. Further, Wald and Calhoun-Brown (2014) write that this institutional context is the reason abortion is a more divisive issue in the U.S. than in Canada, even though there are similar amounts of Catholics and evangelical Christians in each country and abortion policies became relevant around the same time in each country. Churches and religious groups in the U.S., they argue, consciously decide what issues to pursue and how to pursue them through raising awareness, shaping policies, trying to influence the content of policies or monitoring government action. Like the abortion issue, U.S. religious institutions also exert influence over gay marriage policies in the same way, often lobbying these issues and many others directly (Wald & Calhoun-Brown, 2014).

Church Attendance in the U.S. It is also important for this study and the discussion on relevant research on churches influencing political views to consider larger trends in U.S. church attendance. While church attendance in the U.S. has been declining in the past few decades (Pew Research, 2015), there is evidence for the relationship between church attendance and political views. According to the Pew Research Center (2015), 46% of those who attend a religious service at least once a week identify as Republican or lean Republican, while 37% of that group identify as or lean Democrat and 33% have no political leaning. Additionally, 50% of adults who attend a religious service once a week identify as conservative, 15% identify as liberal and 29% identify as moderate (Pew Research, 2015).

Results from the 2016 presidential election indicate that out of those who attend religious worship services at least once a week, 56% voted for Donald Trump, compared to 40% for Hillary Clinton. Of those who never attend religious worship services, only 31% voted for Trump, and 62% voted for Clinton (Smith and Martinez, 2016). Trump clearly outperformed Clinton with the demographic that attends religious services. Thus, the concept of the church's role in shaping political views will be further discussed later in this research. Through this study, it will become clear that the church represents a form of social inclusion. This is a concept worth considering and could be applied to understanding citizens' vote choice in a broader context and as part of a larger community.

Concept Three: Normative Political Attitudes and Voting

In addition to the relationship between religion and politics and churches influence on political views, another broad concept I found relevant to this study is

normative political attitudes. Prior political communication research has shown that some normative political attitudes have been found to influence how someone votes, why voters vote, or whether they vote at all. For instance, political information efficacy, or the level of confidence in one's political knowledge, affects whether one will engage in the process of voting. Additionally, citizens' confidence and cynicism in their vote choice have been found to be the highest after an election (McKinney and Chattopadhyay, 2007). While the interviews for the current study were conducted over a year after the 2016 presidential election, political information efficacy will still be worth considering in analyzing the interviews. This perception of one's political knowledge also differs by gender, with female voters having been found to have a lower political information efficacy than males, even though they might have the same level of interest in the election or politics in general (Banwart, 2007).

I also found the idea of issue versus image as relevant to this study, especially after gathering the evidence from the interviews with the research participants. One study involving this (Johnston and Kaid, 2002) found that U.S. presidential candidates often use ads and rhetoric surrounding issues, rather than image, to appeal to voters. Additionally, issue ads, which discuss policy preferences or provide insight into a campaign, garner emotion more than image ads, which serve to portray the personal characteristics of the candidate (Johnston and Kaid, 2002).

Another study (Dean, 1960) has also found that powerlessness, normlessness and social isolation are all factors that contribute to alienation, and therefore lower voter turnout. For minority populations, political cynicism, engagement and efficacy are factors that contribute to their voter turnout (McIlwain, 2007). Other factors such as alienation

and indifference toward a candidate can affect whether a citizen chooses to vote at all (Plane & Gershtenson, 2004). Ideological stance also influences voter turnout by affecting groups of eligible voters who feel indifferent toward or alienated by the candidates (Plane and Gershtenson, 2004). Therefore, elections that involve a centrist candidate would produce higher turnout.

Nationally, the 2016 election produced the lowest voter turnout in 20 years (Wallace, 2016). In Wisconsin (although the state still ranks high in voter turnout compared to other states), voter turnout for the 2016 presidential election decreased four points from 2012 and three points from what was projected by state election officials (Opoien, 2016). That this happened right after the state had witnessed the highest presidential primary turnout since 1972 (Opoien, 2016). However, it was not wholly a surprise since past research documents that in elections with more extreme candidates (like Trump), fewer citizens become indifferent, but a larger number become alienated, or feel that neither candidate will represent his or her policy preferences (Plane & Gershtenson, 2004). In the 2016 election, neither candidate was considered centrist, which could have also contributed to the low voter turnout. However, because one candidate in the 2016 election was a woman, gender became an important normative political attitude to consider.

Gender. One of the relevant normative political attitudes to consider for this study is gender. While there is a considerable amount of research on political motivations of women voters, there is a lack of research on Christian women. In presidential elections since 1980, a gender gap has existed with women more likely to vote for the Democratic candidate than men (Deckman, 2014, p. 199). However, in the 2008 election, the vote

choices of white Evangelical women were more like their male counterparts because they voted more Republican than other groups of women voters (Deckman, 2014). This distinction between women in general and Christian women is an important topic that few scholars have researched.

Because the 2016 presidential election was the first to include a female candidate nominated by a major party, research has begun to address the effect this might have on voters' attitudes and vote choices. For instance, research indicates that framing the 2016 campaign and election as "historic" by emphasizing Clinton's gender might have reinforced existing differences in how female candidates are covered by the media, and therefore negatively affect voters' perceptions of female candidates and their qualifications (Caughell, 2016). Further, this novelty frame emphasizing Clinton's historic presidential run negatively affected less educated and conservative voters, yet it appealed to other voters, particularly those traditionally underrepresented in politics and those who identify as independent voters (Caughell, 2016). Therefore, the efficacy of this frame is worth pursuing further in normative political attitude research.

Other normative political attitude research related to the 2016 presidential election found that women had much more egalitarian attitudes toward sex roles than men in the election, and that those who voted for Trump held significantly higher levels of sexism, traditional attitudes toward women and significantly lower egalitarian sex role attitudes, compared to Clinton voters (Bock, Byrd-Craven, Burkley, 2017). Therefore, although this research is new, it indicates that sexism could have played a role in the 2016 presidential election. Still, other recent studies (Wilz, 2016) have argued that it is important not to assume that all critiques of political candidates are rooted in sexism. In

doing so, both voters and politicians discredit real instances of hatred, dismissal, sexism and trivialization of women in politics (Wilz, 2016). In addition to this research on normative political attitudes and the 2016 election, broader research should also be considered.

Relevant research from the 2016 election

Because this study is centered on the 2016 election and President Trump's first year in office, it is worth considering other research that has begun to explore its historic nature. In the context of the 2016 presidential election, a few studies and books have examined the normative political attitudes of those who voted – and those who did not. Books like *Hillbilly Elegy* (Vance, 2016) and *The Politics of Resentment* (Cramer, 2016), two books published prior to the election, point to the factors that could have led to the outcome that was so surprising to many. Cramer's qualitative, year-long study of Wisconsin voters point to ideas like rural consciousness, or the idea that people in urban areas are taking and being given more resources than those living in rural areas (Cramer, 2016). This led to many rural areas resenting what she calls the "liberal elite" (Cramer, 2016). This rural-versus-urban divide that Cramer discusses is one perspective through which some Wisconsin voters think about politics. Additionally, even in Wisconsin specifically, during the years leading up to the 2016 election, researchers found that political talk and conversations became increasingly contentious (Wells, Wagner, Kramer, Alvarez, Friedland, Shah, Boed, Franklin, Edgerly, 2017). Other researchers (Kraus and Weinschenk, 2015) predicted that Wisconsin would remain an important swing state in the 2016 election years before it occurred.

Vance's more personal account detailed the decline of the white working class, specifically in the industrial Midwest (Vance, 2016). His book focuses on the deeply-rooted anger and frustration among a specific constituency in American politics – a constituency that largely voted for Trump in the election. Each of these books was especially popular following the election due to the underlying issues that they addressed and those which many pre-election polls and media seemed to miss.

Following the election, researchers continued to uncover the underlying factors that led to the outcome. Sociologist Arlie Hochschild (2016) wrote in her qualitative study of rural, Republican voters in Louisiana how many voters in red states are cynical to federal help, even though they are the states that need it and use it the most. She calls this distinction the “Great Paradox.” According to Hochschild (2016) and as cited in Kreiss et. al (2017), Trump resonated with the “deep story” of citizens who held fears of economic anxiety – the White, working-class declining in social and cultural status and mourning a loss of a perceived way of life. She largely found that Trump fulfilled voters' emotional self-interest, rather than economic self-interest (Hochschild, 2016).

Kreiss, Barker and Zenner (2017) also argued through their study of relevant books – including Hochschild's – published before the election and 123 content analyses published in the journal *Political Communication* between 2003 and 2016 that future research should be completed in the areas of: “people's perception of identity, group status, deprivation, and political power, as well as the role of the media, political actors, and social groups in creating these narratives of American politics” (p. 470). Although some studies point to the underlying attitudes that could have led to the outcome of the 2016 presidential election, research in this field is still scarce.

More recently, scholars have continued to study what other factors could have led to the surprising outcome of the 2016 election. For instance, Gelman and Azari (2017) considered how polling and the news media incorrectly predicted the results. Others asked questions on the role of fake news and social media in the 2016 election and campaign season (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017). Interestingly, they found that fake news was both widely shared and heavily tilted in favor of Donald Trump (Allcott and Gentzkow (2017).

Inglehart and Norris (2016) ask how did “such a polarizing figure and political neophyte surge to become the potential standard-bearer for the GOP – much less have any chance of entering the White House?” (p. 5). They point to two theories, both of which frame Trump as a populist candidate and his election as consistent with other international populist trends. Their explanation – the economic insecurity thesis – explains populism as “a product of growing income inequality, grievances among the losers from global markets, disaffection with mainstream center-left parties, and loss of faith in the capacity of the mainstream parties to respond to these concerns” (Inglehart and Norris, 2016, p. 12). Their second idea – the cultural backlash thesis – asserts that populism is “a social psychological phenomenon, reflecting a nostalgic reaction among older sectors of the electorate seeking a bulwark against long-term processes of value change, the ‘silent revolution,’ which has transformed Western cultures” (p. 13). The cultural backlash thesis essentially predicts that older, more traditional Americans felt threatened by the erosion of their conventional values. Each of these ideas will be considered while analyzing the interview texts later in this research.

Other explanations for the outcome of the 2016 presidential election surround the gender aspect and the fact that Trump was running against the first woman presidential nominee from a major party – Hillary Clinton. For instance, some researchers argue that “the 2016 election implicated gender through Hillary Clinton’s candidacy and Donald Trump’s sexist rhetoric, and activated gender attitudes such that sexism is associated with vote choice” (Bracic, Israel-Trummel, Shortle, 2018, para. 1). Using Election Day exit poll data, they determined that views on sexism predicted support for Trump in terms of vote choice and favorability, with white voters being more highly influenced by the gender factor (Bracic, et al, 2018). Interestingly, they also found that among exit poll respondents, sexism was most important for White women’s vote choice; women who largely agreed that men are better suited for politics than women were much more likely to vote for Trump than women who opposed this idea (Bracic, et al. 2018). Although studies have already begun to research the historic 2016 campaign and election, this is certainly an area of research that will continue to grow by focusing on different aspects and using various methods and theoretical frameworks.

Theoretical Framework

I will use grounded theory as a theoretical framework to guide the analysis of interviews with Christian women following the 2016 presidential election. This qualitative research method is used “for developing theory that is grounded in data systematically gathered and analyzed” (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p. 273). This theory involves generating theory and performing social science research as two parts of the same process (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p. 273). To accomplish this, I will use what Glaser and Strauss (1967) termed the *constant comparative method*, which is the practice

of continuously comparing interview texts as they are collected during a study. While original research that used grounded theory was done by sociologists, these days researchers in a wide variety of fields, including communication, education, nursing and social work (Strauss & Corbin, 1994) draw on the theory.

For this communication research study, I used qualitative approach centered on grounded theory to obtain a deeper understanding of political motivations for the selected Christian women – a “deeper dive” than quantitative research could provide. This method, first utilized and created by Blarney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967), was created to fulfill a need in social research for a method that allowed theories to be generated or determined from material itself, rather than the other way around. Within studies using grounded theory, the “theories” that are developed are not the “formulation of some discovered aspect of a preexisting reality” (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p. 279). Rather, theories are “interpretations made from given perspectives as adopted or researched by the researchers” (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p. 279).

Later writings following Glaser and Strauss’ *Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967) have further explicated the details of this theory. Strauss and Corbin (1994) pointed out that grounded theory researchers are focused on the patterns of action and interaction among various actors, and that the ensuing theories from the research should always be traceable to the texts that gave rise to them. Grounded theorists must begin with inductive logic and move toward abductive reasoning, which accounts for surprises or anomalies in the interview texts being analyzed (Charmaz, 2008). Like most qualitative research, writing that uses grounded theory presents the findings in “discursive form” in the sense that the findings “are embedded in a thick context of

descriptive and conceptual writing” to convey “descriptively also the substantive content of a study far better than does the natural science form of propositional presentation (typically couched as ‘if-then’)” (Strauss and Corbin, p. 278, 1994).

Overall, the relevant research for this study surrounds three major concepts: (1) the connection between religion and politics, (2) the role of churches in influencing political views and (3) normative political attitudes – specifically, gender. Additionally, research surrounding the 2016 presidential election and that which uses grounded theory – which will serve as the theoretical framework for this study – are important to consider.

Chapter 3: METHODOLOGY

This study uses grounded theory as a theoretical framework for analyzing the transcribed interview texts of Christian women in Kenosha and Racine counties – two Wisconsin counties that flipped in Wisconsin during the 2016 presidential election. This chapter will review the methodology, including the selection of research participants, material collection strategy and material analysis strategy.

Like all qualitative research, this study relies on an inductive approach of analysis in which the findings emerge from the interview texts itself (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994), rather than from the researcher prior to the collection and analysis of the evidence. I used a constant comparative method of analysis in this study to interpret the transcribed interview texts for key concepts, themes, phrases and words. Each unit of meaning identified in the interview texts becomes interpreted with knowledge of the researcher's focus of inquiry (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). From this analysis, a better understanding of how a small group of Christian women in Wisconsin feel about certain issues and politics was obtained. The following research question guide this study:

RQ: How do Christian women in Racine and Kenosha counties discuss politics and its relation to their religion, a year after the 2016 presidential election?

Research Participants

The theoretical framework of grounded theory and method of intensive interviewing are both open-ended yet directed, shaped yet emergent, and paced yet unrestricted (Charmaz, 2006). Keeping this in mind, I conducted nine long-form, in-

person, tape-recorded interviews of Christian, women voters in Racine and Kenosha counties for this study. Eight interviews were one-on-one and one interview included three women, therefore the total number of participants is 11. I found the subjects through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. First, I performed a Google search to identify Christian churches in the selected geographic area. I obtained contact information for participants by reaching out to leaders or staff members of the Christian churches in the selected geographic area, explaining the area of research and asking for contact information of any women members of their church who might be interested in participating in this study. Because additional participants were needed after this method, I then employed snowball sampling by asking the interviewees if they knew other women who attended their church or who they knew might be interested in participating in the study and fit the qualifications. Prior to the interviews, I briefed participants on the purpose, procedures, duration, risks and benefits related to this project. I also made them aware of the voluntary nature of participating and granted them confidentiality. Therefore, the women who participated in this research have been assigned different names in this paper.

Why “Christian?” Before discussing how the interviews were conducted and transcripts were analyzed, it is important to explain how I defined the term “Christian” for this study. For this study, “Christian” is defined as any denomination that falls under the Christian faith, but is not Catholic. I made this broad distinction and decision to exclude Catholic Christians for a variety of reasons. Previous research shows a division in voting patterns, beliefs and history among Catholicism and other Christian faiths (including Evangelicals and Protestants) (Putnam and Campbell, 2010). For instance,

Catholics have more diverse congregations than Protestants and other faiths, largely due to the connection between the faith and ethnicity in past generations (Putnam and Campbell, 2010). Even today, many Catholic parishes are centered around an ethnicity – like Italian, Latino or Irish, for example.

Additionally, Catholics have historically held different views on social teachings. Beginning with Vatican II in 1962, leaders of the Catholic Church urged their members to directly apply their Christian values to the world’s problems – like poverty, war, social justice and economic development (Wald and Calhoun-Brown, 2014). Perhaps the most dramatic indication of these viewpoints came with the Catholic Church’s reaction to the Vietnam War, which American Catholic bishops criticized under the “just war principle” (Wald and Calhoun-Brown, 2014). This is defined in the Catechism of the Catholic Church under the headline of “Avoiding War.” It states: “All citizens and all governments are obliged to work for the avoidance of war...The strict conditions for legitimate defense by military force require rigorous consideration... The evaluation of these conditions for moral legitimacy belongs to the prudential judgment of those who have responsibility for the common good” (Catholic Church, 1994). This is not to say that other faiths do not oppose war, but it was a uniquely Catholic position early on, and from its church leaders.

It is for these reasons and others that Catholic voters have tended to vote more Democratic compared to other Christian faiths, which have historically and more strongly associated with conservatism and the Republican Party (Wald and Calhoun-Brown, 2014). As seen in Figure 1, Catholics have voted more Democratic than other Christian faiths in every presidential election since 2000.

Presidential vote by religious affiliation and race

	2000		2004		2008		2012		2016		Dem change '12-'16
	Gore %	Bush %	Kerry %	Bush %	Obama %	McCain %	Obama %	Romney %	Clinton %	Trump %	
Protestant/other Christian	42	56	40	59	45	54	42	57	39	58	-3
Catholic	50	47	47	52	54	45	50	48	45	52	-5
White Catholic	45	52	43	56	47	52	40	59	37	60	-3
Hispanic Catholic	65	33	65	33	72	26	75	21	67	26	-8
Jewish	79	19	74	25	78	21	69	30	71	24	+2
Other faiths	62	28	74	23	73	22	74	23	62	29	-12
Religiously unaffiliated	61	30	67	31	75	23	70	26	68	26	-2
White, born-again/evangelical Christian	n/a	n/a	21	78	24	74	21	78	16	81	-5
Mormon	n/a	n/a	19	80	n/a	n/a	21	78	25	61	+4

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

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of exit poll data. 2004 Hispanic Catholic estimates come from aggregated state exit polls conducted by the National Election Pool. Other estimates come from Voter News Service/National Election Pool national exit polls. 2012 data come from reports at NBCnews.com and National Public Radio. 2016 data come from reports at NBCnews.com and CNN.com.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Figure 1: Pew Research Center, *How the Faithful Voted: A Preliminary 2016 Analysis*

While there are numerous ways to break down the religious makeup of the U.S. electorate, I use a broad definition of “Christian” to encompass all Christian faiths – except for Catholicism – that mirrors the major political polls. Figure 1 illustrates that the Pew Research Center did not begin separating the category of “White, born-again/evangelical Christian” from “Protestant/other Christian” in presidential political polls until 2004. Gallup did not differentiate between “Protestant” and “Christian (nonspecific)” until 1998. Their other options for religious preference, which they have measured since 1948, include: Catholic, Jewish, Mormon, Other or None. Additionally, the American National Election Studies (ANES) separates Americans into four religious categories: Protestant, Catholic, Jewish and Other/None. The fact that each of these major polling organizations either do not (or until recently, did not) separate Christian faiths in their polls further supports the decision to exclude “Catholic” voters from this study.

Additionally, Trump’s rhetoric since the campaign largely appealed to Christians. During a campaign interview, when asked “Who is God to you?”, Trump answered, “God

is the ultimate...So nobody, no thing, no there's nothing like God" (Burke, 2016). In an October 2017 speech, he said he was "stopping the cold attacks on Judeo-Christian values" and said that ISIS was ruthless because they were killing "innocent Christians, along with the vicious killing of innocent Muslims and other minorities" (White House, 2017). And in his first State of the Union Address in January of 2018, he told the story of a North Korean prisoner whose "tormenters wanted to know if he had met any Christians" (White House, 2018). These broad references to Christian values from Trump were common both during his campaign and his first year in office, and they help support the reasoning behind the broad definition of the Christian faith for this study.

Participant Characteristics. Based on reasoning explained above, the 11 participants picked for this study were women who attended six different Christian churches in Kenosha or Racine County. Ideally, I would have obtained a more racially diverse sample since all the participants were White in this study. However, the sample used here is somewhat reflective of the counties where they reside. According to the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey, Kenosha County is 86.9% white, and Racine, 80.1% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016 ACS 5-year estimates). The median age for the participants in this study is 50, and the ages range from 34 to 74 years old. Seven of the participants live in Kenosha County, while four live in Racine County, providing a somewhat diverse geographic makeup among the counties. Additionally, seven participants were married, while four were not, and seven of the women had children, while, again, four did not. Education levels varied slightly, although a majority of the participants (nine) held a Bachelor's degree; four of these nine women also held Master's degrees. The other two completed some college, but did not earn a degree.

Most of the women in this study admitted to being Trump supporters, or said that they had a history of voting for Conservative or Republican candidates. Patricia, for example, was retired and volunteered with the county's Republican Party, but previously worked in the U.S. Navy. Gina, who held a Bachelor's and two Master's degrees, was a former IT project manager; Monica owned a small business with her husband; Susan, who attended some schooling but left to pursue a career in real estate, now runs a non-profit organization; Allison, a recently-divorced mother of three, works as a counselor and part-time as a church secretary; and Jennifer works for the children's ministry at her church. Each of these women expressed some relation or connection to the Republican Party – whether in the current climate or in the past.

Other participants in this study, however, said they considered themselves more moderate, meaning that they vote for both Republican or Democratic candidates. Sarah – a self-proclaimed libertarian – works as a children's director at her church; Megan was a communications director at her church; Gretchen ran an alcohol and drug abuse center; and Dianne was a mother and student, obtaining her second Bachelor's degree in sociology at a local university.

Only one participant – Gwendolyn – openly said she was a liberal, although she cannot vote in U.S. elections due to her immigration status. She serves as the senior pastor at her church.

Finally, six of the 11 women worked full-time, while the other five were either retired or did not work. Their occupations and backgrounds also varied. Their occupations or titles included: executive director of an alcohol and drug abuse center, senior pastor, small business owner, student, counselor, communications director,

children's and ministry director, assistant children's ministry director. Two of the women also formerly served in the U.S. military – one in the Army Reserve and another in the Navy.

Data Collection Strategy

The results of this study stem from nine semi-structured, long-form interviews that occurred in the winter of 2018, nearly a year after President Donald Trump took office. I conducted eight of the interviews one-on-one, and one interview with three participants in a group setting at their church (where they also worked). The group interview, which occurred because the three women who participated in it worked together and therefore wished to be interviewed at the same time, contained the same questions as the individual interviews. This interview, therefore, was somewhat longer than the others to account for each participants' answers. While I initially found it more difficult to obtain rapport with these participants, eventually the interview became much more conversational as the time passed. I tape recorded and later transcribed each interview – the eight individual interviews and one group interview – for analysis purposes.

I asked the participants a series of questions about themselves, their faith communities, politics and the 2016 presidential election. First, I asked them to describe themselves – their age, education, occupation, upbringing, family life and area in which they live. These initial questions helped to build rapport between myself and interviewee. Next, I asked them questions about their church or faith community, their role in it and whether politics is discussed within their church – whether political messages are delivered directly from church leadership or discussed in informal circles and outside

groups. Finally, I asked the participants broad questions about politics today, what specific issues are important to them, their views on President Donald Trump and their reactions to the 2016 presidential election – in their church communities, county and nationwide. I also asked appropriate follow-up questions of the interviewees when relevant. The interview questions were general, but centered on what issues the interviewees care most deeply about and how they would describe the political climate today, specifically as a Christian woman. The full list of questions is included in Appendix A.

Data Analysis Strategy

I analyzed the interview transcripts from this study using the grounded theory method. Following each interview, I transcribed the audio recordings and began to analyze the interviews. First, I read each interview several times and analyzed them for common themes, phrases or ideas. Then, I coded, or “unitized” (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) the themes, phrases or ideas using the constant comparative method, using “focused coding to pinpoint and develop the most salient categories in large batches of data” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 46). To determine these interpretations, I asked questions like: “What are the recurring words, phrases, and topics in the data? What are the concepts that the interviewees use to capture what they say or do?” (Maykut and Morehouse, p. 133, 1994). I also coded patterns and emerging themes in the interview texts, expressed as phrases, propositions or questions (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994). The constant comparative method of analyzing texts was especially useful because it allows for categories and themes to be constantly refined, merged, deleted and added through the simultaneous comparison of all units of meaning obtained (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

The ultimate interpretations that were derived from the analysis of the interview transcripts become the themes and takeaways presented later in the results of this research.

During the constant comparative analysis, I made a conscious effort to keep an open mind in the interpreting and sorting process to avoid predetermining any specific interpretations, while also recognizing that all researchers hold prior ideas, skills and experiences (Charmaz, 2006). Therefore, the research will ultimately somewhat reflect my own characteristics. Additionally, although the interview texts are framed by my own focus of inquiry for this research, the results of this research and others that use the same method should be understandable without the need for any additional information (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The results that follow showcase the themes that emerged from this strategy of analyzing the 11 interview transcripts of the research participants.

Chapter 4:

INTERPRETATIONS AND FINDINGS

To gain a better understanding of the political motivations of a group of Christian women in Kenosha and Racine Counties in southeast Wisconsin – two counties that flipped to support Trump in the 2016 presidential election – this study analyzed qualitative, in-depth interviews with 11 women. I transcribed the texts and analyzed the content using grounded theory and the constant comparative method.

After I analyzed the interview transcripts for this study, three major themes emerged from the discussions, which will be explained in this chapter. First, the women discussed (1) the role their faith and church community plays in their lives, including the role these two play in voting decisions. Additionally, (2) the women discussed their views on the state of politics today and what issues they are passionate about. And finally, (3) the women all expressed their thoughts on President Trump and the 2016 election.

While some of the previous research (explained in chapter 2) supports the findings from the interviews in this study, other findings from the interviews are not directly supported by research. In other words, I found that the marriage of religion and politics – or the modern relationship between Christianity and the Republican Party – is not working well, especially for religious institutions that aim to mold members who use their moral judgement to evaluate policies, politics and politicians. However, the participants' faith was certainly woven through their lives – both personally and

professionally. Most participants were involved in some way at their church, or they volunteer in non-profit, faith-based organizations.

Yet the participants did not use their faith to evaluate policies necessarily, but rather, to evaluate politicians and preach the idea of “not judging” fellow human beings, or specifically, fellow Christians. This was the narrative largely used to describe President Trump; he appears to lack moral character, but some of his policies (if only a few) seem to align with Christian values, or those values taught within their church. These might include abortion, other social issues, or even, taxes and immigration. This line of reasoning might have been used because the participants also discussed the entire political arena as antithetical to Christian values – as a divisive culture with untrustworthy, self-centered leaders who are tearing the country and its citizens apart. Therefore, if the entire political arena is considered un-Christian, then it is easier to accept a character within this arena as also being un-Christian – especially if that character supports values that they also hold.

These topics will all be discussed in more detail in the following sections of this chapter. Each of the three major themes emerged from the interview transcripts through the constant comparative method of analysis. The broad topics discussed in this chapter were largely influenced by the semi-structured interview guide (included in Appendix A). However, each theme and subtheme will be further explained through detailed analyses and the proper use of quotes and examples from the interviews.

Theme One: Role of Church and Religion

The first theme that arose from the interview transcripts that I will discuss in this chapter is the role of the church and religion in the participants’ lives. Overall, the

participants of this study were comfortable discussing both politics and their religion with me. As indicated by the interview guide, I began by asking questions about the participants' church and their involvement in it. This then led to discussions on whether their church and faith influenced their voting decisions and their views on politics and important issues.

The Church and Ideology of its Members. Before evaluating the participants' views on Trump and the 2016 presidential election, it is important to examine their identities as Christian women – the criteria that qualified them to participate in this study. This includes the role that their church plays in their lives. When I asked them to describe their church communities, the participants did not hesitate to use “conservative” and “liberal” labels, both in terms of the religious affiliation and the political views of its members – especially regarding social issues. However, more of the research participants used the “conservative” label than “liberal” to describe themselves, which I expected based on prior research.

“You might have a conservative bend to the congregation,” Monica said. Similarly, “Most people are political conservatives. More social conservative than political conservative,” said Patricia. And Gwendolyn described her congregation as “monochrome” and having “a slightly more conservative leaning in some of their politics.” Allison’s description largely mirrored these responses, yet she was somewhat hesitant to use the term “conservative” when asked to describe her congregation, stating, “I don’t know if I would use the word conservative...bible-believing. I guess people consider that conservative?” she said. These statements largely mirror previous research

connecting conservative, Christian faiths like those of the participants in this study and conservative political ideologies.

When describing their congregations, it is interesting to note that none of the participants directly claimed that most members of their church were “Republican” or “Democrat.” In fact, these political labels were barely mentioned at all in the interviews to describe themselves or their congregations. This therefore indicates that the connection between Christianity and the Republican Party – at least from the participants’ perspectives – was not based on party affiliation or voting for Republican or Democratic candidates. Rather, they described themselves as both Christians and conservatives. Previous research goes a step further to categorize these conservative voters as Republicans; however, the participants do not describe themselves in that way.

Interestingly, the only mentions of congregations being described as “liberal” – whether in religious or political beliefs – were in relation to social issues. Gretchen said that her church was liberal in that the congregation supported “gay marriage, abortion rights, social issues” and was discussing using the church “for a sanctuary for immigration.” Additionally, Gwendolyn said that her congregation was “logically pretty liberal,” adding that they even have “same-gender couples in the congregation.” Compared to the rest of the participants, these two participants’ descriptions were the exception. However, it is still interesting to note that these descriptions of liberal viewpoints are largely based on issues like gay marriage, which was legalized nationally in June of 2015, and which most Americans (62%) support (Pew Research, 2017). In contrast, however, only 35% of white, evangelical Protestants support it (Pew Research,

2017). Therefore, it is not surprising that these participants would still consider support for gay marriage a liberal policy.

While none of the participants overtly claimed that their congregation is largely made up of Democrats or Republicans, research (Putnam and Campbell, 2010) shows that the more that religion guides Americans' politics, the more likely they are to be Republican. Other research (Butler, 2012; Williams, 2010; Watson, 1997; Gottschalk, 2006; Selby and Jones, 2013; Haidt and Graham, 2007; Schnabel, 2013; Jones, 2016; Putnam and Campbell, 2010), as explained in previous chapters, has also noted the relation between conservative faiths and conservative politics – mostly under the labels of Christianity and the Republican Party. Therefore, while none of the participants overtly said they were Republican, their involvement in their church and description of their church communities as being conservative proves the connection between their religion and the Republican Party.

It is also important to note that when describing their faith, many of the participants explained it in terms and relation to the Catholic faith – either stating that it was similar or different from Catholicism in various ways. This separates the rest of the Christian faiths from Catholicism, as previous research indicates by voting patterns and views on social issues. Gretchen, for example, said that her church was “Catholic-light” in the sense that there is no pope, no confessions, and “female priests if you want them,” but there is still “that sort of pomp and circumstance” that she was used to, since she and her husband used to be Catholic. Dianne also said that her church was “not super structured like Catholic or Lutheran,” and Allison said that she specifically chose her current church because it was “not liturgical,” like the Catholic church she used to attend.

These distinctions – as noted by the participants themselves – further justify my reasoning for not including Catholic women in this study. While they describe Catholicism more in liturgical terms than politically or socially, research also suggests that the faith is different in these ways based on how members of the faith vote and think about certain issues.

Overall, the participants in this study described their church and religious ideology in liturgical, religious terms, indicating that they think about the world through a religious lens. Additionally, the “conservative” label used so often, especially compared to “liberal,” indicates that the participants are comfortable thinking of themselves and their church communities in those ideological terms.

Political Discussions Within the Church. Another important sub-theme worth considering is the level that politics is discussed within the participants’ church communities. While most of the participants largely describe their congregation as “conservative” – either religiously, socially or politically – they also note that their church leadership does not explicitly endorse political candidates or take official political stances on issues. This begs the question, therefore, of where the political influence within the Christian faith and local churches arises. As stated in a previous chapter, church members oftentimes find it difficult to admit that their church or clergy affect their political outlook (Wald et. al, 1988). Therefore, it is unsurprising that the research participants would state that politics are officially kept out of their church.

For example, Monica stated that her church itself “isn’t taking any (political) stand or whatever.” Politics aren’t discussed at Dianne’s church, either, she said. “(The pastor) doesn’t say what he would do as far as telling you who to vote for or encourage

people to prayerfully consider.” Sarah and Meghan agreed, stating that politics would never be discussed at their church “officially from any kind of teaching or business.” Allison mirrored this, stating that church leadership “don’t push voting a certain way,” and Gina said that voting and issues are never found in the sermons. Especially since the participants were hesitant to describe their congregations or themselves as Republican or Democrat, it is unsurprising that they would also be hesitant to say that politics are discussed directly from the pulpit.

Yet, if politics are not discussed in church like the participants suggest, how do members of the same church form similar political or ideological beliefs? Previous research also indicates (Wald and Calhoun-Brown, 2014; Wald, et. al, 1988; Putnam and Campbell, 2010; Bergstresser et. al, 2015) that even though politics may not be directly endorsed from the pulpit, political discussions still occur within the community. Many participants indicated that political issues are still discussed among church friends, in outside church groups, after church services, or even – at times – implicitly from the pulpit. Regarding this final method of communication – indirect mentions of politics from the pulpit – Patricia said that certain issues like abortion, or the “a word,” as she called it, are sometimes discussed in sermons. “We’ll talk about how it’s not God’s will – people who get abortions. When (the preacher) talks about politics, it’s general and he says you need to find out what the candidates are saying and you need to get out there and vote.” Similarly, on the topic of politics in sermons, Allison said the following about her church:

During the election, they talked about spending a lot of time in prayer and doing research on candidates and knowing where they stand on issues and making the best decision you possibly can in light of all that information and prayer. But they

do not preach any particular candidate like ‘vote this way, or vote that way, or not at all.’

Gina, who attends the same church as Allison, mirrored this response, explaining that politics are only subtly referenced during sermons. When I asked if politics are discussed in her church, she responded:

Not in the sermons necessarily. Sometimes when (preachers) do, it’s brought up subtly. It’s not like ‘This is how you should believe on gun control, people. No, it’s not like that. It’s not even to that extent. It’s more...I know he has this thing where it’s quite obvious he doesn’t believe in divorce, but he knows that’s the only ultimate outcome. And of course, there’s a biblical relation to that.

Gwendolyn, who is a preacher herself, also said that she sometimes obscurely incorporates political issues into her sermons, especially surrounding the 2016 election. Her sermons, however, seem to incorporate politics more blatantly than the others described by the other participants. She stated:

Yes, it’s spoken about, though maybe not overtly. I would certainly refer to what’s going on in the world, and if that’s the political, so be it, in sermons. I don’t really see the point in serving and not relating to what’s happening now. And there’s a lot happening now. For me, my faith addresses my life as it’s lived now. And it should address other people’s lives and how they’re lived now, and not just stuck in the past. What might the gospel have to say?

When I asked how her congregation responds to these types of sermons, Gwendolyn said that “It’s never a personal attack. It’s more that I will continue to push the gospel. And if that doesn’t fit with your politics, then I will make no apology for that.” Each of these examples of subtle political references from the pulpit or church leadership shows how the participants have a hard time admitting that their church might influence their political views. Plus, as previously explained through the absence of “Republican” and “Democrat” labels to describe their churches or ideologies, the participants do not think of their churches as political institutions whatsoever. However,

the type of references made from the pulpit on abortion, praying for politicians and what is going on in the world seem to indicate otherwise. In some way, politics are discussed, however the participants either do not recognize the statements as political, or they do not want to admit that their church is also a political institution. Therefore, any political references – whether subtle or not – that come from church leadership are not considered in a political context, but rather, an ideological or religious sense.

Another form of communication that may foster political discussions for the participants within their church communities is discussions with members of their church, many of whom they are close friends with. Or, like Gina said, for example, church members might discuss current events and issues in church groups that meet throughout the week. She noted the example of mass shootings and how they might prompt discussions on gun control within these groups. Patricia also stated that politics might be discussed with church members “in the church lobby” following services and Monica said that she discusses politics with friends “outside of church stuff.”

These responses also largely mirror much of the research on churches as political institutions. Putnam and Campbell (2010), who call political discussions within congregations “echo chambers,” write that although explicit “politicking” within churches is rare, politically relevant information still circulates widely through congregations – as indicated through the interviews. This circulation can occur through interactions with friends within the church, sermons that address certain social issues, or explicit politicking – though rare (Putnam and Campbell, 2010). Interestingly, Putnam and Campbell (2010) also claim that “the ‘theological climate’ within a church, or the opinions held by one’s fellow parishioners, correlates more strongly with one’s political

ideology than do one's own religious beliefs" (p. 436). Therefore, if most of the members of a church hold a certain opinion on an issue, election, religious belief, etc., it is more likely that those opinions will correlate to a conservative or liberal political ideology than to a religious affiliation.

Additionally, Bergstresser et. al (2015) found that people often describe political participation in terms of political inclusion – or those who hold similar beliefs as they do. As indicated by the participants' responses, this inclusion could certainly take the form of a church congregation, as many of the congregations described in this research act as social institutions as much as they do religious institutions (Putnam and Campbell, 2010).

However, this idea of the churches attended by the research participants acting as social institutions as indicated by previous research would not be as strongly upheld unless the participants were actively involved with their churches and felt some type of connection to them as communities. In other words, if they only occasionally attended services on Sundays, then they would feel less of a connection to their congregation and faith. However, this was not the case for the participants in this study, as many of them indicated high levels of involvement in their church communities.

Allison, for instance, said that she runs church groups for women and used to work in the children's ministry. Susan said she leads a middle school girls' program on Sunday evenings and assists with a program that helps families escape "financial, spiritual, relational or emotional issues." She said that she also encourages others to get involved in their church since "you grow in your faith when you grow in communion with other people when you're serving." Dianne said she assists with her church's youth ministry. Patricia volunteers at her church's bookstore, and Monica helps run a Bible

study for women. Gwendolyn also said that her church has “a pleasantly high proportion of people who are really involved, rolling up their sleeves.” Other women said they are usually involved, but not currently at the time. Still, others noted that their husbands or children are equally, or more so involved, than they are.

Recognizing the level of involvement of the women who participated in this study is especially important when considering the role of churches as social institutions, specifically in the political context. This shows how the women’s church communities are much more than religious institutions; they also serve as social institutions where they meet and socialize with friends and participate in activities or volunteer work. These church groups, which might not meet within the church building itself, still serve as opportunities for political or ideological discussions to occur. Overall, the participants indicated that politics are certainly discussed within their church communities, even though they were hesitant to explicitly state the connection between their religion and political preferences.

Using Religion to Justify Voting. The research participants also discussed the connection between their faith and politics in their lives, and how they use their faith to justify voting decisions or their stances on policy issues. These beliefs that they discussed, which were centered around religion, involved specific policies like healthcare, taxes, abortion and education, as well as gay marriage and homosexuality – often categorized by the interviewees as “social issues.” Many participants spoke about these issues using religious terms, as they did when describing their church and the ideology of church members. A few interviewees even said that some of these beliefs

stem directly from the Bible. Gina, for example, said that much of politics today and the work of politicians in general is “going against the Bible.” And Susan said that:

The issues of the day are the issues of the Bible, and some people don't see that. They just want to believe what they want to believe without looking at the Bible. And they don't want the Bible to tell them how to feel, and they don't want to have that sway them.

This idea of using the Bible to justify political beliefs is something that I did not include in the literature review, which mostly suggested that political beliefs came from church leadership. In contrast, this idea places more emphasis on the person reading and interpreting the Bible. Interestingly, the participants did not say that their church leaders told them to think this way; rather, they attributed these beliefs to their own interpretation of the Bible. Further, on the topic of gay marriage, Monica also justified her beliefs using the Bible. She stated in the interview:

According to the Bible, homosexuality is wrong. And (my church) has no problem saying that. It's kind of like a, 'Love the sinner, hate the sin' kind of thing. They love the person. But what they're doing, they don't accept. And they're up front about that.

Monica continued, stating that the Bible also contradicts other social issues facing Christians today. “Some of the newer things now that we're having to deal with identity and all that kind of stuff...It's hard because the Christian values don't really support that. It's hard, really hard for people.” In terms of social services and the role of the government in providing for its citizens, Dianne also used the Bible to defend her views:

The Bible talks about how God created us to work, and He told Adam to work in the garden (of Eden). He didn't just say 'Here's this beautiful garden. Just relax and rest. He set aside time for rest – one day a week. I definitely think that He gave us our physical bodies and strength and the ability to do things. Even people who have physical limitations still have a mind, and they can use it.

Another reoccurring issue that participants discussed in terms of their faith was abortion. “It’s just hard for me to believe that anybody would be able to read the Bible and not value life,” said Allison. Patricia also said that her church helped shift her views on the issue – from being pro-choice while in the military to pro-life now. Sarah mentioned during the interview that she was recently following a specific abortion bill and glad to learn that it failed to pass. A few of the women also said that they volunteer with pro-life groups and support pro-life causes within their church communities. Gretchen said that she donates to a group who supports pregnant women who opt out of having an abortion.

I did not find the fact that this issue arose in the interviews as surprising, because previous research (Butler, 2012; Schnabel, 2013; Deckman, 2014; Jost et. al, 2003) has already evaluated the connection between negative views on abortion and voting for Republican candidates, which most of the women admitted to doing (whether in the 2016 presidential election or other past elections) in the interviews. In recent history, for example, Deckman (2014) found that attitudes on abortion were a significant predictor of vote choice in the 2008 presidential election, with those with more liberal views on abortion more likely to vote for Democratic candidate Barack Obama and more conservative views on abortion more likely to vote for his opponent, the Republican candidate, John McCain.

Yet research participants from this study also noted using their religious beliefs to justify their views on other policy areas besides abortion. This is an idea that is not widely discussed in previous literature connecting religion and politics. Gwendolyn, for example, who is not from the United States, said, “In this country I care about healthcare

for all. And for me, that is from my Christian faith and from my understanding of a civilized society, that healthcare should be part of it.” In terms of taxation and social services, Gina suggested:

You take care of your own first. You take care of your own people. The church is already taking care of third world countries. Our church does it. And that’s OK. A church is a nonprofit, but I would like to tax people who invest outside of the U.S. or keep their money out of the U.S. that put their money in Swiss and Mexico bank accounts. I have to pay taxes on my measly, little savings.

Relating to the use of faith to justify political decisions and stances, Putnam and Campbell (2010) found that the “religious traditions whose members say that they draw on religion when making political decisions are also more likely to say that religion influences other decisions in their lives on nonpolitical matters like career, family, and health” (p. 439). While not the direct focus of this study, it can be inferred that because the participants draw on their religion for political decisions, they use their religion for other nonpolitical decisions. Additionally, in relation to the previous section of this chapter on churches as social institutions, Putnam and Campbell (2010) also found that “relying on religion for political decisions and having dense religious social networks typically go together” (p. 439).

Prayers for Politicians. Participants in this study also largely expressed a faithful or religious concern for those holding public office, regardless of their party identification or religious affiliation. Gwendolyn, one of the participants who openly expressed dissent toward Trump, said that she still tries to understand those who disagree with her viewpoint. “Yeah, so I don’t care about Republican or Democrat,” she said. “I just don’t like what comes out of his mouth and the way you respect people.” Dianne also expressed the need for prayer, regardless of political affiliation, by stating: “I tend to lean

more towards conservative, but I think we need to pray for our leaders. And sometimes they have people with influence around them that can influence them positively.”

Similarly, Allison expressed the importance of praying for politicians in her interview.

She said:

I believe that God is really sovereign over everything. So, it's because that is who God allowed to be in that office. And I don't think that God votes. You know what I mean? I think that He is in control of all the little pieces of everything. And so, when Obama was in office, even though I didn't vote for him, I totally supported him. He's there, and he's in leadership in our country. And I'm going to support him, and I'm going to pray for him and do everything I can to help him make this country successful.

Even if the research participants did not mention direct prayers for political leaders, they still expressed a sense of respect for politicians from all political parties.

Like Meghan, for instance, who said, “You know, you've got all the folks who are ‘hashtag not my president,’ but (Trump) is our president. So, we do need to respect him.”

Again, these statements regarding prayers for politicians indicate the importance of the participants' faith in their lives and the lens in which they view the world, including the election of public officials.

Summary of Relation Between Religion and Politics. This first theme of the relation between politics and religion was interwoven through each of the interviews that I conducted with the research participants for this study, with the concepts of (1) the church and the ideology of its members, (2) political discussions within the church, (3) using religion to justify voting and policy preferences, and (4) prayers for politicians becoming particularly relevant.

Key takeaways include the idea that the participants in this study were hesitant to place political labels on their church or the ideology of its members. Rather, they see the

world through a religious or ideological lens, and therefore consider their churches mostly “conservative.” In terms of whether politics is discussed in their church, the women in this study indicated that they discuss politics and current events with members of their church and that issues are discussed from the pulpit, even if they do not consider these issues political, necessarily. While many of the interpretations and findings from this section are consistent with previous research, they remain important in setting up the second two themes from this study, which relate more specifically to the participants’ views on current politics and the 2016 election.

Theme Two: Politics and Current Events

The research participants were willing to discuss their views on current politics in a fairly open and willing way. Concepts that emerged involving the participants’ views on the current state of politics include: a frustration with the divisiveness (both within government and among citizens), the need for greater government accountability due to a distrust in politicians, the role of the news media in shaping political opinions or preferences, and important issues that they care about. Each of these ideas were discussed by the research participants in terms of politics today. However, they were not necessarily tied to their views on the 2016 presidential election (which will be discussed in the next theme).

Frustration with Divisiveness/Polarization. One of the most consistent themes that I found from discussions on politics today and following the 2016 presidential election was the participants’ frustration with political divisiveness – both with government leaders and among U.S. citizens and voters. The participants discussed this frustration largely as a recent phenomenon. I was not surprised by this, as research has

indicated that political polarization has been increasing in recent years (Wells, et. al, 2017). However, even when they noted the newfound nature of this issue, very few of the participants directly connected their frustration with the 2016 election. Rather, this issue was discussed very passionately, yet broadly, without using specific examples. Jennifer, for instance, stated:

I think politics is causing a lot more division than it has in the past, and that goes with them being more biased to their own (views). You know, instead of taking care of everybody, their own agenda. So, it's become very selfish and divisive.

When I asked who she thought this division was between, Jennifer answered, "People in general. Men and women. Just different groups." Sarah also expressed that she thought this division was a more recent trend. She stated:

I think politics have begun to define more people's identity. Because things have become more partisan, more people tend to be like, 'This is who I am, and these are my things.' And they find their identity in that maybe more than they have in the past.

Similarly, when I asked how she would broadly describe politics today, Gwendolyn expressed concern, noting the fact that she was not born in the United States and the uniqueness of U.S. politics:

Divided. Divided and divisive. And lacking gravitas. I mean this as someone from the outside, and I am disappointed that it lacks the gravitas that I think politics deserves because I really look up to the United States and your government, and I made a conscious decision to move here.

Later in the interview, Gwendolyn continued to express this frustration with divisiveness, yet among U.S. citizens, rather than the U.S. government. She stated:

People are not listening to each other, and I think we should continue to try to listen to each other because these are people I want to respect, and I want to understand them. And I would want them to understand my perspective. And I think when we stop listening, we're probably in trouble.

These statements were not at all uncommon in the interviews, as many women expressed extremely similar opinions. Patricia, for instance, was especially direct in expressing this frustration. “We’ve lost civility,” she said. “People are too ingrained in their sides, and we’re not talking. We’re not playing well. And, you know, I pray for our leaders to get wisdom and to use it. But it’s going to take a miracle.” Later in the interview, Patricia continued to express this frustration on a more personal note:

People are so entrenched that they don’t know they’re entrenched. I have a handful of friends who are social and political liberals. And most of them can’t get past talking points and finger pointing. A handful of them can tell me why they believe what they believe. We’re on the same page. Can we talk more? Unfortunately, politicians won’t listen to us. But I have some friends where we can talk, and even when we don’t agree, it’s like, “This is what I don’t agree with you on.” Not, “You’re an idiot.” And I cherish that. But too many people don’t realize that it has become “us versus them” on each side.

Monica also expressed her disappointment in an emotional sense, stating that “the divisiveness is just absolutely tragic,” and that people were the ones who suffered from politicians refusing to come together. “There are very different philosophies. There’s no question. But it just seems like they don’t want to come together. You know? And that’s sad. It’s really sad.”

Three women suggested that this divisiveness could stem from people’s inability to work together, engage in productive dialogue, or accept political outcomes they do not agree with. For example, Sarah said:

I think people are really attached to (politics), and I also think people are really sick of it at the same time. Like, they want it to go away. And at the same time, they want it to go their way.

Similarly, Susan said, “When their candidate doesn’t win, and when they try to talk with someone who’s on the other side...It’s always like, ‘Well my candidate didn’t win, so I’m going to be angry.’” And Meghan said, “So many people want things to happen the

way they want it to happen. That's why they get so upset about politicians. Because when you're not doing what I elected you to do, I'm against you." I found that these suggestions imply that their frustration stems from personal experiences – perhaps conversations or dialogue they have encountered. However, very few of the participants listed a specific example or experience with this frustration. Nonetheless, it is clear that the participants in this study have a negative view toward politics and the effect it is having on many levels of American society – from the highest offices of government to everyday people in casual conversations. To them, this divisiveness was not a new phenomenon.

Interestingly, however, only one participant – Sarah – mentioned this frustration in direct relation to the 2016 election. Further, she alluded that President Trump directly contributed to this divisiveness. She stated:

With all the stuff that came out in the days after the election, it was just so obvious how dividing that election was. The “not my president,” but also the, “all you Obama people are finally getting what you deserve.” I think I still have a fear of how he's not doing anything to promote unity in our country. He's making it more divisive because he doesn't have a filter.

These statements regarding divisiveness in politics are not surprising, as recent research has also noted the divisiveness and polarization among Americans and within politics. Gelman and Azari (2017), for example, write that one factor that could be leading to this divisiveness is increasing polarization among American voters – or, the fact that cross-party voting is declining and members of the party that's not in power hold the president in lower and lower esteem. One effect of this trend, they note, is that the number of moderate voters is declining. Therefore, candidates do not need to focus on moderation and appealing to a broad group of people; rather, they can concentrate on firing up their base – a key factor in the success of Trump's campaign (Gelman and Azari, 2017).

Additionally, according to Gelman and Azari (2017), “If nearly everyone is voting on party lines, then ‘electability’ is not such a concern.”

Additionally, Wells et. al (2017) found that political polarization (through a breakdown of political talk) was especially widespread in Wisconsin prior to the 2016 presidential election. They write:

The politicization of certain experiences, especially occupational identities and perceptions of economic hardship, led many citizens to experience this moment in painfully personal terms. For others, the magnification of political differences, such as by being a political minority in a workplace or home county, led to avoidance of disagreement by cutting off talk.

This is especially concerning because the breakdown of political talk can “sharpen social cleavages” and “curtail cross-cutting discussion,” both of which take a toll on a society’s civic culture (Wells et. al, 2017). The responses from the research participants in this study reflect the concern for increased polarization discussed in recent research. While I was uncertain of the specific cause for this frustration, the women made clear that the frustration stems from a personal level and not from national figures.

Distrust in Politicians. Another common theme I found expressed by the participants was a need for better government accountability, largely due to a distrust of politicians. Again, this adds to the participants’ negative view on government and politics today. This sub-theme was somewhat discussed in terms of the 2016 election and to explain Trump’s victory, yet especially in terms of politics in general. Some of the women also said they do not trust politicians due to the empty promises they have received from their elected leaders. “I think there’s a mistrust with politicians today. I just don’t trust what they say,” Jennifer said. Later in the interview, she continued this line of thought, by expressing how she thought politicians think about public service and re-

election: “There’s not much empathy in our politicians anymore. ‘How can I get elected next?’ Not necessarily, ‘What can I do for my country?’ But, ‘How is this going to work out for me?’”

Similarly, Gina said that politicians rarely measure the effectiveness of their laws, or try to think of new ideas that would benefit the most people. She explained this in terms of her previous career at a corporate organization and witnessing organizations undergoing audits. In the same way, she said, the government should be required to evaluate the effectiveness of laws after they are passed.

When something gets voted into law, we don’t want to admit that maybe it’s not working. And then someone comes along with another idea, and just because they’re not the same party as us, we’re like ‘Oh, you can’t pass that law.’ What’s going to work, regardless of who proposed it?

Regarding the 2016 presidential election, many participants in this research discussed the outcome in terms of this idea of distrust in politicians. Therefore, they said, Americans were willing to vote for a candidate who was not a typical politician. Relating to this, Dianne said “I think people are starting to see that the promise of Democrats to help people get pulled out of their distress...they’re not keeping their promises. I think a lot of people were frustrated.” When I asked why she thought her county flipped in the 2016 election, Jennifer noted this idea. “Maybe we did flip too because of the distrust in our politicians,” she said. “I think people saw this new guy who wasn’t a politician.” Likewise, Monica said that “people were fed up, and the message wasn’t getting through” and Patricia stated that politicians are “too busy playing politics instead of doing what we need them to do to trim the fat. And boy, when we got an outsider, we got an outsider.” Finally, Gretchen said that “People were tired of having non-issues shoved down our

throats...People were tired of being told what they should think, and what is important, and how they don't care enough."

Again, this distrust in politicians, which was expressed by many participants in this study, was not surprising. Much of the research and press coverage (Cramer, 2016; Gelman and Azari, 2017; Hocschild, 2016; Kreiss, 2017) surrounding the 2016 election pointed to this as a factor that led to Trump's victory. As Christian women who seem to follow the rules of their church by attending services every Sunday and going above and beyond these duties by also volunteering and participating in other activities, it appears that the participants place the same type of responsibility on public officials. If they follow their duties as Christians, so should politicians as public servants.

Role of News Media. In addition to the frustration with political divisiveness and a distrust of politicians, the participants in this research study also expressed a largely negative view of the news media and the idea that it holds a liberal bias. Again, this was not exclusively discussed in terms of the 2016 presidential election, but rather toward politics today in general. Like the other sub-themes addressed in this chapter, the fact that these topics were not discussed in relation to the 2016 election indicates that the participants found them important before the election of Trump. For example, Patricia, who stated in the interview that she volunteers with the Republican Party of Kenosha County and therefore supports many Republican candidates, said:

I don't even like to watch FOX News. They're so slanted, and they're not even honest in their slant. And of course, the other news is even worse. I watch as little as possible. I prefer to get my news on the Internet, because at least I don't get the emotional voices going through. Because you watch even the evening newscast, the local newscast, and these people try to sway your opinions.

Similarly, Dianne said that the news is largely “bent,” and overall, “has a liberal bias.” Sarah said that all the news stations “come with a bias, and they can’t report objectively.” Gina said that news outlets should report “just the facts,” something she said many no longer do nowadays. Gretchen even called the news media “a sham,” and Susan said she was so frustrated with the news nowadays that she purposely distances herself from it, actively trying not to consume it. Jennifer also noted the news as being liberal-leaning. She noted:

The media is in the Democrats back pocket. They play into the one side. And then they’re still trying to destroy Trump. They say nothing positive on him. And it’s just frustrating...If I want to hear something from the media, I don’t want them to be biased. I want you to report the facts and the news. They don’t do that.

Yet even though many of the participants in this research expressed negative views toward the news media, most still said that they follow the news in some way or at least expressed its importance in playing a role in politics. “Since I’m a conservative, I follow FOX News more, but I try to get a variety,” said Monica. Gretchen and Sarah both said that they follow BBC News because it is unbiased and objective compared to some of U.S. national news outlets, while Jennifer said she mostly listens to local talk radio because “They’re hometown guys. They’re going to be more real.”

Allison and Gwendolyn both acknowledged the idea that the media influences politics and voters’ views. For instance, Allison said, “The media has a huge influence, and what you’re taking in has a huge effect on how you’re going to see the world.” And Gwendolyn noted, regarding the 2016 election, “I think people were very swayed by the news. It was confirming their beliefs. And that’s dangerous that we’ve gone down the path where whatever you want to call the news...I would prefer more unbiased reporting from both sides.” I found it interesting, however, that none of the participants admitted

that the news might influence their own views. The research participants were clear in their conviction that the news is largely negative and liberal, therefore showcasing their negative viewpoint on liberal ideas.

Many of these responses on this topic, however, are also consistent with research on the 2016 presidential election. Gelman and Azari (2017), for example, claim that the news coverage of this election could further increase the polarization between how conservatives and liberals consume and interpret the news. “The 2016 election, with its sharp divide between traditional news organizations on one side and fake news spread by Twitter and Facebook on the other, seems like the next step in this polarization” (Delman and Azari, 2017, p. 4). This area of research must continue to be examined, especially since the idea of “fake news” is a recent phenomenon, as revealed by the 2016 election.

Important Issues. When I asked what issues were most important to the participants in this research, several themes emerged. Notably, abortion was discussed by many participants, followed by taxes, education, social issues and broad views on less government in general. As I previously discussed in this paper, the abortion issue is widely connected to Christian voters, and the participants in this research largely reflected this connection. Susan even ran a nonprofit that focused on post-abortion care and healing for women. On the topic of her work and the issue in general, she said that “A lot of women who’ve had abortions, they bought into the lies and into the softening with the terminology that the pro-choice side has used over decades.” Additionally, Susan said that pro-life issues are “more than abortion. It’s euthanasia, too. That’s a growing concern in our country and in the world.”

Allison also expressed a connection to this issue through her counseling work.

She stated:

Anytime something is legal, people think it has to be OK. Right? So, when people want to legalize marijuana, they think if it's legalized it must be OK. But, now look at alcohol. That's legal, and everybody knows the damage that can be done by alcohol...drunk driving and all kinds of stupid, crazy behavior...fights and bad things. So, just because it's legal doesn't mean that it's good for you or that it's going to go well. And so if abortion is legal, people think that it must not be that big of a deal. It must be OK. But then these women come into counseling, and their little lives have been affected by that, and they are completely wrecked because of a decision they made that they thought wasn't going to be a big deal. But they've ended a life, and that's something that haunts a lot of them.

Both Susan and Monica brought up the recent pro-life march in Washington, D.C., each expressing how they were pleased that Vice President Pence was in attendance and that Trump spoke to the marchers from the White House. "It doesn't matter who the president is, just the fact that the president spoke," Susan said. "He's hearing us, and he's reacting to the people. That's what a president is supposed to do, so I was totally thrilled." The fact that so many women framed this issue as important to them indicates that the pro-life cause remains strong among the research participants. Again, this was not discussed in terms of the 2016 candidates, which proves that it has been and will continue to be an issue for both the Christian church and therefore, politicians to consider.

Of the seven women who said abortion was one of the most important issues they care about, only two expressed softer views on the issue. For instance, Gwendolyn said, "I'm not in favor of abortion just because it's an inconvenience. But I do know that there are some circumstances such as rape, and I think you should have the right to choose." Additionally, Dianne said that while she is "anti-abortion," she also thinks that Christians need to focus on giving women resources once they give birth:

If you're going to encourage a woman to give birth to her child, then come along beside her. Give her resources. Give her parenting skills, because these children are suffering the abuse and trauma and neglect because they were born to unfit parents. We encourage this woman to have this baby, but then this baby could suffer severe neglect because all we care about is whether she had her baby.

Although these two statements are still anti-abortion, they are more moderate than the other participants' views, which is interesting considering the close relationship between this issue and the Christian faith and Republican Party. In addition to abortion, however, many participants stated that "taxes" was an important issue for them. Yet, they did not expand on this issue as much as they did on abortion – perhaps because abortion is more widely discussed in their church communities. Rather, most of the participants simply mentioned "taxes" as being an important issue for them. For example, Patricia posed the question: "What do they want to do with my tax dollars? Do they want to fix the roads, or do they want to modify the roads?" Similarly, Susan mentioned that there should be "more tax breaks for the lower class, and then also for those who are below the poverty line," and Allison, admitting that she was not completely sure how tax law worked, said she'd be happy if she got a bigger tax refund.

The idea of "taxes" as a broad idea is often discussed by politicians, so even if the participants do not feel strongly about a specific tax policy, it is not surprising that they would mention it as an important issue. Gina was the only participant who went into this issue in length during her interview, even connecting taxation with topics discussed in the Bible, which was an important sub-theme already discussed in this research. She stated:

You know, you do a tax reform, and yes taxes are good. It says in the Bible, they're good. But how does it benefit for (a large corporation)? They keep pushing people out, people with Visas, opening plants abroad, not in state, and they get tax breaks. Really? ... You take care of your own first. You take care of your own people. Yes, you can still do what the church is already taking care of third world countries. Our church does it. And that's OK. A church is a non-profit,

but I would like tax on people who invest outside of the US or keep their money out of the US that put all their money in Swiss and Mexico bank accounts. I have to pay taxes on my measly little savings. You know? Maybe I'll just put it in my mattress, I mean seriously. And corporations that are opening up and going to other countries, they're getting a tax break for that. Why should they? You just laid off how many people? Just like Foxconn. It irritates me. They're getting a tax break and they're bringing their workers. Why are you giving them a tax break?

Finally, many participants in this study expressed “social issues” as being important to them. These ranged from policies like welfare, education, homelessness and protecting veterans. Dianne spoke on a few of these when I asked her what issues she cares most deeply about. She responded:

Education is pretty big for me, and social issues like what we're doing to help veterans and homeless people and like that...I think a lot of our systems are incredibly broken. They're mismanaged. Trying to throw money at things, and usually you don't know what people's motivation is where they say they're trying to help or that they care about an issue. But are they willing to get their hands dirty? I just think there's corruption in politics. So, there's misspending of funds, and maybe people get elected to be head of whatever program. But do they really have a passion for it? And are they really making changes?

Dianne also said that she thought the church was best equipped to deal with these issues – not the government and that many churches need to step into this role. “I think if we were really following Jesus, we wouldn't have so many social problems,” she said. Gina also noted the education system as an important issue for her – specifically higher education and the struggle that many Americans have in paying off student debt. And Susan also mentioned education as one of her main issues, yet not in the sense of student loans or the role of the government in the education system. Rather, she said that American society forces students to go to college, instead of allowing them to discern the right path for them. “People can make education an idol and think that education is the be-all-end-all, instead of searching for what God has in store for them and the truth God has for them.” She said that while she plans on sending each of her kids to college, she

worries that this expectation surrounding higher education clouds the paths for many young Americans. These ideas surrounding social issues seem to indicate that the participants would like less of the responsibility to fall with the government, and more to fall on individual churches. Similarly, many Republican politicians often speak on limited government in this context.

Summary of politics and current events. The goal of this chapter was to set up how the participants think of politics today outside the context of the 2016 presidential election. The participants expressed views that ranged from broad ideas on frustration with divisiveness in American politics, a distrust in politicians and a negative view of the media, to more specific policy preferences regarding abortion, taxes, social issues and other policies. Notably, the participants said that divisiveness nowadays ranges from politicians to people they encounter daily, that politicians cannot be trusted because they no longer work to serve their constituents, and that the news media has a liberal – and therefore, negative – bent to it.

Like the previous theme on religion and politics, this theme of important issues today showcases how the participants in this research view politics and current issues mostly through a religious lens. For instance, political leaders do not fulfil their responsibilities as good Christians (like themselves) do. Additionally, the government is overstepping into churches realm of administering social services. And, abortion is both a main political and religious issue because of their faith. Again, the questions I asked that led to these responses were open-ended and allowed for appropriate follow-up on the issues.

Theme Three: Politics in the Age of Trump and the 2016 Election

The final theme I will discuss in this chapter is the participants' views on politics through the lens of the 2016 election of Donald Trump. While the ultimate focus of this study is to examine the political motivations of Christian women following the 2016 presidential election, the interviews themselves did not turn to this topic until the last section of interview questions. I determined that it was first important to understand the research participants as people and as voters – specifically through their identity as Christian women, which were the designated characteristics that qualified them to participate in the study. Setting up the identities of the participants prior to explicating their views on the 2016 election also aids in placing this study into a broader body of research on the connection between faith and politics. That being said, there were notable findings from the research related to the 2016 election, specifically the distinction between Trump's personality and his policies and an anti-Hillary Clinton bias, which was also related to broader women's issues. The sub-themes that I will consider in this chapter are: the distinction between Trump's personality and his policies, an anti-Hillary bias, ideas surrounding gender and voting, and whether their views changed since Trump's campaign through his first year in office.

Distinction Between Trump's Personality and Policies. Perhaps the most notable finding from the discussions on Trump and the 2016 election/his first year in office was the clear distinction that the research participants made between the current president's personality, of which they largely spoke negatively of, and his policies, with which they largely agreed. This distinction was clearly made by most participants, although there were a few outliers. Even some women who clearly did not defend Trump

or vote for him still defended some of his policies. Others, like Jennifer for example, expressed that they could overlook personality traits in exchange for policy preferences.

She stated:

I voted for him. But I vote for major issues. I don't vote necessarily on moral issues. I feel that it's not my place to vote somebody in on their moral judgement. I'm voting for someone because of their leadership skills, building a wall, our medical system. Those are the two major things for why I voted for Trump. For immigration and healthcare. And taxes. Those were the big major things for me. It was more of a logical vote than an emotional vote for me as a Christian woman. I don't vote on emotion. I vote on black and white.

One of the main questions that inspired me to perform this research was how Christian women could justify supporting Trump based on his attitudes toward women, views on immigration, comments made about the poor and actions that seemed to contradict their Christian faith. The short answer, based on their responses, is: they didn't. Rather, the women in this study separated Trump as a moral being and Trump as a president – or, in other words, his personality and his policies. Continuing along this idea, Gretchen expressed a similar opinion as Jennifer's, making a clear division between her views on him as a person and her views on his leadership and policies. In the interview, she stated:

Well the economy is good. Jobs are good. So that's hard to criticize. I don't feel any safer, but I can't blame him for that either. He's the president, not the sheriff. I think he is a disaster as a human being...But I think it's hard to argue with the politics of him. You can keep throwing stuff at him and nothing is sticking, and nothing is sticking. And we're trudging along as a country and actually doing fairly well. So, it's hard to say he's the worst president, but he's not a likeable person. It's really sad for me, and it's hard to separate that, because if I don't like him, then he must be a bad president. Well, it doesn't really work that way.

Other women had similar views on the president. Monica, for instance, said, "It's interesting because I think currently we have someone who you might not personally like,

some of his characteristics, but I believe in his principles and what he's doing. And I see good things happening." Later in the interview, Monica also stated:

The bottom line is, if he is going to change the economy for the better and he is pro-life, and I mean a lot of the things he stands for, I do agree with. Sometimes with his tweets and his conversations and whatever, I think he could be a little more presidential. But that's who he is.

And further, Gina stated during her interview:

I may not like Trump as an individual, how he does his own lifestyle or whatever. But that's not why he's there. He's known to me strictly as somebody that has businesses... You make business decisions because that's what the government is. It's a business decision.

These types of justifications that distinguish between Trump's attractive policies from his unattractive personality were extremely common among the research participants in this study. These justifications also bring into question the role of morality in the political sphere. As indicated in previous chapters, the relationship between Christianity and conservatism seems strong. But, is it strong enough that Christian voters will vote for a Republican candidate, regardless of the candidate's behavior and Christian morality? Based on the interviews I conducted for this study, it seems so. A few of the participants even defended both Trump's personality and his policies. Like Allison, for example, who said she was happy her taxes went down but otherwise did not see a change in her life since Trump took office. She stated:

Trump is sort of really reality-based. When I see the decisions he's making, to me it feels very much like what I've learned about how I should be so that I am the most real person that I can be, and that I'm protecting myself. And he's doing that for our country. I feel like he's protecting us.

Similarly, Susan, who said she was especially pleased with Trump's pro-life stances, said that Trump "doesn't care about all the negative things people say. He just keeps going with what he wants to do, and that's what we need." She also noted that

Trump's sexist comments were not unique to him. Rather, they also exist in our broader culture – in politics and “in every layer of society,” she said. “I don't discount the president for things he said because I see it so regularly,” she continued.

If the relationship between the Christian faith and Republican Party is strong enough where the participants in this study can justify voting for a seemingly “un-Christian” politician, then how does this relationship play out – both within churches and for individual members/voters? I will further discuss as to why this is in the next and final chapter of this study.

Continuing the topic of Trump's personality and his policies, although they were the minority, there were a few women who stated they could not defend Trump's personality nor policies. Gwendolyn, for instance, said she disapproved of both his policies and rhetoric. In her interview, she said:

I have a real concern that anyone can even talk and say that that's OK. I really don't care who the president is or what party they're from, but I'm looking for someone who is a role model. And I'm surprised that more Christians wouldn't say that that's not OK.

Meghan and Sarah also agreed, stating that they voted third party because they could not decide between Trump and Clinton. On this topic, Sarah stated:

I do worry about how we appear on the world stage based on some things that he's said and done. That's a concern for me. Not that I think Hillary would have done much better, but I do wonder about the outcome, and mostly I wonder...It's not so much the decisions he's made but the arrogance in the way that he goes about them makes me concerned about the backlash and backswing that will happen in the next election. Because no one likes a sore winner. And I feel like that's the attitude that comes out of there sometimes.

Meghan, who was in the group interview, agreed. She stated, “He's been doing what he said he was doing, but I'm with her on the whole arrogance part of it. And there's stuff he said he wants to do that I don't agree with.”

However, excluding Gwendolyn, Sarah and Meghan, every participant in this study could justify at least one of Trump's policies. Oftentimes, they used lower taxes and the economy as a justification for voting or defending the president. This is not entirely unexpected, as many of the interviews were conducted shortly after Trump signed a sweeping tax reform bill into law. Monica, for instance, said, "The job market is getting much better. So, you can't deny that." Sarah said, "I'm never going to complain about taxes going down. That's always great." Dianne echoed this and stated, "I'm really happy about the job creation and getting more on my tax return," and Allison said, "Maybe I'll get a bigger tax refund, and then I would be happy." Additionally, as already stated, Jennifer and Gretchen also used taxes or the economy to justify Trump's policies. During the discussions on the 2016 election, this was the major sub-theme that emerged from the interviews.

Anti-Hillary Bias. Another theme that arose during discussions about the 2016 election and Trump was not about Trump at all, but rather, his opponent Hillary Clinton. Although Hillary Clinton won 54% of the women vote nationally (Huang, Jacoby, Strickland, Lai, 2016), the responses from the women in this study indicate that as voters, the women in this study might better align with other normative political attitudes than their gender – like their Christian faith or how often they attend religious services, for example. New York Times (2016) exit polls indicate that 58% of Protestants or other Christians voted for Trump. Additionally, 56% of those who attend a religious service once a week or more also voted for him over Clinton (Huang et. al, 2016), and CNN exit polls indicate that Trump also won among white women – earning 52% of their vote, and among Republican women – earning 88% of that group's vote. Regarding the participants

in this study, they seem to align more with these numbers than with their gender. This was specifically indicated through their negative views on Clinton. It is important to note, however, that the interview questions did not focus on Clinton. Rather, the research participants chose to bring her up in the discussion on the 2016 election.

For instance, during her interview, Gretchen said, “At some point it was like, I don’t think Hillary was qualified. I don’t think being the wife of a president makes you qualified. So, there’s that.” Similarly, Gina said, “Not to mention Hillary...I mean what she did in that embassy...sorry. And those emails...I could get fired for less than that.”

Jennifer said that Clinton “had a lot of baggage” and Patricia said:

It was time for a woman, and had it been a different woman, it probably would have been. There were a lot of people who couldn’t stomach Clinton who voted third party like I did, or said that Donald was the lesser of the evils. I’m tired of voting evil. Lesser of the evil is still evil.

Monica noted the topic of pro-life issues when justifying her decision to vote for Trump instead of Clinton. She stated:

I voted for him mainly because...well, I believed in some of his policies. I didn’t care for him particularly, but I was so against his opponent. And I am grateful every day that she was not elected because I think she would have done much greater harm for our country at the rate she was going. And talk about dishonest...I didn’t trust her. I didn’t believe in her. I didn’t believe that she...she was anti-life, and a lot of things about her I didn’t like.

A few other women also noted pro-life issues. During her interview, Susan said that she was surprised so many Christian women could “swing to Hillary with her being so pro-choice, and supporting abortion in the last month. And Sarah also noted, “I couldn’t in good conscience vote for Trump. But I also couldn’t in good conscience vote for Hillary as someone who cares a lot about the pro-life cause.” Later in the interview, Sarah expanded on this idea:

Depending if you had a different woman in that position, you might have had an even bigger swing towards the left. I think that a lot of Christian women still had a negative view of Hillary back from whether it be the Monica Lewinsky scandal or just who she is as a person. So, I think had it been a different woman running, you would have seen an even bigger swing in that direction.

Gretchen even used her faith to justify her vote for Trump over Clinton. She was also the only participant who mentioned the appointment of a Supreme Court justice as reasoning for voting for Trump over Clinton. I found this somewhat surprising since this was a common theme in the media and in the candidates' rhetoric leading up to the election. She stated:

Making that decision was really hard. And I think what it came down to...it came down to my faith. It came down to if Hillary Clinton is president, she gets to appoint at least one, maybe two Supreme Court justices. And that honestly was the bottom line. She gets to appoint two Supreme Court justices, and we're going to hell in a handbasket. And I don't trust Trump. I think he's narcissistic at best.

So, considering Clinton was not the subject of the interviews, why did the participants speak so negatively of her, especially in comparison to Trump? It is possible that the relationship between Christianity and the Republican Party is so strong that the participants could look past Trump's wrongdoings and misbehavior, but not Clinton's (or her husband's). However, based on the findings I already presented in this chapter, the participants did not vote for Trump as a person, but rather, for his policies. Perhaps because they chose to look past his personality for his policies, they felt the need to justify this decision by demeaning the personality of his opponent – Hillary Clinton. I will further explore these questions regarding the participants' anti-Hillary bias in the next chapter.

Gender and Voting. In addition to critiquing Clinton and stating reasons for not voting for her, many participants also expressed discontent that anyone would vote for

Clinton, or any other candidate, solely based on gender. The topic of gender and voting was another sub-theme that arose from the discussions on the 2016 election, but was not in the interview guide. I found the statements made on this topic as especially surprising due to the timing of the interviews in relation to the #MeToo movement and widespread discussion of gender issues and equality. Nonetheless, the women in this study were alarmed that gender would influence voting at all. Again, since most of the participants voted for Trump, this discussion on gender and voting could have stemmed from a need to justify their decision. For example, when I asked about politics from her perspective as a Christian woman, Allison answered, “I don’t feel that I’m treated differently or that politics has a different approach toward women than men. I don’t feel any inequality or anything.” Additionally, Dianne said, “I would never vote for someone based on gender, but I wouldn’t be surprised if some people did.” Later, in the interview, she said:

I think a lot of women are like ‘Well, my daughter can do anything, so a woman can be president. I want to show her that.’ And there are a lot of Christians that are pro-abortion and things like that. You know, a lot of pro-liberal things. So, I don’t fault them.

Meghan further expanded on this idea, stating that she doesn’t think that Christian women would vote for Clinton “just because she’s a woman.” Gina and Monica also expanded on this, expressing that women, in fact, were not unequal to men nowadays like recent movements suggest. When I asked what she thought about voting based on gender, Gina said:

I think it’s stupid. That’s my personal opinion. It’s not a matter of gender. It’s a matter of who’s qualified best. If it happens to be a woman, OK. But that’s not a criterion. And unfortunately, you hear all about the glass ceiling, and that’s unfortunate. There are female CEO’s and female senators. So, I don’t see it as totally impossible. Just be qualified in what you’re doing.

Monica later said that she disagreed with some of the recent women's movements – specifically the Women's March, which she claimed was purposely scheduled the day after the March for Life in Washington, D.C. to take media attention away from pro-life movements. She later stated that she came from a generation where women might not have had the same opportunities; however, today, that is not the case. She further stated, regarding the Women's March:

Well first of all, a lot of them are not pro-life – a lot of them. I think their equality is kind of ridiculous. I mean I think women do have equality today, and I think they've carried it to the extreme. And I think women have the best of both worlds when you think about it...I came from a generation where women were looked at as not having the same opportunities, although I can't say that. I came through high school or had friends in high school or college that did amazing things as women. So, I never say it. But I know that, you know, years ago there was more of a restriction on women and what they can do. And today, I think it's pretty wide open. And I think it's really whatever you want to go for, frankly. I think women in most cases have the same opportunities (as men).

Interestingly, this discussion on gender and voting and the idea that women are more equal to men than society suggests contradicts previous research and literature, which shows Christians being more conservative and accepting of more traditional gender roles. However, a woman has never been the Republican presidential nominee. Therefore, the participants, who seem to usually vote for Republican candidates, have never been given the chance to place such a vote. The idea of gender and voting, however, is an important sub-theme that arose with the discussions on the 2016 presidential election.

Changing (or Unchanging) Views. Finally, this study largely indicates that those who admitted to voting for or supporting Trump in 2016 and during his campaign had more positive views about him when the interviews took place in the spring of 2018. Consequently, those who did not support Trump in 2016 expressed either no change in

their views or more negative views during their interviews for this study in 2018.

Therefore, regardless of the participants' feelings toward Trump, their feelings mostly became stronger during the time between the election and when the interviews for this study occurred. The strengthening of views toward Trump is the final sub-theme that formed from discussions on the 2016 election.

Susan, Dianne, Jennifer, Monica and Sarah – all of whom expressed support for Trump during their interviews – said that their opinions had further improved since the election. “Stronger supporter than ever,” Susan said. “He’s doing things he said he would do, and he’s not lingering with the bad publicity.” Allison reiterated this. “I think (my opinion has) become more positive,” she said. “It’s gone better than I thought it was going to go,” she later added. Additionally, Monica said she was “pleasantly surprised with what he’s gotten done so far, with all the media,” and Dianne said that her opinion was also better because “things are improving a lot.”

The fact that these views became even more positive presents the question of whether any scandals that arose once Trump took office affected the participants' approval of the president. Trump's first year included accusations of sexual assault, accusations of extramarital affairs and, once again, “un-Christian” comments – such as calling places like El Salvador, Haiti and Africa “shithole countries” (Cillizza, 2018) where the U.S. should not accept immigrants from. However, as discussed earlier in this chapter, the women in this study did not vote for Trump as a person; rather, they voted for his policies. Therefore, I found it unsurprising that their views became stronger even though he became more divisive.

On the other hand, Sarah, Meghan, Patricia and Gina – those who expressed more neutral views on Trump – said their opinion largely stayed the same. These women were those who justified some of his policies or characteristics, but did not fully support him like those previously discussed. For example, Meghan said, “My opinion hasn’t changed. And as somebody who didn’t vote for him, it’s like alright we’ll deal with this in four years.” Similarly, Patricia stated, “I’m still on the fence. And I probably will be for the next two years, and then I have to make a decision” and Gina said that she is “still watching what he does” before making her determination. Lastly, Sarah said, “My opinion has kind of stayed the same, but it’s made me think about things that I didn’t always pay attention to.”

Interestingly, Gretchen was the only participant in this research whose views on Trump were initially neutral, yet became more negative. She was also the only participant who provided me with an in-depth answer when I asked if her views changed at all. To answer this question, she stated:

Oh gosh, I think (my views) have probably changed for the worse. Like, I thought, how bad can it be? And I’m like, oh it can be this bad. And it’s not political bad, but again the sort of just...stop. If somebody would take away his Twitter account, that would really go far... It would be nice if he cared about common courtesy. That would be awesome, and it would have gone really well. It would have taken him much farther in the presidency. Obviously in his life, he doesn't need my advice.

Finally, as I previously stated, the only participant who expressed entirely negative views on Trump – Gwendolyn – also was the only participant who said her views became more negative (besides Gretchen). When I asked if her views changed, she said, “I think I was willing to give him a go. My opinion is that I’m concerned.” This topic of “concern” was a common theme in Gwendolyn’s interview. She said she was

“concerned” multiple times for the following reasons: “politicians being celebrities,” “racism and sexism in our societies,” “healthcare and the right of everyone to have it,” “that we might be led into war,” and “with the deep rhetoric and confusion that’s coming out from both sides.” Therefore, I did not find it surprising that Gwendolyn said she was “concerned” when I asked if her opinion of Trump had changed since the election.

Summary of Politics Today. Discussions directly relating to the 2016 presidential election and Trump’s first year in office centered around four main issues: the distinction between Trump’s personality and his policies, an anti-Hillary bias, gender issues that counter current gender movements and the fact that their views on Trump – whether negative or positive – grew stronger since the election. These findings present many opportunities for researchers to continue examining the relationship between Christianity and the Republican Party. Except for two women, all the participants in this study either supported Trump entirely, or at least some of his policies or aspects of his personality. Additionally, only one participant indicated that her views on Trump changed for the worse since the election. I will explore the questions and theories that arose from this theme in the next chapter.

Chapter 5:

CONCLUSION

This research is unique in that I seek a qualitative understanding of a specific and under-studied group of participants: Christian women in two Wisconsin counties that flipped in the 2016 presidential election from Obama, the Democratic nominee, to Trump, the Republican nominee. I took into consideration gender, religion and how each of these characteristics could have affected a specific group of voters. Inspired by press coverage that seemed to focus on this group surrounding the 2016 election, I sought to better understand the deeper, political motivations of Christian women.

Perhaps the largest takeaway that I found from this research is the idea that this constituency is more complex than how it is often displayed in the media. While a majority of participants in this research voted for Trump, very few fully support him as both a person and a politician. And while their faith guides many of their decisions – including, oftentimes, who to vote for – these decisions are largely grounded in deep-rooted beliefs that embody who they are as people and as voters.

One of my goals for this study was to examine the relationship between Christianity and the Republican Party through the perspectives of the research participants. Based on their support for Trump or his policies, and religious justifications for policies and voting, I found that this well-developed relationship seems to remain strong. However, I questioned how this relationship translates to and affects specific voters like the participants in this research? Or, in other words, how could Christians justify voting for a man who acted in an “un-Christian” manner?

The responses from the participants in this study indicate that Christians do not vote for Republican candidates because of the candidates themselves or the candidates' moral character. Rather, they vote for the policies and issues that Republican candidates support – like abortion, for example. Even other issues like taxation, education, or social issues like gay marriage, were discussed by the participants through a religious lens, indicating that they were more attached to Republican issues in the 2016 election than Trump – the Republican candidate. This finding expands on previous research (Johnston and Kaid, 2002), which found that rhetoric surrounding issues, rather than image, garners a greater emotional appeal and connection to voters. The evidence from this study supports this research (Johnston and Kaid, 2002) and suggests that the women voted for Trump's and the Republican Party's issues, rather than his image.

I also found that many Christian churches act as more than just religious institutions, but also social institutions (Putnam and Campbell, 2010) where ideas on many topics, including politics, are discussed. This has also been addressed in previous research. What's clear from this study, however, is that the religious voter continues to be an important aspect of American politics, and additionally, that the relationship between Christianity and the Republican Party remains strong. Like Williams (2010) found, the *Contract with the American Family*, which contains religious values, has permeated Republican platforms since 2000. However, it will be important to examine whether this contract continues to influence Republican platforms, or whether the relationship is already so strongly formed that platforms may start to sway from these values without electoral repercussions.

If a polarizing figure like Donald Trump could not shift these trends between Christianity and the Republican Party, I am not sure what will. It was clear that the participants in this study were largely “anti-politics” through their expression of distrust in politicians and frustration with political divisiveness. However, they could still justify voting for a politician like Trump due to his Republican beliefs and values – not because they supported him as a person, but because they supported his policies, first heard through sermons at their church.

I therefore believe that Christian churches in the U.S. are helping frame political issues in a religious sense, which then attracts voters like those in this study to the Republican Party and Republican candidates – regardless of the candidate’s morals. When a preacher discusses a policy, it is considered religious; and therefore, the participants think favorably toward it. However, when a politician (Republican or Democrat) discusses the same issue, it is often unfavorable because it is considered political. This distinction embodies the separation of church and state on the most personal level.

Another connection to previous research involves the deeper connections that the participants held to the Republican Party, since they seemed to vote more for Republican ideas and policies, rather than the individual candidate. As discussed in the literature review, the foundations of morality that conservative voters hold include: (1) harm/care, (2) fairness/reciprocity, (3) in-group/loyalty, (4) authority/respect and (5) purity/sanctity, while liberal voters build virtues only on the first two foundations (Haidt and Graham, 2007). Many of the women in this study especially discussed issues involving

authority/respect and purity/sanctity, indicating that this line of research should continue to be examined.

However, while it was clear to me that the participants framed political issues in a religious sense, or perhaps through the purity/sanctity psychological foundation of morality, they were hesitant to accept the idea that their church could influence their political views, or even prompt them to vote for Trump. This justification could possibly be explained through the cognitive dissonance theory, or when “a situation involving conflicting attitudes, beliefs or behaviors” causes someone to justify an action or decision to reduce their own discomfort (McLeod, 2014). Perhaps the women in this study are influenced by their sermons, but they are not willing to accept it. Or, perhaps they rationalized their decision to vote for Trump and his Republican policies by putting down his opponent – Hillary Clinton.

I found that the participants’ views on Clinton and the recent gender movements largely mirror the rhetoric of rightwing media, which many of them indicated they pay attention to. While findings of this study indicate that the participants’ identities are complex, their views on gender issues seem to place them in opposition to recent feminist movements. To the participants in this study, gender equality has already been attained; therefore, they choose to identify more through their Christian faith than through their gender as a woman. These identities, which served as the qualifications to participate in this study, do not seem to co-exist smoothly.

When I asked the participants how they thought of politics today as Christian women, many were taken back, and very few mentioned gender issues or being offended by the president’s sexist comments during the campaign. This negative perception or

confusion among participants of highlighting gender in political rhetoric supports previous research on the 2016 election discussed in Chapter 2, which found that discussions surrounding Clinton's gender negatively affected conservative voters (Caughell, 2016). This is yet another finding that suggests that the identities of Christian women are much more complex than I thought prior to conducting this research.

As someone examining this research question from an outside perspective, it would certainly seem perplexing that the participants in this study – or other Christians and Christian women – voted for Trump based on their Christian values and heavy involvement in their church. However, most research surrounding this question typically uses political polling to examine and determine the results. Examining this question through quantitative polling would indicate that this group of voters largely support Trump as a candidate. However, by examining this question through qualitative, in-depth interviews, I was able to obtain a richer, deeper understanding into the reasoning behind this decision. The qualitative nature of this study allowed the participants to reflect on Trump, the 2016 election and politics today through their own lens – or, for the most part, a religious lens.

By allowing the participants to answer the open-ended questions in this way, it became clear that they were more comfortable speaking about the issues surrounding the election than speaking on Trump and the Republican/Democratic labels. However, they were comfortable speaking on Clinton and essentially expressed only negative views toward her. Perhaps this is because they knew that Trump was not a “Christian-like” candidate; and therefore, they justified their decision to vote for his policies by critiquing his opponent, Hillary Clinton.

I believe that this study and others considering these connections between religion and politics continue to be important. Just as citizens serve as a check on the government, perhaps the same should go for religious institutions. As *Washington Post* columnist Michael Gerson wrote for *The Atlantic*:

It is the strangest story: how so many evangelicals lost their interest in decency, and how a religious tradition called by grace became defined by resentment. This is bad for America, because religion, properly viewed and applied, is essential to the country's public life. The old "one-bloodism" of Christian anthropology—the belief in the intrinsic and equal value of all human lives—has driven centuries of compassionate service and social reform. Religion can be the carrier of conscience. It can motivate sacrifice for the common good. It can reinforce the nobility of the political enterprise. It can combat dehumanization and elevate the goals and ideals of public life.

I don't believe that evangelicals and Christians in the U.S. have lost their interest in decency, but it appears they have lost their interest in electing decent politicians to lead the country. It's possible that Trump's victory was based off the success of former Republicans who helped form the connection between Christianity and the Republican Party. Therefore, Christians were comfortable with the party platform and would therefore vote for any Republican candidate. This finding adds nuances to past issue versus image research, which I discussed earlier. Or, if this is not the case, the election of Donald Trump poses serious questions for the Religious Right in the U.S. to consider. For instance, how will they balance the urge to support Republican and conservative policies with support for candidates who embody their Christian beliefs?

Limitations and Future Directions

Obvious limitations to this study include the diversity and number of participants. Ideally, I would have conducted more interviews with a diverse range of ages and races. It would also be interesting for me to further this research to include Catholic women and

to examine the similarities and differences between their views. Although polling and research indicate that Catholics vote slightly differently than other Christians, I think this would be an interesting area to examine. It would also be interesting to include a more geographic diverse area for this study – perhaps surrounding the State of Wisconsin, including other states, or comparing rural to urban areas. While the specific qualifications for this study’s group of participants was interesting due to its specificity, I think it would also be worthwhile to open it up to a larger group of women voters in the U.S.

Additionally, I believe that future research should consider the need for more political polls and qualitative research like this study that address the intersection of gender and politics. While there is a good amount of political science research that addresses religion and gender separately, more polls should be conducted with religious and gender breakdowns to produce relevant evidence and to better support existing and future research on the topic. Additionally, to accompany these polls, more research in the field of political science/communication should consider qualitative methods like I did in this research that seeks a broader understanding of political motivations and voting habits. The election of Donald Trump was surprising to many, including myself, due to the inaccuracy of political polls leading up to the election; therefore, more qualitative studies like this one would be worthwhile to better understand groups of voters and their multiple, or conflicting identities.

Finally, I believe that future research surrounding the 2016 election and Trump presidency should expand on the distinction made by participants in this study between Trump’s personality and his policies. As I explained in the previous chapter, many participants expressed that they only voted for Trump’s for his policies or one issue – not

for him as a candidate. This idea of voting for singular policies, rather than for candidates and their image is discussed in previous research, yet the findings from this study certainly add to it. Therefore, it should also be expanded upon, especially in relation to Christianity and the Republican Party. The relationship between Christianity and the Republican Party remains strong, as indicated by Christians' support for Trump; however, I believe this relationship must continue to be examined.

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APPENDIX A

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

- I. General probe questions:
 - a. Tell me about yourself: your age, occupation, education.
 - b. Tell me about your upbringing. How/where did you grow up?
 - c. Tell me about your current life and your family. Are you single, married, divorced, separated or widowed? Do you have any children? If so, how many and what are their ages?
 - d. Please describe, using detail, your neighborhood/town. How long have you lived there?

- II. Questions involving role in church:
 - a. Could you please describe in detail your faith community?
 - b. Which religious denomination does your church belong to?
 - c. How long have you been a member of that community?
 - d. How are you involved in your church?
 - e. Would you say that most members of your church are equally as involved as you are?
 - f. Would you say that most members of your church community agree on most issues?

- III. Questions involving politics
 - a. Are you comfortable talking about politics?
 - b. Do you talk about politics with others? With who? How often?
 - c. Do you think that news matters in politics? Should people pay attention to it?
 - d. As a woman, what do you think about politics today?
 - e. As a Christian, what do you think about politics today?
 - f. How would you describe American politics and government today to someone who just moved to this country?
 - g. Is politics discussed in your church? How and how often?
 - h. What issues do you care most deeply about? What about those in your community?
 - i. Did you vote in the last election? What about previous elections?
 - j. Many media outlets were wrong in their predictions of the outcome of the election. Were you surprised by the outcome?

- k. Also, many media outlets focused on how certain groups of people were going to vote. One group they focused on was Christian women voters. Was that surprising to you?
- l. Tell me about how people in your community feel about President Trump. Is that true for you? If so, please explain.
- m. What do you think about how the president is handling things so far?
- n. Have your opinions changed at all (about Trump)?

IV. Concluding thoughts

- a. Is there anything else you would like to add?
- b. Is there anything you would like to have the media or future scholars know about you or who you are?

APPENDIX B

MARQUETTE UNIVERSITY
AGREEMENT OF CONSENT FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS
*Widely Questioned but Often Misunderstood: Examining the Political Motivations of
Christian, Women Voters During the 2016 Presidential Election*
Julie Grace, Dr. Sumana Chattopadhyay,
Diederich College of Communication

You have been invited to participate in this research study. Before you agree to participate, it is important that you read and understand the following information. Participation is completely voluntary. Please ask questions about anything you do not understand before deciding whether or not to participate.

PURPOSE: The purpose of this research is to determine the political motivations of women, Christian voters in the 2016 presidential election by performing at least ten long-form interviews with these women in Kenosha and Racine counties – two counties that flipped from supporting Obama to Trump in the last presidential election.

PROCEDURES: You will be asked to answer a series of open-ended questions about what issues are important to you and your community. The interview will be audio recorded; however, your name will not be recorded. Direct quotes from the interview will be used in final report.

DURATION: Your participation will consist of the time needed to complete the interview, probably an hour in duration.

RISKS: The risks associated with participation in this study are no greater than you would experience in everyday life.

BENEFITS: There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this study. This research may benefit society by understanding voting patterns of a specific group of people and contribute to the broader body of research on voting patterns in U.S. presidential elections.

CONFIDENTIALITY: Data collected in this study will be kept confidential. When the results of the study are published, you will not be identified by name. The data will be destroyed by shredding paper documents and deleting electronic files within 3-5 years after the completion of the study. Your research records may be inspected by the Marquette University Institutional Review Board or its designees and (as allowable by law) state and federal agencies.

VOLUNTARY NATURE OF PARTICIPATION: Participating in this study is completely voluntary.

ALTERNATIVES TO PARTICIPATION: There are no known alternatives other than to not participate in this study.

CONTACT INFORMATION: If you have any questions about this research project, you can contact Julie Grace at (330) 410-6212 or Dr. Sumana Chattopadhyay at (414) 288-3488. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, you can contact Marquette University's Office of Research Compliance at (414) 288-7570.

I HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO READ THIS CONSENT FORM, ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE RESEARCH PROJECT AND AM PREPARED TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS PROJECT.

(Printed Name of Participant)

(Signature of Participant)

Date

(Printed Name of Individual Obtaining Consent)

(Signature of Individual Obtaining Consent)

Date