



Christian Nationalism, Illiberalism, Gender, and the 2024 United States Presidential Election

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of Christian nationalism and support for a traditionalist social hierarchy in shaping support for Donald Trump in the 2024 presidential election. The Trump campaign spent a significant portion of its ad budget attacking Kamala Harris over gender and sexuality issues which resonated with swing voters. In this paper I outline what Christian nationalism is, how it is strongly correlated with the desire for a traditionalist social hierarchy, and how they are both strongly correlated to support for Trump. After defining Christian nationalism as an exclusivist, conservative fusion of Christianity and American civic life, I identify three key aspects of traditionalist social hierarchy: opposition to LGBTQ non-discrimination laws, opposition to same-sex marriage, and support for religiously-based service refusals. All three show positive and statistically significant correlation with support for Trump as well as adherence and sympathy to Christian nationalism. The final result additionally empirically confirms the expected correlation between Christian nationalism and support for Donald Trump. This paper further underscores the uncertain path ahead as Trump claims to be the sole protector of America's Christian identity, evoking a larger illiberal trend that leverages majoritarianism to institutionalize traditionalist understandings of gender and sexuality.

Keywords: Christian Nationalism, Donald Trump, 2024 Presidential Election, Gender, Voting Patterns

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During the last weeks of the 2024 presidential election, the Trump campaign spent over 20% of its overall ad budget—almost \$40 million—on ads attacking Kamala Harris on transgender issues. The tag line for these ads, “Kamala is for they/them, President Trump is for you,” resonated with swing voters, according to internal polling for the Harris campaign. Some commentators believe the ads might have also helped motivate Trump’s base to turn out on election day.¹ Even though transgender Americans make up an extremely small percentage of the total population, Trump and his campaign used the issue to claim he was the candidate who would focus on the needs of the majority of Americans and return our nation to a time where such issues were not visible.

Gender and sexuality have been key to understanding the link between Christian nationalism and millions of Americans’ support for Donald Trump from early on in his foray into the 2016 presidential election in 2015 until the present day. The ads attacking Harris around transgender issues is merely the latest example of this link. Trump has repeatedly promised political access and power to American Christians, appealing to a desire to order society according to “traditional” understandings of gender and sexuality. This is the promise that America will be great, once again.

Research examining Christian nationalism continues to demonstrate that a desire for a traditionalist social hierarchy in the United States is one of its foundational elements. The social hierarchy imagined within Christian nationalism focuses particularly on gender and sexuality. This desire for a traditionalist gender and sexuality framework within Christian nationalism is fundamentally aligned with illiberalism as it “proposes solutions that are majoritarian,” in particular a majoritarianism that “advances a ‘traditional’ vision of gender relations.”² Below, I will outline what Christian nationalism is and discuss the centrality of traditionalist social hierarchies to understanding Christian nationalism. Then, I will provide a preliminary examination of the role both gender and sexuality played in the 2024 presidential election using state-level measures of Christian nationalism, views of gender and sexuality, and support for Trump in the election.

Defining Christian Nationalism and its Cultural Contours

Christian nationalism is a cultural framework that idealizes and advocates for a close fusion between a rather exclusivist and conservative expression of Christianity and American civic life. It believes that all levels of government—national, state, and local—should vigorously defend and preserve this cultural framework as central to our national identity, civic participation, and social belonging.³ The particular expression of Christianity privileged within the cultural framework of Christian nationalism refers not only to various historical Christian beliefs—like the divinity

1 Adam Nagourney and Nicholas Nehamas. “Harris Loss Has Democrats Fighting Over How to Talk About Transgender Rights.” *The New York Times*, November 20, 2024. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/11/20/us/politics/presidential-campaign-transgender-rights.html>.

2 Laruelle, Marlene. “Illiberalism: A Conceptual Introduction.” *East European Politics* 38, no. 2 (2022): 309. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2022.2037079>.

3 Paul A. Djupe, Andrew R. Lewis, and Anand E. Sokhey. *The Full Armor of God: the Mobilization of Christian Nationalism in American Politics*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2023); Philip S. Gorski and Samuel L. Perry. *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022); Eric L. McDaniel, Irfan Nooruddin, and Allyson F. Shortle. *The Everyday Crusade: Christian Nationalism in American Politics*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022); Paul D. Miller. *The Religion of American Greatness: What’s Wrong with Christian Nationalism*. (Lisle: InterVarsity Press, 2022); Andrew L. Whitehead. *American Idolatry: How Christian Nationalism Betrays the Gospel and Threatens the Church*. (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2023); Samuel Perry and Andrew L. Whitehead. “The Role of Christian Nationalism on January 6 and After: What National Survey Data Tell Us.” *SocArXiv*, (2023). <https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/qu5h6>.

of Jesus and eternal salvation—accepted by billions of Christians over the centuries, but also to various cultural elements specific to the social and political context of the United States. Social science research demonstrates these cultural elements are central to the “Christianity” of Christian nationalism.

One of the cultural elements of Christian nationalism is strong ethno-racial boundaries around national identity, social belonging, and the benefits of citizenship. The myths, narratives, and symbols of Christian nationalism maintain that the United States was created by a particular people, according to particular religious and political values, for the benefit of a particular group of modern-day people: white, Anglo-Protestant natural-born citizens. This group, it is believed, should maintain control over the levers of political and cultural power. It is through this lens that they view racial and ethnic diversity as a liability to national strength, not a benefit, as liberalism generally proposes.⁴ The cultural element of strict ethno-racial boundaries therefore upholds “whiteness”—the values, behaviors, habits, attitudes, and beliefs “that result in the organization of society in such a way that white Americans, as a group, tend to have greater access to power, privilege, wealth, and other benefits bestowed by various social institutions.”⁵

Another cultural element is comfort with authoritarian social control. Christian nationalism holds that the world is a chaotic place and that only through strong rules and leadership can a nation like the United States maintain its position as God’s chosen nation. In addition, it is through violence, or at least the threat of violence, that the correct social hierarchies and boundaries can be enforced. Research consistently underscores the authoritarian and illiberal threat of Christian nationalism.⁶ Those who embrace Christian nationalism are more supportive of political violence in the event of an election loss, more supportive of their own leaders breaking ethical norms, more supportive of limiting access to the democratic process, and more supportive of state-sanctioned violence through policing and official forms of punishment.⁷ For

4 Rosemary Al-Kire, Michael Pasek, Jo-Ann Tsang, Joseph Leman, and Wade Rowatt. “Protecting America’s borders: Christian nationalism, threat, and attitudes toward immigrants in the United States.” *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 25, no. 2 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430220978291>; Joshua T. Davis and Samuel L. Perry. 2021. “White Christian nationalism and relative political tolerance for racists.” *Social Problems* 68, no. 3, (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spaa002>; Samuel L. Perry, Cyrus Schleifer, Andrew L. Whitehead, and Kenneth E. Frantz. “Our Kind of American: Christian Nationalism, Race, and Contingent Views of Cultural Membership.” *The Sociological Quarterly* 65, no. 1 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1080/00380253.2023.2229385>; Samuel L. Perry, Andrew L. Whitehead, Joshua P. Grubbs. “Race over Religion: Christian Nationalism and Perceived Threats to National Unity.” *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 10, no. 2 (2024). <https://doi.org/10.1177/23326492231160530>.

5 Andrew L. Whitehead. *American Idolatry: How Christian Nationalism Betrays the Gospel and Threatens the Church*. (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2023)

6 Samuel Perry and Andrew L. Whitehead. “The Role of Christian Nationalism on January 6 and After: What National Survey Data Tell Us.” *SocArXiv* (2023). <https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/qu5h6>.

7 M.T. Armaly, D.T. Buckley and A.M. Enders. “Christian Nationalism and Political Violence: Victimhood, Racial Identity, Conspiracy, and Support for the Capitol Attacks.” *Polit Behavior* 44 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-021-09758-y>; Joshua T. Davis. “Enforcing Christian nationalism: Examining the link between group identity and punitive attitudes in the United States.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 57, no. 2 (2018). <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26652127>; Paul A. Djupe, Andrew R. Lewis, and Anand E. Sokhey. *The Full Armor of God: the Mobilization of Christian Nationalism in American Politics*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2023); Philip S. Gorski and Samuel L. Perry. *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022); Eric L. McDaniel, Irfan Nooruddin, and Allyson F. Shortle. *The Everyday Crusade: Christian Nationalism in American Politics*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022); Samuel Perry and Andrew L. Whitehead. “The Role of Christian Nationalism on January 6 and After: What National Survey Data Tell Us.” *SocArXiv*. March 23, 2023; Samuel L. Perry and Andrew L. Whitehead. “Character Matters? Christian Nationalism and Insistence on Ethical Political Leaders.” *Review of Religious Research*, (2025). <https://doi/full/10.1177/0034673X241310417>; Samuel L. Perry, Andrew L. Whitehead, Joshua P. Grubbs. “I Don’t Want Everybody to Vote: Christian Nationalism and Restricting Voter Access in the United States.” *Sociological Forum* 37, no. 1 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1111/socf.12776>.

these Americans, “setting aside democracy in order to ‘save’ the nation from itself is a worthy sacrifice.”⁸

Populism and conspiratorial thinking are a third element of Christian nationalism. The populism of Christian nationalism exploits a sense of the nation being taken away from ordinary citizens and casts “elites” as trying to persecute them. This creates space for feelings of victimization and persecution, which leads to a tendency toward conspiratorial thinking. It also predisposes people to desire a strongman and authoritarian leadership in order to enforce their particular social and political goals on the nation and fellow citizens. Americans who embrace Christian nationalism are more likely to assent to the central tenets of QAnon, believe the “Big Lie,” identify as a persecuted minority, endorse false claims about scientific findings on vaccinations, and adhere to various other conspiracy theories.⁹

The final cultural element of Christian nationalism is central to this analysis: a desire for a traditionalist social hierarchy that is structured according to strict rules regarding gender and sexuality. Within the cultural framework of Christian nationalism, a strong nation is one in which men lead and women support and submit. Marriage is limited to heterosexual couples who are committed to procreation. Gender is binary and not a spectrum or fluid. The benefits of citizenship within a Christian nation are therefore reserved for those Americans who best reflect these hierarchical and traditionalist customs.¹⁰ Furthermore, a nation is only powerful and worthy of the Christian God’s favor to the extent that it reflects a traditional gender and sexual hierarchy.

Given the importance of the cultural element of traditionalist social hierarchies to Christian nationalism, and the established connection between Christian nationalism and support for Trump, there should be significant bivariate associations between the support for Trump in the 2024 election in each state, the proportion of the state population that embraces Christian nationalism, and the proportion of the state population that desires heteronormative social relations.

8 Andrew L. Whitehead. *American Idolatry: How Christian Nationalism Betrays the Gospel and Threatens the Church*. (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2023) 60.

9 Katie E. Corcoran, Christopher P. Scheitle, and Bernard D. DiGregorio. “Christian nationalism and COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy and uptake.” *Vaccine* 39, no. 45 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.vaccine.2021.09.074>; Dennen, Jacob, and Paul A. Djupe. “Are Christian Nationalists Antisemitic and Why?” *Social Science Quarterly* 104, no. 3 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1111/ssqu.13248>; Christopher H. Seto and Laura Upenieks. “Under God and Under Threat: Christian Nationalism and Conspiratorial Thinking as Links between Political Orientation and Gun Ownership.” *Justice Quarterly* 41, no. 4 (2024). <https://doi.org/10.1080/07418825.2023.2197482>; Samuel Perry and Andrew L. Whitehead. “The Role of Christian Nationalism on January 6 and After: What National Survey Data Tell Us.” *SocArXiv*. (2023). <https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/qu5h6>; Brooklyn Walker and Abigail Vegter. “Christ, country, and conspiracies? Christian nationalism, biblical literalism, and belief in conspiracy theories.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 62, no 2 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12836>.

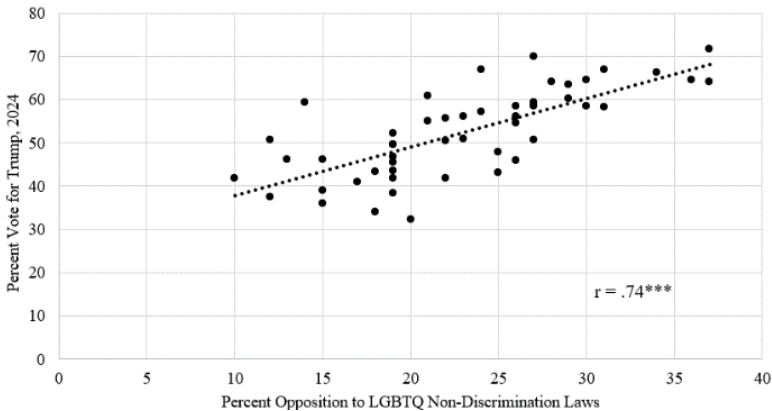
10 R. G. Cravens “Christian Nationalism: A Stained-Glass Ceiling for LGBT Candidates?” *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 11, no. 5 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2022.2070076>; Samuel L. Perry, Andrew L. Whitehead, Joshua P. Grubbs. “‘I Don’t Want Everybody to Vote’: Christian Nationalism and Restricting Voter Access in the United States.” *Sociological Forum* 37, no. 1 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1111/socf.12776>; Stewart, Evan, Penny Edgell, and Jack Delehanty. “Public Religion and Gendered Attitudes.” *Social Problems* 72, no. 1 (2025). <https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spado12>; Nathan R. Todd, Jacqueline Yi, Emily J. Blevins, Elizabeth A. McConnell, Yara Mekawi, and Brett A. Boeh Bergmann. “Christian and Political Conservatism Predict Opposition to Sexual and Gender Minority Rights through Support for Christian Hegemony.” *American Journal of Community Psychology* 66, no. 1-2, (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajcp.12420>; Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry. “A More Perfect Union? Christian Nationalism and Support for Same-Sex Unions.” *Sociological Perspectives* 58, no 3, (2015). <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44290121>; Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry. “Is a ‘Christian America’ a More Patriarchal America? Religion, Politics, and Traditionalist Gender Ideology.” *The Canadian Review of Sociology* 56, no 2, (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1111/cars.12241>.

Data and Methods

To measure Christian nationalism at the state level, I use recent estimates by the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) combining the percentage of each state that scores as a “Sympathizer” or “Adherent,” according to their methodology.¹¹ I draw upon the Cook Political Report’s 2024 National Popular Vote Tracker to establish the percentage of each state that voted for Trump in the 2024 presidential election (Cook Political Report, 2024).¹² For the estimated proportion of each state that desires traditionalist social hierarchies, I refer to the PRRI American Values Atlas.¹³ PRRI provides proportions of each state who oppose LGBTQ nondiscrimination laws, who oppose same-sex marriage, and who support religiously based refusals to serve lesbian or gay people. For this preliminary investigation, I examine the correlations between the three social traditionalist hierarchy measures and support for Trump in each state. I then examine the correlations between Christian nationalism and the three social traditionalist hierarchy measures. Finally, I examine the correlation between Christian nationalism at the state level and the percentage of the vote for Trump.

Findings

Figure 1: Percent Opposition to LGBTQ Non-Discrimination Laws and Percent Vote for Trump in 2024, by State



11 Public Religion Research Institute. 2024. “Support for Christian Nationalism in All 50 States: Findings from PRRI’s 2023 American Values Atlas.” Accessed at: <https://www.prri.org/research/support-for-christian-nationalism-in-all-50-states/>.

12 I used the vote totals after the Cook Political Report labeled each state’s vote count as “results certified.” I also compared the Cook Political Report with the US Election Atlas and found little or no difference (see “2024 National Popular Vote Tracker.” *The Cook Political Report*. <https://www.cookpolitical.com/vote-tracker/2024/electoral-college>).

13 Public Religion Research Institute. 2024a. “The American Values Atlas.” Accessed at: <https://ava.prri.org/>.

Figure 2: Percent Oppose Same-Sex Marriage and Percent Vote for Trump in 2024, by State

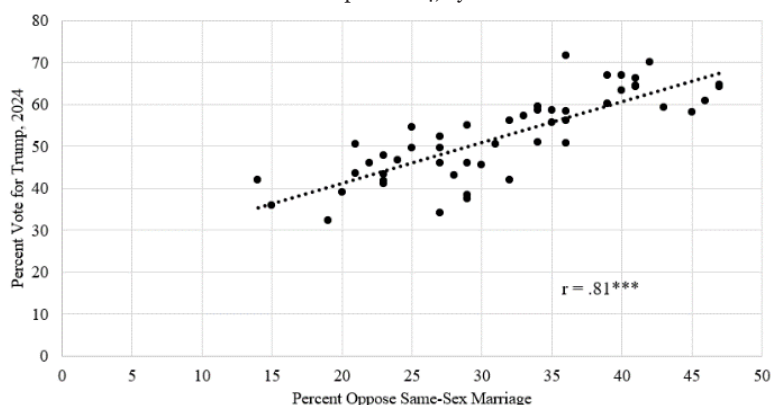
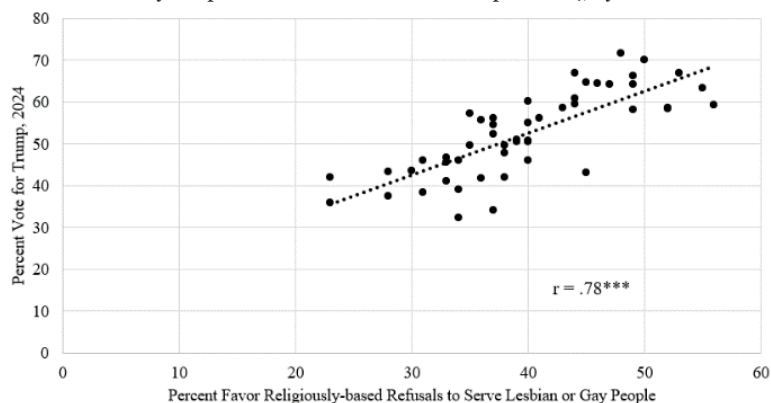


Figure 3: Percent Favor Religiously-based Refusals to Serve Lesbian or Gay People and Percent Vote for Trump in 2024, by State

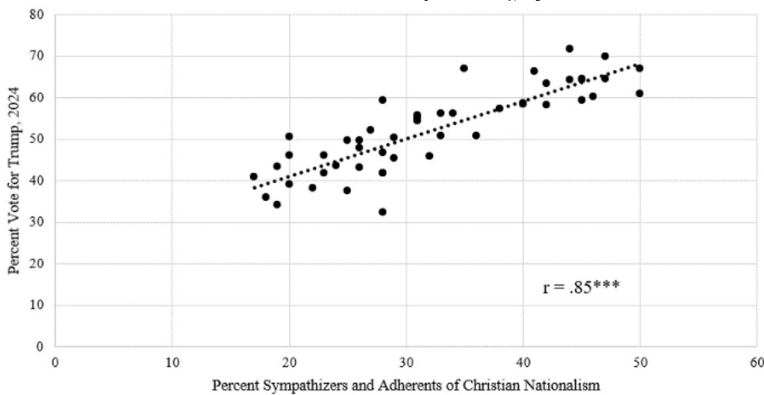


In Figure 1, which features an array of three scatterplots, we quickly see the strong associations between desire for a traditionalist social hierarchy according to gender and sexuality at the state level and the percentage of the state population that voted for Trump in 2024. The correlation between the percentage who oppose LGBTQ nondiscrimination laws and voting for Trump is strong ($r = .74$; $p < .001$), positive, and statistically significant. The correlations between the percentage opposing same-sex marriage ($r = .81$; $p < .001$) and the percentage favoring religiously based refusals to serve lesbians and gays ($r = .78$; $p < .001$) and voting for Trump are similarly strong, positive, and statistically significant. These findings underscore the link between a desire for a society ordered according to traditionalist understandings of sexuality and gender and support for Trump.

Figure 2 displays an array of three scatterplots showing the associations between Christian nationalism at the state level and the measures of a collective desire for a traditionalist social hierarchy. Aligning with prior research at the individual level on Christian nationalism and attitudes toward gender and sexuality, the state-level associations are strong, positive, and statistically significant. States with a higher proportion of Christian nationalism sympathizers and adherents have a similarly high proportion of people who oppose LGBTQ nondiscrimination laws ($r = .82$; $p < .001$), oppose same-sex marriage ($r = .89$; $p < .001$), and favor religiously based refusals to serve lesbian or gay people ($r = .76$; $p < .001$).

Based on the clear associations at the state level between (1) a desire for a traditionalist social hierarchy and support for Trump and (2) Christian nationalism and a desire for a traditionalist social hierarchy, we should expect a strong and significant correlation between Christian nationalism and support for Trump. In Figure 3, we see this is indeed the case. The correlation between the percentage of state populations that are either Christian nationalism sympathizers or adherents and the percentage of the state that voted for Trump in 2024 is strong, positive, and statistically significant ($r = .85$; $p < .001$).

Figure 4: Percent Sympathizers and Adherents of Christian Nationalism and Percent Vote for Trump in 2024, by State



Conclusion

A hallmark of illiberalism is proposed solutions for the nation that are majoritarian—in particular, majoritarian solutions that push for traditionalist understandings of gender and sexuality (Laruelle 2022). The literature on Christian nationalism establishes that one of its key cultural elements is a desire for a traditionalist social hierarchy, particularly around gender and sexuality. During the lead-up to the 2024 presidential election, Trump and his campaign made the case that he alone could protect the Christian identity of the United States and that Harris’ embrace of nontraditional gender and sexuality conceptions was a threat to the nation.

The above analysis of data at the state level demonstrates that a traditionalist social ethic, Christian nationalism, and support for Trump in the 2024 presidential election are indeed closely intertwined. As the United States enters uncharted waters with the reelection of Trump in 2024, it will be important for future studies of Christian

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nationalism and illiberalism to focus on efforts to institutionalize a traditionalist social hierarchy, particularly around gender and sexuality. Limiting the participation of gender and sexual minorities in civic life will likely remain a target of the Trump administration as it seeks to consolidate its power and influence over the identity of the United States. The question will remain as to whether this is a country by and for all the people or by and for a particular people—those who embrace Christian nationalism and a traditionalist social hierarchy.