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One Nation Under God

Parker Garrett

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The American people vote for what they believe in, and for many Americans that belief is placed in God. In light of the recent Texas Abortion Bans, I wanted to look into how faith or belief in God influences my fellow Americans' political practices and if there really is such a thing as separation of church and state. I looked at a multitude of sources and have picked a couple to share with you today that will show my collective findings. Those findings being that many Americans use their faith and religious beliefs as a guide for their voting and that influences how laws are made.

Separation of Church and State

The concept of "Separation of church and state" comes from the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment in the Constitution. The Establishment Clause is the first part of the First Amendment, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion," which prohibits the government from promoting one religion over another and establishing an official religion. The Clause was made by Thomas Jefferson, first officially said in a letter he wrote addressing the Danbury Baptist Association in Connecticut, "I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should 'make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,' thus building a wall of separation between Church and State." Today the Establishment Clause does exactly that by prohibiting the government from inhibiting or advancing any religion (*US Courts*). In all legal ways, there is a Separation of Church and state, but this doesn't separate religion from politics.

Faith Voting

Religion is a big part of politics. People will vote with their religious practices in mind because that is what shapes their morals and beliefs on how the world should be. People can even go against their true political beliefs in exchange for laws and/or candidates that are aligned more with what their faith deems wrong or right. I've seen a trend in voting, something that I've called "Faith Voting." A YouTube video called "The Danger Of Religion Controlling Politics" by Grace Baldrige completely encompasses this "Faith Voting" idea. In this video, Grace Baldrige analyzes the issues that relate to politics and religion but this episode specifically centers on looking into the 2020 election and how candidates' "religious background is packaged and leveraged during a campaign season." The episode features Nabilah Islam who was running for congress in May 2020. Islam is of the Muslim faith and she gives insight into how hard it is to be involved in any politics when you don't consider yourself to be a part of Christianity, which is the most prevalent religion in America according to Pew Research Center's "Religious Landscape Study." When candidates belong to a religion other than Christianity, it can be harder to get the votes needed because many Americans choose a candidate that aligns with their faith instead of their political alignment as seen in the video. When asked if there have ever been issues pertaining to people wanting to discuss her faith, Islam says, "My name is a statement in itself" ("The Danger Of Religion Controlling Politics" 6:38-6:45). Islam gets comments from many people along the lines of "I'm a Christian first," after she asks what are the issues people care about and what they would like to see happen in congress. This is a prime example of how some Americans will vote for candidates that they don't agree with politically for a candidate of the same faith.

This was an interesting topic to look into, how candidates use their religion/faith as a voting point as if it were the same thing as being pro/con [Insert any political stance here]. This shows just how much religion and politics are intertwined, and it made me look back on all the political candidates I know about and how they indeed use their faith as leverage when Campaigning. The research article, "The Effect of Religion on Candidate Preference in the 2008 and 2012 Republican Presidential Primaries" by Leigh A. Bradberry

goes into detail on how religion influences Presidential Primary voting. Bradberry summarizes well the idea that candidates use their religion as voting points by saying, “the candidate may explicitly discuss the importance of his religion or faith, and/or the candidate can explicitly and effectively label himself as ‘a Christian’ or ‘born again.’” In this way, the candidate is signaling to a specific religious constituency, such as highly religious voters or born-again Christians, that “I am one of you” or “I understand you.” It is a tactic to get more votes, as people may not agree with X’s opinion/stance on political issues but will vote because he/she is also a Christian. In addition, this accesses a whole new group of voters who may not have planned to vote but because the candidate was pitching their religious values they decided to cast their vote.

With Great Power

Kathrine Hayhoe is a good example of a candidate using faith voting in a positive way. In the article “*Climate Scientist Katharine Hayhoe’s Faithful Quest to Heal a Divided World*” Eric C. Miller interviews Kathrine Hayhoe, a spearhead for the climate change community, who also happens to be an evangelical Christian. In the interview, Hayhoe goes into great detail on how her faith impacts her beliefs on climate change, therefore influencing her political opinions and positions on laws being passed in regard to climate change. When asked how her Christian faith influences her stance on climate change she says, “I’m a climate scientist because I’m a Christian. . . . As a Christian, as someone who believes that we are to love others as we are loved by God, and who believes that love is expressed in service, I felt called to this work. How could I not?” This is a perfect example of how someone’s faith influences their political stances and Hayhoe is not the only one. She has a following and works to spread her climate message to other Evangelical Christians through her books and YouTube channel. In discussing Hayhoe’s newest book *Saving Us: A Climate Scientist’s Case for Hope and Healing in a Divided World*, Miller (the interviewer) says, “She[Hayhoe] also works to communicate her message to fellow evangelical Christians. Drawing on a vocabulary that resonates in churches and laboratories alike, Hayhoe makes the case for unity and cooperation on climate, religion, and science.” Hayhoe uses her faith to communicate the

importance of climate change action to others who believe in the same thing, showing them that they can use their political voting power in accordance with their faith. This is a great example of using faith as a way of encouraging others to think about climate change. While telling other evangelical Christians about the ways they should care about climate change, she is showing the similarities between the science and religion communities. It's not forcing anything onto anyone, just showing them a new way of thinking and encouraging everyone to do their part in stopping climate change.

Not all candidates use their religious standing in the same way as Hayhoe. Some use their religious beliefs as a way to control others who they think are going against them. The article "Gov. Greg Abbott signs into law one of nation's strictest abortion measures, banning procedure as early as six weeks into a pregnancy" by Shannon Najmabadi speaks on the reasons Gov. Greg Abbott has for wanting this bill to go through. "Our creator endowed us with the right to life and yet millions of children lose their right to life every year because of abortion," Abbott said in a bill signing ceremony, captured on a Twitter *video* posted to social media (@GregAbbott_TX 0:05-0:16). There is no legal or political reasoning on why women should not be able to have abortions, only a moral belief based on his religious beliefs. He is forcing others who do not have the same beliefs as him to conform to his morals, contrary to Hayhoe who is more so educating others while allowing them to form their own conclusions based on their beliefs. In doing this Gov. Abbott is influencing others who believe in God, like himself, to vote and agree with this ban because he is justifying it with their/his faith.

The American Religion

Being an American is like being in a religion. This idea comes from the article, "America Without God" by Shadi Hamid. The main point of the article is that, "American faith, it turns out, is as fervent as ever; it's just that what was once a *religious* belief has now been channeled into a *political* belief. Political debates over what America is supposed to mean have taken on the character of theological disputations. This is what religion without religion looks like." The examples given throughout the article explain clearly the similarities between being American and being a part of a religion. For

example, the Constitution is compared to the Bible, as we follow the words like Scripture, and being called “Un-American” is taken the same or used in the same context as “Un-Christian(Like).” Another example from the article is how, for some immigrants, becoming an American citizen can feel the same as converting to a religion, “This is because America itself is ‘almost a religion,’ as the Catholic philosopher Michael Novak once put it, particularly for immigrants who come to their new identity with the zeal of the converted.” The article also mentions the following lines from Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I have a dream” speech, “one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed.” The way King speaks, specifically the word “creed” in regards to America, is important because according to Hamid, “The very idea that a nation might have a creed—a word associated primarily with religion—illustrates the uniqueness of American identity as well as its predicament.” From the way we treat the words of the Constitution like Scripture, the way we treat the transferal of citizenship similar to conversion, and the words we use when speaking about America, it’s easy to see how being an American can be comparable to being a religious person. Similarities laid out in the article may not make “Americanism” the next world religion, but it surely makes one think about what it means to be an American.

The true separation between church and state

I’ve laid out my observations in order to bring awareness to the influence that religious views have on voting and voter turnouts in America. The danger of blending church and state is having a government-appointed religion that the government would then use as backing/reasoning for laws. This would potentially allow the government to favor one religion over others, while also being able to restrict citizens’ rights to express the religious views that contradict the state-approved religion, causing an imbalance in government officials who would all presumably be of the “approved” faith.

As a counterargument, I suppose one could say, “But there IS a separation of church and state, you’ve said it yourself, the establishment clause is doing what it was meant to do,” and I agree with you, partially. There IS a separation of church and state legally and technically. The government does not endorse one religion over

another or stop a religious group from expressing its beliefs but the people do. People don't vote for those with the same political beliefs as them if that candidate isn't of their faith, instead, they put leaders who are part of their religion, as seen in the case of Nabilah Islam. Those leaders can then either use their faith to encourage people to do good by their faith in helping humanity, like Kathrine Hayhoe, or control others in the name of their faith the way Gov. Greg Abbott does. So legally, there is a separation of church and state, but in reality, we have unintentionally made it so we are controlled politically by religion. With the majority of Americans being of the Christian faith, there are bound to be votes made with religious backing behind them, an example being Gov. Greg Abbott's abortion bill.

When it comes to politics, laws affect everyone but are aligned with the beliefs of one particular group. Religion and politics work closely together, and people can justify their actions to themselves with their faith and to others through the laws created based on that faith. With that being said, my final observation is that religion and politics in America have become blended and with this blending, there is no separation of church and state, not truly. I do think that people should put their political views above their faith because the results of political debates (laws) affect everyone while religious views should be applied BY the individual TO the individual's own life, not everyone else who doesn't share the same views as them. True separation of church and state would have American citizens voting with everyone's best intentions in mind, not just those of the same religion. It would not allow laws to be pitched with religious backing and there would be much more religious diversity among government officials.

In my opinion, a complete separation of church and state is impossible, religion will always be a big part of America, and it is unlikely to change in the near future. By writing this piece, I hope to bring awareness to the ways the people, of all religions, are affected by religion in America. After all, we are one nation under god.

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