

Race, Religion and Gender:
Conservative Christians and the Politics of the American Identity

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Introduction

Following the election of Donald Trump to President in 2016, White Christian America was once again flung into the spotlight. The term “White Christian America” derives from the concept of the “WASP” that is the white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant, and their traditional cultural, societal norms (Jones 2017:30). More specifically in the context of this thesis, “White Christian America” refers to the white Protestants and Evangelicals in the United States that are recognized not just for their religious but their political community. White Christian Americans are notable for their conservative Republican votes, “traditionalist” mindset and desire to maintain and protect the Christian cultural values that have been embedded in United States culture. From the structure of the calendar to the Protestant work-ethic that ensures our capitalist economy, White Christian America has served the nation as a “cultural touchstone... [that] provided a shared aesthetic, a historical framework, and a moral vocabulary” (Jones 2017:2). Author of *The End of White Christian America*, Robert Jones (2017), first used this the term “White Christian America” when making his argument that White Christian America had once been a formidable and unsurpassable political and social force, but as United States culture shifted and with the election of President Barack Obama, becoming extinct. Jones (2017) hypothesized that because of President Obama’s success in primary and second term elections, White Christian America was losing their footing, and even if Republican candidates managed to rally White Christian America to the polls, their numbers would never be strong enough to win an election again. The election of Donald Trump obviously challenged this theory as White Christian America turned out to support his campaign. This thesis asserts that the source of Donald Trump’s White Christian American support has nothing to do with his personal faith, but his promises to return the U.S. to a time when White Christian America, and White Christian

males did dominate. The election of Donald Trump is the latest wave of conservatism within the United States, and it is being characterized around the discussion of who gets to be American. Trump's use of nativist, Islamophobic, racist, and sexist rhetoric mobilizes the white Christian conservatives who want to return to a time where their racial, religious, and gender supremacy was unchallenged.

In October of 2017, Ta-Nehisi Coates wrote and published an article in *The Atlantic* titled "The First White President: The Foundation of Donald Trump's Presidency is the Negation of Barack Obama's Legacy." In this article, Coates outlines the way in which Trump has and continues to capitalize on the "Identity Politics" of white Christianity, and devalues the citizenship and successfulness of other social groups. Coates writes:

[Trump's] political career began in advocacy of birtherism, that modern recasting of the old American precept that black people are not fit to be citizens of the country they built... After his cabal of conspiracy theorists forced Barack Obama to present his birth certificate, Trump demanded the President's college grades (offering \$5 million in exchange for them), insisting that Obama was not intelligent enough to have gone to an Ivy League school, and that his acclaimed memoir, *Dreams From My Father*, had been ghostwritten by a white man, Bill Ayers.

It is often said that Trump has no real ideology, which is not true—his ideology is white supremacy, in all its truculent and sanctimonious power. Trump inaugurated his campaign by casting himself as the defender of white maidenhood against Mexican "rapists," only to be later alleged by multiple accusers, and by his own proud words, to be a sexual violator himself. White supremacy has always had a perverse sexual tint ... [Trump was] fending off multiple accusations of such assaults, immersed in multiple lawsuits for allegedly fraudulent business dealings, exhorting his followers to violence, and then strolling into the White House. But that is the point of white supremacy—to ensure that that which all others achieve with maximal effort, white people (particularly white men) achieve with minimal qualification. (Coates, 2017)

White Supremacy and "Identity Politics" were crucial not just to Donald Trump's campaign, but to his election. He mobilized voters around his nativist, sexist, homophobic, racist and Islamophobic rhetoric. He exemplified the white male entitlement that questioned everyone

else's right not only to exist but to be American. Conservative Christians have been a powerful Republican voting block for many years, but the influx of support Trump received pointed to a larger cultural backlash than White Christian America had seemed to be capable of in the past. To the point Coates (2017) was making, Trump tapped into a deeper American political issue, one that had long been covertly legislated, restricted and debated: who gets to be American. While American propaganda has long preached that anyone can become an American - regardless of their racial, ethnic, religious, sexual, or gender identity - and even more importantly, be successful in America- this has never been the case. The election of Donald Trump depicts unequivocally what disenfranchised Americans have known: that the institutions of the United States benefit and prioritize the white Christian male. White Christian America's support for Donald Trump, despite his behavior regarding President Obama's qualifications for presidency, his rhetoric about immigration, his Islamophobia, the many accusations of sexual assault against him, and his overt sexualization of his daughter, suggests that White Christian America's allegiance is to their own superiority and standing, not their faith. Trump ran on a platform that signaled a return to the past, he supported nativism, racism and upholding the patriarchy, and White Christian America elected him for it.

HISTORY OF POLITICS AND MOTIVATING THE CHRISTAIN CHURCH

Over the decades it has become clear that the Evangelical and Protestant Church is a motivated and engaged political actor. The American political scene has been influenced by many Conservative Christian faith based groups over the years: The Moral Majority, the Christian Right, the Tea Party, and the Freedom Caucus have all played a heavy role in the shaping of conservative ideologies and the American political sphere overall. One of the most

salient spaces for Christianity is Washington, D.C., and has often reflected its commitment to Protestant moral values and cultural Christianity (Jones 2017:11).

Christianity as a Cultural and then Political Force

Attempting to outline all the ways Christianity has influenced, modeled, and founded the institutions that create community in the United States would be an impossible task. It is important, however, to acknowledge some of these contributions and recognize the Christian morals that funded and built them. The Christian faith motivated Evangelicals and Protestants alike, not only to be politically engaged but to be engaged within their communities, by emphasizing another “civic duty” (Lindsay 2009:16). Christians founded the Boy Scouts, the Girl Scouts, the YMCA (Lindsay 2009:20). White Christian America was rooted in the social welfare and community-building initiatives of the United States, from founding and funding hospitals, churches, rehabilitation centers, and soup kitchens and other community-building initiatives (Jones 2017: 2).

Engaging in one’s community became recognized as “the Ministry of Presence” by journalist Steve Turner. “The Ministry of Presence” brought evangelical faith narratives into mainstream culture, and with it created space for Christian Americans to gain influence and network as cultural elites (Lindsay 2009:40). The success of these Christian institutions “eroded the boundaries that existed between evangelicals and secularists” (Lindsay 2009:144). This laid the cultural influence of White Christian America in the majority of U.A. institutions as it exists both subtly and overtly to this day.

Because White Christian America wielded such social power, it was only a matter of time before it became a central tenant of American politics. The impact of religious faith on the political world was intentional: the forefathers never believed the American public would leave

their personal beliefs at the door and govern from a state of complete secularism. Though as the Christian faith continued to bleed into politics, the secular nature of the United States became problematized, and religion became an indispensable campaigning and engagement tool.

Religion as a Marketing Tool: Motivating Voter Support

Going as far back as John Winthrop's "City on a Hill" speech in 1630 (if not earlier), generations of politicians have used their religious morals and values as their political platforms. Michael Lindsay (2009), author of *Faith in the Halls of Power* writes, "from public speeches to presidential appointments, evangelical politicians have drawn upon their faith as a way of signaling their allegiances, which in turn has won the support of fellow evangelicals" (Lindsay 2009:16). With the election of the Southern Baptist Jimmy Carter and many presidents afterward, "evangelicals have tapped into politics as a way of expressing their faith, bringing evangelicalism into the public sphere" (Lindsay 2009:16). President Ronald Reagan was also largely credited for bringing evangelicals into the G.O.P. He endorsed many evangelical leaders throughout his presidential campaigns, providing substantial visibility and political status to evangelical movements (Lindsay 2009:18).

While this thesis focuses primarily on Republican conservative Christians, faith motivated many Christians into the Democratic party as well. During his 1992 campaign, former President Bill Clinton focused a great deal on his "new covenant" platform. Citing biblical passages, he was able to reach his religious support base, and advocated for a closer relationship between the federal government and the American people (Lindsay 2009:23). Religious moral appeals are very effective persuasion techniques across party lines. Charles Marsh (2007) a religious studies scholar, recounts this story about his father:

Though he considers himself a political conservative, my father understands that his commitment to the gospel chastens a man of his own cultural and political preferences. He opposes abortion but supports gun control and universal healthcare. He voted George W. Bush in 2000 and 2004, but admires Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton, whom he voted for in 1992, both of whom are Baptists from the deep South. (Marsh 2007:176)

Despite the different party affiliations, primary issues, and politics, the President's personal religious affiliation has continued to sway voters, even across party lines. The religious affiliation of the President is used to communicate the personal values of the man behind the title, something the public continues to cherish.

The importance of Presidential faith continued under President George W. Bush. Crucial to his campaign and his image was his evangelical faith. Under Bush, the early 2000s became the height of American Evangelical's prominence and political influence (Marsh 2007:21). President George W. Bush once admitted that while he recited the Lord's Prayer he often added the phrase "through me" after "thy will be done" (Marsh 2007:41). Such phrasing is common within evangelical practice. It expresses the hope that one's life would be an instrument of God and the recognition of divine guidance (Marsh 2007:41). However, stating this in an interview served to bolster Evangelical support, branding him as a classic and dedicated Evangelical, and earning him the Evangelical vote. During his run for presidency, Evangelical voters - about a quarter of the adult population- strongly supported George W. Bush (Lindsay 2009:24). In 2000, during his first run for presidency, Bush gained 72% of the Evangelical vote, and in 2004 for his second term, his numbers stayed strong, receiving 87% (Lindsay 2009:24). These results highlighted not just how influential the religious commitment of the President was in mobilizing the Evangelical vote but also that the sheer population of Conservative Evangelicals was a massive political advantage.

CHANGING POLITICAL DEMOGRAPHICS

While White Christian America was the backbone of American Culture and American politics for decades, eventually American culture shifted. Over time, Americans became less white, less heterosexual, and less religious (Cox, and Jones). Many, if not the majority, of young Americans no longer embodied the picturesque white Christian American that the U.S. political system favored. The young people of today are significantly less religious than their ancestors, and with them began the era of the “religiously unaffiliated” (Jones 2017:49). These demographic shifts shook the cultural and political foundations of the United States, and the election of President Barack Obama seemed to reflect not only the changing socio-political landscape but the influence of these new young voters. Obama’s election seemed to unseat White Christian America. Electing the first Black President, especially one so “progressive” signaled to some that his “inauguration was indisputably the end of the White Christian Presidency” (Jones 2017:82). Scholars believed the election of President Barack Obama was leading the United States in a new direction, proving that political power no longer lived with white Christian voters, but with their more liberal, less religious counter parts. Robert Jones (2017), author of “The End of White Christian America” wrote:

In 2016 and beyond, the shrinking white Christian voter pool will probably continue to support Republican candidates as much as they have in the past, but their loyalty will help the GOP less and less. By the 2024 presidential election, even if the GOP nominee could secure every single white Christian’s vote, these votes would land 3 points short of the national majority... if the GOP wishes to remain competitive in 2016 and beyond, the White Christian Strategy, one of the most dependable tactics in the Republican playbook, will need to be put to rest. (p. 110)

However, obituaries in honor of White Christian America were published too soon. On November 8th of 2016, Donald J. Trump was elected President. In response to the changing demographics, White Christian American lashed out, fearing the end of the “American Identity”

and American Culture as they knew it, and supported a candidate who pledged to return America to the White Christian-dominated past. As demographics and culture shifted, a mislabeled “religious persecution” became a rallying cry for evangelical movements (Laborde 2017:3).

Conservative Christians had felt the pressure of changing demographics before. In the past, the Civil Rights Movement, *Roe v. Wade* (1973), the popularization of birth control, and growing LGBTQIA movements signaled a changing America and motivated Conservatives to turn out at the polls bringing in terms of presidential conservatism during the Reagan Era. The same rhetoric that was used to mobilize Evangelical Conservatives in the past against the “secular, liberal culture” became relevant again in the 21st century (Marsh 2007:21). It was this belief that the “Christian Right was under siege” and that “America has abandoned its historical religious foundations and needed to be restored to its proper status as a Christian Nation that mobilized conservative voters back into the political realm, with a renewed desire to “Keep America American” [read: keep America White and Christian] (Marsh 2007:25, Lane 2008:25).

As the United States began to look more and more “immoral,” moral issues became the primary concern of Christian Conservatives. Religious freedom took on new meaning in the political sphere: “exercising freedom of religion is one of the ways in which we exercise a more generic freedom- moral freedom” (Laborde 2017:269). Religious freedom became grounds for opting out of national healthcare and as reasoning for discriminating against LGBTQIA patrons. Legislating abortion, LGBTQIA rights, social freedoms and welfare were rebaptized in the political realm with a distinctively moral tilt. The question of whether or not the United States was a Christian Nation became a political divider. The United States ensured religious freedom, but what that meant and how it would be implemented was deeply dividing. For many, the cultural roots of the forefathers and the role of Christianity in creating the foundations of U.S.

institutions signaled that the United States was and must continue to be a Christian Nation. For others, the protection of religious liberty, self-determination, and the history of the colonizers as fleeing religious persecution communicated the U.S. need to be secular. Fredrick Lane, author of “The Court and the Cross: the Religious Right’s Crusade to Reshape the Supreme Court” wrote:

The claim ... that America is a Christian nation is disturbing enough when preached from the pulpit or proclaimed on national television, it assaults the fundamental premise of this country, that is a pluralistic society that draws its strength in large part from the varied contributions of numerous cultures and traditions. (Lane 2008:28)

These “numerous cultures and traditions” came under attack as White Christian America fought to maintain what once was. By advocating for the legislating of morality - the decision of who is and gets to be American, and who has constitutional rights - White Christian America involved itself in a much deeper and very segregating debate about who gets to be American. This debate of who gets to be American and to what extent their citizenship has to be respected has had a heavy hand in the polarization of American politics, and in the rebranding of the Republican Party around social issues. In this polarized era, it has become clear that White Christian America is not dead or dying as some believed, but that it is active and playing a crucial role in identity politics, and that the election of Donald Trump was a response to the changing demographics and liberalization of the United States.

This thesis explores the role of White Christian America in advocating and influencing who gets to be American, and the racial, religious, gendered undertones of this debate. Since the founding of the United States, scholars have documented the waves of religious conservatism that happen as backlash to increasing liberalization. The election of Donald Trump and all the rhetoric that goes with him is the latest wave.

The first chapter of this thesis will outline how Christian morality and identity became intertwined with the Republican Party. By highlighting the incorporation of the KKK into the

Republican party, the motivational rhetoric of “protecting the traditional family,” and the emphasis on “American Exceptionalism,” this chapter will explore what motivated conservative Christians to vote Republican, and how the Republican Party’s political platform became irreversibly “Christian.” In response to the civil liberty gains Black Americans were making, the leaders of the KKK began to run for conservative political office. As feminist issues and LGBTQIA rights became prominent in the social sphere, protecting the nuclear family and the “American way of life” mobilized many Christians to vote Conservative. American Exceptionalism reinforced America’s importance in the eyes of God, and for many reinforced Christian superiority and dominance domestically and abroad.

The second chapter will follow the case study of the controversy surrounding Barack Obama’s election as a lens through which to contextualize the racial and religious undertones of who gets to be American, and even more so, who gets to hold political office. From discussions of Obama’s citizenship, to the immigration status of his parents, to the doubts of his Christian faith, Obama’s presidency functioned as a lightning rod for political and social discussions on immigration, race relations, and the importance of Christianity in both American culture and in constructing the American Identity.

The third chapter of this thesis will examine the question of who gets to be American through the case study of Brett Kavanaugh’s confirmation to the Supreme Court. This case study examines the influence White Christian America has had over the Supreme Court and how faith commitments may influence decision making, while also analyzing how the religious, racial, and gendered make-up of the Court has evolved. The case of Kavanaugh also incited conversations about how the United States responds to survivors of sexual assault and reflects a larger dismissal of women’s rights and liberation movements. It became clear through the Kavanaugh

case that some conservative women have constructed an American Identity that does not rely on feminist rhetoric or on women across the aisle. And lastly, Kavanaugh's confirmation to the Court also brought to light the importance of overturning *Roe v. Wade* (1973) and protecting the religious freedom of modern White Christian America.

Who gets to be American continues to be politicized, and the racial, religious, and sexual requirements for the protections of American citizenship are deeply problematic. As the United States continues to grow more diverse, more vocal, and to shake off many of its Christian cultural limitations, White Christian America has risen up with a strong political backlash. Inherent in this wave of conservatism is the debate of who is American and who gets to benefit from the full protections of the law.

**How Christianity became a Republican Value:
The Ku Klux Klan, Traditional Families, and American Exceptionalism**

The connection between the Republican Party and Conservative Christian groups has been long-standing, stable, and beneficial for those involved. Over time, the ideology of Christian conservatism became entangled and inseparable from the social policies and ideologies of conservatism in the United States political sphere. This chapter maintains that the connection between Christian values, culture, and morals became embedded in the Republican party through the incorporation of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), the rhetoric of American Exceptionalism, and the Christian ideal of the nuclear, “traditional family.” While these are not the only factors that led to the symbiotic relationship between Christian Conservatism and the Republican Party, they have been key drivers throughout history. This chapter will begin by explaining how the KKK functioned as part of White Christian America and co-opted the Republican Party. This chapter will then discuss how the “traditional family” became a rallying cry for conservative Christians, and how it was used to mobilize Christian Americans to vote for the Republican party and their candidates. To conclude, this chapter will then explore the rhetoric of American Exceptionalism as motivating White Christian America into the Republican party based on its Christian rhetoric, symbolism, and emphasis on being “God’s chosen people.” Principal to the study of White Christian America’s influence on U.S. politics is their ties to the Republican Party. In order to understand White Christian America’s conservative political influence, we must first explore how they ended up intertwined with the Republican Party. By exploring the KKK, “traditional family,” and American exceptionalism, motivational patterns and responses to the liberalization of the U.S. become more clear.

CHRISTIANITY, THE KKK, AND THE REPUBLICAN PARTY

The Ku Klux Klan was first established in 1866, and by 1870 had rallied many Southern Conservative Christians around the rhetoric of white supremacy, nativism, and anti-blackness (Ku Klux Klan 2019). The Klan opposed the reconstructionist policies of the late 1800s, and through a campaign of violence attempted to intimidate reconstructionist leaders from moving forward (Ku Klux Klan 2019). Since its founding, the KKK has opposed all attempts at racial equality and as the KKK continued their violence into the 1950s-1960s, they continued to pose a threat to the safety of Black Americans and the success of civil rights movements (Ku Klux Klan 2019). It is in part, though not entirely, through the KKK's use of Christianity and accumulation of conservative political power that deeply intertwined racist and nativist beliefs, conservative Christianity, and the Republican party.

Throughout the KKK's history, it has utilized the Christian faith to cement, rally, and organize membership. The KKK, despite their violence and hatred, identifies as a Christian group. This connection is most evident in their use of Christian symbolism. The Ku Klux Klan from the 1820s though into the 1960s utilized and relied on Christian symbolism and rituals to create order, and communicate their cause. As Baker (2011) writes, "The Klan rendered Jesus as its organizational image... in print, culture, robes, and rituals the order communicated its adherence to the Protestant faith..." (p. 39). One of the most obvious Christian rituals the KKK used was the induction of a new member to the Klan. In order to be initiated into the KKK, new members underwent a "naturalization ceremony." Former Klansman Henry Fry stated that the ceremony was very similar to the "sacred and holy rite of baptism" (Baker 2011:34). The robes worn by members resembled the traditional dress of Christian clergy, reinforcing the KKK's connection to the Christian faith. Similarly, in order to once again establish their dedication to

Christianity, the KKK built an altar into the side of a mountain, and often used (and burned) crosses (Baker 2011:34). These symbols were used to emphasize the Klan's Protestant Christian roots and communicate perhaps to themselves and their audience that they were a Christian organization.

The Christian faith was crucial to recruitment to The Klan. Not only was Christian rhetoric used to justify their actions, but they believed Protestant males were the ideal recruits.

As author Kelly Baker (2011) writes,

Faith was an integral part of that incarnation of the order. Simmons [William Simmons, creator of the "new" KKK] articulated the religious vision, which Evans and many Klan lecturers (often ministers) continued. The Klan, for Simmons and Evans, was not just an order to defend America, but also a campaign to protect and celebrate Protestantism. It was a religious order (p. 6).

The KKK favored Protestant Christians, actively recruiting people from high schools and off of Church membership records (Pegram 1955:22). The inclusion of the Christian faith was so important to the Ku Klux Klan that membership required "independent minded American[s] who endorsed Christian Religion" (Pegram 1955:23). Joining the KKK was understood to reflect the strength of one's commitment to their faith and to the good of the nation (Pegram 1955:22). For those involved in the KKK, the protection and continuation of America depended on the continuance of White Protestant supremacy. In the eyes of the KKK, to be American depended greatly on being Protestant. Protestantism was a tenant of Americanism, and to be involved in the KKK, was considered by some to be incredibly patriotic.

The Klan & the Grand Ol' Party

The Klan's continuous violent terrorist action and opposition to minority groups within the United States had always involved them in the political realm. However, in response to the

civil rights movement gaining momentum in the 1950s, the KKK was mobilized into the political arena with more vigor than years previous. Prior to 1936 when the Republican and Democratic Parties shifted of voting bases, Tom Metzger, a leader of the Klan in California, ran for U.S. Congress and while he received the Democratic primary nomination, he lost the general election (Bullard 1991:32). While Metzger failed to win a seat, the precedent that leaders of the Klan could run with electoral support had been set. However, over time the Klan lost steam in the political sphere, suffering from decentralization and fracturing. This was rectified following the Supreme Court ruling on *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, when the “self-styled” Klan members became unified and mobilized to action (Mcveigh 2014:1149). The KKK began to throw their support behind the Republican Party, building a platform based on supporting and reestablishing segregation, (Cunningham 2014:81), and the perceived unfair treatment of white citizens in the United States (CNN 2013). It was in part through the campaigns of KKK leaders that the Republican Party incorporated Christianity, “Southern ideals” and White supremacy into their party platform.

In order to achieve these political objectives during the 1950s and 60s, KKK leaders became politically engaged, running for office and emphasizing the importance of voting and political engagement within their Klan meetings. In 1966, large rallies were used to capitalize on resentment and to influence and encourage voting (Mcveigh 2014:1149). The KKK continually emphasized the importance of voting Republicans into offices and voting out the Progressive politicians that had led to the to the social issues the Klan were protesting against (Mcveigh 2014:1150). This strategy had relative success, beginning to incorporate the “Protestant” ideals of the KKK into the Republican party.

David Duke, leader of the KKK in the 1970s, ran for various offices during and after his leadership. Duke began distancing himself from the Klan in 1979, running for a Louisiana State Senate seat as a conservative Democrat (Southern Poverty Law Center 2011). Following this success, Duke ran for President in 1980, but with very little to no public support (Southern Poverty Law Center 2011). Eight years later, Duke ran for president again, this time promising to lead his “sunshine coalition” into the oval office. Despite new rhetoric, Duke raised only 5% of the Louisiana state vote, and garnered even less support nationally (Southern Poverty Law Center 2011). In 1989, Duke surprised many when he won a spot in the Louisiana House of Representatives race, running as an anti-busing, anti-tax Republican, and avoiding his KKK and neo-Nazi past (Southern Poverty Law Center 2011). Duke continued to gather attention when he ran against Edwin Edwards in the 1991 Louisiana governor’s contest. He lost this race against Edwards, but it was this campaign that solidified Duke as a mainstream career politician (Southern Poverty Law Center 2011). Duke’s streak of unsuccessful runs continued in 1990 when Duke ran in the Republican Primary for a U.S. Senate seat, and lost (Southern Poverty Law Center 2011). While Duke had limited success in the political arena, it gave Klansmen, or at least ex-KKK members, an active role in the United States government, giving KKK members one of their own to vote into office. The KKK’s displeasure with the growing liberties Black Americans were receiving forced them into the political sphere and motivated KKK leaders to run for political office. Because Klan leaders ran under the conservative Republican platform, and the success of the “Southern Strategy,” the Ku Klux Klan became a reliable voting bloc for the Republican Party.

This support from the KKK that had a lasting impact on Republican Party ideals and cemented the Klansmen as a cornerstone voting block for the Republican Party (Mcveigh

2014:1149). In 1962, the KKK dislodged voters from their previous party alliances, thus leading to a complete overhaul of network ties and linking racist ideologies and legislation to the Republican Party (Mcveigh 2014:1161). During the 1970s and 80s, Duke emphasized the importance of voting and support of the Republican Party with some surprising results, but limited success (Bullard 1991:32). The KKK failed to meet their political objectives of returning to segregation and defending Jim Crow. However, the Klan had effectively linked the working-class constituency to the Republican Party whose ideals hinged on opposing federal intervention in creating socio-economic and racial equality (Mcveigh 2014:1165). The involvement of the KKK was not the only political factor that melded together conservatives, racist rhetoric and the Republican Party. The KKK's influence is one element that brought specifically racist, Christian Conservatives into the Republican Party. The connection between the KKK and the Republican Party remains prominent even to this day, with Duke backing and supporting Trump's 2016 campaign (Nelson 2017). The Klan's involvement and support for the Republican Party continues to manifest. In counties where the KKK was involved in community and "vigilante" building there are higher Republican Party affiliation numbers (PBS). While this trend remains true, it is important to also acknowledge the cultural influences and histories of segregation of the South that also play a crucial role in intertwining racism and the Republican Party.

The rhetoric of unfair competition, government handouts, and the importance of patriotism are all used by the Republican Party today. The 1950s and 1960s KKK was not able to preserve or reestablish Jim Crow or any of its other tangible political goals, but the Ku Klux Klan did manage to link a conservative Christian constituency to the Republican Party. Counties where the Klan was most active have some of the highest Republican Party allegiances and affiliations, and these counties exhibit higher rates of violent crime (PBS). Scholars attribute the crime rates

of these counties to another crucial element of the KKK's identity: vigilante crime (PBS). While these affiliations are most definitely influenced by a large number of other factors, the role of the KKK is one to consider. The Klan promoted themselves as protectors, warriors, and patriots of the United States- protecting the "true Americans" – White Christians. It was in part the KKK's racist and nativist rhetoric and their role in emphasizing the importance of political engagement that encouraged many Conservative Christians into the Republican Party.

THE TRADITIONAL FAMILY, CULTURE WARS, AND THE REPUBLICAN PARTY

Also during the 1960s, in tandem with KKK's induction into the Republican Party, conservative Christians were called to the Republican party largely through the rhetoric of the "traditional family." One of the many motivators of the Religious Right within the conservative political platform was to lobby and regulate the morality of the nation, primarily through defining and promoting the image and practice of the "traditional family." The American political debate has often been influenced by issues of Christian morality. For most of United States history, Christian morality has been the foundation for the laws and legislation passed in the U.S. (Griffith 2017:ix). Those who did not conform to cultural norms like: avoiding pre-marital sex, being in a heterosexual couple, and reproducing, were shunned and shamed for their choices. But, as history has moved on and many more American citizens have chosen "alternative" paths, support for traditional Christian morality, sexuality, and gender roles has begun to decay. "Culture wars" over such moral disagreements have become more heated during various civil rights campaigns. From Women's Suffrage in the 1920s, to access to birth control, to the sexual liberation of the sixties, into gay marriage becoming legalized in 2015, such debates

have caused fracturing in what was once a general political consensus about sexuality (Griffith 2017:ix).

After 1975, with the height of the backlash from *Roe vs. Wade* and other civil rights advances, “family values” like those mentioned above became a rallying cry. White Christian America saw “the family” as the center of the society - established by the Christian God, and crucial to the “survival” of America (Dowland 2009). Political wins like *Roe v. Wade*, along with popularization and acceptance of feminism and homosexuality have represented “a multifaceted attack” on the traditional Christian family (Dowland 2009). As abortion and gay rights became central partisan politics and dominated the national stage, both conservatives and progressives began to fear for the future of America. Conservatives hoped the nation would continue to “embody traditional Christian values” while progressives hoped for future that would extend the privileges given to white hetero-males to the greater public, and dismantle the structures that upheld White male supremacy (Griffith 2017:xviii). Part of the conflicts surrounding the morality of the United States comes from the symbolism White Christian American has attributed to these moral values. There is a degree of nostalgia and of “wholesomeness” that many Republicans attribute to the “traditional family.” Because of the purity of the institution of the traditional family and how well it fits within the larger Christian gender roles and attitudes, the “traditional family” is the idealization of what American families should be. President George W. Bush is quoted as saying, “[w]e need a nation closer to The Waltons than to The Simpsons” (Dodds 2012:274). For years, Republican leaders have been rallying around claims that national media shows like the *Teletubbies* promote “the gay lifestyle” and that many national television programs embody indecency, adultery, and promiscuous behavior (Dodds 2012:274). Many television series, celebrities, and other forms of media have received backlash from

conservative Christians for accepting and popularizing “alternative” lifestyles. Fear that the United States is moving too far away from the traditional Christian foundations has mobilized conservative Christians to protect what once was. Author Griffith (2017) argues that in the need to maintain the old sexual order and social roles, the primary driver has been fear. It is this fear that has “aroused passionate defiance, motivated acts of resistance, and galvanized political support on the anti-change side” (p. xi). As the United States leans more progressive, Conservative Christians have become increasingly politically active, attempting to prevent the erosion of Christian morality in legislation.

“Family values” was rhetorically crucial to assembling Conservative Christians in preventing of the Equal Rights Amendment from passing in 1972. The ERA was viewed by many religious conservatives as “anti-family, anti-children, and pro-abortion” (Dowland 2009:617, Manza and Brooks 1997). The killing of this bill showed a fundamental shift in the policy decisions of the Republican party. The Religious Right and Conservative leaders had successfully modernized “traditional political conservatisms” (Manza and Brooks 1997). They had shifted the focus from ending the intrusion of government in individual’s daily lives, and instead promoted governmental legislative standards that prohibited “amoral” behavior (Dowland 2009).

Legislation against indecent behavior continued into the 1980s with the election of President Ronald Reagan. Reagan and the New Right were able to motivate “traditional family” Republicans, as well as to convert some of the more religious Democrats through moral outrage, racial resentment, and the “war on the family” (Courtwright 2013). These “new” Republicans, born from the culture wars of the 1970s, were disproportionately White, low to middle income voters who prioritized social Conservatism when it came to national federal issues (Himmelstein

and McRae 1984). During the Reagan era, “Americans publicly assented to a moral code that emphasized hard work, honesty, patriotism, sensual self-restraint, and other Christian values,” and conservatives began looking to their nominees to reflect these ideals (Courtwright 2013).

Scholar Graham Dodds (2012), believes that the election of and continued support for former president George W. Bush was the pinnacle of Christian values winning an election. G.W. Bush reflected the very values that many conservative Christians feared were deteriorating. Dodds (2012) argues that during the Bush era, the Republican party began to mimic the Christian Coalition’s previous actions, and in doing so adopted and internalized the Coalition’s values of morality and traditionalism, and ultimately, with the election of President George W. Bush, the Republican party once again flipped from “The Grand Old Party” to “God’s Own Party.” In a 2004 national exit poll, “22% of respondents said that ‘moral values’ were the ‘most important issue’ influencing their vote, and 80% of those voters voted for Bush” (Dodds 2012). While only a quarter of those surveyed defined “moral issues” as a national issue that required immediate attention, four fifths of these voters voted for President George W. Bush. This signifies that a large portion of Bush’s appeal stemmed from his commitment to traditional Christian moral values.

Because of the increased religiosity with the conservative party Republican Presidential nominees took on more than political leadership, they had to be spiritual guides as well (Brint 2010). A study referenced by Steven Brint (2010) found that:

Many evangelicals as well as members of other Christian religious traditions see the world as governed by moral standards and these standards lead them to oppose changes in society that threaten these standards. Commitments to traditional moral standards and fears about threats to these standards shape both their attitudes about government social provision and their attitudes about acceptable forms of social reform. (p. 15)

Emphasizing this, the data also showed that moral standards of traditionalism are the most reliable and strongest single source of Conservatism amongst White evangelicals (Brint 2010). Thus, when the Republican Party began to tap into the religious voting bloc, it became necessary for their platform to include the protection of traditional conservative Christian values.

The rhetoric of the “traditional family” unified conservative Christians throughout the mid 1900s as they faced a more progressive United States that debated abortion rights, gay marriage, birth control, individual liberties, and feminism. The United States had institutionalized Christian morality as the standard of behavior in the United States, but as the U.S. diversified and historically marginalized populations demanded equality, many felt that their faith and their America were under attack. This fear mobilized many Conservative Christians into the political arena, demanding roll-backs on grounds of religious freedom, and defending “American culture.” As the culture war between Christian values and more progressive values continued to be center stage, Conservative Christians and others became politically mobilized and the Republican Party adopted many of their concerns. Efforts under the Reagan administration as well as the backing for former President George W. Bush demonstrate the power and successfulness of the blending of Conservative Christians and the Republican party on the grounds of protecting the family.

AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM, PATRIOTISM, AND THE REPUBLICAN PARTY

The influence of American Exceptionalism in motivating conservative Christians to join the Republican party has been a much longer and more clandestine process than that of the KKK or “traditional family” impact. Nonetheless, American Exceptionalism has played a crucial role in linking being American with being Christian. It was through the belief that America was

chosen by (the Christian) God that Christian beliefs and morals played a role in patriotism and nationalism. The Republican party's connection with religious conservatives contributes to and reinforces the ideology of American exceptionalism. American exceptionalism "involves a kind of sacralization of the political order," and in the case of groups like the Religious Right, politics becomes a holy process, "sanctioned" by the Divine (Silk 2012:34). The theory of the role of the Religious Right as reinforcing the ideology of American exceptionalism is especially obvious within three specific Republican voter types. A Pew Report conducted in 2014 identified several political voter types that directly reference this American exceptionalism: "(1) Libertarians—mostly the Libertarian Right with some Independent Libertarians; (2) 'Staunch Conservatives'—Activists and the most intense Establishment Republicans and members of the Christian Right; and (3) 'Main Street Republicans'—Establishment Republicans and some Christian conservatives and moderates" (Keckler, Charles and Rozell 2015:94). These voters are the descendants of those who were deemed the "Moral Majority," "Christian Coalition," and "Religious Right" of 1960s-1990s.

While addressing Soviet military commander and Marshal Goergy Zhukov, President Eisenhower alludes to this philosophy, saying, "our form of government has no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith, and I don't care what it is. With us of course it is the Judeo-Christian concept, but it must be a religion that all men are created equal" (Silk 2012:34). What Eisenhower demonstrates here is a link between the American ideals of equality, liberty, democracy, and Judeo-Christian faith, ultimately tying together American (democratic) government and Christianity. Conservative groups and Republican representatives used the myth that the United States of America was in a moral decline and needed to be restored in order to justify moral legislation, while reinforcing that the United States was a "Christian Nation," with

a special purpose from God (Schnabel 2013:34). This theory is supported by the study conducted by Mark Silk which found that “Over nine out of 10 Republicans (but little more than seven out of 10 Democrats) agree that because of US history and the Constitution, the U.S. has a unique character that makes it the greatest country in the world” (2013:38). This implies that American exceptionalism is an incredibly unifying principle within the Republican platform.

President George W. Bush was able to harness the unification power of American Exceptionalism to further his own political agenda as well. Through rhetoric that made not only Americans God’s chosen people, but the United States God’s chosen nation - his “divine project”- President Bush was able to discredit his critics, claiming their criticisms were blasphemous, and “anti-American” (Silk 2013:38). This alignment of Republican ideals and policy, with God’s plan for the United States, threatened the Democratic party, and ultimately contributed to the polarization of the political parties. To combat the “godless socialism” Democrats were pushing for, Republican candidates returned more and more to classical liberalist philosophies, but this time with Judeo-Christian morals, and ethos (Schnabel 2013).

A modern example of political leaders mimicking the religious and American Exceptionalist ideologies of their constituents is visible within the Tea Party. Many scholars argue that there is a great deal of overlap between that of the Tea Party (a fundamentalist group within the Republican party), and the Religious Right (Dodds 2012). The connection between the Religious Right (who have often acted as proponents and defenders of American exceptionalism) and the Tea Party is to be expected. Evangelical Christians like many Republican and Tea Party representatives are fundamentalists. Evangelicals view the Bible as the literal word of God and the absolute religious authority, very similar to those within the Republican party who view the Constitution in its original intent (Brint 2010). The Tea Party alliance to Christian values and

American exceptionalism is made more and more obvious every time the Tea Party argues for the Christian intent of the Framers (despite that many were Enlightenment deists), and refer to the Framers as carrying out God's divine plan for America (Brint 2010).

Another element of the discussion of American exceptionalism within the Republican party and Conservative Christians is that of the future, namely younger religious Republican voters. Author David Courtwright (2013) argues that as United States culture continues to value "permissive, or self-indulgent" activities like social media, selfies, sex, etc. there will be no shortage of "moral traditionalists" pushing back against these "liberalist" values, and continuing to support conservative politicians. In many ways, young voters and their ancestors maintain similar beliefs. Religious Republicans still largely agree on defending individual "traditional" liberties, and oppose an expansion of governmental power, and agreement on the defense of traditional rights of property and contract and on opposition to expansion of the governmental role (Keckler, Charles and Rozell 2015). However, what younger evangelical voters are concerned about has shifted away from the protecting "the family" rhetoric that was so heavily favored by older conservatives. On the issue of homosexuality, Millennial voters (those born between 1989-2000) are not as concerned about adoption, marriage, and the prevention of civil rights as their ancestors were (Pelz, Mikael and Schmidt 2015). This may come from a variety of factors: increasing numbers of millennials and Gen Xers identify as LGBTQIA+, there has been a large increase in representation in TV, movies and music, and for several generations now men and women have been putting off starting a family and instead been more career driven.

These declines in conservatism amongst millennial voters may also be explained by the political socialization theory. As the societal context shifts away from the issues that created the Religious Right and Christian Coalition, Millennial voters are shifting their own concerns, and

with them the concerns of their representatives will have to change (Pelz, Mikael, Schmidt 2015). With the continued polarization of politics within the United States and Christian conservatives continuing to perceive an attack on religion and American exceptionalism, studies suggest that there is little reason to believe that the role of religiosity in voter decisions is likely to experience a major decline in future elections (Manza, Jeff and Clem Brooks 1997). Thus, even if the original role of religious groups within the Republican party was to protect the family, in order for these groups to remain relevant and to maintain power, their agendas and ideologies have been forced to add and enforce beliefs of American exceptionalism.

American Exceptionalism ties conservative Christians to the Republican party differently than that of the “traditional family” or KKK rhetoric. American Exceptionalism is able to cross generations much more effectively. Where younger generations are generally less conservative in that they are less concerned with familial structures and gender roles, and are less overt with their White supremacy, they are still motivated by the rhetoric that the U.S. is special and that it is holy. American Exceptionalism relies on Christianity to cement its divinity. And it is because of the mass appeal of American Exceptionalism rhetoric that the debate of whether America is a Christian nation is likely to continue.

CONCLUSION

Christian Conservatives became linked to the Republican Party in part through the incorporation and support of Ku Klux Klan leaders joining the political sphere; through the rhetoric of protecting and encouraging the “traditional family;” and through the ongoing rhetoric of American exceptionalism and patriotism. While these three paths were very influential in the intertwining of Christian faith and American Conservatism, they are of course not the only

factors. This chapter could not account for the myriad ways throughout its history that the Republican Party has utilized Christian faith to mobilize Christian voters. Nor does it mean to suggest that all Christian Republicans were or are motivated by the rhetoric of the KKK, “traditional family” or American Exceptionalism. I simply point to these factors as key influencers in how the Republican Party and more extremist Conservative Christian groups became intertwined.

Following the Civil Rights advances in the 1950s and 1960s, KKK leaders began to run for public office and emphasized the importance of voting and “protecting” the United States through political participation. While the KKK was unable to achieve their goals of reinstating Jim Crow laws and rolling back Civil Rights advances, they were able to secure a Protestant, White Supremacist voting base for the Republican party for years to come. The rhetoric of “traditional families” was another mobilizing force for white Christian Americans to join the conservative Republican party. Fear that the acceptance of single mothers, unmarried sex, homosexuals, and interracial couples would harm the morality of nation encouraged White, Christian, nuclear families to vote for the “protection” of their lifestyles and the morality of the United States. The third factor that lead some conservative Christians into the Republican party was that of American Exceptionalism. More specifically, American Exceptionalist rhetoric that America is a nation and a people chosen by God, that Christian faith and patriotism go hand in hand, and that ultimately, the United States is a Christian nation. Patriotism and its connection to the Christian faith, the use of Christian symbolism and rhetoric to define what it means to be “American” has played a crucial role in establishing that the Evangelical and Protestant Christian voting base that consistently turn out for Republican candidates.

As United States culture shifts away from traditional Christian rhetoric, morality, and social roles, White Christian America has responded with waves of political conservatism. The Ku Klux Klan, the “traditional family” rhetoric, and American Exceptionalism examples all demonstrate backlashes of conservatism in response to the American identity becoming less and less defined by traditional Christian ideals. More importantly however, this chapter explains three key factors in how White Christian America became a republican voting bloc. While these were not motivating factors for all White Christian Americans or Conservative Christians more generally, these factors begin to explain the connection between the Republican Party, White Christian America and nativist, homophobic, and racist rhetoric. All of this began to set the stage for Donald Trump’s election, illustrating in part why his exclusionary platform was effective in mobilizing White Christian America.

In the next chapter, the qualifications of what American looks like and who gets to be American is analyzed through the case study of the rumors surrounding President Obama’s election. Through this case study the effectiveness of the KKK’s entanglement into the Republican party becomes more prominent. The dependence of the American Identity on being White and Christian sparked debates on Obama’s citizenship status, his religious identity, and with it greater Islamophobia and anti-immigration narratives.

Who Gets to Be American: Obama, Race and Religion

Motivated by the increasingly partisan political divide and the intense disagreements on the definition of “American Identity,” journalist Miceala Tompkins conducted a questionnaire to get to the heart of how Americans understood the designation “American.” Tompkins asked 100 individuals to “define the word ‘American,’ in the sentence: keep America American.” She published her findings on Affinity Magazine’s website. Tompkins’ questionnaire reiterated what many had already expected: “American” conjured images of white Christians. This underscored the pervasive nature of White Christian American rhetoric and displayed White Christian America’s continued dominance over the “American Identity.” 42% of the White people over the age of 35 in Tompkins’ study struggled to discuss immigration, becoming visibly uncomfortable and skirting around the question and avoiding discussions of race. In contrast, 62% of the White people questioned who were under the age of 35 expressed that “American” implied Whiteness and were more comfortable than their elders in discussing White privilege, even if they did not believe it existed. Comparatively, 82% of people of color responded that “American” could be described as “white” or “Caucasian,” and 100% of the queer-identifying people of color used the terms “white” “straight” or “Christian” to describe “American.” In every demographic but White people over 35, it was acknowledged that “American” implied white and Christian identities (Tompkins 2017).

Despite the informality of this study, the findings reflect a larger American cultural reality. The United States is rooted in ideals of Christianity and Whiteness, and as historically minoritized populations were denied citizenship and political power, being American and having the benefit of citizenship was reserved for White people. Nativist rhetoric is deeply embedded in race. The rhetoric of “going back to where you came from” implies a level of not belonging.

Because the “American Identity” is so thoroughly intertwined in Whiteness and the Christian faith, any citizen who does not meet one or both of these qualifications has their American Identity contested. The influence of race and religion continue to taint societal understandings of Americanism. President Obama’s election brought this contested identity to center stage when he became the first Black President of the U.S.

To contextualize the impact race and religion have on an individual’s perceived United States citizenship, the history of when and how recently people of color in the United States have been allowed to participate in governance becomes crucial. One very straightforward example is that of the United States Congress. Electing a descriptively representative congress has been a slow moving and very recent process in the United States. It has only been in the last century that minorities were allowed to participate in the governance of the United States. In 1870, African American men were granted the right to vote, though through Jim Crow and other discriminatory legal practices the right to vote was not truly granted and accessible to African Americans until the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (Voting Rights Act 2019). Hiram Revels was the first black man to be elected to Congress. In 1870 he was elected to the Senate representing Mississippi (Hiram Revels 2018). The first white woman to serve in Congress was elected in 1916, representing Montana in the House of Representatives (Milestones for Women 2019). The first Asian man to serve in Congress was Hiram Fong, who was first elected in 1959 (Hiram Fong 2018). The first black woman elected to the House of Representatives was Shirley Chisholm in 1968 (Pak 2019). Not only are these firsts recent developments in United States history, but such firsts are continuing in 2018. The 116th Congress was the most diverse Congress ever elected, though it still falls short of the overall demographics of the United States (Pew Research Center 2019).

In 2018, Deb Halaand and Sharice Davids became the first Native American women to be elected to congress; Rashida Tlaib became one of the first Muslims, and the first Palestinian-American woman to be elected; Ilhan Omar was one of the first Muslim women, and the first Somali-American to win a seat in Congress (Cooney 2018). The demographics of Congress are changing, and they are beginning to reflect the shifting demographics of the United States. But not everyone is happy that the government is becoming more representative.

On April 12th, 2019 President Donald Trump tweeted an edited video in which a speech Omar had given was altered in order make it seem as if she was downplaying the seriousness of 9/11 (Stolburg 2019). Since the publication of this video, Omar received an onslaught of death threats via mail, email, and social media (Stolburg 2019). While Democrat leaders pointed out that the video was edited, they were hesitant to completely defend Omar, only reinforcing the lack of support across party lines for historically marginalized community representatives (Stolberg 2019). Many White conservatives fear the ethnic and racial population shifts and are pushing back against inclusive American citizenship. Fearing the loss of their own supremacy and power, they are antagonizing, dehumanizing, and threatening those who represent the changing demographics. This fear has created an insurgence of “Keep America American” rhetoric and has encouraged brazen acts of racism and nativism. In the United States, an individual’s religious affiliation and their race greatly influences perceived citizenship. This is largely due to the continued popularization of the rhetoric that the United States is a white and Christian nation. The case study of the seemingly never-ending controversy surrounding former President Barack Obama’s religious identity and citizenship affirms that the truest form of American Identity is perceived to be White Christian America.

A CASE STUDY: PRESIDENT OBAMA

Barack Obama became the first Black president in United States history in 2008. Despite President Obama's continued Christian identification, and his speeches filled with Christian rhetoric, rumors that President Obama was in fact Muslim continued. The endless doubts of President Obama's Christian faith, and the calls for proof of former President Obama's citizenship demonstrate how deeply embedded race is in defining American citizenship. Rumors that President Obama was not born in the United States swirled through the media and demands to see Obama's birth certificate and proof of citizenship were nonstop. Because President Obama's father was "foreign," conservatives were able to situate Obama as having also been born in Kenya, thus making him an "immigrant" and allowing them to question his citizenship (Williams 2013). Current President Trump even weighed in on the rumors, saying on "The View" in 2011 "I want him to show his birth certificate... There's something on that birth certificate that he doesn't like" (Diamond 2017). It should come as no surprise that Donald Trump did not like President Obama or his policies, or that he played a large role in stirring the rumors-about-Obama pot. In 2012, Trump continued to add fuel to the fire tweeting "An 'extremely credible source' has called my office and told me that @BarackObama's birth certificate is a fraud" (Diamond 2017). Trump's persistent doubts of President Obama's citizenship and American identity, regardless of proof, only encouraged the nativist and racist ideologies conservatives and conservative Christians were feeling in regard to immigrants and people of color.

The Pew Research Center crafted a study to analyze just how pervasive doubts of President Obama's religious faith were in 2010. This study reported that 18% of Americans believed that Obama was Muslim. This number had increased from the 2009 numbers, in which

11% believed he was a Muslim. Only 34% of Americans report that they believe that Obama is Christian, this number had decreased from the 2009 report that 48% believed Obama was Christian. This left 43% of Americans responding “I don’t know” when asked what they believed Obama’s religious identity was (PRC 2010).

Unsurprisingly, President Obama’s perceived religious affiliation is intertwined with his approval and popularity ratings. Pew Research Center found that “roughly a third of conservative Republicans (34%) say Obama is a Muslim, as do 30% of those who disapprove of Obama’s job performance” (PRC 2010). There is a strong correlation between conservative Americans who do not agree with President Obama’s policy and those who believe him to be a Muslim. Following this study into perceptions of President Obama’s religious identity, the Pew Research Center stated “those who say he [Barack Obama] is a Muslim overwhelmingly disapprove of his job performance, while a majority of those who think he is a Christian approve of the job Obama is doing.” This is not a coincidence.

President Obama’s campaign trail, his election, and his two terms in office were peppered with doubts, conspiracies, and issues of his racial and religious identity (Taylor 2016). Despite President Obama identifying as Christian and relying heavily on biblical symbolism in his speeches, doubts of his religious faith continued. “The confusion around Obama’s religious affiliation stemmed from White Christians who were unwilling or unable to see him as an embodiment of their own religion, largely because of his race and his Kenyan ancestry” (Jones 2017:81). For many White Americans, the “White Anglo-Saxon Protestant male” was the only “authentic model of citizenship,” and President Barack Obama became a lightning rod for discussions of race and citizenship in the United States (Jones 2017:80).

In *The End of White Christian America*, Robert Jones (2017) argues that both elections of Barack Obama deeply rattled ideas about who got to be President, and what ideals they had to reflect, challenging the Christian political strategy (p. 81-3). The “crossing of the color-line” as Jones puts it, was the “most visible symbolic challenge to the White Christian America’s hold on the country,” resulting in a massive turn out for Obama’s inauguration and signaling for many that there was hope for a “post-racial” America (p. 80). Because of the symbolic significance of President Obama’s election and its attack on White Christian America, many tried to discredit Obama, citing primarily his race, his religion and his citizenship status (Jones 2017:80).

The drama surrounding President Obama’s religious faith demonstrates how embedded the concept of race is in defining who is Christian and who is American. Being a Black man, former President Obama challenged conservative’s preconceived notions of what a Christian looks like, and disrupted the pattern of White male presidents that appealed to conservative conceptions of the United States as a predominantly White, Christian society. Conservatives have clung to the historic and segregated ideals of citizenship. The Republican party continues to appeal to predominantly White Americans, and maintains its strongest base in the same areas that fought to maintain segregated systems less than 50 years ago (Williams 2013). The embedded narrative that Americans are White and Christian, and people of color are “foreigners” dominates the narratives surrounding the conspiracies that President Obama was not who he said he was and contextualize why Trump’s campaign was so successful. Trump embodied the opposite of Obama and had been in conflict with him and his racial religious identity from the beginning.

“Muslims Aren’t Americans:” Fear Mongering and Competition

The previous section outlines one of the two problems surrounding the controversy of Obama's religious identity: that Obama is not a Muslim, despite the pervasiveness and effectiveness of the rumors. This section outlines the second problem: that because the American identity hinges on the Christian faith, in the eyes of many conservative Christians, being an American and being a Muslim are incompatible. Islamophobia remains a powerful intersection of fear and ignorance in the United States. By making Islam inherently "other" than American, and inciting fear of terrorist attacks and putting Christians and Muslims in direct competition, Christianity has been able to discredit and marginalize Islam in the United States.

By labelling President Obama as a Muslim, Conservative Christian Americans were able to align him with "otherness" and devalue the legitimacy of his presidency. Because conservative Americans tend to view Islam as completely oppositional to Christianity, painting it as a religion that is completely against individual freedoms and breeding violence, Muslims have often faced exclusion from the "in-group" of American society. Given the larger exclusionary rhetoric of defining the American identity, being a Muslim, at least in the eyes of many conservative Christians, makes an individual not truly American, regardless of birthright (Williams 2013). Donald Trump gained prominence through his constant anti-Muslim rhetoric and by encouraging Christian Americans to fear Muslims. In 2015, at the beginning of his campaign trail, Donald Trump pitted Christians and Muslims against each other, stating that in regards to immigration, "Muslims can come in but other people can't; Christians can't come into this country but Muslims can. Something has got to be coming down from the top... the Muslims aren't in danger but the Christians are" (Medium 2018). He alludes here that current President Obama was prioritizing Muslim refugees while denying entrance to Christians. Not only is that false, but it perpetuates the fear that many Christians are being oppressed and minoritized, and that the allowance of Muslims

to enter the United States is threatening to Conservative Christians, and to the overall Christian identity of the Country.

Donald Trump has often been quoted aligning President Obama not just with Islam, but with violent sects responsible for terrorist actions. In June of 2016, during a Fox News Interview, Donald Trump announced his belief that that President Obama was sympathetic to Islamic terrorists, stating "You know, people cannot believe that President Obama is acting the way he acts and can't even mention the words radical Islamic terrorism...There's something going on — it's inconceivable. There's something going on" (Diamond 2017). By suggesting that President Obama was soft on terrorists, Trump incited fear and encouraged the already pervasive lies about President Obama's faith. This was not the first time Trump suggested that President Obama was aligned with Muslim populations. In 2015, Donald Trump tweeted "Refugees from Syria are now pouring into our great country. Who knows who they are—some could be ISIS. Is our president insane?" (Medium 2018). In August of 2016, Trump escalated his Obama-is-a-Muslim-terrorist rhetoric when, at his own campaign rally, he stated "ISIS is honoring President Obama. He's the founder of ISIS. He's the founder of ISIS. He's the founder. He founded ISIS," (Diamond 2017). Trump often aligns Muslims with ISIS and Al-Qaeda, often citing the terrorist group as reason to ban Muslim refugees and immigrants from entering the country and justifying this as reason for surveillance and discrimination of American Muslims. In 2015 on ABC's "The Week," Trump falsely stated:

there were people that were cheering on the other side of New Jersey where you have large Arab populations...they were cheering as the World Trade Center came down. I know it might be not politically correct for you to talk about it, but there were people cheering as that building came down—as those buildings came down, and that tells you

something. It was well covered at the time” (Medium 2018).

This statement horrified many as it links the 3.45 million Muslims in the United States to supporting and celebrating the horrific actions of a terrorist organization.

Creating Competition: Christians, Muslims, and Immigrants

Trump continues to make sweeping generalizations that instigate fear, racism, and Islamophobia. Just as Trump’s Tweeted video about Omar suggests, he continues to align all Muslims and Muslim Americans with supporting the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Trump has referred to Muslims as “sick people,” claiming Islam hates “us,” continually using lies to build a Muslim enemy (citation). Pitting Muslims against this undefined “us” is a recurring element of Trump’s hate speech. And while he never says outright who he is referring to, it is clear that he means his supporters: White, Christian Americans. In 2016, Trump said that Muslims “...have to respect us. They do not respect us at all. And frankly, they don’t respect a lot of the things that are happening throughout not only our country, but they don’t respect other things” (Medium 2018). Trump is speaking to the same desire that helped promote Conservative Christianity in the 1960s: assimilation. This rhetoric utilizes the same themes of nostalgia, the same fear, and the same threat to the dominate culture, that was used to protect the “traditional family” and to “Make America Great Again.” The symbolism is in no way new; however it still works, and White Christian Americans are still clinging to the idea that they are the only “true” Americans.

Reports that the former President is not “one of us,” as if allegations of being Muslim made him irrevocably something other than American, is a recurring theme in anti-Obama rhetoric, and relies heavily on anti-immigration narratives. Obama’s alleged immigrant and “other” status has become a frequent theme at anti-Obama demonstrations, with “some demanding he “go back where he came from” or another one with a picture of the president over

a caption that reads “undocumented worker.” All of this serves to neatly encapsulate both opposition to immigration and to Obama by marking them [both] as foreign” (Williams 2013). By separating former President Barack Obama from his Christian identity, and using his race to allege his “immigrant” status, conservatives were able to contextualize him in greater anti-immigration narratives.

Donald Trump’s rhetoric surrounding immigrants, much like his rhetoric about Muslims, has been full of racist stereotypes and has consciously painted immigrants as a threat to “Americans.” Donald Trump has been quoted saying, “When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best, They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people” (Korte and Gomez 2018). By stating this, Donald Trump is tapping into the same American Exceptionalism, nostalgia, and fear that mobilized Christians into the Republican party in the first place. While his rhetoric cannot reflect the opinions of all of White Christian America, this anti-immigrant rhetoric was a predominant element of his political platform. White Christian America voted for him either because of or despite his nativist propaganda. His rhetoric also mobilized White Christian America as it situated and reinforced that they were the “true” Americans.

Trump pitted immigrants against (White Christian) American public’s safety, stating that California’s new sanctuary city policy “provides safe harbor to some of the most vicious and violent offenders on Earth, like MS-13 gang members putting innocent men, women, and children at the mercy of these sadistic criminals.” Trump goes on to state “these aren’t people. these are animals” (Korte and Gomez 2018). Trump is heavily overemphasizing a life of crime and dehumanizing migrants, fueling rhetoric of fear, hatred and racism. Donald Trump not only situates immigrants as dangerous, but labels them as economically threatening, by claiming that

immigrants are overwhelmingly uneducated, low-skilled workers who “compete directly against venerable American workers” (Desjardins 2016). Again Trump’s nativist attitudes and statements harken back to the very rhetoric that brought conservative Christians to the Republican Party. The desire to maintain White supremacy, keep America for White Christian Americans, and ultimately “Make America Great Again” all capitalize on the continuation of the institutional supremacy for the “true” Americans, and the clear distinction from them and the “others.”

To address these immigration concerns and fear, Donald Trump has a plan. During his campaign, Trump promised Americans, “I will build a great, great wall on our Southern Border, and I will make Mexico pay for that wall. Mark my words” (Valverde 2019). This wall would only really address immigration from the South, and once again highlights the racist layers of how immigration is conceptualized by many Americans. Furthermore, on the topic of immigration, Trump has perpetually emphasized the importance and requirement of assimilation to United States residency. In 2016, he stated, “Not everyone who seeks to join our country will be able to successfully assimilate. It is our right as a sovereign nation to choose immigrants that we think are the likeliest to thrive and flourish here” (Desjardins 2016). He referenced again the right of the state to choose who is allowed asylum, entry, and residency claiming, “it’s our right as a sovereign nation to choose immigrants that we think are the likeliest to thrive and flourish and love us” (Diamond 2017). Assimilation plays a crucial role in immigration policy to many conservatives because it promises to protect and maintain the current status quo. Again, the crucial element is maintaining the “American” way of life and protecting all the current racist, classist, nativist institutions. And the distinction between the “Americans” and “the rest” is highlighted again, through the use of the ominous “us.”

On paper, American citizenship can be granted to anyone, regardless of racial or religious identity. Nevertheless, it is clear, through the rhetoric surrounding President Obama, that an individual's "American-ness" is heavily impacted by such characteristics. This is not to argue that Obama's experience is at all the full story regarding race and religious experience in the United States; more that the case study of Obama highlights one intersection of race and religion in the United States. The continuous narratives of fear, nativism, racism and Islamophobia were all captured in the example of conservative backlash to the election of President Obama. This example also accentuates the clear influence of nostalgic and protection narratives that originally drew Christians to the Republican party and drew them to Donald Trump. Trump defines a clear "us" versus "them" in his discussions of immigration and American-ness. He excludes Muslims, labelling them as terrorists and pitting them against the Christian American Identity and the "American way of life." He outcasts immigrants, framing them as criminals, as uneducated, and as dangerous. He makes it clear that both Muslims and immigrants are Brown and Black folks and that neither is an acceptable American Identity. Trump refers to this undefined "us" as the true Americans. Reading between the lines of Trump's statements, this "us" is those who agree with his hate speech; they are the conservatives and conservative Christians who feel threatened by the growing amount of diversity and representation in the United States. The "us" is the White men and women who are beginning to see their privilege and superiority coming under threat.

**Who Gets to Be American:
Kavanaugh, Faith Commitments, and Women's Movements**

In early September of 2018, the nation was captivated by the nomination and confirmation of Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court. The case study of Brett Kavanaugh's nomination and appointment demonstrated the importance of faith commitments to both those in the seats of power and their supporters. It also shows the reaction of White Christian America not just to feminist movements but to the stories and experiences of sexual assault survivors. Just as American identity has become tied up with perceptions of race and faith, so too has it become intertwined with gender norms.

As we have seen, the Christian faith is not only the framework through which the majority of U.S. legislation is defined but has played a crucial role in the identities and electability of those in power. In the case of the Supreme Court, religious freedom cases regularly appear before the Court and their constitutionality is debated. Because of the prominence of religious debates within the Court, the personal religious commitments of the Justices are worth consideration. The concern for the Justices' personal faith stems from the fear that their personal beliefs could cloud the Justices' ability to separate what is constitutional from what they believe to be right. It is in this contentious space that issues of abortion, gay marriage, birth control and national healthcare become religious freedom issues. Because White Christian America believes that America and Americans are Christian, and part of its rhetoric frames abortion, gay marriage, and health care Christian morality, not constitutionality. For some vocal Conservative Christians, the debate has strayed from whether something is legal and constitutional, to whether the Bible and the Lord would approve.

Christianity has long influenced the Supreme Court, though in recent years this has started to change. While the separation of Church and State is central to U.S. law, the majority

of- if not every- Justice to ever hold a seat has identified as religious (Livini 2018). Of the 114 Supreme Court Justices, 91 have been from Protestant denominations. Of these 91, 33 have been Episcopalians, 18 Presbyterians, nine Unitarians, five Methodists, three Baptists, one Lutheran, one Quaker, and the remainder have been non-denominational Protestants (Adherents). Of the remaining non-Protestant Justices, David Davis (who was on the bench from 1815-1886) had no known religious affiliation. 13 Justices have been Catholic, and eight have been Jewish (Adherents). These statistics not only highlight the dominance of Christian faith narratives in the personal lives of the Supreme Court Justices but reflects the strength of connection between the Christian faith and those in power. Catholic and Jewish peoples have historically been excluded from White Christian America, and that is reflected in how little representation they have had on the Court. It is notable however that Catholics have had a longer history of serving on the Supreme Court, whereas the first Jewish Justice was not appointed until the early 1900s. Of the eight Jewish Justices, three currently sit on the bench, and two of them are women. Of the 13 Catholic Justices, five of them currently serve on the Supreme Court. Of these five, one is female.

Of the 113 Justices, only four women have sat on the bench (Campisi and Giggs 2018). The first female Justice, Sandra Day O'Connor, was appointed in 1981 by Ronald Reagan and identified as Episcopalian (Adherents). Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Elena Kagan are both Jewish, and Sonia Sotomayor is Catholic (Adherents). It is vital to point out that with the confirmation of these Justices not only was there gender diversity but religious diversity as well. To have three out of four female Justices identify as something other than Christian demonstrates the beginning of a cultural shift. Despite these shifts, there have been no openly LGBTQIA+ Supreme Court Justices, and only three have been people of color: Sonia Sotomayor, Clarence Thomas, and

Thurgood Marshall (Campisi and Giggs 2018). Justices Sotomayor and Thomas still sit on the Court today. The exclusion of women and people of color from the Supreme Court has allowed for the continued dominance of White Christian men over the greater public. While there is no doubt that this has influenced Supreme Court Cases like *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), it may contextualize other Supreme Court case decisions as well. It is easier to make decisions that limit the personal freedoms to healthcare, marriage and others if you are not a member of the community that is impacted by the decision.

It is important to consider the religious saliency of Supreme Court Justices' personal identities when sitting on the Supreme Court. While the Court is meant to rule only on the constitutionality of a case, the Justices' personal life experiences are bound to impact their understanding of basic civil liberties. It also must be acknowledged that the precedents set by the Supreme Court reflect the ideal "American Identity." The Court has, until recently, been dominated by white, Christian males and it is their interpretations have granted or denied civil liberties to women and people of color. This is shifting, and with increasing numbers of women, people of color, and people with non-Christian religious affiliations, the Supreme Court's demographics appear to reflect a changing reliance on White Christian America to fill positions of power.

While White Christian America is no longer the representative force of the Supreme Court, it remains a powerful political influence outside of the Court. White Christian America was mobilized into conservatism following the legalization of abortion under *Roe V. Wade* (1973), and again with the legalization of gay marriage with *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015), both of which signaled large cultural shifts way from "Christian morality." Because of these deviations, cases like *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby Stores* (2014), or even *Masterpiece Cakeshop v.*

Colorado Civil Rights Commission (2017), which ruled on the religious exemption for corporations, were framed as religious freedom cases. Because of these landmark cases and their importance on not just issues of religious freedom, but on the human rights and non-discrimination amendments, White Christian America has been vocal in its support for the nomination of conservative Christians to the Supreme Court, and has contributed greatly to the contentious religious identity politics of the judiciary.

KAVANUAGH: A CONTINUATION OF THE PAST

On June 27th of 2018, former Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy announced that he was retiring from his lifelong appointment to the Supreme Court (Bowden 2018). This opened the floodgates for rumors of who President Trump would nominate to fill Kennedy's now open spot. Kennedy, who was a Catholic and sat on the bench starting in 1988, was known to be a more conservative judge, but a swing vote nonetheless. With Kennedy's retirement, Trump as the President, and the Republicans still the majority in the House and Senate, the opportunity arose to swing the Supreme Court in a more conservative direction. During his campaign, Trump had pledged to White Christian America to only to appoint Justices who would limit women's access to abortion (Burns et.al. 2018). True to his word, on July 9th, Trump nominated Brett Kavanaugh, a 12-year member of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the D.C. circuit, to fill Kennedy's seat (Bowden 2018). At the time, the nomination of Kavanaugh was relatively expected, and conservative Christians fully supported the nomination (Jackson 2018). Kavanaugh had begun his career as a clerk for Supreme Court Justice Kennedy, and in 2006 had been nominated to the D.C. Circuit Courts by former President George W. Bush. Generally speaking for many conservative Christians, the nomination of Kavanaugh changed little about

the balance of the Supreme Court. Catholic like his predecessor, Kavanaugh maintained the current religious make-up of the court. Five Justices identify as Roman Catholic; three are Jewish; and Neil Gorsuch, a Trump nominee who was raised Roman Catholic, currently identifies himself as Episcopalian. While Kavanaugh is Catholic and Catholics have often been excluded from White Christian America, he reflected many of the classic tenants of conservative Christian ideology and a commitment to religious freedom. Kavanaugh earned a reputation as anti-immigrant and anti-abortion following his dissent on a publicized case involving an unaccompanied minor who recently migrated to the U.S. and was living in an immigration shelter and requested an abortion (Miller 2018). Kavanaugh was also considered as “anti-union, anti-civil and consumer rights, anti-immigrant, anti-LGBTQ[IA+], and anti-health” by some more liberal-leaning Catholic advocacy groups (Jackson 2018). Kavanaugh would continue to protect “Christian religious liberty,” granting corporations religious exemptions and small businesses the right to turn away patrons based on their sexuality (Kuruvilla 2018).

Many conservative Christians were vocal about their support, praising “Trump... for cementing their vision of a Supreme Court that will uphold conservative beliefs on culture war issues” (Kuruvilla 2018). Conservative Christians were assured that Kavanaugh would “protect religious liberty for Christians,” and “focus on the family” (Jackson 2018). Also important to the nomination of Kavanaugh was his position on *Roe v. Wade* (1973). Access to abortion remains a point of contention for many conservative Christians, with tens of thousands of people marching in the “March for Life” (Burns et. al 2018). According to a Pew Research Center poll, two in five American women believe that abortion should be illegal in all or most cases (Burns et. al. 2018). Thus, the support for Kavanaugh was originally two-fold. On one hand, “Judge Kavanaugh’s nomination is the pinnacle of a different social movement: the 45-year quest by activists on the

right to overturn *Roe v. Wade* (1973), the court decision that made abortion legal nationwide” (Burns et. al. 2018). Kavanaugh’s nomination also assured the success of other conservative Christian issues, such as the advancement of religious liberty laws, and the ability to define the rights of LGBTQIA+ Americans (Burns et. al. 2018).

Despite the support and eventual confirmation of Kavanaugh, many within and from outside the Christian faith were vocal about their opposition. The largest critique from the Left came from fear that Kavanaugh would overturn *Roe v. Wade* and make abortions and other elements of women’s healthcare much more difficult to legally obtain (Livini 2018). This critique was echoed by William J. Barber, a pastor in North Carolina and a leader of the New Progressive Religious Movement who was inspired by Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.’s Poor People’s Campaign saying:

[Trump’s supporters] act as though the right to abortion is the litmus test for faith. It is not. The litmus test of faith is how you treat the poor, how you treat the least of these,” Barber said. “If you say you’re pro-life but all your other policies are pro-hurt and pro-death, it’s ultimate hypocrisy (Barber quoted by Kuruvilla 2018).

While being anti-abortion has become a calling card for Conservative Christians, abortion is not the partisan issue it appears to be.

Research conducted by the Guttmacher Institute suggests that Catholic women get abortions at the same rate as the general American public. A Pew Research Center study found that 61% of the Catholics surveyed were not in favor of overturning *Roe v. Wade* (1973); a small majority of Catholics, 53%, reported that they believed abortion should be legal in all or most cases (Kuruvilla 2018). This demonstrates that despite the mainstream narrative, not all Christians are anti-abortion, in fact anti-abortion Christians may not be the majority of Christians. Barber commented on the hypocrisy of anti-abortion rhetoric stating, “faith is supposed to be about challenging the houses of injustices, not about taking away healthcare. It’s

not about being anti-abortion and pro-prayer in schools and hating gay people. That is politics masquerading under the cover of religion” (Kuruvilla 2018).

The general emphasis on being anti-abortion is not the only issue Christian voters have with Kavanaugh. The Methodist Christian activist group American Family Association argued against Kavanaugh not for his history, but because they believed he was too weak on religious freedom rulings, and were hoping instead for someone more committed to protecting Christians (Livini 2018). While some groups argue that Kavanaugh is not hardline enough, more progressive Christians fear Kavanaugh’s views on the 14th Amendment (which grants equal protections of the law), and what that will mean for the rights of people of color and LGBTQIA+ Americans (Kuruvilla 2018). The controversy surrounding Kavanaugh grew in early September, as the conversations around his nomination shifted from his conservative Christian politics to his misogyny and treatment of women.

KAVANAUGH AS AN ABUSER

What would have been a cut and dry nomination of a White Christian America pleasing conservative became momentous as Kavanaugh’s history of sexual assaults and harassment was reported. On July 30th, Dr. Christine Blasey Ford, a professor in California, sent a letter to Senator Dianne Feinstein expressing that in high school Brett Kavanaugh physically and sexually assaulted her (Kelly and Estepa 2018). For several months Kavanaugh’s assaults were not mentioned to the Senate and the Kavanaugh hearing proceeded without interruption. However, rumors began to spread, and on September 12th, Feinstein sent Dr. Blasey Ford’s letter to the FBI. The FBI acknowledged the letter, including it in Kavanaugh’s background file, but did not open an investigation, asserting that the statute of limitations had expired on the case (Kelly and

Estepa 2018). On September 16th, the *New York Times* released an interview regarding the assault, and published it using Dr. Blasey Ford's name. In the interview, Ford recounts that one night at a house party, Kavanaugh pinned her down and assaulted her. She feared for her life due to Kavanaugh suffocating her, pressing his hand over her mouth to silence her screams (Kelly and Estepa 2018). Following the media attention and publishing of this interview Kavanaugh denied having ever assaulted Dr. Blasey Ford. In light of Dr. Blasey Ford's experience, a committee was formed in the Senate to hear from her and Kavanaugh. This committee was originally scheduled for September 24th but then rescheduled to the 27th. On September 23rd, a second woman, Deborah Ramirez, came forward and accused Kavanaugh of exposing himself to her at a college party (Kelley and Estepa 2018). Tensions continued to rise as a third woman came forward and accused Kavanaugh.

On September 27th, the committee to hear both Dr. Blasey Ford and Kavanaugh met. The committee meeting was emotional, with Dr. Blasey Ford giving a heartbreaking testimony, confirming that she was 100% positive that Kavanaugh assaulted her. Kavanaugh continued to deny that the event took place, yet refused to participate in an FBI investigation to clear his name (Kelly and Estepa 2018). Despite the backlash from much of the American public and many organizations, Kavanaugh was confirmed to the Supreme Court.

CONTINUED SUPPORT

Following the testimonies at the committee hearing including Dr. Blasey Ford's own experience, many hoped that Kavanaugh would be barred from serving on the highest court in the United States, or that at least his support base would be shaken. Some institutions, like the American Bar Association and *American Magazine*, both of which had previously endorsed

Kavanaugh, did withdraw their support during the controversy. But many conservative Senators, much of White Christian America, and President Trump, continued to uphold Kavanaugh's nomination and support him. It should be no surprise that support for Kavanaugh was heavily centered around White Americans, specifically White men. But on their heels, approximately 45% of White women continued to support Kavanaugh despite the allegations; only 30% of those who identified as Hispanic, and 11% of Black people supported the nomination (Ensler 2018).

President Trump stood by Kavanaugh, refusing to withdraw his nomination, and the two expressed that these accusations functioned solely as an attempt to "assassinate" Kavanaugh's character, ruin his career, and prevent him from sitting on the court and had no actual basis (citation). This is not surprising rhetoric coming from Trump. From his "grab 'em by the pussy" comment to the objectification of women on "The Apprentice," and his own comments regarding his daughter, Trump has often proven his sexist and misogynistic attitudes. In response to Trump's continued dedication to Kavanaugh, some have responded, "Trump has consistently expressed skepticism or hostility toward women who accuse men, including him, of sexual misconduct, [he] has been dismissive of Dr. Blasey. The President wrote on Twitter Friday that she surely would have filed charges decades ago if the assault 'was as bad as she says'" (Burns et al 2018). Not only did Trump's comment discredit Dr. Blasey Ford's testimony, but it once again reinforced his lack of empathy or recognition of sexual assault survivors. The attacks on Dr. Ford continued, with Trump publicly mocking Blasey Ford's testimony in front of the Senate, making a show of the gaps in her memory and attempting to further discredit her story (Beauchamp 2018).

Kavanaugh mirrored Trump's animosity. Kavanaugh responded incredibly aggressively to Dr. Blasey Ford's testimony, earning the praise of several White male Republican senators. The events of the last several weeks had become a pinnacle moment for the expanding #MeToo movement (Beauchamp 2018). #MeToo is an international movement to recognize and encourage women to speak out about their experiences of sexual assault and harassment, and through these conversations make cultural change (Langone 2018). Dr. Blasey Ford's assault was so relevant not only because of its intersection with #MeToo, but it clearly communicated that there are few, if any, consequences for those who assault women. Because so many people stood with Dr. Blasey Ford and denounced Kavanaugh under the #MeToo umbrella, the conversation around the assault shifted to a greater conversation about feminism and the reassertion and protection of male innocence and privilege (Beauchamp 2018). Senator Lindsey Graham remained unwavering in his support of Kavanaugh, and commented on the larger discussion of #MeToo and women's empowerment, stating during the Senate Judiciary Meeting "I'm a single white male from South Carolina and I'm told I should just shut up, but I will not shut up" (Beauchamp 2018).

Justice Kavanaugh's confirmation and the continued support he received opened the floodgates to questions of where the U.S. government stood on the issues of gender and women's equality. Kavanaugh was "hand-picked" by a President who also was himself accused of sexually assaulting numerous women. And now Kavanaugh would sit on the highest court in the United States. Discussions of whether or not to condemn men who assault and harass women, or to appoint them to the highest governmental offices in the U.S.; issues of legislating abortion; whether birth control should be included in national healthcare, are all connected: they all revolve around women's ability to make decisions about their bodies, [and] to protect their

bodies (Burns et al 2018). Not only did Kavanaugh's confirmation determine a credibly accused abuser of women would have the opportunity to potentially overturn *Roe v. Wade* and set the precedent on all further cases of sexual and gender equality, but it also brought conversations of women's empowerment, women's equity and #Metoo to the political religious arena (Burns et al. 2018).

The nomination and confirmation of Kavanaugh brought to light the Republican Party's tendency to dismiss sexual assault allegations, and highlighted a divide in United States' Christian identity politics. Jon O'Brian, the President of Catholics for Choice, stated:

It is very unfortunate that because the Religious Right, including ultraconservative Catholic special interest groups, are the squeaky wheel in American politics they get heard and privileged above the majority of Americans of faith or no faith" (Kuruville 2018).

The special favors given to Conservative religious voters have mobilized many of the more progressive Christian and Catholic political groups into counter action. Some progressive Christian voters argue that the "Bible says much more about defending the poor, caring for the sick and welcoming the stranger than it does about restricting abortion or allowing business owners to discriminate based on sexual orientation" (Kuruville 2018). Donald Trump and his nominees prioritize the desires of Religious conservatives and ignore the "majority of the faithful, who believe in social justice" (Kuruville 2018). It is in Kavanaugh's continued success and in the treatment and dehumanization of women that many progressives across the religious spectrum are becoming mobilized and speaking out against the embedded patriarchal and Christian structures. It is in response to the growing support for feminist and women empowerment movements that White Christian Americans, specifically White Christian women, are holding ever tightly to their own personal and religious beliefs.

FEMINISM, SEXUAL ASSAULT, AND WHITE CHRISTIAN WOMEN

The continued support for Kavanaugh reflects a greater pattern in White Americans' continual support of sexual predators. One study published by journalist Christine Kray found that:

In fact, 52% of white women in 2016 cast their vote for Donald Trump. That was despite the 22 allegations of sexual misconduct against him. Roy Moore got 63% of the white women's vote in the 2017 Alabama Senate race, despite the sexual misconduct allegations against him. And Republican women were the only demographic that increased its support for Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh during the hearings of sexual assault allegations during his confirmation process in October (Kray et. al. 2018).

Despite the rhetoric that sexual assault allegations "ruin men's lives" and "end their careers," time and time again we have seen that there are few actual ramifications for sexual assaults, and in some cases the controversy has led to more attention and more support for those accused (citation).

The resounding support from Republican women for men who have committed sexual assault is contextualized by the findings of a recent poll conducted by the Washington Post-Schar School, which found that "76% of Republicans, compared to 34% of Democrats, expressed fear that men close to them 'might be unfairly accused of sexual assault'" (Kray et. al. 2018). These figures document a very real phenomenon within Republican women. Embodying Sarah Palin's "Momma Grizzly," Republican women could "stand firm within their roles as women... and protect their cubs (sons), in the case against false accusations" (Kray et. al. 2018). This aspect of Republican culture was also demonstrated in the 2016 election. The continued support of Donald Trump even after being captured on tape bragging about groping women demonstrated the ease with which sexual assault allegations are ignored to protect men (Burns, et. al. 2018). The 2016 election results are even more shocking when considering the heightened stakes that Trump's opposition could have been the first female United States President.

Interrelated to the discounting of survivors of sexual assaults experiences is Republican women's dissatisfaction with feminism. Going back at least as far as the women's suffrage movement, conservatives have rejected women's liberation movements. The thought of giving women the right to vote was colored by fears that it would upset the U.S.'s social equilibrium by bringing women into the political sphere and the workforce, which would ruin family roles and values and encourage men to divorce their wives and leave them penniless (Griffith 2017). South Carolina senator Benjamin Tillman argued against women's suffrage, arguing that just as women's rights had brought down Rome, women's rights would bring about the end of the nation (Griffith 2017:xvi). While times have changed, some of the disapproval for women's movements continues. A Pew Research Center study conducted in September and October of 2018 reported that "14% of Republicans said that the term 'feminist' describes them well, compared to 60% of Democrats" (Kray et. al. 2018). Thus by standing by men accused of sexual assault and distancing themselves from feminism, Republican women are "able to construct their own version of womanhood that does not eclipse- or hold to account- the dominant position of men in their lives" and "at the same time, it precludes gender-based solidarity by rejecting any possible alignment with feminists on the Left who hold offending men to account, and who demand change with a culture that devalues women's experiences overall" (Kray et. al. 2018).

The role of women in relation to men has been defined by many cultural and religious models. For example, longstanding religious models (including Christian ones) have encouraged women to define themselves based on their ability to care for a family, and to depend upon and celebrate their husband's ability to provide for them economically (Kray et. al. 2018). While this has been a long standing cultural and religious expectation, modernization has begun to shift this. Women are stepping away from these traditional family models, becoming increasing involved

and dominating higher education and career industries. Women are also often waiting longer to get married and have children nowadays. Potentially as a result of this, recent studies have shown that “the number of women who identify as Republican- and with that subscribe to ‘traditional’ gender roles and values- has declined over the last two years from 27% in 2016 to 25% in 2017” (Kray et. al. 2018).

While these numbers are not so great as to signal a shifted tide and gender divide in politics, it may be the beginning of something, and continuing to track these shifts may signal a larger cultural change in the United States. As an example of this, some have noted that it was Hillary Clinton’s 1992 statement, “I suppose I could have stayed at home and baked cookies,” that forever lost her the evangelical Christian vote. Her remarks, when asked why she had chosen to pursue her career, were interpreted as dismissive by many evangelical Christians, who emphasize and identify with the “traditional” role of house wife and mother (Kray et. al. 2018). It is these shifting cultural norms that make working women, abortions, and feminist movements a threat to conservative Christian women and white Christian America as a whole.

MOVING FORWARD

The case of Kavanaugh’s nomination and confirmation to the Supreme Court, despite his past of sexually harassing and assaulting women, provides a window through which to frame the importance and dominance of White Christian America within the Supreme Court. It also highlights the continued oppression and dehumanization of women in general, and in particular those who have experienced sexual assault. This chapter begins by looking at the Kavanaugh’s nomination as a continuance of the power structures and religious makeup of the white male dominated Supreme Court. Of 113 Supreme Court Justices, an overwhelming majority have been

of Protestant denominations; four Justices have been women; three have been people of color; none have been publicly LGBTQIA+. With these figures, it is clear the context in which so many racist, sexist, and homophobic precedents have been made. The embedded structures of the White male supremacy within the Supreme Court continue to influence and reinforce these structures in greater American culture. The religious make-up of the Court continues to influence healthcare and discrimination policies, continuing to disenfranchise historically marginalized populations.

The case study of Kavanaugh also dealt with the treatment of sexual assault survivors and feminist movements and what, if any, repercussion the U.S. government gave on those who committed these acts of violence. Dr. Blasey Ford came forward and shared that Kavanaugh abused her. Despite her testimony, Kavanaugh was confirmed to the Supreme Court. In the media frenzy surrounding the nomination, it became clear that many Americans, and many Americans in power, did not believe her, or simply did not care. Based in the continued support for Kavanaugh, President Trump denounced Dr. Blasey Ford and mocked her. This conflict became a platform through which conservative Americans could criticize and rebuke feminist and women empowerment movements overall. Throughout history, White Christian America has fought hard to maintain the traditional family, as we see in its antiabortion rhetoric and denouncement of gay marriage; deeply embedded in the traditional family is traditional gender roles. As women demand equality and move away from the traditional family model they threaten the dominance of White Christian America in American culture. This influences the way in which many conservative women distance themselves from feminist and women's empowerment movements as well as denounce sexual assault survivors and protect and support abusers. The case of Kavanaugh is twofold: first, it shone light on the dominance and importance

of White Christian America within the Supreme Court as well in the continued oppression of women. Second, it spoke to the dehumanization and discrediting of those who have experienced sexual assault. This case highlights how the protection of their abusers devalues the experiences of survivors of sexual assault and their rights to bodily sovereignty, free will, and protection as American citizens.

Conclusion

In the analysis of the impact of White Christian America on the “American Identity,” we must remember to look towards the future. Donald Trump became President with the support of White Christian America, but having seen what the first three years of Trump’s Presidency has accomplished, will White Christian America continue to support him? Paul Starr, writer for *The Atlantic*, emphasizes the importance of Trump’s potential re-election. Starr writes:

In normal politics, the policies adopted by a president and Congress may zig one way, and those of the next president and Congress may zag the other... But some situations are not like that; a zig one way makes it hard to zag back. This is one of those moments...the effects of a full eight years of Trump will be much more difficult, if not impossible, to undo...with a second term, Trump’s presidency would go from an aberration to a turning point in American history. But it would not usher in an era marked by stability. The effects of climate change and the risks associated with another nuclear arms race are bound to be convulsive. And Trump’s reelection would leave the country contending with both dangers under the worst possible conditions, deeply alienated from friends abroad and deeply divided at home. The Supreme Court, furthermore, would be far out of line with public opinion and at the center of political conflict, much as the Court was in the 1930s before it relented on the key policies of the New Deal (Starr 2019).

While the United States is seeing larger cultural shifts away from White Christian America, relying less heavily on Christian morality and on White Christian America to fill seats of power, the reelection of Trump may signal that a non-White Christian future for the United States is still far in the distance.

The most recently elected Congress is the most diverse and representative Congress the United States has ever seen. The Supreme Court has also moved away from White Protestant male dominance. While these trends signal hope for some that there will be continued change and a more general lean away from White Christian America, these demographic shifts signal to others an attack on their Christian American Identity and on the very definition of “American.” In response to this perceived attack, White Christian America will continue to exercise all the political power they can muster, and even after White Christian America grows weaker (if it ever

grows weaker) one can predict that they will continue to loudly oppose pushes to be more progressive. Within the Republican party, in both the House and the Senate, Christian fundamentalists continue to operate as their own faction (and shutting down the government), and former Speakers of the House Boehner and Ryan struggled to control them and unify the Republican Party. A similar divide is beginning to become apparent within the Democratic Party, with Speaker Pelosi failing to support her younger and more progressive counterparts Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Ilhan Omar. There is a chance that the changing shifts within Congress will only continue to weaken the institution, pitting the more moderate incumbents against fresh new faces. It is unlikely that these changing demographics mean we can see the light at the end of the tunnel yet.

The United States is in a time of staunch political polarization, and being a hardline representative on either side of aisle is what wins re-elections. Because of this, it seems likely that Congress and the Supreme Court will continue to be polarized; compromise and teamwork across parties and even within them is still far in the future. While this can only be proven over time and with future political elections, we need to maintain a close eye on the upcoming Presidential election of 2020. Many of the Democrats that have announced their campaigns for presidency reflect more moderate democratic values or have become “old dogs” in the political debate. Being a moderate, “old dog” was not effective in mobilizing support for Hilary Clinton, and it is doubtful that it will prove strong enough to mobilize the rather ununified Left.

This is not to say that Trump will win re-election. During his first term he has struggled to deliver on his campaign promises to White Christian America. A portion of White Christian America may be fed up with his antics as he has failed to (outside of his nominations to the Supreme Court) return America to its former racist and sexist glory. It is unclear where this

leaves the United States and our conflict over the “American Identity.” The United States is in a contentious and unstable space and this environment is unsustainable. We have seen the patterns of conservative backlash following progressive moves forward, and while this may simply be the latest one, it’s a doozy.

White Christian America has been an enormous and seemingly impassable cultural and political force in the United States prior even to its founding. This thesis analyzed how White Christian America determined and shaped who gets to be American and the impact of racial, religious, and gender identities on who is perceived as American, and how their experience of being American takes shape. In light of the liberalization and changing demographics of the United States, White Christian America and political conservatism have resisted these shifts, and the support for Donald Trump and his rhetoric of sexism, racism, and nativism is a direct result of this resistance.

White Christian America is deeply embedded in the foundations of the United States. This shows up in the creation of many of the nation’s industries and social welfare institutions, as well as shaping the country’s social norms and regulations and providing the cultural morality through which legislation has been framed. White Christian America has molded the “American Identity,” contributed largely to definitions of morality, and influenced the social hierarchies within the nation. It was identity politics, or in this case, faith politics, that long upheld the domination of White Christian males over the presidency and across the aisle. The marketability of the President’s Christian faith, and the support nominees garnered for expressing their faith, further linked American politics and the Christian faith. But as we have seen, demographics in the United States are changing. Younger generations are less religious, less White, and have larger percentages of out LGBTQIA+ individuals. These shifts in population are met with shifts

in cultural expectations and an increase in liberalism, threatening the imbedded structures that prioritize White Christian Americans. In response to these changing ideals, we have seen White Christian America mobilized into the political realm and embracing more conservative rhetoric of nativism, tightening the racial, religious, and gendered expectations of Americans.

White Christian America became a conservative political force primarily in the Republican Party. It became linked to the Republican party primarily, though not entirely, through the involvement of the KKK, the desire to protect the “traditional family,” and the overwhelming rhetoric of American Exceptionalism. In response to civil liberty gains for people of color in the United States, leaders of the KKK began to run and get elected to state and federal political offices. The rhetoric of “protecting the traditional family” gained influence as women’s empowerment, feminist movements, and LGBTQIA+ movements gained in popularity and support. Again, motivated by increasing liberalization and away from the traditional Christian social roles, White Christian Americans embedded themselves within the Republican Party and called for a return to the old ways. Using American Exceptionalism was a third pivotal recruiting tool used to bring White Christian Americans into the Republican Party.

By incorporating the values of American Exceptionalism into Republican speeches and policy and emphasizing the connection between American Exceptionalism and patriotism, the Republican Party and White Christian America were able to reinforce the notion that the United States is a Christian nation. And if the United States is a Christian nation, it reinforces the supremacy of Christians and Christian ethics and social norms in American culture. It was because these factors were so successful in motivating conservative Christians into the political realm that the Republican Party’s rhetoric, policy, and values began to reflect the ideals of these conservative Christians, irreversibly making the Party fundamentally conservative Christian.

White Christian America has been a formidable voting bloc, having won many political elections and debates, and it is difficult to imagine an America where they do not dominate.

By analyzing the case study of the controversies surrounding Obama's presidency, this thesis was able to explore the unspoken racial and religious qualifications of who gets to be American. Because President Obama was Black, many Christians were unable to view him as a member of their own faith, further fueling rumors that President Obama was Muslim, and that he was foreign. Through this example it becomes clear that however forthright or clandestine, there are expectations that an American male would be both White and Christian, and that these qualifications impact whether or not an individual is an effective and justified President. Mirroring these cultural assumptions about the American Identity is Trump's constant nativist and Islamophobic rhetoric. Trump created a platform of nativist attitudes; he made racist and dehumanizing comments about immigrants, specifically immigrants of color; he aligned all of Islam with terrorist organizations; he demanded Obama's birth certificate; and ultimately publicly suggested that President Obama was the leader of ISIS. Instead of his racist, Islamophobic, and nativist claims discrediting him as a presidential candidate, it rallied much of White Christian America behind him. What Trump was promising White Christian America was a return to the past: a past in which White Christian males had complete control over social, economic, and political worlds.

The final analysis of this paper is an exploration into the gendered requirements of the American Identity and how it influences the American experience. By looking at the case of Kavanaugh's nomination, two strong influences of White Christian America become clear. Based on the Protestant dominance over the Supreme court (91 out of 114), and the male dominance over the Supreme Court (111 out of 114) and the complete exclusion of LGBTQIA+

individuals, it is clear that the experience of white Christian males has dictated the experience and constitutionality of all other American Identities since the nation's founding. Brett Kavanaugh's nomination was not groundbreaking; rather, it was a continuation of the patterns that had always been in place. His commitment to the religious freedom of Christians and his vote to overturn *Roe v. Wade* (1973) made him an ideal nominee for much of conservative White Christian America. In early September of 2018, the Kavanaugh case became more contentious. Kavanaugh's past of sexually abusing women, including Dr. Blasey Ford, ignited a newer debate amongst White Christian America. It brought to light the ways in which conservative Christians and Republican women interact with feminist and women's empowerment movements. Conservative women's own denouncement not just of feminism, but of other women's experiences of sexual assault, surfaced and contextualized a clear pattern of support for male sexual predators. It also illuminated how many conservative women construct their own "American Identity" separate from women across the aisle.

This thesis has revolved primarily around the success and incorporated nature of White Christian America within American politics in order to contextualize the greater question of to what extent America is the Christian nation White Christian conservatives want it to be. The United States is not a fundamentally Christian nation, though it for a long time functioned as such. But the citizens of the United States continue to evolve as a population: we are moving farther and farther from the Christian morals, ethics, and identities upon which the U.S. was founded. Furthermore, it is because of these shifts that we see the White Christian America "coming in hot" in an attempt to maintain the "traditional" ways and structures of dominance that ensure the place of White Christian America at the top of the social hierarchy. White Christian America has returned to outwardly embracing narratives of nativism, sexism, racism

and homophobia in order to maintain these structures. While these narratives never ceased to exist in the United States, the fervor with which they are emerging in public discourse is a technique of backlash to incite fear and zealousness. The election of Donald Trump, despite the sexual assault allegations, and his racist, Islamophobic, and nativist rhetoric, speaks to the desire of much of White Christian America to prevent change.

We see this political conservative fervor mirrored internationally. Political leaders internationally are being referred to as the “Trump of...”. The United States plays a crucial role in this as a primary actor in global commitment to democracy and to “inclusive” citizenship, something the United States has still failed to achieve—specifically in the unincorporated territories. The U.S. sets the precedent for addressing potential human rights violations and discrimination. The discussion of who gets to be American, and more broadly, how a nation should treat a diverse racial and religious population, and how women may live their lives within that system, will continue to dominate politics and elections in the years to come. The United States is polarized in this moment, and as those in power continue to exclude and question American citizenship, the more likely we are to see a roll-back on the civil liberties granted to historically marginalized populations.

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