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**Article — Published Version**

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Politische Vierteljahresschrift

**Provided in Cooperation with:**

Springer Nature

*Suggested Citation:* Pickel, Gert; Pickel, Susanne (2023) : A God Gap Driving a Revolution from Conservative to the Far Right in the United States—With Significance for Europe?, Politische Vierteljahresschrift, ISSN 1862-2860, Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden GmbH, Wiesbaden, Vol. 65, Iss. 2, pp. 311-338,  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11615-023-00509-8>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/312797>

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# A God Gap Driving a Revolution from Conservative to the Far Right in the United States—With Significance for Europe?

Gert Pickel · Susanne Pickel

Received: 27 February 2023 / Revised: 3 October 2023 / Accepted: 7 October 2023 / Published online: 6 November 2023  
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**Abstract** For some time now, the Christian right in the United States has sought proximity to the Republican Party. However, it is only since Donald Trump’s presidency that the central desires of the Christian right for a moral change have been fulfilled. This hope has existed since the 1980s and has been expressed in far-above-average voting behavior, especially of white evangelicals and Pentecostals for the Republicans. Thus, the Republicans’ focus on moral issues increasingly links them to the image of white Christian nationalism. This stance opposes transgender issues, homosexuality, abortion, and critical race theory and is preoccupied with America’s founding era and racist structures. Favored by the bipolar electoral system and driven by a politics that differentiates between good and evil, a political polarization is establishing itself that leaves hardly any room for compromise. These developments are not limited to the United States but are beginning to migrate globally, as recent incidents in Brazil, Serbia, and Russia show. The United States can be seen as a prototypical case of a particular form of transformation of a democracy into a polarized political system. A certain understanding of religion plays just as much a role in this as the rejection of plurality, especially at the level of sexual and gender diversity.

**Keywords** Religion · Conservativism · Polarization · Far right · White Christian nationalism

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## Eine „Gotteslücke“ treibt eine Revolution von den Konservativen zur extremen Rechten in den USA an – mit Bedeutung für Europa?

**Zusammenfassung** Die Christliche Rechte in den USA sucht schon seit längerer Zeit die Nähe zur den Republikanern. Doch erst seit der Präsidentschaft von Donald Trump haben sich die zentralen Wünsche der Christlichen Rechten in den USA nach einem moralischen Wandel erfüllt. Diese Hoffnung besteht seit den 1980er-Jahren und drückt sich in einem überdurchschnittlichen Wahlverhalten der Republikaner durch weiße Evangelikale und Mitglieder der Pfingstkirchen aus. Die Fokussierung der Republikaner auf moralische Fragen verbindet sie zunehmend mit dem weißen christlichen Nationalismus. Dieser wendet sich gegen Transgender, Homosexualität, Abtreibung und eine Beschäftigung mit der Gründungszeit Amerikas und rassistischen Strukturen, wie es die Critical Race Theory tut. Begünstigt durch das bipolare Wahlsystem und angetrieben von einer Politik, die zwischen Gut und Böse unterscheidet, etabliert sich eine politische Polarisierung, die kaum noch Raum für Kompromisse lässt. Diese Entwicklungen sind nicht auf die USA beschränkt, sondern beginnen, weltweit zu wandern, wie die jüngsten Vorfälle in Brasilien, Serbien oder Russland zeigen. Die Vereinigten Staaten können als prototypischer Fall für eine besondere Form der Umwandlung einer Demokratie in ein polarisiertes politisches System angesehen werden. Ein bestimmtes Religionsverständnis spielt dabei ebenso eine Rolle wie die Ablehnung von Pluralität – insbesondere auf der Ebene der sexuellen und geschlechtlichen Vielfalt.

**Schlüsselwörter** Religion · Konservatismus · Polarisierung · Extreme Rechte · Weißer christlicher Nationalismus

### 1 Introduction: U.S. Politics Between the “God Gap” and “Christo-Fascism”

In the last years, the view of American political culture is increasingly alienating many Europeans. Not only the election of Donald Trump but also the radicalization of political positions are being watched with concern. We observe an intensification of the already existing polarization between the two political parties and within the U.S. population (Baldassarri and Bearman 2007; Carothers and O’Donohue 2019; McCarty et al. 2016). The conservative party, the Republicans, in particular seems to be undergoing a transformation toward right-wing authoritarian politics. Following this, more and more antidemocratic and racist nationalist tendencies are being included in the polarization (Lewandowsky and Jankowski 2023, pp. 40–45). Polarization and populism are not only on the rise in the United States but have also spread in Europe in recent years (Gidron et al. 2020; Minkenberg 2017; Munro and Pfeiffer 2021). In particular, the rise of right-wing populists in Hungary and

Poland shows the success of polarizing populists (Charnysh 2017; Pytlas 2015).<sup>1</sup> Thus, developments in the United States are not necessarily singular. They are very far reaching and represent a slide of a formerly conservative party toward a party in which right-wing populist or even right-wing extremist positions dominate. At the same time, it sometimes seems as if the American developments serve as a role model for other representatives of the extreme right to come to power. That a corresponding influence is also present elsewhere is shown by events in many countries; Russia, Serbia, Poland, Hungary, and Brazil are just a few examples.<sup>2</sup>

An important factor of mobilization for the Republican Party is its electoral affinity with Christian evangelical groups (Balmer 2007, 2021; Gashaw 2021; Rozell and Wilcox 2017). This affinity is based on strong efforts by the Christian right, Pentecostals, and evangelical currents in particular to gain influence over political decisions (Schlozman 2015). This desire for influence, which was already a central driver for coordinating the interests of the Christian right in the 1980s, coincides with an interest on the part of Republicans to win votes beyond their previous supporters. It also addresses an existing coalition of interests that Republicans have had with evangelicals for many years. Corwin Smidt calls it a “God gap” (Smidt et al. 2010, p. 3; Dombrinck 2012; Putnam and Campbell 2011), i.e., the significant difference in voting patterns and party support between voters with deeply or zealously religious beliefs on one side and more mainline religious practitioners and nonreligious voters on the other side. This God gap appears to be a central driver of the widening contrast between liberal Americans and Americans who vehemently oppose abortion, homosexuality, and transgender, sexual, and gender diversity.

Religion is one driver of the observable polarization alongside ethnicity and nationalism, or is closely intertwined with them (Whitehead and Perry 2020; Gorski and Perry 2022); thus, these issues of polarization occur alongside other important divisions between Republican and Democratic voters regarding critical race theory and attitudes about climate change (Fisher and Hout 2016; Fisher et al. 2013; Ray and Gibbons 2021).<sup>3</sup> Arguments against these issues are often found among white evangelical Christians, which means that the combination of race and religiosity is one central driver for political preferences as well as for voting behavior. Most recently, this alignment between evangelicals and support for nonliberal and even authoritarian and racist politicians and policies was called “Christo-fascism” (Brockschmidt 2021).

In this context, the assessment as a “conservative revolution” may be an understatement (see the introduction to this special issue). It seems that conservative Republicans may even be changing not only into right-wing populists but even drifting into a radical right-wing party with a corresponding electorate. With regard to

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, what we understand today as populism originated in the United States in the early 19th century. The first populist developments were linked more to the Democrats than to the Republicans (Kazin 1995).

<sup>2</sup> The peculiarity of the American case may lie in its historical tradition and the anchoring of polarization in the population.

<sup>3</sup> Critical race theory, for example, has now been banned from being taught in schools and universities in several states (Wood and Kickham 2023).

this, we ask: *To what extent do white evangelical Christians and their understanding of religion support a polarization in the United States?*

This question is examined with reference to conceptual approaches to the relationship between religion and politics (Bruce 2003; Roy 2008; Riesebrodt 2001; Smidt 2017), considerations from sociostructural approaches of elections (Lazarsfeld et al. 1944), and also discussions about polarization (McCarty et al. 2016). Building on these theoretical approaches, we shed light on the relevance of religion for (polarized) politics in the United States. By combining these approaches, we draw on previous discussions and open up a new perspective on the relevance of religion to American politics and also beyond. With these tools, we analyze the influence of religion—or, rather, specific religious expressions and denominations—on the political positions of citizens by using different data material, including data from the Pew Research Center on religion and American elections and American National Election Studies (ANES) election data. The central argument is that *certain values and prejudices bridge the gap between Republicans and white evangelical Christians, as well as white Catholics*. This “electoral affinity” may produce and consolidate a Republican Party identification of white evangelicals, but also in turn will align other religious groups with the Democratic Party. With regard to the former alliance in particular, though, antidemocratic convictions may be increasing that are directed above all against pluralism. This in turn strengthens the tendencies of polarization into two positions, propluralist and antipluralist.

In the following article, we first discuss approaches and theories that deal with the relevance of religion for polarization in the United States. The guiding principle here is the observation of a perception of religion as a conflict factor and threat. This is followed by a necessary presentation of the specificity of the religious situation in the United States, which then transitions into the hypotheses of the paper using the approaches addressed. Using different material as mentioned above, the relevance of white evangelical Protestants in the United States in particular is elaborated. Finally, the transferability to other countries is discussed.

## 2 Conceptual Approaches and Hypotheses

### 2.1 Political Polarization

Polarization refers to a drifting apart of different groups in the population or between elites and the population (McCarty et al 2016, p. 9; Svolik 2019). This is not a completely new process, but the sharpness of political debate, a stronger affective filling of polarization, and the resulting danger to a democratic political culture have given the topic increased relevance (Carothers and O'Donohue 2019; Fischer and Hout 2006; Pickel and Pickel 2006). In this context, polarization is usually understood as a distancing between two parties and two parts of the population (this does not exclude the general possibility that it can also include multiple parties). Polarization implies a process in which different groups in the society distance themselves more and more from each other. Ideology plays a large role in this process. A “core of political polarization is the extent to which citizens hold strong and moralized atti-

tudes” (Van Prooijen 2021, p. 2). The concept of polarization includes the idea of conflict. On the one hand, polarization can manifest itself in disputes over issues; on the other hand, it can manifest in fundamental orientations of society. In this case, it does not so much involve decisions about how to reach consensus on issues (e.g., combating unemployment) but rather concerns that electoral research calls conflict issues. Thus, debates about abortion, transgender issues, homosexuality, critical race theory, and, to some extent, the acceptance of climate change are less factual issues to be debated than ideological and moral choices (Baldassarri and Bearman 2007; Butler 2021). Not infrequently, it is less about the individual issues than about interpretive sovereignty, i.e., the view of how society should look and how existing hegemonies can be defended (e.g., man vs. woman; white vs. Black). Polarization manifests itself in less openness to compromise, as well as in an increasingly clear sorting of voters into parties that represent their often moral convictions (Carothers 2019, pp. 82–83). This has been the case in the United States in recent years (Fiorina and Abrams 2008, pp. 577, 584; Westfall et al. 2015).<sup>4</sup>

## 2.2 Religion and Religiosity

If we look at religion, we must first distinguish the system of religion from personal religiosity. For us, the latter is of interest here. Of less interest to us are the various dimensions of religiosity that Charles Glock (1954) elaborated (religious practices, religious ideology, religious knowledge, religious consequences, and religious experiences), but rather more different religious understandings resulting from belonging to a specific religious group. What is interesting is the affiliation and identification with a group—e.g., evangelicals, Pentecostals, or Catholics—and the understanding of religiosity, such as liberal, conservative, or fundamentalist. Thus, not every evangelical and Pentecostal is a fundamentalist, and vice versa. However, there is a certain closeness in the interpretation of religious scriptures (Wuthnow 1989; Riesebrodt 2001). One is a fundamentalist if one assigns an unconditional validity and immutability to the religious scriptures. This position is called literalist. The Bible or the referential book in the respective religion may not then be interpreted contextually. In other words, it must not be adapted to the present. Another fundamentalist orientation describes the specific interpretive power of a person chosen for this purpose by God. This charismatic fundamentalism again invokes the underlying book but is supplemented by interpretations by the charismatic preacher (Riesebrodt 2001). These forms are possible in all religions. However, they are most likely to be found in the Christian environment in the Pentecostal movement, which has a strong Bible orientation and at the same time has elements of speaking in tongues and charismatic selection of its preachers. Standardized training of preachers tends to oppose charismatic interpretations, whereas a congregation’s own choice of preachers, as in evangelical churches, is more conducive to it. Accordingly, more fundamentalist traits are found in evangelical congregations, although they do not necessarily have to be fundamentalist.

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that debates about polarization in the United States are quite controversial (Fiorina and Abrams 2008).

Theodor Adorno (1973; Adorno et al. 1950) differentiated between understandings of religion, each of which is more or less affected by prejudice. Gordon Allport (1979) came to the same conclusion. He distinguished universalistic believers, who are more open to other groups and religions, from strict believers, who accept only their own religion (Allport 1979, pp. 450–455; Allport and Ross 1967). A universal understanding expresses itself, for example, in the idea of charity or love of your neighbor toward other religions, whereas the second type of religion, the strict believers, uses it for group delimitation.<sup>5</sup> If the first religious group has fewer prejudices, the prejudices of the second group are significantly higher than the population average. Allport tested this on anti-Semitism and anti-Black racism (Allport 1979, p. 454). However, this also makes clear that different religious attitudes are related to certain ways of life, which in turn codetermine political attitudes. The decisive factors are attitudes in the personal sphere and moral–political issues, such as abortion, euthanasia, transgender issues, and homosexuality, where people fall back on religion to determine their positions.

### 2.3 Religion and the Christian Right

There is a vast range of existing research, findings, and ideas on the relationship between politics and religion (for an overview, see, e.g., Safran 2003). Moreover, religion has long been considered to play a particularly important role in American culture and politics (Fox 2018; Wald and Calhoun-Brown 2014). The idea that religion can cause conflict is not new, either. The political differences between believers with different orientations are becoming apparent in the United States. Since the 2004 presidential election, there has been talk of a so-called God gap (Rozell and Whitney 2017, pp. 2–5). It was observed that religious people (or churchgoers) tended to vote more strongly for Republicans than for Democrats. This is because certain policy positions overlapped with those of Republicans. Specifically, churchgoers would be more likely than nonchurchgoers to want to ban abortion. Churchgoers are also significantly more opposed to homosexuality than nonchurchgoers—at least that was the finding. Putnam and Campbell (2011, pp. 384–388) see attitudes toward homosexuality and abortion as the glue that has held white evangelical Christians and Republicans together since the 1980s, in response to the sexual revolution and increasing sexual and gender diversity rights in the 1970s. Subsequently, there has been repeated speculation, such as regarding the 2008 presidential election, as to whether this God gap might close again (Smidt et al. 2010). However, the last elections in particular do not seem to support this. Donald Trump counted on voters on the Christian right—and in 2016 was successful in doing so (Baker et al. 2020). The God gap was less about pure affiliations or church attendance than specific religious understandings. Specifically, it was directed at the strong voter group of white evangelical Christians.

A corresponding development was also noted on the political side. A new religious right formed in the 1980s. A conscious attempt was made to mobilize and

<sup>5</sup> A typical saying is that only one's own religion is true and others are not. In addition, there is often a fundamentalist view of the world.

unite the hitherto rather unconnected evangelical religious groups with a view to political effectiveness (Brocker 2004; Butler 2021; Minkenberg 2003). The Christian far right found an important mouthpiece for its interests in televangelists such as Billy Graham and Pat Robertson. Central to the organization of interests was a concentration of support for specific candidates who were close to the issues and values of this group and its supporters. Almost without exception, these were Republican Party candidates.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the Christian far right supported selected candidates (such as Rick Santorum) in the primary elections and used their increasing influence to incorporate their own issues more strongly into Republican politics or to support existing representatives of such issues (Madrid et al. 2022). Even if these—mostly more radical—candidates did not prevail, they could still become the “kingmaker” of the Republican presidential candidate. The electoral successes of Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush in particular are attributed in part to the financial and moral support of evangelical groups and their coordinated electoral behavior.

As has been noted, it was not only religious convictions that were decisive but also their combination with a nationalistic, sometimes even racist, political orientation. Philip Gorski (2020; see also Gorski and Perry 2022; Butler 2021; Hollinger 2022), for example, recognized a close connection between Christian nationalism and racist positions. In doing so, he notes a transformation of the conservative party in the direction of a right-wing populist, nationalist party, which has reached its preliminary climax with the presidency of Donald Trump (Gorski and Perry 2022). In his view, the historical narrative of the white Christian nation in particular forms the core of the current shift of the Republican Party toward a right-wing populist party. However, according to Gorski (2020, p. 100), evangelical and Pentecostal religious groups play an important role because they demand that the Republicans adopt corresponding policies (Wuthnow 1989). Their most important theme is the preservation of the traditional family and, in connection with this, a rigid rejection of virtually every form of abortion, homosexuality, and other forms of gender and sexual diversity. Thus, when we use the term religion in the following, we are on the one hand referring to membership in certain religious groups or religious identities, and on the other hand we include a certain understanding of religiosity (e.g., as addressed by Adorno and Allport).

## 2.4 Religion in the United States

To understand American politics and even political culture requires taking the religious situation in the United States into consideration. Although religion is an important factor in political life in many countries, of course, the United States stands out in a number of ways in this regard. Therefore, we can delineate four distinctive features:

1. According to its constitution, the United States has a complete legal–institutional separation of church and state at the federal level (not religious establishments in

<sup>6</sup> Even if comparable religious value patterns could be found among conservative southern Democrats as exist among Republicans. (see, e.g., Adorf 2016).



the states; Handy 2014). A major contributing factor to this decision was the early migration movements to the United States. In addition to ideational influences regarding religious tolerance, immigration during the colonial and founding eras brought with it a strong religious heterogeneity (Bejan 2015; see also Morgan 1983; Kloppenburg 1987). This had the potential to import the religious–political conflicts from the immigrants’ home states. The migration process, which took place in various waves, brought opponents in the former conflicts to the United States. In order to prevent such conflicts from flaring up on the ground in the United States, the American founding fathers opted for strict religious–political neutrality on the part of the state in conjunction with the guarantee of far-reaching religious freedom (Engeman and Zuckert 2004). None of the religions may be institutionally favored, but all persons are free to practice their religion within the limits of their generally existing rights (see Niebuhr 1948). This also implies the right to exert influence on public officials, such as presidents and members of legislatures. In addition, religious influences persist in various states, as evidenced by the simultaneous move toward conservative religious positions on the one hand and a secularization that counters them on the other (Hollinger 2022).

2. This decision, combined with the need to unite the heterogeneous population into a political community, led to the search for a common set of values. The result was a nondenominational, general civil religion (Bellah 1967; Gorski 2017). It not only combines American identity with the belief in a god, but it also guarantees a common identity despite different specific religious affiliations. This civil religion, which encompasses dimensions of both content and symbolism, manifests itself, for example, in the mention of “God’s own country” in presidential speeches, in the singing of the national anthem in schools and at every sporting event, and in profound attachment to the U.S. Constitution as a “sacred text” (see, e.g., Corbet et al. 2013; Kidd 2007; Levinson 1979, 1988; Liedhegener 2006; Pestana 2009).
3. In addition, the United States has an unusually high level of religiosity for a modern industrialized country. Adherents of the market model of religion—which is widespread in the United States and has a long history that goes back as far as the late colonial era of outreach, missions, and “competition for souls” (see, e.g., Lenski 1961)—attribute the high level of religiosity to the diverse and competing religious offerings (Finke and Stark 2006; Stark and Finke 2000). The high level of religious supply is facilitated by the state’s noninterference in religious affairs, which may also encourage competition. The result is a wide range of different denominations, often with strong local roots. Another supporter of this approach explains the above-average number of members of evangelical or Pentecostal churches (Iannaccone 1998). In his view, it is the clarity of evangelical Christianity, freed from free riders, that brings the greatest benefits to its members. Accordingly, it is precisely the radicalism that is attractive because it promises clear moral values, the conviction of going to heaven (which, from the point of view of evangelicals and members of Pentecostal churches, is unlikely to be

granted to moderate and “lukewarm” Christians), clear and simple answers to life questions, and social integration in this world (Wuthnow 1989).<sup>7</sup>

4. At the same time, this reciprocity is centrally shaped by the emergence of Christian fundamentalism in the United States. Martin Riesebrodt (1990) locates the emergence of the term “fundamentalism” in the United States in the 1920s. At that time, individual fundamentalist communities developed and concentrated, also in reaction to economic crises. Later uses of the term in the Islamic context should be understood against the background of the genesis of the term and the phenomenon of fundamentalism in the United States of the 1920s. At the same time, a temporal proximity to what is called populism can likewise be identified. This, too, albeit in the late 19th century, developed in response to the economic crises in rural areas through so-called populists, who were supposed to make the concerns of the “simple man” and the common people heard in Washington (Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2017).

Overall, religious development in the United States differs from that in Europe. For the context at hand, it is beside the point whether it is the United States or Europe that represents a special case (Davie 2002). In any case, this specific religious situation in the United States is of far-reaching importance for political developments. Particularly since Ronald Reagan’s presidency (1981–1989), an alliance between Republicans and evangelical Christians has emerged in the United States, which, according to various observations, has consolidated and persisted to the present (Smidt et al. 2010). The growth of evangelical Christians in the United States and the world is undoubtedly significant for this. Therefore, according to all analyses in the sociology of religion, the coming together of economic prosperity and high religiosity is a special case (Norris and Inglehart 2005, pp. 243–253). The penetrating power of fundamentalist religious groups is also considerably lower in European countries. Thus, our first hypothesis is as follows:

**H1** Evangelical and fundamentalist Christians predominantly support Republicans, which is noticeable in their voting behavior.

This suggests that the increasing importance of fundamentalist religiosity and its politically oriented organization of religious groups into a “conservative revolution” has brought about a shift from classical or mainstream conservative to religious–fundamentalist positions. The ties to the Republicans are often less ideological than “electoral affinities” on certain issues (Gorski 2020, p. 19). These relate primarily to issues of personal proximity with moral significance (e.g., against abortion, homosexuality, LGBTQ+ rights, and euthanasia, but for more [Christian] religion in schools and in public, as well as censorship of “offensive” media, among others).<sup>8</sup> In addition, they are directed against social modernization in the context of family.

<sup>7</sup> It should be noted here that, from the perspective of secularization theory, the United States represents a special case of religious development and is not immune to secularization, either (Bruce 2002, pp. 6–12).

<sup>8</sup> Therefore, the United States was ranked only 23rd in LGBTQ+ rights 2017–2020. With recent court decisions, a deterioration is likely in the United States (Williams Institute 2021).

The moral position is one of preservation of traditional moral concepts and defense against modern pluralization.

**H2** Evangelical Christians are aligned with the Republican Party and its representatives primarily on moral issues, such as those related to abortion and sexual and gender diversity.

The combination of polarizing majoritarianism—i.e., the plurality (“winner takes all”) electoral system that encourages voting for one of (only) two major parties—and the Republicans’ embrace of policies demanded on the part of white evangelicals have deepened the “electoral affinity” into party identification in many places. The size of the evangelical electorate has encouraged the Republicans to move ever closer to antimodernist attitudes and a radical, right-wing populist interpretation of life in the United States. Hence, a development in terms of partisan platform is paired with a specific form of political strategy and politicization (populism). Since the issues at stake are moral and linked to values, there is a polarization between supporters and opponents of the developments that transcends issue-specific differences and is reflected in hardened, morally contentious camps (see also McCarty et al. 2016). Such issues include moral debates related to abortion and transgender people, for example.

**H3** Attitudes on moral social issues are polarized between supporters of the Democratic and Republican parties and lead to ongoing polarization.

**H4** By aligning itself with a mobilization of evangelicals, Pentecostals, nationalists, and also the white lower and middle classes, the formerly conservative Republican Party is drifting ever increasingly toward a right-wing white Christian nationalist party.

Just as the four hypotheses posed take into account the specificity of the United States, the third hypothesis and the fourth hypothesis in particular address an overarching assumption of the relationship between radical or fundamentalist Christian groups and radical right and right-wing populist parties. We tried to test this with empirical material using the United States as an example.

### 3 Methods, Data, and Research Design

For our study of polarization in the United States, we used the differentiation of followers of the two major American parties, the Republicans and the Democrats. In doing so, we examined the extent to which religiosity and a certain understanding of religiosity, e.g., a fundamentalist one, influence the choice of party, in line with the hypotheses already formulated. To this end, we examined political issues that can serve as bridging constructs for the relationships between religiosity, fundamentalism, and voting behavior. This was done via various descriptive representations, ending in a linear regression analysis. For clarity and contextualization, we have limited our descriptive analysis to the last five presidential elections. In the following, the results are continued only with the most recent data.

To address the research question in our analysis, we used different survey data. The survey data used will help us understand the positioning of citizens as well as the relationship between religion and politics in society. First, we drew on data and publications from the Pew Research Center in Washington (<https://www.pewresearch.org/>).<sup>9</sup> The Pew Research Center studies international developments in the field of religion and politics as well as the situation in the United States in detail. The Pew data are characterized by a recurrence of information on religion. Nevertheless, these are often scattered across different studies and have to be pieced together. Also used were data from the Religious Landscape Study (<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/religious-landscape-study/>) of the American civil society organization Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) as second source. The third important source of data was from the American National Election Studies (ANES; <https://electionstudies.org/>).<sup>10</sup> These data are particularly helpful in calculating the relationship between a certain understanding of religion and voting behavior. At the same time, there is a particular lack of good expressions on the important political bridge issues between white evangelical Christians and Republicans. Thus, the analyses necessarily remain fragmentary at some points. Not all necessary indicators can be found together in one data set, and the measurement of religious affiliations and religiosity in particular often remains underdeveloped. At the same time, the composite findings do paint an emphatic and demonstrable picture of the relevance of white evangelical Christians as a Christian religious right in the process of increasing radicalization of the Republican Party (Mudde 2019).

#### 4 Empirical Results: Religion, Race, and Voting in the United States

So to what extent does religion contribute to polarization in American society? A particularly informative and appropriate way to determine the influence of religion is to examine the American presidential election campaign. The elections are decided in a majority process, usually between the Democratic and Republican candidates. Other candidates are possible and do compete, but they almost always gain only marginal shares of the vote. Unlike votes for the House of Representatives or the Senate, for example (or nearly all other offices in the United States), the winner of a presidential election is determined by the electoral vote (referred to as the Electoral College). Consequently, the popular vote, i.e., the votes cast directly for a presidential candidate, is important but not alone decisive. Electoral votes are gained by winning the simple majority in a state, irrespective of the margin of victory. Accordingly, the goal of presidential campaigns is to win states—not only the “safe” ones but also, and especially, the narrow “swing states.” The effects of denomination affiliation were identified as politically important relatively early on (Lenski 1961, pp. 120–191). Nevertheless, the influence of denominational affiliation

<sup>9</sup> All papers, analysis of current policy, and data access can be found at <https://www.pewresearch.org/>

<sup>10</sup> Both series of studies are also the data sources most often used in the U.S. media and academic discussions. The Pew Research Center in particular has been collecting data on religion in relation to politics for a long time.

**Table 1** Ethnoreligious voting in presidential elections (in percentages). (Authors' own composition based on Pew Research Center data)

	2004		2008		2012		2016		2020	
	Kerry	Bush	Obama	McCain	Obama	Romney	Clinton	Trump	Biden	Trump
General	48	51	53	46	50	48	51	42	52	42
White Protestant, evangelical	21	79	26	73	20	79	16	81	15	84
White Protestant, nonevangelical	44	55	44	55	44	54	39	58	43	57
Black Protestant	86	13	94	4	95	5	89	9	91	9
White Catholic	43	56	47	52	40	59	37	60	42	57
Hispanic Catholic	65	33	72	26	75	21	67	26	65	33
Jewish	74	25	78	21	69	30	71	24	68*	30*
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon)	19	80	–	–	21	78	25	61	–	–
Other religions	74	23	73	22	74	23	62	29	64	32
Unaffiliated	67	31	75	23	70	26	68	26	71	26

Analysis: "How the Faithful Voted: 2012"; Mormons 2008 not surveyed; "How the Faithful Voted: A Preliminary 2016 Analysis"; Most White Americans Who Regularly Attend Worship Services Voted for Trump in 2020; "Jewish Virtual Library 2022: U.S. Presidential Elections: Jewish Voting Record," Pew 2020a, b, 2016; Catholic Newsagency 2022

has become more pronounced in recent decades. This is mainly due to changes in group sizes, the organization of religious interests among denominations with a fundamentalist understanding of religion, and consideration of the link between ethnic and religious affiliation. The results in Table 1 describe the voting behavior of the last five presidential elections along ethnoreligious groups.

The results are striking. Voting behavior differs substantially according to the denomination in combination with ethnic classification (also Smidt 2017, p. 135). Since 2004 at the latest, the Republicans have had central support among white evangelical Protestants. With the exception of the 2008 campaign, Republicans have consistently managed to capture 79% of the vote or more among this group. Republican presidential candidate John McCain alone was somewhat less popular among white evangelicals than his predecessors and successors.<sup>11</sup> For this reason, the conservative-religious Sarah Palin was recruited as a running mate to satisfy the demands of this group (see also Pickel and Pickel 2006; Djupe and Claasen 2018). This tactic was not completely successful, though the share of the vote was nevertheless substantial (i.e., more than 70%). As the table shows, a small dip in the traditional electorate of white evangelical Christians occurred for the Republicans. One reason was small gains that Barack Obama was able to make in 2008 through a combination of demonstrative piety, high-profile display, and McCain's weakness

<sup>11</sup> This sets him apart from Mitch Romney, a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), who was said to have less support among evangelicals but whose scores among that group were equal to George W. Bush's and six percentage points above John McCain's (Merritt 2012).

among younger members of the religious right (Smidt et al. 2010, pp. 214–218). This admittedly small group, along with an equally better showing among white Catholics and Black Protestants, contributed to Obama’s electoral victory in several key states. In the wake of this result, some scholars made the case for a decline in significance of the God gap (Smidt et al. 2010). That this assumption was exaggerated was already shown by the 2012 and especially the 2016 elections, where support for the Republican candidate among white evangelical Christians returned to previous levels. In 2012, however, Obama’s victory was again secured by higher ratings among Black Protestants and Hispanic Catholics.

In 2016, the tide turned. On the one hand, Donald Trump succeeded in mobilizing nonvoters; on the other, he achieved considerable gains among white evangelical Protestants and white conservative Catholics (Smith 2021). This demonstrates his strategy of constructing the idea of a threat to a white and a Christian America mobilizing a white Christian nationalism (Gorski and Perry 2022, p. 101). The fact that he lost the popular vote to his Democratic opponent Hillary Clinton did not prevent victory in the presidential election on account of the aforementioned electoral vote system in the United States. His success in a number of key states can also be explained by his promise to stand up for more traditional values and the offer to implement long-standing demands of Pentecostals and fundamentalist evangelicals. In particular, the promise to appoint conservative judges in general and ones critical of new forms of gender and sexual diversity as well as abortion rights in particular appears to have mobilized evangelicals and many traditional Catholics. In doing so, Trump united the defenders of a white America with the defenders of a Christian America and mobilized the supporters of a white Christian nationalism (Baker et al. 2020; Campbell 2007; Whitehead and Perry 2020). Moreover, Trump’s campaign succeeded in increasing the Republican voter share among Hispanic Catholics.

Of course, other issues also shape an election campaign and have significance. For example, there is a focus on the attribution of economic successes and the economic situation in the country. But security policy issues and concrete political decisions also have an impact on election decisions. Last but not least, the desire of Republican voters for a weak state in terms of taxes and social benefits but a strong state in foreign policy should not be underestimated and lays a foundation for further electoral behavior. At the same time, American election campaigns are *mobilization campaigns*. The aim is to motivate registered party members to vote and perhaps to win some new supporters and/or swing voters. Especially in the last point, Donald Trump has been more successful than average with his aggressive rhetoric directed against the political system, the political “establishment,” and the Democrats, e.g., for “being too detached from ordinary Americans.” It is fair to say that he used classic right-wing populist approaches and themes (antimigration, anti-sexual and anti-gender diversity, antielites, anti-“globalist”).<sup>12</sup> Even given this focus

<sup>12</sup> The enforcement of these premises in the Republican Party was not entirely free of conflict. Nevertheless, Donald Trump managed to commit even strong critics, such as Ted Cruz, to a common line before the 2020 presidential election. The party’s brutal treatment of its own critics did the rest. Donald Trump’s personal influence has been waning only since the midterm elections of 2022, which were only narrowly won and seen as a loss, and since the emergence of his opponent Ron DeSantis, whose position in the party is almost identical in terms of content. However, his right-wing populist line is likely to remain intact.

and success, the overtures to fundamentalist white Christians may have been of great importance to his electoral victory, especially given how close the decision was in some states. It was hardly a coincidence that the polarization between Democrats, who tended to be progressive on women's rights and equality issues, and Republicans, who were traditional to the point of being backward on lifestyle issues, was deliberately deepened. This positioning of the Republicans was now entirely in line with white evangelical Christians. With recourse to cleavage theory, one can speak of overlapping lines of conflict instead of cross-cutting cleavages (see also Cremer 2021; Lipset and Rokkan 1967; Pickel 2012).

The Republican primaries in 2016 showed that Donald Trump was by no means the fundamentalists' candidate of choice at the outset. Nor should it be assumed that many evangelicals consider Donald Trump to be a devout or God-fearing person. It was the offer of conservative policies with the restoration of Christian values and a focus on white people and white identity that led most white evangelicals to vote for Trump (Gorski 2020, pp. 156–158). In this sense, the election of Donald Trump revealed something of an “electoral affinity” between conservative and fundamentalist Christians and the Republican Party (Gorski 2020, p. 19). Donald Trump was able to retain this electorate in the 2020 presidential election, but at the same time he mobilized for the Democrats as a personified symbol of an antidemocratic upheaval in virtually all other groups beyond white evangelicals and Catholics.<sup>13</sup> In the process, the number of Hispanic Catholics supporting Republicans has also continued to grow (now 33% of Republican voters). Just as noticeable, however, is the mobilization of all of the more Democratic-leaning groups, as well as the voter share among nonevangelical Protestants returning to 2008 levels. But how does this “electoral affinity” come about?

Let us try to figure out where religious voter groups differ from the overall population. The first column of Table 2 shows the importance of the respective issue, and in the following columns, correlations between the importance of the issues and religious groups are calculated. Overall, members of most religious communities differ little from the overall U.S. population.

This changes when looking at church attendance and the group of evangelicals (Pentecostals were not reported separately in the study). Evangelicals and people who attended church more frequently rated issues such as migration, and especially gay marriage and abortion, as more important than average (Table 2). One should not be deceived by the seemingly low importance ratings of 28% to 42%. While the economy and health are so-called consensus issues, where disputes tend to take place over the way they are shaped, migration, abortion, and gay marriage are so-called conflict issues. These are topics about which opinions are generally different and controversial. Above all, the significance of these topics can be seen in the importance of specific political issues, or, more precisely, the polarization over these issues. It is true that abortion and gay marriage (transgender issues were not included in this data set) alone are of greater interest to evangelicals and members

<sup>13</sup> Comparable events were repeated in the 2022 midterm elections, which brought parts of the Republican Party to first criticize Donald Trump's political strategy due to the fewer gains by Republicans in the elections than expected.



**Table 2** Political issues and their perception of importance among religious and social groups. (Authors' own calculations)

	Importance (in %)	Evangelicals	Catholics	Hispanic Americans	Black Ameri- cans	Church attenders
Economy	87	n. s.	n. s.	n. s.	n. s.	0.07
Health care	76	n. s.	n. s.	n. s.	0.07	0.06
Budget deficit	74	0.07	n. s.	n. s.	n. s.	0.13
Environmental protection	48	n. s.	n. s.	n. s.	0.11	n. s.
Immigration	43	0.10	n. s.	n. s.	n. s.	0.12
Abortion	41	0.22	n. s.	n. s.	n. s.	0.18
Gay marriage	28	0.19	n. s.	n. s.	-0.07	0.13

Importance refers to reported assessment of the topic as very important in the total population; correlations suggest deviations from the views of the overall U.S. population<sup>14</sup>

Pew Research Center values data set 2012; importance related to the fall 2012 election decision; reported Pearson's R-correlation coefficients (significant at  $r < 0.05$ )

n. s. no significant correlation

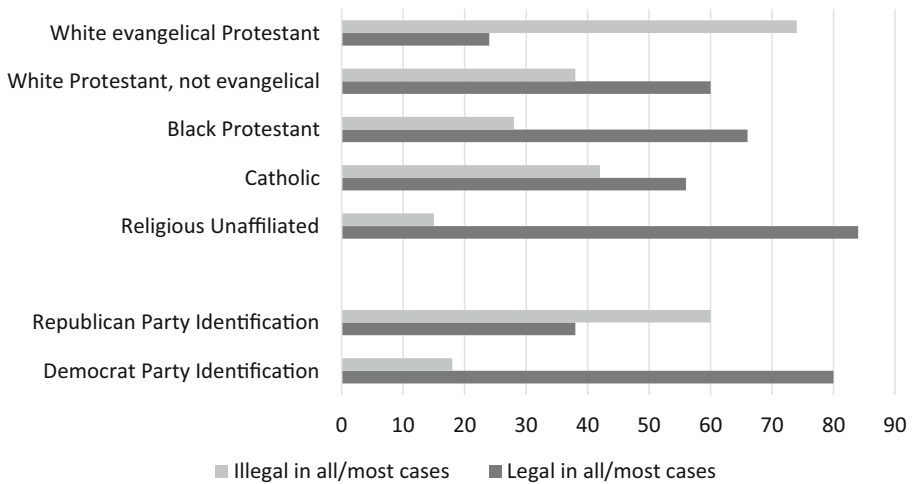
of the Pentecostal church, but unlike other issues considered important, this is not a consensual issue area with different proposed solutions, but a controversial issue on which party supporters fundamentally differ.

These issues have a polarizing effect between those who support these rights, for example members of the LGBTQI+ movement, and the religious opponents of abortion and homosexuality (Mallory 2019, p. 5; Davis 2023). Since the use of importance still contains certain errors and could even underestimate the reference due to expressed importance of members of the LGBTQI+ community, it makes sense to consult further material. For this purpose, it is worthwhile to look at a survey on attitudes toward abortion collected on the current occasion of a series of recent laws restricting abortion in several states in 2022. Approximately 73% of white evangelical Protestants consider the issue of abortion important, which is considerably higher than all other importance ratings of other groups (Mohamed et al. 2022, p. 22). Three quarters of white evangelical Protestants favor prohibiting abortion in almost all cases (Fig. 1; Mohamed et al. 2022, pp. 44–45).

However, the basic attitude is clearly recognizable and goes in one direction: rejection of abortion rights. Interestingly, this is the only religious–ethnic group that considers that abortion should be illegal. In all other religious–ethnic groups, majorities hold that abortion should be a legal act. This is most strongly the case among the unaffiliated: Four out of five respondents believe that abortion should be a legal act that a woman should decide for herself. Particularly on abortion and also sexual and gender diversity, these seem to be wedge issues for the closeness between evangelicals and Republicans as well as for polarization. The electoral affinity (*Wahlverwandtschaft*) between white evangelical Protestants and Republi-

<sup>14</sup> Due to the lack of equivalent question compositions in the more recent election studies, we had to resort to a calculation based on a value study by the Pew Research Center (2012). Due to the reference to importance, these data are also of limited quality, as concrete position statements would be required.

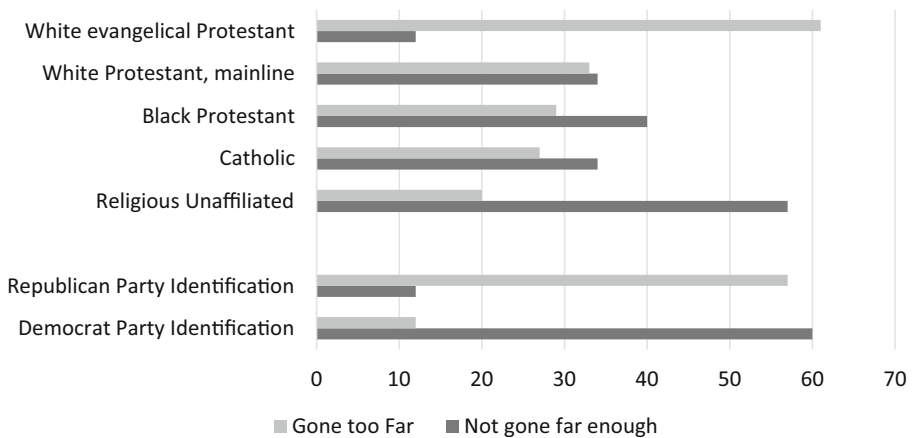




**Fig. 1** Views on abortion by religious affiliation and party identification, 2022 (Source: Mohamed et al. 2022)

cans on the abortion issue becomes apparent when looking at the second set of bars in Fig. 1. While 80% of Democratic Party supporters are convinced that abortion should be legal, this portion shrinks to one-third among Americans with a Republican Party identification (Pickel 2016). As many as 60% of Republicans believe abortion should be illegal. This closeness between Republicans and white evangelicals shows the overlap in interests, as well as the mix of groups.

This may not be a new finding, but it is currently gaining even more political volatility on account of the expanded influence of conservatives appointed to the Supreme Court and lower federal courts under the Trump administration. With the landmark decision of the Supreme Court in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* in 2022, a long and rather liberal scope of abortion rights, which had been interpreted as having been protected under the federal constitution since *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, was transferred to the states, upon which many Republican states rapidly restricted these abortion rights and access and in some cases prohibited abortion outright (Brint and Abrutyn 2010, pp. 336–337; Mohamed et al. 2022; Mende 2021). Trace lines are also visible in the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision concerning racial segregation (Butler 2021, p. 45). In this, intersections of a white evangelical racism, as Anthea Butler (2021) calls it, with a campaign against sexual and gender diversity pursued by (white) evangelicals become apparent. Current Republican efforts are increasingly focused on transgender individuals (Warburton and Horowitch 2023). These efforts follow on from attitudes toward abortion but bring into focus a new group who stand for emancipation and liberalization. While 60% of Democratic voters think that granting rights to transgender people does not yet go far enough, a mirror image is that 57% of Republicans think it already goes too far (Brown 2017). The connection to groups by religion and race quickly becomes clear here as well. Among white evangelicals alone, for example, a majority say that transgender people are already far too widespread in society (Fig. 2).



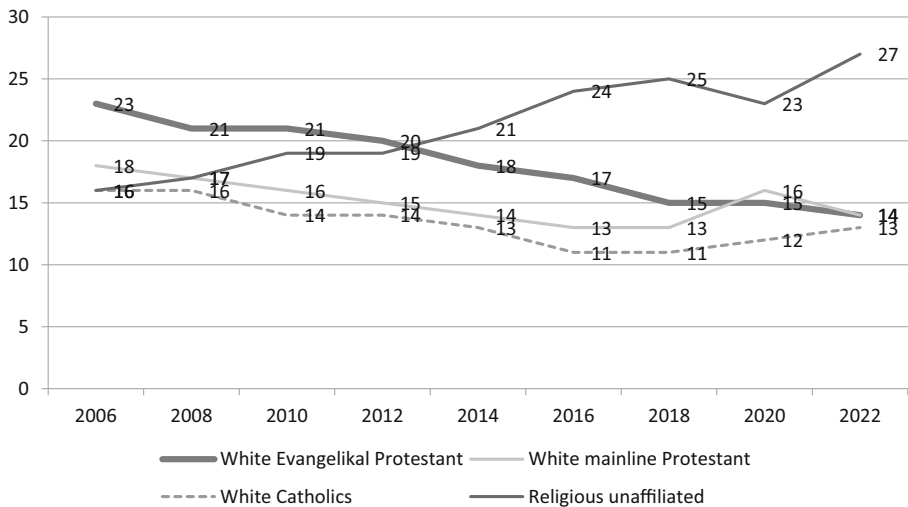
**Fig. 2** View on transgender issues and party identification,  $n = 4573$ . (Brown 2017; Smith 2017; Survey August and September 2017; Pew Research Institute; Research Center American Trend Panel)

The individuals most open to further integration of transgender people into American society are those without church affiliation. Among Catholics and mainline Protestants, attitudes are ambivalent or undecided. The close proximity between Republicans and white evangelicals is also clear in attitudes toward transgender people. Traditional images of the family, as well as the fear of a drop in the birth rate among the white population, play just as much a role in these rigid attitudes as do a rejection of emancipation efforts and desires for change in society (Whitehead and Perry 2019, pp. 162–175). One problem is that such debates are less negotiable. They are not consensus issues in which people argue about different ways of doing things, but moral issues in which positions are fixed and there is no intention to settle with the political opponent. However, the more that moral positions such as these guide politics, the less necessary it is for parties to pay attention to voters beyond the targeted base.

## 5 Structural Explanations for Changes in Voting Behavior

As mentioned previously, in addition to successful mobilization campaigns, sociostructural shifts have become important for elections. In 2008, for example, several American newspapers claimed that demographic changes and the growth of “Hispanics” in particular had decided the election for Obama.<sup>15</sup> Given the relatively small size of this group in relation to the total electorate, such an interpretation seems overstated. The increase in more Democratic-leaning Hispanic voters is only one building block of several that contributed to Barack Obama’s election and re-election in 2008 and 2012, respectively. More important may be another trend, that

<sup>15</sup> A problem of considerations of the development of group sizes is the partly different results of the corresponding research institutions like Pew and PPRI. We decided to use the PPRI data because they are more detailed in their development. See also Pew 2012.



**Fig. 3** Ethnoreligious groups and their change over time. (PRRI 2012, 2020, 2021, 2022; Pew 2019)

of secularization. The significant growth of the group of religiously unaffiliated people (+12% since 2004, according to Pew; +7%, according to PRRI [Pew 2019]; Fig. 3) appears to have favored the Democrats since the unaffiliated are a growing group of voters who are also clearly distanced from white evangelical Christians (Davis 2023; Burge 2022).

Accordingly, the Democrats are benefiting from demographic change because their core electorate includes Black Protestants, Hispanic Catholics, and nondenominational voters. Conversely, Republicans suffer from the decline of white evangelical Protestants and their consolidated alignment with the Republican Party (Patrikios 2008; Cremer 2021). It is possible that concern about this loss of a consistent voter base may in part explain the radicalization of the Republicans (Abrajani and Hajnal 2015). The Democrats are in a structurally more favorable position going forward. At the same time, this perception not only exacerbates Republican efforts to tap new constituencies, as Donald Trump has done, but it adds alongside political polarization a polarization between the “true” religious and the secular (Gorski 2020, pp. 166–169). This is visible, for example, in the breakdown of the groups classified as moderate (nonevangelical white Protestants and moderate white Catholics): Among Catholics, for example, the proportion of more conservative Catholics has increased (Pew 2012). At the same time, the number of Catholics who describe themselves as moderate has decreased substantially (by 3 percentage points since 2000).<sup>16</sup> This decline of white evangelicals not only creates problems for the core Republican constituency but also stirs up fears of secularization among them. This is matched at the level of ethnic composition by a fear of the loss of power of the

<sup>16</sup> Evidence data can be found in the Catholic “swing vote” (Pew [2012]). Most white Americans who regularly attend worship services voted for Trump in 2020 (<https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/08/30/most-white-americans-who-regularly-attend-worship-services-voted-for-trump-in-2020/>).

white “race”. It is not surprising, then, that conspiracy narratives such as the “great exchange” or the “great replacement” are widespread among conservative and right-wing Americans (Pickel et al. 2022, p. 178). Evangelicals and Pentecostals accordingly saw Trump’s reign as one of the last opportunities to protect a white Christian America and advance their interests. Overall, the Democrats seem to be benefiting from the sociostructural shift in the electorate, but at the same time, their opponents are reacting to this. The result is a further massive intensification of polarization and a drifting apart on issues related to convictions and values that can hardly be negotiated and balanced.

## 6 The Religion Factor in the Electoral Decision

Religiosity or ethnicity alone cannot adequately explain the dynamics and results of American presidential elections. The successful structure of the respective election campaigns, economic issues, or the controversies surrounding the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic are likely to have motivated significantly more voters. However, in the case of morally charged issues such as abortion and gay marriage, unlike many other policy issues, there is probably an identity clustering of groups and lifestyles along religious-ethnic affiliations that is reflected in similar political attitudes within the group. For current and fundamental political issues such as abortion rights, same-sex marriage, immigration policy, or the handling of budget deficits, solutions are sought that correspond to this group identity (Pickel et al. 2020). Consequently, the positions have now also been reflected to a considerable extent in the party identification of citizens (Table 3). This is significant because party identification is by far the most important factor explaining voting behavior in the United States in comparison to issues and persons (which often are focused on in media).

Party Identification results from a variety of factors such as socialization, electoral experience, and the social environment. These, in turn, are based on social structural anchors (Lazarsfeld et al. 1944). And here it seems that in hardly any other modern Western democracy is there such a strong effect of social structure or social environment on voting behavior as in the United States. This partially contradicts current interpretations of voting behavior in the United States, which tend to focus on candidates and media campaigns. If one looks closely at the campaigns, one sees that they focus more strongly on voter mobilization than on voter recruitment. Against the background of a specifically religious socialization, combined with a class-specific political socialization, selective mechanisms of perception of the respective political situation occur. Media mediations are classified in these subjective perceptual grids and interpreted within their framework, mobilizing or not. This explains the high degree of consistency in voting behavior and the relative decline in voter volatility in the United States. In election research, reasons for this are captured in the “funnel of causality,” which describes the formation of party identification in the socialization phase. This social-psychological attachment to a party, once achieved, seeks constant confirmation in order to maintain one’s political position.

**Table 3** Explaining voting behavior—Biden vs. Trump. (ANES 2020)

	Party Identification	Religion	Issues	Overall model
<i>Party identification</i>				
Democrat	292.0%	—	—	123.1%
Republican	−72.6%	—	—	−51.9%
<i>Religious identification</i>				
Charismatic/Pentecostal	—	−17.8%	—	n. s.
Traditional	—	−37.7%	—	n. s.
Mainline	—	−5.9%	—	14.7%
Progressive	—	33.3%	—	n. s.
Nontraditional believer	—	n. s.	—	n. s.
Secular	—	43.3%	—	n. s.
Spiritual but not religious	—	19.1%	—	n. s.
<i>Issues</i>				
State of economy	—	—	−62.2%	−57.7%
Medical insurance: government vs. private	—	—	−65.6%	−34.5%
Environment–business trade-off	—	—	−69.2%	−44.9%
Importance of reducing deficit	—	—	−20.4%	−17.8%
Feeling: illegal immigrants	—	—	106.8%	85.3%
Feeling: transgender people	—	—	—	19.1%
Feeling: Black Lives Matter movement	—	—	595.0%	323.7%
Feeling: Planned Parenthood	—	—	180.6%	80.8%
Importance of abortion	—	—	n. s.	16.0%
Position on gay marriage	—	—	55.0%	38.3%
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>	0.649	0.166	0.753	0.870

Binary logistic regression, authors' calculations; dependent variable: vote Trump vs. Biden: Trump=0, Biden=1, coefficients: +=pro Biden, −=pro Trump; residual categories: religion="none"; PID="independent;" "none"; variables standardized; significance <0.05. The table presents various models to explain voting behavior. The coefficients indicate how much the probability of voting for Trump (negative sign) or Biden (positive sign) increases when the value of the independent variable increases by one unit. Nagelkerke R<sup>2</sup> indicates the extent to which the model can explain voting behavior. The overall model explains 82.7% of the variance in voting behavior

*State of economy:* Would you say that over the past 12 months, the state of the economy in the United States [has gotten much worse, gotten somewhat worse, stayed about the same, gotten somewhat better, or gotten much better]?

*Medical insurance:* Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this? 1. Government insurance plan 7. Private insurance plan

*Environment–business trade-off:* Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this? 1. Tougher regulations on business are needed to protect environment 7. Regulations to protect the environment are already too much a burden on business

*Importance of reducing deficit:* How important is it to reduce the deficit? [Not at all important, a little important, moderately important, very important, or extremely important]

*Importance of abortion:* How important is this issue to you personally? [Not at all important, not too important, somewhat important, very important, or extremely important]

*Position on gay marriage:* Which comes closest to your view? You can just tell me the number of your choice. 1. Gay and lesbian couples should be allowed to legally marry. 2. Gay and lesbian couples should be allowed to form civil unions but not legally marry. 3. There should be no legal recognition of gay or lesbian couples' relationships. Code: 1 and 2=0; 3=1

n. s. not significant

The social psychologist Leon Festinger (1957) has addressed such processes for individuals in general under the mechanism of the reduction of so-called cognitive dissonances. Irritations are rejected, while religious–ethnic group identity, party identification, and issue orientation are kept congruent as far as possible and can explain voting behavior to a high degree. Added to this is an authoritarian orientation, as described by Adorno. This is also the case for the 2020 presidential election (Table 3). Voting behavior, as the stepped logistic regressions show, is determined to a dominant extent by party identification. This in effect absorbs the religious differences (second row in Table 3) and also reflects them to some extent, in that “being a Republican” is closely associated with self-identification as highly religious, whereas “being a Democrat” is associated with identification as “progressive–religious,” “secular,” or “spiritual but not religious.” This absorption may also be the reason that the long-term religious effects are occasionally somewhat overlooked (Conger and Djupe 2016). It is interesting that the remaining importance of the abortion, transgender, and gay marriage issues for voting behavior is in favor of Biden and the Democrats. The same applies to positions on current debates on racism. This means that a rejection of sexual and gender diversity, like willful ignorance of racism, boosts the election of the Republican presidential candidate—in this case, Donald Trump. These turn out to be the strongest factor, going even beyond party identification and also religion. Clearly different positions on immigration complement this.

Overall, the strong relevance of issues that are now often seen as identity politics is evident. Religious affiliation does not have the strongest effect; it is mediated by different positions on sexual and gender diversity that also contribute to the polarization between Democrats and Republicans. The entrenchment of polarization becomes clear (Zingher 2022), which makes short-term change—not only but especially at the federal level—difficult and encourages populist action (Skocpol 2020). In doing so, it combines with nationalist ideas that identify a white Christian nation as the core of American society to be defended (as many as 60% of Americans favor this; Smith 2017).

## 7 Conclusion: A Religious Base for Conservative Polarization

The analyses presented here and the literature on the relationship between politics and religion in the United States show high relevance of religious identity for voting behavior and party identification. Thus, affiliation with religious communities in combination with ethnic affiliation determines a preliminary electoral decision. This predetermination of party identification contributes to a certain stability of voting behavior. However, in combination with the polarized—and even polarizing—electoral system, it also lays the foundation for a gradual intensification of the existing polarization. Because it has become increasingly important for the parties to mobilize their own potential voters and less important to win over voters from the other party, it makes sense for them to take the clearest possible positions and to campaign for their approval—or, in other words, to appeal to the more radical segments of their potential supporters.

On the Democratic Party side, the developing pattern is increasingly in the direction of a pluralistic democracy, including Black people and sexual and gender diversity. Among Republicans, positions have been steadily shifting toward radical right-wing positions coupled with the use of right-wing populist rhetoric (Grossmann and Hopkins 2016). These Republicans largely refuse to confront racism, and they wish for a return to traditional families and for white male hegemony. They call for critical race theory to be banned in schools and universities, and they fight sexual and gender diversity. This is evident in their desire to exclude transgender people from the health care system and, most significant, to ban transgender completely. Here, too, it is a matter of maintaining traditional power structures in society. Accordingly, Hypothesis 4, which described an alignment of Republicans with white Christian nationalism, can be assessed as accurate. The more the Republicans represent the interests of the white population and of one of their core constituencies, evangelicals and Pentecostal churchgoers, the more controversial their position becomes in relation to the Democrats, who primarily advocate a pluralistic society.

Polarization based on group identities and lifestyles in some cases has become a matter of course. This polarization is also reflected in the divide between urban and rural populations. It appears to be condensing under these confrontational circumstances into a moral distinction between “true Americans” and the corrupt “others” and even between good and evil. The good is always on the side of one’s own party and one’s own candidates. Against this backdrop, unsubstantiated exaggerations and conspiracy narratives—such as those used by Donald Trump and numerous Republican politicians—are a proven means of mobilization, since segments of the electorate distrust and even expect the worst of their political opponents. The resulting mobilization successes encourage Republican politicians in particular to further escalate this form of politics (Moffitt 2016). This situation is also connectable for white evangelicals because their line of conflict with secular individuals in the country is reinforced by the political line of conflict between the two major parties. This increases the chance of pushing through decisions on highly conflictual issues, as in the case of strict abortion laws and regulations antagonistic and discriminatory toward sexual and gender diversity. This confirms Hypothesis 2.

It is no coincidence that the differentiation between good and evil resembles religious positions. White Christians, especially evangelicals and Pentecostals, are an important core constituency of the Republicans—which confirms Hypothesis 1. Most of them are white evangelical Protestants. But white Catholics also make up a large part of the electorate and perhaps half of the Republican voters (Fig. 2). Since the formation and spread of the Christian radical right began approximately three decades ago, evangelical religious convictions have been increasingly reflected in the positions as well as the actions of the Republican Party. In conjunction with the often implicitly and meanwhile increasingly explicitly propagated protection of white Christianity, an ethnoreligious identity politics of the Republicans is becoming more dominant over other political goals. They are wedge issues sharpening polarization in the population. Other political and policy positions are not abandoned in consequence, but at the same time, the central political demands of the Christian fundamentalists can no longer be ignored. In this sense, the thematic electoral affinity and community of purpose between evangelical Christians and Republicans is

increasingly becoming a community of identity. In other words, the former “electoral affinity” is developing into a solid alliance. It positions itself along existing beliefs in hostility to all pluralistic approaches to a liberal democracy. One can call this shift toward the far right a revolution. However, it goes beyond the conservative. The God gap is an important reason for this revolution, but surely not the only one. In answer to our research question, white evangelical Christians and Pentecostals and their understanding of religion are, through their issues and meaning, a central driving force for polarization in the United States as well as for the shift of Republicans to a right-wing populist party. This also applies to other countries: It is in the growing political impact of Pentecostals and evangelical Christians in Brazil and other Latin American countries; it is right-wing authoritarian Catholics in Poland and Hungary, and Orthodox Christians in Serbia (Carothers and O’Donohue 2019; Pickel and Pickel 2023). Polarization is accelerated and exacerbated by current crises, especially when these are accompanied by conspiracy theories and negative attributions to enemy groups.

Just as the development in the United States has some special features (bipolar party system, particularly strong separation between church and state), it could serve as a model for other countries, especially with regard to the successful mobilization of conservative citizens through greater polarization and the emphasis on morally and ideologically charged conflict issues. In some countries of the world, there are signs of intensification and polarization that have much to do with the rise in relevance of right-wing populists (Brazil, France, Great Britain, India, Germany, ...). Right-wing populism, nationalism, and a certain understanding of religion in a certain group thus also meet in Western Europe (Cremer 2021; Eatwell and Goodwin 2018). Even if polarization has so far progressed so much only in the United States and Brazil, right-wing populists have already come to power in Eastern Europe and Latin America. The events in the United States in recent years have served as a model for many right-wing populists worldwide. The storming of the Capitol was seen as a model in Brazil as well as in Berlin (Peitz 2020; Borges 2023). Religious groups, especially evangelical Christians but also right-wing authoritarian Catholics, are of considerable relevance in many cases where right-wing populists are gaining influence. Brazil can again serve as an example. The differences between groups with different religious understandings already identified by Adorno et al. (1950) still apply today. They have only become more closely linked to politics and depend on the size of the respective fundamentalist religious group. Such electoral affinities are useful on the way to implementing antimodern religious convictions in society, but they are also a considerable and loyal source of voters. This is demonstrated not least by the PiS party in Poland or by the followers of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil. It is not possible here to provide a detailed comparative analysis of these developments; only brief examples can be given. This should be the goal of analytical comparative analysis. At the same time, there is much to suggest that we find a kind of archetypal case (archetype of a development) or at least a *prototypical case* (pattern of a typical development) in the United States (Muno and Pfeiffer 2021, p. 117).

The prime example of the resulting threat to a democracy is the United States. Today one can no longer be sure that the birthplace of modern democracy will itself remain a democracy.



**Funding** Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

**Conflict of interest** G. Pickel and S. Pickel declare that they have no competing interests.

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