

Shibboleth of Republican Primary Debates

Kevin Qualls, JD

Tim Vance, Ph.D.

Bauernfeind College of Business
Murray State University
United States

Abstract

A 2012 CBS voter poll showed that a full fifty percent of primary voters identified themselves as evangelical, or born again Christians. It stands to reason that this segment of the GOP, and the electorate as a whole, would have a substantial influence on the outcome of elections. It is assumed that people vote within their own ideological bent, so often times political rhetoric revolves around the religious subtext of any political issue. Our goal with this study was to measure how the use of a religious subtext influenced the 2016 GOP debate season. The research question was simple and straightforward: did the use of God Words during a pre-primary debate result in a positive relationship with post-debate poll results? Content analysis of debate transcripts provided the means for counting of God Words used. Thus, this study examines the use of "God Words" in the Republican primary debates of 2015 and 2016. "God Words" are those words of religion included in the Linguistic Inquiry Word Count database. Operationalized in 2001 by Pennebaker, these terms (table 1) have been used by other scholars inquiring about the intersection of political and religious speech. These religious terms are one of many data sets included in LIWC. This study simply counted what words were used, and how often, by each of the Republican primary candidates in televised debates. Concurrent data were collected to compare favorability ratings just prior to and after each debate. Contrary to previous assumptions, results from our study show a significant inverse relationship between the use of God Words during the debate and follow-up approval polls. Our findings and discussion open the door to continued predictive research demonstrating the changing nature of the GOP primary voters and the electorate as a whole.

Introduction – The Concept of God Words

Article VI, Clause 3 of the United States Constitution provides that no federal employee or official must agree to adhere to or accept any religious doctrine as a condition of holding office or federal employment. This statement is immediately followed by a requirement that such individuals take an oath affirming their support of the United States Constitution. That Constitution is, in many ways, an expression of the Judeo Christian ethic rooted in the law of Moses (less the ceremonial aspects), expressed centuries ago in the Magna Carta then again in the declaration of independence. It is not surprising that, despite Article VI Clause 3, the electorate has certain expectations regarding the religious beliefs of political candidates.

These expectations have factored into every presidential campaign. The circa 1960 controversy surrounding the candidacy of Roman Catholic John Kennedy and the 2012 lack of controversy regarding a Mormon candidate and another Black Theology candidate together illustrate the dynamic nature of an ongoing discourse about politics and religion. Bennett (2013) asserts that Presidential duties include acting as "national priest." In this role, the president is expected to attend to a civic piety wherein sacred truths are enunciated as political principles. President George W. Bush played this role in the immediate aftermath of the 911 attacks. President Obama operated in this capacity after Hurricane Sandy devastated parts of New Jersey. To do so, they harken to what Crosby (1991) describes as a "civic piety." They use language that invokes the consideration of God. They use "God-Words." God-Word use in political discourse has received much cross-disciplinary study in Rhetoric, Political Science, Psychology, Theology, and Communication. Consequently, the term "God Words" has developed various connotative meanings. In most academic articles and essays the term has not been operationalized. Still, the term (or the phenomenon it is meant to describe) persists in every presidential election cycle as the religiosity of candidates is assessed. (Crosby, 2015, pg. 247). According to research by Pew, the religious faith of political candidates remains an important consideration for much of the electorate (The Pew Forum, 2016). The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life provided "religious biographies" for each of the candidates in the 2012 Republican presidential primary and measured public perception of religiosity (or faith) among 2016 presidential primary candidates (The Pew Forum, 2016). In 2012, Pew and Media reports estimated the impact Mitt Romney's Mormon faith has on his electability (Pew Research Center Publications). Whether President Barak Obama is Christian or Muslim persists as controversy for many. In 2016, Gallup polled to determine the electability of a hypothetical atheistic candidate.

Americans' willingness to support an atheist candidate was at 58%, up 4% from 2012 at 40% higher than when the question was first asked in a 1958 Gallup poll (Saad, 2016). The American Religious Identification Survey of 2008 indicated that 76 percent of responding Americans self-identified as being Christian (ARIS, 2008). This number is down from a 1990 percentage of 83 percent. ABC news reported the survey with the headline, "America Is Becoming Less Christian, Less Religious." Political news coverage is antagonistic toward Christian fundamentalists (Bolce & De Maio, 2008). The ARIS study suggests a majority viewpoint that is still Christian. Directly speaking about faith in a media environment that is decidedly secular, however, may prove difficult. Yet, it is an important consideration for voters, as indicated by the Pew polling data cited above (Pew, 2012)

Literature Review

In the discipline, Rhetoric, the term "God Words" has been defined differently by its principal modern scholars, Burke and Weaver. Because of the significance of their work, it is necessary here to provide a brief discussion of their uses of the term "God-words" for the purposes of acknowledgement and distinction from the use in the present study. Burke defined "God-words" as those that invoke an awareness of the transcendence between God and His creation (1945). Weaver expressed this as Universalism versus Nominalism, where the former considers issues in terms of an overarching objective truth, and the latter is more concerned with the non-abstract, material world (1970). The Universalist may agree with Sproul's contention that, "right now counts forever (2011)." Before proceeding, it is well to consider how these formidable scholars defined this term.

Burke saw theology as an opportunity to study language. Whether God exists or not, he surmised, the word "God" is used by man, a "symbol-using animal," (Burke, 1945). This results in a hierarchy of words that establish order. Burke defined a "God-term" as any reference that allows for the generalization of a variety of terms so that they can be organized (Bruenger 1961). The ordering of terms, then, gives rise to the sacrificial principles intrinsic to the very idea of order, as some terms are subordinate to others. Burke acknowledged the inherent paradox of his inquiry. Words from the natural realm are used to describe the supernatural realm. Those words are then re-applied in the material realm, often with supernatural implications (Simons, 1989). Words such as faith, belief, Holy and righteous, according to Burke, are powerful words in that they subordinate the words around them (1945; Simons, 1989). Burke described the secular use of words that once had been used exclusively to describe the sacred. An example is "divinity chocolate." This moniker describes chocolate that, by inference, tastes heavenly.

Weaver provides a more expansive definition of "god-words." Alternately using the monikers "God-words" and "ultimate terms", Weaver also considered words that subordinate all other words around them. That is, the meaning of every term surrounding an ultimate term is considered within the context of that ultimate term. Traditionally, this ordering of terms was accomplished through reasoned inquiry designed to discover truth. This approach held sway from the time of Plato until the Renaissance, when the scientific method began yielding "facts". Weaver cited this historical period as a time when the rhetorical tradition was distorted. Now, "fact" is an ultimate term (Weaver, 1970, p. 47). (Weaver laments this distortion in a footnote in which he observes that the word "fact" does not exist in the King James Bible.) He expressed concern that without a strong evenly dispersed religion; "God-words" may be used as the "stratagems of evil rhetoric" (Weaver, 1970, p. 94). As evidence, he described the misuse of the term "efficient". In manufacturing and mechanical processes, efficiency is highly valued. The word efficiency became so lauded that it began to subordinate the words around it. That may be appropriate when describing the gas mileage of a car. But, when used in the context "efficiency apartment," Weaver argued that the positive associations of the word "efficient" were coopted to describe living quarters that are, in actuality, lacking (Weaver, 1970, p. 48).

Stuart Hall posits that there are many possible meanings to any statement. Furthermore, some of these possible meanings can be the result of non-negotiable ideologies that determine the meaning for the individual (Hall, 1993). Therefore, where some viewers may see a negative bias, others may see a glaring truth. Stuart Hall's, "Encoding/Decoding" (1980) focused on the manner in which communicated messages were sent and received, or encoded in production and decoded at the receiver end. Hall's argument is one of environment, which is to say that the reception, understanding, and proper decoding of a message only happens in times of "perfectly transparent communication" (pp. 32, 59). This only happens when the producer and receiver are operating within the same dominant, hegemonic coding system.

Hall said, "The different areas of social life appear to be mapped out into discursive domains, hierarchically organized into dominant or preferred meanings. New, problematic or troubling events, which breach our expectancies and run counter to our common sense constructs, to our "taken-for-granted" knowledge of social structures, must be assigned to their discursive domains before they can be said to make sense" (1980, pg. 134). This contention supports an assumption that GOP candidates may harken to a discursive domain that appeals to preferred meanings among evangelicals.

According to Chris Campbell, “Semiotics is the science of signs and meaning-making; a sophisticated/complicated way to interpret/analyze messages and culture—how meanings are constructed and coded/decoded”(Campbell, 2006). It is this “construction” of meaning that is of concern and sought. Weaver recognized that ultimate terms would change “according to the affections of the times,” (1980). He cited “progressive” as the most dominant ultimate term in the first decades of the last century. That word may not be as ultimate as it used to be, as many now recognize it as a more attractive word than socialism, but meaning the same. Perhaps a current example would be the term “marriage equality” which is to “same-sex marriage” what “pro-choice” is to “pro-life.” The ultimate term used to categorize an issue is a signal in itself, subordinating and providing meaning to the words around it. This is not to assume that either meaning discovered is right or conversely wrong. Hall describes “decoding” media texts through three levels of analysis. The first step is to describe the denotative (or “preferred”) meaning. Hall explains that these readings have “the whole social order imbedded in them as a set of meanings, practices and beliefs; the everyday knowledge of social structures, of how things work for all practical purposes in this culture” (1982, p. 134)

The second is the connotative (“negotiated” and/or “oppositional”) readings of the same message. What Hall would describe as a “negotiated” reading of the stories allows for analysis beyond the meaning intended by the team of journalists who produced them including its potential for myth-making. Fiske and Hartley (1978) include the impact of television production techniques to connote meanings: “Camera angle, lighting and background music [and] frequency of cutting are examples” (45). For Hall, the denotative, commonsense meanings of the stories are less significant than the connotative, interpretive readings.

As all messages contain codes, the search for the hidden “mythology” or “ideology” contained in messages constitutes the “highest level of analysis” according to (Fiske & Hartley, 1978). “This, the third order of signification, reflects the broad principles by which a culture organizes and interprets the reality with which it has to cope” (30). Whether candidates use god-terms because they represent their own views or as a calculated rhetoric designed to resonate with voters, one thing is apparent: the terms do resonate.

The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life conference, “How Our Brains Are Wired for Belief,” documents the relationships between belief systems and brain function. Neuroscientists studying Magnetic Resonance Imaging of the brain have discovered common denominators regarding religious belief and political views. The same brain physiology involved in decision making for political choices also houses deeply held religious beliefs (The Pew Forum on Science and Bioethics). Pew Forum member Newberg describes this phenomenon as “fired together, wired together” as the same neuro-pathways are involved (n.d.). Responses in this part of the brain can be precipitated by the hearing words or ideas. This functions within the limbic system, where emotional responses are generated. The ability to identify specific emotions is still beyond current research capabilities, except for the emotional response of disgust, which is easily and strongly triggered.

In the same Pew conference, researcher David Brooks indicated that emotion is necessary for decision making, as it is used to assign value to ideas. In light of this research, and the insight provided by Burke, Weaver and Hall, language use by presidential candidates is of particular interest. Crosby recognizes Bennett’s historical account of the electorate’s expectations regarding candidates’ religious bona-fides (2015). Whereas Bennett sees the role of religion diminishing in recent election cycles, Crosby asserts that the role is transitioning (Crosby 2015, 249). Specifically, Crosby draws a distinction between religious/political rhetoric that harkens back to an earlier time of greater faithfulness and another view that greater faithfulness to religious principles are aspirational. Speeches by candidates Romney and Obama illustrate Crosby’s distinction. Interestingly, both candidates delivered speeches for the purpose of explaining their religion. Romney’s 2007 “Faith In America” speech described the need to once again embrace the faith of the founders of the United States. In contrast, candidate Obama described principles that were articulated in founding documents but not yet realized in his 2008 “More Perfect Union” speech. The speeches contained many of the same words such as “faith”, “belief” and “God.”

Maddux suggests that politicians excel as what ecumenical ministry has always done: use Dissociative Arguments (2013, pg. 355). Maddux argues that use of “God-words” creates a paradigm in which the anxiety of disagreement is relieved through the use of common words, even if those words have different connotations among disparate groups.

This may be what Chapp (2012) describes as words of identification. In his study of civil religion in election campaigns, Chapp investigated the linguistic attributes of God-words used by candidates. Using the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) tool, he was able to parse God-words as those of “identification” or “war”. The context of identification served the function described by Maddux. God-words were used to communicate idea that the candidate shares the same beliefs as everyone else in the civil religion. Otherwise, Chapp measured for agenda-based words, concerning stances on issues important to people of faith.

The Evangelical Voter

The literature review above traces some of the academic research that considers the interplay between politics and religion, or faith. For the most part, previous research considers the effects of religion on politics. Stecker (2012) provides evidence into what may be the cause of these effects so many researchers study. In The Podium, The Pulpit and the Republicans, Stecker builds the case that Republicans have been particularly adept at winning elections through activation of the evangelical voter through the use of language that resonates with the tenants of the evangelical faith. Moreover, Stecker provides evidence that this use of “God Words” is a strategy developed through linguistic studies sponsored by the Republican think-tanks now known as the Heritage Foundation and formally as The Moral Majority. Clapp (2014) studied how this linguistic approach is manifest in voting behavior. In *Religious Rhetoric and American Politics*, Clapp identifies a library of “religion” words used in the Linguistic Inquiry Word Count Database. In his study, Clapp identified two ways that religious words are used in political speech. A primary purpose is to use words to identify with others who have a shared belief. Other words are used in a context of attack. That is, further identification to a group through identifying common foes through a negative moral interpretation. Some of these attack words serve to further differentiate between two recognized types of Evangelicals. While all Evangelicals agree the Christian Bible is inerrant, some Evangelicals believe all parts of the bible, including those that are poetic or metaphoric, must be followed literally. This subset of Evangelicals is known as Fundamentalists. (More references that tie the evangelicals to the GOP as a voting block as can be used to establish the working hypotheses or research questions.)

Hypotheses

This study’s purpose is to expose any possible relationship between the use of God words by a candidate and his weight in the polls. The point is to determine if there is a correlation between the use of “God words” in debate rhetoric and an increase of support in post-debate polls as a result.

Therefore, given that a number of Republican voters self-identify as evangelical, we can hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 1: Increased use of “God Words” used during the debates will result in higher poll numbers for the candidate using them.

Likewise,

Hypothesis 2: Limited use of “God Words” will result in a drop in support as reflected in poll numbers reflecting support levels for those individual candidates.

Methodology

This study examines the use of “God Words” in the Republican presidential primary debates of 2015 and 2016. This is a longitudinal study ranging from the earliest televised Republican pre-primary debate through the final pre-primary televised debate prior to the Republican Party Convention. The debates transcripts were obtained through the Time’s official website. Candidate responses purposely selected from the Republican Presidential candidate debate response population were used as a sample for this analysis. The analysis attempted to find evidence in the text of the rhetoric that support the hypotheses. Any religious cultural values, portrayals or mentions of “God words” in general are evident following analysis. The textual analysis also includes a synopsis of both denotative as well as connotative meanings within the rhetoric. Construct validity may be associated with the content analysis’ use of variables mentioned as well as the textual analysis technique. This type of analysis seeks the implicit as well as explicit indications of the sought-after variables. This then becomes a form of conceptual analysis, whereas a concept (portrayal of religious bias, religiosity bias) was chosen for examination, and the analysis involves identifying and tallying of its presence. As mentioned previously in Chris Campbell’s, “Semiotics is the science of signs and meaning-making; a sophisticated/complicated way to interpret/analyze messages and culture—how meanings are constructed and coded/decoded” (C. P. Campbell, 2006). It is this “construction” of meaning that is of concern and sought. Using the theoretical perspectives of Stuart Hall and others as a basis, an examination of sources of political use of “God words” exposes any ideologies inset purposely or accidentally into the rhetoric. Through textual analysis, an argument is made for alternative meanings and symbolism that can only be noticed through additional contemplation. Obviously, there is a dominant meaning textually inferred in a debate answer, yet further analysis could uncover some more latent or negotiated meanings. This can also be thought of as the connotative versus denotative meanings of the text in question. (Hall). Alternative meanings were not sought in this study. In fact, intended meaning wasn’t even a consideration. Instead, this was a simple word count. Our intent was to demonstrate any correlation between use of certain words, regardless of intent, with changes in poll numbers. Neither Burke’s or Weaver’s definitions of God Words are used in this study. Rather, “God Words” are those words of religion included in the Linguistic Inquiry Word Count database for religion. The Religion Word dictionary (table 1) has been used by many scholars inquiring about the intersection of political and religious speech. How these terms were operationalized is described in the research of Pennebaker, Francis and Booth (2001).

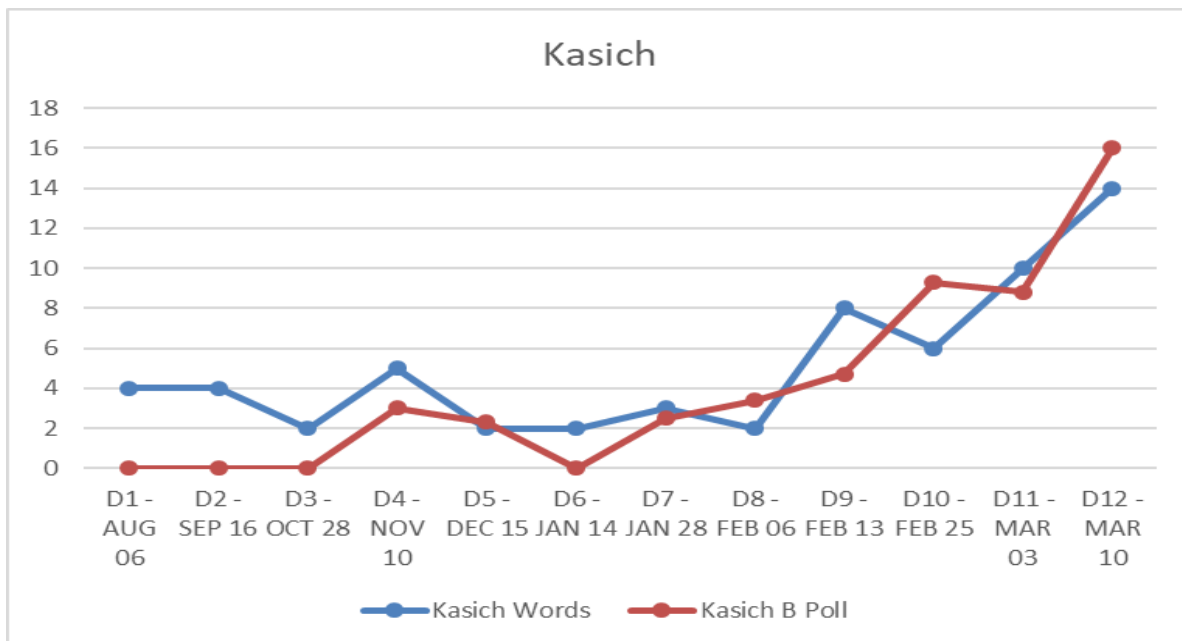
For simplicity, these words were loaded into TextStat. TextStat (Simple Text Analysis Tool) was used to perform a frequency count of all God-words used by each candidate in the Republican primary debates. Concurrent poll data were collected from RealClearPolitics.com to compare favorability ratings for each candidate just prior to and after each debate.

Findings

For convenience, “God-word” frequency counts were conducted on the five highest polling candidates: Carson, Cruz, Kasich, Rubio, Trump. These candidates were the most consistent debate participants. The results are the relation between each GOP Candidate’s use of God words and their polling data just prior to and after each debate.

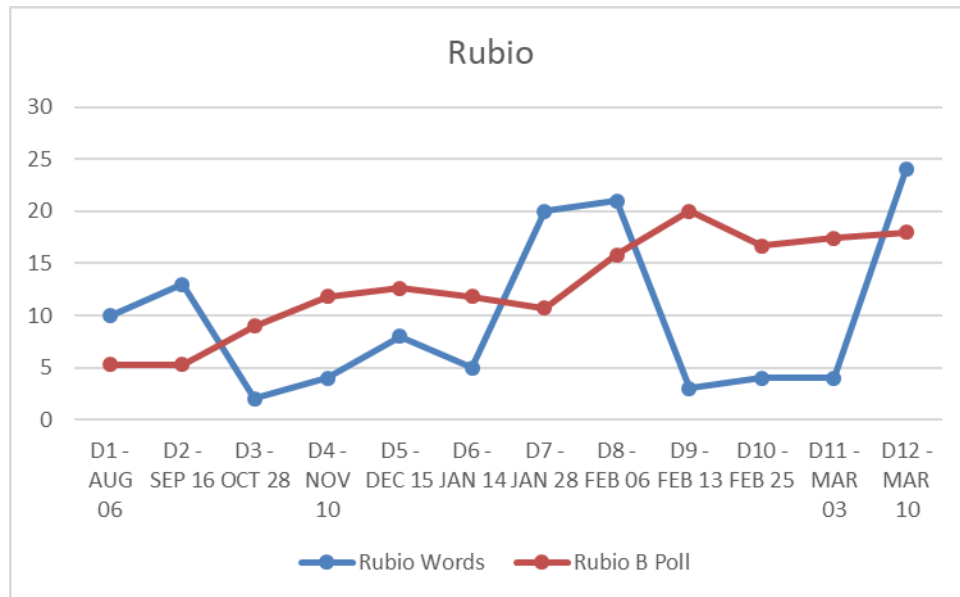
DEBATES	Carson			Cruz			Kasich			Rubio			Trump		
	Words	A poll	B Poll	Words	A Poll	B Poll	Words	A Poll	B Poll	Words	A Poll	B Poll	Words	A poll	B Poll
D1 - AUG 06	1	5.8	5.8	40	5.5	5.5	4	X	X	10	5.3	5.3	1	24.3	24.3
D2 - SEP 16	2	20	20	7	6.8	6.8	4	X	X	13	5.3	5.3	0	30.5	30.5
D3 - OCT 28	0	22.2	22	2	7	6.6	2	X	X	2	6.6	9	2	27	26.8
D4 - NOV 10	2	24.4	24.4	2	9.6	9.6	5	3	3	4	11.8	11.8	1	24.8	24.8
D5 - DEC 15	12	11.3	12	26	16.4	16.1	2	2	2.3	8	12.6	12.6	4	33.1	33
D6 - JAN 14	11	8.8	9	12	18.8	19.3	2	2.4	X	5	11.6	11.8	4	34.8	34.5
D7 - JAN 28	6	7.6	8.3	8	19.6	19.7	3	2.4	2.5	20	10.2	10.7	X	35.8	35.3
D8 - FEB 06	3	7.8	7.4	7	21	20.6	2	4	3.4	21	17.8	15.8	5	29.5	31.8
D9 - FEB 13	2	6.7	7.5	9	19.7	21	8	5.7	4.7	3	20.3	20	1	31.7	29
D10 - FEB 25	7	8.2	7.5	14	20.4	20.3	6	9.8	9.3	4	16.6	16.7	2	32.8	33.2
D11 - MAR 03	X	9	9	10	19.8	19.6	10	8.8	8.8	4	17.4	17.4	4	35.6	35.6
D12 - MAR 10	X	X	8.5	16	21.8	21.8	14	12	16	24	18	18	9	36	36
TOTAL	46			153			62			118			33		

The use of God Words did not guarantee a high score in the polls. Early debate polling suggested that, at least for Donald Trump, use of God Words was not necessary to enjoy high polling numbers nor demonstrate a negative correlation. Further argument against inverse correlation is evidenced as Cruz reaches the second highest level of support in the poll and yet is by far the candidate with most extensive use of God words thus, superficially inferring a positive correlation. Cruz demonstrated both high poll numbers and high use of God Words. The graphs below suggest that the historically positive correlation between use of God Words and Polling numbers many no longer hold true. A notable exception was Kasich, who polled better when he used God Words.

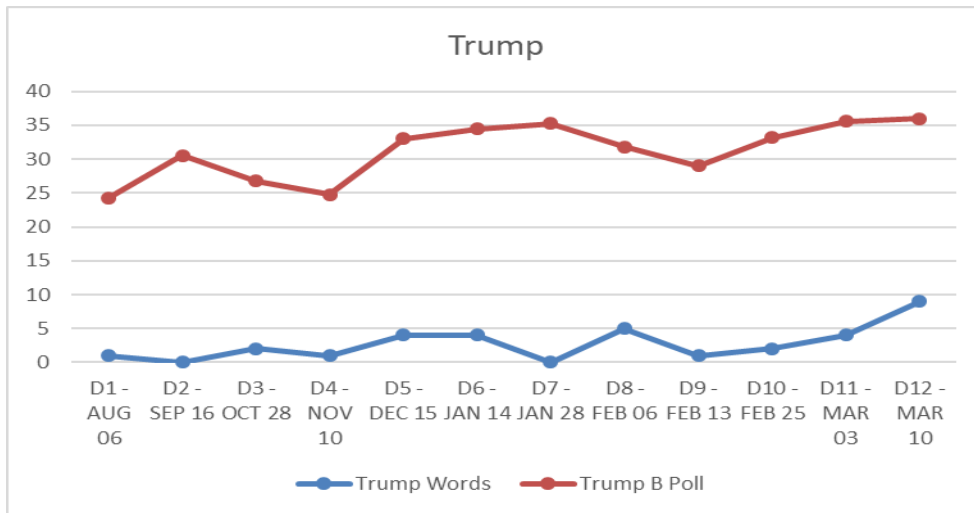


*D1: GOP Debate One

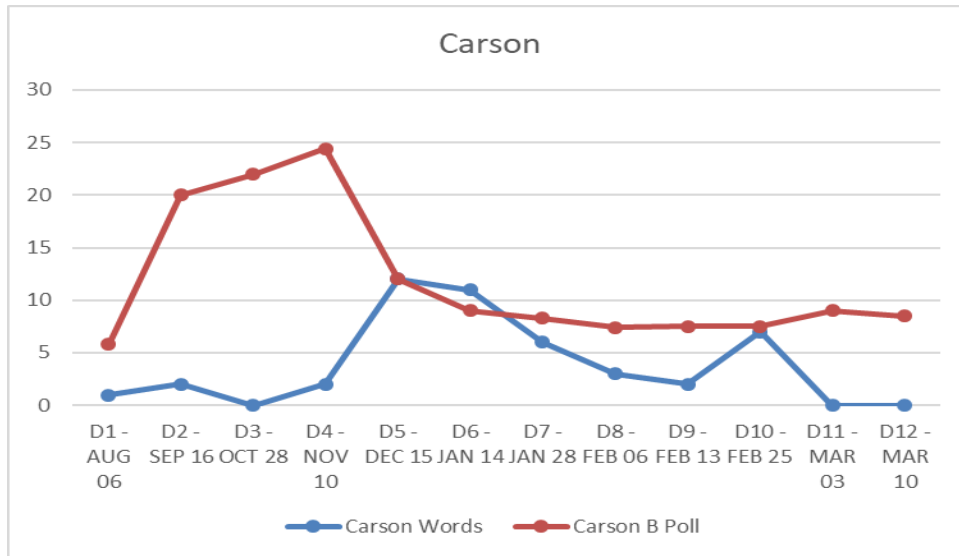
The graph clearly shows that both variables are moving in the same direction, and tends to both increase overtime. While these numbers are not of sufficient magnitude to say if Kasich used God Words as a debate tool or if the candidate was putting personal opinion and ideology in his debate responses. Nevertheless, the data indicates a positive correlation between the use of “God words” in Candidate Kasich’s debate responses and the subsequent poll numbers.



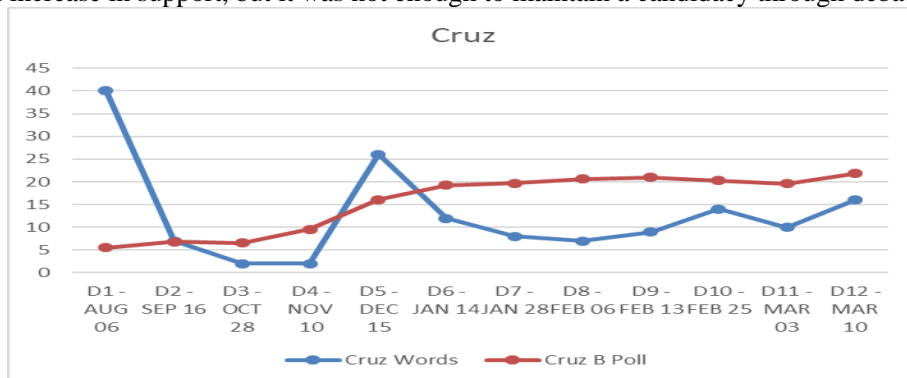
Rubio shows a pattern similar to that of Kasich. The correlation between the use of God words and the resulting poll numbers seems to be positive. Notice that as God word usage decreased in debate 6, there was a subsequent downward trend in the following poll numbers. The sharp increase in frequency of God word use during the seventh debate which aired January 28 could have been the direct result of a strategy designed to address this drop in poll numbers. Subsequent poll numbers doubled during the next two weeks. However, on February 13, during the ninth debate, his use of God Words plummeted to the level below that of debate seven. Accordingly, his poll approval rating fell from 20% to 16.7%. Interestingly, another sharp increase in God word usage was employed during debate 12 implying that, once again, this increase was being used as a strategy to address falling poll numbers. It is interesting to notice that Rubio’s support in the polls had been evolving (both positively and negatively), extremely smoothly, until debate seven and debate nine. Polls following debate seven showed a relatively dramatic increase in support through debate nine. This is when Rubio had a significant decrease in God word usage and his support decreased incrementally and leveled off. As mentioned, there is another sharp increase in God word usage in debate 12 but it only resulted in a small change in reflected support. However, the loss of momentum in debate eleven is not as significant as the gain in debate seven. The possibility exists, and interpretations can be made, that during debate seven Rubio gained voters who value religion from a moderate to a high level. Once he stopped using God words during debate ten, he may have lost those supporters who value religion at a high level.



The correlation between God Words and polling is unique with candidate Trump. He is the only candidate for whom use, or lack of use, of God Words did not vary with his poll numbers. Trump used God Words sparingly. In fact, there appears to be no relationship between God word use and poll numbers whatsoever for candidate Trump.



Carson established himself as an evangelical candidate outside of the debate arena and seldom used God words during the first few debates. This candidate began his run with less than 6% support from Republican voters but rallied to 24.4 percent of republican voter support by the fourth debate. It wasn't until debate 5 that a dramatic increase in the number of God words was seen from Carson accompanied by a simultaneous drop in poll numbers or electorate support. It was at this point that the two lines on the graph intersected. As the downward trend of the use of God words continued following debate 5, so did support as reflected in poll numbers. A small increase in God words was used in debate 10, resulting in a small increase in support, but it was not enough to maintain a candidacy through debates 11 and 12.



Candidate Cruz used a staggering 40 God words during the first debate alone. This is significant to this study because this is almost as many as Carson used throughout the debate season (46), and nearly 20 percent more than candidate Trump used during all of the debates in total. The use of these words dropped significantly during the next three debates and dramatically increased for debate 5. It is interesting to note that the upward trend in support began prior to the increase in God word use during debate 5. Subsequent debates saw a reduction in God word use and poll numbers began to level off at the +/- 20th percentile.

Discussion

The impact of use of God Words seems to be relevant but its strength differs according to the listener and the candidate that person tends to support. Moreover the impact of God Words may be less relevant to the overall presidential campaign due to the decrease of voters who identify as Evangelical Christians. The Pew Forum shows that the percentage of people that designate themselves as Christians decrease from 78.4% in 2007 to 70.6% in 2014. This is - 7.4% in only seven years. Consequently, this majority is decreasing, and the impact of religion is less and less important. Nevertheless, the evangelical voter sector one that is still to be cultivated by Republican presidential candidates and is also a voting bloc of significant interest in news media and scholarly research. Granted, there are many variables that impact poll scores. There was no intent to demonstrate causation with this study, only the happenstance of correlation between certain words and possible effects on polling support. One of the limitations of this study was the lack of control for news stories and other information made available to the electorate from the plethora of other sources during the campaign season. Certainly, these other sources of information, news stories, commentary, entertainment television, parody, social media, etc., all have an impact on candidate support and isolation of one particular point of influence is difficult at best, or perhaps even impossible. Nevertheless, some correlation can be seen by analyzing data through content analysis of debate transcripts. The most interesting finding is that the correlation seems to be positive for some candidates and negative for others. This finding, as well as the relatively incremental changes in poll positions, seems to corroborate the notion that the electorate has already decided on a candidate prior to the debates and the debate itself is being used only to reinforce a previously established voting decision. The small changes in poll position could be a reflection of the small number of still undecided voters during the election cycle.

The 2016 election seems to have been led by aggressiveness directed at opposing candidates as well as policy. One of the major talking points for political candidates was that people's quality of life has been deeply and negatively impacted by the current economy, society, and the overall climate of the country. This is not a new tactic in American political campaign rhetoric. It is fairly common for a candidate to point to problems, create a fear of impending problems, and then assign blame for that problem to an opponent. The use of God words is apparently meant to instill a sense of "faith" within the electorate that the candidate using those God words will be divinely directed to do what is best for the masses and will follow a moral and ethical path toward legislating. This strategy seems to be going through an evolution and the result is that the self-described evangelical voters may still be a sought-after voting bloc, but no longer have the influence to dramatically move a candidate's position in the polls. The data seems to demonstrate that not only do fewer people value having a Christian president, but people tend to look for something different in terms of personality and behavior. That is reflected by the way Donald Trump, who barely used God Words and clearly had the most shallow political resume, consistently scored the highest in the polls. Instead of God Words, Donald Trump used words from the business world. The candidate pushes his business career and successes in his speeches as leverage and simultaneously targeting values that people presume to worship even more than Christianity: power and money. It is interesting also to notice that of the 33 God words he used in 12 debates, Trump used the word hell eleven times. It is interesting to notice that instead of trying to affiliate himself with the evangelical voting bloc like other candidates would seem to do, he stays true to business jargon and does not employ the God word vocabulary. However he manages to catch the interest of all Christians by pointing at a common enemy, using the old adage that "enemies of my enemies are my friends."

Conclusion

Whether candidates use God-Words for agenda setting purposes cannot be readily answered. The same can be said of the application of framing theories. While this study provides some evidence that religious rhetoric can be a tool to attract some electors, it is by no means an attempt to demonstrate causation. As mentioned earlier, many variables cannot be controlled in a study of political attitudes and it is essentially impossible to point to a single cause for movement within the polls. During the months of pre-primary campaigning the electorate had been exposed to an avalanche of candidate information. Still, observation tells us that this avalanche is unevenly spread among the candidates.

Certainly, horserace news coverage of political races focuses on extended coverage of race leaders while minimalizing coverage of those with lower support in the polls. Moreover, access to media itself is certainly a contributing factor and candidate Trump was certainly a media industry player even before the campaign season began. The electorate rarely, if ever, has the opportunity to interact with a candidate directly. Instead, voters are at the mercy of mass media when forming views and opinions of political candidates. This media-mediated exposure takes many forms and all of these can effect political knowledge. The internet has become a major source of political knowledge of candidates as well as cable television entertainment programming such as *The Daily Show, with Jon Stewart*, on Comedy Central network and *Saturday Night Live*, an NBC program that has used politics as a comedy topic since its inception in the 1970's. Brewer and Cao have demonstrated a positive association between viewing of political comedy shows and political knowledge (Brewer & Cao, 2006). Furthermore, according to a 2008 Pew report, Jon Stewart ranked fourth on a list of most admired journalists. Further compounding the perceived legitimacy of this source is the occurrence of mentions, quotes, or even clips from the shows being used as subject matter, and as popular culture references used in traditional broadcast news stories (Rosenstiel & Mitchell, 2008). The Internet, cable television programming such as *The Daily Show*, and old standards like *Saturday Night Live* have brought popular culture embedded politics directly into living rooms. Television news has recognized this and has even mentioned these programs and used the term "pop culture" in news stories. Candidates have used popular culture references at an increasing rate through the previous presidential cycles. In the 2006 election cycle, Hillary Clinton even used a parody of the Soprano's final episode, a very popular cable television series, to announce her candidacy. It therefore stands to reason that a popular culture figure would perform well in election polls.

Political knowledge is quickly being replaced by simple support of ideology. This is evidenced by the continuation of growing political polarity and the notion that political party affiliation is now being used as a self-identifier. The electorate describes itself as "left," "right," "conservative," or "liberal," and as Stuart Hall points out, there are dominant, negotiated, and oppositional meanings to all text, and that would include these labels as well. There is still a segment of the electorate that self-identifies as evangelical and these voters are mentioned often in news media during election cycles. However, this segment of the population is shrinking as it ages and the percentage of people prone to be seduced by god-words is plummeting. Moreover recent social and economic trends seem to pull people away from their religious principals when it comes time to look at a candidate, and instead to focus their interest on the political party line, and ideology over candidates, and the perception of who can increase their quality of life.

References

- ARIS. (2008). ARIS 2008 Summary Report. Retrieved February 17, 2012, from American Religious Identification Survey: <http://commons.trincoll.edu/aris/publications/aris-2008-summary-report/>
- Bennett, J. (2013). Farewell to faith? the changing role of religion in presidential politics. *Theology Today* 30(3). Belief Net. (n.d.). Ron Paul's Christian Values: Pro-Life, Anti-War. Retrieved from Belief Net: <http://www.beliefnet.com/News/Politics/2008/01/Ron-Pauls-Christian-Values-Pro-Life-Anti-War.aspx?p=3>
- Bolce, L. &. (2008). A prejudice for the thinking classes: Media exposure, political sophistication, and the anti-Christian fundamentalist. *American Politics Research*, 36 (2), 155-185.
- Brewer, P. R., & Cao, X. (2006). Candidate appearances on soft news shows and public knowledge about primary campaigns. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 50 (1), 18-35
- Bruenger, A. (n.d.). *The Rhetoric of Religion* by Kenneth Burke University of California Press, 1961. Retrieved January 14, 2012, from <http://www.comm.umn.edu/burke/rhetrel.html>
- Chapp, C. B. (2012). *Religious Rhetoric and American Politics: The Endurance of Civil Religion in Electoral Campaigns*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. Retrieved October 15, 2017, from Project MUSE database.
- Crosby, R. (2015). Toward a practical, civic piety: Mitt Romney, Barack Obama, and the race for national president. *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 18(2). Michigan State University.
- Hall, S. (1980). Coding and encoding in the television discourse. In S. Hall, D. Hobson, A. Lowe, & P. Willis (Eds.), *Cultural theory and popular culture: A reader* (pp. 124-155). Athens, Ga: the University of Georgia Press.
- Hall, S. (1982). The rediscovery of ideology: Return of the repressed in media studies. In John Storey (Ed.), *Cultural theory and popular culture: A reader* (pp. 124-155). Athens, Ga: The University of Georgia Press.
- Hall, S. (1993). Encoding, decoding *The cultural studies reader* (Vol. 4, pp. 90-103).
- Hostler, M. (2013). Talking about religion in public: finding critical distance. *Journal of Communication and Religion* 36(3).
- Fiske, J., & Hartley, J. (1978). *Reading television*. London, UK: Methuen.

- Freie Universität Berlin. (n.d.). Freie. Retrieved February 1, 2012, from TextSTAT – SimpleText Analysis Tool / Concordance software: <http://neon.niederlandistik.fu-berlin.de/en/textstat/>
- Kaylor, B. (2012), *The Podium, the Pulpit, and the Republicans: How Presidential Candidates Use Religious Language in American Political Debate*. By Frederick Stecker. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2011. 229 pp. *Pres Stud Q*, 42: 917–918. doi:10.1111/j.17415705.2012.04032.x
- Lunceford, B. (2012). Rhetoric and religion in contemporary politics. *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 16(2).
- Madduz, L. (2013, Summer). Religious dissociation in 2013 campaign discourse. *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 16(2).
- Medhurst, M. (2009, Nov.). Evangelical Christian faith and political action: Mike Huckabee and the 2008 Republican presidential nomination. *Journal of Communication and Religion*.
- Morgan, D. (2008). *Key words in religion, media and culture*. New York: Routledge.
- Nichols, R. (n.d.) LIWC in practice: applying LIWC to research questions in genre theory, or toward a science of science fiction. Center for Human Evolution, Cognition, and Culture. The University of British Columbia. Retrieved October 15, 2017 from <http://www.hecc.ubc.ca/quantitative-textual-analysis/qta-practice/liwcinpractice/>
- Pennebaker, James W., Martha E. Francis, and Roger J. Booth. 2001. *Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC): LIWC2001*. Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Pew Research Center Publications. (n.d.). *Religion and Politics: Profiles of the 2012 President Candidates and Their Beliefs*. Retrieved from Pew Research Center Publications: <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/2150/religion-politics-2012-presidential-candidates>
- Pew Research Center Publications. (n.d.). *Romney’s Mormon Faith Likely a Factor in Primaries, Not in a General Election*. Retrieved November 20, 2012, from <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/2136/mormon-mormonism-evangelical-christian-catholic-protestant-rigion-politics-presidential-primaries-race-mitt-romney-barack-obama-herman-cain>.
- Powell, L. & Neiva, E. (2006, Mar.) The Pharisee effect: when religious appeals in politics go too far. *Journal of Communication and Religion* 29(1).
- Rosenstiel, T., & Mitchell, A. (2008). Journalism, satire, or just for laughs? “The daily show with Jon Stewart,”. Examined. Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism, 8 May.
- Saad, L. Support for Nontraditional Candidates Varies by Religion, Gallup News, Retrieved October 15, 2017, from http://news.gallup.com/poll/183791/support-nontraditionalcandidatesvariesreligion.aspx?utm_source=Politics&utm_medium=newsfeed&utm_campaign=titles
- Simons, H. (1989). Introduction. In H. W. Melia, *The Legacy of Kenneth Burke* (pp. 3-27). Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Sproul, R. (2011). Right Now Counts Forever. Retrieved December 11, 2011, from Ligonier Ministries: <http://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/right-now-counts-foreversproul-jr>
- The Pew Forum. (2009, July 9). *A Contentious Debate: Same-Sex Marriage in the U.S*. Retrieved November 19, 2011, from Pew Form on Religion and Public Life: <http://www.pewforum.org/Gay-Marriage-and-Homosexuality/A-Contentious-Debate-Same-Sex-Marriage-in-the-US.aspx>
- The Pew Forum. (n.d.). *Science and Bioethics Panel Discussion*. Retrieved Jan 18, 2012, from The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life: <http://www.pewforum.org/Science-and-Bioethics/How-Our-Brains-are-Wired-for-Belief.aspx>
- The Pew Forum. (2010). *U.S. Religious Knowledge Survey*. Retrieved December 19, 2011, From The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life: <http://pewforum.org/Other-Beliefs-and-Practices/U-S-Religious-Knowledge-Survey.aspx>
- Weaver, R. (1970). *Language is Sermonic*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.

TABLE ONE

angel
angels
bible*
bless*
catholic*
chaplain*
christ

christian*
church*
commandment*
communion
confess*
devil*
devine*
easter
etern*
faith*
fundamentalis*
god
god'*
gods
gospel*
heaven*
hell
holy
immortal*
jesus
jewish
lord
meditat*
mercy
methodis*
minister
moral*
pastor
pope*
pray*
preach*
presbyterian*
priest*
protestant*
religo*
sacred
saint*
satan*
sin
sins
soul
souls
spirit*
temple*
testament*
theology*
worship*