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Religion vs. Politics: Which Wins at a Christian Liberal Arts University?

Amanda Williams

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Abstract:

Scholars have studied the effects of framing on different groups of people for decades. There has also been research on the relationship between religious beliefs and politics. This article takes the unique population of a Christian college campus to combine the test of faith against politics through subtle framing. When faced with a political frame, will these Christians ultimately side with their political beliefs or their religious beliefs? I found through a questionnaire experiment run in November 2021 on Taylor University students and some faculty that religious beliefs prevailed. This result is somewhat surprising giving the current political climate, but it is just a step into understanding the evangelical population and their relationship with politics.

Introduction and Literature Review

When two belief systems are pinned against one another, like religion and politics, whichever is stronger will ultimately prevail. One would think that among those that attend a religious university that emphasizes the integration of faith and learning that religious beliefs would be predominant. But what if there's a frame that makes them think more politically? Will the frame alter which belief set is more valuable? This is known as a framing effect.

According to James Druckman (2001), "a framing effect is said to occur when, in the course of describing an issue or event, a speaker's emphasis on a subset of potentially relevant considerations causes individuals to focus on these considerations when constructing their opinions." One of the main ways that people come across frames in their everyday lives is through the news. It is probably no surprise to anyone in the twenty-first century that news outlets can have different focuses when covering the same event. People are familiar with the biases that are present in news media, especially since the launch of cable news networks like Fox News and CNN. One way that these news networks frame their content is by putting emphasis on certain details that would otherwise not be considered essential. This causes the audience to think about the event in a way that they otherwise would not have.

One famous example in the research world of this phenomenon involves a Klu Klux Klan rally in rural Ohio (Nelson, Clawson, Oxley, 1997). The researchers framed the story in two different ways to their undergraduate student participants. One emphasized the free speech aspect of the rally, emphasizing the want of the protestors to get their message out to the world as part of their First Amendment right to free speech. The other emphasized the public order of the event, highlighting the potential for disorder or violence and threat to public safety. The results of this study show that those who were given the free speech frame were more likely to show tolerance for the KKK rally. What we learned from this study is that framing can help people recall their underlying attitudes. Those that were given the public order frame were reminded that they care about the safety of their communities. Similarly, the ones who received the free speech frame were reminded that they care about the First Amendment and the right to free speech. These attitudes were there all along, but the frame emphasized one

over the other so that either public order or free speech was at the forefront of the reader's mind.

Many studies have been done on the effects of framing and how effective they are. However, there is some research that suggests that there are limits to the effects that framing can have on the public. When it comes to contentious issues, those that are important to the public and on their minds frequently, it is difficult for frames or cues to alter opinions. In one experiment on Swiss voters a week before an important referendum vote on immigration (Becthel, Hainmueller, Hangartner, and Helbling, 2015), the results showed that issue frames and partisan cues did not have a significant effect on support for the initiative or people's vote intentions. They suggest that this is due to the fact that people are likely to already have opinions, and the cues remind them of their pre-existing beliefs.

Past research done by Rohlinger and Quadagno (2009), shows that in order for a frame to influence a broad range of Christians, it must appeal to something fundamental to Christianity. The content of the frame matters when trying to influence Christians because the different denominations have similar yet different values. For example, the Catholic church is more focused on social than political action, yet it showed support for the New Deal and programs that 'express social solidarity with the poor.' The uniting factor for the conservative Christian movement was *Roe v. Wade*. The frame that united Catholics with other Christian denominations was the framing of the issue of abortion as the 'right to life.' This right to life to these people is seen as a 'basic human right which must undergird any civilized society.' Cooperation among many types of Christians was possible until there was specialization within the movement. The more detailed frame as the 'right to life without exception or compromise' caused the movement to break up into parts. This caused the different denominations to take their own moral views and approach abortion in different ways. This gives us insight into how groups of Christians might respond to frames directed towards their core beliefs. When the frame hit a core belief of all of Christianity, the idea that all people have a right to live, it worked to unify the group into action against abortion. When the frame was more specific, it no longer broadly applied to the core of all Christian denomination's beliefs, and therefore, the frame was less effective at getting Christians to act collectively.

How does this Christian conservative movement of the late twentieth century relate to today? One interesting connection to Christians and political action today is the 2016 general election. In 2016, Trump and his supporters uniquely used fear tactics to get people's votes. He called the Mexican border, the Middle East, and inner cities 'disasters.' Some supporters referred to the 2016 election as the "Flight 93 election" because the United States was heading towards disaster, and we need to gain control of the cockpit again (Gorski 2017). He also used messianic language to particularly persuade evangelicals. Those that felt their values were threatened by Clinton could feel comfort in a candidate like Trump. These voters were concerned about abortion, gay marriage, contraception coverage by the Affordable Care Act, and transgender bathroom access. Clinton was on the wrong side of these important cultural issues for this demographic. Trump promised to be their voice and to fix the nation's problems. He was very good at reassuring these voters that he would fight for their cultural values in Washington. This appealed to a wide set of Christian conservative voters.

Why is this particular research important? There is no doubt that the political climate since about 2016 has grown increasingly polarized. White evangelicals were largely Trump voters in the 2016 election. They are part of the reason he was elected even though the news media thought Clinton was a shoo-in and portrayed her as such to the American public. Taylor University is an evangelical higher institution that is primarily white. My research will help us gain insight into what this population values. There are many similar universities across the country that this can be useful for as well. Emulating similar research in those places can help us understand even further.

Even though there has been previous research testing the relationship between religion and politics, this experiment is valuable to the research community because of the specific population sample. This survey was sent to students and faculty at Taylor University, which is an evangelical Christian liberal arts university in Upland, Indiana. One would assume that those that either attend or work at such a place would place high value on their Christian beliefs. Those involved with such Christian universities would certainly hope that these religious beliefs would rank higher in importance than political beliefs. In this experiment, we are combining

what we already know about frames and the news to test this specific population in order to discover which belief set is actually more important to the participants.

I find that in this particular questionnaire, the Christian values proved to be a stronger frame than the partisan cues. Both questionnaires had reminders of what Christianity values, particularly showing love for neighbors, which is sometimes seen as contributing to charity and those that cannot afford to provide for their families or children. The framed version contained references to the fact that Republicans control the Indiana state government. However, there was not a significant difference to be found between the framed and neutral party responses when it came to the questions that were asked after the reading of the different articles.

Methods of Research

The purpose of this research is to see how the students and staff of Taylor University react when given two articles that only differ in one mentioning political party and one refraining from mentioning either party. I picked an article about education funding because this is a higher education institution, and one may assume that those who either attend or work at such a place would consider education a priority. I asked them about who should be responsible for funding education because I figured that would be a good place to see some difference in answers. I thought that asking whether families, charities, or the government should fund education would get the political part of their brain engaged in answering as well. Just the mention of the government funding education might spark a reminder of an already existing opinion.

In order to test this hypothesis, an online research questionnaire was created and sent out to Taylor University students and staff in the Fall 2021 semester. The questionnaire was included in the daily student announcements email with a link that randomized which survey each participant would receive. The two possible questionnaires only differed in which version of the article was included. One was framed to include references to the Republican party, and the other was neutral, which included no mention of political party. A small incentive was included for participants in the form of a lottery drawing for a \$10 gift card to a local restaurant.

The subject matter of the articles was educational funding in the state of Indiana and its effect on the state's economy. When I picked this topic, I wanted to test on something that was fairly non-partisan to begin with and that would be unlikely that people would already have strong opinions formed on. I figured that education funding was something that was not a high priority issue for most people my age, especially when it is compared to abortion, racial equity, or LGBTQ+ rights. I also wanted the subject to be something that could relate to core Christian principles in some way. Christians are told to 'love their neighbors' and have a servant's heart. Quality education for all children should be something that all Christians want. So, this topic seemed perfect to test to see which would win between religious beliefs and partisanship. In both versions, the participants were reminded of their Christian values with the following sentences, "As Christians, we are called to love our neighbors as ourselves. We do this often by supporting our communities or donating to charities. We do fundraisers for local causes or help a family in need. Some charities make sure that children have access to a quality education."

130 people responded to the survey, with 62 receiving the link to the neutral article and 68 receiving the framed article. There were multiple sections to the survey. The first section measured the students' and staff's existing opinions on state funding for education.

I asked them first what their current interest in state funding for education was as a base before the article to gauge how much information they might already know on this topic. For the next two questions, I added the phrase "as a Christian," to the front of the questions so that their religious values would be recalled and at the forefront of their minds. In this way, I was framing the respondents to think specifically about their religious values. I reminded them that they identify as Christians, and that this should be part of their consideration when answering these questions. I asked, "As a Christian, do you believe that every child has the right to a high quality education?" I felt that that this question was important, given that my demographic is a Christian higher education institution. As a member of this community, it might be assumed that high quality education is a priority. I also asked, "As a Christian, who should be responsible to make sure that children receive a high quality education?" The options were the federal government, the state government, individual families, non-profit charities, or

other. I used this question to get a sense of what who they think should fund education. Finally, I asked whether we should increase or decrease school funding.

The next series of questions were to gather demographic information on my sample. I asked for their political affiliation so that I could see if there was a pattern with parties and reactions. I also asked which Christian denomination best fits their faith as a way to check for any patterns within different sectors of Christianity. I also asked for their age, gender, and for them to describe the type of community they call home (urban, suburban, rural) also to check to see if that had any correlation with other responses. Lastly, I asked them to rate their news consumption to see if it was possible that they had heard of the state funding issue already.

On the next page was the article that was either neutral or framed. The article came from a Fort Wayne, Indiana TV station's website. It talked about one economics professor's view of Indiana school spending and the effect on the state's economy. The framed article mentions that the Indiana Governor is a Republican and states at the end that for the past ten years, the Indiana House, Senate, and Governor seats have all been Republican controlled. This framing is subtly taking what the professor was saying about education funding and blaming it on Republican leadership. The neutral article does not mention that the Indiana governor is a Republican and does not have the sentence on Republican control in state government.

News Article



Now you will read a local news article from March 2021. Please read it in full and then answer the questions about the article and what you think about it.

Local Economist: Low School Spending Drag on State Economy

FORT WAYNE, Ind. (WANE) — Writing "stark observations" about education finance, one economics professor warns Indiana school spending is falling at the same time as worker productivity and personal income. He thinks they're connected.

He argues in his weekly online commentary more educational spending on Indiana's "human capital" is a better path to growth than the current "Mississippi Strategy of low taxes, declining educational attainment and huge tax incentives" to businesses.

"It should be a fairly non-partisan issue that we want better school performance and are very concerned about the lackluster performance in the Indiana economy. The two are linked," he says over Zoom with WANE 15. "There's not really an important study anywhere that says you can get a better economy without better education."

His comments come after his analysis of the Indiana Governor's "Next Level Teacher Pay Commission" report. The report offers many ways to trim educational costs to boost teacher pay to competitive levels.

"A number of school corporations have written they're already doing almost all of the cost savings measures the Commission suggested," says the professor. "We'll be lucky to squeeze out \$100 million from all of these 37 recommendations when in fact we probably need more like \$600 million to \$1.2 billion to really get us back to where we should be today."

He writes in his weekly commentary that from 2010 to 2019, Indiana's worker productivity declined and per capita personal income saw its largest relative decline in history.

Figure 1 - Screenshot of the article from the neutral condition.

News Article



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His comments come after his analysis of Indiana’s Governor (Republican) Eric Holcomb’s “Next Level Teacher Pay Commission” report. The report offers many ways to trim educational costs to boost teacher pay to competitive levels.

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He writes in his weekly commentary that from 2010 to 2019, Indiana’s worker productivity declined and per capita personal income saw its largest relative decline in history. Since 2011, Indiana’s House, Senate, and Governor have all been Republican controlled.

Figure 2 – Screenshot of the article from the framed condition.

On the final page, the participants were asked a few closing questions. They were first asked if they actually read the article. They were also asked how they agree with the article on a scale of 1-7, with 1 being strongly disagree and 7 being strongly agree. They were also asked “should we increase or decrease school funding?” and “As a Christian, who should be responsible to make sure that children receive a high quality education?” These questions were repeats from before the article, and they are repeated to see if there was any change in the answers. The final question explicitly asks if their opinion regarding education funding changed after reading the article.

A total of 130 people responded to the survey. 106 of the respondents were within the ages of eighteen and twenty-two. Twenty answered that they were twenty-three or older. Seventy-seven participants were female, and fifty-three respondents were male. When asked what type of community home was, fifty-one said rural, sixty-six said suburban, and eleven said

urban. The most popular answer of rating political stance was somewhat Republican with thirty answers. Leaning Republican was second with twenty-eight responses, and neutral was third with twenty-seven answers.

	18-22	23+	
Number of Respondents	106	20	
	Female	Male	
Number of Respondents	77	53	
	Rural	Suburban	Urban
Number of Respondents	51	66	11

Table 1 – Breakdown of the demographics of respondents

Pre-results

Hypothesis:

H1: Participants who read the partisan-framed article will react to the article in a partisan manner according to their existing predispositions, whereas those presented with a neutral article will rely on their Christian faith to answer the question. In other words, we would expect to see subjects in the framed condition to have a higher degree of differentiation on school funding than subjects in the neutral condition. The goal of testing H1 is to see which priority among young Christian college students wins, partisanship or religion.

I expect partisanship to win because current college-aged students have come into adulthood during a time of high polarization between the two main parties. Even though Christian values teach to love your neighbor as yourself, which arguably would include a quality education, the extreme partisanship division could have a stronger foothold. College aged adults are some of the most passionate voices in the nation. They have strong beliefs about politics and are likely to participate in protests and other events where they feel their voices can be heard.

If partisanship wins over religious belief, it would be evidence that the current political climate has influenced these Christian young adults more than their religious beliefs. A Christian higher education institution like Taylor University would like to think that their love for Christ is the most important factor or priority in the lives of their students and staff. Partisanship

winning would be evidence that this is not the case. Even though on the surface these people like to believe God is the influencer on all other matters, subconsciously their beliefs about politics have a stronger foothold.

If religious belief wins over partisanship, it would be evidence that this unique religious environment has a significant influence on students and staff. This community-oriented university's values emphasize showing love to one another. If religious belief wins, this means the university is accomplishing its goal of developing Christian leaders to show Christ's love and selflessness to the world. These religious convictions being more important than partisan politics in such a polarized time would speak volumes to the faith-based learning at this institution.

No matter what the results conclude, this experiment will contribute to the research on partisan cues and what that means for a particularly religious population. We will have a better idea of what these people ultimately value more, which is useful information not only for Taylor University, but also for similar Christian institutions like it across the United States.

Results

Even though I expected partisanship to beat religious values, the results do not support this hypothesis. When comparing the framed and neutral responses to the questions given after the article, no significant difference in the means of the responses could be found. When the difference in means test was applied to the question, "As a Christian, who should be responsible to make sure that children receive a high quality education?" the probability was about 50%. This tested the change in difference of answers from before and after the article. Even when the respondents were asked to rate how much their opinion had changed, there was not a significant difference between the neutral and framed responses.

This means that in this particular questionnaire, the Christian values proved to be a stronger frame than the partisan cues. Since both versions of the questionnaire had a Christian frame in that the questions reminded the participants of their religious priorities, we can see that the partisan cues from the article (as the only difference) did not have the effect that we expected. The answers from both versions of the questionnaire were very similar and had

similar patterns for the questions that were asked both before and after the article. These questions were “As a Christian, who should be responsible to make sure that children receive a high quality education?” and “Should we increase or decrease school funding?”

These results are not entirely surprising. As I referenced earlier, Rohlinger and Quadagno (2009) found that the way to influence a large group of Christians is with a broad frame that applies to a core belief of Christianity. The conservative movement of the 1970’s and 1980’s relied on the ideas of the ‘right to life’ and ‘family values’ to appeal to the widespread audience of American Christians. When the frames became specific, it no longer broadly applied to the core of all Christian denomination’s beliefs, and therefore, the frame was no longer effective at sparking collective action. In the responses to the questionnaire, when asked “Which Christian denomination best fits your faith?” there were 18 different answers of denominations given by Taylor students and staff. This shows that there are a wide variety of Christians at Taylor University and suggests that they also would need a broad frame that appeals to a core Christian belief in order to be swayed as a group.

One interesting thing to note that came from this research was the optional comment section at the end of the questionnaires. Although the majority of respondents did not leave a comment or question about the research, more people in the framed group left comments than the neutral. Also, the responses that were left were longer in length. When comparing, the framed comments section had eight responses (68 total participants) for a total of 449 words while the neutral only had two comments (62 total participants) totaling 114 words. This is almost four times the amount of words for the framed comments compared to the neutral comments.

I realize that this is just one experiment done at one school. However, I believe that this unique sample and the unexpected results are worth noting. I did not try to have a sample that was representative of the United States. This specific sample helped test a specific question about how groups of Christians respond when their religious values are put to the test against their political stances. The small response sample of 130 is about six percent of the student population, which is a decent response given that the timeframe given for responses to the questionnaire was only a little over a week.

Conclusion

This particular research is important because of the recent changes we have seen in politics. In the past five years, we have seen that evangelical Christians are an influential demographic when it comes to elections. This means that political scientists want to know more about them and what they value. The unexpected (by news media) election of Donald Trump in 2016 was in part due to white evangelical Christian voters. Since Taylor University is an evangelical higher education institution with a primarily white population, my research on this fight of values is advancing the political science field. We are gaining insight into what matters to this demographic. Further research on Taylor or institutions similar to it can give us a greater insight into how these people vote, why they make the decisions that they do, and what that means for politicians running for office.

Why do we care about the relationship between faith and politics? I was particularly interested in this population because I myself am a student at Taylor University and have witnessed these people talk about politics in the past. I am also aware of the culture here and how important integrating faith into learning different subjects is in the classroom. I figured that my professors and some administration would care about these results because it is some evidence that their goals of integrating faith with other aspects of life is working. Further research on the Taylor populations and ones like it are needed to know if this is true over time or on other subjects. One improvement I would advise to anyone wanting to do similar research is to add a third situation where the participants are NOT reminded of the Christian values or given a political frame. This is the true neutral with no frames whatsoever and would give a great baseline to test the others on. I would also ask some more questions in terms of race demographics, other political opinion background (who did you vote for in the last election), and maybe something about how much they trust the news.

The reason that I would add such questions is so that we could further understand why there are differences in answers. A different topic might cause more of a reaction from the participants and show a bigger difference in the neutral and framed. I would pick something that affects a core belief of Christianity so that it has a better chance at affecting the majority of responses. Future experiments could test the framing that is used in political campaigns to see

how it affects these voters. This could help further the field's knowledge of how this group of voters reacts and help them better predict how they would react to certain candidates. Overall, this general idea could easily be recreated with the same Taylor community or in other Christian higher education institutions, and this could help political scientists to understand the demographic better.

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