

May God Protect Us: The Effect of Perceived Existential Threat and White Christian Nationalism Among American Evangelicals

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RESEARCH FOCUS

This project inquires into whether and how American evangelicals participate in politics. This thesis proposes that evangelicals’ adherence to white Christian nationalist values and their perceived existential threat influences whether one engages in politics and how one does so.

Research Question: *How does perceived existential threat and alignment to white Christian nationalism influence the type and level of political participation among American evangelicals?*

HYPOTHESES

H1: Evangelicals who have a higher alignment to white Christian nationalism and a higher level of perceived existential threat are likely to have a high level of political participation.

H2: Evangelicals who have a higher alignment to white Christian Nationalism and a higher level of perceived existential threat are likely to engage in more forms of nontraditional political participation than traditional forms of political participation.

H3: Evangelicals who have a lower alignment to white Christian nationalism and a higher level of perceived existential threat are likely to have a high level of political participation.

H4: Evangelicals who have a lower alignment to white Christian nationalism and a higher level of perceived existential threat are likely to engage in more forms of traditional political participation than nontraditional forms of political participation.

H5: Evangelicals who have a higher alignment to white Christian nationalism and a lower level of perceived existential threat are more likely to have a low level of political participation.

H6: Evangelicals who have a higher alignment to white Christian nationalism and a lower level of perceived existential threat are likely to participate in more forms of nontraditional political participation, even if the overall rate of participation is lower.

MOTIVATION FOR THIS WORK

In the United States, scholarship about evangelicals as a political and cultural movement has dramatically increased since Trump won the presidency for the first time in 2016. Nearly a decade later, it is clear that Trump’s wins and the influence of white Christian nationalism is not a fluke: white Christian nationalism has become a guiding force in American political and religious life, and it seems to be led by white evangelicals. It has become an asset for scholars to explore the influence of white Christian nationalism on evangelical behavior and on politics in the United States.

This thesis seeks to make the assumptions of fear implicit in the evangelical, white Christian nationalist, and political participation literatures explicit. This study develops a theory of perceived existential threat to explain the relationship between evangelicals, white Christian nationalism, and the amount of and type of political participation that one engages in.

LITERATURE

This thesis examines two main bodies of literature:

- A narrative of perceived persecution in evangelicalism
 - Imagining themselves as an embattled and persecuted minority
 - Fear and anger as a necessary political motivator for evangelicals
 - Fear underlies political values such as positions on race, gender, immigration, and the LGBTQ+ community
- An underlying sense of threat amongst white Christian nationalist values
 - Us vs. them mindset, with ‘them’ always threatening ‘our’ power and privilege
 - Zero sum game: one party always loses power when the other gains power
 - Empirical truth matters little; the *perception* of loss of power

THEORY

The thesis constructed a theory of perceived existential threat. Drawing on the literature related to the scarcity mindset of white Christian nationalists and the perceived insecurity/narrative of threat of American evangelicals, this thesis argues that perceived existential threat is the missing link to understand why American evangelicals participate in white Christian nationalism. Perceived existential threat is a comprehensive theory that brings together two similar political science theories, downgrading and ontological insecurity, to explain multiple facets of perceived threat.

From the theory of downgrading, it is necessary to understand that privileged majorities in a society can feel a loss of status, even if it is not empirically true. That perceived loss of status can lead to two separate outcomes: conforming strictly to the norms of one’s ingroup, and expressing fear, hatred, and anger towards members of the outgroup.

The inclusion of ontological insecurity highlights the ‘other’ as a threat to privileged majorities. Evangelicals tend to understand themselves as living in a system characterized by scarcity, where power and resources are interpreted as a zero-sum game.

Ontological Insecurity	Downgrading
‘Other’ as a threat	Privileged majority in society
Sense of scarcity/zero sum game	Perception of loss of status
Global threats/threats to majority brought close to home	Conforming to norms of ingroup, and/or expressed hatred/anger/fear towards outgroup

THEORY CONTINUED

Perceived existential threat can be grouped into two key areas: perceived threats to the status quo and perceived victimhood. This thesis divides the central components of ontological insecurity and downgrading into perceived threats to the status quo and perceived victimhood. In doing so, this thesis highlights the causal mechanisms underlying the theory of perceived existential threat, building the foundations of a new theory.

Perceived Threat to the Status Quo	Perceived Victimhood
Privileged majority in society	‘Other’ as a threat
Perception of Loss of Status	Sense of scarcity/zero sum game
Global threats/threats to the majority brought close to home	Conforming to the norms of ingroup, and/or expressed hatred/anger/fear towards outgroup

METHODOLOGY

This thesis utilized a self-designed survey targeted at evangelical populations in the United States. The survey sought to measure evangelicals’ conflation of religion and nationhood (alignment to white Christian nationalism) and their level of fear of threats to the status quo (perceived existential threat). Respondents were then asked to select from a list which forms of political participation they had engaged in over the last five years. Political participation was separated into two categories: traditional political participation that is well-documented in the literature as the means through which individuals engage in a functioning democratic system, and nontraditional political participation, characterized by a more extreme system of political beliefs.

The independent variables are analyzed through a scoring method. Participants were provided with statements to rank on a seven-point Likert scale (strongly agree to strongly disagree). Scores were measured accordingly, with strongly disagree coded as 1, neither agree nor disagree coded as 4, and strongly agree coded as 7. The tables below indicate which scores would be considered low, medium, and high on the white Christian nationalism and perceived existential threat spectrums, respectively.

Low Alignment to White Christian Nationalism	Medium Alignment to White Christian Nationalism	High Alignment to White Christian Nationalism
0-30	31-60	61-91

Low Perceived Existential Threat	Medium Perceived Existential Threat	High Perceived Existential Threat
0-62	63-126	127-189

The dependent variable, political participation was analyzed through two methods. First, respondents were scored by how much they participate in politics. Second, they were scored by the type of political participation that they engaged in. Under the second method, traditional forms of participation were coded as 1, and nontraditional forms of participation were coded as 2.

FINDINGS

White Christian Nationalism: The majority of respondents had a medium to high alignment to white Christian nationalism. Most results were dispersed close to the average; few respondents were outliers on the spectrum, indicating that most evangelicals are not extreme in their alignment to white Christian nationalism, whether that be on the low or high end. The results of this section further suggest that fear is intertwined with white Christian nationalism. White Christian nationalism and perceived existential threat were found to be correlated in this analysis.

Perceived Existential Threat: Under perceived existential threat, this thesis measured five subcategories: threat to American culture and belonging, partisan threat, xenophobia, racial threat, and religious threat. The sampled evangelicals all had medium to high levels of perceived existential threat; none considered themselves to be safe in this world, especially as it relates to challenges to the status quo. Fear of domestic forces were revealed to be more salient than fear of foreign influence. The sampled evangelicals expressed immense fear of being replaced by immigrants, non-white racial groups, non-Christian groups, non-religious individuals, and members of the opposite political party. Religious threat appeared to be the most powerful perceived threat to the sampled evangelicals, especially as it relates to loss of religious influence in the United States.

Political Participation: All six hypotheses were rejected due to lack of supportive evidence. The sampled evangelicals seem to be largely unengaged in politics. The survey did reveal an interesting implication about social forms of political participation. Social forms of political participation seem to be popular among evangelicals. The results suggest that evangelicals are driven by social interaction and proselytization, even in their politics.

IMPLICATIONS

The results of this analysis suggest that evangelicals want to tell themselves stories of fear and persecution. In some ways, they want to be the persecuted minority that overcome all barriers to conquer the world. Stories about American exceptionalism, threat, and power are potent within evangelical populations and have become intertwined with religious narratives about belonging, place, and personhood. Further research should expand upon these narratives of fear to understand political behavior among evangelicals.

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