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Making America Exceptional Again: Donald Trump’s Traditionalist Jeremiad, Civil Religion, and the Politics of Resentment

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Abstract

Donald Trump’s campaign slogan to “Make America Great Again” captivated the imagination of millions of Americans by contextualizing disparate sources of social resentment as emblematic of a broader story of American decline. Employing a “traditionalist civil religious jeremiad,” Trump called for a reassertion of American exceptionalism, and extolled a romanticized golden age predating transformative social changes (e.g., sexuality, gender roles, racial equality). As such, his rhetoric legitimized the defense of white male privilege as a vital component of this restoration. While this use of civil religious themes emboldened those who harbor prejudicial views, it alienated others who interpret such rhetoric as an assault on the soul of the nation. Relying on a unique module within the 2018 Cooperative Congressional Election Study, we demonstrate that adherence to the tenets of American civil religion significantly exacerbated the effects of symbolic racism and modern sexism on support for Trump.

Introduction

In the years since Donald Trump’s unexpected victories in the 2016 Republican presidential primaries and general election, social scientists have attempted to better understand who his supporters are and what motivates their allegiance. Some have highlighted his populist appeal to a working class that felt betrayed by elites (Rahn and Oliver 2016) and a globalizing economy (Sides and Tesler 2016; Wood 2017), while others contend that his pugnacious style and rhetoric was a natural fit for those exhibiting authoritarian characteristics (MacWilliams 2016; Choma and Hanoch 2017; Womick et al. 2019). However, most scholars have focused on Trump’s use of prejudicial language (Cohen 2017; Leonhardt and Philbrick 2018) to capture the support of those harboring racist (Major, Blodorn, and Major Blascovich 2018; Luttig, Federico, and Lavine 2017; Hooghe and Dassonneville 2018) and misogynistic attitudes (Cassese and Barnes 2018; Schaffner, Macwilllams, and Nteta 2018; Valentino, Wayne, and Ocen 2018). These relationships are best contextualized as part of a broader backlash against social, demographic, economic, and political changes that have challenged white, male privilege

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in American society. Trump, however, did not merely give voice to these resentments; he legitimized them as a vital component in the battle for the soul of the nation.

In this paper, we argue that Donald Trump utilized the rhetoric of American civil religion (ACR) to legitimize such resentments and embolden those harboring them. ACR, famously described by Robert Bellah as a “public religious dimension expressed in a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals with respect to sacred things,” has over the course of the nation’s history “provide[d] a religious dimension for the whole fabric of American life, including the political sphere” (Bellah 1967, 3–4). Drawing upon civil religious themes, Trump’s rhetoric contextualized disparate sources of social resentment as emblematic of a broader story of American decline whose restoration required a recommitment to a pre-1960s vision of American greatness. This vision reflects a romanticized Golden Age predating transformative social changes with respect to sexuality, gender roles, and civil rights. As such, Trump’s call to “Make American Great Again” legitimized the defense of white male privilege as the vital center of efforts to restore national glory.

While this use of civil religious themes emboldened those who harbored prejudicial views, it alienated others who interpreted such rhetoric as antithetical to the national identity. We concur with the emerging scholarly consensus that racism and sexism are powerful predictors of support for Trump, yet we argue that, because he has relied on civil religious themes to legitimize such sentiments, the presence of the former tends to exacerbate the effects of the latter. Relying on a unique module within the 2018 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), we demonstrate that civil religious Americans who harbor racial resentments and misogynistic sentiments are significantly more supportive of Donald Trump than those who are not civil religious, because he has provided a particular sort of patriotic justification for such animosities. Conversely, civil religious Americans who abhor such prejudicial beliefs are significantly less supportive of Donald Trump than those who are not civil religious, because they view his rhetoric as an assault on the soul of this nation.

Trumpian Politics: Racism, Sexism, and Resentment of Social Change

Drawing upon the insights of Social Identity Theory,¹ scholars contend that Barack Obama’s 2008 election and Hillary Clinton’s nomination in 2016 signified a status threat to white males, who would now be more receptive to rhetorical appeals and policies that could restore their preeminence in the social hierarchy. With respect to race, scholars have noted that since Obama’s election in 2008, expressions of white identity have increased (Jardina 2014), as has the influence of racial animus on partisan preferences (Tesler 2012). Furthermore, many white Americans now view themselves as a “disadvantaged group” (Valentino, Neuner, and Vandebroek 2018) and believe that status gains for racial/ethnic minority groups inevitably reduce their own social status (Wilkins and Kaiser 2014). Most importantly for our purposes, such perceptions of status threat have also been linked to support for Trump (Major, Blodorn, and Major Blascovich 2018).

When individuals feel that their relative status is under threat, they are more likely to discriminate against (Branscombe and Wann 1994), and exhibit greater tolerance for expressions of hostility toward, out-groups (Valentino, Neuner, and Vandebroek

2018). Over the last several decades, “Symbolic Racism” (and other related constructs²) has been employed to explain continuing opposition to policies that address racial inequities absent explicit beliefs in biological inferiority/superiority (i.e., “Old-Fashioned Racism”³). Accordingly, symbolic racism reflects beliefs that “blacks violate such traditional American values as individualism and self-reliance, the work ethic, obedience, and discipline” (Kinder and Sears 1981, 416). A number of studies have demonstrated the influence of symbolic racism on political attitudes (Kinder and Sanders 1996; Sears et al. 1999; Kinder and Mendelberg 2000; Rabinowitz et al. 2009) and support for Republican presidential candidates (Tesler and Sears 2010; Kinder and Dale-Riddle 2012). Symbolic racism has also been shown to have a negative effect on support for Barack Obama (Block and Onwunli 2010; Lewis-Beck, Tien, and Nadeau 2010; Piston 2010) and a positive effect on support for Donald Trump (Luttig, Federico, and Lavine 2017; Hooghe and Dassonneville 2018; Major, Blodorn, and Major Blascovich 2018; Schaffner, Macwilliams, and Nteta 2018; Setzler and Yanus 2018).

A wealth of literature similarly documents the overt and subtle forms of sexism that permeate American society and influence public evaluations of female political figures (Huddy and Terklidsen 1993; Streb et al. 2008). Despite the growing normative pressure against “Gender Traditionalism” and expressions of blatantly prejudicial sentiments against women in recent decades, “Modern Sexism” asserts that negative attitudes toward women persist through more subtle means (e.g., denial of gender discrimination, antagonism toward demands for equality, and resentment of undeserved “special favors” for women) (Swim et al. 1995).

While the prospect of electing the first female president would likely render sexism a more important factor for voters regardless of the candidates, it may have been particularly pronounced in the 2016 election context⁴ given that Hillary Clinton has been a “lightning rod for antifeminist backlash” (McThomas and Tesler 2016) dating back to her tenure as First Lady (Jamieson 1995; Troy 2006). But while sexism has been shown to be a powerful predictor of attitudes toward Clinton throughout much of her political career⁵, it also has a significant impact on evaluations of Donald Trump (Bock, Byrd-Craven, and Burkley 2017; Ratliff et al. 2019) whose complicated personal history with women⁶ and numerous sexist statements during the campaign (Cohen 2017) appeal to those harboring such beliefs.

Although these studies have made a valuable contribution to our understanding of Trump’s political success, it is equally important to examine the vehicles by which these sentiments are communicated and validated in a twenty-first century political environment where even implicit or coded expressions of racism and sexism remain taboo. We contend that Trump’s reliance on ACR and the rhetorical form of the jeremiad not only signaled his common cause with those who harbor racist and sexist beliefs, but more importantly, legitimized them as a socially acceptable political expression vital to the restoration of American exceptionalism.

American Civil Religion

Although the notion of civil religion dates back to Machiavelli and Rousseau (Cristi and Dawson 2007; Beiner 2010; Pierard 2010), our focus in this paper is on the concept’s American variant. In his foundational 1967 article, Robert Bellah described the

ACR as having “played a crucial role in the development of American institutions” (Bellah 1967, 3). In Bellah’s account, ACR was “selectively derived from Christianity [but] clearly not itself Christianity”⁷ (Bellah 1967, 7) and manifested itself in “sacred” texts (Declaration of Independence, Constitution), myths (America as a “Pure Eden,” the Revolution as Exodus), symbols (the flag, Washington as Moses, Lincoln as Christ), and rituals (presidential inaugurations, pledge of allegiance, Independence Day, Thanksgiving) (Bellah 1967, 1992; Angrosino 2002). It is through exposure to such texts, myths, symbols, and rituals that individuals are socialized to adopt such beliefs over the course of their lives.⁸ For Bellah, this civil religion linked American politics with a larger, transcendent reality; he traced its origins and development through American history and expressed concern about its continued capacity to bind an increasingly divided nation. In the intervening half-century since Bellah’s groundbreaking article, scholars have both subjected his thesis to critical engagement and built upon its foundations.⁹ Most recently, Gorski (2017) positioned ACR as a “vital center” between the extremes of religious nationalism and radical secularism, a language of American identity with the potential to build on the nation’s foundational aspirations while acknowledging the deep injustices that persist.

ACR has often been linked, conceptually and politically, with American exceptionalism, the idea that the nation serves as the primary agent of God’s meaningful activity in history (Bellah 1992; Skousen 2009). Such accounts tend to highlight the importance of John Winthrop’s “Model of Christian Charity,” with its invocation of a “city on a hill” and the Puritan covenant with God (Winthrop 1630; see also Holland 2008; Rodgers 2018; van Engen 2020). The covenant was a promise to assume an “individual and collective obligation to carry out God’s will on earth... [as] a light to all the nations” (Bellah 1967, 4, 18).

Yet an undercurrent of anxiety has always been present alongside the confident proclamations of American chosenness, leading to deep expressions of concern voiced by American elites. In *The Broken Covenant*, Bellah argued that deviations from these covenantal notions threatened an existential crisis of national identity. He focused on “times of trial”, “periods of testing so severe that not only the form but even the existence of our nation have been called in question” (1992, 1). In situations where American practices flaunt the nation’s professed principles, movements for reform often ground themselves squarely in those principles in their efforts to remake those practices (e.g., the Seneca Falls Declaration, Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech). Such discourses often take the form of a jeremiad, a rhetorical form that has long offered Americans a means to deal with crisis and change through a rededication to the shared national mission (Bercovitch 1978). Murphy (2009) describes the American jeremiad as composed of several components: (1) description of the current crisis, (2) a contrast between the current state of decline and a more virtuous past, (3) a call for renewal and reform, and (4) placement of the American experience in the context of larger claims about the nation’s unique importance in human history. Critics employing the jeremiad attribute economic, political, and military crises to contradictions between sacred ideals and imperfect practices, and present the road to recovery as a process of revival and recommitment to those ideals. The “jeremiad’s political and rhetoric power, its ability to move

Americans to social and political action, lies in its capacity to evoke a dynamic tension between despair and hope,” and thus it “represents the most loyal patriotism even while engaging in the most strident dissent” (Murphy 2009, 11, 6).

Many scholars have observed how Donald Trump’s political rhetoric, with its refusal to offer even lip service to values like equality and liberty, represents a repudiation of the long tradition of ACR (Gorski 2017, Carlson 2018). However, such interpretations assume that there is a single way to employ civil religion, and downplay a rich history of contestation over such values (Hart 1977; Williams and Alexander 1994; Wuthnow 1988; Demerath and Williams 1985; Cristi 1997; Hicckel 2019). We contend that Donald Trump’s campaign rhetoric to “Make America Great Again” contains key elements of a traditionalist civil religious jeremiad, which “understands the past’s value to lie in its concrete social practices, institutions, and traditions, and lament[s] the community’s falling away from those practices” (Murphy 2009, 109), and aims to restore an American golden age by recreating past conditions.

Donald Trump’s Traditionalist Civil Religious Jeremiad

While all politicians propose solutions to societal problems, Donald Trump’s success (in part) reflects his ability to connect concerns about recent social changes with a compelling narrative about an existential crisis facing the nation. Lament over decline from a virtuous past represents one of the core elements of the American jeremiad, and thus the very structure of the Trump campaign slogan “Make America Great Again” points to its roots in that genre. (That President Trump has continued to stage MAGA rallies throughout his presidency suggests that it is not only a campaign slogan but also an enduring theme of the Trump presidency.)

In employing the jeremiad, Trump echoed previous presidents like Franklin Roosevelt, who framed major economic policy innovations during the Great Depression as a recommitment to the nation’s founding ideals.¹⁰ But while Roosevelt, and others like him, recognized that the nation’s unfulfilled national promise must be pursued in drastically changed manner from those of previous eras (what Murphy describes as a “progressive jeremiad” [2009, 137–138]), Trump’s traditionalist jeremiad looks to the past as a model to be recreated as literally as possible. As Pettigrew (2017, 112) puts it, “Make America Great Again” represents a brash reactionary call to return to an earlier time when America’s position in the world was unchallenged, when American presidents and Supreme Court judges were all White males, when immigration was restricted and widespread racial segregation persisted, and when the government’s affirmative action programs largely helped White males.

In other words, while progressive jeremiads legitimize novel reforms as means of actualizing the spirit of the nation’s traditions in the contemporary context, traditionalist jeremiads legitimize a return to past practices as a means to reclaim a “golden age.” For Trump and his supporters, the desire to reclaim this golden age and “Make America Great Again” legitimized everything from his own personal predilections (e.g., saying “Merry Christmas” instead of “Happy Holidays,” doctors making house calls, violently shutting down protesters) to policy aspirations (e.g., rebuilding the American manufacturing sector, bringing back coal, capital punishment).

At the heart of Trump's traditionalist civil religious jeremiad lays an assertion that the pursuit of "political correctness" by WA elites has generated policies that not only threaten the life, liberty, and material well-being of the populace, but have also produced an existential crisis for the nation. Because attacks upon political correctness have long been a means by which those who harbor prejudicial attitudes can voice their preferences without garnering the social condemnation reserved for blatant expressions of prejudice, Trump's rhetoric may be seen as a coded appeal. In this way, we can see similarities to Nixon's "Southern Strategy," Reagan's emphasis on states' rights, and the use of the Willie Horton advertisement by George H.W. Bush. (Luttig, Federico, and Lavine 2017; Pettigrew 2017)

Trump's comments on NFL national anthem protests help to illustrate this argument. Shortly after bragging about how Colin Kaepernick's difficulty finding a job was partially attributable to NFL owners' concern about the backlash they might receive from Trump and his supporters, he remarked that:

We are one people and we share one faith. Whether we are black or brown or white, we all bleed the same red blood. We all salute the same great American flag. And we are all made by the same almighty God. As long as we remember these truths, we will not fail.... Together, we will make American strong again. We will make America wealthy again. We will make America proud again. We will make America safe again. And we will make America great again!¹¹

While Trump is ostensibly arguing that race should not divide Americans, his assertion that "we all salute the same great American flag" implicitly characterizes those who protest the national anthem (and hence protest racial injustice in the criminal justice system) as "un-American." Furthermore, because the restoration of American exceptionalism is dependent upon "remembering these truths," opposing protesters becomes a patriotic act. In this way, Trump provides a means for the justification and expression of racial resentments while avoiding social stigma.

Trump's rhetorical attacks against political correctness throughout his campaign and presidency often served to deflect criticism about his own prejudicial language while simultaneously legitimizing its use. Perhaps the most prominent example occurred during the first Republican primary debate in an exchange with Fox News's Megyn Kelly, who questioned Trump on his use of terms like "fat pigs, dogs, slobs, and disgusting animals" to describe women:

I think the big problem this country has is being politically correct.... I don't frankly have time for total political correctness. And to be honest with you, this country doesn't have time either.¹²

Similar processes were at work in his defense of restrictive immigration policy proposals:

America is more than just a place on a map. America is a nation, America is a family. ...we're going to take care of this country for our children and our grandchildren and our great grandchildren. And we're not going to let people come

into our country who are going to destroy our country. And that may or may not be politically correct. But honestly, I don't care.¹³

Given that the majority of immigrants (undocumented or otherwise) are of Latin American descent, it is difficult to ignore the implication that such individuals are inherently a threat to the American way of life. Similarly, in defending his proposed ban on travelers from majority-Muslim countries, Trump argued:

You're gonna have more World Trade Centers.... We can be politically correct and we can be stupid, but its going to get worse... Until we are able to...understand this problem and the dangerous threat it poses. Our country cannot be the victim of horrendous attacks by people that believe only in jihad...¹⁴

Trump would later seek to situate his characterization of people who don't respect American traditions and values as referring only to "Radical Islamic Terrorists," yet his proposal banned everyone from those Muslim-majority countries who sought to enter the United States.

In an effort to deflect criticism that his policies and rhetoric were prejudicial, Trump's offered a series of arguments rooted in patriotism and the restoration of American exceptionalism:

[People] who want their laws enforced and respected...and who want their borders secured, are not racists. If you want to have strong borders so that people come into our country, but they come in legally through a legal process, that doesn't make you a racist...It makes you an American. They're all patriotic Americans.

People who speak out against radical Islam and who warn about refugees ... are not Islamophobes.... They are decent American citizens who want to uphold our ... tolerant society and who want to keep the terrorists ... out of our country. If the choice is between saving lives or appeasing politically correct censors in Washington, D.C., that is the easiest choice you and I will ever have to make. We will always choose saving American lives.¹⁵

Collectively, these excerpts illustrate how rhetorical attacks against political correctness functioned as a coded appeal to those who harbor racist and misogynistic attitudes. More importantly, his characterization of political correctness as an impediment—and his prejudicial policies as a prerequisite—to the realization of American greatness served to legitimize the expression of these resentments in a way less likely to garner social condemnation.

The Polarizing Effect of Civil Religion

Although much of the literature on ACR presents it as a consensual phenomenon with the potential to unify the country in times of trial (Bellah 1967; Adams 1987; Pierard and Linder 1988; Roof 2009), the meaning of these shared symbols has always

been contested (Hart 1977; Demerath and Williams 1985; Wuthnow 1988; Williams and Alexander 1994; Cristi 1997; Hickel 2019). While the language of sacred American nationality and imperiled national promise offer powerful tools of legitimation that can influence electoral and policy preferences (Wimberley 1980; Wimberley and Christenson 1982; Chapp 2012), such beliefs are not inherently associated with particular ideological/partisan preferences. In this regard, our approach diverges from the important work of Whitehead and Perry (2015) and Whitehead, Perry, and Baker (2018), who focus more specifically on “Christian nationalism,” which they define as “a set of beliefs and ideals that seek the national preservation of a supposedly unique Christian identity” (2018, 153). By contrast, our understanding of civil religion, drawing on scholars from Bellah to Gorski, posits it as distinct from any particular religious tradition, and as constituting less a monolithic ideology (à la Christian nationalism) and rather a set of symbolic or rhetorical tools.¹⁶

With this conceptualization in mind, civil religious discourse is akin to a hammer which can be utilized to build or destroy. While a hammer does not inherently favor one set of tasks over the other, those who wield it may very well have such preferences. But unlike a hammer, civil religion reflects core beliefs about the national identity, meaning, and purpose in the world. As such, the subjective perception that civil religion is utilized correctly or incorrectly can have a powerful effect upon bystanders in a way that a hammer does not.

We argue that the coupling of civil religious themes with ideological/partisan goals holds the potential to exacerbate pre-existing divisions. Doing so not only validates the beliefs of those who share one’s predispositions, but also denigrates one’s opponents as an “un-American” existential threat to the nation’s sacred foundations. As such, the effect of civil religious beliefs on attitudes toward Trump depends upon whether one agrees with the partisan/ideological goals he has sought to legitimize. Because the positive effect of civil religious beliefs among those predisposed to agree with Trump is likely to be offset by the negative effect of these beliefs among those predisposed to challenge him, we do not anticipate that civil religious beliefs will have a significant independent impact upon attitudes toward the President.

As we have previously mentioned, the extant literature demonstrates a strong relationship between racist and misogynistic beliefs and support for Trump. Furthermore, our analysis of his traditionalist civil religious jeremiad demonstrates that his rhetoric serves to legitimize such prejudicial beliefs as vital to the restoration of American exceptionalism. As such, we contend that the confluence of civil religious beliefs and racist/misogynistic attitudes will produce more support for Trump than either in isolation precisely because the former validates the latter. Furthermore, civil religious Americans who abhor such prejudicial attitudes should express greater opposition to Trump than non-civil religious Americans because they regard his use of these themes as a betrayal of the nation’s sacred identity. In other words, the presence of civil religious beliefs will exacerbate the effects of prejudicial attitudes on support/opposition to Donald Trump.

Hypothesis—There will be a significant interaction effect between civil religious beliefs and racism/sexism on attitudes toward Donald Trump.

Data and Methods

This project relies on data obtained from the 2018 CCES, a nationally stratified sample survey administered online by YouGov in two waves. The pre-election wave was conducted from late September to late October and the post-election wave was administered in November 2018. Half of the questionnaire consists of common content administered to over 50,000 participants, while the remaining questions are submitted by teams of researchers to be administered to subsets of 1,000 respondents. All variables employed in the subsequent analysis are derived from common content or our unique module that was administered in the post-election wave.

Within our unique module, a subset of participants ($n = 424$) were asked to register their level of agreement¹⁷ with a series of civil religious statements inspired by previous studies (Wimberley et al. 1976; Christenson and Wimberley 1978; Chapp 2012; Hickel 2019)

CRQ1—“The Founding Fathers instilled God-given values that have made America a great nation.”

CRQ2—“America is God’s chosen nation.”

CRQ3—“America has a God-given responsibility to be an example of freedom and equality for all nations.”

CRQ4—“Our nation will suffer if we abandon our founding principles.”

Figure 1 depicts the distribution of responses to these questions. With the exception of CRQ2, the plurality of respondents expressed strong agreement with the civil religious statements. Perhaps owing to the omission of the word “God” from CRQ4¹⁸, the percentage of strong agreement and mean response was higher compared to the other questions. Interestingly, a plurality of respondents strongly disagreed with CRQ2. Despite these differences, factor¹⁹ and reliability²⁰ analyses demonstrate that it is appropriate to combine these questions into a Civil Religious Belief Scale²¹ that can serve as our primary independent variable of interest.²²

We evaluate our hypothesized relationships with two dependent variables operationalized to capture attitudes toward Trump. The first is a traditional measure of job approval asked during the post-election wave of the survey and scaled such that positive values indicate higher levels of support.²³ The second is a composite measure of emotional affect in response to Donald Trump’s presidential campaign slogan “Make American Great Again.” During the post-election wave of the survey, participants were asked to indicate whether it made them feel “Happy,” “Sad,” “Anxious,” “Excited,” “Angry,” “Proud,” or “I’m Not Sure.”²⁴ In constructing this measure, respondents began at 0 and then received a +1 for each positive emotion selected (“Happy,” “Excited,” “Proud”), and a -1 for each negative emotion selected (“Sad,” “Anxious,” “Angry”).²⁵ Although this survey question did not allow us to measure the strength of each particular emotion, this dependent variable does capture the range of emotions reported. As such, it may be interpreted as an indication of the overall strength and direction of an individual’s emotional response to this critical aspect of Trump’s civil religious jeremiad.

The existing literature is quite clear that symbolic racism and modern sexism are strong predictors of support for Donald Trump. As such, our analysis incorporates a scale of “Racial Resentment”²⁶ and “Resentment of Feminism,”²⁷ derived from

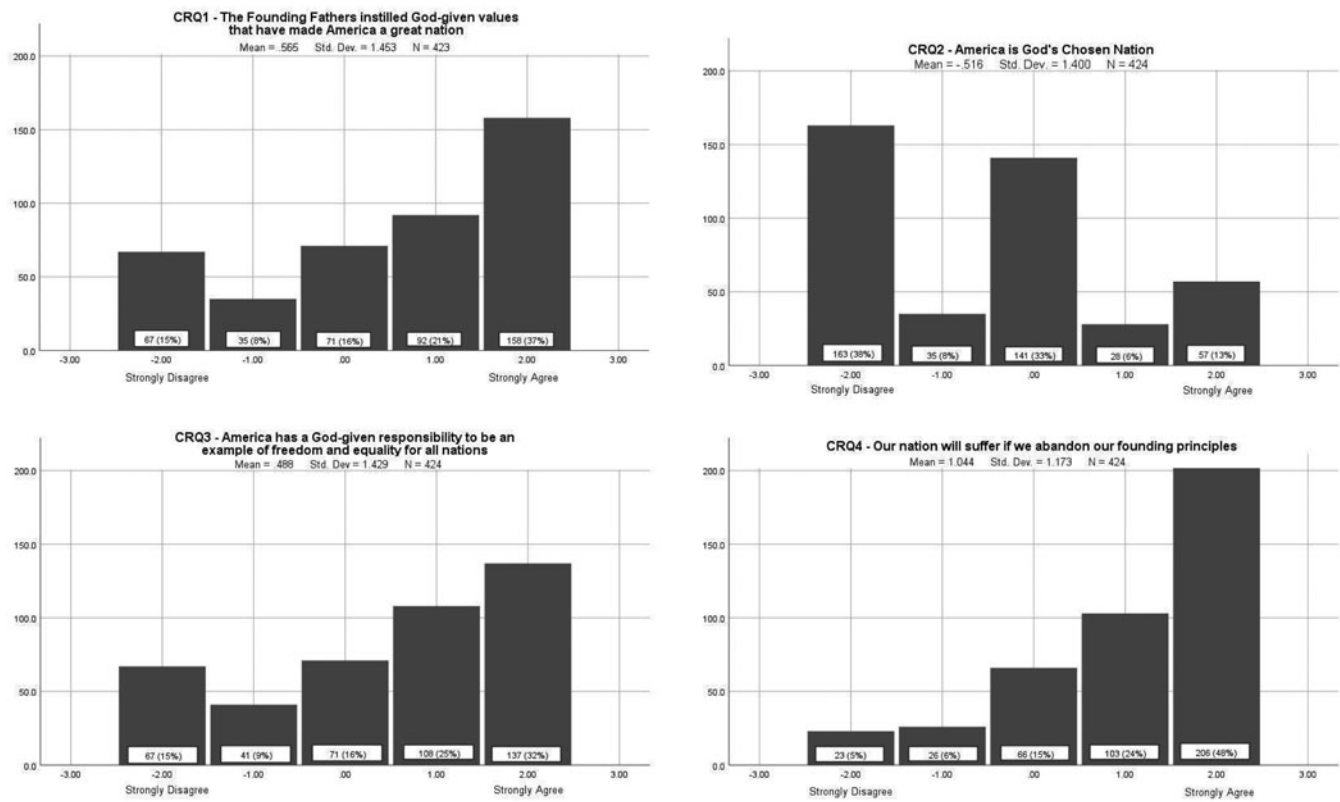


Figure 1. Response distribution for civil religious belief questions.

questions provided as common content in the post-election wave of the survey. In addition to our key variables, we account for standard demographic controls and a number of theoretically important confounders such as party identification, political ideology, political knowledge, and authoritarianism. Due to space limitations, we provide a detailed discussion of these variables (along with unweighted summary statistics of all variables) in the Appendix.

Results

Our research relies on Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression²⁸ to evaluate our hypothesized interaction between civil religious beliefs and racial resentment and resentment of feminism on support for Donald Trump and emotional reactions to his “Make America Great Again” campaign slogan. For each dependent variable, we separately examine the interaction between civil religious beliefs and racial resentment (Tables 1a and 2a), and the interaction between civil religious beliefs and resentment of feminism (Tables 1a and 2a).²⁹ The first column in each table presents the independent effects of civil religious beliefs, racial resentment, and resentment of feminism (model 1). The second and third columns incorporate the interaction term between civil religious beliefs and the resentment measure, and a fully specified model with all of the control variables (models 2 and 3, respectively).³⁰ We begin by discussing our analysis of support for Trump before moving on to emotional reactions to his campaign slogan.

Consistent with the existing scholarship, Tables 1a and 1b illustrates that racial resentment and resentment of feminism have significant positive effects upon Trump’s approval in each model specification. While civil religious beliefs do have a significant positive effect in models 1 and 2, it fails to attain statistical significance once our control variables are introduced in model 3 (as expected). Most importantly, the hypothesized interaction between civil religious beliefs and racial resentment/resentment of feminism is significant in each model. Figures 1a and 1b depict the estimated marginal means (with 95% confidence intervals) of each interaction from model 3 while holding all covariates at their means. They illustrate that as the level of civil religious belief increases, support for Trump also increases among those with higher levels of resentment and decreases among those on the opposite end of the resentment scales. As such, the presence of civil religious beliefs exacerbates the effect of preexisting sentiments with respect to race and gender.³¹

Before moving forward, it is worth noting that the fully specified models do a very good job explaining the variance in approval of Trump (Adj. $R^2 \approx 0.682$). While the majority of demographic indicators did not have a significant effect in these models, Party Identification and Ideological Orientation were both significant predictors.³² Furthermore, Authoritarianism also failed to register a significant effect in these models.³³

Tables 2a and 2b presents the results of a similar analysis focused on emotional reactions toward Trump’s “Make America Great Again” slogan. Once again racial resentment and resentment of feminism have significant positive effects in each of the models. As before, while civil religious beliefs did have a significant independent effect in models 1 and 2, it failed to attain significance in the fully specified model

Table 1a. Regression analyzing Trump approval with CR/race resent. interaction

Variable	Model 1 B (s.e.)	Model 2 B (s.e.)	Model 3 B (s.e.)
(Constant)	-0.395 (0.060)***	-0.518 (0.071)***	-0.767 (0.289)**
Female	-	-	0.023 (0.107)
Age	-	-	0.054 (0.031)
Education	-	-	0.000 (0.041)
Pol. know.	-	-	0.026 (0.034)
White	-	-	0.162 (0.144)
Income	-	-	-0.077 (0.042)
Income missing	-	-	-0.241 (0.214)
Christian	-	-	-0.072 (0.136)
Relig. import.	-	-	0.055 (0.063)
Party ID	-	-	0.210 (0.037)***
Ideology	-	-	0.190 (0.044)***
Authoritarianism	-	-	0.113 (0.079)
Resent feminist	0.475 (0.062)***	0.480 (0.062)***	0.257 (0.061)***
Racial resent.	0.588 (0.061)***	0.542 (0.062)***	0.302 (0.069)***
Civil religion	0.209 (0.063)**	0.228 (0.063)***	-0.022 (0.075)
CR × race resent.	-	0.131 (0.041)**	0.080 (0.040)*
Adj. R^2	0.577	0.586	0.682
<i>N</i>	417	417	382

Notes: Significance levels are presented as: * <0.05 , ** <0.010 , *** <0.001 . “Christian” reflects those who identify as Catholic, Protestant, and/or Born-Again Christian.

(model 3). As hypothesized, the interaction between civil religious beliefs and racial resentment/resentment of feminism is significant in each model. Figures 2a and 2b depict the estimated marginal means (with 95% confidence intervals) of each interaction in model 3 while holding all covariates at their means. They illustrate that as the level of civil religious belief increases, emotional reactions toward Trump’s campaign slogan become increasingly positive among those with higher levels of resentment and decrease among those on the opposite end of the resentment scales. As before, the presence of civil religious beliefs exacerbates the effects of racism and sexism.

Further, these fully specified models also do an excellent job of explaining the variance in emotional reactions toward “Make America Great Again” (Adj. $R^2 \approx 0.670$). Once again, Party identification and Ideological orientation were significant predictors³⁴ while the remaining demographic indicators failed to attain statistical significance. Interestingly, in these models, Authoritarianism did have a significant positive effect on emotional reactions³⁵. Although it goes beyond our scope to provide a definitive explanation for this discrepancy, this finding may suggest that

Table 1b. Regression analyzing Trump approval with CR/FEM. reset interaction

Variable	Model 1 B (s.e.)	Model 2 B (s.e.)	Model 3 B (s.e.)
(Constant)	−0.395 (0.060)***	−0.480 (0.065)***	−0.735 (0.288)*
Female	–	–	0.011 (0.107)
Age	–	–	0.058 (0.031)
Education	–	–	−0.004 (0.041)
Pol. know.	–	–	0.029 (0.034)
White	–	–	0.121 (0.146)
Income	–	–	−0.079 (0.042)
Income missing	–	–	−0.270 (0.214)
Christian	–	–	−0.073 (0.136)
Relig. import.	–	–	0.060 (0.062)
Party ID	–	–	0.210 (0.037)***
Ideology	–	–	0.191 (0.043)***
Authoritarianism	–	–	0.113 (0.079)
Resent feminist	0.475 (0.062)***	0.420 (0.064)***	0.211 (0.064)**
Racial resent.	0.588 (0.061)***	0.596 (0.060)***	0.337 (0.068)***
Civil religion	0.209 (0.063)**	0.231 (0.063)***	−0.016 (0.075)
CR × resent. fem.	–	0.135 (0.043)**	0.100 (0.043)*
Adj. R ²	0.577	0.585	0.683
N	417	417	382

Notes: Significance levels are presented as: *<0.05, **<0.010, ***<0.001. “Christian” reflects those who identify as Catholic, Protestant, and/or Born-Again Christian.

respondents exhibiting these characteristics are more supportive of the vision articulated during the campaign and somewhat disillusioned by the actual job Trump has done while in office.

Discussion and Conclusion

Many observers viewed Trump’s offensive prejudicial rhetoric as an impediment that could not be overcome. Although he did not win the popular vote, and failed to secure majority support for his presidency, his political “success” continues to defy expectations. While much of this can be explained by pointing to the continuing influence of party identification/ideological orientation and the prevalence of racism/sexism in American society, we believe it is equally important to understand how the latter is communicated and legitimized. Consistent with the extant literature, our results confirm that symbolic racism and modern sexism are powerful predictors of attitudes toward Trump. However, our results also confirm our expectations that civil religious beliefs exacerbate the influence of these sentiments. Civil religious

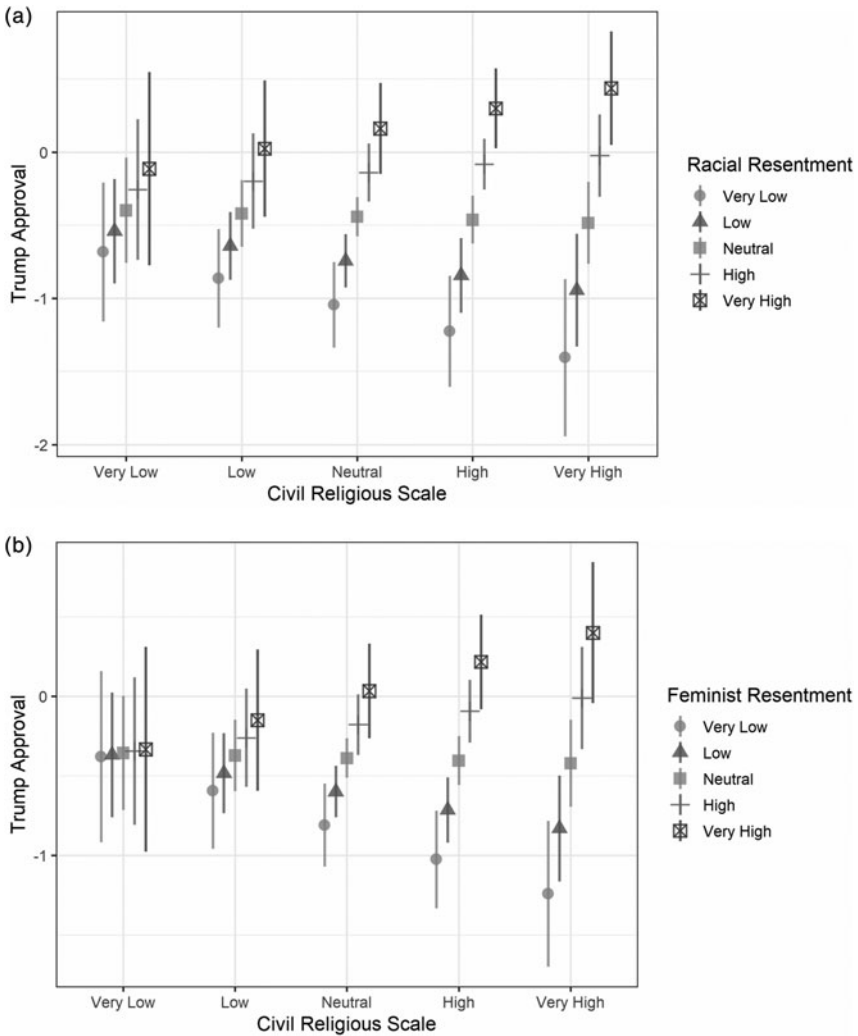


Figure 1a and b. (a) Estimated marginal means: Trump approval (racial resentment interaction). (b) Estimated marginal means: Trump approval (resentment of feminism interaction).

individuals who harbor these prejudicial attitudes are more supportive of Donald Trump than similar individuals who are not civil religious (and vice versa). MAGA, then, represents a traditionalist civil religious jeremiad that legitimizes the expression of racist and sexist sentiments as vital to the reassertion of American exceptionalism.

However, it is important to clarify that we are not making a causal claim that Trump’s rhetoric necessarily influenced or caused these individuals to develop racist and misogynist views. Our data do not allow for such a claim, and we suspect that it would not be accurate given the extant literature on the socialization of racism and sexism. Our analysis highlights the relationship between Trump’s use of civil religious rhetoric and the racial and gendered resentments held by many of his supporters.

Table 2a. Regression analyzing Trump affect with CR/race resent. interaction

Variable	Model 1 B (s.e.)	Model 2 B (s.e.)	Model 3 B (s.e.)
(Constant)	-0.171 (0.063)**	-0.328 (0.074)***	-0.003 (0.314)
Female	-	-	0.029 (0.116)
Age	-	-	0.031 (0.033)
Education	-	-	-0.002 (0.044)
Pol. know.	-	-	-0.056 (0.037)
White	-	-	0.014 (0.157)
Income	-	-	-0.036 (0.045)
Income missing	-	-	-0.249 (0.232)
Christian	-	-	0.011 (0.148)
Relig. import.	-	-	-0.017 (0.068)
Party ID	-	-	0.185 (0.040)***
Ideology	-	-	0.219 (0.047)***
Authoritarianism	-	-	0.224 (0.086)*
Resent feminist	0.432 (0.066)***	0.438 (0.065)***	0.225 (0.067)**
Racial resent.	0.650 (0.065)***	0.591 (0.065)***	0.280 (0.075)***
Civil religion	0.285 (0.067)***	0.310 (0.066)***	0.084 (0.081)
CR × race resent.	-	0.168 (0.044)***	0.154 (0.043)***
Adj. R ²	0.582	0.596	0.677
N	417	417	382

Notes: Significance levels are presented as: *<0.05, **<0.010, ***<0.001. “Christian” reflects those who identify as Catholic, Protestant, and/or Born-Again Christian.

Rather than generating these resentments, we argue that civil religious framing provided a legitimizing discourse that allowed potential Trump supporters to make sense of their pre-existing resentments. The idea of making America great “again” framed American greatness as a once and future phenomenon, and enabled Trump to present white, male resentment as the justified response to recent American social and political developments.

Similarly, it should be acknowledged that the nature of our data precludes us from ruling out the possibility of an endogenous relationship whereby civil religious beliefs emerge in response to pre-existing resentments and attitudes toward Donald Trump. Because civil religious beliefs have been historically conceptualized as being socialized through a variety of texts, myths, symbols, and rituals throughout an individual’s lifetime (Bellah 1967, 1992), we are confident in our hypothesized relationships. However, we concede that the salience and intensity of such beliefs could be influenced by changes in the political context. Future scholars are therefore encouraged to gather data (e.g., survey experimentation and/or panel data) that would enable the evaluation of this potential.

Table 2b. Regression analyzing Trump affect with CR/race resent. interaction

Variable	Model 1 B (s.e.)	Model 2 B (s.e.)	Model 3 B (s.e.)
(Constant)	-0.171 (0.063)**	-0.238 (0.069)**	0.070 (0.316)
Female	-	-	0.011 (0.117)
Age	-	-	0.032 (0.034)
Education	-	-	-0.007 (0.045)
Pol. know.	-	-	-0.045 (0.037)
White	-	-	-0.018 (0.160)
Income	-	-	-0.043 (0.046)
Income missing	-	-	-0.288 (0.235)
Christian	-	-	0.002 (0.149)
Relig. import.	-	-	-0.001 (0.069)
Party ID	-	-	0.196 (0.040)***
Ideology	-	-	0.212 (0.048)***
Authoritarianism	-	-	0.219 (0.087)*
Resent feminist	0.432 (0.066)***	0.389 (0.069)***	0.169 (0.070)*
Racial resent.	0.650 (0.065)***	0.657 (0.064)***	0.340 (0.075)***
Civil religion	0.285 (0.067)***	0.303 (0.067)***	0.082 (0.082)
CR × resent fem.	-	0.106 (0.046)*	0.110 (0.047)*
Adj. R ²	0.582	0.587	0.670
N	417	417	382

Notes: Significance levels are presented as: *<0.05, **<0.010, ***<0.001. “Christian” reflects those who identify as Catholic, Protestant, and/or Born-Again Christian.

Despite these limitations, this research also helps us to better understand Trump’s complicated relationship with religious voters. Trump’s emphasis on nominating judges who will defend traditional values, as well as his laments about the “War on Christmas” and the notion that Christianity is “under attack,” signaled his common cause with this important constituency of the Republican Party. But while Trump advocated policy positions popular among religious conservatives and selected Mike Pence as his running mate, his personal history and lack of familiarity with the Bible³⁶ limited his ability to talk about religion as authentically as other Republican (or Democratic) candidates, and may account for why this analysis failed to detect a significant relationship between one’s religiosity or Christian affiliation and support for President Trump. On the other hand, given the positive relationship that religiosity and religious affiliation have with civil religious beliefs (Chapp 2012; Hickel 2019; and demonstrated in Appendix Table 2), it is possible that his traditionalist civil religious jeremiad similarly polarized the religious vote depending upon their prejudicial attitudes. In this context, it is worth noting the stark divide between liberal and conservative understandings of Christian beliefs and practices, which

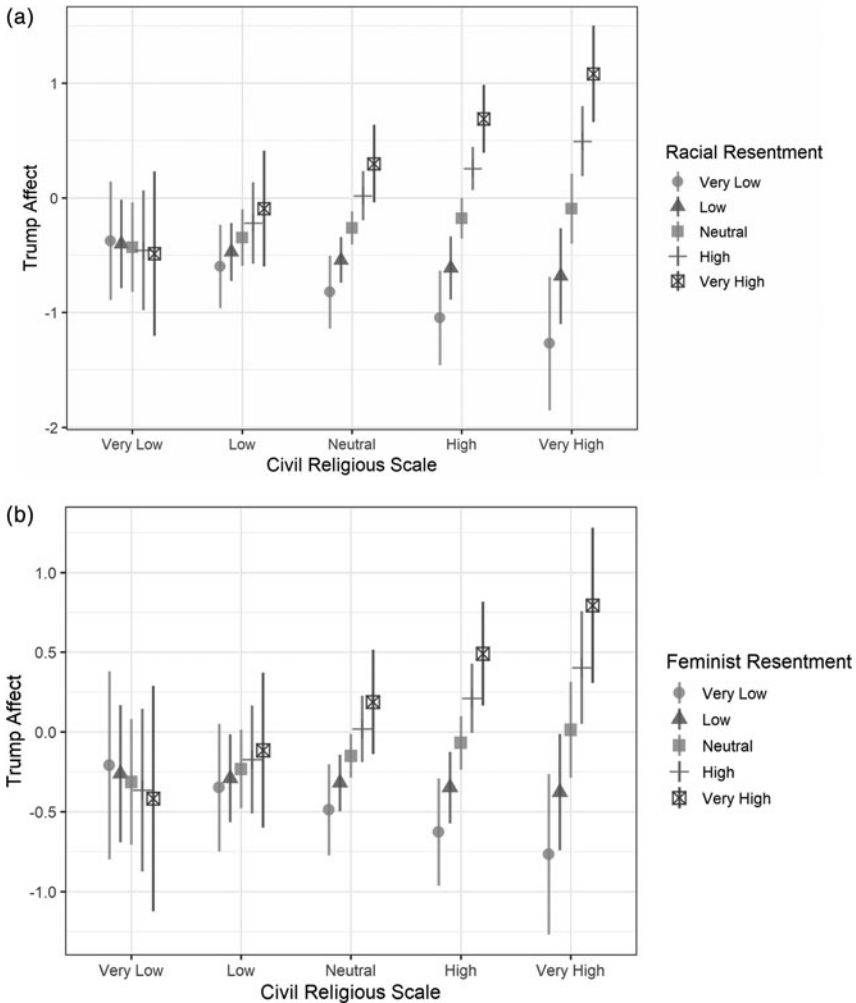


Figure 2. (a) Estimated marginal means: Trump affect (racial resentment interaction). (b) Estimated marginal means: Trump affect (resentment of feminism interaction).

intertwine inextricably with partisan political leanings (although the causal direction of this relationship remains controversial; see Margolis 2018). Although religious conservatives are more likely to report holding racist or sexist attitudes than religious liberals, and religious Americans are more likely to hold civil religious views than non-religious Americans, we do not think that the phenomena we have reported here are merely reducible to a liberal-conservative Christian dichotomy. The intersections of religiosity, civil religion, and Trumpian politics, we would suggest, are complex and multidirectional. We therefore encourage future researchers to elaborate upon the nature of these interrelationships.

Finally, this research illustrates the utility of examining our acrimonious politics through the lens of national identity conflict. The 2016 election campaign was in

many ways a battle over the national identity with both candidates evoking civil religious themes to legitimize their perspectives. Hillary Clinton's "Stronger Together" campaign emphasized the benefits that diversity brings to American society and how this has been an integral component of the national identity throughout its history (Sides 2017). In contrast, Donald Trump's "Make America Great Again" coupled with his central campaign pledge to build a border wall and impose a ban on travel from Muslim-majority countries suggests that the nation's return to glory hinges upon exclusion. While Bellah viewed civil religion as fostering integration and unity as the salience of an American identity superseded other group identities (Bellah 1967), our research is consistent with other work demonstrating that such rhetoric has also been employed to exclude certain groups from the American family (Beasley 2004; Weller 2013). Murphy argues that "all jeremiads subdivide their respective communities into those deemed faithful to the founders' examples and those apostates who have squandered national promise" (2009, 120). Seen in this light, Clinton's campaign reflected a national identity that excludes those who hold prejudicial attitudes from the American family while Trump's rhetoric and actions emboldened them. We encourage others to more explicitly consider the role of such rhetoric in exacerbating these divisions in American society.

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048321000249>.

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Notes

1. Social Identity Theory suggests that individuals are motivated to support/oppose policies that benefit/harm members of their in-group in order to protect their social status (Tajfel et al. 1979).
2. For example "Modern Racism" (McConahay 1986), "Racial Resentment" (Kinder and Sanders 1996).
3. However, there is some evidence that "Old-Fashioned Racism" is experiencing a resurgence (Tesler 2012; Lajevardi and Oskooii 2018).
4. A number of studies demonstrate that while sexism had a significant impact on favorability ratings and vote choice in 2016, it did not in 2004, 2008, or 2012 (Cassese and Barnes 2018; Schaffner et al. 2018; Valentino et al. 2018)
5. Sexism has been shown to be related to assessments of Clinton as First Lady (Sulfaro 2007; Winter 2008), Senator (Tesler and Sears 2010), Democratic Presidential Candidate in 2008 (Moss-Racusin et al. 2010, McThomas and Tesler 2016), and Secretary of State (McThomas and Tesler 2016).
6. Beyond Trump's reputation as a philanderer, a litany of incidents came to light during his presidential campaign (e.g., the Access Hollywood Tape, allegations of sexual assault, and hush money payments).
7. A number of studies have demonstrated that civil religious beliefs are distinguishable from "church religion" (Coleman 1970; Wimberley et al. 1976; West 1980; Flere and Lavric 2007).
8. Although it has not been quantitatively verified in the public opinion or political psychology literature, civil religious beliefs are not generally conceptualized as being the result of personality traits.
9. Some have subjected Bellah's thesis to critical analysis (Richey and Jones 1974; Moosa 2010); others have extended his insights into new arenas like military affairs (Ungar 1991; Haberski 2012; Ebel 2015), the Pledge of Allegiance (Kao and Copulsky 2007), presidential rhetoric (Beasley 2004; Squiers 2018), and the national motto (Lienesch 2019).
10. Franklin D. Roosevelt, Acceptance Speech for the Renomination for the Presidency, Philadelphia, Pa. (June 27, 1936). <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/208917>
11. Campaign Speech delivered in Louisville, KY, March 30, 2017. <https://factba.se/transcript/donald-trump-speech-louisville-ky-march-20-2017>

12. August 6, 2015. <https://factba.se/transcript/donald-trump-first-gop-debate-august-6-2015>
13. Campaign Speech delivered in Pensacola, FL on December 8, 2017. <https://factba.se/transcript/donald-trump-speech-make-america-great-again-pensacola-december-8-2017>
14. Campaign Speech in Mt. Pleasant, SC on December 7, 2015. <https://factba.se/transcript/donald-trump-speech-mt-pleasant-sc-december-7-2015>
15. Campaign speech in Manchester, NH on August 25, 2016; <https://factba.se/transcript/donald-trump-speech-manchester-nh-august-25-2016>
16. The differences in conceptualization between Whitehead, Perry, and Baker's "Christian nationalism" and our "civil religion" lead to differences in our expectations: while they find that Christian nationalism has an independent effect on support for Trump, we expect that civil religious beliefs have an interactive effect with racism and sexism, increasing support for Trump among those who hold racist and sexist views and reducing it among those who do not.
17. Responses were coded on a 5-point scale ($-2 =$ Strongly Disagree, $-1 =$ Disagree, $0 =$ Neither Agree nor Disagree, $1 =$ Agree, $2 =$ Strongly Agree).
18. The literature on religious framing finds that subtle religious cues are less likely to polarize individuals with different levels of religiosity than overt ones (Calfano and Djupe 2009; McLaughlin and Wise 2014; Albertson 2015).
19. A Principle Component Analysis of these four questions yielded a single factor with an eigenvalue of 2.64 that explained 66% of the total variance.
20. Results of this reliability analysis are available in the Appendix (Appendix Table 1). These four questions produced a Cronbach's α score of 0.828 (above the preferred threshold to assert internal consistency). This statistic would not improve with the exclusion of any particular item, and there was sufficiently high inter-item correlation and corrected item-total correlations to be confident in the reliability of a scale composed of all four questions.
21. Scale was constructed by taking the mathematical average of responses to these four questions.
22. The results of an OLS regression analysis of civil religious beliefs are available in the Appendix (Appendix Table 2).
23. Exact question wording: "Do you approve or disapprove of the way Donald Trump is handling his job as President?" This variable was rescaled to: $-2 =$ Strongly Disapprove, $-1 =$ Somewhat Disapprove, $0 =$ Not Sure, $1 =$ Somewhat Approve, $2 =$ Strongly Approve.
24. Exact question wording: "What emotions do you feel when you hear President Trump's 2016 campaign slogan 'Make America Great Again'? (Check all that Apply)." (Happy, Sad, Anxious, Excited, Angry, Proud, I'm Not Sure).
25. This variable was scaled from -3 to $+3$ with positive values indicating that a respondent selected more positive than negative emotions (and vice versa). Selecting "I'm Not Sure" had no numerical effect on the construction of this variable. A histogram of this variable is provided in the Appendix (Appendix Figure 1).
26. "Racial Resentment" is a 5-point scale reflecting the average response to four statements commonly employed in the study of Modern Racism (Kinder and Sanders 1996) Responses were recoded so that positive values indicated higher levels of racial resentment. (1) "Irish, Italians, Jewish, and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without any special favors"; (2) "Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for Blacks to work their way out of the lower class"; (3) "Over the past few years, Blacks have gotten less than they deserve"; (4) "It's really a matter of some people not trying hard enough, if Blacks would only try harder they could be just as well off as whites."
27. "Resentment of Feminism" is a 5-point scale reflecting the average response to two statements that were recoded such that positive values indicate higher levels of resentment toward Feminism. (1) "When women lose to men in a fair competition, they typically complain about being discriminated against"; (2) "Feminists are making entirely reasonable demands of men."
28. While our interaction terms failed to attain traditional levels of statistical significance in an alternative Ordered Logistic Regression model analyzing our Trump Support variable, the substantive results and predicted probability plots are broadly consistent with the findings from our OLS model.
29. Alternative models which incorporate a three-way interaction (Civil Religion Belief Scale \times Racial Resentment Scale \times Resentment of Feminism Scale) provide substantively similar results and are available in the Appendix (Appendix Tables 4 and 5 and Appendix Figures 2 and 3).
30. Supplementary analysis verifying the linearity of the interaction effects produced in our analysis is available in the Appendix (Appendix Figures 4a, 4b, and 4c).

31. As a robustness check that these interaction effects were unique to Trump (as opposed to other Republican political figures who have not adopted his rhetorical strategy) we conducted a similar analysis of public approval of Republican governors during the pre-election wave of the 2018 CCES. The results (Appendix Table 6) failed to detect a significant interaction effect in either the Civil Religion/Racial Resentment Interaction model or the Civil Religion/Feminist Resentment Interaction model. As such, we are confident that the hypothesized relationships examined here are unique to Trump.

32. Alternative models specifying an interaction between Civil Religious Beliefs and Ideology/Party ID demonstrate that the former significantly exacerbates the effects of the latter. Due to space limitations we present and discuss these results in the Appendix (Appendix Tables 7 and 8).

33. Alternative models specifying an interaction between Civil Religious Beliefs and Authoritarianism failed to produce significant results.

34. Alternative models specifying an interaction between Civil Religious Beliefs and Ideology/Party ID demonstrate that the former significantly exacerbates the effects of the latter. Due to space limitations we present and discuss these results in the Appendix (Appendix Tables 9 and 10).

35. Alternative models specifying an interaction between Civil Religious Beliefs and Authoritarianism failed to produce significant results.

36. See <https://www.nytimes.com/politics/first-draft/2016/01/18/donald-trump-quotes-scripture-sort-of-at-liberty-university-speech/>

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