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Religion's influence in the GOP

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One of the many paradoxes of the Trump era is that our unusual president couldn't have been elected, and couldn't survive politically today, without the support of religious conservatives ... but at the same time his ascent was intimately connected to the secularization of conservatism, and his style gives us a taste of what to expect from a post-religious right.

The second point was clear during the Republican primaries, when the most reliable churchgoers tended to prefer Ted Cruz but the more secular part of the party was more Trumpist. But it was obscured in the general election, and since, by the fact that evangelical voters especially rallied to Donald Trump and have generally stood by him.

Now, though, a new survey reveals the extent to which a basic religious division still exists within Trump's Republican Party. The churchgoers who ultimately voted for Trump over Hillary Clinton still tend to hold different views than his more secular supporters, and the more religious part of the GOP is still the less Trumpist portion — meaning less populist on economics, but also less authoritarian and tribal on race and identity.

The survey was conducted by the Cato Institute's Emily Ekins for the Voter Study Group, who analyzed the views of Trump voters based on their frequency of church attendance — from “never” to “weekly” or more often. The trend was consistent: The more often a Trump voter attended church, the less white-identitarian they appeared, the more they expressed favorable views of racial minorities, and the less they agreed with populist arguments on trade and immigration.

The differences were particularly striking on race. For instance, a quarter of Trump voters who never attend church describe being white as “very important” to their identity; for the most frequent churchgoers voters, it was 9 percent. Among non-churchgoing Trump voters, only 48 percent had warm feelings toward black people, compared to 71 percent of weekly churchgoers; the same sort of pattern held for views of Hispanics, Asians and Jews.

Churchgoing Trump voters were still more culturally conservative than Clinton voters — more likely to support the death penalty, more skeptical of immigration — and their views of Muslims, interestingly, seemed to have been influenced by Trump's own rhetoric, becoming more hostile between 2016 and 2017.

But in general, churchgoing Republicans look more like the party many elite conservatives wanted to believe existed before Trump came along — more racially tolerant, more accepting of multiculturalism and globalization, and also more consistently libertarian on economics. Secularized Trump voters look more like the party as Trump has tried to remake it, blending an inchoate economic populism with strong racial resentments.

Interestingly in the survey the different groups make about the same amount of money, which cuts against strict economic-anxiety explanations for Trumpism. But the churchgoers and nonchurchgoers differ more in social capital: The irreligious are less likely to have college degrees, less likely to be married and more likely to be divorced; they're also less civically engaged, less satisfied with their neighborhoods and communities, and less trusting and optimistic in general.

This seems to support the argument, advanced by Tim Carney of the Washington Examiner among others, that support for populism correlates with a kind of communal breakdown, in which secularization is one variable among many leaving people feeling isolated and angry, and drawing them to the ersatz solidarity of white identity politics.

Meanwhile frequent church attenders, already a minority within the wider society, are also a minority within the Republican coalition. Relatively few Republicans are explicitly religiously unaffiliated (though that number has been climbing, too), but only about a third of Trump's 2016 voters are in church on a typical Sunday, and almost half attend seldom or not at all.

This suggests a possibility that should worry both Trump's religious supporters and anyone concerned and anyone who finds his style of conservatism racially toxic. Despite their resistance to that toxicity, the churchgoers in this survey did vote for him, making a pragmatic bet that his policies on abortion and religious liberty were worth living with his Caligulan personal life and racial demagoguery. To defend that bet, some historically inclined believers have cited past cases where Christians accepted bargains with a not-particularly moral leaders — including the way the early church accepted the patronage of Roman emperors, from Constantine onward, whose personal piety was limited at best.

But the Constantinian bet involved a rising religion allying with a worldly power to accelerate its growth and gains. The bet under Trump involves the reverse sort of situation: A Christian community trying to make the best of its decline, and allying with a leader whose core appeal depends upon and possibly furthers the de-Christianization of conservatism.

Such a bet might be understandable as an act of desperation. But it's hard to see how it can reverse de-Christianization, and easy to see how it might accelerate it. Which, on the evidence of this survey, is something that secular liberals should fear as well.