

# The Rise of the Religious Right: Evidence from the Moral Majority and the Jimmy Carter Presidency

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## Abstract

We investigate the rise of the religious right in the context of the Moral Majority and Jimmy Carter, the first Evangelical President. During Carter's Presidency, Jerry Falwell, a key televangelist, headed the newly formed Moral Majority, which turned against the incumbent Carter, a Democrat, and campaigned for Ronald Reagan, a Republican, in the 1980 Election. To investigate the role of religious leaders in the political persuasion of followers, we first develop a theoretical model of multidimensional politics in which single issue voters follow issue leaders when choosing which candidates to support. Using data from county-level voting returns, exit polls, and surveys, we find that, consistent with our model predictions, Evangelical voters followed the lead of the Moral Majority, shifting from supporting Carter in 1976 to Reagan in 1980. Using the irregular terrain model, we also find persuasion effects in counties that were exposed to the televised ministry of Jerry Falwell.

**Keywords:** Religion and Politics, Media Economics, Single-Issue Voters

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# 1 Introduction

The Establishment Clause of the United States Constitution prohibits the government from establishing an official religion. Yet, this has not prevented religion from playing a key role in U.S. politics and policy. Indeed, religion casts a wide shadow over controversial policy issues today, such as abortion, funding of basic science, public funding of religious schools, school curriculum, and gay marriage. Moreover, the religion of candidates for public office has often been a key issue on the campaign trail, from John Kennedy's Catholicism in 1960 to controversy over Barack Obama's faith in the 2008 and 2012 elections. Moreover, religious leaders have often played a key role in shaping U.S. politics and elections, from allegations over a link between the Evangelical leader Billy Graham and President Richard Nixon to the endorsement by Jerry Falwell Jr., another Evangelical leader, of Donald Trump in the 2016 Republican primary.

In this paper, we investigate these issues in the context of Jimmy Carter, a Southern Democrat and the first Evangelical President of the U.S., and Jerry Falwell Sr., a key Evangelical leader during Carter's Presidency. Evangelical leaders grew disillusioned with Carter during his Presidency (from 1977 to 1981). Jerry Falwell Sr. in particular played a key role in the formation of, and ultimately became head of, the Moral Majority, a religious special interest group that campaigned against Carter and in favor of the Republican Ronald Reagan, a non-Evangelical who ultimately won the 1980 Presidential election.

To more formally analyze the role of religious leaders and voters in elections, we begin by developing a theoretical model of multi-dimensional politics. One dimension involves religious policy and the other dimension represents a general ideological dimension. Religious leaders, but not voters, observe the religious policy preferences of the candidates and endorse the pro-religion candidate. Single-issue voters, those with extreme pro-religion policy preferences, follow the lead of religious leaders and support the endorsed candidate, even when it goes against their general ideological inclinations.

The empirical component of our paper investigates these issues via an analysis of voter support for candidates in the 1976 and 1980 Presidential elections. We employ county-level data on religiosity, county-level voting returns, and survey evidence on both religiosity and support for Presidential candidates. Starting with the county-level data, we document a strong negative within-state relationship, conditional on demographics, such as race, between the presence of Evangelicals and a change in county-level support for Carter between the 1976 and 1980 Presidential elections. That is, support for Carter fell between 1976 and 1980 in counties with more Evangelicals, relative to counties within the same state and with fewer Evangelicals. In terms of magnitudes, a 10 percent-

age point increase in the share of Evangelicals in the county is associated with (roughly) a one percentage point drop in the vote share for Carter in the 1980 election, relative to the vote share in the 1976 election and relative to other counties within the state.

We then corroborate this county-level aggregate evidence with information from two surveys, one based upon exit polls in the 1980 election and one based upon the 1980 American National Election Survey (ANES). Both surveys have questions about religion as well as voting in the 1980 election and, retrospectively, voting in the 1976 election. In both cases, we find that, conditional on demographics and geography, Evangelicals were 4 to 9 percentage points less likely to support Carter in the 1980 election, relative to their support for Carter in the 1976 election. While more speculative, we also find some evidence of a role for religious leaders. In particular, when asked what policy areas drove their choice in the 1980 election, these Evangelical voters identified key issues (abortion and the Equal Rights Amendment) that were highlighted by the Moral Majority in campaigning for Reagan in the 1980 election. Likewise, Evangelical voters were also more favorable to the Moral Majority as a group in a thermometer rating.

While this evidence is consistent with a role for religious leaders, it does not allow one to separate a role for religious leaders from other factors that could be related to religion or from individual decisions by Evangelical voters. To better identify a role for religious leaders, we next turn to an analysis of exposure to Jerry Falwell’s popular televised ministry, the Old Time Gospel Hour. To do so, we begin by collecting information on which television stations in the U.S. broadcast this ministry. We then collected information on characteristics, such as height, power, and latitude/longitude, of the broadcast tower associated with these stations. Using the irregular terrain method, we then compute the signal strength in each county. Conditional on the free space signal, which captures distance to the closest tower, we document that exposure to the Old Time Gospel Hour is associated with a reduction in support for Carter in 1980, relative to 1976. This is again a within-state comparison and conditional on demographics, such as race. In particular, exposure to the Old Time Gospel Hour leads to a (roughly) 1 percentage point reduction in support for Carter in 1980, relative to 1976. Using information on viewership, this translates into a persuasion rate of (roughly) 7 percent. In the context of an event study, we document no effects of exposure to the Old Time Gospel Hour before 1980 and effects on vote shares that last during the one-decade existence of the Moral Majority.

This paper is closest to a literature on religious media, religiosity, and political outcomes. Wang (2021) studies a Catholic Priest named Charles Coughlin and his popular radio program in the U.S. during the 1930s. Coughlin’s programming involved anti-FDR content, and Wang (2021) documents that exposure to the program reduced FDR’s vote share in the 1936 election. Moreover,

these results were particularly strong in counties with a larger share of Catholic voters. Buccione and Mello (2020) study television stations associated with the Pentecostal church in Brazil. They first document strong conversion effects, with exposure to the TV channel leading to an increase in the share of Pentecostals in exposed areas. Building upon this evidence of religious conversion, they then document the socioeconomic consequences, such as higher fertility rates, of this conversion but, more relevantly for our study, increased support for Pentecostal candidates in elections. Grosfeld et al. (2021) examine the effects of religious programming, in the form of pro-Catholic propaganda on government television, on religious participation in Poland. While areas with access to independent television experienced trends towards secularization, areas without independent television relied on government television, leading to a reversal of the trends towards secularization. We contribute to this literature via an examination of a new setting, the religious right in the U.S. We also focus on the role of candidate religion, with Evangelical leaders turning against the first Evangelical President during his first term in office and supporting Ronald Reagan, a non-Evangelical, over Carter in the 1980 election.

Given our time period of the 1970s, the strength of Evangelicals in the U.S. South, and the shift in support from Carter to Reagan, our paper also contributes to a literature on the re-alignment of Southern voters away from the Democratic Party and towards the Republican Party following the Civil Rights era of the 1960s. Kuziemko and Washington (2018), using newly available survey data, document an important role for racial attitudes among conservative White voters in explaining this shift. Likewise, Ang (2019) documents White backlash against the Voting Right Act, with newly covered areas in 1975 experiencing a drop in support for Democratic candidates. We contribute to this literature via an examination of the Evangelical movement, which, as noted above, was concentrated in the U.S. South, and the associated shift among these voters towards the Republican Party.

Finally, our paper contributes to a literature on single issue voters. Bouton et al. (2021) consider a model with single-issue voters, a small group of voters who care intensely about secondary policy issues, and politician responses to these groups. Based upon an empirical application of gun and environmental policy, they document a political cycle, under which members of Congress pander to these groups in roll-call voting decisions but, consistent with recency bias, only in the year prior to elections. Along these lines, Bombardini and Trebbi (2011) consider a role for special interest groups in terms of delivering votes from their members versus campaign contributions, and the former is more relevant for special interest groups with large memberships, such as religious groups. We contribute to this literature via an examination of a religious group and show that religious leaders of this group can hold a large sway over voting decisions among single-issue followers.

## 2 Context

Jimmy Carter, an Evangelical from Georgia, won the Presidential election over Gerald Ford in 1976. Carter was a Southern Democrat but, among White Southerners, tended to be more liberal on race relations. Carter was the nation's first Evangelical President and had a strong faith, teaching Sunday school in his hometown of Plains, Georgia. Carter defeated President Gerald Ford, who became President following Richard Nixon's resignation in 1974, in the 1976 Presidential Election. Carter integrated his faith and politics, popularizing the phrase "born again" during his 1976 campaign and praying several times per day during his Presidency.<sup>1</sup>

During his Presidency, Carter supported policies that were often at odds with the social conservative nature of the Evangelical Church. These issues included Carter's support for women's rights, such as the Equal Rights Amendment and pro-choice abortion policies, along with opposition to prayer in public schools. Moreover, his Administration attempted to remove the non-profit status of so-called religious "segregation academies", all-white private schools that arose following school integration.

Given these issues, Evangelical leaders began to move against Carter and towards the Republican side of the partisan spectrum. This movement was captured most importantly by the formation of the Moral Majority in the late 1970s. The Moral Majority was led by Jerry Falwell, a conservative Southern Baptist preacher with a popular television ministry titled the "Old Time Gospel Hour" (OTGH).

While Falwell did criticize Carter in the 1976 election over an interview of the candidate by Playboy Magazine, Falwell also criticized the Republican incumbent candidate Gerald Ford. Moreover, the Moral Majority had not yet been formed, and Falwell did not campaign for Ford. In addition, other Evangelical leaders supported Carter in 1976, with Bailey Smith, the future President of the Southern Baptist Convention, noting in his keynote address at the 1976 SBC that the U.S. needed a "born-again man in the White House. And his initials are the same as our Lord's".<sup>2</sup>

During the 1980 Presidential Election, by contrast, Evangelical leaders in general, and the Moral Majority in particular, put their full support behind the Republican candidate Ronald Reagan. Reagan spoke at Falwell's Liberty Baptist College in Lynchburg, Virginia during the final months of the 1980 campaign. Other Moral Majority activities included local voter registration drives, fundraising, and television advertising.<sup>3</sup> At its start, the Moral Majority capitalized on the resources

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<sup>1</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jimmy\\_Carter](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jimmy_Carter) (accessed October 2023).

<sup>2</sup>Williams (2012)

<sup>3</sup><https://www.britannica.com/topic/Moral-Majority> (accessed October 2023)

of Falwell’s Old Time Gospel Hour and its mailing list of 2.5 million members.<sup>4</sup> While Falwell played a key central role, the Moral Majority also created a decentralized movement, establishing local chapters, appointing chairs in the each of the 50 states, and enlisting pastors of local Evangelical churches in spreading the conservative message. This decentralized network was formed around the Baptist Bible Fellowship, a collection of independent evangelical churches and thus outside of the Southern Baptist Convention, the largest denomination of Evangelicals.<sup>5</sup> Due at least in part to this decentralized structure, The Moral Majority, in collaboration with aligned Christian Right groups, reportedly registered at least 2 million new Evangelical voters through local voter registration drives.<sup>6</sup>

Carter lamented the Moral Majority’s support for Reagan, writing in his diary “that autumn [1980] a group headed by Jerry Falwell purchased 10 million dollars in commercials on southern radio and TV to brand me as a traitor to the South and no longer a Christian.”<sup>7</sup> Reagan ultimately won the 1980 election by a large margin, winning 44 out of 50 states in the Electoral College.

The Moral Majority continued to support Reagan throughout his two-term Presidency. While Evangelical leaders have continued to support Republican candidates, the Moral Majority dissolved in 1989, following the end of Reagan’s Presidency. Yet the legacy of this movement remains, with Jerry Falwell’s son Jerry Falwell Jr. issuing a key endorsement for Donald Trump in the 2016 Republican Presidential Primary. In the general election of 2020, according to surveys, over 80 percent of White Evangelicals supported Trump over Biden in the 2020 election.<sup>8</sup>

### 3 Theoretical Model

This section, following Chiang and Knight (2011), develops a model of informative endorsements in elections and voter responses to these endorsements. In our model, church leaders observe candidate platforms over policies related to religion and support the pro-Church candidate. In the context of this model, we analyze how pro-Church voters process and respond to these endorsements. We also study how the responsiveness of the endorsement depends upon whether the voter is a single-issue voter.

Voters, indexed by  $v$ , have preferences over religious policy ( $r$ ) and all other policies, which we

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<sup>4</sup>Liebman and Wuthnow (1983)

<sup>5</sup>Williams (2012)

<sup>6</sup>Williams (2012)

<sup>7</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moral\\_Majority](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moral_Majority) (accessed October 2023)

<sup>8</sup><https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/08/30/most-white-americans-who-regularly-attend-worship-services-voted-for-trump-in-2020/> (accessed October 2023)

aggregate into a single policy labeled ideology ( $i$ ). Candidates are policy motivated, and candidate  $c$  implements policies  $r_c$  and  $i_c$ . There are two candidates, a Republican ( $c = R$ ) and a Democrat ( $c = D$ ). Voter  $v$  receives the following quadratic payoff from the policies of candidate  $c$ :

$$U_{vc} = -\alpha(r_c - r_v)^2 - (1 - \alpha)(i_c - i_v)^2,$$

where  $r_v$  and  $i_v$  are the voter bliss points over the two policies and  $\alpha$  is the weight that voters place on religious policy, relative to ideological factors. Thus, voters prefer candidates with platforms that are close to their bliss points. We assume that the Republican candidate lies further to the right in ideological space ( $i_D < i_R$ ) and, for simplicity, that candidate ideology is symmetric around zero, so that  $i_D = -i_R$ . These candidate ideologies are assumed to be known to voters due to, for example, party labels.

Regarding religious policy, candidates can be either pro-religion ( $r^P$ ) or anti-religion ( $r^A$ ). Again, we assume that religious policy is higher for the pro-Church policy and that religious policy is centered around zero, such that  $r^A < r^P$  and that  $r^A = -r^P$ . Regarding preferences over religious policies, there are three types of voters, those preferring pro-Church policies ( $r_v > 0$ ), those preferring anti-Church policies ( $r_v < 0$ ), and those indifferent, such that ( $r_v = 0$ ). Among voters preferring pro-Church policies, there is heterogeneity in the intensity of such preferences, with some voters having more extreme pro-Church preferences and some voters with more moderate views. Likewise, there is heterogeneity in the intensity of preferences for anti-Church voters.

We assume that Church leaders observe the religious platforms of the two candidates and endorse the pro-Church candidate when the two candidates have different policy preferences and make no endorsement otherwise. For now, we assume that only pro-Church voters, those preferring a pro-Church policy, observe the endorsement. This could be due, for example, to local pastors discussing politics during Church services or by pro-Church voters learning from other pro-Church voters in their networks. We later consider an extension in which anti-Church voters might also observe the endorsement.

First consider the simple case of no endorsement. In this case, pro-Church voters learn that the two candidates have the same platforms over religious policy and thus vote purely based upon the ideological dimension. In particular, voters with  $i_v > 0$  vote Republican and voters  $i_v < 0$  vote Democratic.

When religious leaders endorse the Republican, by contrast, voters learn that the Republican is the pro-Church candidate and that the Democrat is the anti-Church candidate. Assume for now that only voters preferring pro-Church policies ( $r_v > 0$ ) observe the endorsement. In this case, these

pro-Church voters support the Republican under the following condition:

$$-\alpha(r^P - r_v)^2 - (1 - \alpha)(i^R - i_v)^2 > -\alpha(r^A - r_v)^2 - (1 - \alpha)(i^D - i_v)^2$$

This condition be simplified to

$$\alpha r_v(r^P - r^A) > -i_v(1 - \alpha)(i^R - i^D)$$

Focusing on voters who support Democratic candidates in the absence of an endorsement ( $i_v < 0$ ), the condition requires that voter preferences over Church policy be sufficiently extreme, relative to their preferences over the general ideological dimension:

$$r_v > \frac{-(1 - \alpha)i_v(i^R - i^D)}{\alpha(r^P - r^A)}$$

Given that we are focusing on voters who support Democratic candidates on the ideological dimension ( $i_v < 0$ ), the threshold on the right-hand side is positive. This threshold is higher, meaning that voters need more extreme pro-religious preferences to be persuaded by religious leaders, when voters place more weight on the ideological dimension ( $1 - \alpha$ ), when voters have extreme preferences over the general ideological policy ( $i^v$ ), when differences between the religious policies ( $r^A$  and  $r^P$ ) are small, and when differences between the ideology of the two candidates ( $i^R$  and  $i^D$ ) are large. The latter two factors both make differences in policy positions between the pro-Church and the anti-Church candidate less salient.

We next extend the model to allow other voters, including anti-Church voters ( $r_v < 0$ ), to observe the endorsement with probability  $q < 1$ . Those indifferent over religious policy naturally do not respond to the endorsement, and the behavior of pro-religion voters is unchanged. Anti-religion voters, conditional on observing the endorsement, by contrast, might switch their vote from the endorsed candidate to the candidate not endorsed, and, by symmetry, this occurs when preferences over religious policy, which are negative in this case, are sufficiently low:

$$r_v < \frac{-(1 - \alpha)i_v(i^R - i^D)}{\alpha(r^P - r^A)}$$

For these voters, who would support the Republican candidate on ideological grounds ( $i_v > 0$ ), the threshold on the right-hand side is negative. As before, this threshold is lower, meaning that voters need more extreme anti-religious preferences for the support by religious leaders to backfire, when voters place more weight on the ideological dimension ( $1 - \alpha$ ), when voters have extreme



preferences over the general ideological policy ( $i^v$ ), when differences between the religious policies ( $r^A$  and  $r^P$ ) are small, and when differences between the ideology of the two candidates ( $i^R$  and  $i^D$ ) are large. The latter two factors both make differences in policy positions between the pro-Church and the anti-Church candidate less salient to voters.

There are three implications to this extension. First, to the extent that there is backlash, our empirical results will capture the relative effects of the endorsement on support for endorsed candidate. And, in this sense, we cannot distinguish between the positive effects of an endorsement and the backlash effect. Second, religious leaders will only issue endorsements when the electoral backlash associated with these spillovers is sufficiently small. Third, following the logic in Glaeser et al. (2005), religious leaders face incentives to minimize these informational spillovers to anti-Church voters and, in lowering  $q$ , to ensure that only pro-religion voters observe the message.

## 4 County-level Voting and Evangelicals

We begin with a county-level analysis of changes in support for Carter between 1976 and 1980 following the formation of the Moral Majority and the associated shift among Evangelical leaders towards the Republican Party and against the Democratic Party in general and Jimmy Carter in particular.

Our voting outcome measure is based upon the change between 1976 and 1980 in the two-party vote share for Carter. These data are taken from Amlani and Algara (2021) and, as noted above, are at the county level. The Republican candidates in these Presidential elections were Gerald Ford, a Congressman from Michigan who became President in the wake of Nixon’s resignation in 1974, in 1976 and Ronald Reagan, previously governor of California, in 1980.<sup>9</sup>

Our county-level data on Evangelicals are based upon the share of Evangelical adherents within the county. That is, we count the number of Evangelical adherents within the county using data from ARDA during 1971, and this count is then scaled by 1970 Census county population; in some specifications, we use more historical measures from 1952. Our definition of Evangelical is based upon Shibley (1991).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>In some specifications, we also examine additional years and always compute the Democratic two-party vote share in that year.

<sup>10</sup>Shibley (1991) distinguishes between Southern Evangelicals [Assemblies of God, Baptist Missionary Association of America Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee), Pentecostal Holiness Church, and Southern Baptist Convention] and Non-Southern Evangelicals [Baptist General Conference, Christian Churches and Churches of Christ, Christian and Missionary Alliance, Christian Reformed Church, Church of God (Anderson, Indiana), Church of the Nazarene, Conservative Baptist Association of America, Free Methodist Church in North America, International Church of the Four-Square Gospel, Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, Salvation Army, Seventh-day Adventists, and Wisconsin

Our empirical strategy involves a regression of the change in Carter’s vote share between 1976 and 1980 on the share of Evangelicals in the county. We include state fixed effects in order to account for both the concentration of Southern Baptist Churches (SBC) in the U.S. South and the overall re-alignment among Southerners from the Democratic Party to the Republican Party following the Civil Rights Era. That is, by including state fixed effects, we conduct a within-State analysis and do not compare changes in Northern counties to changes in Southern counties.

We begin with spatial representations of these data. As shown in Figures 1 and 2, counties that tended to have more Evangelicals, relative to other counties within their state, also tended to shift away from Carter between the 1976 and 1980 Presidential elections. These areas included, for example, northern Texas. Overall, the spatial correlation between share Evangelical and changes in support for Carter, both at the county level, in two maps is roughly -0.2.

To more formally quantify and test for the statistical significance of these relationships, we next run a regression with, as the dependent variable, the change in the Carter two-party vote share between the 1976 and 1980 Presidential elections. Our key independent variable is the share Evangelical in the county. As noted above, we also control for state fixed effects and our analysis is thus based upon within-state comparisons. We also include the following Census controls in all specifications: population, share black, share female, and employment rates. Accounting for the Black share is particularly important as the movement among Evangelicals to the right was concentrated among Whites, and, more generally, there was a shift among Whites from the Democratic Party to the Republican party during this time period. Finally, we weigh specifications by state population in order to make these results representative at the individual level and for comparability with the individual-level survey evidence presented later in the paper.

As shown in the first column of Table 1, we find, within states, a negative and statistically significant relationship between Evangelical share and the change in support for Carter between 1976 and 1980. In terms of magnitudes, a change in Evangelical share, from, say, 10 percent to 20 percent within states is associated with a roughly 1 percentage point reduction in the change in the vote share for Carter between 1976 and 1980. While not definitive, in the sense of ruling out alternative explanations, this evidence is consistent with the role of Evangelical leaders in general, and the Moral Majority in particular, in shifting Evangelical voters away from Carter towards Reagan in 1980.

Note that our analysis includes all counties and that very small counties might experience large swings in vote shares from year to year, given the small number of votes tabulated in these places.

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Evangelical Lutheran Synod]

To address this point, we next drop very small counties, those with population below 10,000. As shown in column 2 of Table 1, our results are very similar in this specification, relative to our baseline specification in column 1.

We next examine potential heterogeneity within the Evangelical movement. We first separately control for the share Southern Baptist Convention, which is the largest branch of the Evangelical movement and concentrated in the U.S. South. This is also the branch of both Jimmy Carter and Jerry Falwell, the leader of the Moral Majority in the 1980 Election. As shown in Column 3, we find that, if anything, the results are stronger for other branches of the Evangelical Church. Considering again a change within states in Evangelical share, from, say, 10 percent to 20 percent, this is associated with a roughly 1.6 percentage point reduction in the change within states in the vote share for Carter between 1976 and 1980 for non-Southern Baptists within the Evangelical Church but only a 0.8 percentage point reduction for Southern Baptists. This is consistent with, as noted above, the Moral Majority state headquarters being located in independent Baptist Bible Fellowship churches.<sup>11</sup>

Further examining regional differences, we next distinguish between Southern Evangelicals and non-Southern Evangelicals, again based upon Shibley (1991). Similarly to our results for Southern Baptists, we again find that our results are somewhat stronger for non-Southern Evangelicals, relative to Southern Evangelicals. During this time, non-Southern Evangelicals tended to operate in states in the Midwest, with the largest presence in the states of Wisconsin and Nebraska, and, as noted above, the Moral Majority had local headquarters in every state. It also is possible that Southern Evangelicals were less willing to abandon Jimmy Carter in 1980 given his Southern roots and Evangelical faith.

To ensure that our results are not driven by the absence of other religious groups in these counties, we next include controls for the share Mainline Protestant, again using the definitions in Shibley (1991), and share Catholic. These two groups, along with Evangelicals, are the three largest religious groups in the U.S., and there is a strong negative correlation between the share Evangelical and the share of these two groups, both within states and across states in the U.S. at this time, raising the possibility of omitted variables bias. As shown in column 5, we find small positive effects for mainline Protestants and Catholics. That is, an increase in the share Catholic within states from say, 10 to 20 percent, is associated with a 0.4 percentage point increase in the change in support for Carter between 1976 and 1980, and we find similar magnitudes for Mainline Protestants. After

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<sup>11</sup>In addition, it is possible that many Southern Baptists were already shifting towards the Republican Party prior to the 1980 Presidential Election. It is also possible that Southern Baptists were not willing to abandon Jimmy Carter, given their shared faith, for Ronald Reagan in 1980.

controlling for the presence of these groups, however, we continue to find a negative and statistically significant relationship between share Evangelical and the change in support for Carter between 1976 and 1980. Taken together, these results suggest that our results are not driven by religiosity per se and instead are driven by Evangelical voters.

Given that our religion measure is from the 1970s, it is possible that religious affiliation already had political meaning prior to the Jimmy Carter Presidency. Indeed, during the 1970s, the U.S. South was already undergoing a political transformation, with Whites shifting to the Republican Party following the Civil Rights Era. To address this point, we next use a measure of religiosity from the 1950s, prior to the realignment of Whites in the South. In particular, we examine the change in support for Carter between 1976 and 1980 as a function of religiosity as of 1952. As shown in Table 2, the results in columns 1 (all counties) and column 2 (excluding small counties) are, if anything, stronger than those in our baseline results in Table 1. Interestingly, we no longer find evidence of weaker effects for Southern Baptists (column 3) or for the broader group of Southern Evangelicals (column 4). We do find somewhat stronger evidence of within-state increases in support for Carter Mainline Protestants and Catholics (column 5). Again, however, after controlling for these effects, we continue to find a negative and statistically significant relationship between the share Evangelical and the change in support for Carter between 1976 and 1980.

## 5 Evidence from Exit Polls

As additional evidence on the role of Evangelicals in support for Carter in the 1976 and 1980 Presidential elections, we next turn to two independently collected surveys conducted in 1980. Both included questions on support for Presidential candidates in both 1980 and, retrospectively, 1976 as well as questions about individual religion.

Our first analysis is based upon exit polls conducted by CBS and The New York Times (ICPSR 7812). These were surveys administered as voters left their polling stations in the 1980 Presidential election. Crucially, the interviewers collected information on not only the 1980 vote decision but also, retrospectively, their 1976 vote decision. In addition, there were two questions about religion. The first question asked respondents whether they were Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, other, or had no religion. While this question does not distinguish between Evangelical Protestants and Mainline Protestants, a second question asked respondents whether they were a “Born Again Christian”, a concept that is central to beliefs of Evangelicals.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, according to the General Social Survey,

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<sup>12</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Born\\_again](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Born_again) (accessed October 2023)

in 1988, the first year in which the question was asked, roughly 70 percent of Evangelicals identify as “Born Again” versus less than 30 percent of Mainline Protestants and roughly 10 percent of Catholics.<sup>13</sup>

Given this, our regression analysis is based upon a change in support for Carter between 1976 and 1980, with -1 indicating a shift from Carter to Reagan, +1 indicating a shift from Ford to Carter, and 0 indicating no change (i.e., the respondent supported either Carter or the Republican candidate in both 1976 and 1980). We again control for available demographics (gender, age, education, and race). Our total sample size, based upon individuals who responded to all questions, is 10,372. While we do not have any precise information on identifiable geography, the data include precinct indicators, allowing us to include precinct fixed effects and thus conduct a within-precinct analysis.

As shown in column 1, we again find a negative relationship between Born Again Christians and the change in support for Carter between 1976 and 1980. In terms of magnitudes, comparing a Born Again respondent to a non-Born Again respondent within the same precinct, we find that the Born Again respondent was 4 percentage points less likely to support Carter in 1980, relative to their support for Carter in 1976, and thus more likely to vote for Ronald Reagan. This evidence is again consistent with a role for the Moral Majority in persuading Born Again Christians to support Ronald Reagan in 1980.

Given that the within-precinct comparison group for Born Agains might include Catholics, other religions, or individuals who are not religious, we next conduct a within-Protestant analysis, comparing Born-Again Protestants to non-Born Again Protestants. As shown in column 2, the results are, if anything, a bit stronger. That is, comparing Born Again Protestant respondents to a non-Born Again Protestants within the same precinct, we find that Born Again respondents were nearly 5 percentage points less likely to support Carter in 1980, relative to their support for Carter in 1976, and thus more likely to vote for Ronald Reagan.

Note that these data also include information on key issues driving voter decisions in 1980. In particular, voters were given a long list of possible issues, including economic issues, the crisis in Iran, U.S. prestige around the world, and, most critically for our purposes, a single category labeled the E.R.A. (the Equal Rights Amendment)/Abortion, two of the critical issues for the Moral Majority in the 1980 Presidential Elections. We create an indicator for whether an individual chose this category for either their “most important” or “second issue”. There was a strong link between these issues highlighted by the Moral Majority and Born Again Christians. That is, as shown in column 3, Born

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<sup>13</sup>[www.christianitytoday.com/news/2020/january/us-born-again-rise-mainline-catholic-evangelical.html](http://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2020/january/us-born-again-rise-mainline-catholic-evangelical.html) (accessed October 2023)

Again, relative to other respondents in the same precinct, were 4 percentage points more likely to choose the E.R.A./abortion category. The results are again stronger, as shown in column 4, when restricting the sample to Protestants, and thus comparing Born Again Protestants and non-Born Again Protestants. While we do not have corresponding retrospective questions around the 1976 voting decision, this evidence is again consistent with an important role for the Moral Majority in persuading Evangelical voters to support Ronald Reagan over Jimmy Carter in the 1980 election.

## 6 Evidence from the 1980 ANES

We next turn to evidence from the 1980 American National Election Survey. Similarly to the Exit Poll Survey, the ANES in 1980 included questions on the vote choice in both 1980 and, retrospectively, 1976. Given this, our regression analysis is again based upon a change in support for Carter between 1976 and 1980, with -1 indicating a shift from Carter to Reagan, +1 indicating a shift from Ford to Carter, and 0 indicating no change (i.e., the respondent supported either Carter or the Republican candidate in both 1976 and 1980). The survey question regarding religion is more detailed than that in the exit polls, allowing us to directly measure Evangelical Protestants as well as Mainline Protestants. We again control for available demographics (gender, age, education, and race). Our total sample size, based upon individuals who responded to all questions, is smaller in this case, only 1,035. In terms of geography, we have state-level identifiers and, for comparability with our county-level analysis, thus include state fixed effects.

As shown in Table 4, we again find a strong link between Evangelicals and a shift in support from Carter in 1976 to Reagan in 1980, and despite the small sample sizes, the effects are statistically significant. In terms of magnitudes, comparing a Evangelical respondent to a non-Evangelical respondent within the same state, we find that the Born Again respondent was 8 percentage points less likely to support Carter in 1980, relative to their support for Carter in 1976, and thus more likely to vote for Ronald Reagan. As shown in column 2, when restricting the sample to Protestants, the results are, if anything, stronger. That is, comparing an Evangelical Protestant respondent to a Mainline Protestant respondent within the same state, we find that the Evangelical respondent was 9 percentage points less likely to support Carter in 1980, relative to their support for Carter in 1976, and thus more likely to vote for Ronald Reagan. Taken together, this evidence is again consistent with an important role for the Moral Majority in persuading Evangelical voters to support Ronald Reagan over Jimmy Carter in the 1980 election, relative to their support in the 1976 election.

As further evidence on the mechanism, we examine a question around a “feeling thermometer”, in which respondents were asked to express their feelings, from cold to warm to hot, on a 0 to

100 scale. As shown in column 3, we find a link between Evangelicals and support for the Moral Majority, and results are similar when comparing Evangelical to Mainline Protestants in column 4. While these results are not statistically significant, and we do not have corresponding retrospective questions around the 1976 election, this evidence is again consistent with an important role for the Moral Majority in persuading Evangelical voters to support Ronald Reagan over Jimmy Carter in the 1980 election.

## 7 Media Analysis

To summarize, we have documented, in three separate datasets, a shift in support among Evangelical voters from the Democrat Jimmy Carter in 1976 to the Republican Ronald Reagan, who was supported by the Moral Majority. While this is consistent with persuasion by Jerry Falwell and the Moral Majority, there are important alternative explanations for these results. It is possible, for example, that these patterns were driven by private choices made by Evangelical voters, rather than by persuasion associated with Evangelical leaders.

To provide further support for the role of the Evangelical leaders and, more specifically, Jerry Falwell and the Moral Majority, we next turn to an analysis of the televised ministry of the Jerry Falwell, the Old Time Gospel Hour. The show started in 1956 on radio but quickly expanded to television and gained a national following. The show aired for many decades, until its end in 2007 following the death of Jerry Falwell.

To conduct a media exposure analysis, we have obtained a listing of the television stations in the U.S. that carried the Old Time Gospel Hour from the archives of the Jerry Falwell Library. While we do not know exactly when the listing of stations was compiled, a few dates listed on the document (e.g. effective dates) suggest that the listing was around the time of the 1980 Presidential election. Based upon this list of stations, we then compiled information on the characteristics of the towers for these stations (i.e., height, power, and latitude/longitude) from the Television Factbook.<sup>14</sup>

Based upon this information, we then computed the signal strength for each tower-county centroid pair using the Irregular Terrain Model and then took the maximum signal received for each county across all towers. As shown in Figure 3, the signal propagates further from antennas in flatter parts of the U.S., such as Kansas, but does not travel as far in more mountainous regions, such as the western part of neighboring Colorado. Following Buccione and Mello (2020), we then convert the continuous signal measure into a discrete measure, indicating exposure to the Old Time Gospel Hour signal, when the signal strength exceeds -55.

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<sup>14</sup><https://www.worldradiohistory.com/TelevisionFactbook>

As shown in Figure 3, antennas tended to be clustered in more urban parts of the U.S. and thus, to avoid an urban-rural comparison, we also compute the free-space signal, the maximum signal strength in each county centroid were the terrain of the U.S. completely flat. Combining the two measures, the signal and the free-space signal, we compare two areas with the same free-space signal, meaning that they were equally close to an antenna, but one area received the signal but the other did not due to the terrain.

Our regression approach, similarly to that in Table 1, relates the change in the Democratic vote share between 1976 and 1980 to an indicator for Old Time Gospel Hour exposure and the measure of the free-space signal. We again include state fixed effects, leading to within-state comparisons, and controls include population, share black, share female, and employment rates.

As shown in Table 5, comparing two counties with the same signal in free space, we find that exposure to the Old Time Gospel Hour ministry is associated with a reduction in support for Carter equal to roughly 1 percentage point. As shown in column 2, results are similar when dropping small counties, those with population under 10,000. As noted above, our previous evidence was consistent with persuasion by Jerry Falwell and the Moral Majority in explaining a shift from Carter in 1976 to Ronald Reagan in 1980. At the same time, other explanations, such as the shift driven by private decisions made by Evangelical voters, were possible. These results, by contrast, provide causal evidence of persuasion by Evangelical leaders and, more specifically, Jerry Falwell and the Moral Majority.

In columns 3 and 4, we also incorporate our measures of percent Evangelical. As shown, controlling for share evangelical leads to very similar results. So, comparing two counties within the same state, the same share of Evangelicals, and the same distance from an antenna broadcasting the Old Time Gospel Hour, the county that received the signal experienced a reduction in the Democratic vote share in 1980, relative to 1976, equal to 1 percentage point. Importantly, however, religion still matters. That is, comparing counties within the same state and the same media environment, counties with more Evangelicals experienced a larger drop in support for Carter between 1976 and 1980.

Finally, in column 4, we examine the interaction between exposure to the Old Time Gospel Hour and religion. In terms of our hypotheses, on the one hand, Evangelicals would naturally view Falwell as a credible source and should thus respond more strongly to his message. On the other hand, Evangelicals might have already voted Republican prior to the 1980 election. It is also possible that Evangelical voters were reluctant to abandon the Evangelical candidate Jimmy Carter. In addition, our religion measures are as of 1972, and Falwell might have converted additional voters towards the Evangelical faith between 1972 and 1980. In terms of our findings, and as shown, we find no



statistically significant evidence of an interaction effect, and both exposure to the Old Time Gospel Hour and the share Evangelical continue to matter in explaining the shift from Carter in 1976 to Reagan in 1980.

Turning to the longer run trends, we provide event study estimates in Figure 4. This regression is run in levels of support for the Democratic candidate. Controls include demographics, with the effects allowed to vary by year, and election year by state fixed effects. We also include the free-space signal as a control and allow the effect of this to vary flexibly over election years. Finally, we normalize the effect in 1976, the first Jimmy Carter election to equal zero.

As shown, there are no effects of exposure to the Old Time Gospel Hour signal on the Democratic vote share in Presidential elections prior to the founding of the Moral Majority during the 1980 Presidential campaign. In addition, there is no evidence of pre-trends in support for Democratic candidates in these places with access to the Old Time Gospel Hour. In 1980, by contrast, there is a drop in support for the Democratic candidate Jimmy Carter and, equivalently, an increase in support for the Republican candidate Ronald Reagan. The magnitude of this effect, roughly 1 percentage point, is consistent with the effects documented in Table 5. This effect of exposure to the Old Time Gospel Hour persists into the 1984 election, under which Ronald Reagan was re-elected as President and also into 1988, when the Republican George H. Bush, the Vice President of Ronald Reagan, was elected as President. Consistent with the Moral Majority dissolving in 1989, the effects began to fade in 1992 and 1996, two elections in which the Democratic candidate Bill Clinton was elected as President.

Returning to the analysis of changes in support for Carter between 1976 and 1980, and for comparison with the existing literature, we next compute persuasion rates using the formula from DellaVigna and Kaplan (2007):

$$f = \frac{v_T - v_C}{(e_T - e_C)(1 - r)} \frac{(1 - r)t_C t_T}{d}$$

where  $v_T - v_C$  is the Democratic vote share difference between control and treated counties,  $e_T - e_C$  is the difference in exposure between treated and counties, and where  $r$  and  $d$  represent the fraction of eligible voters supporting the Republican and Democratic candidates, respectively, at baseline. Finally,  $t_C$  and  $t_T$  represent turnout rates in control counties and treatment counties, respectively. The first term captures the persuasion rate among the voting population, and the second term adjusts for turnout.

In computing the persuasion rate, we use a treatment effect of 0.0098 from column 1 of Table 5. This is the difference in the change in the Republican two-party vote share between 1976 and

1980. While we do not have measures of turnout rate at the county level, overall turnout in 1976, at baseline was 0.548, and we assume that this is the same in treatment and control counties.<sup>15</sup>

To compute exposure rates, we compare viewership among eligible voters in treated counties. Note that, according to our voting data, there were 1,606 counties that received the signal, and, on average in those counties, there were 36,648 votes for either Carter or Ford in 1976. Given this, we have roughly 59 million voters in treated counties; turnout rates of 0.548 at baseline implies a total number of eligible votes of 108 million in treated counties.

For viewership data, we rely primarily on a national survey of adults conducted in 1981 by the National Broadcasting Company (accessed via the Roper Center at Cornell University). According to the topline estimates, 10 percent of respondents report having watched Jerry Falwell’s Old Time Gospel Hour during the last month. With 162.8 million adults in the U.S. in the 1980 Census, this implies 16.3 million viewers of the show. While lower than Falwell’s claim of 25 million viewers, this is still substantially higher than Arbitron viewership estimates of the Old Time Gospel Hour, with 1.5 million viewers, as reported in Williams (2012). In understanding these differences, note that the higher figure, that from the survey, is based upon viewership in the past month, whereas the Arbitron estimate is a weekly measure. Also, note recall measures tend to be higher than diary-based measures in other settings as well. In DellaVigna and Kaplan (2007), for example, the recall measure is 3.43 times higher than the diary measure for CNN. Overall, the viewership of 16.3 million out of 108 million implies an exposure rate of 15.2 percent, and, for simplicity and due to data limitations, we assume an exposure rate of zero in control counties.

Plugging all of these factors into the formula above yields a persuasion rate of 6.7 percent. This persuasion rate is similar to the persuasion rates discussed in DellaVigna and Gentzkow (2010). For example, DellaVigna and Kaplan (2007) compute a persuasion rate of 11.6 percent and Enikolopov et al. (2011) compute a persuasion rate of 7.7 percent.

As a robustness check, we can use the Arbitron measure of 1.5 million viewers. This creates a substantially higher persuasion rate of 72.7 percent. There are several possible explanations for a high persuasion rate. First, a high degree of persuasion in our setting is consistent with the idea that, in the context of belief-based models, religious leaders might have very high source credibility in the eyes of their followers, an idea discussed in DellaVigna and Gentzkow (2010). Moreover, these so-called “single-issue voters” might be particularly responsive to endorsements by religious leaders. Second, it is possible that there were indirect effects, with Evangelical adherents or even local Evangelical leaders exposed to the Old Time Gospel Hour spreading the word to non-exposed

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<sup>15</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1976\\_United\\_States\\_presidential\\_election](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1976_United_States_presidential_election) (accessed October 2023)

Evangelical adherents in treatment counties.<sup>16</sup>

## 8 Conclusion

We study the role of religious leaders and voters in the U.S. and, in particular, support for Jimmy Carter, a Southern Democrat and the first Evangelical President. Using county-level data, we begin by documenting a shift in support away from Carter in 1976 towards Reagan in 1980 following the formation of the Moral Majority, a religious special interest group in the U.S. led by the televangelist Jerry Falwell during the Carter Administration. We find similar results when using data from two surveys, 1980 exit polls and the 1980 American National Election Survey (ANES). To better identify a role for the Moral Majority, we examine Falwell's televised ministry, the Old Time Gospel Hour, and document that exposure to this programming led to a shift in support away from Carter between 1976 and 1980. Thus, while the U.S. does not have an official religion, we document an important role for religious leaders and voters in potentially shaping policy via the selection of candidates with like-minded views on policy areas prioritized by the group.

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<sup>16</sup>Of course this persuasion rate could also be overstated. As noted above, the diary based measures are much lower than recall-based measures and this Arbitron estimate is based upon viewership for a single week.

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Figure 1: Within-state variation in share Evangelical

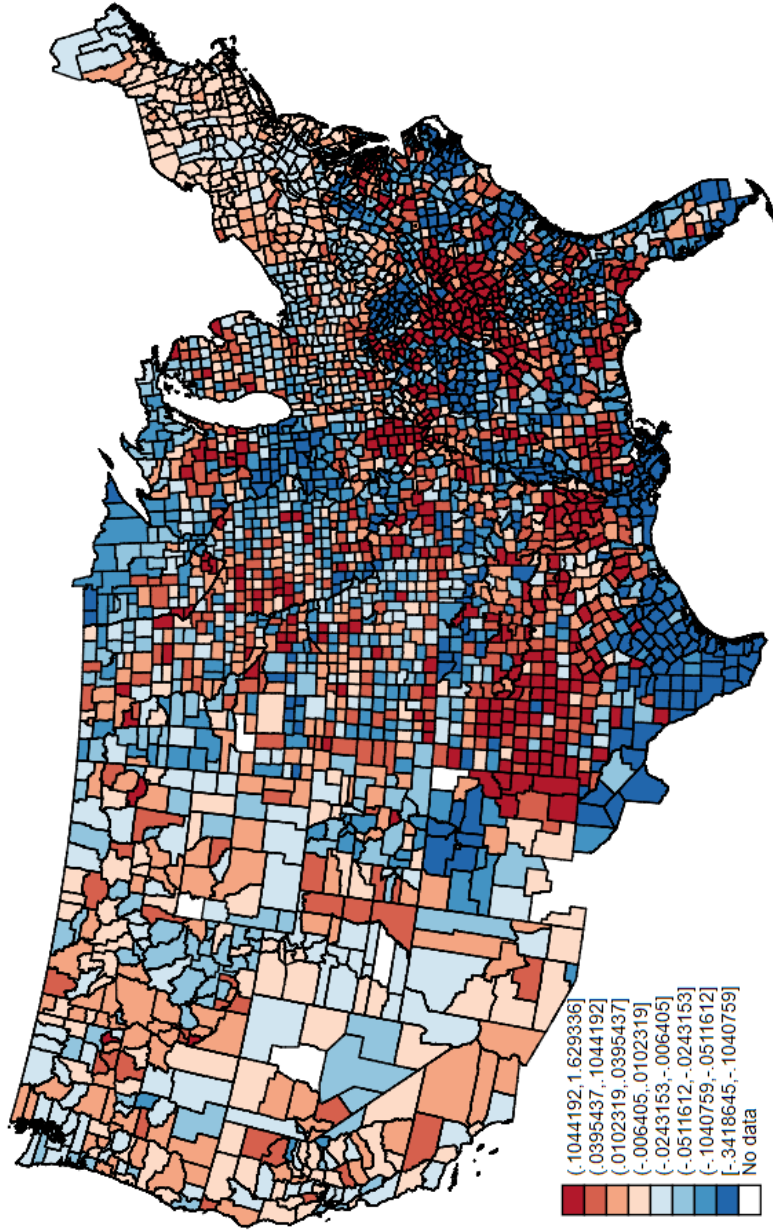


Figure 2: Within-state changes in Carter Vote Share

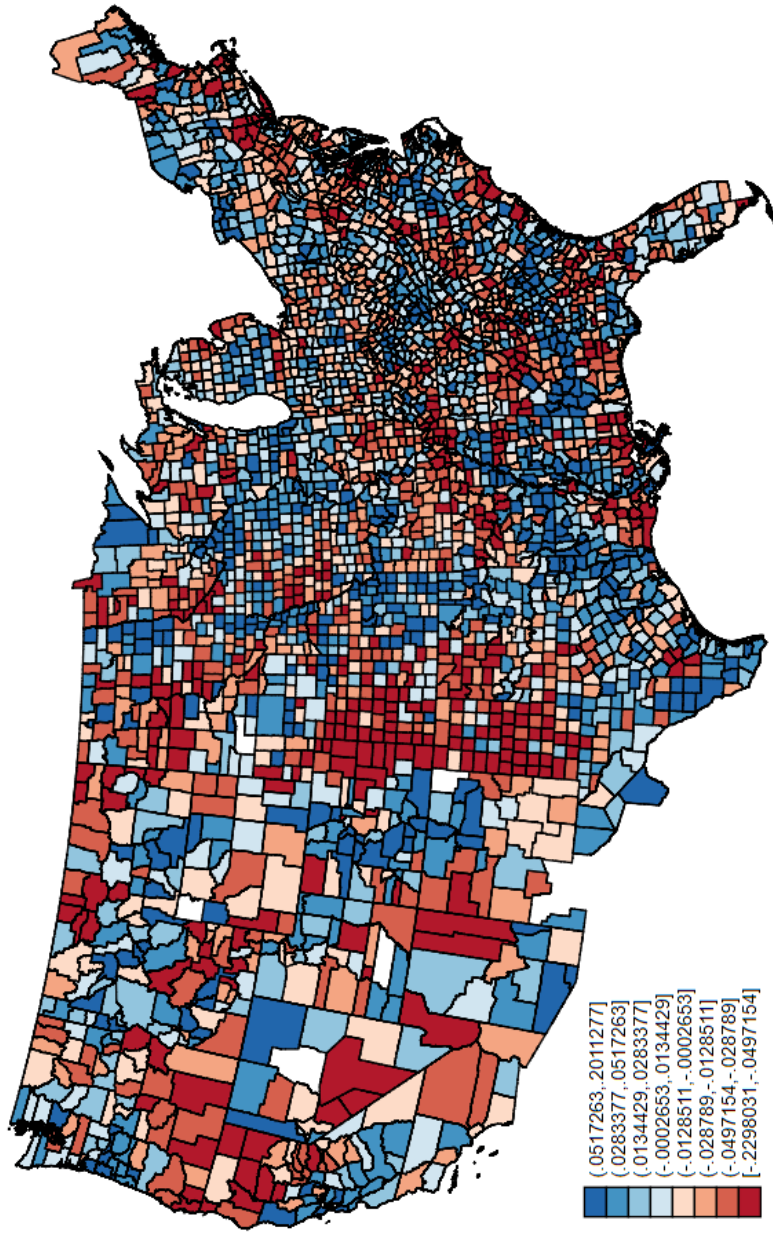


Figure 3: OTGH Antennas and county-level Exposure

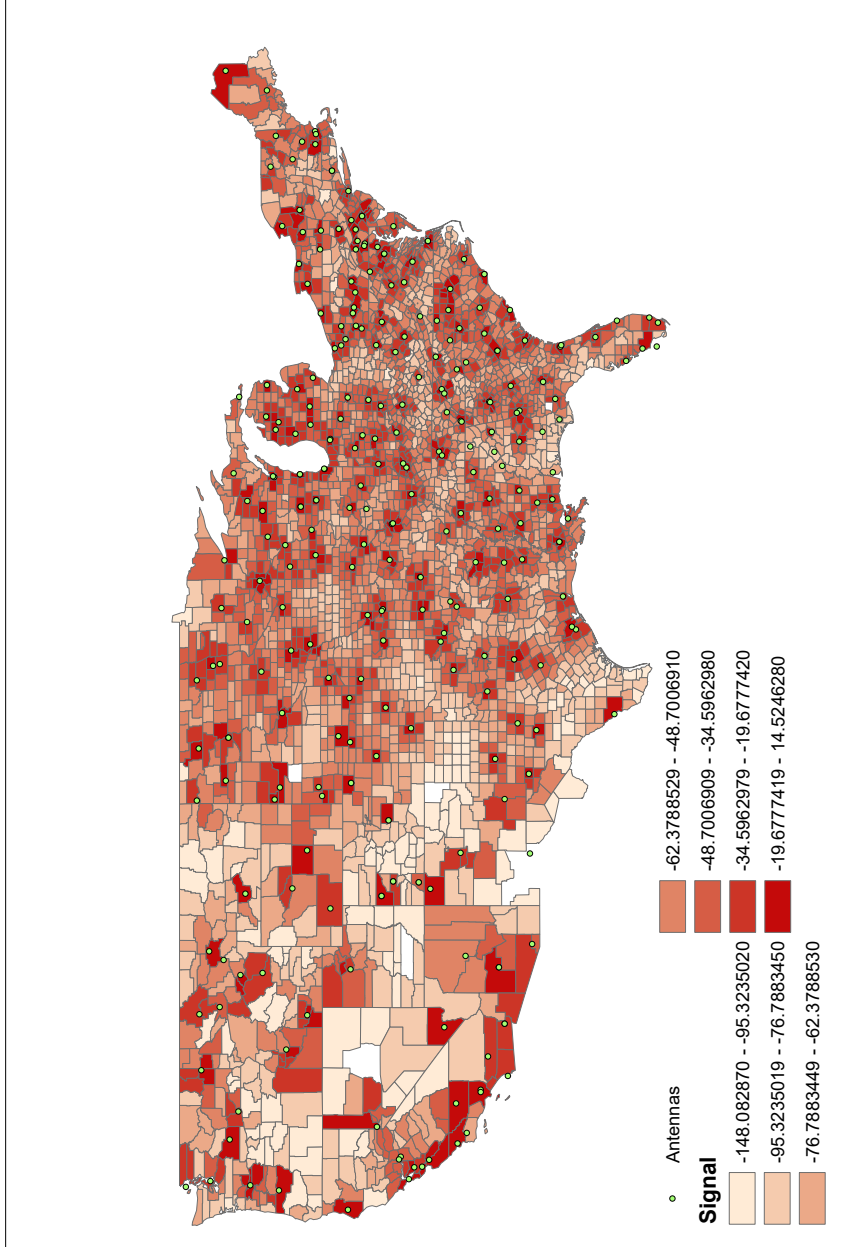




Figure 4: Effect of OTGH Exposure on Democratic Vote Share

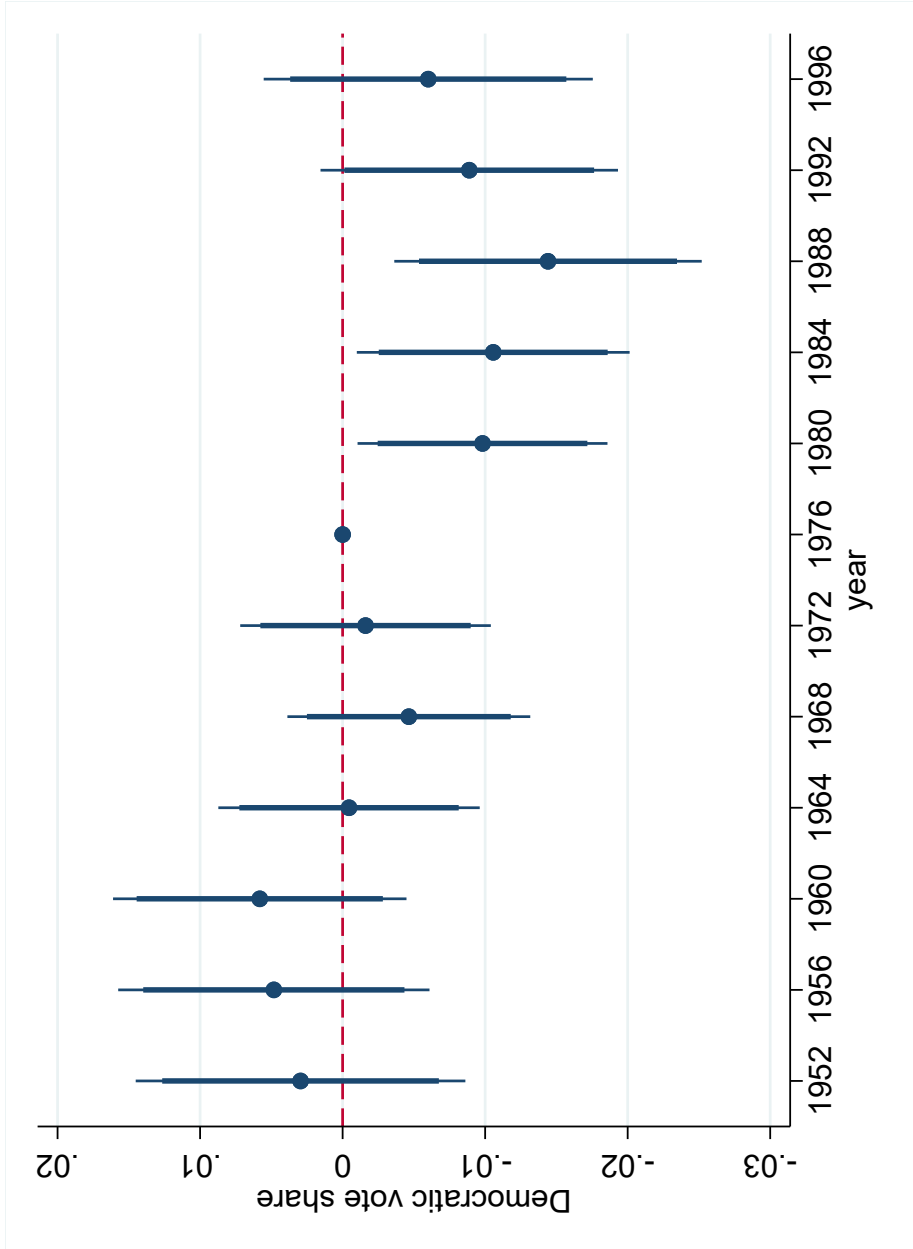


Table 1: Evangelical share and Change in Support for Carter

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	Chg Dem shr	Chg Dem shr	Chg Dem shr	Chg Dem shr	Chg Dem shr
Shr Evangelical	-0.0962*** (0.0110)	-0.0968*** (0.0132)	-0.1612*** (0.0264)	-0.1672*** (0.0276)	-0.0749*** (0.0118)
Shr Southern Baptist			0.0774*** (0.0286)		
Shr Southern Evangelical				0.0816*** (0.0290)	
Shr Mainline Protestant					0.0346*** (0.0129)
Shr Catholic					0.0393*** (0.0084)
Constant	-0.5373*** (0.0266)	-0.5159*** (0.0313)	-0.5390*** (0.0266)	-0.5394*** (0.0266)	-0.5431*** (0.0266)
Observations	3051	2217	3051	3051	3051

Standard errors in parentheses

Dependent variable is the county-level change in the Democratic Presidential two-party vote share from 1976 to 1980

Column 2 drops small counties, those under 10,000 population.

Controls include population, share black, share female, employment rates

\*  $p < 0.10$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$

Table 2: 1952 Evangelical share and Change in Support for Carter

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	Chg Dem shr	Chg Dem shr	Chg Dem shr	Chg Dem shr	Chg Dem shr
Shr Evangelical	-0.1057*** (0.0145)	-0.1093*** (0.0174)	-0.1170*** (0.0307)	-0.0954*** (0.0309)	-0.0599*** (0.0148)
Shr Southern Baptist			0.0142 (0.0343)		
Shr Southern Evangelical				-0.0128 (0.0339)	
Shr Mainline Protestant					0.0754*** (0.0150)
Shr Catholic					0.0781*** (0.0072)
Constant	-0.5531*** (0.0267)	-0.5304*** (0.0313)	-0.5533*** (0.0267)	-0.5529*** (0.0267)	-0.5416*** (0.0263)
Observations	3051	2217	3051	3051	3051

Standard errors in parentheses

Dependent variable: county-level change in the Democratic Presidential vote share 1976-1980

Column 2 drops small counties, those under 10,000 population.

Controls include population, share black, share female, employment rates

\*  $p < 0.10$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$

Table 3: Born Again and Change in Support for Carter (Exit Polls)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Chg in Carter vote	Chg in Carter vote	ERA/abortion key	ERA/abortion key
Born Again	-0.0407*** (0.0144)	-0.0461** (0.0189)	0.0382*** (0.0071)	0.0534*** (0.0089)
Observations	10372	4991	13535	6071

Standard errors in parentheses

The dependent variable in column 1 and 2 is the change in support for Carter between 1976 and 1980 (-1, 0, or 1)

The dependent variable in columns 3 and 4 is an indicator for respondents listing the ERA or Abortion as key issues in their 1980 vote

Columns 1 and 3 are based upon all respondents. Columns 2 and 4 keep only Protestants

Precinct FE

Controls include gender, age, education, and race

\*  $p < 0.10$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$

Table 4: Born Again and Change in Support for Carter (ANES)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Chg in Carter vote	Chg in Carter vote	Moral Majority feeling	Moral Majority feeling
Evangelical	-0.0796* (0.0473)	-0.0879* (0.0495)	3.5552 (2.3117)	2.1309 (2.4764)
Observations	1035	699	1073	706

Standard errors in parentheses

The dependent variable in column 1 and 2 is the change in support for Carter between 1976 and 1980 (-1, 0, or 1)

The dependent variable in columns 3 and 4 is an indicator for respondents listing the ERA or Abortion as key issues in their 1980 vote

Columns 1 and 3 are based upon all respondents. Columns 2 and 4 keep only Protestants

State FE

Controls include gender, age, education, and race

\*  $p < 0.10$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$

Table 5: OTGH Signal Strength and Change in Support for Carter

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Signal	Chg Dem shr -0.0098*** (0.0022)	Chg Dem shr -0.0101*** (0.0026)	Chg Dem shr -0.0095*** (0.0022)	Chg Dem shr -0.0117*** (0.0028)
Free-space signal	0.0014*** (0.0001)	0.0014*** (0.0001)	0.0014*** (0.0001)	0.0014*** (0.0001)
Shr Evangelical			-0.0915*** (0.0107)	-0.1001*** (0.0129)
Signal X Shr Evangelical				0.0158 (0.0130)
Constant	-0.4546*** (0.0277)	-0.4313*** (0.0325)	-0.4404*** (0.0275)	-0.4375*** (0.0276)
Observations	3051	2217	3051	3051

Standard errors in parentheses

Dependent variable is the county-level change in the Democratic Presidential two-party vote share from 1976 to 1980

Column 1 is based upon all counties. Column 2 drops small counties, those under 10,000 population.

Controls include population, share black, share female, employment rates

\*  $p < 0.10$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$