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URBS-2200 Introduction to GIS Methods
Final Report

Support for LGBTQ Rights, Evangelism, and Political Approval: An Obama-Trump Comparison

Project Summary

This project seeks to identify changes in political authoritarianism in the continental United States by comparing evangelism and presidential approval. Furthermore, given the baseline understanding of the relationship between evangelism and presidential support and the correlation that this has to greater authoritarianism, this project is interested in the seemingly paradoxical trend of greater American acceptance for the LGBTQ community. The project uses GIS methods to determine if national trends on these topics are reflected at the state level.

Background

During the 2016 presidential election, political scientists focused extensively on the predicative traits of Trump voters, given the unprecedented nature of then-candidate Donald Trump's campaign. In essence, they were interested in determining the catalyst for Trump's initial success in the primaries and later electoral success over Hillary Clinton. Recent research has indicated that the strongest predictor of support for Donald Trump during the 2016 was actually authoritarianism.

Authoritarianism is generally defined as a psychological profile of individuals who prefer "conformity to authorities and norms within the groups with which they identify."[1] Generally, voters with large authoritarian traits are attracted to "strong leaders who promise whatever action necessary to protect them from outsiders and prevent the changes they fear."[2] Research has further indicated that voters who score highly on authoritarian markers are more likely to be whiter, more nationalist, and more religious, especially evangelical voters.

As authoritarianism is a psychological and personality trait, there are no good statistical or public opinion data on measures of it, meaning that surveyors have to extrapolate measures. The objectively strongest measure was pioneered by Stanley Feldman who developed a survey using parenting goals as a proxy for authoritarianism, to determine how much participants valued "hierarchy, order, and conformity."[3] This survey asks participants to give their preferences to

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[1] Christopher Weber, Christopher Federico, Stanley Feldman. "How authoritarianism is shaping American politics (and it's not just about Trump)." *The Monkey Cage- Washington Post*. May 10, 2017.
[2] Amanda Taub. "The rise of American authoritarianism." *Vox*. March 1, 2016.
[3] Ibid.

four parenting questions: what is more important for a child to have (independence/respect for elders), (obedience/self-reliance), (to be considerate/well-behaved), (to have curiosity/good manners)? It should be noted that authoritarianism does not mean that people wish to live in a totalitarian or anti-democratic political system, but rather that these people prefer conformity to authorities. While this survey is a strong correlation predictor of authoritarianism, there is little to no state-based and publicly accessible data available (this topic will be discussed more in the limitations section of this report).

Purpose

My research aims to analyze a paradox in the current research regarding political partisanship, and support for LGBTQ marriage in the United States. This is a subject which has received insufficient rigorous analysis in recent years as general national aggregate levels of support for LGBTQ people have grown while authoritarianism (and its general disdain for trends which buck the status quo) has also grown.

Generally, the United States has become less religious in recent years, but the number of self-identified evangelical Christians has not been significantly declining, and if anything, this group has been growing.[4] Additionally, this religious group has been highly involved with the Republican party and perhaps paradoxically, has been highly supportive of President Trump. While there has been generally a trend towards decreased authoritarianism among self-ascribed Democrats, while the national average among Republicans has grown slightly leading to a greater partisan gap. Paradoxically, there has also been a widespread emergence in public support for LGBTQ people in the United States (national aggregates estimate national support for LGBTQ marriage in 2006 was around 35% and 55% in 2016).[5] I'm interested in researching how these variables relate to the general growing support for LGBTQ people.

Literature Review

As noted above, in recent years there has been a dramatic increase in the literature on political authoritarianism in the United States and its relationship to the development of the highly partisan political climate. However, authoritarianism has been a topic within the political science literature since the 1960's, when scholars first became interested in measuring the causal variables for intolerance, specifically anti-Semitism towards Jewish Americans.

Previous political science research has emphasized the role of equalitarianism and egalitarianism in American politics. Specifically, research has focused on how higher regional measures of self-described equalitarianism are correlated with greater advocacy for racial and gender equal opportunity measures, as and are evidenced by greater "education, media exposure, political knowledge" (Whitten, 2007). Additionally, levels of self-reported equalitarianism are

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[4] Masci, David & Lipka, Michael. "Americans may be getting less religious, but feelings of spirituality are on the rise." Pew Research Center, January 21, 2016.

[5] Pew Research Center. "Support steady for same-sex marriage and acceptance of homosexuality." May 12, 2016.

highly associated with political authoritarianism, especially when considering social (for example reproductive and women's and LGBTQ rights) and national defense issues, however this association is weaker when considering social welfare and foreign policy (Cizmar, et al 2014). However, little research has specifically analyzed the relationship between equalitarianism as reported by the ANES and levels of religious commitment, a variable which is frequently associated with greater levels of political authoritarianism.

Examples of representative studies on this subject have included Marc J. Hetherington and Jonathan Daniel Weiler's book "Authoritarianism and polarization in American politics." The authors argue that while the "elites" have been polarized for a significant amount of time, "ordinary" Americans are also polarized, specifically with how people view "right and wrong and good and evil" resulting in what is in their view, authoritarianism. They find that differences in key social issues, such as gay marriage, actually reflect differences in innate psychological and political authoritarianism.

Data

- Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI)
    - PRRI American Values Survey (2012, 2017)
    - PRRI June and January Surveys (2012, 2017)
    - PRRI/RNS Religion and Culture Surveys (2012, 2017)
        - PRRI has conducted a significant number of longitudinal studies on religion and public opinion in the United States. I ended up using PRRI's data exclusively for the maps below because the studies generally had similar N sizes and question wording remained consistent over time. One challenge with using this data, which will be discussed more below in the limitations section are the small N sizes and geographic weighting of participants.
- Pew Research Group
    - American Trends Panel (2017)
        - I used several of Pew's studies on religion in the United States to find data on religious affiliation and public opinion before finding that Pew did not conduct longitudinal studies for two of the questions I was interested in mapping.
- Gallup Analytics Corporation
    - Religion and Ethics Survey (2012)
        - I used publicly accessible data from the Gallup Organization to find levels of religiosity for 2012 (this map was not included in the final report due to limited data accessibility for the 2017-2018 period). I also used Gallup's aggregate presidential approval numbers which I used to compare to my final dataset from PRRI.

Findings:

Generally, this research project found no discernably statistically significant findings in the relationship between evangelism, support for either President Barack Obama or President Trump and support or hostility towards LGBT rights. Much of this can be attributed to small sample sizes which are not truly representative of the demographics and broader public opinion of the population. However, this also implies the ease with which data can be manipulated to fulfill a specific political or social motivation if proper procedures and protocols are not followed.
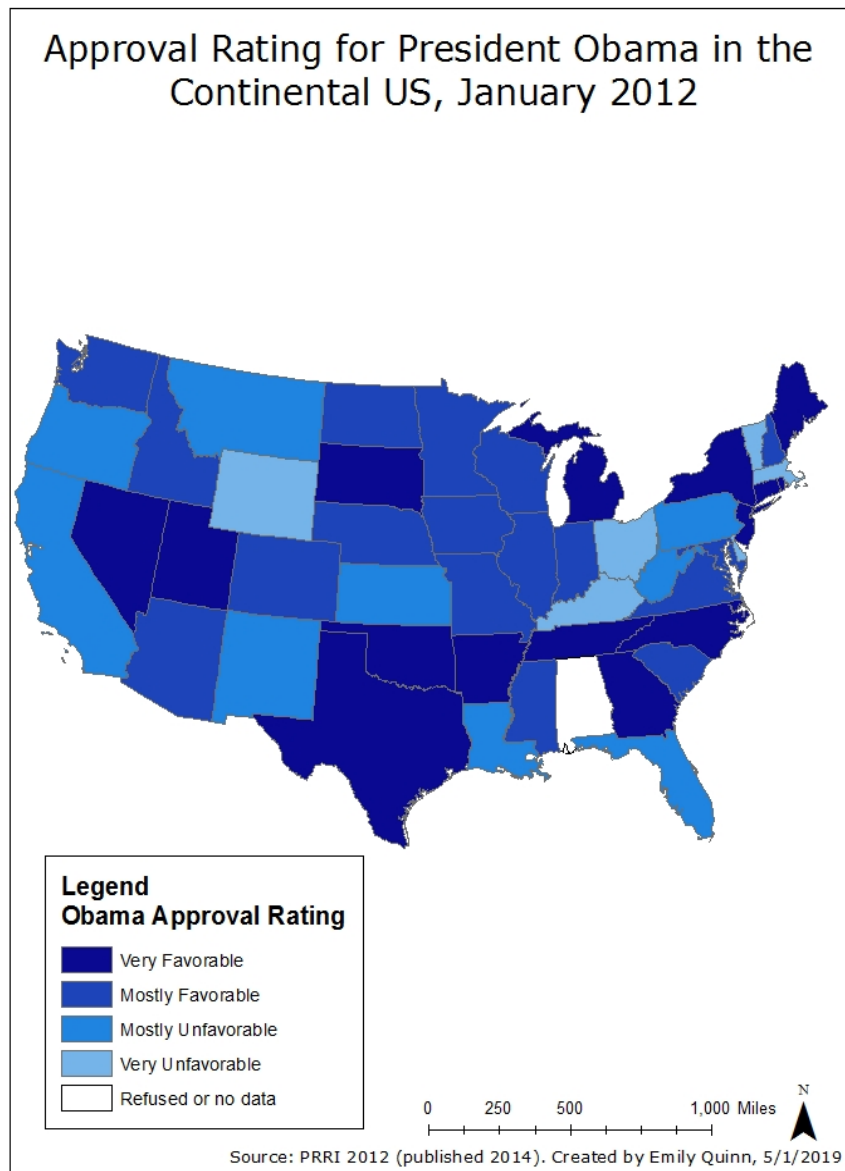
Map 1. President Barack Obama's approval rating in the continental United States. Data was collected by the Public Religion Research Institute as part of its biannual survey on American public opinion trends. This map illustrates Obama generally had a fairly high approval rating, although the small size (N = 1,005) means that these findings should not be taken as representative.
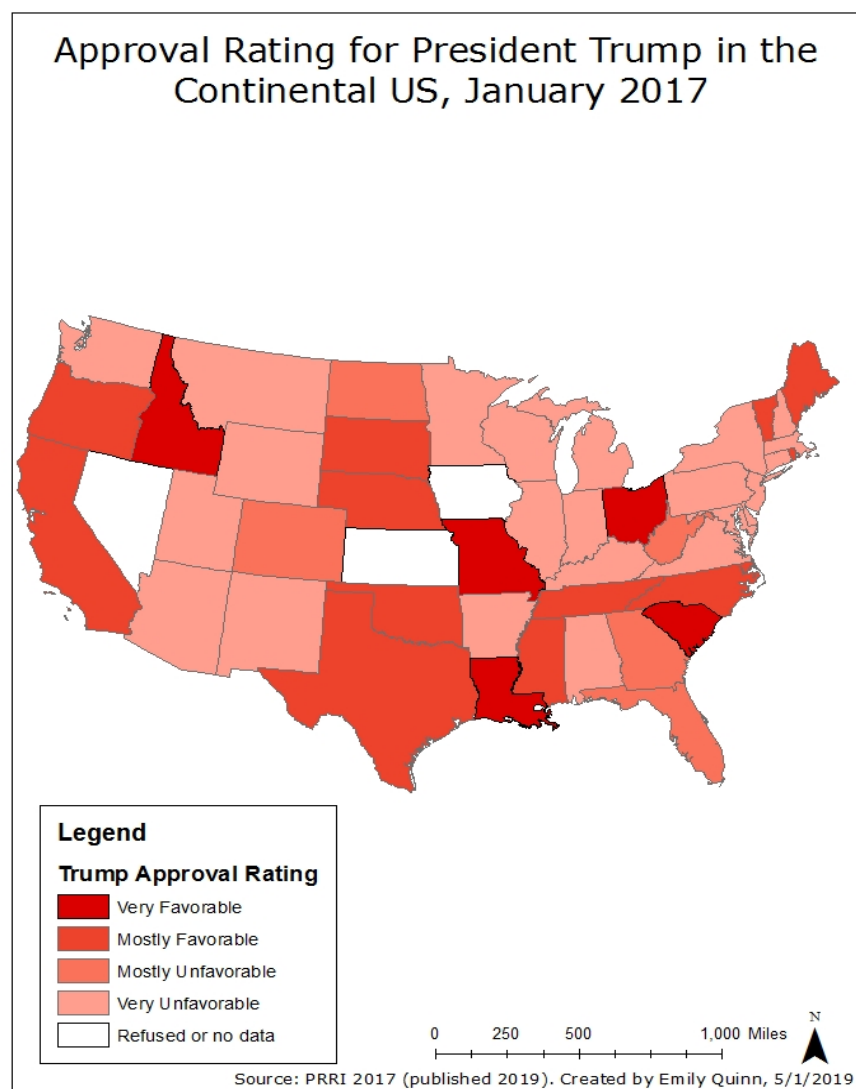
Map 2. President Donald Trump's approval rating in January 2017. Data was collected by the Public Religion Research Institute as part of its biannual survey on American public opinion trends. As mentioned above, the small sample size (N = 1,013) accounts for the somewhat surprising results of this survey.

Support for LGBTQ Marriage in the Continental United States (2012)

Legend
Support for LGBTQ Marriage 2012
- Strongly Support
- Support
- Oppose
- Strongly Oppose

Source: PRRI 2012 (published 2014). Created by Emily Quinn, 5/1/2019
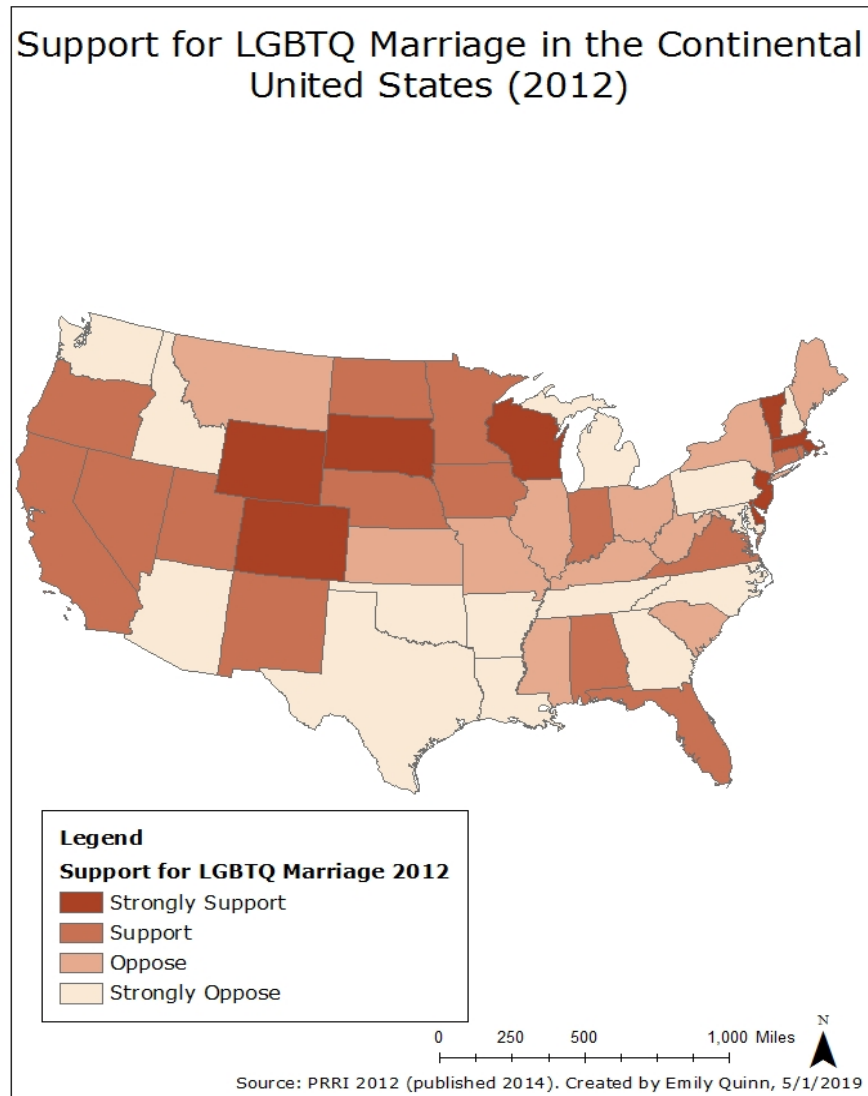
Map 3. Support for LGBTQ marriage in the continental United States in 2012. The map shows that few states strongly supported gay marriage in 2012 while strong opposition was mostly concentrated in the south. Again, the small sample size (N = 1,022) limits the extractability of these findings. This data came from the PRRI's annual June survey on American values and LGBT issues.
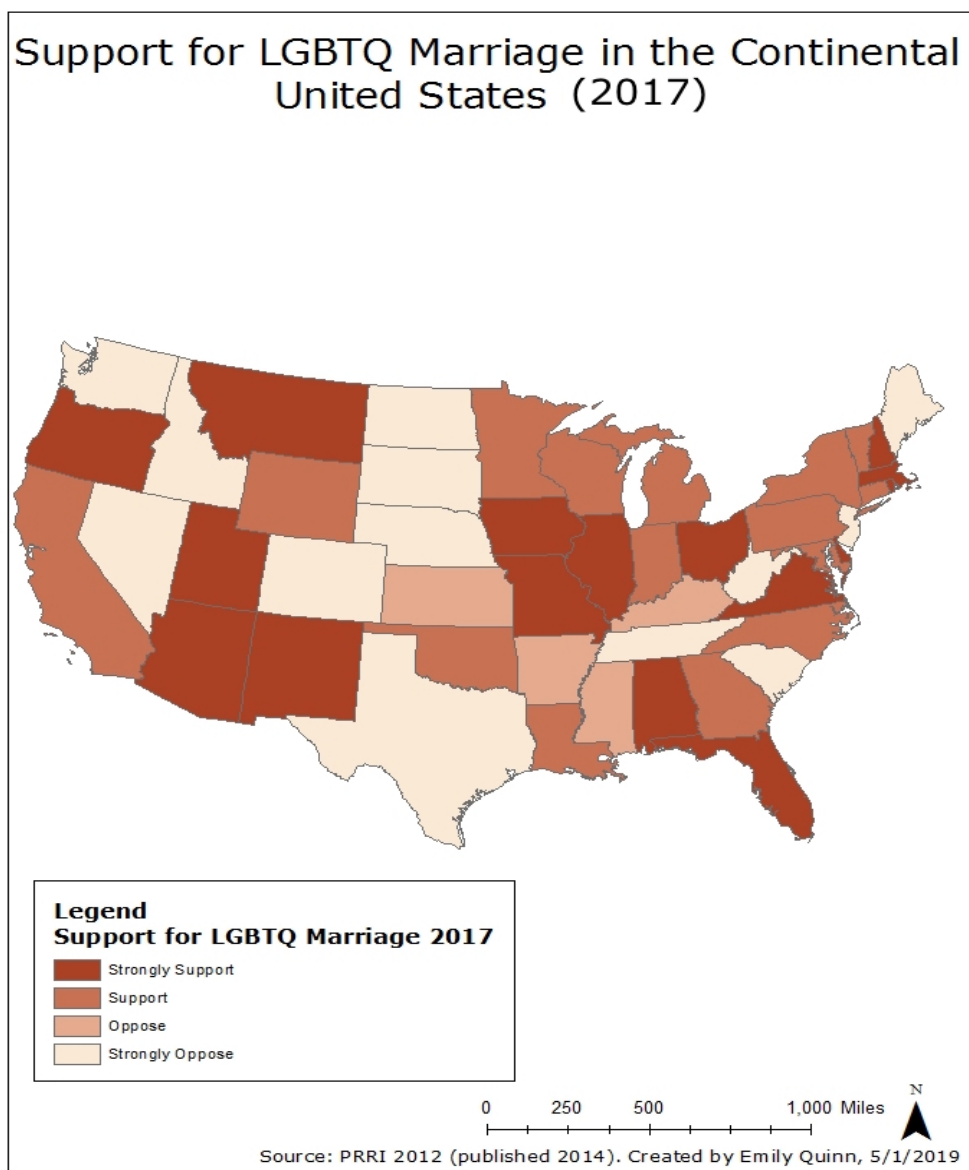
Map
4. Support for LGBTQ marriage in the continental United States in 2017. The data presented in this map appears to present the argument that support for LGBT marriage has become stratified throughout the United States. Again, the small sample size, while larger than the previous studies should still not be considered representative of the broader US public opinion (N = 2,024). This data came from the PRRI's annual August survey on American values and LGBT issues.
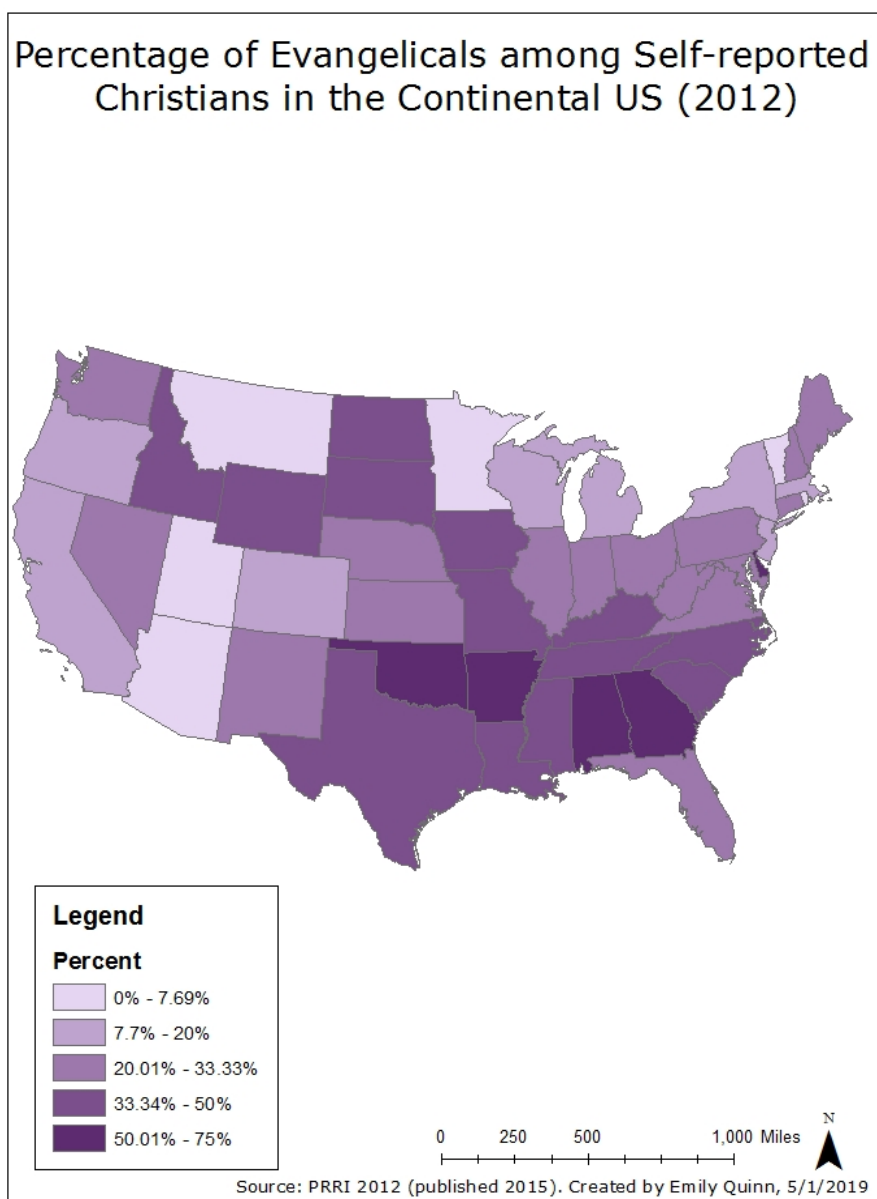
Map 5. Number of evangelical or born-again Christians as a percent of the total self-described Christian population in the continental United States in 2012. This data came from the PRRI's annual survey on American religion and culture. N = 3,033.

Percentage of Evangelicals among Self-reported Christians in the Continental US (2017)

Legend

Percent

- 0% - 11.11%
- 11.12% - 21.52%
- 21.53% - 32.08%
- 32.09% - 41.18%
- 41.19% - 60%

Source: PRRI 2017 (published 2018). Created by Emily Quinn, 5/1/2019
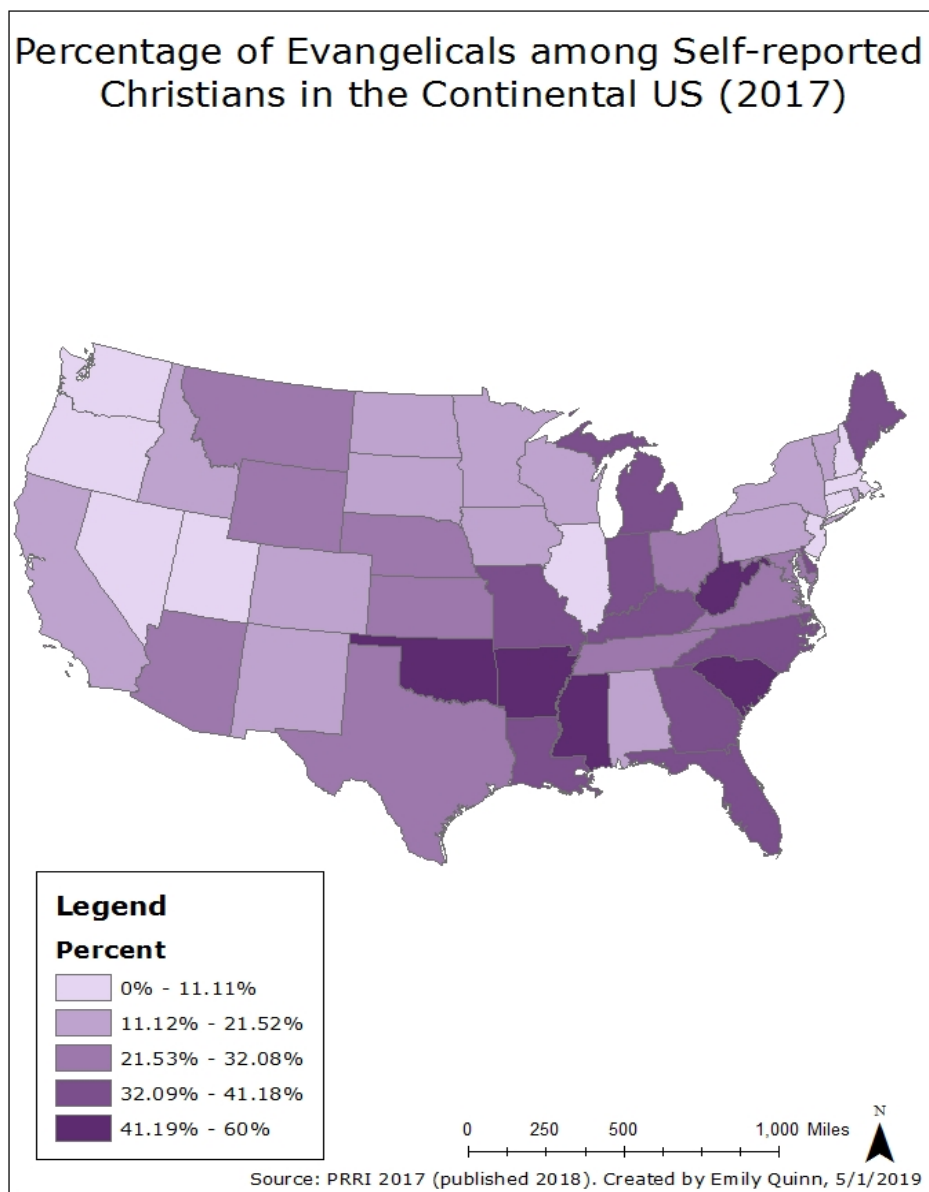
Map 6. Number of evangelical or born-again Christians as a percent of the total self-described Christian population in the continental United States in 2017. This data came from the PRRI's annual survey on American religion and culture. N = 2,019.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this analysis. As mentioned previously, there were numerous issues with data collection and analysis. Limitations with data methodology include questions about whether the wording of questions changed over time (for many surveys wording does change, resulting in potential biases), very small sample sizes which may not be representative of actual public opinion or demographics at the state level nor statistically significant, and the timing of questions (for both longitudinal and non-longitudinal surveys). For example, there was little publicly accessible data for the period before 2009 or after 2017. Another challenge for this project was public privacy for participants in public opinion surveys. Due to privacy concerns, organizations usually only record the state or geographic region where a participant lives. In some cases, organizations collect no geographic data at all. This makes making public opinion answers particularly challenging. Additionally, there are human error concerns in this study. As all of the data analyzed above was not ready for GIS analysis, it required that I download the files and analysis the variables in SPSS. This opens the possibility of human error, especially when analyzing so many datasets.

Beyond methodological concerns, there is the question of actual measuring authoritarianism which the motivating purpose of this research project was. As the maps presented above are representing trends over time to see if aggregate statistical models of authoritarianism, which often rely on self-report from either survey. This is a challenging variable to measure because participants are unlikely to want to present accurate representations of their true levels of authoritarianism to surveyors.

Recommendations and general conclusions

The limited findings of this research project should be considered preliminary, at best, as this analysis is really better fit for a statistical and correlational model. The geographic component does not really reflect much substantive information, beyond displaying the data percentages at the state level. While this could be illustrative of broader trends, the limited accurate and representative data actually may be misleading.

Future GIS work on public opinion models could improve on some of these limitations by focusing at a more granular level (i.e. county or ZIP code) to measure localized public opinion, where data may be more accurate and representative.

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Appendix A

Average score on authoritarianism index

1.0

0.72 Republicans

0.65

0.5

0.46 Democrats

0.0
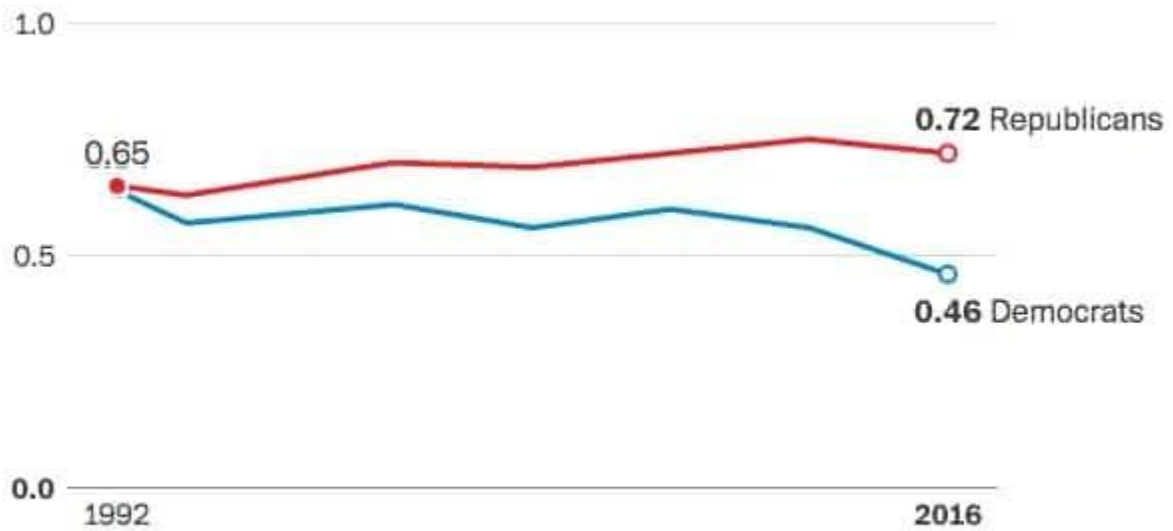
1992

2016

Surveys conducted in 1992, 1994, 2000, 2004, 2008, 2012, and 2016

Source: American National Election Study

THE MONKEY CAGE