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Faith Trumps Climate Change: The Engagement of White Evangelicals with Climate Change Narratives

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Abstract

In spite of the nearly global consensus amongst scientists regarding the imminent and devastating impacts of climate change, U.S. President Donald Trump has implemented and repealed nearly one hundred legislations to the detriment of the environment on both domestic and international levels. Often referred to as the "worst President for the environment in history," his support amongst white evangelicals is also the highest in history, with 81% voting for him in the 2016 presidential election. As one of the most consistent and dependable voting blocks for the Republican party since President Ronald Reagan's administration, white evangelicals play a significant and strategic role in influencing and informing the political landscape, including decisions related to the environment. This has occurred in spite of the fact that white evangelicals comprise only 16% of the U.S. population; a number that is steadily declining. Therefore, the goal of this paper is to examine how white evangelicals manage to influence environmental policies, or lack thereof, in the era of President Trump. By utilizing a qualitative methodological approach that draws on materials ranging from legislative documents to news media articles, and by leveraging theories of the power elite by C. Wright Mills and G. William Domhoff, this paper determines that white evangelicals employ three key narratives to manipulate the political landscape against pro-environmental policies. The first narrative relies on a literal interpretation of the Bible. The second narrative involves the conflation of the white evangelical identity with the conservative Republican identity. The third narrative, which has been increasingly leveraged in the age of President Trump, involves the vilification and demonization of environmentalists and of those on the Left. These findings demonstrate the contemporary mechanisms through which the white evangelical identity is operationalized for political power, particularly through climate change-related policies. While the rationale and motivations of white evangelicals to influence policies, such as those related to women's reproductive rights, may be more obvious, those related to environmental policies are more complex. Therefore, this paper also examines the rationale and motivation behind this political stance, which has important implications for understanding and predicting future political stances and strategies of white evangelicals, as well as the actions necessary to democratize their influence in U.S. politics.

Keywords: climate change; white evangelicals; Donald Trump; conservative Republicans

Introduction

Since the 1980s, white evangelicals in the U.S. have gained increasing power and prestige within the Republican party and amongst the conservative Republican[1] electorate. This power and prestige have been accompanied by conservative and value driven[2] policy positions on a variety of topics ranging from women's reproductive rights to the environment. Over time, the policy positions of white evangelicals[3] and of conservative Republicans have become more closely aligned to the point where many of their positions, and the rationale that they use to justify them, is indistinguishable.

For many, evangelicalism is not simply a religious ideology or a set of beliefs; it is an all-encompassing identity that necessarily shapes and informs all actions and decisions. Therefore, when evangelicals enter and occupy spaces of incredible responsibility and power, such as the White House, their identity is often reflected in the language that they use and the policies that they put forward. The topic of climate change,[4] in particular, has illustrated how one's religious identity and ideology have the ability to shape and to determine one's perspective and position on the issue, as well as one's perspective regarding the role that the government ought to play in addressing it.

Generally, white evangelicals exhibit disinterest, disbelief, or hostility towards the concept of climate change, and of the government's role or responsibility to address it. I will demonstrate that this collective political stance is largely fueled by the deployment of a series of religious, political, and partisan narratives by white evangelical leaders, which are then absorbed and embodied within the white evangelical community.

Narratives are discursive tools through which truths and values may be communicated. They are employed by individuals and communities to help make sense of various concepts and events, thereby acting as one of the primary means through which individuals establish their personal and collective identity (Ricoeur, 1981; Bruner, 1993; Ingram, Ingram, & Lejano, 2019). White evangelicals frame and understand the issue of climate change through three key narratives. The first is rooted in their literal interpretation of the Bible; the second is rooted in their relationship with the conservative Republican party and identity; and the third is rooted in their vilification of environmentalists.

While narratives regarding climate change amongst the white evangelical community have existed and persisted since approximately the 1980s, their presence and influence in U.S. politics has been minimal. This changed, however, through the election of President Donald Trump in 2016. Throughout his presidential campaign, and since his election, Trump has surrounded himself with prominent white evangelical leaders. He has also embraced the (largely) unwavering support of the white evangelical community, and has incorporated their rhetoric and policy positions into many of his speeches, statements, executive orders, etc. With this in mind,

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[1] Conservative Republicans are those who maintain a conservative ideology regarding the role of the government and strongly align with the Republican identity. A conservative ideology often leans towards limiting government action and involvement; however, the Republican identity is often quite friendly to large corporations and executives.

[2] A number of conservatives refer to themselves as "value voters." Value voters are motivated primarily by an interest in upholding conservative social values.

[3] For the purpose of this paper, "white evangelicals" refers to a political and social group of people.

[4] Climate change refers to long-term transformations in the Earth's climate. Science has demonstrated that contemporary climate change is primarily anthropogenic, meaning that it has resulted from, or has been produced by human beings and their activity (IPCC, 2012).

the second goal of this paper is to examine how and why the various narratives espoused by white evangelicals regarding climate change have been particularly effective (in their objective to influence government action on climate change) in the era of President Trump.

Climate change policies are crafted and executed by the most powerful individuals in the U.S., and while many of these individuals operate within the political sphere, several are located in other institutions. As such, to understand how white evangelicals are able to effectively shape and execute narratives regarding climate change to influence government action on climate change, I will engage the concept of the power elite. Originally proposed by Charles Wright Mills in, *The Power Elite* (1959), the power elite describes a network of individuals within the economic, political, and military sectors who shape and control every aspect of American life.

While Mills' work is a useful starting point to understand how power is concentrated at the top of American society rather than equally dispersed amongst its citizens, it claims are somewhat outdated. Since its publication, white evangelicals and other groups to a lesser extent, such as the Conference of Catholic Bishops, have not only entered into these institutions, but they now occupy some of their top leadership positions. As such, to supplement Mills' work, I will also consider the "four network theory of power," as described by G. William Domhoff (2012). While Domhoff generally agrees with Mills' theory of power, he argues that there is another sphere that wields enormous social power: the religious sphere. This theory of the power elite is more comprehensive as it acknowledges the role and influence of religious leaders, groups, and ideologies in U.S. institutions.

To examine how white evangelicals shape and mobilize narratives to advance anti-environmental policies, I leveraged qualitative secondary research methods. Sources were gathered from political science, religion and culture, environmental, and government databases[5] on topics regarding white evangelicals in the U.S., conservative Republicans, environmental[6] and climate change perspectives, religious perspectives, and partisan affiliations. The contents of these sources provided a necessary historical and contextual framework through which government action on climate change, as well as the development of evangelical perspectives towards the topic, have evolved since the late 1970s.

Secondary sources such as news media articles, and primary sources such as speeches, blog posts, bills, and interviews, were then gathered to understand how conservative Republican white evangelicals mobilize and engage with the issue of climate change. Many of these sources were traced to white evangelical elites[7] and to three key conservative organizations: the Cornwall

[5] The following databases were used for this paper: Political Science @ ProQuest, Political Science @ EBSCOhost, Atla Religion Database with AtlaSerials, GreenFILE, and First Gov Search.

[6] For the purpose of this paper, "environmental" means "concerned with the protection of the natural world of land, sea, air, plants, and animals" (Collins English Dictionary, n.d.).

[7] For the purpose of this paper, 'white evangelical elites' refers to members of the conservative Republican white evangelical community in leadership positions. This includes pastors, scholars, and politicians, as well as any other individual who has a tangible community of support or trust.

Alliance,[8] the Heartland Institute,[9] and the Heritage Foundation.[10] Examination of these sources revealed how the majority of narratives espoused by the white evangelical community are often traced to white evangelical elites, and then embraced by the white evangelical electorate. The language of policymakers, including Trump, were then analysed and compared to those used by white evangelical to understand if and how they affected government action on climate change.

A variety of factors have contributed to the rise of white evangelicals in U.S. conservative Republican politics, and to the formation of their understanding of climate change. The next section examines a number of these factors to develop a foundation through which the narratives espoused by white evangelicals regarding climate change may be examined, as well as a framework through which the particular effectiveness of these narratives during the era of President Trump may be understood.

White Evangelicals in the U.S. and Amongst the Power Elite

White evangelicals represent a distinct and powerful political and social group in the U.S. The National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), an association that represents more than 45,000 Christian evangelical churches in the U.S., defines the evangelical community, and distinguishes them from other religious groups and Christian denominations, through the following characteristics:

- Conversionism: the belief that lives need to be transformed through a "born-again" experience and a life-long process of following Jesus
- Activism: the expression and demonstration of the gospel in missionary and social reform efforts
- Biblicism: a high regard for and obedience to the Bible as the ultimate authority
- Crucicentrism: a stress on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross as making possible the redemption of humanity (NAE)

As of the late 2010s, white evangelicals comprised 16% of the U.S. adult population; a 3% decrease since 2009 (Pew Research Center, 2019). This trend is particularly interesting because, while the population of white evangelicals has steadily declined, their relative power and presence in U.S. institutions has increased, most notably since the election of Trump. In *Faith in the Halls of Power*, Michael Lindsay describes how this occurred (2007). Prior to the 1970s, evangelicals were largely relegated to the private sphere. Throughout his book, Lindsay guides readers through the political, social, and cultural landscapes through which evangelicals rose to power. Drawing on interviews with some of the country's most prominent evangelical leaders, Lindsay determined that the rise and dominance of evangelicals may be observed in four key areas of American life and in the upper echelons of power: (1) politics; (2) academia; (3)

[8] Formerly known as the Interfaith Stewardship Alliance, the Cornwall Alliance was created in 2006 by Dr. Calvin Beisner. The conservative organization routinely publishes papers and articles on topics related to Biblical perspectives and interpretations regarding climate change and provides recommendations on local and national policies related to climate change.

[9] The Heartland Institute is a conservative think tank based in the U.S. It was created in 1984 by David H. Padden and Joseph L. Bast. It provides research and policy recommendations on issues ranging from climate change to education.

[10] Founded in 1973, "The mission of The Heritage Foundation is to formulate and promote conservative public policies based on the principles of free enterprise, limited government, individual freedom, traditional American values, and a strong national defence."

popular culture; and, (4) business. He concluded that the implications of the presence of evangelicals in these sectors has redefined America's power elite (Lindsay, 2007).

Lindsay's research is useful as he explains how evangelicals have come to occupy and influence high-level positions in the White House. Some of Trump's closest allies in his administration, including Vice President Mike Pence and his personal spiritual advisor, Paula White, amongst numerous others, are evangelicals whose identities inevitably inform their decisions and the advice that they give to the President. In fact, Trump, more so than previous presidents, has surrounded the White House with white evangelicals who are quick to support his policy decisions, such as his withdrawal from the Paris Agreement (PA), or to jump to his defence, as was observed throughout his impeachment in late 2019 and early 2020.

White Evangelicals and Conservative Republicans

The rise of white evangelicals into America's power elite has occurred in tandem with their alignment with the conservative Republican identity and ideology (Egan, 2018). The reverse may also be observed as the conservative Republican identity and ideology has increasingly aligned itself with – and has been shaped and informed by – the identity and ideology of white evangelicals (Margolis, 2017; Margolis, 2018). Diversity certainly exists within each of these identities and ideologies; not all white evangelicals are conservative Republicans, and not all conservative Republicans are white evangelicals. However, research has demonstrated that the relationship between these two groups is significant and noteworthy insofar as it has led to the development of an increasingly powerful political front whose elite members have been able to shift politics in their favour (Lindsay, 2007). Understanding the dynamics through which these processes of identity and relationship construction occur is necessary to understanding how white evangelicals utilize their religious identity and ideology to shape narratives and to influence government action regarding climate change.

Although white evangelicals have engaged in American politics at various levels and in various capacities since the nineteenth century, their overt alignment with the conservative Republicans was arguably marked by the 1980 presidential campaign of presidential candidate Ronald Reagan (Lindsay, 2007). At the time, white evangelicals felt disenfranchised and misrepresented by President Jimmy Carter, because, even though Carter identified as an evangelical, the community felt that many of Carter's actions and policy decisions, such as his refusal to exclude homosexuals at the 1980 White House Conference on Families, did not reflect their more conservative brand of politics (Lindsay, 2007). During the 1980 election, Reagan stepped in to fill this void. He did so by aligning many of his policies with the ideological positions of the evangelical community, such as those regarding women's reproductive rights and LGBTQ+ rights. At an event sponsored by the Religious Roundtable in Dallas, Texas in 1980, Reagan told the religiously devout crowd, "… I know that you can't endorse me, but… I want you to know that I endorse you..." Since this time, Republican candidates, and to a lesser extent, Democratic candidates, have courted white evangelicals and their ideologies to maximize their chances of winning elections. Trump, however, appears to have taken this relationship to another level, as is demonstrated through his development of the Evangelical Advisory Board (EAB), and through the unprecedented access to the White House provided to its members; something that did not exist in previous administrations. The access will be described in the following section.

White Evangelicals & President Trump

Although the relationship between white evangelicals and the Republican party has been fairly stable since President Reagan's administration (Lindsay, 2007), their relationship with President Trump during his campaign and throughout his presidency has been unique and impactful in various ways. For example, in July 2017, Trump announced via Twitter, "… that the United States will not accept or allow transgender individuals to serve in any capacity in the U.S. Military" (realDonaldTrump, 2017). While Trump claimed that this decision was taken in consultation with high-ranking military officials, a number of military officials and Defence Chiefs disputed this claim (The Guardian, 2017; Levin, 2017). Later, it was determined that this policy recommendation originated from conversations between Trump and Tony Perkins, a member of Trump's EAB, and the President of the Family Research Council. Following the announcement, Perkins had the privilege of co-authoring the official report (2018) with Vice President Pence and Ryan Anderson, a member of the Heritage Foundation (Santoscoy, 2018). This incident, and others like it, are unique to Trump's administration because, unlike other Presidents who have received guidance from religious communities, Trump appears to be taking direct orders from white evangelicals on national policies without the consultation of others.

It is important to note that the relationship between white evangelicals and Trump is largely reciprocal and mutualistic. In other words, both parties benefit from the relationship. To understand how this relationship developed, it is helpful to first examine how white evangelicals contributed to the election of Trump.

During the 2016 presidential election, Trump received 81% of the white evangelical vote; a higher percentage than previous Republican presidential candidates (Martinez & Smith, 2016).[11] Their overwhelming support for Trump likely contributed to his success, because although only 16% of the U.S. population identifies as white evangelical (Pew Research Center, 2019), they comprised 26% of those who voted (Martinez & Smith, 2016).

Many white evangelicals claim that this support is rooted in their evangelical identity and religious beliefs. This was made clear through a report by the Pew Research Center (2020) which found that 67% of white evangelicals, compared to 38% of all U.S. adults, believe that Trump represents and fights for their beliefs and religious interests (Pew Research Center, 2020, p. 6). This sentiment has been echoed by many white evangelical leaders, including James Dobson, the founder of Focus on the Family,[12] who justified his support for Trump during the 2016 presidential election through his official endorsement:

> Mr. Trump has been unwavering in his commitment to issues that are important to evangelicals such as myself. In particular, I have been heartened by his pledge to appoint conservative Supreme Court justices, preserve religious liberty, rebuild the military, and defend the sanctity of human life. (Dobson, 2016).

For many white evangelicals, however, Trump does not simply represent and fight for their evangelical beliefs, they perceive him to be chosen by God to lead America and the World. Collectively, 70% of white evangelicals in the U.S. (regardless of party affiliation) believe that "God chose Trump to become president because God approves of Trump's policies," or that

[11] 78% of white evangelicals voted for George Bush in 2004; 74% voted for John McCain in 2008; 78% voted for Mitt Romney in 2012 (Pew Research Center, 2016). Prior to 2004, white evangelicals were not officially identified as a distinct voting block.

[12] Focus on the Family was created in 1977 by James Dobson. They own a variety of media outlets that feature information, guidance, and practical insights on topics such as adoption and marriage. The organization takes a strong conservative and fundamentalist evangelical stance on their issues.

"Trump's election must be part of God's overall plan, but doesn't necessarily mean God approves of Trump's policies" (Pew Research Center, 2020, p. 18). 81% of white evangelicals voted for Trump in 2016. If we assume that the 100% of the 70% of white evangelicals in this study voted for Trump in 2016, we are able to deduce that only 11% (81% - 70% = 11%) of white evangelicals who voted for Trump do not agree with the above statement, and that 89% (100% - 11% = 89%) of white evangelicals who voted for Trump hold an overwhelming conviction that Trump's power goes beyond the realm of politics, thereby elevating how he and his actions are perceived by those in the white evangelical community. This is significant because it enables Trump and his administration to suggest and implement numerous policies that are detrimental to the environment with minimal, if any, retaliation from his base.

While the beliefs of white evangelicals certainly play a role in explaining their support for Trump, authors such as Daniel D. Miller (2019) and Philip Gorski (2017) believe that this unwavering support is more likely attributed to the Republican identity of many white evangelicals. In his article, "The mystery of evangelical Trump support?", Miller argues that evangelicals support Trump simply because of their identification with the Republican party and identity. Drawing on the group theory of political behavior,[13] Miller argues that the identity of white evangelicals, which many equivocate with the identity of conservative Republicans, shapes and informs their engagement in politics regardless of the issue at hand (2019). In other words, white evangelicals (and other political groups), vote and determine their policy positions based on who they are, rather than on a rational process of decision-making. While Miller provided some insight to how white evangelicals conflate their identity with that of conservative Republicans, he appears to be too quick to dismiss other theories that may explain evangelicals' support for Trump. This is problematic because it assumes that there is a single motivation amongst evangelicals to engage in conservative politics; however, substantial research exists that points to other compelling motivations such as the sentiment amongst white evangelicals that Trump represents and fights for their religious beliefs (Gorski, 2017; Margolis, 2020; Pew Research Center, 2020). Miller's argument is also flawed because, while he admits that Trump has more evangelical support than previous Republican presidents or presidential candidates, he does not examine how and why their support for Trump is particularly high. To do this, it will be important to consider Trump as a unique actor, who has been particularly receptive to the presence and to the opinions of white evangelicals in the White House. Although Miller does not consider the multiplicity of factors that contributes to evangelical support for Trump, his thorough examination of how the evangelical identity is tantamount to the Republican identity is useful in understanding how the identity of white evangelical and Republicans are used to inform and advance anti-climate change policies.

Trump also appears to surround himself with "yes men" and with those who boost his ego. Therefore, it is understandable that his White House is filled with white evangelical leaders such as Paula White, Rick Perry, Robert Jeffress, etc., who say that he has been chosen by God and who portray him as a messianic-like figure (Duin, 2017; Lecaque, 2019; Glenza, 2019). This praise by white evangelicals for Trump has translated into a number of initiatives that were directly recommended or influenced by white evangelicals closest to Trump. For example, Trump and the EAB have worked to repeal the Johnson Amendment, a Bill that prohibits tax-

[13] The group theory of political behavior suggests that political engagement and voting behaviour are primarily determined by partisan identity rather than ideology (Miller, 2019).

exempt institutions, such as churches, from endorsing political candidates, and a Bill that the EAB is in direct violation of (Miller, 2017).[14]

Regardless of the particular rationale and/or motivation of white evangelicals to support Trump, or of Trump's decision to embrace and reciprocate the support of white evangelicals, their close relationship has provided white evangelicals with unprecedented access to the White House. The access provided to white evangelicals, for example, through Trump's EAB, which includes the nations' top evangelical leaders such as Tony Perkins, the president of the Family Research Council, and Robert Jeffress, a senior pastor at the First Baptist Church of Dallas (Banks, 2017), has resulted in people like Richard Land, another member of Trump's EAB, to say, "… this is unlike anything we've experienced in our career or ministry — unprecedented access, unprecedented solicitation of opinions and viewpoints" (Banks, 2017).

This unprecedented access is unique to the Trump administration. George W. Bush created the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, which enabled faith-based initiatives to collaborate with the federal government for the delivery of social services, however, this Office operated separately from the White House (Miller, 2017). Obama took this relationship with faith communities further. According to Melissa Rogers, former special assistant to Obama and director of the White House Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships, Obama was first modern-day president to include religious leaders in policy discussions (Miller, 2017). Unlike the members of Trump's EAB, who are all evangelical, Obama ensured that members of his council were diverse, and therefore included members of Baha'i, Baptist, Buddhist, Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Mormon, Muslim, Native American, Orthodox Christian and Sikh faiths (Miller, 2017).

Understanding the unique and unprecedented relationship between Trump and the white evangelical community is crucial to understanding how white evangelicals are able to effectively shape and promote narratives regarding the environment to advance anti-climate change policies. This is because, as Mills and Domhoff explain in their theories of the power elite, to have power and control over the trajectory of society, members of different sectors need to have established positions within the institutions that make these crucial decisions (Mills, 1959; Domhoff, 2012). Trump has provided white evangelicals with this position, and as such, white evangelicals are now positioned to control and affect various narratives and policies, including those regarding the environment, for their own interests.

Climate Change

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, President Richard Nixon's Republican administration implemented several environmental policies that addressed the impacts of climate change,[15] thereby ushering in a new wave of environmental politics. The positive steps towards improving the environment were well received by the political elite and the American public, regardless of their political and/or religious affiliation (Turner, 2018). By the 1980s, however, Reagan's administration dismantled any sense of bipartisanship within climate politics (Turner, 2018).[16]

[14] To date, Trump and the EAB have been unsuccessful in their attempts to repeal the Johnson Amendement.

[15] Throughout Nixon's time in office, his administration implemented the National Environmental Policy Act (1969), the Clean Air Extension Act (1970), the Marine Mammal Protection Act (1972), and the Endangered Species Act (1973). The EPA was also developed under his leadership, and he proposed the Safe Drinking Water Act (1974).

[16] Although the Reagan administration took some positive steps towards protecting the environment, he frequently sided with the interests of industries that were contributing to climate change and drastically reduced the EPA budget.

This time also saw, perhaps uncoincidentally, the rise of white evangelicals in the power elite as well as the development of various organizations and think tanks[17] that were dedicated to producing and distributing narratives related to the intersection of evangelical ideologies and climate change skepticism.

This time also marked a distinct shift within climate politics, as a wedge was firmly established between the Republican and Democratic parties, as well as the white evangelical community and other religious and non-religious communities. This gap has increasingly widened since Reagan's administration.

U.S. Partisan Politics

One of the key factors that determines an individuals' perspective of climate change in the U.S. is party affiliation. In a 2017 report by the Pew Research Center, it was determined that within U.S. politics, those who identify as liberal Democrats[18] are more likely to believe that there is solid evidence of global warming and that it is caused mostly by human activity (90%), and that the government ought to implement stricter measures to curb its impact (77%) (Pew Research Center, 2017). Conversely, those who identify as conservative Republicans are far less likely to believe that there is solid evidence of global warming and that it is caused mostly by human activity (18%), and that the government ought to implement stricter measures to curb its impact (36%) (Pew Research Center, 2017). This 41-point gap in support for government spending amongst liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans, in particular, has significantly increased over the past few decades, as only 66% of liberal Democrats supported increased government spending in 1994, compared to 58% of conservative Republicans (Pew Research Center, 2017).

The results of the Pew Research Center report were preceded by many scholars who have examined the role that partisan politics and identity have played in informing perspectives on climate change (McCright, Xiao & Dunlap, 2001; McCright & Dunlap, 2008; McCright & Dunlap, 2011; Lockwood, 2018; Hornsey, Harris & Fielding, 2018; Forchtner, 2019). Aaron McCright and Riley Dunlap and are amongst those who have provided a comprehensive analysis into this relationship. In one of their earlier articles (2008), Dunlap and McCright discussed some of the factors that contributed to the division on climate change perspectives across party lines, as well as some of the implications that this division has had amongst the electorate (2008). Using data from Gallup polls conducted each year between 1997 and 2008, Dunlap and McCright observed that those who say that the seriousness of global warming is generally exaggerated in the news is greater amongst Republicans (59%) than democrats (17%), a gap that increased over the decade. Republicans were also less likely to believe that there was a consensus amongst the world's scientists that global warming was indeed happening (54%), compared to 75% of Democrats. These gaps were also reflected in questions regarding the question of whether climate change is more attributable to human activities rather than natural changes, with 72% of Democrats agreeing compared to 40% of Republicans (Dunlap & McCright, 2008).

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[17] McGann (2020, p. 13) defines think tanks as "… public-policy research analysis and engagement organizations that generate policy-oriented research, analysis, and advice on domestic and international issues, thereby enabling policy makers and the public to make informed decisions about public policy."

[18] Liberal Democrats are those who affiliate with the Democratic political party and align with a liberal political ideology.

Although this article may be dated, it continues to be relevant and reflective of some of the key identity factors at play with regards to climate change politics during the Trump administration. The results are important to understanding how Republicans frame climate change denial in terms of their identity.

White Evangelical Biblical Perspectives

While diversity exists within the white evangelical community regarding perspectives towards climate change, the vast majority perceive the issue through a lens of disinterest, disbelief, and/or hostility (Pew Research Center, 2015b; Pew Research Centre, 2015c; Pew Research Center, 2017). For many, this perception is shaped and rationalized through three key narratives that are rooted in a literal interpretation of the Bible.

The first perspective or understanding of climate change within the white evangelical community is largely rooted in the notion that humans are to have dominion over all of nature. One of the most prominent authors to first examine the dynamics of this relationship is American historian, Lynn White. Through his article, "The historical roots of our ecologic crisis," White argues that Christianity, and how it has been interpreted amongst Western cultures, altered how humans understand their relationship with the environment (1967). Drawing on various religious, scientific, technological, and industrial events throughout history, White explained how humans have come to believe that they were not meant to be a part of nature; rather, they were meant to exploit and dominate it (White, 1967). White attributes this interpretation to the Book of Genesis, in which God creates the Earth for the specific and explicit benefit of man (1967). White's key conclusion in the article was that, "Especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen" (1967, p. 1205).

White's article contributes to understanding the historical and contextual factors that led to the widespread belief that the goal and role of the environment is to serve the needs and desires of humans. White's work provides insight into the dynamics of the dominion narrative, as it was written before white evangelicals became part of the power elite in the U.S., and thus, before the dominion narrative was widely accepted amongst the white evangelicals as a reason for opposing climate change policies. Since that time, however, white evangelical leaders, politicians, energy corporations, churches, etc., have latched onto this narrative for political purposes (i.e. to oppose government spending and/or climate policies). As such, understanding the religious, cultural, and historical roots of this Western narrative is crucial to understanding how it came to be a part of American politics, particularly amongst white evangelicals within the Republican party.

Another group of white evangelicals in the U.S. believe that climate change is occurring; however, they dispute that human activity has caused it, and/or that human activity can reverse the damage. Rather, many believe that climate change, and all of its consequences, such as flooding, famine, etc. are actually a sign that the End Times are near. While Christian eschatology is divided into sub-theories,[19] the majority of white evangelicals in the U.S. subscribe to an eschatology known as Premillennial Dispensationalism (Barker & Bearce, 2012). Premillennial Dispensationalists believe that Jesus Christ will return before the millennium,[20] however, this will be preceded by a period of tribulation as well as the rise and reign of an anti-Christ.

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[19] For example, premillennialism, postmillennialism, amillennialism, etc.

[20] For Christians, the millennium refers the time when Jesus Christ will return to Earth and usher in one thousand years of peace.

Through their research, David Barker and David Bearce, both experts in American political science, examine how and why this disinterest developed amongst evangelicals over the past few decades. They hypothesize that this is because many evangelicals in the U.S. are premillennial dispensationalists (Barker & Bearce, 2012). To explore this phenomenon, the authors introduce the theoretical concept of relative sociotropic time horizons.[21] Their analysis ultimately determined that due to their belief in premillennial dispensationalism, evangelicals have shorter sociotropic time horizons, which makes them less likely to demonstrate concern for the environment and for policies that would address climate change. The authors' use of the concept of sociotropic time horizons provides a new and unique perspective into how the disinterest amongst some American evangelicals to address climate change is thoughtfully calculated based on their affiliation with premillennial dispensationalism.

The third perception or understanding of climate change within the white evangelical community is denial. This denial is largely rooted in a belief amongst white evangelicals that God would not let that happen to his creation, particularly in light of his promise to Noah:

> Then God said to Noah and his sons, "See, I make My agreement with you, and with your children after you… that never again will all flesh be destroyed by the water of a flood. There will never again be a flood to destroy the earth." (Genesis 9:8-12, KJV)

This particular narrative regarding the perspectives of white evangelicals towards the environment has been examined by various authors in recent decades (e.g. Guth, Green, Kellstedt, & Smidt, 1995; Eckberg & Blocker, 1996; Veldman, 2019; Hempel & Smith, 2020), and while the approach or methods used by these authors often differ, they generally conclude that those who believe that the Bible is the literal word of God tend to be more skeptical towards climate change and opposed to government actions addressing its impacts (Guth et al., 1995; Eckberg & Blocker, 1996; Veldman, 2019; Hempel & Smith, 2020).

The Gospel of Climate Skepticism (2019), by Robin Globus Veldman, examines this relationship in the Red/Republican state of Georgia. Throughout her book, Veldman, a scholar whose expertise lies in understanding the relationship between religion and politics, examined how climate skepticism became synonymous with the conservative ideology, the Republican identity, and the evangelical community. Her research, which relied on interviews with members of evangelical churches and community centres in the state of Georgia, originally sought to uncover how evangelical beliefs about the End Times influenced their negative feelings toward climate change. While many people attributed their attitudes towards climate change to their belief that the End Times were near, she found that the majority of people justified their disinterest or inaction on the environment to the view that climate change was fake, and/or if it was occurring, humans were not responsible (Veldman, 2019). Interestingly, however, she determined that evangelical Republicans were far more likely than secular Republicans to espouse climate change skepticism (Veldman, 2019). This finding, along with others, allowed Veldman to conclude that while climate change skepticism is certainly associated with the conservative Republican identity, for evangelical Republicans, it is much more – it is a way of affirming and defending their evangelical identity (Veldman, 2019).

[21] Rooted in game theory, relative sociotropic time horizons refers to how individuals perceive a community's "shadow of the future." Those with finite sociotropic time horizons believe that the humans and the planet will one day cease to exist. (Barker & Bearce, 2012)

Typology of Climate Change Narratives

The previous section outlined factors that have contributed to the rise of white evangelicals to positions of power within U.S. national politics, and how white evangelicals have framed climate change as an issue that is rooted in both their religious and political identities and ideologies. Understanding both of these processes, and how they are played out in a contemporary political context, is crucial to understanding the means through which white evangelicals have been able to shape and mobilize narratives surrounding climate change to influence government action on climate change.

Prior to the election of President Trump in 2016, evangelicals and their narratives regarding climate change were considered to be fringe, in that they were not widely acknowledged or acted upon within political institutions. 2016, however, marked a notable shift in how politics is conducted, as the voices and narratives of those who were considered to be "fringe" were now centered and amplified to influence government action on a variety of issues, including those regarding climate change. This section examines three narratives and analyzes how and why they have been effective during the Trump era. The first narrative is rooted in white evangelicals' literal interpretation of the Bible. The second is tied to the conflation of the white evangelical identity with the conservative Republican identity, and the third relies on the demonization of environmentalists and of those on the left.

Narrative 1: God and the Bible are the Ultimate Authority

One of the pillars of evangelicalism is the belief that the Bible is the literal word of God. References to Biblical passages act as a powerful tool amongst the white evangelical community to determine and to justify what is right and wrong, and to legitimize their position on a variety of issues. A recent study found a direct correlation between an individual's perception of the Bible as the literal word of God and their willingness to support government action on climate change (Hempel & Smith, 2020). The study concluded that those who hold a more literal interpretation of the Bible are less likely to support government policies targeted toward addressing climate change (Peifer, Khalsa & Ecklund, 2016; Hempel & Smith, 2020). As such, within the white evangelical community, Biblical references are often embedded in climate change narratives to outline and to defend one's position on the issue. Three sub-narratives, in particular, are referenced by white evangelicals to rationalize their disinterest, disbelief, and or opposition to climate change. The first narrative leverages the Book of Genesis and the story of creation to justify humans' dominion over nature. The second narrative largely draws on the Book of Revelation to dismiss the need for government action on climate change. The third narrative references the Old Testament, as well as a general belief that God would not harm his creation.

Mastery-Over-Nature

A common narrative utilized by white evangelical to justify their indifference towards the environment and towards government action on climate change is rooted in a literal interpretation of the Bible in which humans are said to have dominion over everything:

> And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and

> multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth. (Genesis 1:26-28, KJV)

The term, "dominion," is key to understanding how and why white evangelicals have used this passage to define their relationship with the environment (White, 1967). In other words, rather than perceiving the relationship between humans and the environment as reciprocal and symbiotic, white evangelicals argue that the Bible bestows humans with the power to exploit the environment for their own prosperity and wealth. Within U.S. politics, this narrative has translated into policies that favour the extraction of natural resources, and, throughout Trump's administration, to achieving "energy independence and dominance" (White House, 2017c; White House, 2019a; White House, 2019b)

Amongst the white evangelical electorate, it was determined that "Views of the Bible mediate differences in support for environmental spending between evangelical Protestants and other Americans" (Schwadel, 2017, p. 180). As such, because white evangelicals are more likely than other Christians to interpret the Bible literally, they are more likely to interpret the dominion narrative as an ultimate truth, thereby fueling their disinterest in and/or opposition to government action on climate change.

Noteworthy amongst white evangelicals, however, is their firm attachment to a literal interpretation of this particular Biblical passage. Certainly, other Biblical passages could be interpreted to be in support of government action on climate change, however, white evangelicals are rarely exposed to these passages, and are more likely to hear about the dominion narrative within their conservative communities and churches (Schwadel, 2017).

Scott Pruitt, the former Chief Administrator of the EPA and a self-declared evangelical and former Sunday school teacher, also holds this perception of the Bible and used it to inform a number of his political actions towards the environment. For example, in an interview with the Christian Broadcasting Network, Pruitt defended coal and fossil fuel industries by claiming that, "the biblical world view with respect to these issues is that we have a responsibility to manage and cultivate, harvest the natural resources that we've been blessed with to truly bless our fellow mankind" (Brody, 2018). Though his time in the EPA was limited, Pruitt demonstrated how narratives may be translated into policies when taken up and embraced by those in positions of power. One of the key actions that Pruitt has taken against the environment has been his successful pressuring of Trump to withdraw from the PA. Under his supervision, the EPA also obstructed the implementation of the 2015 Clean Water Rule, and reduced the number of fines given to polluting industries who violated government policies (Schaeffer, Pelton, & Kelderman, 2018).

The adherence to the dominion narrative by the white evangelical electorate has been noted by the Trump administration, as several think tanks and right-wing organizations, such as the Cornwall Alliance, have pushed and congratulated Trump on his administration's commitment to pursuing energy independence and dominance (Beisner, 2017). This support by high-ranking organizations and by his electorate has enabled Trump to pursue policies that benefit energy corporations (White House, 2017c), and to repeal policies that address the impacts of climate change, with little resistance.

The dominion narrative has also been particularly effective in influencing government action on climate change during Trump's presidency because it closely aligns with the general interests of conservatives, especially those with financial ties to energy corporations (Turner & Isenberg, 2018). This alignment is demonstrated by the support of energy corporations, such as

Koch Industries, who contributed over $12 million to the 2016 presidential election, 98.45% of which was given to the Republican Party (Center for Responsive Politics, n.d.-b). Koch Industries and ExxonMobile also have financial ties to groups such as the Heartland Institute and the Cornwall Alliance,[22] thereby demonstrating how the dominion narrative espoused by white evangelicals, particularly by the elite, is rooted in the political and policy interests of multinational corporations and wealthy donors to conservative causes and think tanks.

Embracing the End Times

Another narrative espoused by white evangelicals to defend their indifference and/or opposition to government action on climate change is rooted in a belief that the End Times are near, and therefore, taking steps to reverse the will of God would be futile. In the U.S., many white evangelicals are premillennial dispensationalists, who believe that Jesus Christ will return to Earth before the Millennium. Before this occurs, however, there will be a great tribulation, marked by the rise of an anti-Christ, and by a time of great suffering and death brought about by famines, floods, etc.[23] White evangelicals who subscribe to this eschatology believe and acknowledge that climate is changing, however, they ascribe these changes to the great tribulation. Some white evangelicals within this community have even expressed excitement over climate change, as they believe that it is reflective of Christ's second coming to Earth. William Bradford Nichols, a man who grew up in the evangelical church explains: "I not only believed this would happen, I was excited about it. I, like many evangelical Christians, longed for the day that Jesus would return… climate change wasn't something I worried about. On the contrary, I welcomed it as a fulfillment of ancient biblical prophecy" (2019). Nichols is not alone. 41% of all American adults believe that Christ will definitely or probably return to Earth before 2050 (Pew Research Center, 2010). This number jumps to 58% amongst white evangelicals (Pew Research Center, 2010). The prevalence of this narrative and belief amongst the American electorate is crucial to consider, as it has been demonstrated to alter perceptions and support of government action on climate change. In their article, Barker & Bearce determined that, "… a belief in the Second Coming reduces the probability of strongly agreeing that the government should take action… In a corresponding manner, a belief in the Second Coming increases the probability of disagreeing with government action to curb global warming…" (2012, p. 272).

Throughout Trump's presidency, this narrative has been used by members of his administration. For example, in a 2019 interview with Fox & Friends, Rick Perry, Trump's former Energy Secretary, noted the following interaction with the President:

> God's used imperfect people all through history. King David wasn't perfect. Saul wasn't perfect. Solomon wasn't perfect, and I actually gave the President a little one-pager on those Old Testament kings about a month ago. And I shared with him, I said, 'Mr. President, I know there are people who say, you know, you are the chosen one,' and I said, 'You were.'" (Fox News, 2019a)

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[22] Calvin Beisner has numerous ties to organizations such as the the Heartland Institute, the James Partnership, the Committee for a Constructive Tomorrow, the Climate Change Denialist Network, the Action Institute, and the Atlas Economic and Research Foundation – all of whom receive financial contributions from energy corporations such as ExxonMobile and Koch Industries.

[23] References to the End Times can be found in the Old Testament (Deuteronomy; Psalms; Isaiah; Jeremiah; Ezekiel; Daniel; Joel; Zephaniah; Zechariah) and in the New Testament (Matthew; Mark; Luke, Romans, 2 Peter; Revelation).

While the context of this interview was related to Trump's impeachment, it demonstrates how evangelicals within Trump's administration employ biblical narratives to influence the President. Perry's comment is relevant to the End Times narrative, and to climate change, as many of Trump's white evangelical supporters believe (or claim to believe) that Trump was chosen by God to usher in the End Times (Mencimer, 2020).

Another prominent member of Trump's administration who leverages this Biblical narrative is Vice President Pence. He, and many others, believe that "Jesus will be unable to return until the church controls what they call the seven pillars of society: government/military, media, arts/entertainment, business, education, religion, and family" (Nichols, 2019). Therefore, while Trump may not have explicitly justified his inaction on climate change due to narratives regarding the End Times, the adherence to this belief by various members of his administration, such as Rick Perry and Mike Pence, provides insight to understanding how the actions of the administration regarding climate change have been non-existent, and in several of cases, actually contribute to the accelerated warming of the Earth.

Amongst white evangelicals, the widespread belief regarding the End Times has certainly shifted the politics of individuals regarding climate change, however, the presence of numerous white evangelicals amongst the power elite in the White House, more so than in any other administration in recent U.S. history, has embedded this narrative within the conservative Republican ideology regarding climate change. It is for this reason that it has been particularly prevalent and effective during the Trump era.

God is Greater

The third, and perhaps most popular, Biblical narrative espoused by white evangelicals to justify their opposition to government action on climate change is one of denial and skepticism. While climate denial is certainly a popular sentiment within the Republican party (regardless of religious affiliation) (Veldman, 2019), a significant portion of white evangelicals connect this denial and/or skepticism with their religious ideology. Rather than pointing to a specific passage in the Bible, however, this narrative relies on a conviction that God has the utmost power, and that he would not destroy his creation (Veldman, 2019). In other words, while liberal Democrats and scientists have affirmed that climate change is caused by humans, white evangelicals have rejected the notion due to its insinuation that humans had more power and control than God (Veldman, 2019).

The implications of this narrative in politics has been widespread during Trump's presidency, as several politicians and members of his administration often cite their belief in God to rationalize their inaction or opposition to government action on climate change. For example, in an interview with Sarah Huckabee Sanders (a white evangelical and Trump's former White House Press Secretary) regarding Democratic Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's Green New Deal (GND) proposal, said, "I don't think we're going to listen to her on much of anything, particularly not on matters that we're going to leave in the hands of a much, much higher authority..." (Fox News, 2019b). As Trump's former Press Secretary, Huckabee-Sanders not only had the ability to influence the President and his policies, but her statements were often meant to reflect the views of the President. Therefore, when she claimed that climate change was an issue that should be left to God, she essentially indicated that the President believed this as well. Her use of the term "we" is further representative of this, as she is arguably referring to the President, and to his administration.

Robert Jeffress, an evangelical pastor and a member of Trump's EAB, expressed similar sentiments in response to the Climate Action Marches that took place around the world in September 2019. In an interview with Fox News, he addressed Greta Thunberg, one of the youth activists that was involved in spearheading the movement:

> Somebody needs to read poor Greta Genesis, Chapter 9 and tell her the next time she worries about global warming, just look at a rainbow. That's God's promise that the polar ice caps aren't going to melt and flood the world again. (Gryboski, 2019)

As a member of Trump's EAB, Jeffress has had unprecedented access to the President. He and others on the EAB have said that Trump "… is the most faith-friendly president we've ever had" (Miller. 2017) and that "My experience is I've had more access with these guys than I did under Bush and other GOP leadership" (Miller, 2017). Their presence in the White House has concretized their membership within the power elite, thereby establishing and legitimizing their perspectives and interests within a key institution responsible for shaping and implementing policies (Mills, 1959; Domhoff, 2012).

Another method through which white evangelicals have amplified the narrative of climate denial and skepticism to advance anti-environmental policies has been through the assistance of groups such as the Cornwall Alliance, the Heritage Foundation, and the Heartland Institute. For example, in recent years, the Cornwall Alliance has published numerous policy papers that dispute the veracity of climate change, its causes, and its impacts. These papers often draw on Biblical passages and on unverified and questionable scientific data. One of their "landmark documents," "Protect the poor: Ten reasons to oppose harmful climate change policies," offers some insight to how the Cornwall Alliance blends a literal interpretation of the Bible with climate change policies. The first reason on the list claims:

> As the product of infinitely wise design, omnipotent creation, and faithful sustaining (Genesis 1:1–31; 8:21–22), Earth is robust, resilient, self-regulating, and self-correcting. Although Earth and its subsystems, including the climate system, are susceptible to some damage by ignorant or malicious human action, God's wise design and faithful sustaining make these natural systems more likely—as confirmed by widespread scientific observation—to respond in ways that suppress and correct that damage than magnify it catastrophically. (Cornwall Alliance, 2014)

The document concludes with a call to action:

> We call on political leaders to abandon fruitless and harmful policies to control global temperature and instead adopt policies that simultaneously reflect responsible environmental stewardship, make energy and all its benefits more affordable, and so free the poor to rise out of poverty. (Cornwall Alliance, 2014)

Following the election of Trump, recommendations by the Cornwall Alliance, including their endorsement of Pruitt for the role of EPA Administrator (which has since been removed from their website), has been welcomed by the Republican administration. For example, the administration ended up appointing Pruitt to this prestigious position, and while the Cornwall Alliance may not be completely responsible for his appointment, they certainly contributed. This was demonstrated, for example, during Pruitt's confirmation hearing when Republican Senator John Barrasso favorably cited Calvin Beisner and the Cornwall Alliance's endorsement of Pruitt for the position (United States Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works, 2017). Armed with financial ties to fossil fuel industry (FollowTheMoney.org, n.d.) and with a history

of opposing the EPA,[24] Pruitt willingly abided by the recommendations of the Cornwall Alliance, as was demonstrated by the EPA's rolling back of the Clean Power Plan, and by his implementation of policies including the Executive Order Promoting Energy Independence and Economic Growth (White House, 2017b).

To impact policy, narratives must be taken up by those in power. Prior to the election of Trump, the "God is greater" denial narrative regarding climate change by members of the white evangelical community were seen as fringe and radical, as was demonstrated by former President Obama and the media's dismissal and mocking of Senator James Inhofe's attempt to disprove climate change by bringing a snowball onto the Senate floor (C-SPAN, 2015a; C-SPAN, 2015b). As such, they had little to no impact on policy. Throughout Trump's presidency, however, these individuals have been able to occupy spaces of incredible power with regards to the environment, such as the EPA, thereby legitimizing and embracing their narratives and policy recommendations.

Narrative 2: To be a White Evangelical is to be a Conservative Republican

Another means through which white evangelicals have mobilized narratives to advance anti-environmental policies is through their conflation of the white evangelical identity with the conservative Republican identity and ideology. Two of the most common conservative Republican narratives or perspectives within the white evangelical community that are used to oppose government action on climate change include: (1) that science is wrong or exaggerated; and, (2) that climate change policies are anti-American.

Climate Change is a Hoax

Climate change denial and skepticism are common perspectives amongst white evangelicals and amongst conservative Republicans. Amongst conservative Republicans, only 10% believe that climate change is due to human activity (compared to 78% of liberal Democrats), and 57% believe that there is no solid evidence that the Earth is getting warmer (compared to 10% of liberal Democrats) (Pew Research Center, 2015b). These numbers change slightly amongst white evangelicals (not factoring political identity) with 28% believing that climate change is due to human activity, and 37% believing that there is no solid evidence that the Earth is warming (Pew Research Center, 2015b).

This narrative resonates particularly well with the white evangelical and conservative Republican community, as it may be conveniently rationalized through a religious or political framework. In other words, white evangelicals tend to latch onto the narratives that dispute and/or deny climate change because it does not align with their literal interpretation of the Bible, or with their belief/faith in God's omnipotence. For conservative Republicans, this narrative aligns well with their desire to decrease the role of the government, and to place increasing amounts of power and control in the hands of private corporations. With this in mind, however, research has demonstrated that Americans often alter or shift their religious identity to better align with their politics (Egan, 2018; Margolis, 2018; Miller, 2019).

Throughout Trump's time in office, conservative Republicans and white evangelicals have managed to unify their members on climate change policy by amplifying and advancing a common narrative that the science regarding climate change cannot be trusted. Recently, the Cornwall Alliance published an article titled, "The Green New Fascist Deal," by Mark Musser (a

[24] Pruitt opposed Obama-era EPA legislations such as the Mercury and Air Toxics Standards and has attempted to sue the EPA over a dozen times.

contributor to the Cornwall Alliance), which compares the GND to the Nazi Regime and to scientific discoveries of Charles Darwin: ”That such utopianism, political legalism, and apocalypticism is presented as hard science demonstrates the general madness of the present time that is largely rooted in the Social Darwinian scientism of the 1800s…” (Musser, 2020). For the Cornwall Alliance (and for many other white evangelicals and conservative Republicans) this overall distrust and/or skepticism in science is rooted in their denial of the notion “… that societies built on atheism, pantheism, panentheism, animism, or any other rejection of the Creator/creature distinction can flourish intellectually, morally, aesthetically, and materially” (Cornwall Alliance, n.d.-a). In other words, societies that utilize secular science to develop and implementing policy proposals are doomed to fail.

Conservative Republicans have been quick to embrace this narrative because numerous scientists and organizations, such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), have urged federal governments to implement swift and widespread measures to combat the effects of climate change – a policy position that does not align with the pro-corporation and deregulation platform of the Republican party.

Prior to and since the election of President Trump, the narrative of climate skepticism has made its way into many of Trump’s speeches and policy documents. For example, while Trump has claimed on numerous occasions that climate change is a “hoax,”[25] he and other members of his administration, such as Scott Pruitt and Rick Perry, have explained that the President is simply taking a more inclusive approach when it comes to considering scientific data. In other words, the Trump administration believes that climate change is not a settled issue, and that there should be a debate about its impacts (White House, 2017a; White House, 2017e; Oh, 2018). This explanation echoes those put forth by the Cornwall Alliance, the Heritage Foundation, and the Heartland Institute, and has been used as a framework to inform policies. For example, in June 2019, it was discovered that a member of Trump’s National Security Council (NSC), William Happer, sought the advice of the Heartland Institute on how to challenge the scientific consensus on climate change (Milman, 2019). The administration also blocked the testimony of Rod Schoonover, a State Department intelligence staffer, on the possibly catastrophic impacts of human-caused climate change (Eilperin, Dawsey, & Dennis, 2019; Watkins, 2019). Both of these events occurred following the administration’s development of an NSC panel on climate change (Milman, 2019; Watkins, 2019).

With this information in mind, the climate skepticism narrative espoused by both white evangelicals and by conservative Republicans has been particularly effective during the Trump era, because Trump, more than any previous president, has embraced a personal and political position and identity that is skeptical of science and disputes climate change. The position and identity are also popular amongst his electorate, white evangelicals and/or conservative Republicans, thereby making it much easier, and even beneficial for him politically to hold this position and to translate it into concrete policy decisions, such as withdrawing the U.S. from the PA.

Government Action on Climate Change is Anti-American

Another narrative espoused by white evangelicals that conflates and equates their religious identity and policy positions with those of conservative Republicans is rooted in the notion that to be a white evangelical and conservative Republican, one must be in favour of capitalism and of creating jobs for Americans – key components of the American identity. This narrative also

[25] See Schulman (2018) for a detailed list of Trump’s comments on the environment until December 2018.

draws on skepticism about climate science, but it is largely rooted in the notion that climate change offers numerous benefits to Americans and Christians, and to the beneficial impact energy corporations have had, and continue to have, on Americans.

The Cornwall Alliance, the Heritage Foundation, and the Heartland Institute have again played a crucial role in advancing this narrative. For example, in the Cornwall Declaration on Environmental Stewardship, they affirm, "We aspire to a world in which widespread economic freedom—which is integral to private, market economies—makes sound ecological stewardship available to ever greater numbers" (Cornwall Alliance, n.d.-b). The Heartland Institute has routinely published documents with similar sentiments, which have claimed that, "Energy is an essential part of American life and a staple of the world economy" (Lakely, 2018). These organizations have also published documents boasting the benefits and blessings of climate change (Bast & Ferrara, 2018; Wilkerson, 2019; Beisner, 2020).

The intention behind these narratives is to translate sentiments into action, therefore, many policy recommendations that conflate climate change with benefits and blessings simultaneously advocate for the maintenance or increase of jobs in industries that have historically contributed to climate change, such as coal and fossil fuel. For example, in 2017, prior to Trump's announcement of the U.S.' withdrawal from the PA, the Heritage Foundation published an article titled, "To save American jobs, leave the Paris Agreement now," which claimed that unnecessary industry regulations (caused by the PA) would hurt Americans in coal and fossil fuel industries (Doescher & Moore, 2017). This narrative was mirrored in Trump's speech announcing the official withdrawal of the U.S. from the PA, as he claimed that this decision would bring back American jobs and help boost the U.S. national economy (White House, 2017e).

This narrative has been particularly effective during the Trump era due to the close relationship between the Trump administration and the Heritage Foundation, who also has ties and solicits contributions from the Cornwall Alliance and the Heartland Institute. Trump spoke at the Foundation's 2017 President's Club Meeting, and a document on their website described their accomplishments to date:

> One year after taking office, President Donald Trump and his administration have embraced nearly two-thirds of the policy recommendations from The Heritage Foundation's "Mandate for Leadership." The "Mandate for Leadership" series includes five individual publications, totaling approximately 334 unique policy recommendations. Analysis completed by Heritage determined that 64 percent of the policy prescriptions were included in Trump's budget, implemented through regulatory guidance, or under consideration for action in accordance with The Heritage Foundation's original proposals…. With approximately 70 former Heritage employees working for the Trump transition team or as part of the administration, the policy recommendations have served as guidelines for reducing the size and scope of the federal government through specific and detailed actions. (Heritage Foundation, 2018)

Amongst these recommendations were the withdrawal of the U.S. from the PA and allowing the development and extraction of natural resources (Heritage Foundation, 2018).

While the policy recommendations put forth by the Heritage Foundation and by other organizations are not new, they have been particularly impactful due to Trump's willingness and eagerness to implement their recommendations in exchange for their unwavering support.

Narrative 3: Finding and Defining a Common Enemy

One of the most effective narratives mobilized by white evangelical elites to influence government action on climate change has been one that demonizes and vilifies those on the Left. These narratives are meant to solicit fear and anger amongst its target population to organize a strong and cohesive base that feels that it is necessary to fight for their cause, and to protect their identity.

Amongst white evangelicals, a narrative that is commonly espoused to dismiss and demonize the call to action from environmentalists regarding the urgent action on climate change, is that they are violating God's laws and trust. This narrative cites the second of the Ten Commandments which declares: "Thou shalt have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3, KJV). White evangelicals have taken this passage and used it to vilify the actions of environmentalists, claiming that they "worship the creation more than the Creator" (The Victory Channel, 2019). In a 2018 publication on the Cornwall Alliance's website titled "The ten religious reasons against climate change,' they explain:

> There is a prohibition against the superstition of idolatry. The Bible consistently forbids the worship of the creation as an end in and of Itself. However, so much of the modern environmental movement is based upon superstitious and pagan beliefs. For instance, the focus on 'Mother Earth', the worship of Gaia, and in particular the 'deep ecology' of environmentalism, all take on an explicitly religious devotion. (Powell, 2018)

Calvin Beisner has even gone so far as to say that, "Radical environmentalism, at its heart, is false religion" (2019b). By framing the actions and behaviours of environmentalists as a violation of one of the Ten Commandments, white evangelical elites and organizations are able to condemn environmentalists along religious lines. Amongst the devout, this is incredibly effective in deterring pro-environmentalist behaviours, such as supporting government action on climate change, as it frames the issue of environmental action/inaction as either sinful or as pious and virtuous.

Throughout Trump's time in office, many of his white evangelical supporters and advisors have utilized this narrative in response to a variety of initiatives and policy proposals aimed at curbing the effects of climate change. For example, following Rep. Ocasio-Cortez's and Sen. Edward Markey's GND proposal, they were met with substantial backlash by white evangelical elites who claimed that the GND was simply another proposal by the Left that represented a concerted effort to incite fear amongst the population and to bring others into the fold of their radical environmentalist cult (Jayaraj, 2019a). This argument has been routinely bolstered by the notion that, "Global warming alarmists demand everyone must pay up, sacrifice and comply because the alleged threat is worldwide" (Landsbaum, 2019), which has often elicited a visceral reaction amongst the white evangelical electorate, thereby leading them to cling more strongly to their anti-environmental beliefs and behaviours. An anti-environmental stance thus becomes a marker of their identity – one that needs to be protected at all costs. As a result, white evangelicals often hold strict anti-environmental policy positions because it has become an embedded part of their evangelical and conservative Republican identity. In other words, to side or to sympathize with environmentalists would be anti-Christian.

In the era of President Trump, this narrative of demonizing environmentalists on the basis that they are violating God's laws and acting as if they are religious fundamentalists, has been amplified – in part - through the renewed attention and credibility provided to the Cornwall Alliance. A number of their articles, and their documentary, "Resisting the Green Dragon" characterizes environmentalists as "sinners," "idol worshippers," and "cult members" who promote "spiritual deception" (Clough, 2016; Jayaraj, 2019a; Jayaraj, 2019b).

Trump has also made a point of embracing white evangelicals and engaging them in various policy discussions, thus legitimizing and amplifying this narrative. Several members of his EAB, including Tony Perkins, Harry Jackson, and Richard Land, have claimed at one point or another, that climate change and environmentalism is a corrupt and misinformed movement or cult that is rooted in sinful or anti-Christian beliefs (Veldman, 2019; Resisting the Green Dragon). Although not a part of Trump's EAB, Calvin Beisner and Pat Robertson have had many interactions with the President and have also espoused similar narratives (Cornwall Alliance, 2019a; Tashman, 2017), thereby bringing renewed attention and credibility to their arguments; something that was not observed in previous administrations.

Another narrative that is frequently employed by white evangelicals to demonize and to vilify environmentalists to mobilize anti-environmental sentiments and policies relies on the notion that policies and initiatives that claim to protect the environment are actually ploys by the Left to control the U.S. and the world. From the perspective of the white evangelical community, there is a widely held belief that environmental policies and initiatives "facilitate and act as pathways for the elites to exert control over the masses by devising energy restrictive policies in the name of climate change" (Jayaraj, 2019a). For example, prior to and following the election of Trump, the Heartland Foundation, the Heritage Institute, and the Cornwall Alliance, published numerous documents and sent letters to the President urging him to withdraw from the PA (Doescher & Moore, 2017; Horner & Lewis, 2017; Jayaraj, 2017). Many of these documents referenced the notion that the PA, and the UN in general, was simply a system through which those on the left and the elite were attempting to wage a form of "regulatory warfare" against American citizens and businesses (Doescher & Moore, 2017; Horner & Lewis, 2017; Jayaraj, 2017). Some within the white evangelical community have even gone so far as to claim that environmental movements are "… the work of the Antichrist, who was sowing fear in order to gain power" (Vox, 2017), and that environmental pacts, like the PA, pave "the way for a charismatic world leader to form a global government and begin the seven-year Tribulation that precedes the Second Coming of Christ" (Vox, 2017). For example, in 2015 – the year that Obama signed the PA - Texas evangelist Hal Lindsey "denounced climate change as a scam 'being used to consolidate the governments of the world into a coalition that may someday facilitate the rise of the Antichrist'" (Vox, 2017). The impact of these narratives regarding the PA have successfully influenced policy during Trump's time in office, as was demonstrated by his decision to withdraw the U.S. from the PA and by the language used in his speech to justify this decision (White House, 2017e). In that speech, he claimed that "This agreement is less about the climate and more about other countries gaining a financial advantage over the United States" (White House, 2017e). Although Trump refrained from employing terms such as the antichrist, the messaging regarding the PA, and a variety of other initiatives, is markedly similar to those espoused by white evangelicals.

The mobilization of polarizing narratives by white evangelicals existed prior to Trump's election. Leading up to the 2016 election, Robert Jeffress, a member of Trump's EAB reminded white evangelicals of their duty to elect Trump through the following statement:

> What I want to say in closing is this election is not a battle between Republicans and Democrats. It's a battle between good and evil, light and darkness, righteousness and unrighteousness… This is the last chance we have, I'm convinced, as a country to turn this country around. (Morris, 2019)

Although Jeffress was not speaking directly about climate change, his comments reflect the mindset that is embedded within the white evangelical community: that the liberal Democrats are

evil, and that the conservative Republicans are good and virtuous. This narrative, and the tactic that it employs, have been successful during the era of Trump as he, arguably more than any other president, has willingly embraced narratives that demonize and vilify those who are not Christian, white, or conservative Republicans. This narrative has also been effective because Trump and his administration have positioned themselves as the only people who can "save" white evangelicals from the efforts of environmentalists and of liberal Democrats to destroy, convert, and control them.

Discussion and Conclusion

Throughout this paper, I explored how white evangelicals have effectively shaped and mobilized narratives to influence government action on climate change. I was particularly concerned with how these narratives appeared to be especially effective at influencing government action during the era of President Trump.

Throughout the review of the literature, it was determined that the narratives espoused by white evangelicals to dispute the veracity of climate change have existed for a several decades. However, it was not until 2016, the year of Trump's election, that these narratives entered into the White House and became normalized within political discourses. Therefore, this paper sought to determine which narratives were most impactful throughout Trump's Presidency, and the reasons behind their relative success.

The first narrative examined in this paper that is frequently espoused by white evangelicals to justify their opposition to government action on climate change leverages white evangelicals' literal interpretation of the Bible. Through this typology of narratives, white evangelical elites, think tanks, and organizations have normalized sentiments of disinterest, disbelief, and/or hostility towards government action on climate change by citing biblical passages, and by outlining/defining how these passages ought to be interpreted. The second narrative examined in this paper was regarding how white evangelicals mobilize and conflate their religious identity with the conservative Republican identity to justify and to legitimize their disinterest, disbelief, and/or hostility towards government action on climate change. Research has demonstrated that individuals often shift their religious identity to align more closely with their political ideology and vice versa (Egan, 2018; Margolis, 2018; Miller, 2019). Opposition to government action on climate change amongst the white evangelical community has become an issue that is deeply rooted in their affiliation with the conservative Republican identity and ideology, which is largely pro-corporation and anti-government action on a variety of issues, including those regarding climate change. Finally, I examined how white evangelicals vilify and demonize those who are pro-government action on climate change to legitimize and justify their own opposition to the issue. Through this narrative, white evangelicals frame climate action as an attack on their religious and/or political identity, and anti-environmental action as a defence of their religious and/or political identity. These findings are significant as they demonstrate how religious identities and ideologies are able to be mobilized and conflated with political identities and ideologies to influence government action on a variety of issues, such as those regarding climate change.

These findings are also demonstrative of the fact that once members of a relatively small, yet unified portion of the population (16%) are appointed to positions within the power elite, they essentially become anointed with a power to shape the trajectory of the U.S. in a way that aligns with their narratives, rather than with the collective needs and sentiments of the entire population.

More broadly, I determined that the narratives espoused by white evangelicals were much more effective in their efforts to influence government action on climate change during the Trump era due to many factors. First, Trump has appointed several white evangelicals or individuals who are receptive to the views of white evangelicals to high-ranking positions within his administration. He also has an EAB which has effectively silenced differing religious opinions and perspectives regarding climate change. Second, as an individual, Trump is highly receptive and reactive to praise and support. Throughout his time in American national politics, this praise and support has come from the white evangelical community and has come in the form of their widespread political support, and through their characterization of him as a messianic-like figure, or as someone chosen by God. Therefore, Trump appears more willing to satisfy the needs of his core supporters, which is framed by their disdain for government action on climate change. Another reason why anti-environmental narratives espoused by white evangelicals have been particularly effective in the era of Trump is due to the increasing conflation and equivocation of the conservative Republican identity and ideology with the white evangelical identity and ideology. Finally, the U.S. is more polarized than ever. As such, narratives that frame political issues, such as climate change, as one that is deeply rooted in one's identity, whether that be political, religious, racial, etc. elicit a stronger reaction amongst the white evangelical community, and amongst politicians. When political issues are tied to identity, government action on these issues is often perceived as an attack or as a defence of one's identity. Therefore, efforts to address climate change, such as the GND, are often interpreted by white evangelicals as attacks on their political and religious identity. Conversely, when Trump withdrew the U.S. from the PA, he received praise from the white evangelical community for defending their values and their identity.

These findings are critical to understanding how Trump and his administration perceive and react to the climate change politics. He, more so than any other previous president, has welcomed white evangelical perspectives into the White House while simultaneously excluding the views, beliefs, and voices of others. This is undemocratic and sets a dangerous, and perhaps, irreversible precedent through which the fate of the environment may be determined through the identities and ideologies of a powerful few, rather than through the collective needs of the majority.

To understand how the white evangelical community has effectively mobilized narratives regarding climate change to influence government action on climate change, this community was were largely considered and analysed through a homogenous lens. In other words, although factors such as gender, age, education-level, geographic region, etc., likely mediate some of the findings, they were outside the scope of this paper. This underscores, however, the need for further research on the topic. For example, some white evangelical youth, such as members of the Young Evangelicals for Climate Action, have views that are incongruent with the views and narratives outlined in this paper. This fracture within the white evangelical community deserves attention, and more work should be done to examine and analyse the factors that have contributed to the decisions of white evangelical youth who distance themselves from the narratives outlined in this paper. Although outside the scope of this paper, greater attention to the role of the news media may also reveal some interesting findings that contribute to the widespread anti-environmental attitudes amongst white evangelicals.

Despite these limitations, this paper provided a framework through which the narratives mobilized by white evangelical elites, and embodied by the white evangelical community, may be understood and interpreted through a political and partisan lens. Until 2016, white

evangelicals largely remained in the shadows of American politics, in that their narratives had a relatively minor impact on government action on climate change, and on a variety of other issues. This paper demonstrated, however, the overwhelming force and impact that white evangelicals have on influencing government action on climate change when placed in positions of power and prestige. Throughout Trump's time in office, their narratives regarding climate change have been legitimatized and have been translated into actions and policies that are harmful to the environment. Americans should expect this trend to not only continue, but to amplify should he be re-elected in November 2020.

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