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James L. Guth

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# ARE WHITE EVANGELICALS POPULISTS? THE VIEW FROM THE 2016 AMERICAN NATIONAL ELECTION STUDY

By James L. Guth 

The rise of populism across the globe has garnered enormous attention from scholars of comparative politics. The U.S. presidential election of 2016 added one more entry to the list of nations experiencing such movements. Despite the growing interest, the academic literature suffers from a lack of convergence: scholars define populism in many ways and offer several theories about its causes. Despite this diversity, most explanations fall into two broad categories, *cultural resentment* and *economic stress* perspectives. Although each has distinguished proponents, cultural interpretations have come to dominate discussions of European and American populism, especially when located on the political right—often specified as “right-wing populism” (Kaufman 2019), “authoritarian populism” (Norris and Inglehart 2019), or “national populism” (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018). This variant is our topic and we use the omnibus “conservative populism” to encompass all these terms. A prominent feature of conservative populism is its anti-internationalist disposition, manifest in opposition to immigration and hostility toward multilateral institutions.

Cultural explanations of populism invariably entail the role of religion, albeit in different ways: most focus on the connection between general

“religiosity” and adherence to conservative populism, whether because of its emphasis on historic national religious attachments or its electoral appeal to observant voters. But few studies address conservative populism’s varying attraction for different ethnoreligious groups. This question may be less relevant in Europe, where most nations are dominated by a single religious tradition (see Norris and Inglehart 2019), but could be crucial in the United States, with its significantly greater religious diversity.

In this article, we examine religious responses to the themes stressed by populist parties and leaders—and by Donald Trump, the avatar of contemporary American populism—with a particular focus on anti-internationalism (Weyland and Madrid 2019). In terms of ethnoreligious groups, we focus especially on

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**Abstract:** The role of religion in the rise of populism is sometimes contested, but usually neglected. In this article, we consider the question of whether white American Evangelicals are part of the populist movement. Using the American National Election Study of 2016, we demonstrate that Evangelicals share almost all of the central traits of “populists” posited by observers of such movements and consider some of the implications of this finding.

**Keywords:** evangelicals, populism, nationalism, internationalism, biblical literalism, immigration, nativism

white Evangelical Protestants, both the largest religious constituency in Trump's 2016 electoral coalition (Kellstedt and Guth 2019) and the most steadfast supporters of his administration. If there is a religious basis to contemporary American populism we should find it among white Evangelical laity (Bonikowski 2019, 119). Such populism at the grass-roots may well conflict with a contrasting recent trend among some white Evangelical elites—namely, a movement *toward* cosmopolitan internationalism. Our analysis, then, addresses two questions: Are rank-and-file white Evangelicals indeed populists? And, if they are, in what ways?

We proceed as follows: First, we examine theoretical descriptions of conservative populism to derive a list of dominant features, avoiding the hotly contested issue of their primacy. Second, we use the 2016 American National Election Study (ANES) to establish religious connections with the characteristic traits of populist politics, comparing ethnoreligious traditions and assessing the role of other religious variables. Finally, we test whether those traits hang together or, perhaps, constitute different dimensions of political dispositions and attitudes. We discover that a coherent dimension, which we call the “Populist Syndrome,” does exist and is closely associated with white Evangelicalism.

### Theory: Populist Markers

As Weyland and Madrid (2019) argue, theoretical disputes about the nature and origins of populism have passed the point of diminishing returns. They bypass such controversies by analyzing universally acknowledged cases of populist movements and leaders. We concur with their assessment, but take a different analytic tack by focusing on the widely accepted dispositional and attitudinal traits of grass-roots conservative populists (and their leaders). Despite significant scholarly differences on the origins of conservative populism, a broad consensus exists on such traits. Our premise here is simple: the religious adherents exhibiting the characteristics almost universally attributed to conservative populists are indeed “populists.” In the next few paragraphs we delineate those commonly recognized traits.

To begin, some theorists contend that populism is a “thin” ideology that stresses a few main themes (Mudde 2007), including *distrust of political elites and institutions*, a sense of *national decline* (“declinism”), insistence on *majoritarianism* and *opposition to pluralism*, and the *need for strong, if unconventional, leadership*. Thus, populists see their nation betrayed by political elites and institutions, explaining the decline in national and personal fortunes. The remedy is a return to rule by “the [true] people,” even if that means excluding minorities from the political process—or perhaps from the nation itself. This majoritarian revival requires a strong leader willing to take unconventional or even unconstitutional action to restore national greatness.

Although such perspectives are shared by populists of both left and right, conservative populists usually add more specific features to their ideology. As many scholars note, they stress *nationalism*, exhibit *authoritarian* tendencies, are willing to support *rough politics*, and regard *political compromise* as a violation of majority rights and a constraint on strong leadership. These “second-order” emphases are cut from the same attitudinal cloth as the “thin” traits (i.e. distrust, declinism, majoritarianism, strong leadership), but reinforce and expand their scope among conservative populists.

A third set of themes emphasizes “national identity” factors, which specify the exact nature of populist nationalism. As Jan-Werner Müller puts it, “populism is always a form of identity politics” (2016, 3), defining the nature of the “true people.” Thus, conservative populists exhibit *anti-immigrant* sentiments, *nativism*, a preference for *white ethnic power*, and (in Europe and America) *anti-Muslim* sentiment (Camus and Lebourg 2017). Although many analysts stress these interrelated factors of immigration, ethnicity, power, and religion, they differ sharply in normative assessments, with some relatively empathetic to populist concerns (Kaufman 2019; Eatwell and Goodwin 2018) and others more critical (Norris and Inglehart 2019).

Other cultural accounts assert that conflicts over moral values help explain the rise of conservative populism. Indeed, Müller insists that

populism is always “a particular *moralistic interpretation of politics*” (2016, 19). Even economic stress theorists concede that economic resentments against the dislocations from globalization or neo-liberal policies are often expressed as *moral traditionalism, sexual traditionalism, anti-feminism, or suspicion of science and experts*. In this telling, conservative populists are uncomfortable with the rise of new moral frameworks, rejecting the legalization of abortion, gay marriage and LGBTQ+ rights, new gender roles, and the dominance of “experts,” especially scientists who denigrate the dictates of “common sense” or religious tradition (cf. Norris and Inglehart 2019).

Finally, *economic stress* theories see populism issuing from modern economic problems, disproportionately affecting certain social groups. These theories seldom consider the impact of such stress on different religious groups, but people in the social categories affected (the working- and lower-middle classes, rural residents, older people) often hold more traditional religious beliefs. Although empirical tests of the role of *personal* economic problems have produced mixed results, those perceiving *national* economic decline are indeed more prone to support populist politics. Populists are also more suspicious of international trade and other features of economic globalization, including multilateral agencies and agreements. Beyond that, however, the economic policy content of populism is more contested: many see conservative populists, like their left-wing counterparts, supporting more state economic intervention, while others find that conservative populists are just that, skeptical of official action designed to rectify economic disparities. Some conservative populists may be open to state economic interventions but prefer aid only to certain domestic sectors (e.g. farmers, small businesses, or senior citizens). Still other scholars discover an even more nuanced relationship (cf. Guth and Nelsen 2017).

Just as scholars heatedly debate the nature and origins of populism, but usually agree on “cases” (“we know it when we see it”), they often concur on its features but argue vigorously about their causal primacy. We avoid that issue and

focus on the location of populist markers within religious groups and on other religious variables. In the end, however, we discover a case of the proverbial “blind men and the elephant”: whatever their causal primacy, almost all of these traits contribute to a broad Populist Syndrome, which has a dramatically varying presence within American religious groups.

## Data and Methods

We use the 2016 American National Election Study (ANES) to analyze the nexus between religion and conservative populism. Long the gold standard for political science surveys, ANES provides a variety of tested measures. The relatively large *N* (3649 in the complete pre- and post-election sample) and detailed screens for religious affiliation permit us to examine specific religious traditions, testing the insights of an *ethnocultural* interpretation, which treats ethnoreligious groups as the building blocs of American electoral politics (Swierenga 2009). Other ANES measures permit assessment of the impact of *restructuring* theories of American religion, which see theological divisions between traditionalists and progressives in all the major denominations and religious traditions as central in shaping religious politics (Wuthnow 1988; Hunter 1991).

We are fortunate to have multiple items tapping the populist traits mentioned above. Most variables used here are multi-item indexes or principal components scores (see the Appendix for details), giving us considerable confidence in the robustness of our results. To summarize a vast amount of data, we report two OLS regressions for each conservative populist “trait”: first we examine the coefficients for *ethnoreligious traditions*, and then add variables tapping *religious traditionalism*.

## Populism and American Religion: The “Thin” Ideology Traits

To consider religion’s influence on the “thin” ideology traits of populism, we looked at preferences for strong leadership, distrust of government, a sense that the country is on the wrong track, and commitment to majoritarianism, with populism scored “high” on

**Table 1.** Populism and Religion: “Thin Definition” Factors (OLS regressions, standardized coefficients).

Religious Tradition	Need Strong Leader	Distrust Government	Country on Wrong Track	Majority Rules Minorities Adapt				
Evangelical	.22***	.07***	.10***	.14***	.07***	.15***	.05*	
White Catholic	.10***	.05**	.02	.03	.06**	.03	.09***	.06**
Mainline Protestant	.07***	.01	.03	.03	.03	.01	.08***	.04*
Latter-day Saints	.04*	.03	-.02	-.02	.02	.02	.03*	.03
Latino Protestant	.03	-.03	-.07***	-.07***	.00	-.03	-.01	-.05**
Latino Catholic	.07***	.03	-.17***	-.15***	-.06***	-.08***	-.02	-.05**
World Religions	.03	.05**	-.02	-.02	-.03***	-.03	-.02	-.01
Jews	-.07***	-.04**	-.07***	-.06***	-.05***	-.04**	-.04**	-.02
Agnostic/Atheist	-.12***	-.01	.00	.03	-.04*	.01	-.09***	-.01
Black Protestant	.01	-.08***	-.11***	-.10***	-.14***	-.17***	-.08***	-.13***
<i>Identifications</i>								
“Evangelical”		.10***		.03		.10***		.08***
“Progressive”		-.11***		.02		-.02		-.10***
“Secular”		-.10***		-.05		-.05		-.08***
<i>Traditionalism</i>								
Biblical literalism		.25***		-.06**		.05*		.15***
Religious Guidance		.06**		.07**		.04		-.01
Attendance		-.13***		-.06**		-.05*		-.06**
<i>Adj. R squared=</i>	<i>.08</i>	<i>.17</i>	<i>.06</i>	<i>.06</i>	<i>.06</i>	<i>.07</i>	<i>.05</i>	<i>.09</i>

Source: American National Election Study 2016.

The religiously unaffiliated and miscellaneous smaller groups constitute the omitted reference category.

\*\*\* $p < .001$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$

each for ease of interpretation. Table 1 reports the findings.

The results are very consistent. Ethnoreligious groups locate themselves in similar ways across all four traits in the first regression in each section.<sup>1</sup> White Evangelicals are invariably the most populist: more likely to favor strong leadership (even when that means breaking the rules), to distrust government, to see the country on the “wrong” track, and to think that the majority should always rule (and minorities adapt). On most traits, white Catholics, Mainline Protestants, and Latter-day Saints show a modest propensity for populist answers, but the coefficients are not always statistically significant. On the other side, most ethnoreligious “minorities” have varying negative scores on populist traits. This is especially true for Latino Catholics, Jews, agnostics and atheists, and Black Protestants, with some modest variation.

The second column in each section adds measures that tap, directly or indirectly, *religious*

*traditionalism*, which restructuring theorists see as dominant in contemporary religious politics. The best measure is biblical literalism, but traditionalists are also likely to claim high religious salience (the ANES “guidance” measure), and to attend worship services frequently.<sup>2</sup> We also use *religious identity* measures, with several “evangelical” labels included under that heading, three “progressive” identities under that head, and three “secular” ones under that label (see Appendix for details).<sup>3</sup> The first measure, we assume, captures religious traditionalism, while the latter two tap “progressive” religious identity or secularism (cf. Hunter 1991).

Religious restructuring clearly has an impact. “Evangelical” identifiers are consistently populist, with only the coefficient for distrust in government narrowly missing significance. On the other side, “progressives” and “seculars” are consistently less populist, although some coefficients miss statistical significance. Biblical interpretation has a powerful effect: literalists

prefer strong leadership, think the country is on the wrong track, and favor majority rule, but are actually modestly less distrustful. Those claiming much guidance from religion are quite likely at the bivariate level to be populist. Much of that tendency is absorbed in regression by biblical literalism, but salience does retain some power on strong leadership and distrust of government. Church attendance has a strong positive bivariate correlation with all four populist traits, but its influence reverses when included in the multivariate analysis with literalism and salience, working *against* populism—an interesting tendency that will appear across many traits.

Finally, note that inclusion of the “restructuring” variables usually reduces, but does not change the typical position of ethnoreligious groups. Evangelicals, for example, are still significantly more populist on all four traits, even when their high biblical literalism and religiosity are accounted for. The same generally holds for groups on the other side of the scales, although the agnostic/atheist coefficients are absorbed by secular identity and other religious measures. Note that Black Protestants often become *more*

anti-populist once all their religious traits are taken into account, suggesting that religious traditionalism, even among African-Americans, moves believers toward populist attitudes. All in all, religious factors alone account for a respectable portion of the variance on these “thin” traits, ranging from 6 percent on distrust of government to an impressive 17 percent on the desire for strong leadership.

### Populism and American Religion: The “Second-Order” Thin Ideology Traits

Religious factors clearly influence “thin” populism, but do they shape other putative traits? Table 2 considers “second-order” characteristics often associated with the “thin” measures, especially for conservative populists: nationalism, authoritarianism, support for “rough politics,” and distaste for political compromise. “Nationalism” combines two items asking respondents how the American flag makes them feel and whether the world be better off if more countries were like America. Once again white Evangelicals top the league table for nationalism, while secular folks and Black Protestants are more

**Table 2.** Populism and Religion: “Second-Order” Factors (OLS regressions, standardized coefficients).

Religious Tradition	Nationalism	Authoritarianism	Rough Politics	Compromise Bad
Evangelical	.24***	.09***	.18***	.01
White Catholic	.19***	.14***	.05**	-.01
Mainline Protestant	.15***	.10***	.02	-.04*
Latter-day Saints	.04**	.03	-.02	-.04*
Latino Protestant	.01	-.05**	.10***	.03
Latino Catholic	.09***	.05**	.13***	.08***
World Religions	-.03	-.02	-.00	.01
Jews	-.00	.02	-.09***	-.07***
Agnostic/Atheist	-.11***	-.02	-.19***	-.06***
Black Protestant	-.04*	-.13***	.21***	.10***
<i>Identifications</i>				
“Evangelical”	.10***	.09***	.11***	.05**
“Progressive”	-.09***	-.11***	-.09***	-.06**
“Secular”	-.12***	-.10***	-.09***	-.06*
<i>Traditionalism</i>				
Biblical literalism	.18***	.31***	.18***	.24***
Religious Guidance	.06*	-.02	.00	.04
Attendance	-.08***	-.04*	-.07***	-.08***
Adj. R squared=	.11	.18	.14	.07

Source: American National Election Study 2016.

The religiously unaffiliated and miscellaneous smaller groups constitute the omitted reference category.

\*\*\**p* < .001; \*\**p* < .01; \**p* < .05

suspicious of unalloyed patriotism. Evangelical identification, biblical literalism, and religious salience bolster nationalism scores, while progressive and secular identities work in the other direction, but adding the “restructuring” variables does not eliminate the effects of ethnoreligious membership. Religious factors account for one-fifth of the variance, again an impressive showing.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, the flip side of nationalism is internationalism or multilateralism, perhaps best captured by Eugene Wittkopf’s “cooperative internationalism,” which stresses that the U.S. should work with international bodies such as the UN, prefer diplomacy over militarism, and forge multilateral agreements to solve international problems (1990). Unfortunately, the 2016 ANES has only one yes/no query on whether the U.S. would “be better off if we just stayed home.” That crude internationalism item reveals few religious differences: only the unaffiliated take a distinctly isolationist position. We know from other surveys, however, that white Evangelicals are less likely than any other religious group to support *cooperative* internationalism. Most Evangelicals are indeed open to American involvement abroad, but they tend to be “hardliners”—favoring military uses—rather than diplomacy and multilateralism (Guth 2010; 2013; Guth and Nelsen 2018). So although we cannot include measures of such “cosmopolitan internationalism” in the present analysis, we may be sure that white Evangelicals would score low, confirming again their populist location.

Evangelicals’ populist predilections show up again on authoritarianism.<sup>5</sup> In respect for authority, ethnoreligious groups line up in nearly the same way as on nationalism; the religious identities do as well. But in the full analysis, authoritarianism is most powerfully predicted by biblical literalism, which absorbs even the impact of Evangelical affiliation. Note that in both regressions, Jews and agnostics/atheists are the least authoritarian, but that Black Protestants (on this indicator) join the populists. The package of religious factors accounts for almost one-quarter of the variation, a not unexpected but still convincing finding.

Another salient trait of populist politics is willingness to ignore democratic civility (Moffitt 2016, 57ff). We constructed a “rough politics” score from three ANES items: whether protesters deserve what they get if they are hurt in demonstrating, whether the country would be better off if it got rid of “rotten apples,” and whether people are “too sensitive” about political discourse (*theta* = .54). Here the usual pattern recurs: Evangelical affiliation, Evangelical identity, and biblical literalism predicts agreement with those assertions, while religious minorities, secular folks and “progressives” tend to demur. Again religious factors contribute a good bit of explanatory power. They are not quite as good in predicting views on political compromise, but those on the Evangelical side tend to see it as betrayal of principle and not to want elected officials to compromise. In summary, then, Evangelicals, whether by affiliation, identity or belief, clearly have an affinity for populist attitudes on government and politics.

### Populism and American Religion: Identity Theories

Evangelicals are clearly high on any “patriotism” scale, but most theories of conservative populism envision a larger role for nationalism as a special assertion of ethnic identity, fostering malignant attitudes such as anti-immigrant sentiment, nativism, “white power” ideologies, and Islamophobia (cf. Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2018). In Table 3 immigration attitudes are tapped by an eight-question score about immigrants and their impact on the U.S. Nativism is a four-item standard scale and “white ethnic power” summarizes whether respondents think whites should have more power and ethnic minorities less. Finally, we gauge attitudes toward Muslims with a score derived from a standard ANES thermometer item (from 0, “very cold” to 100, “very warm”), two queries about Muslims’ patriotism and work ethic, and one on admitting Syrian refugees to the U.S.

By this point, the patterns need little elaboration. Once again, Evangelicals by any standard are the most populist, with especially

**Table 3.** Populism and Religion: National Identity Factors (OLS regressions, standardized coefficients).

Religious Tradition	Anti-immigrant		Nativism		White Ethnic Power		Anti-Muslim	
Evangelical	.28***	.17***	.20***	.07**	.20***	.11***	.27***	.15***
White Catholic	.12***	.09***	.08***	.05*	.12***	.09***	.13***	.08***
Mainline Protestant	.11***	.07***	.07***	.02	.10***	.07***	.13***	.09***
Latter-day Saints	.02	.02	.01	.01	.03	.02	.07***	.05*
Latino Protestant	-.02	-.07***	.02	.03	-.02	-.05**	.01	-.03
Latino Catholic	-.09***	-.12***	.00	.04*	-.05**	-.08***	-.01	-.04*
World Religions	-.02	.01	-.04*	-.02	.00	.01	.00	-.00
Jews	-.06***	-.04*	-.05**	-.04*	-.03	-.01	-.02	.01
Agnostic/Atheist	-.11***	.00	-.12***	-.04	-.08***	-.02	-.07***	-.01
Black Protestant	-.01	-.07***	.10***	.02	-.14***	-.19***	-.10***	-.15***
<i>Identifications</i>								
“Evangelical”		.10***		.07***		.05**		.12***
“Progressive”		-.11***		-.08***		-.12***		-.08***
“Secular”		-.12***		-.05		-.08**		-.08***
<i>Traditionalism</i>								
Biblical literalism		.22***		.27***		.13***		.04
Religious Guidance		.00		.03		.01		.01
Attendance		-.14***		-.12***		-.07***		-.05
<i>Adj. R squared=</i>	<i>.13</i>	<i>.20</i>	<i>.07</i>	<i>.14</i>	<i>.10</i>	<i>.14</i>	<i>.11</i>	<i>.14</i>

Source: American National Election Study 2016.

The religiously unaffiliated and miscellaneous smaller groups constitute the omitted reference category.

\*\*\**p* < .001; \*\**p* < .01; \**p* < .05.

strong coefficients on all four items. The major difference from previous tables is the extent to which white Catholics and Mainline Protestants join white Evangelicals in holding populist ideas, perhaps revealing the sort of “Christian nationalism” that Andrew Whitehead and colleagues (2018) have delineated. Still, Evangelicals stand out: they feel far warmer toward “Christians” than do members of any other religious group, including these other white Christian traditions (data not shown). The minority religions, agnostics and atheists, and—generally—Black Protestants fall on the other side, along with those holding progressive religious or secular identities. And except on anti-Muslim attitudes, biblical literalism contributes strongly to populism. Once again, when everything else is taken into account, religious service attendance has an *anti*-populist effect. Overall, religious variables account for a respectable portion of the variation.

Here we should consider one characteristic sometimes attributed to conservative populists: anti-Semitism. Although not all theorists see anti-

Jewish attitudes as part of the populist mindset, it often has at least a supporting role (Marzouki, McDonnell, and Roy 2016). Our findings, however, are quite clear: Evangelicals do not share such views. In fact, analysis shows just the opposite: on an ANES thermometer rating Evangelicals feel warmer toward Jews than do members of any other major religious group—except for Jews themselves. Evangelical identifications, biblical literalism, high religious salience, and church attendance all produce philo-Semitism (data not shown). Those reading the literature on Christian Zionism will not be surprised by these findings, but they do provide an exception to the white Evangelical pattern seen to this point.

### Populism and American Religion: Social Traditionalism and Economic Distress Theories

Most analysts of conservative populism concede a role for social traditionalism. For some, traditionalism simply marks those left behind by the globalized economy: the modestly educated,



Table 4. Populism and Religion: Background Themes (OLS regressions, standardized coefficients)

Religious Tradition	Moral		Sexual		Anti-Feminism	Suspicion of Science		
	Traditionalism		Traditionalism					
Evangelical	.36***	.10***	.38***	.09***	.26***	.15***	.14***	.04
White Catholic	.12***	.02	.03	-.07***	.12***	.08**	.03	-.01
Mainline Protestant	.10***	-.01	.05*	-.07***	.09***	.05*	.02	-.02
Latter-day Saints	.05***	.01	.07***	.01	.05**	.04*	.02	.01
Latino Protestant	.09***	.00	.15***	.03*	.00	-.03	.05**	.05**
Latino Catholic	.06***	-.02	.02	-.07***	-.02	-.05**	.02	.00
World Religions	-.02	-.02	.00	-.00	.01	.00	-.04*	-.04*
Jews	-.07***	-.06***	-.05**	-.04**	-.03*	-.03	-.05**	-.04*
Agnostic/Atheist	-.17***	-.05*	-.15***	-.06**	-.07***	-.02	-.13***	-.04
Black Protestant	.07***	.09***	.09***	-.09***	-.08***	-.13***	.04*	-.02
<i>Identifications</i>								
“Evangelical”		.14***		.14***		.11***		.12***
“Progressive”		-.09***		-.09***		-.11***		-.10***
“Secular”		-.08***		-.02		-.04		-.04*
<i>Traditionalism</i>								
Biblical literalism		.22***		.26***		.08***		.08***
Religious Guidance		.10***		.05*		.00		-.05*
Attendance		-.07***		.17***		.03		.05*
<i>Adj. R squared=</i>	<i>.18</i>	<i>.32</i>	<i>.19</i>	<i>.38</i>	<i>.09</i>	<i>.13</i>	<i>.05</i>	<i>.08</i>

Source: American National Election Study 2016.

The religiously unaffiliated and miscellaneous smaller groups constitute the omitted reference category.

\*\*\* $p < .001$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$

rural residents, or blue-collar workers—who inevitably hold such attitudes because of the kind of people they are. Norris and Inglehart (2019), however, see value conflicts between *materialist* (religious and socially traditional) populations and the *post-materialist* (secular and socially liberal) vanguard as central to the rise of populism. Of course, social traditionalism usually has deep religious roots, so we incorporate several aspects in the analysis: moral traditionalism,<sup>6</sup> sexual traditionalism (combining items on abortion and gay rights), anti-feminism, and finally suspicion of experts and science, tapped by a thermometer rating of “scientists” (Table 4).

By now the story has become monotonous: religion explains a third or more of the variance in moral and sexual traditionalism, no surprise to any student of religion and political attitudes. The picture is much the same for attitudes toward feminists and female politicians, although the explanation is not as powerful. And if populists distrust experts of every kind, that puts white Evangelicals, those with conservative religious identities, and biblical literalists squarely in the

populist camp—and their counterparts, of course, on the other side. (In an analysis not shown, similar results appear on federal government spending for scientific research.) Once again—if one accepts the putative traits of conservative populists, Evangelicals fit the bill.

To this point, we have considered attitudes attributed to conservative populists by cultural theories. Some scholars—and even more journalists—insist on an alternative *economic* explanation: populists are the new “wretched of the earth,” or at least those with a strong sense of relative deprivation. Although such feelings may well be combined with “cultural” resentments or complaints, “the economy, stupid” really drives populist movements. Still, most empirical tests find at best only modest support for a “personal economic stress” explanation, but some confirmation for a “sociotropic” account using citizens’ assessment of national economic trends (cf. Norris and Inglehart 2019, 349–362).

Populists are also thought to have characteristic economic policy views, most notably, suspicions about free trade and

globalized economics (which bolsters, on this theory, their opposition to immigration). Some scholars also argue that populists favor government action to rectify economic disparities, putting them at odds with traditional conservatives and neo-liberals. Others counter that conservative populists see redistributive programs primarily benefitting immigrants, ethnic minorities and other “outgroups”—not favored domestic groups—making them critical of such policies. Table 5 examines populist economic attitudes.

First, on a sociotropic measure of economic pessimism, combining judgments on the current

state of the economy and prospects for next year, we see the typical pattern: Evangelicals are the only group with a strongly negative assessment, while Black Protestants and agnostics and atheists are much more positive. Other religious measures work in the usual direction, but the coefficients are smaller than we have seen on many populist traits, and the variance explained more modest. The story for personal economic hardship is much simpler: whatever its role in producing populist behavior (e.g. voting for Donald Trump), religious groups differ only slightly (with the possible exception of Black Protestants, who score *low* on reported distress). And religious

Table 5. Populism and Religion: Economic Assessments (OLS regressions, standardized coefficients).

Religious Tradition	Economic Pessimism		Personal Economic Hardship		Oppose Free Trade		Oppose Redistributive Policies		Oppose Affirmative Action	
Evangelical	.15***	.08***	.02	.02	.10***	.08***	.28***	.17***	.25***	.17***
White	.05*	.02	-.04*	-.03	.02	.01	.15***	.10***	.16***	.13***
Catholic										
Mainline Protestant	.02	.00	-.05**	-.05**	.01	.00	.14***	.10***	.14***	.11***
Latter-day Saints	-.01	-.01	-.01	-.00	-.04*	-.03	.07***	.05**	.01	.01
Latino Protestant	-.01	-.04*	-.05**	-.05**	.02	.01	.02	-.02	-.01	-.04*
Latino Catholic	-.03	-.05**	-.01	-.01	-.02	-.03	-.01	-.04	.01	-.02
World Religions	-.03	-.02	-.02	-.01	-.03	-.02	-.01	.00	-.01	.00
Jews	-.05**	-.03*	-.04*	-.03	-.05**	-.03	-.03	-.01	-.05**	-.03
Agnostic/Atheist	-.07***	-.00	-.03	-.00	-.04*	-.00	-.08***	.01	-.09***	.02
Black Protestant	-.12***	-.16***	-.09***	-.09***	.02	.01	-.09***	-.15***	-.24***	-.30***
<i>Identifications</i>										
“Evangelical”		.04*		-.01		-.00		.13***		.07***
“Progressive”		-.07***		-.04*		-.05*		-.07***		-.09***
“Secular”		-.06*		-.04		-.05		-.09***		-.14***
<i>Traditionalism</i>										
Biblical literalism		.08***		.06**		.10***		.05		.13***
Religious Guidance		.04		.02		.01		-.00		.05
Attendance		-.05*		-.11***		-.09***		-.02		-.14***
Adj. R squared=	.05	.07	.01	.02	.02	.03	.12	.15	.18	.23

Source: American National Election Study 2016.

The religiously unaffiliated and miscellaneous smaller groups constitute the omitted reference category.

\*\*\**p* < .001; \*\**p* < .01; \**p* < .05

variables explain very little of the personal distress scores.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the massive attention given to opposition to free trade as a populism marker, religious differences are relatively modest and explain little variance. We see only a shadow of the usual pattern, with Evangelicals and biblical literalists more skeptical of free trade, and several other ethnoreligious groups more favorable. The impact of religion is much more powerful on two measures of redistributionism. Contrary to many journalistic and scholarly interpretations, populist religious groups do not favor higher taxes on the rich, a larger role for government, and more redistribution. Indeed, white Evangelicals by affiliation and identity strongly oppose such policies, as to a lesser extent, do white Catholics and Mainline Protestants, while Black Protestants and nonbelievers hold down the other side. A very similar, but even stronger, pattern appears on support for affirmative action, to which Black Protestants predictably seem more strongly committed than to general redistributive policies. In both cases, religious variables produce very substantial explanations, accounting for about a sixth of the variance on redistribution and one-quarter on affirmative action.

For present purposes, the take-away is quite simple. Whatever the specific trait, white Evangelical Protestants—whether defined by affiliation, self-identification, or belief and behavior—represent the religious core of American populism. As we considered key populist themes, the “Evangelical” scores moved in the same direction across almost all variables (an exception being that for frequent church attendance, in the multivariate analysis). Moreover the size of evangelical coefficients was unmatched by those for other ethnoreligious groups, whose scores varied more by trait and sometimes deviated from the “normal” position. And white Evangelical populism appears not only on legitimate issues of domestic economic and social policy (such as redistributionism, trade, and abortion), but in attitudes potentially more threatening to democratic values, such as countenancing rough politics, favoring a “strong leader,” attacking religious or ethnic “outgroups,” and opposing political compromise.

## Summing Up: Religion and the “Populist Syndrome”

The similarity of religious responses across populist traits suggests that these characteristics are interrelated, an intuition confirmed by a quick glance at a correlation matrix. Perhaps arguments over “primacy” have missed the proverbial forest by concentrating on individual populist trees. To discover the structure of attitudes and produce an overall measure (or measures) of populism, we used principal components analysis (PCA), which revealed four components. The first was by far the largest and accounted for the most total variation in the twenty-one measures, making it a powerful summary of a Populist Syndrome (Table 6).<sup>8</sup>

All the populist traits have substantial loadings on the component, but the larger ones

**Table 6.** The Populist Syndrome (Principal Components Analysis).

Attitude	Loading
Anti-immigrant	.85
Oppose Affirmative Action	.81
Rough Politics	.79
Anti-Muslim	.76
Moral Traditionalism	.76
Sexual Traditionalism	.71
Anti-feminist	.70
Strong Leader	.68
White Ethnic Power	.68
Majority Rule	.68
Oppose Redistribution	.67
Nativism	.66
Nationalism	.59
National Economy Bad	.57
Authoritarianism	.54
U.S. on Wrong Track	.53
Compromise Bad	.51
Distrust Scientists	.43
Distrust Government	.38
Oppose Trade Deals	.37
Personal Economic Stress	.29
<i>Theta reliability= .92</i>	

Source: American National Election Study, 2016. Score is derived from the first principal component of a PCA, eigenvalue = 8.463, explaining 40 percent of the total variance, and 69 percent of the explained variance. Three other mostly uninterpretable components appeared with eigenvalues less than 1.5, each explaining 7 percent or less of the variance.

clearly define its meaning: anti-immigrant attitudes, opposition to affirmative action, preference for rough politics, Islamophobia, and traditionalism appear as the core of conservative “populism.” Demand for strong leadership, white power, majoritarianism, and opposition to redistributive economics are also solid indicators, followed closely by nativism and nationalism. Note that economic assessments load positively on the component, but with smaller coefficients (*much smaller* in the cases of anti-trade sentiments and personal economic distress). The component clearly taps central themes of the populist agenda, with very impressive reliability ( $\theta = .92$ ).<sup>9</sup> The results not only summarize the consistent patterns seen earlier, but comport very nicely with the dominant features of conservative populism portrayed in the literature, giving us confidence in the validity of our measure.

Our main interest, of course, is in discovering the role of religion in producing the Populist Syndrome. For illustration in Table 7, we used the scores to assign respondents to three equal groups, “Populists,” “Neutrals,” and “Anti-Populists.” As we anticipated, Evangelicals end up far above any other religious group, with about two-thirds falling into the Populist category. White Catholics, Mainline Protestants and Latter-day Saints have significant numbers in that group, but far fewer than Evangelicals and nowhere near a majority. The religiously unaffiliated and minority ethnoreligious groups have few Populists—often very few—with Jews, agnostics/atheists, Black Protestants, and members of world religions the most Anti-populist, followed by the two Latino religious groups, who have more Neutrals.

Other religious measures reveal familiar patterns. Half of those identifying as Evangelical fall into the Populist camp, while religious progressives and secular citizens (especially) are critical. Biblical literalists are heavily Populists, scoffers are Anti-Populist. Comparable findings appear on religious guidance and service attendance, with the “religious” more Populist and the non-observant, Anti-populist. This confirms our earlier findings for the individual traits scholars attribute to conservative populism.

Table 7. The Populist Syndrome by Religious Variables (in percent).

Religious Measure	Populist	Neutral	Anti-Populist
<i>Ethnoreligious Tradition</i>			
<i>Evangelical</i>	<b>66</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>10</b>
White Catholic	41	35	24
Mainline Protestant	39	29	33
Latter-day Saints	33	41	26
“None”	22	39	40
Latino Protestant	15	60	25
Latino Catholic	19	50	31
Jews	11	27	62
Agnostic/Atheist	9	22	69
Black Protestant	4	43	53
World Religions	5	43	52
<i>Identifications</i>			
“Evangelical”	<b>49</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>16</b>
“Progressive”	19	34	47
“Secular”	11	25	65
<i>Bible Interpretation</i>			
<i>Literal</i>	<b>59</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>14</b>
Authoritative	30	37	33
Myths and Legends	11	33	56
<i>Religious Guidance</i>			
<i>A great deal</i>	<b>50</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>18</b>
Quite a bit	39	34	27
Some	32	38	31
Not important	18	32	50
<i>Attendance</i>			
<i>More than Weekly</i>	<b>59</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>15</b>
Weekly	48	30	22
Almost Every Week	42	37	21
Monthly	34	37	30
Few Times a Year	30	36	33
Never	26	33	43
<i>All=</i>	<b>33.2</b>	<b>33.4</b>	<b>33.4</b>

Source: American National Election Study 2016.

\*\*\* $p < .001$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$ .

How do religious factors stack up to other influential forces in predicting populist orientations? To answer this question, we ran four OLS regressions, successively incorporating religious, demographic, and political variables (Table 8). As Model 1 shows, ethnoreligious tradition has the basic relationship to populism that we have seen throughout, with Evangelicals exhibiting the strongest coefficients, followed distantly by white Catholics and Mainline Protestants, with most religious minorities on the other side (remember that the unaffiliated are the

**Table 8.** Religion, Demographics and Politics: Explaining the Populist Syndrome.

	Model 1 Ethnoreligious Tradition	Model 2 + Other Religious Variables	Model 3 + Socioeconomic Controls	Model 4 + Political Variables
<i>Ethnoreligious Tradition</i>				
<i>Evangelical</i>	.36***	.14***	.12***	.05*
White Catholic	.16***	.08***	.08***	.03
Mainline Protestant	.10***	.03	.03	-.02
Latter-day Saints	.03	.01	.01	-.02
Latino Protestant	.03	-.05*	-.04***	-.03*
Latino Catholic	.02	-.04*	-.05**	-.02
World Religions	-.03	-.01	-.01	-.02
Jews	-.08***	-.06**	-.04*	-.02
Agnostic/Atheist	-.17***	-.05	-.05	-.02
Black Protestant	-.07***	-.20***	-.20***	-.09***
<i>Identifications</i>				
“Evangelical”		.15***	.15***	.07***
“Progressive”		-.14***	-.12***	-.07***
“Secular”		-.09***	-.07**	-.04
<i>Bible Interpretation</i>				
<i>Religious Guidance</i>		.28***	.23***	.14***
<i>Attendance</i>		-.09***	-.08**	-.09***
<i>Demographics</i>				
Education			-.18***	-.14***
Income			-.04*	-.08***
Age			.08***	.06***
Male			.07***	.01
<i>Political Factors</i>				
Party ID (GOP)				.30***
Ideology (Conservative)				.36***
<i>Adj. R<sup>2</sup> =</i>	.20	.35	.39	.65

Source: American National Election Study 2016.

\*\*\* $p < .001$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$ .

Omitted reference category comprises the unaffiliated and other small religious groups.

omitted reference group and are somewhat less populist than the entire sample). Ethnoreligious tradition alone explains a fifth of the variance. When we add the other religious variables in Model 2, we find that ethnoreligious tradition, religious identifications, biblical interpretation, religious guidance, and attendance all have a significant effect—with the attendance variable once more “flipping signs,” as it did in the individual analyses.<sup>10</sup> Religious variables alone explain more than a third of the variance, a very impressive result.

And these tendencies are not just a reflection of Evangelicals’ demographic or political

characteristics. As scholars have shown, populist attitudes are usually reduced significantly by higher education, but flourish among older citizens and men. We find the same results, and controlling for education, income, age, and gender increases the variance explained modestly (by 4 percent). But incorporation of demographics in Model 3 *does almost nothing to reduce the coefficients for Evangelical affiliation, identity, or biblical interpretation*. Nor is Evangelical populism simply an artifact of GOP party identification and conservative ideology, although much of its impact is mediated by those factors, as shown in Model 4. Even when

partisanship and ideology are included, all the Evangelical indicators retain a significant direct influence, beyond their indirect impact through partisanship and ideology. Indeed, as another indicator of the power of these attitudes, we found that Populist Syndrome scores are a *better predictor of a Trump vote among Evangelicals in 2016 than are party identification and ideology combined* (data not shown).

Such findings help us understand what many have struggled to comprehend: how can white Evangelical Protestants continue to provide strong support for President Donald Trump, whose personal values and behavior trample on the biblical and ethical standards professed by that community? The common explanation is that white Evangelicals have a transactional relationship with the president: as long as he nominates conservative jurists and makes appropriate gestures on abortion and sexual politics, they will support him.<sup>11</sup> The evidence here suggests a more problematic answer: white Evangelicals share with Trump a multitude of attitudes, including his hostility toward immigrants, his Islamophobia, his racism, and nativism, as well as his “political style,” with its nasty politics and assertion of strong, solitary leadership. Indeed, Trump’s candidacy may have “authorized” for the first time the widespread expression of such attitudes, providing a vehicle for their political influence (cf. Kaufman 2019).

The pervasive populism of white Evangelical laity not only helps explain their support for President Trump, but suggests powerful barriers

to influence by “cosmopolitan internationalist” Evangelical elites, who want to turn the community in a different direction. As hostile responses to efforts of anti-populist Evangelicals such as Michael Gerson, Russell Moore, David Platt and many others indicate, there is currently a very limited market for such alternative perspectives among the rank-in-file. Indeed, the vocal populism of many of the conservative Evangelicals filling President Trump’s religious advisory council is probably more representative of the community as a whole.

Nor does cosmopolitan or cooperative internationalism find much purchase among local Evangelical clergy. Analysis of the 2017

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Cooperative Clergy Survey shows that ministers from several Evangelical denominations, especially the large Southern Baptist Convention and Assemblies of God, exhibit exactly the same populist traits seen here in white Evangelical laity, but in more pronounced form: strong Islamophobia, Christian nationalism, extreme moral traditionalism, opposition to trade pacts, militaristic

attitudes, resistance to political compromise, and climate change denial, among others.<sup>12</sup> The obstacles to Evangelical political transformation thus seem massive—but Scripture tells stories of mustard seeds and mountains moving (Matt. 17:20), providing some hope for those who would convert the community—or significant parts of it—to a more biblically grounded politics. ❖

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1. The omitted reference group in the regressions consists primarily of those with no religious affiliation, often referred to as “Nones” in journalistic discourse, and some smaller religious groups. The reference group is less “populist” than the sample as a whole, a point to be remembered in evaluating the relative position of religious groups in the regressions.

2. Indeed, these items form a powerful index of traditional religiosity, but we have kept them separate in the multivariate analysis because attendance often “reverses sign” when all are included.

3. There has been an enormous amount of effort to use religious identities in social science research, with mixed results. For some problems using these measures, see Legee and Kellstedt 1993; Smidt, Kellstedt, and Guth 2009. Our analysis of these items (not shown) suggests that they do capture, in varying degrees, the basic theological divisions posited by scholars such as Wuthnow (1988) and Hunter (1991).

4. This patriotism may also reflect Evangelical proclivity for “American exceptionalism” (Guth 2012).

5. Authoritarianism is based on the standard set of ANES child-rearing questions. The author has several reservations about the use and interpretation of “authoritarian” scales in political science research. This measure is included here because it is a consistent feature of scholarly interpretations of populism and, perhaps more important, is highly correlated with other populist traits, as we will see in the analysis below.
6. This is the standard “Conover-Feldman” scale derived from four questions: whether we agree that the world is changing and we need to adjust our values, whether new lifestyles are breaking down society, whether we should be more tolerant of other moral standards, and whether there should be more emphasis on traditional family values.
7. One is tempted to interpret even the modest differences among religious groups in terms of partisanship, which has increasingly come to shape citizens’ assessment of the economy—and even of their own personal situation. Some scholars would argue that partisanship is primary here, but we need not contest this to note the religious differences.
8. See the legend on [Table 7](#). As an alternative better suited to identifying distinct aspects of populism we ran a factor analysis, which produced virtually the same findings as the PCA. We used a listwise deletion for missing values, but using mean substitution produced almost identical results with only a very slightly reduced amount of variance explained by the first component.
9. The rich lode of ANES items would allow us to add some additional variants on many of the included items, but such additions would do little to bolster this score.
10. Not too much should be made of this sign reversal: at the bivariate level, greater church attendance is marked by much more populist attitudes in every white religious tradition. As higher church attendance is characteristic of those with more orthodox religious views and higher religious salience, these variables explain most of the populist effects. The reversed sign for service attendance thus represents a combination of its impact in other traditions, and the anti-populism of Christian theological liberals who attend frequently—a very small contingent.
11. This common explanation has been offered by an Evangelical White House “insider,” Cliff Sims, in his account of religious politics in the Trump administration (Sims 2019, 194).
12. Although questions in this clergy survey (conducted by the Henry Institute at Calvin College) do not match perfectly those in the 2016 ANES, they tap most of the same traits examined here. When included in a principal components analysis these items produce only one significant component, with item loadings closely resembling those reported for the laity.

## About the Author

**James L. Guth** is William R. Kenan, Jr. Professor of Political Science at Furman University. He has written extensively on the role of religion in American and European politics. His most recent book is *Religion and the Struggle for European Union* with Brent F. Nelsen.

## ORCID

James L. Guth  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8598-957X>

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## Appendix: Variables

Most variables used in this analysis incorporate two or more items from the 2016 ANES. These are the items used to represent each populist belief or trait:

Variable	ANES 2016 Item(s)	
Strong Leadership	V162263	
Distrust Government	PCA score of V161215 to V161218	<i>theta</i> = .68
Wrong Track	V161081	
Majority Rule	V162267+V162266	<i>r</i> = .40
Nationalism	V162123+V162125x	<i>r</i> = .31
Authoritarianism	PCA score* of V162239 thru V162242	<i>theta</i> = .63
Rough Politics	PCA score of V161343, V161362, and V162169	<i>theta</i> = .54
Compromise	V161171+V162259 (reversed)	<i>r</i> = .28
Anti-immigrant	PCA score of V161192, V161194x, V161195x, V161196x, V162313, V162268, V162269, V162270	<i>theta</i> = .87
Nativism	PCA score of V162271 thru V162274	<i>theta</i> = .79
White Ethnic Power	PCA score of V162322 thru V162325	<i>theta</i> = .81
Anti-Muslim	PCA score of V161214x, V162106, V162353, V162355	<i>theta</i> = .77
Moral Traditionalism	PCA Score of V162207 thru V162210	<i>theta</i> = .70
Sexual Traditionalism	PCA Score of V161232, V161227x, V161228x, V161229x, V161230, V161231	<i>theta</i> = .82
Antifeminism	PCA score of V162096, V162227	<i>theta</i> = .67

(Continued)



Continued

Variable	ANES 2016 Item(s)	
Suspicion of science	V162112	
Economic pessimism	PCA score of V161140x, V161141x, V161142x, V161143	<i>theta=.67</i>
Personal hardship	PCA score of V161110, V161111	<i>theta=.57</i>
Oppose free trade	PCA score of V162175, V162176x	<i>theta=.64</i>
Oppose redistribution	PCA score of V161209, V161178, V161189, V162140, V162192, V162276	<i>theta=.79</i>
Affirmative action	PCA score of V161198, V162211, V162212, V162213, V162214, V162238x, V162312 V161204x	<i>theta=.87</i>
Evangelical ID	Coded 1 if “fundamentalist,” “evangelical,” “Pentecostal/Charismatic,” “born-again,” or “traditional”	
Progressive ID	Coded 1 if “progressive,” “spiritual,” or “nontraditional”	
Secular ID	Coded 1 if “secular,” “agnostic,” or “atheist”	

\*PCA = Principal components analysis score.