# Religion and Elections: Trump's Religious Rhetoric Use in his 2016 Presidential Campaign

## Introduction

When thinking of leaders who represent Christian values, Donald Trump is probably not the first person that comes to mind. Nevertheless, he secured a large majority of evangelical Christian votes in both 2016 and 2020 (Gorski 2017, 338; Margolis 2020, 89; Scala 2020, 917; Whitehead, Perry, and Baker 2018, 147). Previous literature tries to explain this contradictory relationship with white Christian nationalism (Gorski 2017, 342; Whitehead, Perry, and Baker 2018, 150), Trump's appeal to nominal evangelicals (Scala 2020, 938), and the slow trend of all evangelicals towards the GOP (Margolis 2020, 111). However, there has also been research into the frequency of religious rhetoric used by past presidents, and Trump's religious rhetoric use per thousand words was about twice as frequent as every president since FDR (Hughes 2019, 534). So, was an increased use of religious rhetoric one of Trump's tactics in 2016? My research question explores if strategic use of religious rhetoric helped Trump win more evangelical voters and swing states in the 2016 election compared to Mitt Romney in 2012. This question is important because it studies a recent election that broke many political norms. And if Donald Trump aims for another presidential run in 2024, he might use similar tactics from his 2016 bid.

In the following sections, I first evaluate the influence of religion and religious rhetoric on American politics. Building on a foundation of previous literature, I hypothesize Trump used more religious rhetoric in counties with a higher proportion of evangelicals and counties in swing states. I also hypothesize that Trump won more votes in counties where he used more religious rhetoric compared to Romney in 2012. To evaluate Trump's frequency of religious rhetoric, I conduct a text frequency analysis to count the number of religious words he used in speeches during his campaign. Then, I incorporate religious demographic data, presidential election

results, and voter registration data all at the county level to create statistical regression models to support or disprove my hypotheses. My findings reveal while Trump does on average use more religious rhetoric in counties with a higher proportion of evangelicals and counties within swing states, Trump also won fewer votes on average in those counties than did Romney in 2012. However, these results are potentially limited by my simple text frequency analysis that does not capture every instance of religious rhetoric and by missing voter registration data that I use as a control variable.

## Literature Review

### Civil Religion, Culture War, and Religious Demographics

Religion has always played a significant role in the history of American politics, but it is increasingly being used as one of the many personal traits fueling a potential culture war in America (Chapp 2013, 5–9; Hartman 2019, 1). Some of the earliest references to religion in American politics can be seen in George Washington's Farewell Address (Washington 1976) and the Declaration of Independence. But, frequent references to religion are still present in American political traditions today and continue under the idea of an American civil religion with shared beliefs and values rooted in Christianity (Bellah 1967, 6). However, many works cite Wuthnow for his warnings of the potential uniting and diving effects that American civil religion has because of its origins and ties with Christianity (Wald and Calhoun-Brown 2014, 57). Past research on presidential candidates' use of religious rhetoric has aligned with Wuthnow's fear that candidates tend to use rhetoric specifically targeted towards appealing to Christian voters, which might ostracize other religious voters (Chapp 2013, 50; Wald and Calhoun-Brown 2014, 57). However, there is also evidence that people who heard religious rhetoric from a candidate developed a better first impression of that candidate than others who did not hear any religious

rhetoric (Albertson 2015, 12–13). Historically, Republican candidates have predominantly used religious rhetoric in this manner to connect with Christian voters, and not to attack other religious groups (Chapp 2013, 80). So, while many previous candidates have seized the opportunity to appeal to Christian voters with religious rhetoric, they have not gone to the extreme end of using religious rhetoric to attack other religions.

Trump, on the other hand, used religion to create culture wars by generating fear and creating divisions among different religious demographics (Chapp 2013, 5–9; Hartman 2019, 1). Evidence from previous literature indicates that Trump's culture war aimed to capture the support of many white voters in America, especially white evangelicals (Major, Blodorn, and Major Blascovich 2018, 931; Whitehead, Perry, and Baker 2018, 149–50). Since the central themes in American civil religion originate from Christian roots, it bears no surprise that Trump won the majority of Christian votes in 2016 (Whitehead, Perry, and Baker 2018, 147). Additionally, research into the frequency of religious rhetoric used by past presidents finds that Trump's religious rhetoric use per thousand words was about twice as frequent as every president since FDR (Hughes 2019, 534). In some of those speeches, Trump even directly appeals to Christian nationalists by portraying Christianity as the best religion and the religion under siege by other religions (Whitehead, Perry, and Baker 2018, 151–52). Combining Trump's culture war and his high use of religious rhetoric, Trump should use more religious rhetoric in places with higher proportions of evangelicals.

***Hypothesis 1:*** *As the proportion of evangelicals in a county increases, the rate of religious rhetoric in Trump's speeches will also increase.*

In American religious affiliations, Christians make up the overwhelming majority and Evangelical Protestants make up the largest group of those Christians (Pew Research Center n.d.;

Putnam, Campbell, and Garrett 2012, 16–17). While evangelicals make up the largest group of Christians and the majority of the religious affiliations in southern states like Alabama and Tennessee, they only comprise about twenty percent of the great lakes' "blue wall" states like Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin (Pew Research Center n.d.). Trump only won these three "blue wall" states by narrow margins of less than one percentage point each. So, the twenty percent of evangelical Christians in these three "blue wall" states could have been critical to Trump's victory in those states. Without winning these three swing states, Donald Trump would not have won enough electoral votes to become the president. Building on Trump's high use of religious rhetoric, Trump should also use more religious rhetoric in his speeches when he campaigns in swing states.

***Hypothesis 2:*** *Trump uses more religious rhetoric when giving speeches in counties located within swing states than in counties not located in swing states.*

**2012 Versus 2016**

Comparing the two Republican candidates for the presidency in 2012 and 2016, Mitt Romney and Donald Trump have many differences, and one of those differences is in each of their respective religions. Past research has shown strong evidence that the religion of a candidate is very important to voters and can affect partisan voting (Campbell, Green, and Layman 2011, 51). Mitt Romney was the first Mormon nominated for the presidency by a major political party; meanwhile, Donald Trump was only "somewhat" Christian according to voters (Fahmy 2020). Focusing on Romney first, there is extensive research on other Christians, especially evangelicals, not accepting Mormonism as a Christian religion (Smith 2016, 790). However, exit polls conducted after the 2012 election suggest that Romney performed as well as Bush in 2004 and better than McCain in 2008 among white evangelical Christian voters

(Martínez and Gregory 2016). While this might initially suggest that evangelical voters are just a consistent Republican vote, it becomes surprising that Trump was able to outperform Romney among white evangelical Christian voters in 2016 according to the exit polls (Martínez and Gregory 2016). So how was Trump able to win so many more evangelical voters while not identifying as an evangelical himself? One potentially critical element that I referred to previously is that Trump's religious rhetoric use per thousand words was about twice as frequent as every president since FDR (Hughes 2019, 534). Trump might have increased his use of religious rhetoric to compensate for his unclear religious alignment to voters (Fahmy 2020). Evaluating the use of religious rhetoric and using Romney's 2012 election results as a baseline for partisan voting patterns, Trump should win more votes in counties where he used more religious rhetoric.

***Hypothesis 3:*** *Compared to Romney's results in 2012, Trump won more votes in counties where he uses more religious rhetoric.*

**Data and Methods**

My text frequency analysis of Trump's speeches uses a dataset that contains scraped text transcripts, from media sites, for every speech given by Trump during his 2016 campaign (Metcalfe 2020). The 2012 and 2016 official election results data and religious demographic data are at the county level, so I focus on the specific places where Trump gave speeches. I only evaluate the counties where Trump physically visited and gave speeches during his 2016 campaign. The election results are from the MIT Election Data and Science Lab (MIT Election Data and Science Lab 2018) and the religious demographic data is from a 2010 census by the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies on religious demographics by U.S. county (Grammich et al. 2018). I use these two sources for my election data and religious

demographic data because they are from reliable sources and contain few missing data points. I define swing states in 2016 according to the National Constitution Center's 11 definite swing states that have also been cited in previous research (Bomboy 2016; Howard et al. 2018, 4). The control data for the party demographic of each county is from Dave Leip's Voter Registration and Turnout Data, which aggregates voter registration data released by every state. All my data wrangling, modeling, and analysis are done in R.

My methodology to evaluate my hypotheses begins with a text frequency analysis of every speech given by Trump during his 2016 campaign to determine his exact frequency of using religious rhetoric at each city he spoke in. I use the stringr package in R to conduct the analysis (Wickham and RStudio 2019) and I define religious rhetoric using the same 102 words and phrases that were used in another recent analysis of presidential speeches up to Trump (Hughes 2019, 532, 549). This collection of religious terms was built upon two older analyses of religious rhetoric in past presidential speeches (Coe and Domke 2006; Hart and Childers 2005). The results of the text frequency analysis allow me to calculate the frequency at which Trump uses religious rhetoric in his speeches at different locations. Then, I incorporate official election results of 2012 and 2016 and religious demographic data to build regressions and conduct statistical analyses. All the datasets used for the regression and statistical analyses are joined at the county level using each counties' unique FIPS code. The first regression regresses the frequency of religious rhetoric used by Trump on the relationship between county evangelical population and whether the county is in a swing state. This first regression evaluates my first two hypotheses that Trump used more religious rhetoric in counties that have higher proportions of evangelicals and in counties located within swing states. I evaluate both proportion evangelical and swing state in the same model to pinpoint the magnitude of the relationship of each on

Trump's use of religious rhetoric. The second regression then analyzes if the frequency of religious rhetoric in Trump's speeches affects the difference in the proportion of votes Trump received in 2016 and the proportion of votes Romney received in 2012. In the second regression, I also control for the party makeup of each county using voter registration data at the county level. This second regression evaluates my third hypothesis that Trump won more votes in places where he used more religious rhetoric, as compared to Romney in 2012. The complete analysis of my regressions then answers my original research question of whether a strategic use of religious rhetoric helped Trump win more evangelical voters and swing states in the 2016 election as compared to Romney in 2012.

**Limitations**

My methodological approach has an extensive range of limitations that are embedded in both the analysis and the datasets used. Starting with the limitations of the text frequency analysis, the main question to consider is what types of words or phrases should be considered religious rhetoric? The 102 words and phrases (Hughes 2019, 532, 549) I use is not a perfect measure of religious rhetoric because it does not identify every instance of Trump using religious rhetoric in the 361 speech transcripts in the dataset due to the complexity of natural language. Leaving out references in my text frequency analysis might lead to inaccurate results that could drastically affect my statistical regressions and conclusion. Additionally, the definition of swing state from the National Constitution Center is only one definition of which states were swing states in the 2016 presidential election. Since there is no formal definition of swing state, this could alter the outcome of the statistical regression due to varying definitions of which states were swing states in 2016. Furthermore, another potential area for error would be inaccurate speech-to-text transcripts or missing speech transcripts from the scraped media sites. This is a

potential issue with inaccurate data, but it is difficult to resolve given the sheer number of speeches and length of speeches Trump made.

Evaluating my statistical analyses, one key limitation is the possibility of confounding variables in my regressions. In my first regression, there could be other strategic factors for Trump's frequency of religious rhetoric beyond the proportion of evangelicals in each county and whether a county is in a swing state. In my second regression, there are tons of other variables such as specific policies, economic hardships, and other demographic variables that might explain county-level results beyond religious rhetoric and party registration. All of this could potentially create an issue of internal validity if my findings are caused by other confounding variables and not religious rhetoric. However, I control for party demographic per county using voter registration data. This accounts for one counterargument that Trump used more religious rhetoric in counties that were more Republican.

Looking at the raw data in my regressions, there could be a vast array of issues such as incorrect election results and outdated religious demographic data. However, I have filtered down to use data from two commonly cited sources with limited missing data. One issue that has already risen is that every state reports voter registration differently. So, for some states, the county-level data is not split by party while for other states it is. However, most of the states are split by party, so only some states are affected. Looking at the benefits of this method, the first benefit of this approach is that the findings and trends can be shown on a scatter plot for easy and quick interpretation. Additionally, this method can draw on data in every place Trump campaigned in, so I can extrapolate the results to other parts of America. This method is also particularly strong in generalizability or external validity because it can easily be replicated with the transcript of speeches given by any future presidential candidate with updated county-level

election results, religious demographics data, and voter registration data. Making the method reproducible is key for future analysis of religious rhetoric, especially if Trump makes a bid in 2024.

**Results**

Table 1: Quasi-Poisson Regression

| | *Dependent variable:* |
|---|---|
| | Number of Religious Terms |
| Percent Evangelical in County | 0.009*** |
| | (0.003) |
| Is A Swing State | 0.246* |
| | (0.127) |
| Constant | 0.081 |
| | (0.150) |
| Observations | 343 |
| *Note:* | *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01 |

Table 1 shows the results of my Quasi-Poisson regression model that evaluates the relationship of a county's evangelical population and swing state status on how frequently Trump uses religious rhetoric while giving a campaign speech in that county. I used a Quasi-Poisson regression model over a standard Poisson regression model to account for overdispersion in the data. From these results, Trump is expected to use more religious rhetoric in counties that are made up of more evangelicals and counties that are in swing states. This supports my first and second hypotheses that Trump does use more religious rhetoric on average while campaigning in places with a higher evangelical population and in swing states. So, if Trump runs for president again in 2024, we can expect him to follow these results by using more religious rhetoric in places that have a high evangelical population and in swing states. The results also show that the percent evangelical variable is statistically significant and that the

swing state effect is still strong while not being statistically significant. The small coefficients for both variables can be explained by the limited number of religious rhetoric used in all campaign speeches generally and the limited number of religious terms I searched for in my text frequency analysis. These results suggest that Trump did have a strategy when choosing where to use religious rhetoric during his 2016 campaign. The second regression evaluates whether his strategy was successful compared to the results of Romney's 2012 campaign results.

Table 2: OLS Regression

| | *Dependent variable:* | |
|---|---|---|
| | 2016-2012 Rep Vote Difference | |
| | No Control | With Control |
| | (1) | (2) |
| Number of Religious Terms | −0.133 | −0.269 |
| | (0.142) | (0.168) |
| Percent of County Registered Republican | | 0.059** |
| | | (0.028) |
| Constant | −0.040 | −1.625 |
| | (0.360) | (0.992) |
| Observations | 343 | 224 |
| $R^2$ | 0.003 | 0.035 |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | −0.0003 | 0.026 |
| Residual Std. Error | 4.889 (df = 341) | 4.633 (df = 221) |
| F Statistic | 0.882 (df = 1; 341) | 3.990** (df = 2; 221) |
| *Note:* | | *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01 |

Table 2 shows the results of the OLS regression that evaluates whether increased use of religious rhetoric allowed Trump to win more votes than Romney did in that county. The second column shows the regression results while controlling for the percent of the county that is registered as a Republican. This model addresses my third hypothesis that Trump won more votes than Romney in places where he used more religious rhetoric. However, the model results,

both with and without the control variable, do not support my original hypothesis as the number of religious terms coefficient is negative. This means that in counties where Trump used more religious rhetoric, he on average does worse than in counties where he used less or no religious rhetoric. These results are particularly interesting because they offer initial evidence that Trump's religious rhetoric strategy was not effective. This also provides evidence for my original research question that Trump's strategic use of religious rhetoric did not help him win more evangelical voters or swing states So, if he bids for the presidency again in 2024, using less religious rhetoric in his speeches might be more beneficial for him. However, the number of religious terms coefficient was not statistically significant and the model with the control variable added is missing 119 counties because those counties did not report the breakdown of their county's voter registration in the dataset I used. The model without the control also has a negative adjusted R-Squared value, suggesting that the OLS regression model might not be the best because it fits the data extremely poorly.

**Conclusion**

Using text frequency analysis and statistical regression models, this paper evaluates if Trump strategically used religious rhetoric during his 2016 presidential campaign and if that helped him win more evangelical voters and swing states. My first Quasi-Poisson regression model confirms my first two hypotheses that Trump did use more religious rhetoric in counties with a higher proportion of evangelicals and counties in swing states. However, my second OLS regression model disputes my third hypothesis that in counties where Trump used more religious rhetoric, he won more votes than Romney did in 2012. As a result, these findings show that Trump's use of religious rhetoric did not benefit him in winning more voters in 2016 than Romney did in 2012. Future research should start with using better methods of textual analysis to

incorporate more religious rhetoric such as words not included in the 102 words I evaluated and phrases that include more than one word. My statistical methods also resulted in models that poorly fit the data, so there are potentially better methods and models. For example, there are many more control variables that could be added to the second regression model. However, since the results of this paper find that religious rhetoric did not help Trump, they suggest that Trump should not use as much religious rhetoric if he runs again in 2024. This finding also supports other research that finds using obvious religious rhetoric punishes politicians (Albertson 2015, 22). It will be interesting to see the findings of future research on this topic and if Trump's religious rhetoric tactics remained the same during his 2020 presidential campaign.

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## Appendix

The appendix contains three sections A, B, and C. The first two sections, A and B, provide additional visualizations for the results of the two regression models used in this paper. Section A includes visualizations for the Quasi-Poisson regression model. Section B includes visualizations for the OLS regression models. Section C includes a table of the 102 religious terms I used for my text frequency analysis.

### Section A

### A1: Graphical Visualization of the Quasi-Poisson Regression Model


Figure A1 provides a graphical visualization of the Quasi-Poisson regression model as an alternative to the numeric results shown in Table 1.

**A2: Quasi-Poisson Regression Model Results Overlaid on the Data**

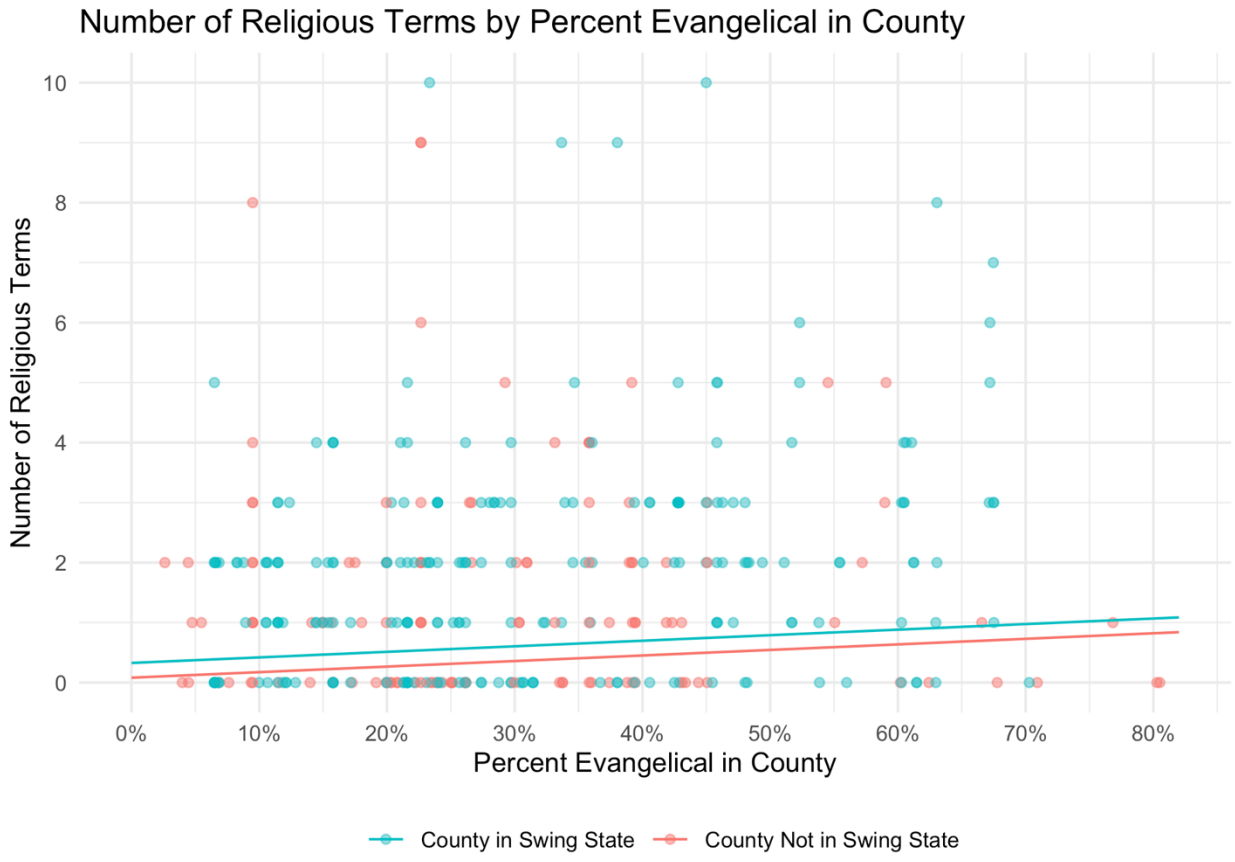


Figure A2 visualizes the Quasi-Poisson regression trendlines overlaid on the data of religious rhetoric used by Trump and the proportion of a county that is evangelical. Each point represents one county where Trump gave a campaign speech in.

**Section B**

**B1: Graphical Visualization of the OLS Regression Models**


Figure B1 provides a graphical visualization of the OLS regression model as an alternative to the numeric results shown in Table 2.

**B2: OLS Regression Model Results with Control Overlaid on the Data**

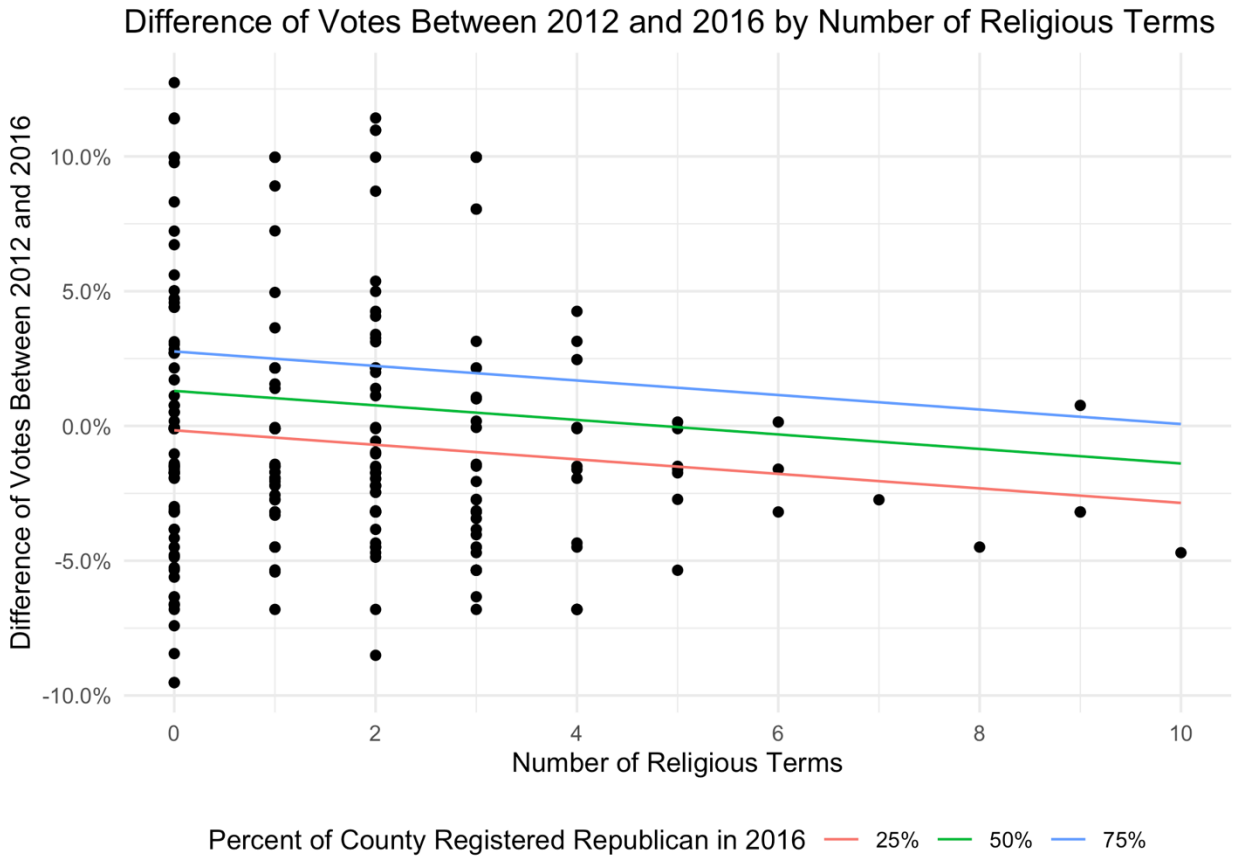


Figure B2 visualizes the OLS regression trendlines overlaid on the data of the difference in Republican vote share between 2016 and 2012 per county and religious rhetoric used by Trump. Each point represents one county where Trump gave a campaign speech in. I selected only 25, 50, and 75 percent of county registered Republican, the control variable, to plot. While the data may appear to be heteroskedastic, the limitations of the text frequency analysis on the number of religious terms used by Trump explained in the paper suggest that the analysis may be under-counting the total number of religious terms used.

**Section C**

**C1: Religious Terms used in Text Frequency Analysis**

Table 1: 102 Religious Terms used in Analysis

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| amen | genesis | repent |
| angel | gospel | restor |
| angels | grace | resurrect |
| angelic | hallow | reverend |
| apostle | heaven | sabbath |
| backslid | holy | sacrament |
| baptism | hymn | sacred |
| baptize | immortal | saint |
| believer | jew | salvation |
| bible | lamp | sanctity |
| biblical | martyr | sanctify |
| bless | miracle | sanctuary |
| cathedral | mission | scriptur |
| christian | orthodox | sermon |
| church | parable | servant |
| churches | pastor | shrine |
| clergy | peacemaker | sin |
| commandment | penance | sins |
| communion | piety | sinner |
| confession | pious | sinners |
| congregation | pope | sinning |
| consecrat | pray | sinned |
| covenant | priest | solemn |
| creed | prophe | soul |
| crusade | proverb | sow |
| denomination | psalm | sows |
| devotion | pulpit | sown |
| devout | rabbi | sowed |
| disciple | reap | spirit |
| epistle | rebirth | temple |
| evil | reborn | testament |
| faith | redeem | theolog |
| fellowship | redemption | trinity |
| fruits | religio | worship |

Table C1 shows the 102 religious terms used in the text frequency analysis. These terms were also used in previous research regarding religious rhetoric (Hughes 2019, 532, 549).