

# US Evangelicals: From Prophecy to Policy

Many evangelicals draw on Biblical prophecies about the apocalypse in order to shape US policies. Multilateral solutions to global problems need to recognize and constructively include such worldviews.

By Cora Alder and Emanuel Schäublin

**W**hite evangelicals are the most important voting group supporting Donald Trump, gaining unprecedented access to the White House since his election in 2016. Different Christian communities in the United States have always engaged in lively debates on how to derive moral judgement and policies from Biblical stories. Evangelical communities pay specific attention to Biblical prophecies about the Second Coming of Christ and the nearing of the apocalypse. They have shaped a number of crucial policy debates ranging from sexual and reproductive health to multilateralism and international cooperation. Evangelicals' interpretations of the Bible will continue to be a driving force in US political decisions, regardless of who wins the presidency in November 2020.

With the spread of COVID-19, interpreting events in analogy to Biblical prophecies has gained traction. Evangelical leaders with ties to the White House explain the pandemic as a sign announcing the end of times or as a punishment for immoral practices. Such narratives are disseminated on conservative news channels and give rise to discussions on Christian blogs and podcasts. From defying lockdown measures and commanding the reopening of churches to putting US funding to the World Health Organization (WHO) on hold, Trump has aligned both his rhetoric and policies for fighting the virus with evangelical leaders' presumed interests.

Despite the far-reaching consequences of policies derived from Biblical interpretations, secularists and liberals in the US and Europe struggle to recognize and engage with such worldviews. European policymakers display incomprehension in the face of decreasing US support for the WHO and other multilateral alliances such as NATO. Since Biblical 'meaning making' will likely continue to inform US domestic debates and foreign policy, the ability of European stateswomen and men to

## Key Points

- In the coming decade, the positions, demands and worldviews of evangelicals and other Christians will continue to shape the US stance on global issues.
- Under the Trump administration, white evangelicals have had unprecedented access to the White House. The presidency has made Biblical references part of its political language.
- Many evangelicals interpret current events as divine signs fulfilling Biblical prophecies about the end times. When such worldviews are politically elevated, they shape US policies on a range of issues such as the current pandemic or the US investment in multilateralism.
- Coming to terms with evangelical worldviews driving US criticism of, and potential retrieval from, multilateralism requires recognizing their linkages to political power and their flexibility in adapting to evolving situations.

understand US-internal dynamics can enhance policy analysis and diplomatic engagement.

### The Evangelical Influence on US Politics

In the United States, a quarter of the overall population identifies as Evangelical Protestants, making up a majority of the 70 per cent identifying as Christian.<sup>1</sup> The term ‘Evangelicals’ encompasses numerous Protestant denominations that recognize the Biblical text as the ultimate moral and historical authority, and which consequently pay close attention to Biblical prophecies about the future.

The political weight of evangelical Christians can be traced back to at least the 1980s, when the Republican candidate, Ronald Reagan, won the presidential elections after having successfully mobilized a critical mass of evangelicals in his campaign. Religious voters have since received more attention by political campaigners, and religion has become an increasingly important determinant of party identification and voter’s choice. Evangelicals predominantly support or lean towards the Republican Party and now constitute a key base for conservative candidates.<sup>2</sup>

Aspiring candidates and elected officials of the Democratic Party have struggled to find a way to express their policies in terms that appeal to the religiously conservative, without alienating their large constituency of religious ‘Nones’. Past attempts to mobilize more evangelical votes include Barack Obama’s religious outreach program in 2012.<sup>3</sup> Most recently, Joe Biden, a Catholic and a self-proclaimed ‘man of faith,’ has targeted his outreach at Hispanic and younger evangelicals who lean less conservatively than their older counterparts, while simultaneously trying to avoid alienating his socially liberal voter base on issues such as LGBTQ rights and gender equality – a delicate balancing act.

Republican faith-based outreach has targeted evangelical Christians first and foremost. In his 2016 campaign, Trump promised that in his administration, “our Christian heritage will be cherished, protected, defended, like you’ve never seen before.”<sup>4</sup> The choice of Mike Pence, a born-again, conservative evangelical, as Vice President was strategically clever. A large majority of evangelicals as well as prominent evangelical figures consequently embraced and voted for Trump. The latter have since been rewarded: Trump’s Evangelical Advisory Board is comprised of numerous religious leaders who supported him during his campaign and who are regularly received in the White House.

White evangelicals continue to support Trump and have become key in his re-election strategy. Trump has surrounded himself with known personas from the evan-



Protesters rally against COVID-19 restrictions at the Pennsylvania Capitol in Harrisburg. Jonathan Ernst / Reuters

gelical community that are steeped in the language of biblical prophecy. His administration regularly reflects that language back to them in its messaging and public speeches. Many of the central issues that have motivated evangelicals to become more politically active still occupy them today, including social and reproductive health, public morality, religious liberty, US foreign policy in the Middle East, and the US retreat from multilateralism. Being sensible to evangelical narratives and discourse, the US president shapes his policies according to their interests, thereby hoping to secure their political support. His dealing with the outbreak of COVID-19 is no exception.

### Evangelical Interpretations of COVID-19

The global outbreak of the virus has hit the US particularly hard – almost 6 million cases and 182,500 deaths have been recorded at the time of writing.<sup>5</sup> While the Trump administration struggled to articulate a consistent policy to reduce the fast spread of the virus, it was quick to back evangelical opposition to virus containment measures. A number of pastors continued to hold in-person services, leading to confrontations between churches and local authorities, and occasional arrests. In Mississippi and California, the Justice Department supported such churches, speaking out in their favor, citing their right to gather and reopen on the basis of religious freedom.<sup>6</sup>

In May 2020, the White House declared houses of worship as places providing “essential services” and the President commanded reopening churches threatening to “override” state governors on the grounds of constitutional religious freedom.<sup>7</sup> Yet, with several hundred cases of COVID-19 infections being traced to Sunday services, church meetings and youth camps Trump must now tread a fine line between protecting people’s health and catering to his main voter base by protecting the right to worship.

Evangelicals tend to draw on Biblical prophecies – predictions of the end times articulated in the Book of Revelations and elsewhere – to give meaning to COVID-19. In an influential Christian podcast on Fox News, Mark Hitchcock, a senior pastor at the Faith Bible Church in Oklahoma, cites a Biblical passage where a horseman arrives with the power to kill a fourth of the earth “by sword, famine and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth.”<sup>8</sup> He emphasizes that, when the apocalypse comes, we will see plagues spilling over from wild animals to humans, which is arguably already happening with COVID-19. Like most evangelicals, however, Hitchcock thinks that the turmoil of the apocalypse has not yet begun. COVID-19 and other irritations of our times – from natural disasters to wars in the Middle East – are rather a ‘foreshadowing’ of what will come upon us in the end of times. The pandemic thus appears as a wakeup call.

Voices with direct access to the White House practice similar kinds of Biblical interpretation. Members of Trump’s Evangelical Advisory Board see the pandemic as a call on Americans to return to God before it is too late. Ralph Drollinger, who leads the White House Bible Study Group, argues in an official newsletter that the pandemic is punishing the US for having allowed unfaithful people, including environmentalists and supporters of LGBTQ rights, to take up powerful positions in government, the educational system, and the entertainment industry. Paula White, the only woman serving on the White House Evangelical Advisory Board, cites the Bible to endow Trump with divine legitimacy by drawing a parallel between the plague that God sent to punish the Israelites defying the leadership of Moses and the coronavirus. COVID-19 could be a divine warning not to be disloyal to Trump, whom many see as a God-chosen leader – or, at least, an ‘imperfect tool’ serving a divine plan to save America.

Against this background, Trump’s COVID-19 policies not only aim at keeping the economy afloat, they also align with evangelical worldviews anchored in prophecy. Many evangelicals assume that Jesus will ‘rapture’ the good Christian souls, uplift them into the sky, and be with them in heaven. The Antichrist will rule humanity before the world is destroyed by natural disasters and the final wars of Armageddon. After this destruction, Jesus will return with his community of true believers to establish a 1,000-year reign on earth before the Final Judgement. Since the 1980s, these narratives have given rise to nation-wide debates about current events and what must be done to preserve the Christian integrity of the US so that it will remain a world power until the end of days. Cur-

rently, they find expression in the ‘Return to God’-movement, which calls for mass prayers in support of Trump’s election starting in September 2020.

### WHO and Multilateralism under Pressure

In May 2020, Trump announced that the US will withdraw from the WHO as a result of the latter’s response to the outbreak of COVID-19. He criticized the UN health agency for failing to quickly sound the alarm when the novel virus emerged and accused it of helping China cover up the threat. Many evangelicals welcomed these statements, as they have a long account of accusing the international organization, *inter alia*, for its support of birth control and abortion.

Since the creation of the League of Nations in 1920, opposition to multilateral bodies and anti-internationalism have been on the rise in evangelical circles. Historically, there are three distinct evangelical faith-based positions objecting a secular internationalist world order: the belief in the church’s right to cultural and political dominion; the disapproval of mixing secular and religious competencies; and the apocalyptic belief that the world will be in decline until the Second Coming of Christ and his 1,000-year reign on earth.<sup>9</sup> Based on the latter conviction, Christians should not seek to prevent the prophetic course of history, but they can try to weaken the Antichrist’s empire and its messengers. For Mark Hitchcock and others, the rule of the Antichrist is already announced by ‘globalism’ and multilateral institutions who pursue ‘worldwide supranational authority,’ the equality of all nations and religions, as well as the promotion of modern and liberal values. It is thus in their interest to debilitate multilateral institutions, such as the UN or NATO.

### Further Reading

FitzGerald, Frances, *The Evangelicals: The Struggle to Shape America*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018).

A comprehensive overview of the white US evangelical movement from the first Great Awakening to the Trump presidency.

Susan F. Harding, “**Convicted by the Holy Spirit: The Rhetoric of Fundamental Baptist Conversion,**” *American Ethnologist* 14:1 (1987), pp.167–181.

A ground-breaking anthropological article exploring the experience of being ‘born again in Jesus Christ’ among US evangelicals in the 1980s.

Sutton, Matthew Avery, *American Apocalypse: A History of Modern Evangelicalism*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2017).

An outline of the historical relationship between Christian evangelical apocalyptic thinking and American politics.

While remaining similarly sceptical of international organizations, other evangelical organizations have chosen to engage in politics beyond US borders and advocate for traditional Christian principles through international vehicles. The Family Research Council, for example, had sought and was admitted 'Consultative Status' to the Economic and Social Council by the UN Committee on NGOs in 2002. When adopting foreign policy perspectives, many of these US evangelical organizations run 'internationalized' campaigns on domestic issues, such as the status of women, marriage, or the sanctity of the family. They remain critical of any UN organs where US taxpayers' money is spent on sexual and reproductive health.

In light of a general evangelical hostility towards international organizations, high-profile evangelical leaders such as Jerry Falwell Sr., Pat Robertson, and Franklin Graham have been outspoken supporters of aggressive, unilateral US foreign policy. Trump's disdain for multilateral institutions and decisions, such as moving the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, have been met with enthusiasm among many evangelicals.

### Conclusion

Evangelical worldviews are politically highly influential. They partly emerge from constant speculation over how current events could be a fulfillment of Biblical prophecies. Regardless of whether Trump is re-elected in 2020, this way of thinking is likely to continue to inform US domestic and global policies ranging from the responses to global pandemics to stances on multilateralism.

US evangelicals are not a homogenous bloc. Trump has faced criticism from the leading evangelical magazine *Christianity Today* accusing him of disrespecting the Ten Commandments. The more marginal *Sojourners Magazine*, representing the 10 to 15 per cent of evangelicals leaning to the liberal Left, oppose Trump, and support the *Black Lives Matter* movement on the grounds of their religious ethics. Moreover, these counter-voices tend to support measures to contain COVID-19. Discussing practical responses of Christian saints to historical plagues, they call on good Christians to support people in need.

In spite of this, the support for Trump among the majority of evangelicals remains very high and their prophetic interpretations of world politics are taken up by the current administration.<sup>10</sup> A second term for Trump would

likely boost evangelical influence and thereby carry implications for norms and value-based relations with other states. A Biden presidency, on the other hand, could also come at a cost, for if evangelical voices are sidelined, their sense of being in a 'culture war' will only become stronger and, as a result, the polarization of society could escalate.

Given the ongoing influence of evangelical worldviews on US policies, such as the response to the pandemic and the resulting withdrawal from the WHO, European policymakers must articulate new strategies that take into account rising forces with different worldviews that increasingly shape international politics. Worldviews – whether secular or religious – provide a sense of social and political orientation in a rapidly changing world. Rather than dismissing certain worldviews out of hand, it is important to recognize their flexibility in adapting to evolving situations and to understand their linkages to political power.

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