

## Does the Unification Movement Flourish Under Republican Administrations?

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Pundits and candidates continually debate which of the two major political parties is better for the United States, particularly on the economy and keeping the peace.

During the most recent election cycle, Hillary Clinton claimed, “The economy always does better when there’s a Democrat in the White House.” On the other hand, it has been pointed out that all of the major U.S. wars in the 20th century—World Wars I and II, Korea and Vietnam—were entered by Democratic administrations while Republicans began détente and ended the Cold War peaceably. Partisans on both sides argue their positions, mostly to the bewilderment of the public.



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If the situation is murky with respect to the economy and war, Republicans and Democrats have settled into less ambiguous postures vis-à-vis religion. Gallup Poll research shows, “Very religious Americans are more likely to identify with or lean toward the Republican Party,” whereas “non-religious Americans” are significantly more supportive of the Democratic Party, the exception being Black Americans who are “very religious on average” and heavily Democratic.

Pew Foundation research indicates the same. A recent study showed, “About two-thirds (68%) of white evangelicals either identify as Republicans or lean Republican” while “61% of those who do not identify with any religion lean Democratic.” This has led to a “God Gap” between the two parties.

Still, the question is whether Republican administrations lead to the flourishing of religion in general or, for the purpose of this article, to the flourishing of the Unification movement.

Simply put, “very religious” American churches and organizations, which include the Unification movement, do better under Republican administrations but not because of Republican administrations. Rather, the social forces and conditions that sweep Republicans into power are the same ones that reinforce values and goals of “very religious” Americans.

Stated differently, it’s not that Republican administrations spur religious awakenings or revivals but that both ride the same wave. On the other hand, Democratic administrations favor values and goals of “non-religious” Americans. As a consequence, the influence of “very religious” Americans, including the Unification movement, tends to recede.

This article will flesh out this thesis by garnering evidence from the past eight presidential administrations. It concludes by considering the incoming Trump administration, with particular reference to the Unification movement.

**Eisenhower (1953-60) – Republican**



The 1950s witnessed a multifaceted postwar revival of religion. Historians have tended to dismiss the popular resurgence of piety as vacuous and superficial. Nonetheless, during the Eisenhower years, church membership in the U.S. peaked at 70 percent of the population. In 1954, “under God” was added to the Pledge of Allegiance and in 1956, “In God We Trust” was added to the nation’s coinage. Eisenhower, himself, was widely quoted as having said, “Our government makes no sense unless it is founded on a deeply felt religious faith – and I don’t care what it is.”

The Unification Church’s first missionaries entered the U.S. at the tail end of the Eisenhower administration. Therefore, evidence is lacking as to whether the Unification movement would have flourished in America during the 1950s. However, it’s worth noting that Reverend Moon regarded the post-World War II era as a unique time in human history when Christianity, centered on the U.S., was poised to “redeem the world.” He clearly intended to undertake work in America during this period but was unable to do so due to the partition of Korea, the Korean War, and other setbacks to his fledgling movement in his homeland.

### **Kennedy-Johnson (1961-68) – Democratic**



The 1960s could not have been more different than the 1950s. Historians recall it as a turbulent, revolutionary era that questioned the legitimacy of American institutions and values, including religious values. Kennedy won the presidency in large measure because he assured the public that his Catholic faith would not dictate his political decisions. Both his “New Frontier” and Johnson’s “Great Society” advanced secular solutions to social problems. The counterculture flouted sexual norms and radical theologians touted the “Death of God.” Prayer was

banished from public school and mainstream denominations, many for the first time, registered membership declines.

This environment was not conducive to the growth of the Unification movement. Youth, in particular, were more drawn to political activism, particularly anti-Vietnam War protests. To be sure, the movement was saddled with a number of developmental tasks in transplanting itself from the Far East to the West. Texts required translation and patterns of community life needed to be established. Still, Unificationism was met with what two sociologists of religion described as “overwhelming indifference.” By the end of the decade, the movement had grown to less than 300 members. The same sociologists concluded that Unificationism only survived due to the “dogged dedication” of its early members.

### **Nixon-Ford (1969-76) – Republican**



The election of Richard Nixon signaled a shift in American consciousness from the radicalism of the 1960s to the conservatism of the 1970s. Nixon, himself, appealed to “the great silent majority” who felt threatened by attacks on American values and institutions. The Nixon-Ford years also marked a return to religion. Data showed that while liberal, mainline denominations were in decline, conservative churches were growing. At the same time, youth who were disillusioned with the political activism and decadence of the 1960s created a pool of spiritual seekers.

They swelled the ranks of new religious movements (NRMs) that proliferated during the period.

The Unification movement flourished during the Nixon-Ford administrations, both internally and externally. Internally, the movement experienced explosive growth, growing from less than 300 to more than 3,000 from 1972-74. Externally, it conducted “Day of Hope” speaking tours in all 50 states, filled Madison Square Garden, brought 45,000 to Yankee Stadium and 300,000 to the Washington Monument. These rallies, together with its National Prayer and Fast for the Watergate Crisis (NPFWC), catapulted the movement from obscurity to national prominence. Although these developments aroused opposition, even kidnappings of members, many recall these years as the U.S. movement’s “golden age.”

### **Carter (1977-80) – Democratic**

The Carter administration was a study in contradictions. Carter, himself, was a professed, born-again Christian and is credited with moving evangelical Christianity closer to the American mainstream. At the same time, his administration supported causes that conservative Christians considered threats to the

family and traditional values, i.e., the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), abortion, and gay rights. Evangelical conservatives also blamed Carter for the Panama Canal “give-away,” the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the Iran hostage crisis. In the end, the Carter administration was undermined by opposition from the Right and Left.



The Unification movement did not fare well during the Carter years. Following the victorious 1976 Washington Monument rally, Rev. Moon expected the American movement to increase its membership to 30,000 and spearhead a “march on Moscow” by 1981. Instead, kidnappings and “deprogramming” of members continued, sometimes sanctioned by court order, and the movement found itself increasingly on the defensive, caught up in government investigations and legal battles. This blunted the movement’s advance and led to what Rev. Moon described as a “prolongation” of the providence.

### **Reagan-Bush I (1981-92) – Republican**



The “Religious Right” emerged as a force in American politics during the Reagan-Bush years. Reagan struck an explicitly religious note in his nomination acceptance speech by calling for a moment of “silent prayer.” In Dallas, he told an assemblage of 15,000 Christian activists, “I know you can’t endorse me, but . . . I want you to know that I endorse you.” Even George H.W. Bush, suspect among evangelicals, had a “come-to-Jesus” moment and professed himself “born again.” Critics claimed Republican piety was long on symbolism and

short on substance. Still, religious conservatives won a place at the table and were shaping public discourse. In addition, the “Religious Right,” including Rev. Falwell’s “Moral Majority,” expanded to include Roman Catholics as well as politically conservative mainline Protestants, Jews, and Mormons.

The Unification movement meshed well with the Reagan Revolution and attained prominence that would have been unimaginable a decade previously. The Washington Times (begun in 1982) was reportedly “the newspaper of choice” in the Reagan White House and exerted a very real influence, becoming within three years the third most quoted newspaper in America. Even Rev. Moon’s conviction and incarceration on tax charges, initiated during the Carter years, had a positive outcome as 40 individuals and organizations, representing 120 million Americans, filed briefs in his defense. The collapse of the Soviet Empire further validated the movement’s public advocacy. Though membership lagged, at least in the U.S., Rev. Moon began speaking more explicitly of his and his wife’s historical role.

### **Clinton (1993-2000) – Democratic**



The 1990s saw the outbreak of “culture wars,” i.e., conflict between traditionalist-conservative and progressive-liberal worldviews. Clinton, like Carter, was a Southern Baptist but failed to connect with religious conservatives. They considered his faith disingenuous and launched an all-out assault against him under the rallying cry, “Character Counts.” A gifted politician, Clinton survived impeachment and, in fact, left office with an exceedingly high (65%) approval rating, higher than Reagan. In the end, economic prosperity trumped concerns over Clinton’s waywardness and his administration’s social agenda. At best, the contest between culture warriors in the 1990s was a draw.

The 1990s was a time of testing for the Unification movement. The Cold War having ended, Unificationism was at loose ends. Rev. Moon proclaimed the Completed Testament Age (CTA), its most visible sign being International Marriage ceremonies dedicated to “World Peace through Ideal Families.” However, after 40 years of investment, the movement was able to find only a handful of Americans willing to wholeheartedly embrace its program of world salvation. Some commentators, including The New York Times, considered the movement’s 1990s investments in Brazil and Paraguay as evidence that having “been rebuffed in the United States,” Rev. Moon was “seeking to reinvent himself...in the South American heartland.”

### **Bush II (2001-08) – Republican**

Religion came to the fore during the Bush II years. This was in large measure due to 9/11. Before and after that tragic event, evangelical Christians rallied behind George W. Bush whom they regarded as “one of us.” Bush, who beat a drinking problem by surrendering to a born-again epiphany, let it be known that Jesus was his “favorite philosopher,” that he read the Bible daily and prayed in the Oval Office. Prior to being consumed by the War on Terror, he championed “compassionate conservatism” and “faith-based

initiatives” which funneled federal funds to religious charities. To his credit, Bush separated terrorism from the faith of Islam and was the first sitting president to visit a Muslim mosque.



The Unification movement regained its footing during the first decade of the 21st century. The American Clergy Leadership Conference (ACLC), a committed core of ministers, actively supported movement initiatives, and Rev. Moon anticipated the pivotal role of religion in promoting peace by calling for “an interreligious assembly ... or council within the United Nations.” The movement subsequently launched the Middle East Peace Initiative (MEPI) which brought more than 10,000 “Ambassadors of Peace” on “peace pilgrimages” to the Holy Land. During this era, Rev. Moon proclaimed Cheon Il Guk (“The Nation of Cosmic Peace and Unity”), considered to be the Unification equivalent of the Kingdom of God and culmination of his ministry.

### **Obama (2009-16) – Democratic**



The Obama years were difficult for “very religious” Americans. Obama, himself, set the tone early by criticizing those who “cling to guns or religion.” According to the Pew Research Center, the percentage of adults describing themselves as Christian dropped nearly eight percentage points in just seven years, from 78.4% 2007 to 70.6% in 2014. Conversely, the number of Americans describing themselves as atheist, agnostic or “nothing in particular” jumped more than six points, from 16.1% to 22.8%. Religious “nones” became the fastest growing American religious demographic accounting for approximately 56 million religiously unaffiliated adults in the U.S., more numerous than either Catholics or mainline Protestants.

The Unification movement went through unprecedented turmoil during the Obama years. The most obvious source of this was the passing of Rev. Moon in 2012. However, even prior to his passing, the movement was rocked by dissent and division. In 2009, Rev. Moon’s eldest living son gained control of major movement assets and broke from his father. After Rev. Moon’s passing, his youngest son turned on his mother and led a break-away group that advocated destruction of the existing movement. These intra-organizational dynamics were entirely foreign to the movement’s previous experience. To some extent, the ensuing polarization mirrored that of the wider society.

### **Trump (2017- ) – Republican**



Any comment as to the flourishing of “very religious” Americans under a Trump administration can only be conjecture. However, it is clear, despite forecasts to the contrary, that evangelical Christians voted overwhelmingly for Trump. Politico reported Trump won the support of nearly every politically prominent Christian leader and won 81 percent of the evangelical vote, a higher percentage than George W. Bush. On the other hand, nearly seven-in-ten religious “nones” voted for Hillary Clinton. Past Republican administrations have courted evangelicals during election cycles and held them at arm’s length while governing. Whether the Trump administration and religious conservatives remain engaged will be important to watch.

Whether the Unification movement will flourish under the Trump administration and be a factor in American public life is also a matter of conjecture. Data on candidate preferences among Unificationists during the primary season was mixed, and there is no data on how Unificationists voted in the general election. Some vociferously supported Trump, others Clinton, some neither. Trump’s motto of “Make America Great Again” resonated with Rev. Moon’s early U.S. speeches in which he celebrated America’s past godliness and called upon the nation to live out its destiny as “the leading nation of the world.” Still, whether a commitment to “Make America Great Again” will result in a commitment to “Make the Unification Movement Great Again,” or whether America and/or the Unification movement need to be made “great again,” is an open question.

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