

This senseless shooting in Las Vegas is absolutely heart breaking. My thoughts and prayers go out to all the victims and their families. Tweet by Rep. John Faso (R) on October 2, 2017 at 6:06am

Visited scene of #Flushing bus crash. Horrible tragedy. Must get answers about what happened.

Thoughts & prayers to all impacted. Tweet by Rep. Grace Meng (D) on September 18, 2017 at 11:21am

Public officials often craft Twitter messages including “thoughts and prayers” to communicate with constituents during tragic events. The two examples above represent countless tweets by members of the United States Congress (MOCs) in response to national and local times of concern and loss. This religiously toned phrase has become so common that some Twitter users now mock its use, viewing it as insincere and insufficient. We want to understand why, when, and which MOCs tweet “thoughts and prayers” and whether they use other religious language on Twitter.

Answering these questions is important work, given the centrality of religion to American political life. Because it includes the “contours of the very identity of the nation and its individual inhabitants and constituent communities of faith, religion deserves a place alongside race, gender, sexuality, class, disability, ethnicity, and other markers of identity in the United States” (Guterman & Murphy, 2016, p. 9). Americans understand religious identity individually and collectively. MOCs can strategically activate religious identity through carefully worded tweets to individuals and communities of faith. These tweets matter for representation as politicians appeal to broader and narrower constituencies, depending on the circumstance. Politicians make civil religion appeals, stressing religious unity among Americans, and at other times, they make culture war appeals, playing on deeply engrained religious differences (Chapp, 2012). Rhetoric has consequences for the perceived God gap between political parties in the United States (Claassen, 2015).

As MOCs increasingly turn to Twitter to communicate with their constituents and members of the media, we want to know more about their religious communication. Specifically, when, how, and which members of Congress use religious language on Twitter? We draw on interdisciplinary research to guide

our expectations and hypothesize that members use religious language repetitively and predictably on Twitter. We expect that MOCs from both parties will tweet with a religious tone, at least occasionally. However, the use of religious language is likely part of a broader strategy for Republican MOCs. We also expect that female MOCs' will use religious language more often on Twitter. And, we expect that religious tweeting, in part, will be a function of current political and religious contexts. Our research findings will contribute to knowledge of how MOCs use religious language, how they use Twitter, and whether this behavior fuels the perceived God gap.

Religious language and politicians

It is nothing new for politicians to use religious language when communicating with constituent groups. Even with a formal separation of church and state, the American people have generally “not denied the political realm a religious dimension” which is “expressed in a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals” often referred to as American Civil Religion (Bellah, 1967, p. 3-4). Religious appeals are not only tolerated but fairly common because they work. Chapp (2012, p.4) argues that “religious rhetoric gains its unique political command because it is well equipped to resonate with individuals’ emotions and identities—two factors that, not coincidentally, are central to political persuasion.”

Both Bellah (1967) and Domke and Coe (2008) highlight the common use of religious rhetoric by U.S. presidents over time. However, Domke and Coe (2008) point to Ronald Reagan’s presidential nomination in 1980 as a turning point in religiopolitical communication in the United States.¹ While

¹ As a conservative political mood washed over the United States in the 1980s, a new religious cultural divide emerged and deepened between political parties (Layman, 2001). For the first time, the two major political party organizations took a stance on abortion legality (Putnam & Campbell, 2010). In the two major parties’ 1972 platforms neither mentions abortion (The American Presidency Project, 2016), but by 1976 and 1980, post *Roe v. Wade* (1973), both parties stated clear and opposing positions on this issue. In subsequent years, elected leaders responded to these changes by switching parties or altering their

politicians used religious communication pre-1980, the authors argue that political leaders have since used a God Strategy, where religious language is “carefully crafted” and “employed by politicians to connect with religious inclined voters” (p. 8).

The use of religious language acts like a heuristic, signaling a set of beliefs and values encouraging voters to consider religious identities when making political choices (Ableson & Levi, 1985; Calfano & Djupe, 2009). “Sometimes these religious signals are intended for the eyes and ears of all Americans, and other times, they are implemented in targeted ways, as veritable ‘dog whistles’ that only distinct segments of the population fully receive” (Domke & Coe, 2008, p. 8). Calfano and Djupe (2009) discuss how this “code” can be used stealthily to appeal to in-groups without out-groups noticing.

Domke and Coe (2008) systematically track religious language used in presidential communication over time, finding that Presidents use religious code strategically. The communication may be sincere, but it’s not random. They show that presidents have used the code over many decades, but religious communication increased decisively after Reagan’s first election. Perhaps surprisingly, given the religious divide among American partisans since the 1980s (Layman, 2001), the authors also find that presidents of both parties use religious signals, targeting Christian fundamentalists, conservative evangelicals, and conservative Catholics (p. 19). Domke and Coe (2008) rule out alternative explanations for why and when presidents use the religious code. They find no evidence that presidents use it only when facing an election or during war time. And, as stated above, it cannot be explained completely by party affiliation of the president.

Building on this work, Calfano and Djupe (2009) question whether the religious code works and ask which people are paying attention. Does carefully scripted religious language by presidents and political elites, more broadly, ignite religious or nonreligious identities among constituents? They design

personal stance on abortion to match their party’s platform. Americans noticed the emerging religiopolitical divide and behaved likewise.

an experiment testing Republican religious messages targeting white evangelicals² and find that the strategy works. White evangelicals indicate their likely support for candidates based on their use of the religious code and associate these candidates with the Republican Party. Yet, for the most part, the religious code did not affect Catholic and mainline Protestant participants' candidate evaluations. Finally, Calfano and Djupe (2009) also examine racial factors, showing that African American candidates benefitted from using the code as well.

To sum up, we know that presidents and political elites use religious language strategically, especially since the 1980s. These appeals likely influence perceptions of the religious and nonreligious, Republicans and Democrats, and may have electoral consequences. For example, ballot measures with a moral component have consistently brought voters to the polls (Biggers 2014). More broadly, the ways political elites use religious rhetoric determines the “exact role that religion plays in American elections, political culture, and the representative dynamics of the country” (Chapp, 2012, p.4).

Most research in this area analyzes religious speech by presidents, but there is much less work considering religious rhetoric by members of Congress. How do they use the religious code to connect with their varied constituencies? With the rise of social media, MOCs have the opportunity for daily messaging with their local constituents (and other interested parties) even when away from the home district.

Members of Congress Using Twitter

Researchers have done considerable work on members of Congress' adoption and use of the Twitter platform in the last several years. Work across several disciplines probes this data to better understand and explain Twitter communication by politicians and specifically, MOCs. After the Obama campaign's extensive use of Twitter during the 2008 presidential campaign, candidates increasingly use the platform to raise money and communicate their issue positions (Evans, Cordova, & Sipole, 2014;

² They administered this experiment to students in introductory American government classes at Texas A&M University in 2007.

Evans, Brown, & Wimberly, 2017; Tumasjan, Sprenger, Sandner, & Welp, 2010). Elected officials increasingly use Twitter as part of a broader media strategy where they want to gain the attention of media outlets, depending on journalists to relay the content of their tweets as they would official press statements (Berhard, Dohle, & Vowe, 2016; Lieber & Golan, 2011; Shapiro and Hemphill, 2017; Wallsten, 2014).

Evans et al. (2014) are among some of the first researchers to examine how politicians use the social networking site to communicate with constituents. In their study, tweets become data to understand how candidates for the United States House of Representatives communicate with the media and constituents during their 2012 campaigns. The authors find that candidates tweeted about their personal lives about one-third of their time on Twitter (and about issues 11 percent of the time). Once elected, not every member of Congress tweets the same. There are varying rates of participation and styles (Evans et al., 2014). Additionally, the content of MOCs' tweets changes depending on whether they are in recess or in session. Glassman, Straus, and Shogan (2010) show that session tweets tend to be policy focused while recess tweets are district focused.

The earlier work collecting this data notes that the conclusions will change as more members use Twitter. And, its use has increased drastically over the last several years. The 112th Congress may be considered the first 'Tweeting' Congress with 95 percent of all members on Twitter (Hemphill, Otterbacher, & Shapiro, 2013; Gervais & Morris, 2014). More recently, nearly every MOC in the 115th Congress had a verified Twitter account, so it is easier than ever to gather data on the content of these communications. Twitter is an ideal platform for exploring MOCs' strategic use of religious code 1) because most members use it, and 2) because it allows for emphasis of both the personal and shared aspects of religious identity.

MOCs may use religious code to communicate personal details that signal a shared identity with targeted constituents. McGregor's (2017) research shows that personalized tweets cause voters "to manifest positive feelings of intimacy towards candidates" and "create impressions of closeness to and imagined relationships with the candidate, which increases the likelihood of electoral support" (p. 2). This

personalization tends to work better for male candidates regardless of party. Tweets by MOCs are not random or haphazard but designed to carefully manage an image in a world increasingly connected by social media (Leary & Kowalski, 1990; McGraw, 2003; Meeks, 2016).

The need for impression management may be greater when “people encounter moments of acute public awareness or intense scrutiny” (Meeks, 2016, p. 1052). MOCs have used Twitter to respond to events tied to the Black Lives Matter Movement. Dancey & Masand (2017) write that it can be especially important for certain members to speak to a diverse public during times of tragedy, protests, and court decisions. In this way, MOCs move beyond district-based representation and the electoral connection to something broader, descriptive representation. In the same way, MOCs may use their religious identities to not only manage their identity when relevant for fulfilling a goal, like getting elected, but also as descriptive representation and part of a larger God Strategy (Leary and Kowalski, 1990; Meeks, 2016). It is also likely that religiously toned tweets are tied to moments of crisis or events of great magnitude in the public square.

The relationship between religion and politics in the United States is important but can be difficult to disentangle. While there is not a lot of evidence that religious leaders use Twitter to signal political identities (Authors, forthcoming), we know that politicians use religious language as part of a God Strategy, and they likely use that strategy on Twitter. We want to understand when, how, and which MOCs use the religious code on Twitter.

Expectations and Hypotheses

Given the past scholarship, we have a few expectations for the relationships between which members of Congress tweet with religious code, how, and when. Because of the broad religious landscape and the winner-take-all nature of many U.S. elections, “candidates cannot afford to ignore religion, nor can they afford to privilege an particular faith tradition” (Chapp, 2012, pg. 6). However, partisanship frames and shapes almost every aspect of current congressional politics, and it likely influences religious tweeting by members of Congress (Evans et al., 2014; Meeks, 2016). We expect to find more religious tweeting from Republicans because they are generally “more inclined and better positioned to capitalize

on a convergence of religion and politics” (Domke & Coe, 2008, p. 9). However, Democratic presidents have used religious language in the past and made inroads after the 2004 elections (Domke & Coe, 2008). Claassen (2015) notes that Democrats are often seen as hostile to religion but not Godless, however it can be difficult to “respect the religious beliefs of a group while accusing the group of waging a ‘war on religion’” (p. 5). Additionally, Democratic politicians risk alienating a growing number of voters who do not affiliate with any religious group but tend to vote Democrat. Even civil religion appeals can leave non-Christians and the non-religious feeling unrepresented and excluded (Chapp, 2012). Weighing all of these considerations in mind, we hypothesize that:

Both Republican and Democratic MOCs will tweet using the religious code, but Republicans will use the religious code more frequently.

The Republican Party has been closely linked with the Christian Right and its voters since the 1980s, so we expect that Republican MOCs will tweet not only more often but also with more variation, focusing on Judeo-Christian terms. For instance, Domke and Coe (2008) note the increase in references to Jesus (twice as many mentions as God) in presidential Christians communications after 1980. They write that “for most moderates and nonbelievers, this is a superfluous distinction,” one that is lost on them but “for the Christian faithful, it’s the ultimate narrowcast message” (p. 97). So, we hypothesize that:

Republican MOCs will tweet using the religious code with more variation than Democrats, and they will mention Jesus and invoke other Judeo-Christian phrasing more often than Democrats.

We also expect gender to correlate with religious tweeting. There is a significant amount of work showing that gender shapes communication and thus, the ways men and women tweet. For one, female House candidates were more likely to have Twitter accounts during their 2012 reelection campaigns, and they tweeted more often (Evans et al., 2014). Meeks (2016) found that female candidates for Senate in 2012 were more interactive overall. They are also more likely to tweet attack messages and to tweet about policy issues and women’s issues (Evans et al., 2014; Evans & Clark, 2015). Even after winning campaigns, female MOCs continued tweeting more often than their male counterparts, however the content and style of female and male tweets didn’t vary much as during the campaign (Evans, Ovalle

&Green, 2016). Female candidates and MOCs may tweet differently because of their out-group status in a still male-dominated field (Evans & Clark, 2015), but they also do this to personalize themselves (Meeks, 2016). We also know that women in general rate more highly on scales of religiosity compared with men (Putnam & Campbell, 2010), so female MOCs may also use the religious code to personally and uniquely communicate with their female constituencies. We hypothesize that:

Female MOCs will be more likely to use religious code in their tweets compared with male MOCs.

And, finally, we also anticipate that the timing of religious code is not random. In his examination of civil religion rhetoric in speeches by presidents, Bellah (1967, p. 2) suggests that references to God are almost always used “on solemn occasions.” MOCs also use religious code during particular seasons and in response to certain events. Domke & Coe (2008) examine Christmas communications overtime and find that references to “Christ” as opposed to “God” have become more common more in recent presidential Christmas communications. Politicians’ use of the phrase “war on Christmas” has also gained traction in recent election cycles (Claasen, 2015).

We should notice these patterns among MOCs on Twitter as well. In the introduction to this research, the authors highlighted MOCs’ frequent use of #thoughtsandprayers in tweets. Our position has been that these tweets are strategic and event driven. In the same way MOCs used Twitter to respond to the Black Lives Matter Movement (Dancey & Masand, 2017), we should find evidence of religious tweets in response to tragic events. Our final set of hypotheses are:

MOCs will be more likely to use religious code in their tweets during Christian religious seasons, such as Christmas or Easter than at other times of the year.

MOCs will be more likely to use religious code in their tweets responding to tragic events that capture a national audience, such as mass shootings or natural disasters, than at other times without these events.

Data/Method

Acquiring a significant database of the tweets composed by members of Congress is a logistically difficult task. The first hurdle that must be cleared is the acquisition of the Twitter usernames of all present members of Congress. Unfortunately, no government entity has officially been given this task, therefore other means needed to be pursued to compile a database. In 2009, Twitter rolled a feature called “lists” which allowed a user to create a custom timeline of user accounts that were grouped around a specific purpose (Stone 2009). For instance, the *New York Times* Twitter account has a list of all its reporters’ official Twitter accounts (<https://twitter.com/nytimes/lists/nyt-journalists>). C-SPAN’s Twitter account has a number of helpful lists, including collections of U.S. Representatives (<https://twitter.com/cspan/lists/u-s-representatives>) and Senators’ Twitter accounts (<https://twitter.com/cspan/lists/senators>). These lists were used as the basis to collect the necessary tweets. However, this is not a perfect solution, as C-SPAN’s lists contain accounts that are not tied to a specific member of Congress. For instance, their Senate list contains the account of the Senate Indian Affairs Committee. Accounts like these were eliminated from the analysis. In total 452 accounts for United States Representatives were scraped, along with 103 U.S. Senators.³

After the list of accounts was acquired, it was necessary to scrape the tweets from each of these accounts. Twitter offers an application programming interface (API) to the general public, however there are a wide variety of APIs that constitute tradeoffs to a researcher. The API that is most widely employed by researchers is the REST API, which is free to use. However, a particular downside is that it can only scrape the previous 3,200 tweets from a user’s timeline.⁴ Because of the vast differences in the frequency of tweets from individual members of Congress, reaching the 3,200 tweet threshold could result in

³ The discrepancy regarding the number of members of Congress and the number of Twitter accounts is due to the fact that some members have multiple Twitter accounts. For example, Senator Majority Leader Mitch McConnell has two accounts: (@SenateMajLdr) and (@McConnellPress).

⁴ https://developer.twitter.com/en/docs/tweets/timelines/api-reference/get-statuses-user_timeline.html

acquiring 30 days or 3 years of tweets. In most cases, this dataset contains the maximum allowable number of tweets. For instance, of the 103 Senator accounts that were scraped, 85 of them contained at least 3,000 tweets indicating that the user's entire timeline had not been acquired through this data collection. This could lead to some methodological issues when making conclusions about social media chatter when looking at Twitter activity several years ago. For instance, one of the most influential Congressional Twitter accounts in 2010 belonged to Michelle Bachmann (Carr 2010), who decided to not run for reelection in 2012 and therefore is not in the dataset (Allen 2013). Other accounts like Senator John McCain's has been quite active with a total of 14,400 tweets, but because of the limitation of the API only the last 3,200 were collected. Despite these limitations, there is no reason to believe that this biases the dataset in any meaningful way when considering how often members of Congress use religious language. The scraping process was conducted on April 4th, 2018 using the rtweet package written for the R statistical software program (Kearney 2018). In total, 1,502,231 tweets were collected from members of Congress.

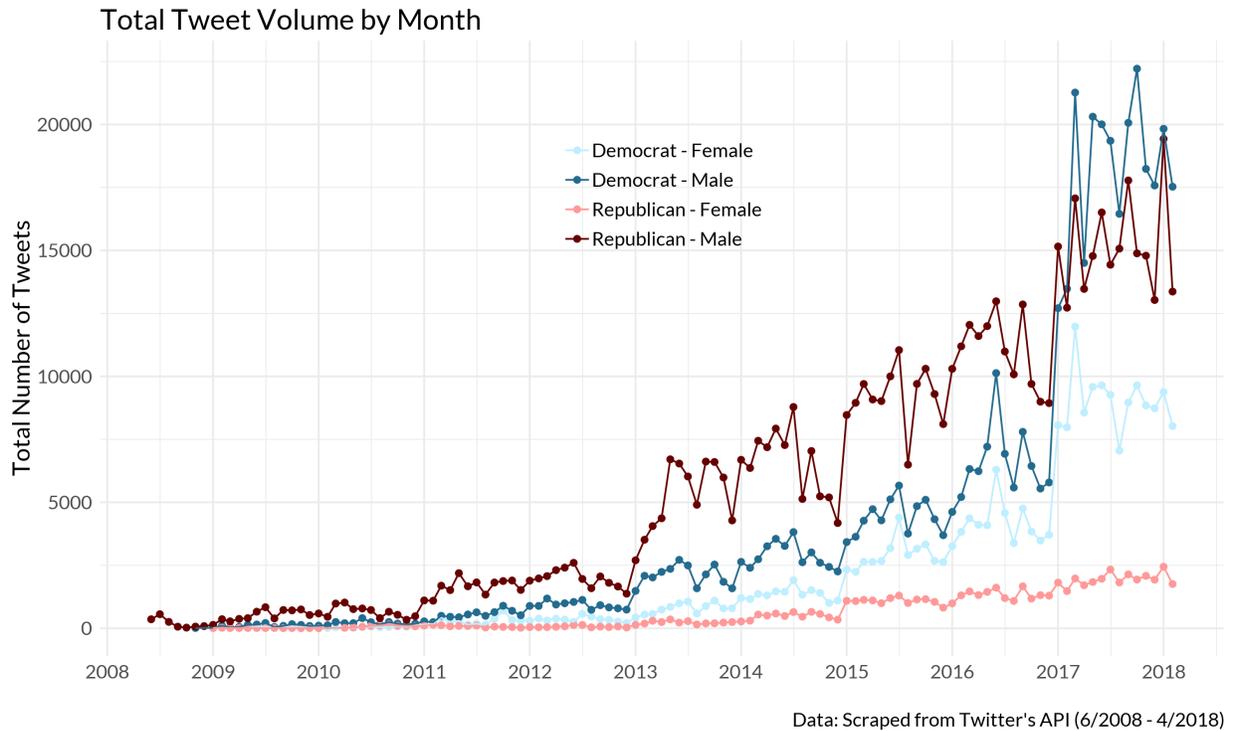
Findings

Volume vs. Concentration

One of the primary methodological problems when dealing with the usage of religious language on social media is coming to a conclusion about which is a better measure: volume or concentration. To measure the volume of religious language, a simple word count is sufficient. This obviously has the benefit of simplicity, however volume is obscured by the fact that the overall number of tweets composed per month has increased exponentially according to the data scraped for this analysis. Figure 1 below displays the dramatic increase in the number of tweets sent per month by four groups: Democrat men, Democrat women, Republican men, and Republican women. In 2013, Democrat males sent out just under 2,500 tweets in the month of January. In January of 2018 that volume had gone up tenfold, reaching just over 20,000 individual tweets. As an example, consider in January 2013 as well as January 2018 that 25 of those tweets contained the word, "God." Reporting this finding would result in the conclusion that

the total amount of religious terminology on Twitter did not change among Democrat males in the last five years. That conclusion is technically correct, however that seems like an incomplete look at the data.

Figure 1



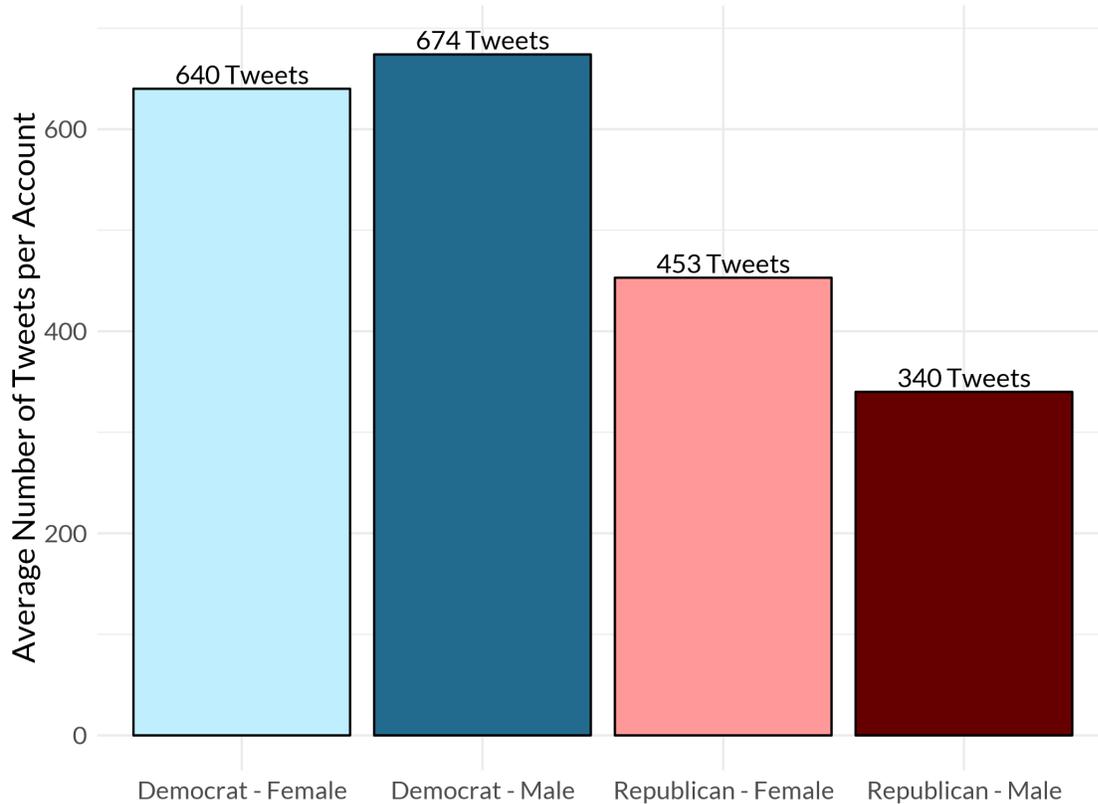
The other approach to this problem is not considering the volume of tweets that contain religious language, but instead the concentration of tweets. Using the prior example of the usage of “God,” the concentration approach would indicate that 1% of tweets among Democrat males used religious language in 2013, while that concentration dropped to just over .1% in 2018. Obviously, this leads to a dramatically different interpretation of the results of the analysis that deviate significantly from looking at sheer volume in isolation. The benefit of this concentration approach is that it takes into account something crucial about communication: the message is seen by the intended audience. It seems logical that the likelihood of the average Twitter user encountering religious language used by members of Congress goes up in concentration, as opposed to volume. This would appear to be the more desirable outcome when considering the best interpretation of Twitter language.

However, what makes this approach more difficult is the reality that Congress does not have gender or party parity. For instance, in the dataset that was collected 79.9% of Twitter accounts belonged to male users, while just one in five belonged to female users. Looking at partisanship, 53.3% accounts were from Republican members of Congress, while 46.2% were Democrats and less than 1% were Independents. However when gender and party are combined stark differences become clear. For instance, just 4.9% of all the accounts were representing Republican congresswomen. On the other hand 48.4%, or ten times more, were from GOP congressmen. The gender disparity was much smaller for Democrats, with women making up 15.2% of all accounts, while Democrat males represent 31.0% of the sample.

It seems possible that these smaller groups, namely Republican and Democrat women could overcome this lack of accounts by tweeting at a higher volume than their male counterparts. Figure 2 below displays the average number of tweets per month from July 2017 to December 2017 for each of the four major groups being discussed. The gap in tweet volume here is not based on gender, but instead is a partisan divide. For instance, a Democrat male tweets at nearly twice the rate as a Republican male, while a Democrat male tweets about 40% more than their GOP female counterparts. Taken from this angle it appears that even though Democrats make up a smaller portion of all member accounts, their overall Twitter activity makes them much more consequential when taking to social media to share their message. As such it seems that Democrats are “punching above their weight” on the Twittersphere, which means that they are more likely to have an impact on the discussion and framing of current political issues than the GOP.

Figure 2

Average Number of Tweets per Party and Gender Between July 2017 and December 2017



Data: Scraped from Twitter's API (6/2008 - 4/2018)

Several realities come into focus now. First, the volume of tweets by members of Congress is staggering. In March of 2018, members sent out nearly 50,000 tweets in thirty-one days. In such a high velocity environment, the only way for a message to cut through the noise is for it be repeated many times. Second, the average number of tweets sent by Democrats is much higher than Republicans in the last year. This indicates that, on balance, the Democratic members of Congress are considering Twitter to be an effective tool to reach their constituents. However, how can these findings be reconciled to create an accurate representation of religious language online? The rest of this paper will rely on the concentration approach. What this means practically is that each specific mention of a religious term will be calculated for each of the four groups under study and then divided by the total number of tweets sent out either by that group during the entire time frame or during that month of Twitter activity. The end

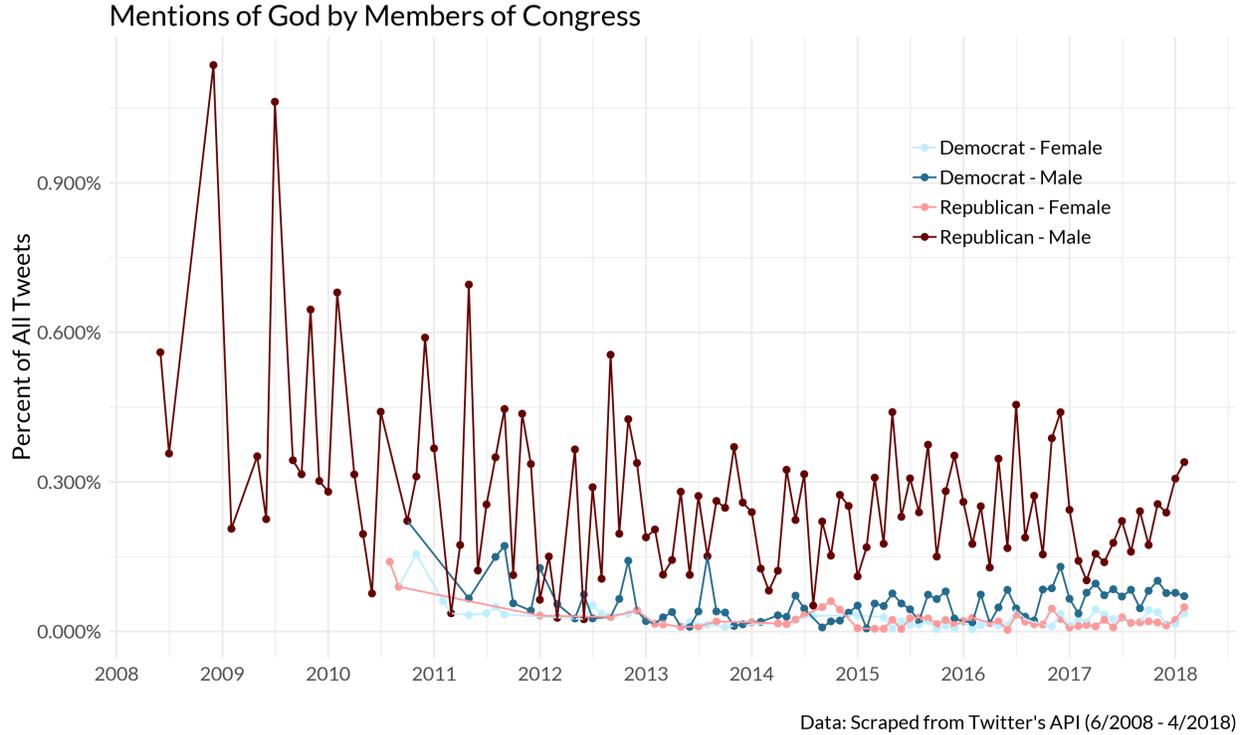
result is that the likelihood of each group to use religious language will be clear, however the total impact of these tweets might be obscured. For instance, if both Democrat men and Republican women used the word “faith” in 1% of tweets from their respective group that does not indicate that the average Twitter user would be just as likely to see the term be used by either group, because Democrat men have twice the monthly tweet volume.⁵ These results should be interpreted more on the intent by the members of Congress than the impact that they have on their constituents and followers (which is much more difficult to measure).

Religious Code

The seemingly most appropriate place to begin this assessment is by considering how often members of Congress use the most generic and ubiquitous religious word: “God.” This term is a common part of discourse in the United States and the phrase “God Bless America” has become an oft-repeated phrase to end a political speech by an elected official. Because of the nature of the term it is well suited to gauge whether religious language (broadly defined) is utilized on Congressional Twitter accounts. The figure below displays the frequency of the word God as a percentage of total tweets sent out that month. Note that tweet data collected several years ago had months where the term never appeared, therefore only months that included “God” are plotted in this visualization. In total the word “God” appeared in 4,853 tweets or .33% of all those scraped. Of all tweets that contained “God”, just 246 contained the full phrase “God Bless America.”

⁵ This is further complicated by the fact that follower counts were not included as part of this analysis as some members have 10,000 followers while others have over one million.

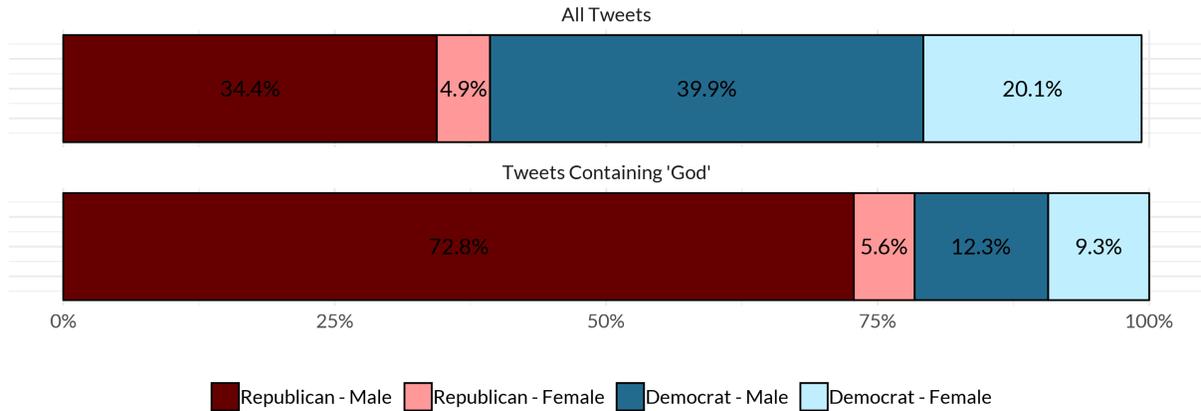
Figure 3



The clear result is that the word “God” appears much more frequently among Twitter accounts from Republican male politicians than any of the other three groups that were assessed. There are some months where over 1% of all tweets contained God, mainly in 2008 and 2009, however that trend has steadily declined in more recently collected data. In an average month between 2013 and 2018, Republican males include the word “God” in their tweets in approximately one out of every 400 total tweets composed by members of Congress. The fact that members of Congress from either party have not ramped up their usage of God seems noteworthy as well as the fact that female members of Congress do not use “God” in any significant frequency compared to their male counterparts. Recall that in the last few years, female Twitter accounts produce more volume – it appears that religious language is not part of increased social media activity. Speaking more broadly, it appears that there is not any type of cyclical pattern throughout the year, as well. As such, a reasonable conclusion is that the word “God” is not necessarily anchored to a holiday or season.

Figure 4

Tweets Sent in March of 2018 by Members of Congress



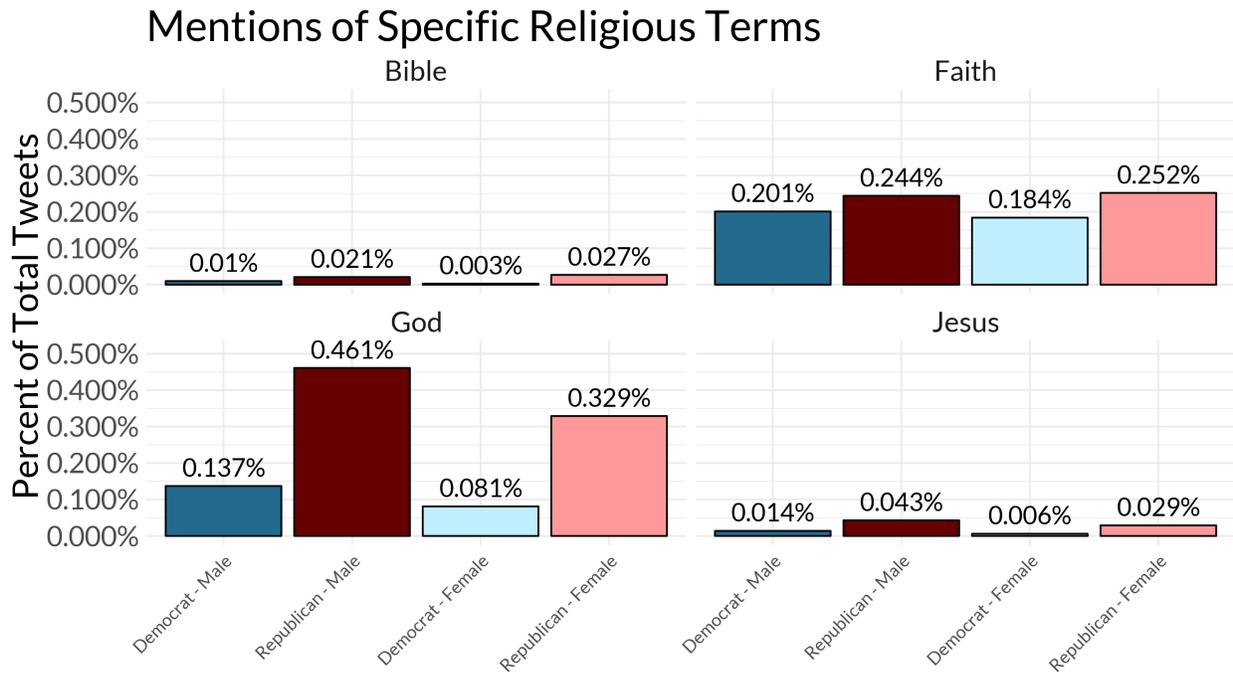
Data: Scraped from Twitter's API (6/2008 - 4/2018)

March of 2018 is emblematic of the overall differences in the usage of “God”. For the month, there were 47,432 tweets sent out by members of Congress. The total share of those tweets by Republican males was 16,325 or 34.4% of the total volume. In total the word “God” was invoked 162 times by Republicans and Democrats, but Republican males were responsible for 118 of those mentions (72.8%). On the other hand, Republican females sent out 4.9% of the total tweets in March of 2018, but their God mentions were 5.6% of the total. Democrats were much less likely to use “God.” While Democrat males made up 39.9% of the total volume, they only accounted for 12.3% of the God tweets, for female Democrats it was 20.1% of total volume, but only 9.3% of God tweets. This pattern is replicated over a number of months, with a clear conclusion: Republican men send out the vast majority of all tweets containing the word “God,” while both female and male Democrats use the term sparingly.

Expanding the discussion to other religious words that could be potentially used by Members of Congress, Figure 5 displays the number of total tweets that contained one of four religious terms divided by the total number of tweets composed by each of the four groups. The first thing that becomes apparent is that religious language is exceedingly rare by either gender of both parties. The term that appears the most, “God,” is only used by Republican men less than once per two hundred tweets. Most of the other terms occur less often, such as “faith,” appearing in one tweet per five hundred. The results from the previous analysis are carried through here: Republican men, by and large, are more comfortable with

using religious language on Twitter compared to the other three groups. In addition, the results indicate that Republicans are more likely to use religious language than Democrats, no matter which term is being observed.

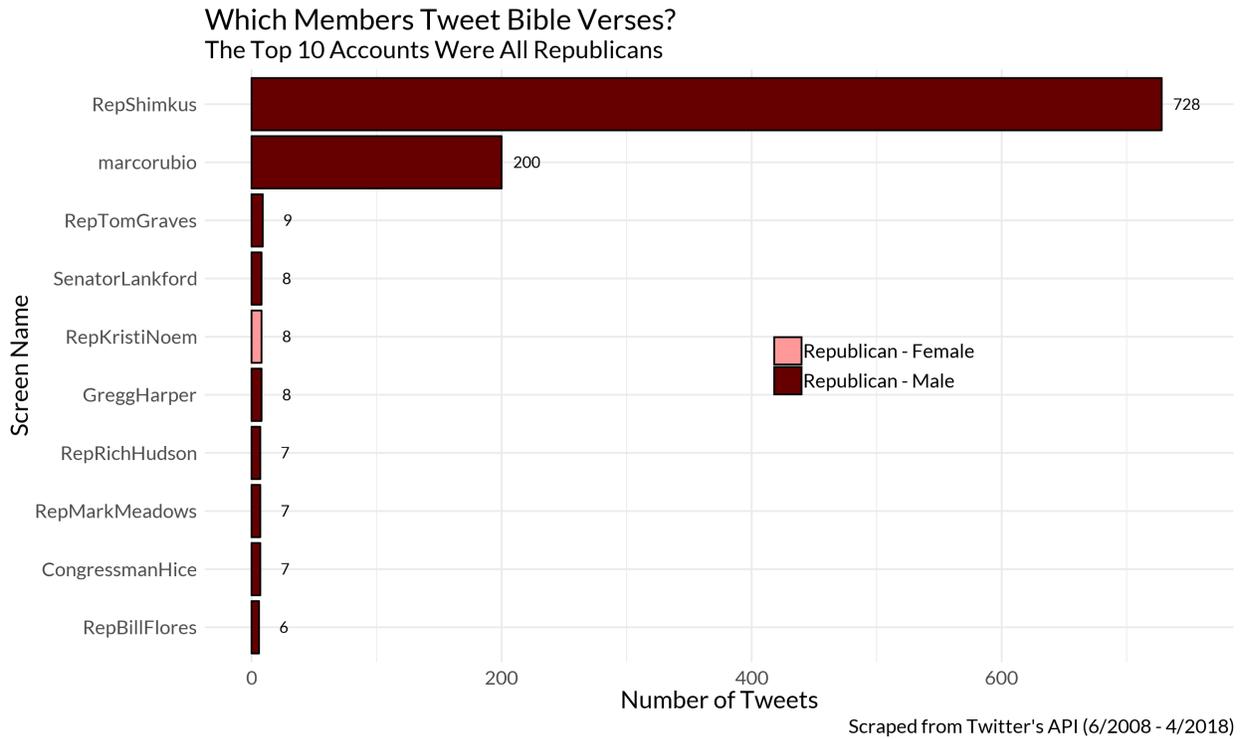
Figure 5



Data: Scraped from Twitter's API (6/2008 - 4/2018)

The other major conclusion is the vast differences in the frequency of the four different words. It seems appropriate that these words can be divided up into two camps, generally religious terms such as “god” and “faith”, and specific Christian terms such as “Bible” and “Jesus.” For instance, Republican men were over twenty times more likely to use “God” than “Bible” and Democrat women were thirty times more likely to tweet “Faith” than “Jesus” The clear indication here is that members of Congress are much more reluctant to use specific Christian terms, while they are less hesitant to talk about religious imagery more generally. One has to wonder if even Republican members of Congress are concerned with using inclusive language on Twitter, even though a significant portion of their constituency come from Christian traditions that would welcome the usage of the term “Jesus”, for instance.

Figure 6



To illustrate this point further, Figure 6 displays the number of instances in which members of Congress tweeted references to specific Bible verses since 2008. Out of nearly 1.5 million total tweets collected, just 1,165 contained a reference to a verse in the Bible, which is .07% of all tweets in the dataset. What makes this number even more interesting is that of the 1,165 Bible verse tweets, 728 of them came from one member: Republican John Shimkus. Beginning in 2011, Shimkus made it a point to include a tweet each day that came out the Lutheran devotional that he was using each morning. Shimkus noted that if he weren't in Congress he would have gone to seminary, and he liked to use his platform to bear witness to his faith (Semnani 2011). The other frequent tweeter of Bible verses was Senator Marco Rubio, who was a fierce rival of Donald Trump during the 2016 Republican primary. Media outlets accused Rubio of using Bible verses as a way to criticize or “subtweet” Trump’s action as President. Rubio would tweet verses such as Proverbs 26:11, “As dogs return to their vomit; so fools repeat their folly,” which was seen by many to be directed toward the President (Lange, 2017). No other member of Congress referenced the Bible more than ten times, and the top ten accounts that tweeted Bible verses

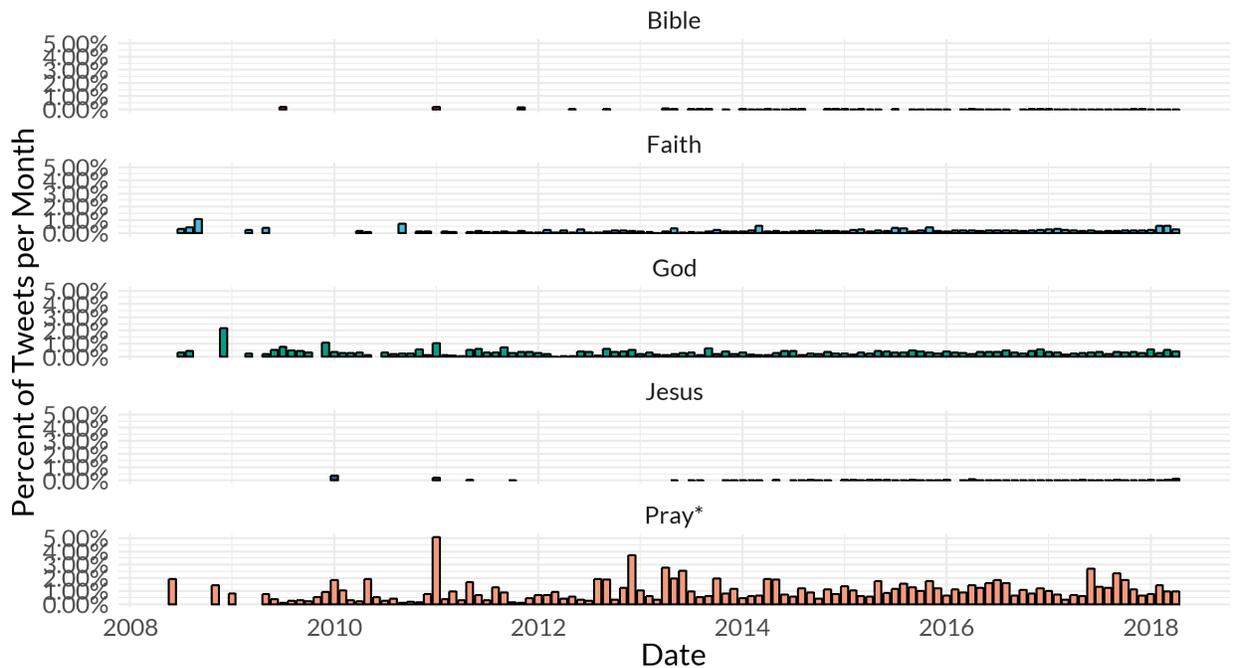
were all Republicans, with nine out of ten being male Republicans. Clearly, directly quoting the Bible happens rarely and when it does happen, it is nearly exclusively coming from Republican members of Congress.

When is Religious Language Used by Members of Congress?

Having described how the usage of religious language varies by party and gender, an important second question is: is religious language used spontaneously when a member feels inspiration to talk about matters of faith, or is it in response to specific events occurring in current events? Figure 7 below displays the usage of five different terms that are related both generically to religious language (faith, God, pray/praying/prayer/prayed), as well as specific to Judeo-Christianity (Bible and Jesus). The bars represent the percentage of total tweets each month that contain the word in question. This is done as a way to correct for the fact that the volume of tweets increased in 2017 and 2018.

Figure 7

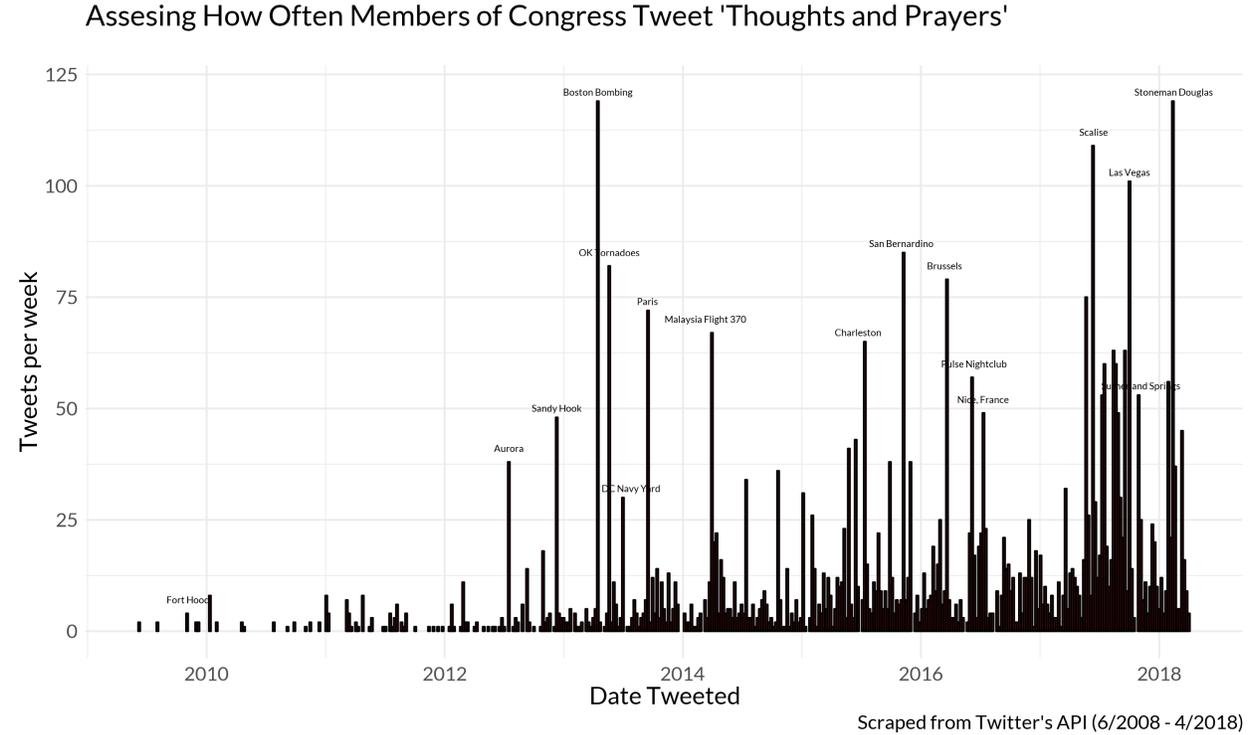
The Usage of Different Religious Language over Time



Scraped from Twitter's API (6/2008 - 4/2018)

Looked at broadly, it clear that most religious language does not appear at any reasonable frequency. For instance, in the average month the word “Jesus” is used in .04% of the tweets by members of Congress, compared to .4% for God, .03% for Bible, .2% for faith, and 1% for the variations of prayer. As previously discussed, members of Congress do not use religious language at a frequency that would be perceptible to almost any of their followers. Because of this incredible infrequency of religious language, it makes it nearly impossible to determine if there are any seasonal effects for these terms being employed. For instance, the month in which Bible is tweeted with the most concentration was January 2011, when it occurred twice out of 986 tweets. However, in November of 2016, it was tweeted out 10 times yet the total volume of tweets had increased so dramatically (20,279 that month) that the percentage dropped from .2% to .05%. As such, trying to tie most of these terms to a specific seasonal event (i.e. Christmas or Easter) would be inadvisable. The only term that comes close to appearing at an interval that is worth further exploration is the variations of the term “prayer.” As an example, the term was used 1,250 times in June of 2017, or 2.7% of all tweets that month. This frequency is ten times greater than the usage of Bible.

Figure 8

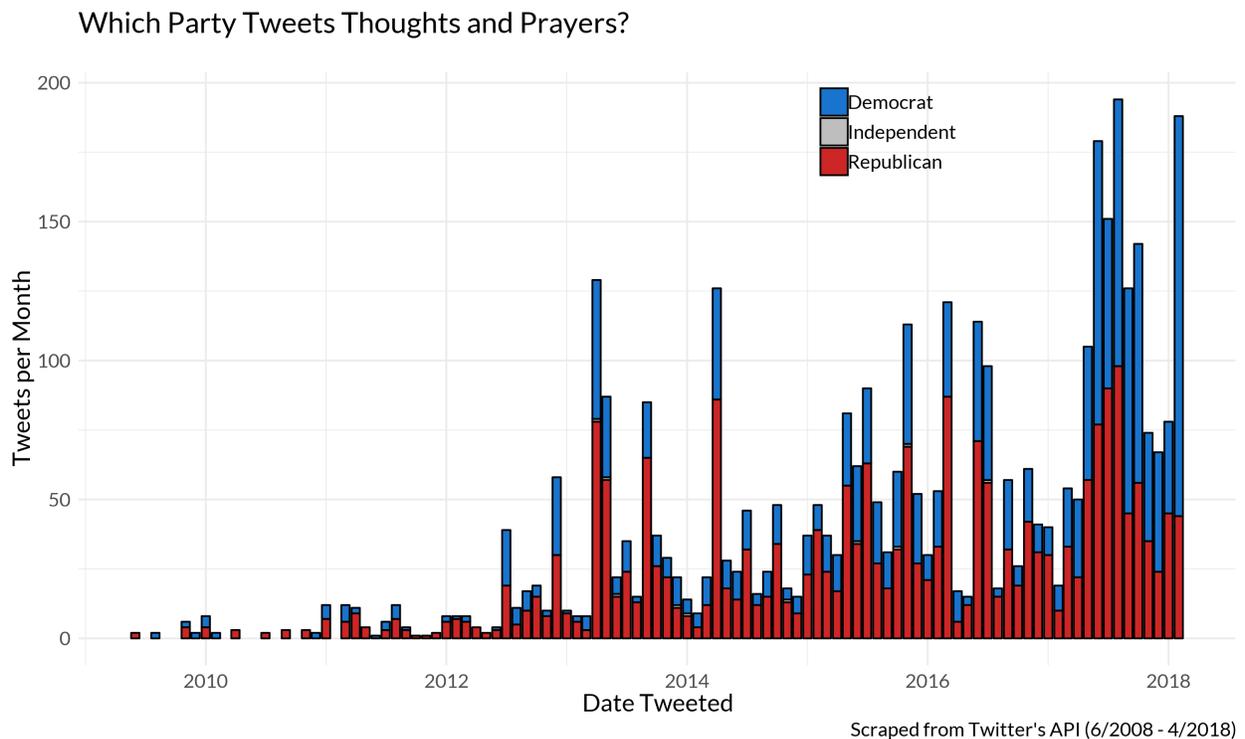


When one begins to consider the occasions on which a member of Congress would use the term “pray” in a tweet, it quickly becomes apparent that the term has been increasingly integrated into a phrase that has become ubiquitous in American discourse: “thoughts and prayers.” The term has become the go-to phrase when members of Congress want to express their care and concern for those who may be going through difficult times. The first instance of the term in the dataset was on June 10th, 2009 when John Culberson (R-TX) tweeted, “A courageous (sic), innocent security guard lost his life today. My thoughts and prayers are with his family.” The term is consistently used by members of Congress to let constituents know that they are showing concern for those who are experience tragedy (such as a natural disaster or a victim of violence) or are moving into harm’s way (troops deploying to a combat zone).

Figure 8 displays the total number of times per week that the term “thoughts and prayers” has been employed dating back to its first usage in June of 2009. Clearly, the term has become one that is event driven as opposed to being used in any sort of regular pattern throughout the calendar year. Many of the dramatic increases in the usage of the term are labelled on the Figure. The event that saw the most

tweets per week was the week of April 15, 2013 when a bomb was detonated near the finish line of the Boston Marathon which killed three people and injured hundreds more (Arsenault 2013). In that week 119 tweets containing the phrase “thoughts and prayers” were composed. The same number of tweets were sent the week of February 12, 2018 when a former student gunned down seventeen people on the campus of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida (Roguski 2018). However, while acts of violence did elicit a tremendous number of “thoughts and prayers” tweets, this was not the only situation in which this became the go-to term for Members of Congress. For instance, the week of May 20, 2013 saw 82 tweets sent out for the victims of tornadoes that swept across Oklahoma (Mannette 2013). Other events, like Malaysia Flight 370 that disappeared over the Indian Ocean also received 67 tweets (Ramzy 2018).

Figure 9



However, the American public most clearly associated the term “thoughts and prayers” as being related to the increasing number of mass shootings that were occurring across the United States. This was made clear in the December 3, 2015 cover of the *New York Daily News* that contained the headline,

“GOD ISN’T FIXING THIS: As latest batch of innocent Americans are left lying in pools of blood, cowards who could truly end the gun scourge, continue to hide behind meaningless platitudes.”

Surrounding this headline were screenshots of four Republican members of Congress who indicated that their prayers were with the victims of the mass shooting in San Bernardino, California (Schaprio 2015).

Other news outlets picked up the usage of “thoughts and prayers,” noting that it had evolved from being a “common condolence” to a “cynical meme.” Much of this cynicism was directed toward the Republican party and their lack of willingness to advance any legislation that would regulate the sale or usage of firearms. Many of the memes referenced contained disparaging images of the GOP and the National Rifle Association, intimated that the two groups had a close alliance which made it impossible for gun control legislation to pass Congress (Willingham, 2018).

Did Republican members of Congress pick up on this increasing cynicism and realize that the term “thoughts and prayers” had become of a symbol of mockery for those who were in favor of gun control? Figure 9 displays the frequency of “thoughts and prayers” tweets by members of Congress by month, broken down by political party. Between January 2011 and March 2017, there were six months in which the number of “thoughts and prayers” tweets from Democrats were greater than those composed by Republican members of Congress. In the twelve-month time period between April of 2017 and 2018, Democrats tweeted out the phrase more often in nine of twelve months. The most striking example of this occurred in February of 2018 in the wake of the Stoneman Douglas shooting when 144 “thoughts and prayers” came from Democrat lawmakers compared to 44 from Republicans. While some of the tweets that month referenced a bridge collapse on the campus of Florida International University (Kay 2018) or the death of former Congresswoman Louise Slaughter (Caygle 2018), a significant number of instances were used in a cynical context. Many of the tweets that month contained references to gun control legislation, as well as marches and walkouts that were focused on reducing the number of mass shootings in the United States. This is most succinctly described in a tweet by Democrat Seth Moulton, “My

thoughts and prayers are with @NRA today.”⁶ His tweet also contained a link to a news article that noted that hundreds of thousands were expected to gather to protest gun violence in Washington, D.C.

Discussion

Our findings build on past work from the fields of religion and politics and communication studies. Early research on members of Congress using Twitter explains who uses the social media tool and how often. Our research not only adds to this work on MOCs’ use of Twitter but is the first expansive analysis of MOCs’ use of religious rhetoric.

We find that both Democratic and Republican members of Congress use religious language on Twitter, as expected, however not in the same ways nor at the same rates. Perhaps surprisingly, we find that MOCs do not tweet religious language all that often. However, it is possible the tweets with religious appeals carry additional moral weight with constituents, compared with non-religious tweets. They may not have to tweet religious appeals all that often to make an impact, but instead tweet religious code sparingly, but carefully and strategically. Further research is needed to examine how people react to religious messaging from MOCs compared with more secular social media messaging. Religious rhetoric has consequences for how we perceive politicians (Claassen, 2015). A study of impact would be appropriate to assess how religiously charged tweets influence perceptions of MOCs and/or candidates among constituents or members of the media.

When members of Congress do tweet religious messages, we know a lot more about the religious content of their tweets with our data analysis. Past work focuses on campaign, policy, and personal content in MOCs’ tweets, but one of the challenges of this work is that it can be difficult to disentangle a campaign message from a policy message and distinguish it further from a personal tweet. One of the important aspects of our work is that we code for religious messaging in tweets that likely span campaign, policy, personal messaging and more. We code for religious words and phrases based on an established set of religious language, previously examined among presidential communication and on a smaller scale

⁶ <https://twitter.com/sethmoulton/status/977715037858160641>

for MOCs. We find that although there are differences between Democrats and Republicans, MOCs tend to use more general religious terms (God, faith) compared with specific Christian terms (Bible, Jesus) when they do use the religious code while tweeting. It seems that MOCs are using Twitter for civil religion appeals more often than cultural war appeals. These results follow with Chapp's (2012, p. 14), argument that "campaign rhetoric is rarely about taking a stance but more about developing a shared identity."

Chapp (2012, p. 4) also notes that religious rhetoric is an evolving and flexible genre, appealing to "religious sensibilities of an incredibly varied religious constituency." On Twitter, we observe MOCs using the phrase "thoughts and prayers," making unifying civil religion appeals during tragedy because most Americans tend to report that they pray (Putnam & Campbell, 2010). Yet, this same phrase later became a sort of battleground between Democrats and Republicans and a way to take a policy stance on gun control. This is additional support for the God Strategy used among politicians. MOCs may rarely use religious code on Twitter, but they likely use it carefully. Additionally, the religious code, its meaning and usage can change quickly, depending on the political context, facilitated by Twitter's fast-paced communication platform.

We build on the significant and growing body of research on members of Congress communicating with Twitter while emphasizing religious rhetoric. Through our research we better understand why, how, when, and which members of Congress use religious language on Twitter. However, we do not examine religious code used by MOCs in other forms of communication, such as speeches, debates, and/or campaign websites. Considering the "integration of church and state" in American "public discourse" documented by Domke and Coe (2008, p. 140) coupled with our own research, this is likely another fruitful area for further research.

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