

How Trump won the 2016 fear sweepstakes

Ted Cruz, Marco Rubio, and Ben Carson understood evangelical anxieties and played to them. But the strategy backfired.

by [John Fea](#) in the [July 4, 2018](#) issue



Pastors praying with Donald Trump during a 2016 campaign visit to the International Church of Las Vegas and International Christian Academy. AP Photo / Evan Vucci.

When the 2016 presidential race began, the evangelical candidates with the best chance to win the GOP nomination were Florida senator Marco Rubio, a Catholic who attended a large Southern Baptist church, and Ted Cruz, the son of a Cuban-born preacher, who rode evangelical support to a Senate seat from Texas. And the evangelical parade of presidential candidates did not stop there. Baptist minister and

former Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee, Ohio governor John Kasich, Wisconsin governor Scott Walker, Louisiana governor Bobby Jindal, former Florida governor Jeb Bush, and businesswoman Carly Fiorina all had positions on social issues that made them appealing to evangelical voters.

These candidates understood the political commitments of conservative evangelicals. Some of them would even feel comfortable preaching a sermon in an evangelical church or comforting people using the words of scripture. But what gave them a legitimate shot at the GOP nomination was their ability to engage in the politics of fear. To win the evangelical vote, these political candidates knew that they would have to convince the faithful that the Christian fabric of the country was unraveling, the nation's evangelical moorings were loosening, and the barbarians were amassing at the borders, ready for a violent takeover.

Evangelicals felt marginalized and even threatened by the social progressivism they witnessed under Obama's administration. The traditional institutions they deemed essential to a healthy society—the society of their childhoods and upbringing—were crumbling around them, and they were terrified. The country was not getting better; it was getting worse. It was evangelicals' turn to call for “change.”

Huckabee was a known commodity among conservative evangelicals. During the first four months of 2015 he criticized Barack and Michelle Obama for allowing their daughters to listen to Beyoncé, reaffirmed his opposition to same-sex marriage, condemned “trashy” New York women for swearing too much, claimed the Islamic State was more of a threat to Americans than the “sunburn” they get from climate change, and declared war against a “secular theocracy.” When on May 5 he announced he was running for president, he held a small lead among white evangelical voters.

When Donald Trump entered the race on June 16, however, it was surgeon Ben Carson—who had declared his candidacy two days before Huckabee—who was leading among white evangelicals. But Carson too was unable to hold on to his lead. Trump came out of the gate with strong language about defending traditional marriage (ten days before the *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision), building a border wall to keep Mexican “rapists” and “criminals” out of the country, ending Obamacare, and bringing back American jobs. Trump also stood up to the “liberal media,” an institution that evangelicals believed presented them and their views in a bad light. His support among evangelicals seemed to rise with every controversial statement

he made.

When during the first GOP debate Fox News moderator Megyn Kelly asked him to explain why he had called women “fat pigs, dogs, and slobs,” Trump refused to apologize, using the question as an opportunity to attack political correctness. The following day, in describing what he deemed to be Kelly’s unfair questions, he said she had “blood coming out of her eyes” and “blood coming out of her . . . wherever.” Following the debate, evangelical leader Franklin Graham published a positive assessment of Trump’s performance on his Facebook page: “He’s shaking up the Republican Party and the political process overall, and it needs shaking up!” There was no mention of Trump’s remarks about Kelly’s menstrual cycle. By the end of June 2105, Trump had a double-digit lead among potential evangelical voters, and he would maintain it for most of the summer.

Trump’s only slump among evangelicals came in September and October, when Carson enjoyed a surge in the polls. Carson mounted a direct assault on Trump’s faith and offered a strong affirmation of his own Christian beliefs. When a reporter at a rally in Anaheim, California, asked Carson how he was different from Trump, he responded, “Probably the biggest thing—I’ve realized where my success has come from and I don’t in any way deny my faith in God.” He followed this statement with a paraphrase of Proverbs 22:4: “By humility and the fear of the Lord are riches, honor, and life.”

During this period Carson also made public statements that played to white evangelical interests. He said that the teachings of Islam disqualified Muslims from serving as president of the United States, opposed the Obama policy of welcoming Syrian refugees, defended the right to fly a Confederate flag on private property, compared political correctness to what happened in Hitler’s Germany, and argued that the Holocaust would have been prevented if German Jews were armed. Carson knew which chords to strike: Muslims, terror, race, and guns. For the first time since entering the race, Trump was running second among evangelicals.

By November 2015, Trump was on the offensive. He took Carson down a notch among evangelical voters by raising doubts about whether the Seventh-day Adventist Church to which Carson belonged was a truly Christian denomination. At a campaign rally in Jacksonville, Florida, Trump announced, “I’m Presbyterian, boy that’s down the middle of the road, folks, in all fairness. I mean, Seventh-day Adventist, I don’t know about. I just don’t know about.” Several weeks later, Trump

questioned the legitimacy of certain aspects of Carson's life story, including a claim that his belt buckle once saved him from a knife-wielding gang member.

With terrorism filling the headlines, it was Trump, not Carson, who did a better job of playing the strongman. On November 13, 2015, the Islamic State claimed responsibility for coordinated terrorist attacks on Paris resulting in 130 deaths. On December 2, jihadist-inspired terrorists killed 14 people in a San Bernardino, California, health center. The day following the San Bernardino shootings, Trump was on Fox News proposing a strategy to kill the families of terrorists and criticizing Barack Obama for never using the phrase "radical Islamic terrorist," adding, "There's something going on with him that we don't know about." In other interviews, he called for the closing of mosques and the "total and complete shutdown" of Muslims entering the United States. In December, Trump and others continued to question Carson's life story, as told in his memoir *Gifted Hands*. It didn't help that the retired neurosurgeon also made several misstatements about U.S. foreign policy when responding to questions about Islamic terrorism. By the end of 2015, Trump had recaptured the lead among evangelical voters, and he would not lose it again.

Trump never had a majority of evangelical GOP primary voters, but his plurality was enough. By January 2016, only Rubio and Cruz had a chance of overcoming his lead among their fellow religionists. Rubio assembled a "religious liberty advisory board" that included Rick Warren, Samuel Rodriguez, and evangelical academics Vincent Bacote, Wayne Grudem, and Thomas Kidd. The advisory board was the brainchild of Eric Teetsel, the campaign's director of faith outreach. Teetsel's choices spoke volumes about the kind of evangelicals Rubio wanted to reach: the educated and middle-of-the-road segment of white evangelicals, the people who send their children to Wheaton College and attend churches with pastors trained at places like Trinity Evangelical Divinity School or Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

On the eve of the Iowa primary in February, Rubio appeared in a television ad that looked and sounded more like an evangelistic sermon than a political appeal. He sat in front of a simple black screen and made multiple references to his belief in the "free gift of salvation offered to us by Jesus Christ" and the need to "store up treasures in heaven." The ad said nothing about his policies.

Trump, on the other hand, was appealing to a different kind of evangelical voter. His business success and wealth made him attractive to those Christians sympathetic to

the prosperity or “health and wealth gospel” movement. Some of the powerful leaders of the Independent Network Charismatic movement, an often-overlooked segment of American evangelicalism, prophesied a Trump victory. In September 2015, when Trump met with nearly three dozen evangelical leaders at Trump Tower, the room was filled with Pentecostal, prosperity gospel, and INC leaders such as Gloria and Kenneth Copeland, Jan Crouch, Paula White, and Mark Burns. By January 2016, Trump had also secured endorsements from Robert Jeffress, the pastor of the First Baptist Church of Dallas, and Jerry Falwell Jr., president of Liberty University, the largest Christian university in the world. Neither of these evangelical leaders was associated with the prosperity movement, but they were entrepreneurial Christians who had built large and successful evangelical institutions.

Cruz’s grassroots campaign among evangelicals led to his eventual victory in the Iowa caucuses on February 1. Endorsements rolled in from James Dobson, the founder of Focus on the Family ministries and one of the architects of the Christian right’s “family values” campaign, and Tony Perkins, the president of the conservative Family Research Council. His endorsers also included Ben Sasse, the popular evangelical senator from Nebraska; Michael Tait, the lead singer of the popular Christian contemporary music band Newsboys; radio commentator Glenn Beck; and conservative Christian activist and former GOP presidential candidate Gary Bauer.

The Cruz campaign mirrored the old days of the Moral Majority, the organization founded nearly 40 years earlier to reclaim America for Christ. Many who attended one of his rallies or watched him on television came away with a sense that he and his followers were on God’s side and everyone else was working with the forces of evil to destroy America.

Political commentator David Brooks described Cruz’s speeches as “pagan brutality” and characterized his campaign as laying “down an atmosphere of apocalyptic fear” in which America is “heading off the cliff to oblivion.” More than any other candidate, Cruz talked about the need to “reclaim” or “restore” America. For many white conservative evangelicals, this was code for returning the United States to its supposedly Judeo-Christian roots. Cruz wanted Americans to believe the country had fallen away from its spiritual founding and that he, with God’s help, was the man who could bring it back.

When Cruz talked about the free exercise clause of the First Amendment—and he did so frequently—he almost always discussed it in the context of persecution against Christians. In a November 2015 speech at an Assemblies of God church in Orlando, Florida, Cruz pulled no punches. “We have a situation in this country,” he told his largely evangelical audience, “America’s in crisis. We’re bankrupting our kids and grandkids. Our constitutional rights are under assault each and every day.” He stoked fears regarding national security, seasoning his talk with attacks on the liberal media.

Many Christians see Trump as the man who can stand up to their enemies.

Cruz gained a new talking point in mid-February, with the Super Tuesday primary a couple of weeks away. When conservative Supreme Court justice Antonin Scalia died suddenly on a quail hunting trip in Texas, and it became clear that the Republican-controlled Senate would not provide a hearing for Merrick Garland, President Obama’s appointee to replace Scalia, the presidential election of 2016 became a referendum on the future of the high court. Scalia was a champion of the social values that conservative evangelicals held dear, and it was now clear that the newly elected president of the United States would appoint his successor.

Cruz seized the day. Two days after Scalia died and five days before the South Carolina primary, Cruz released a political ad in the hopes of capitalizing on evangelical fears about the justice’s replacement. With a picture of the Supreme Court building as a backdrop, the narrator said, “Life, marriage, religious liberty, the Second Amendment. We’re just one Supreme Court justice away from losing them all.” In an interview with NBC’s *Meet the Press*, Cruz said that a vote for Hillary Clinton, Bernie Sanders, or Trump could lead American citizens to lose some of their rights. “We are one justice away from the Second Amendment being written out of the Constitution altogether,” he said. “And if you vote for Donald Trump in this next election, you are voting for undermining our Second Amendment right to keep and bear arms.”

Cruz pushed this appeal to evangelical fear even harder at a Republican Women’s Club meeting in Greenville, South Carolina. He told these Republican voters that the United States was “one justice away” from “the Supreme Court mandating unlimited abortion on demand,” and for good measure he added that it was only a matter of time before the federal government started using chisels to “remove the crosses and the Stars of David from the tombstones of our fallen soldiers.” Cruz and the rest

of the evangelical GOP contenders understood evangelical fear and could play to it in their primary campaign much more effectively than Trump.

But the strategy of these candidates backfired: with evangelicals' fears now stirred to a fever pitch, not enough of them believed that Cruz, Rubio, or Carson could protect them from the progressive social forces wreaking havoc on their Christian nation. The evangelical candidates stoked fears of a world they seemed unfit to tame. Desperate times called for a strongman—and if a strongman was needed, only Trump fit the bill. As Jeffress, the Baptist minister from Dallas, told the *Dallas Observer* in April 2016,

When I'm looking for a leader who's gonna sit across the negotiating table from a nuclear Iran, or who's gonna be intent on destroying ISIS, I couldn't care less about that leader's temperament or his tone or his vocabulary. Frankly, I want the meanest, toughest son of a gun I can find. And I think that's the feeling of a lot of evangelicals. They don't want a Casper Milquetoast as the leader of the free world.

Trump was no novice when it came to fearmongering. And despite his apparent lack of evangelical credentials, he quickly found his way in responding to evangelical anxieties. His December 2015 call to ban all Muslim immigration to the United States had resonated with many conservative evangelicals. In July 2017, Pew Research Center reported that 72 percent of white evangelicals believed that Islam and democracy were in conflict, prompting *Christianity Today*, the flagship magazine of anti-Trump white evangelicalism, to run an article titled "Most White Evangelicals Don't Believe Muslims Belong in America."

Shortly before the Iowa primary, Trump spoke at the Liberty University convocation and told students and others in attendance that he was going to "protect Christianity" and would never allow American Christians to experience the same fate as Christians in Syria, where ISIS was "chopping off heads." Whenever Trump promised to dismantle the presidential legacy of Obama, evangelicals thought about abortion, the Affordable Care Act, same-sex marriage, religious liberty, and a host of other progressive reforms.

Here, then, was someone who sounded like a *real* strongman, whose tough talk made him seem to many to be strong enough to stand up to the terrors of the age. Despite his wealth and power, Trump presented himself as an embattled

outsider—as many evangelicals saw themselves—who always rose triumphant over the myriad of forces trying to bring him down. He was a “winner,” and he managed to convince American evangelicals that he could score a culture war victory on their behalf. He would shelter them from Mexican strangers threatening white evangelical America. He would protect them from Muslims prepared to kill them and their families. He would defend them from political correctness, propagated by the liberal media, that discriminated against them. He would deliver the Supreme Court.

By the end of May 2016, Trump had enough delegates to clinch the Republican Party’s nomination for president. Nearly half of GOP evangelicals supported him. When the Democratic Party nominated Clinton, the evangelical politics of fear had another long-standing threat to oppose. Over the next few months, Trump’s campaign grew stronger among evangelical voters. In the choice between the strongman who paid lip service to protecting their values and their age-old enemy in the culture wars, many evangelicals insisted they had no choice. On Election Day, the long-held fears whose specter had been stoked for decades simply could not be overcome.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “The fear sweepstakes.” It was excerpted from John Fea's new book Believe Me: The Evangelical Road to Donald Trump, just published by Eerdmans.