

Protestant Influence on American Elitism and Democracy

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Abstract: Protestantism is essential in US history and politics and predominantly affects how the American government and people behave. This paper focuses on how Protestant theology and churches affect the politics of the US by discussing the historical background of some denominations in America, the elitism in politics from church traditions, and the dual influence of Protestantism on democracy. Using literature research methodology, the paper concluded that Protestant Christianity, especially the Reformed church, has a considerable impact on US education, politics, and democracy that anyone who wants to analyze American politics cannot ignore. Also, the work ethic derived from Protestantism suggests that Protestant values have contributed to the development of capitalism and industrialization in the United States. Meanwhile, the research of different denominations can help people understand separation of some states and parties. The research paper provides a perspective for readers to consider America a religiously affected country that cultures and policies are nearly all under Christian influences.

Keywords: protestantism, democracy, politics, United States

1. Introduction

Christianity in the United States has significantly influenced its culture, society, and legislative processes [1]. Almost every U.S. president has belonged to a Christian denomination and regularly attended church services, from George Washington to Joseph Biden, except Thomas Jefferson, a deist. Moreover, when presidents take their oath of office, it is customary for them to place their hand on the Holy Bible rather than the Constitution. Nearly all House and Senate Leaders and speakers have also been Christians. In the symbols and representatives of the United States, one can easily find traces of Christian influence, such as the U.S. national motto, "In God We Trust," and similar lyrics in the U.S. national anthem, The Star-Spangled Banner [2]. In daily life, this influence is even more pronounced, with approximately 70% of the U.S. population identifying as Christian, according to statistics and authoritative estimates. Among them, about 30% attend church services regularly. It is a common sight to find churches in cities and towns, large and small, across the United States.

Among the various denominations within Christianity, branches of Protestantism have had the most significant impact on the United States and boast the largest number of members. Protestantism's influence is evident in various aspects of American life, including politics, where the religious faith of political leaders has been a defining characteristic. As mentioned earlier, this influence extends beyond just the presidency; it includes members of Congress, governors, and other government officials, who often adhere to Protestant beliefs. This religious background is crucial in

shaping political agendas and policy decisions. Many contentious social and moral issues, such as abortion, divorce, and LGBT marriage, are often influenced by Protestant values and ethical principles [3]. Politicians frequently reference religious regulations to support or oppose specific policies, a common practice in American politics. For instance, in 2022, the Supreme Court overturned the *Roe v. Wade* decision, which was made in 1973, leading to the rapid enactment of laws prohibiting abortion in many US states [4].

Societally, the Protestant faith has also shaped American traditional culture and values. Protestant ethics emphasize qualities such as hard work, self-discipline, personal responsibility, and charity, widely embraced and revered in American society. Additionally, Protestantism's emphasis on education has profoundly impacted the U.S. education system, promoting the development and accessibility of higher education institutions. For example, Harvard University originated as a seminary for Puritans, and Congregationalists established Yale University. In terms of law, Christian values have left discernible marks on American laws and regulations. Despite the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution explicitly establishing the separation of church and state, religious and moral values continue to play significant roles in legal enactment and practice. Laws like the Religious Freedom Restoration Act and related legislation aim to protect the freedom of religious beliefs while sparking debates about the balance between religious rights, public interests, and individual rights.

Therefore, this paper aims to explore the influence of Protestant Christianity on elite politics in the United States, including its significant role in political, social, cultural, and legal domains. By delving into how Protestant faith has shaped the American political system and decision-making processes, people can better understand the country's values, politics, culture, and their impact on domestic and international affairs.

2. The Beginning of American Protestant Churches and Their Development

2.1. Anglican Church

The roots of American Protestant churches can be traced back to the early days of European colonization, with the Anglican Church, also known as the Episcopal Church in the United States, playing a very significant role.

Before the founding of the United States, Protestantism had already existed in North America. In the mid-16th century, the first group of British Protestant colonists arrived on America's eastern shores under the auspices of the Virginia Company. Many of these early colonists were Anglicans, a branch of Protestantism. The Anglican Church originated in the English Reformation during the reign of King Henry VIII, when it was established as the national church of England [5]. With the support of Queen Elizabeth I, the Anglican Church grew to become one of the largest Protestant denominations in the world. Despite later challenges, it retained its status as the church of England.

These Anglican believers who settled in British America naturally became the largest Protestant group in the early American colonies. The first British colony in America, Jamestown in Virginia, was established by Anglican colonists. However, their influence was more pronounced in the southern colonies, while other Protestant denominations shaped the northern territories. What's more, because the theology, rituals, and organizational structure of the Anglican Church were not significantly different from Roman Catholicism, Anglican colonists did not exhibit the same enthusiasm for radical change, strict moralism, or religious fundamentalism as some other Protestant groups.

In the years leading up to the American Revolutionary War, the Anglican Church's close ties to the British Crown led to tensions, and it changed to the Episcopal Church in the newly formed United States. Nonetheless, its early presence in America was a foundational element in the development of Protestantism in the New World, and it contributed to the religious diversity that would come to

define the United States. After the war, the church grew larger and larger, and eleven US presidents were from this church.

2.2. Puritans

The Puritans, in essence, were dissenters within the Anglican Church. Puritanism originated during the reign of Queen Mary I in 16th-century England. Some Anglican believers, influenced by Calvinism, embraced Calvinist theology, including the doctrine of double predestination. They sought to reform the Church by eliminating Roman Catholic rituals and symbols, making it more aligned with Protestantism. They opposed indulgence and embraced a life of austerity and moral virtue.

However, their beliefs marked them for persecution in England, where the monarch staunchly defended the national church. During Queen Elizabeth I's reign, Puritans faced oppression, with authorities demanding adherence to Anglican rituals and suppressing Puritan religious gatherings. Some Puritans were prosecuted, imprisoned, or executed for conducting underground meetings or promoting Puritan doctrines.

Subsequently, a series of religious conflicts erupted during the rule of Charles I, who attempted to suppress Puritanism through strict religious policies. Oliver Cromwell led the Republican Revolution, leading to the execution of the king and exacerbating religious tensions. Many Puritans were persecuted and sought refuge in the Netherlands, while others embarked on a quest for religious freedom in American colonies.

Establishing colonies in the northeastern United States, such as Plymouth, these Puritan refugees further propagated their theological ideas. They significantly influenced the northern territories, especially in the New England area. Their religious persecution led to their suffering, including imprisonment, executions, and exile. However, their experiences profoundly shaped early American values of religious freedom, paving the way for the later Revolutionary War against Britain and developments in religious freedom. Although Puritans have largely faded from the historical landscape, their theological legacy influenced numerous subsequent Protestant denominations, including the Congregationalist church.

2.3. Religious Society of Friends

The Quakers, founded in England after the English Civil War, also played a crucial role in the early establishment of the British-American colonies [6]. William Penn, the founder of Pennsylvania and New Jersey and a great writer in the 17th century, was a member of the Quakers. Under his management, Pennsylvania and New Jersey provinces became famous for religious freedom [7]. Therefore, several immigrants from Europe who wanted to keep their beliefs were attracted and moved to the two colonies established by the Quakers.

Another vital man was Roger Williams, a member of the Quakers. He was a separatist in the Anglican church and disagreed with the theological beliefs and authority of the church. As a result of his religious view, the governor exiled him from the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Later, he established a good relationship with friendly native troops and built some early settlements. After one year, in 1636, Roger purchased a small piece of land near Massachusetts and founded the Rhode Island colony. This colony was also famous for its religious freedom policy, and all religious groups were respected there. The idea of Rhode Island about religious freedom and separation of church and government also influenced the later policy for religious liberty and the establishment of the constitution of the USA.

3. The Elitism in American Protestantism

In American Protestantism, both elite and democratic elements have been prominent. Due to doctrines like “justification by faith” and the belief that all believers are priests in their own right, Protestantism, in theory, fosters democratic and critical thinking. Believers are seen as equals in the organization and have the right to express their unique interpretations of the Bible. However, there may still be influential figures within the church who have a greater capacity for influence.

From a political perspective, the colonial history of the United States also reflects democratic tendencies. Each colony had its assembly to create laws (within the framework of British rule), and participation was typically limited to adult white males with relatively low property qualifications. These colonial assemblies had the authority to enact laws, levy taxes, and allocate colonial funds, playing a significant role in advocating and protecting the rights of colonial citizens [8].

During the American Revolutionary War against British rule, these colonial assemblies continued to be influential, and their precedent greatly influenced the Continental Congress. The Second Continental Congress, for example, adopted the Declaration of Independence, a document shaped by democratic principles and infused with strong Christian values, including the famous phrase, “We hold this truth to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.” Despite the limitation of rights to white males at that time, this slogan carried progressive significance as the US, by this declaration, became the first modern democratic republic country in the world, emphasizing that God bestowed rights applicable to all. However, one thing that shouldn’t be ignored is that the Protestant church may also be under an elite man’s lead, and this person may guide others to think. Usually, this privileged man is a presbyter or a renowned reverend, which can significantly influence church members and finally have more political power. Also, the theology of Calvinism emphasizes predestination, that only the one who has been chosen can participate in voting and ruling, and this belief somehow improved the elitism in politics.

From the perspective of education, American Protestant denominations have played a vital role in shaping elite politics. Some of the earliest universities in the United States were founded by immigrant Protestant denominations, especially Puritans [9]. As mentioned earlier, the essence of Protestantism emphasizes individual interpretation of the Bible and theology rather than blind acceptance of church teachings. Mainstream Protestant denominations like the Anglican church, Lutheranism, and Puritan churches considered colleges and universities essential for promoting religious and civic education. They were willing to fund these public institutions to enhance citizen education. This ideology led to the founding of elite colleges and universities where outstanding students received excellent education and often went on to influence American politics, shaping the nation’s trajectory in the future.

Even today, well-educated white males who have received elite education continue to hold a dominant position in American politics, with 83% of senators being white and approximately 76% being male and having received elite education [10].

4. Positive and Negative Impact of Protestantism on Political Democracy in the US

American Protestantism’s positive and negative impacts on democracy in the United States are significant. As mentioned, the positive influence is rooted in Protestantism’s theological beliefs and organizational structure.

Compared to other Christian denominations worldwide, especially Catholicism and Protestantism, particularly the Puritanical branches, this research was predisposed to democracy. In Catholic countries, the rule of kings and emperors was predominant, and the church tended to be more rigid and intertwined with the monarchy, with blurred lines between religious authority and political power. For instance, France, under several monarchs, experienced highly centralized royal control, with King

Louis XIV famously saying, “L’État, c’est moi” (“I am the state”). Catholic clergy and nobility often collaborated to oppress the lower classes, exacerbating social tensions [11].

In contrast, Eastern Orthodoxy faced its challenges, with Greek Orthodoxy under Ottoman rule and Russian Orthodoxy exhibiting a solid blend of church and state, lacking democracy. Then, the United States, influenced by Protestantism’s ideals and religious freedom, was more inclined toward democratic principles. The Protestant emphasis on individual interpretation of the Bible and theology, rather than blind adherence to church doctrine, encouraged the idea of equality among believers. This laid the groundwork for a democratic mindset.

During the colonial period, assemblies were established in each colony for lawmaking, often with relatively low property qualifications, allowing for broader participation. These assemblies played crucial roles in advocating and protecting the rights of colonial citizens and later contributed to the American Revolutionary War. The Second Continental Congress, influenced by these colonial assemblies, adopted the Declaration of Independence, a document rooted in democratic principles and Christian values. In education, Protestant denominations played a pivotal role in shaping elite politics. Protestant denominations often founded the early universities in the United States. These institutions provided exceptional education to outstanding students who would go on to influence American politics, fostering a tradition of educated white males in leadership positions.

However, over the past few centuries, certain negative aspects have emerged within American Protestantism that have challenged democracy. In addition to the elitist tendencies of some longstanding Protestant denominations, the rise of fundamentalist and evangelical movements has introduced elements of religious conservatism and anti-democratic sentiment. These movements often advocate for biblical literalism, seek to establish religious authority and align with right-wing or far-right politics. For example, many former President Trump’s supporters were evangelical Christians, representing a conservative faction in modern America. Some of these groups have displayed extremist tendencies, as seen on January 6, 2021, when a mob stormed the U.S. Capitol to overturn election results, which is detrimental to democratic principles [12].

In summary, American Protestantism has positively and negatively influenced democracy. While its early roots nurtured democratic ideals, the emergence of fundamentalism and religious conservatism within certain Protestant denominations has challenged democratic values in modern America.

5. Conclusions

The paper explores how Protestantism has nurtured democratic ideals and influenced the evolution of democratic politics in the United States. Additionally, it analyzes Protestantism’s positive and negative impacts on American politics and society. The paper highlights the theological characteristics of Protestantism, including the individual interpretation of faith, emphasis on equality, and religious freedom. These characteristics have laid the foundation for democratic principles in the United States by encouraging individual rights and participation and fostering liberty and equality. The role of Protestantism during the colonial period in shaping American political structures is also discussed. The paper also examines the American Revolutionary period and discusses its historical background. For education, it observes how Protestant denominations played a constructive role in establishing universities, providing high-quality education, and influencing elite politics. This educational tradition has had a profound impact on American politics and society.

However, the paper also delves into some negative trends within Protestantism, such as the rise of fundamentalism, often aligned with far-right political ideologies. These trends have posed challenges to democratization ideals and contributed to social divisions. This paper comprehensively explains how Protestantism has shaped American political thought. It emphasizes how Protestantism’s historical legacy and beliefs have left enduring imprints on American politics. This holistic study aids

in a better comprehension of the formation and evolution of American politics and the intricate relationship between religion and politics. Nonetheless, the paper has limitations. While it focuses on Protestantism, it does not delve into the significant influence of the Catholic Church, which also played a pivotal role in American politics and has been extensively studied by scholars. Additionally, considering the ongoing secularization of America, the influence of Christianity, including Protestantism, may continue to diminish, necessitating further research and analysis.

Future research could explore how Protestantism impacted different historical periods in American politics and democracy. Moreover, comparative studies can examine how Protestantism has influenced politics and society in other countries and cultures. Overall, this paper underscores the profound impact of Protestantism on American political thought and institutions while recognizing the need for nuanced exploration of its influence alongside other religious and secular factors, especially in contemporary America.

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