

Religion and Politics: A Bibliometric and Integrative Review of Religion in Electoral Processes (2020–2025)

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ABSTRACT - The deep influence of religion on elections creates critical tensions in democratic societies, which, on the one hand, strengthen civic cohesion, but on the other hand, risk fueling polarization, populism, and the erosion of secular governance. To systematically analyze this duality, this study conducts a bibliometric and integrative review of 84 peer-reviewed works (2020–2025). Using a triangulation of two methods, science mapping based on VosViewer, and qualitative synthesis, this review visualizes research trends and critically analyzes frameworks, mechanisms, and actors. These findings strongly affirm the explanatory power of Social Identity Theory (SIT) by revealing that political behavior is a manifestation of loyalty to the in-group and the pursuit of a positive social identity, rather than merely the result of rational calculation. This identity-based logic operates through four interrelated mechanisms: moral guidance, a sense of social belonging, institutional mobilization, and the enduring influence of citizenship. Islam and Catholicism emerge as the most studied and globally influential denominations. This review consolidates a previously fragmented field. It offers academics and practitioners a structured roadmap of how religious identity shapes and potentially burdens democratic engagement, while highlighting gaps for future research in digital mediation and under-researched areas.

Keywords: *Electoral Behavior; Religion; Elections, Integrative Review, Electoral Processes*

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Introduction

Religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things which unite into one single moral community. It functions as a social institution that fosters values and cohesion (Durkheim & Fields 1995). Due to religion's enduring influence on secular affairs across the world, scholars have increasingly examined the intersection between religion and politics. For Heath et al.(2015) and Nwankwo (2019), it influences voter behavior and party alignment through mechanisms like identity-based mobilization and moral persuasion. Furthermore, scholars contend that religion continues to influence political participation, electoral turnout, and ideological alignment across democratic societies (Abbas 2024). This interplay demonstrates religion's power as a key electoral force.

Various scholarships observed that when religious influence intensifies, it poses significant risks to secular democratic principles by deepening ideological polarization, exacerbating social inequalities, and fueling populist rhetoric that can lead to social unrest (Ichsan Azis et al., 2023; Overbeck et al 2024). Iyengar et al. (2024) similarly argued that strong group-based political identities intensify affective polarization, wherein individuals increasingly perceive opposing groups with hostility and align political attitudes according to social affiliations. For scholars like Tusalem, (2015) and Fox & Breslawski (2023), it would lead to perceptions of governmental favoritism, policy bias toward specific ideologies, and eroded public trust. Additionally, the rise of evangelical denominations is expected to influence political decision-making and campaign discourse by providing religious values through which voters justify their political positions (Schwörer, 2024). For instance, in Slovakia, the strategic alliance between a major political party and the Catholic Church has raised persistent concerns about preferential treatment in education and family policy because it challenges the neutrality of the state (Kaščák & Danišková, 2022) Furthermore, the role of religion can degrade social cohesion by exacerbating political polarization, where religious identity becomes a primary political cleavage, and by entrenching discrimination that marginalizes minority groups from political life (Hirschl et al., 2012; Migheli, 2019). This is starkly evident in India, where the politicization of Hindu identity is often exploited during socio-political movements and election cycles, resulting in heightened social tension and violence against religious minorities (Singh, 2024).During elections in Indonesia, religious identity was the strongest determinant of voter choice in the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election, which centered the contest on communal identity and deepening societal polarization (Mujani, 2020). This pattern was similarly observed in North Sumatra, Indonesia, where the politicization of religion intensified hate polarization and strengthened communal divisions during local elections (Sembiring et al., 2023). Likewise, Hossain (2026) noted that political candidates in Bangladesh strategically employed religious symbolism and rhetoric during campaigns to strengthen legitimacy and mobilize faith-based constituencies.

Similarly, the 2019 presidential election showcased the strategic politicization of religion in campaign media to sway public sentiment (Zainuddin et al., 2022). In Germany and the Netherlands, populist parties have leveraged religious and cultural narratives in their manifestos to oppose Muslim communities and champion nationalist heritage (Van den Broeke & Kunter, 2021). In the Philippines, a dominant Roman Catholic population and influential minority groups mobilized through populist styles, infused into patronage politics, and manifested through organized endorsements and bloc voting, significantly shaping campaign strategies and electoral outcomes (Castro,2019). Beyond electoral mobilization, relationships between political leaders and religious groups may affect democratic legitimacy, especially when governments incentivize specific religious

blocs with administrative appointments or state resources in exchange for endorsement (Castro, 2019). A clear example is the widely recognized bloc voting of the Iglesia ni Cristo, which can decisively swing elections in specific constituencies, illustrating institutional mobilization at its most potent.

Despite this wealth of scholarly work, the literature remains fragmented across geographical, denominational, and methodological lines. Studies often focus on isolated cases or single mechanisms, making it difficult to discern overarching patterns, theoretical convergences, and critical gaps, such as the role of digital media or the integrated analysis of religion's positive and negative democratic impacts. Finkel et al. (2020) emphasized that modern political sectarianism is increasingly driven by deeply embedded social identities that intensify intergroup hostility and ideological division, further complicating democratic discourse and political cohesion. This fragmentation obscures the field's intellectual structure and hinders the development of a coherent, comparative understanding. To address this, systematic consolidation is imperative.

Recent studies increasingly frame religion not merely as a belief system but as a powerful form of social identity that shapes collective political behavior, voting alignment, and perceptions of democratic legitimacy across societies (Fox & Breslawski, 2023; Overbeck et al. 2024). These findings reinforce the importance of examining religion through an identity-based framework in understanding electoral participation and democratic engagement. This interplay between religion and politics can be explained through Social Identity Theory (Tajfel et al., 2021), which suggests that religious affiliation may function as a social identity that shapes political attitudes, group loyalty, and electoral behavior. The theory proposes that individuals obtain identity and belonging from group membership. This affiliation affects their attitudes and actions for the purpose of preserving a positive social identity. It assumes that people are motivated to act in ways that protect and enhance the reputation of the group they identify with. In the political context, religious affiliation functions as both a belief system and a social identity guiding collective behavior. Hogg et al. (2004), further explain that social identity is a general framework for understanding group membership, group processes, leadership, collective action, and how individuals behave according to shared group norms. In this review, the theory operates under the condition that religious groups in democratic societies serve as social units where shared faith reinforces political cohesion and collective decision-making. Previous research found that social identity frameworks effectively explain political behavior by highlighting group-based loyalties and collective action, and that group identification considerably influences political attitudes and behaviors (Huddy, 2001; van Zomeren et al, 2008).

This review employs a novel dual-method design to synthesize the dispersed knowledge from 2020 to 2025. It utilizes Bibliometric science mapping and integrative qualitative synthesis in hopes to offer a synthesis that will guide future research and inform policy in an era. This review is guided by an overarching research question: How does religion function as a social identity to influence electoral behavior and democratic participation across different democratic contexts, as synthesized from the contemporary literature (2020–2025)? This will be accomplished through four specific research questions. First, what are the predominant research trends and intellectual structure of the field? Second, what theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches are most salient in explaining the identity-based nexus between religion and electoral politics? Third, through what specific mechanisms does religious group identity translate into electoral influence, and how are these mechanisms interconnected? Finally, which religious denominations are most

prominently featured in the literature as sources of political identity and mobilization, and in what contexts? This review hopes to add to the current state of knowledge on the intersection of religious identity and electoral politics.

Method

Bibliometric Science mapping is the preliminary method used in the study to map and analyze the intellectual structure, research patterns, and thematic development of the current studies (Pessin et al., 2022). Science mapping serves as a high-level viewpoint identifying major authors, ideas and interconnects disciplines that uncover the discussion of religion and democratic participation (Pessin et al., 2022). In this review, science mapping enables the systematic visualization of the existing research by means of paper citation networks, paper co-authorship networks and keyword co-occurrence networks to provide a quantitative background to the identification of influence. The study also utilized an integrative review approach, which is useful for advancing knowledge because it critically analyzes and synthesizes existing literature to develop broader insights and new perspectives on a research field (Elsbach & van Knippenberg, 2020). In using an integrative review, it enables us to combine the results derived from the adherents of different viewpoints on religion, political behavior and democratic autonomy.

Search Process and Data Collection

The search process was a systematic search of papers published between 2020-2025 focused on the relationship between religion and its influences on election practices and processes. The databases Scopus and Dimensions AI were selected for their multi-data bases coverage of high-impact, peer-reviewed social science literature and their robust indexing of interdisciplinary research on politics and religion. Then, a structured Boolean search string was applied to ensure replicability: (religion OR religious) AND (election OR vote OR electoral behavior OR political participation). After that, studies were selected and assessed through the inclusion and exclusion criteria set following a systematic screening protocol. Each record was evaluated against predefined criteria to ensure objectivity and comprehensiveness. The study selection process was documented using the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram (see Figure 1), which visually presents the number of records identified, screened, assessed for eligibility, excluded, and finally included in the review (Page et al 2021).

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Peer-reviewed articles on the following topics were included: studies in English language; studies that focused on Religion and Election are included as well of studies that use “election” “religion,” “religion and election,” “religious influence,” and “religious voting patterns.” However, informal literature studies are excluded; studies with no defined research questions; no defined search process; and no defined data extraction process. This review also excludes duplicate reports of the same study (when several reports of a study exist in different journals the most complete version of the study was included in the review). Each study was reviewed by two of five different authors of this article in which they assessed and identified potentially relevant studies. Areas of discrepancy are addressed by all members of the team through discussions.

The data collected are systematically tabulated into sheets which includes (a.) the author/s and their publication sources. The name of the authors and publication sources are also tabulated to determine the credibility and scholarly origin of each study; (b) the key research themes and

keywords explored in each study, to identify relationships between different studies; (c) the abstract of the study, to identify the relevance of the study to the topic (d) the methodological approaches employed to identify the means on how data is collected, to identify what methodological approaches are commonly applied in the topic; (e) the citation impact and relevance to assess academic influence and temporal relevance.

Data Analysis Techniques

As shown in Figure 2, the data collected are analyzed using mixed methods descriptive. Descriptive bibliometric tabulations through bibliometric science mapping using VosViewer (version 1.6.20) are used to create a visualization of the patterns and relations of different studies. Specific parameters were set for the co-occurrence analysis a minimum keyword occurrence threshold of 5, using the LinLog/modularity normalization method for clustering. VosViewer allowed the study to flag clusters that are connected to conceptual topics, such as “religion and politics,” “bloc voting,” and “electoral autonomy.” These methodological and empirical findings from the mapped literature will be critically discussed, compared, and integrated.

It is then followed by a qualitative content analysis which employed a structured, team-based coding approach. Two researchers independently coded the full-text articles using a hybrid (inductive-deductive) strategy: deductive codes derived from the research questions were combined with emergent themes from the data. Intercoder reliability was ensured through consensus discussions, with a third researcher available to resolve discrepancies. The analysis aimed to capture theoretical frameworks employed to explain the interplay between religion and politics; (b) examine the methodological approaches and patterns (c) identify mechanisms, roles, and influences of religion; and (d) identify prominent religious denominations that actively influence electoral processes. Thus, these steps imply triangulation of method approach. Methodological triangulation was applied to reduce the limitations and potential biases that may arise from relying on a single research method, while also strengthening the credibility and validity of the findings (Noble & Heale, 2019). For Bekhet & Zauszniewski (2012) it has also been found beneficial in providing confirmation of findings, more comprehensive data, increased validity, and enhanced understanding of studied phenomena.

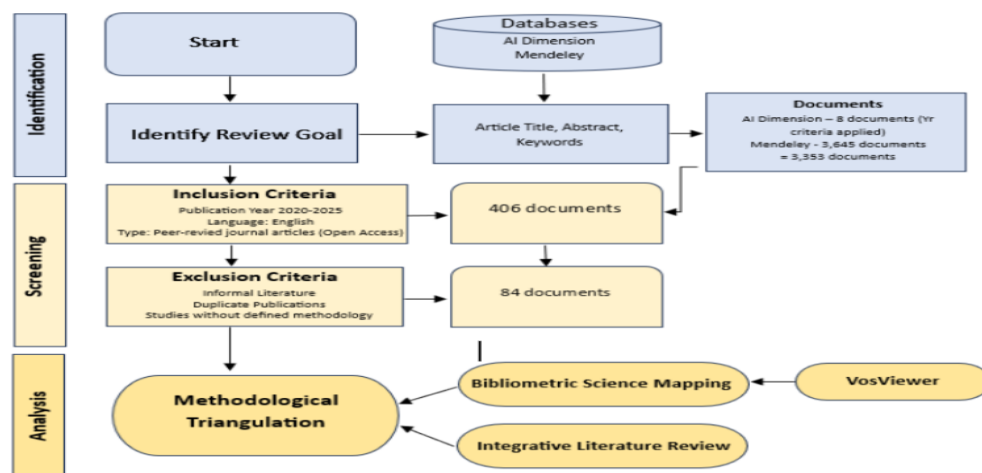


Figure 1. PRISMA chart for literature search and filtering.

Source: Processed by Author, 2026

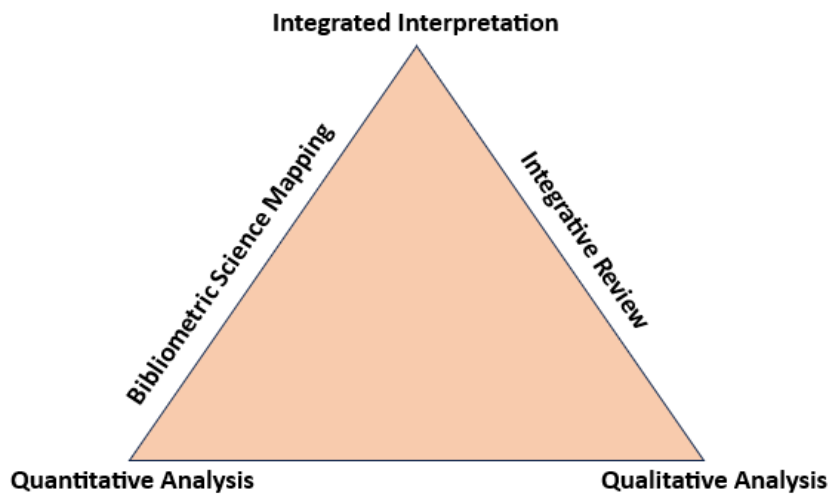


Figure 2. Methodological Triangulation

Source: Processed by Author, 2026

Result and Discussion

This section presents and interprets the findings from the bibliometric analysis and integrative review, structured according to the research questions. The discussion is framed by Social Identity Theory (Tajfel et al., 2001) as an interpretive lens to understand how religious group identity underpins the electoral behaviors and mechanisms revealed in the literature.

Research trend topics

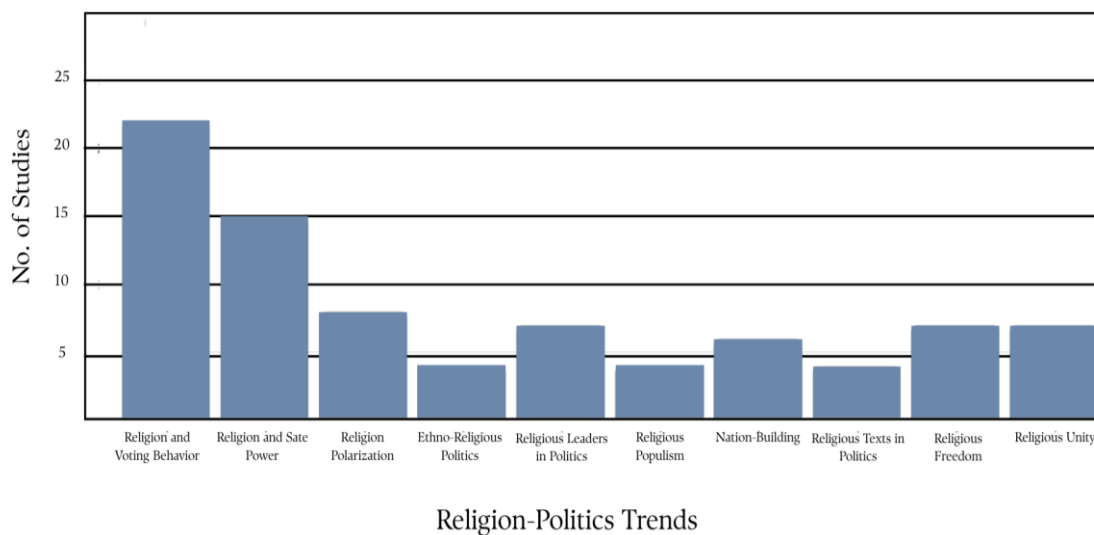


Figure 3. Research trend topics (2020-2025)

Source: Processed From Various Sources, 2020-2025

For Ninkov et al. (2021), to examine the publication trends is a crucial step for understanding the patterns present surrounding a topic throughout the time. In doing so, a review should analyze the annual increase and fluctuations in published documents in hopes to reflect relevant patterns and understand the relationships of trends and clusters present (Roshani et al.,

2021). Based on Figure 3, the most prevalent trend investigates how religion directly shapes voter psychology and behavior. A majority of studies focus on religion's influence on voting preferences, leadership evaluations, and turnout. This suggests a sustained scholarly effort to understand political choice through the lens of faith. Empirical evidence supports this trend across diverse contexts. For instance, in China, religious identity and practice significantly correlate with political voting behavior (Yi et al., 2024). Similarly, in Uganda, religion positively influences political party affiliation and electoral conduct (Kasujja, 2023). The bibliometric keyword analysis through word cloud (Figure 5) reinforces this focus, with high-frequency terms like "religious," "politic," "elected," "condition," and "party" highlighting the academic concern with how faith impacts electoral choices and outcomes.

A second major trend examines the dynamic interaction between religious institutions and state power. Scholars consistently explore how religions regulate, challenge, or transform political structures. This is evident in studies of Israel, where local religious institutions significantly affect members' voting behavior and the broader political status quo (Freedman, 2020). In Peru, the analysis extends to how the Catholic hierarchy shapes national elections and the political landscape as a whole (Lozada, 2023). For Rosenberg and Smith (2021) strengthen this institutional perspective by showing that religious leaders and organizations participate in electoral politics through religious politicking, including political messaging from clergy and religious associations across democratic elections. This trend implies moving beyond individual behavior to analyze religion as a systemic political actor.

Third, a growing body of literature addresses the role of religion in political and social polarization. Recent literature increasingly shows that religious identity can intensify social divisions by strengthening in-group/out-group boundaries, shaping electoral choices, and turning moral or religious differences into political cleavages (Soderborg & Muhtadi, 2023). The keyword analysis (Figure 5) visually links "religious issues" to "polarization." Thus, it emphasized the field's attention to religion's capacity to fragment societies while simultaneously strengthening in-group unity.

Finally, a significant trend explores the complex intersection of ethnicity and religion in politics. Studies in this category analyze how ethno-religious identities shape leadership preferences, concepts of democratic freedom, and electoral behavior. For example, in Ghana, ethnicity combined with religion acts as a primary driver of individual voting patterns (Aidoo & Botchway, 2021). This trend is reflected in the bibliometric network (Figure 5) by the connection of "race" and "ethnicity" to "election." Sobari (2023) found that voting behavior may be shaped not only by ethnicity, but also by religious similarity and socio-religious orientation, showing how both identities interact in electoral decision-making. Complementary research focuses on the specific political roles of religious leaders, detailing how they leverage authority to influence their members' political decisions (Bolarinwa & Ademola, 2022). In contrast, fewer studies address religion's macro-level role in nation-building and state formation, indicating a potential gap in understanding religion's unifying and dividing forces at the societal scale.

Co-occurrence analysis

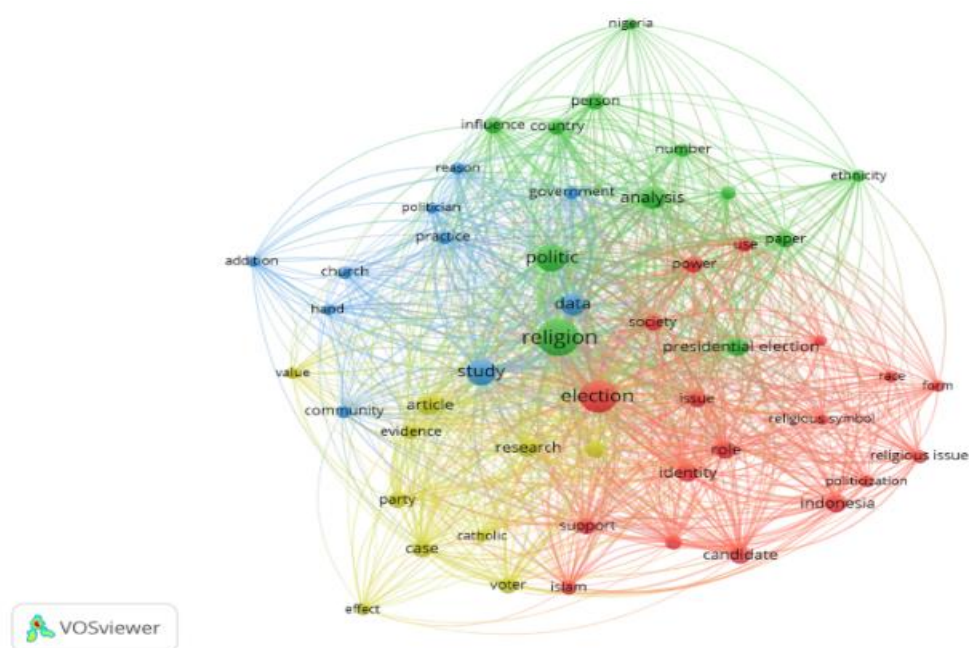


Figure 4. Co-occurrence network of keywords generated through VosViewer

Source: Processed by Author, 2026

Figure 4 shows the co-occurrence network map generated from the keyword analysis of 84 studies reveals distinct patterns of thematic connection within the literature. The co- occurrence map produces relevant visual results of the interconnection of religion and elections. In the network of connections, the strongest and most frequent are the terms “religion,” “election,” and “politics,” which is a relevant finding in this analysis. In the co-occurrence chart, it can be seen that every cluster is representing the core pathway of how religious identity translates into electoral behavior. The cluster which involves the “politician” and “party” indicates the “supply side” of politics.

On the other hand, the cluster which involves the terms “church,” “community,” and “voter” represents the “demand side” or the group in action. Moreover, the prevalence of terms like “polarization” and the separate cluster for “Islam” together with other high-relevance terms like “Nigeria” and “Indonesia” highlights the intergroup dimension. Also, the network shows that even the methodological terms are identity-centered understanding. The high-relevance of “qualitative method” and the frequent appearance of “case” and “evidence” emphasized that scholars mostly use deep, context-specific studies.

Using the framework of Social Identity Theory by Tajfel et al. (2001) this network maps out how certain religious identity of a denomination acts as a foundational driver of how individuals behave politically. This is an important observation in the data because the theory states that individuals received a big part of their sense of self from becoming a member of certain social groups, and they behave in accordance to what will favor their groups in order for them to sustain a positive social identity (Daynes-Kearney & Gallagher, 2024). This result implies that scholars from these literatures does not constrain religion by itself alone, but rather an identity that is often linked to the public, political sphere of elections. Noury and Roland (2020) similarly argued that identity politics strengthens political behavior by encouraging individuals to align themselves with groups that reflect their social identities, beliefs, and collective interests. This strong connection between

these terms in the literature supports that idea that voting is mostly studied as one of the behaviors of individuals belonging to a certain religious group or denomination.

Additionally, when a specific party or group is successful in presenting itself as the frontliner of a religious group's beliefs, it can obtain in-group status, and the members or constituents of that specific religious group will have the sense of motivation to support and reinforce their positive group identity. Castle et al. (2017) support this idea by showing that candidate religiosity can influence voter support, especially when voters perceive the candidate as aligned with their religious expectations, moral values, and group identity. This is also a significant observation because the theory emphasizes and explains this by stating that the desire for social belonging and the internalized norms of the group surrounding the "community" is a powerful tool in shaping the political choices and preferences of the individuals (Stubager, 2025).

Moreover, the theory posits that in defining "us," it should involve distinguishing "them" (Haslam et al., 2024). Chigbu et al. (2025) further showed that religious othering in Nigeria's electoral discourse operates through denomination, stereotyping, and in-group ostracization, where members who support an opposing religious-political cause are treated as outsiders to their own religious community. In the context of Nigeria or Indonesia, religious affiliations are becoming an amplifying factor of social identity that can exceed other factors (Mujani, 2020; Salahu, 2023). Soderborg and Muhtadi (2023) also found that religious and ethnic mobilizations in Indonesia contributed to political polarization, especially when political actors activated existing social resentments during election periods. This circumstance will result in the politicization of faith, in which competition during elections is being framed as a battle or conflict between religious in-groups and out-groups, which fuels social polarization (Campbell, 2020). This methodological implication in the network of connections emphasizes more the content of SIT which indicates the subjective, lived experience of membership in a group.

It can be argued that the co-occurrence analysis of this literature review is deeply aligned with the Social Identity Theory. Using this data, religion operates as a factor to strengthen social identity. This network map shows this identity being enacted by political actors which are the terms "politician" and "party" reinforced within institutions in the community which are the "church" and "community" which results to a political action which are "vote" and the showing of "support," which contextually, may also be in contrast to other groups which also involve the ideas of "polarization" and "Islam."

Word Cloud Analysis

The word cloud provides a visual presentation of the dominant terms in the literature, where the size of each word reflects its frequency and helps identify the central themes emphasized across the reviewed studies (Atenstaedt, 2012). The most prominent term is "Politic," located centrally, underscoring its conceptual importance. This centrality suggests that religion is not examined in isolation but is consistently linked to dimensions of power, governance, and collective decision-making.



From the perspective of Social Identity Theory (SIT), this finding indicates that the political arena is the primary field where religious groups seek status, recognition, and influence. The visual prominence of “Religion” and “Religious” signifies the foundational social category itself, while terms like “Party” and “Leader” represent the mechanisms through which this identity is organized and mobilized. SIT helps explain that a “party” often positions itself as the political representative of a religious in-group’s values and interests, and a “leader” becomes a symbolic figurehead who embodies group identity, promising to enhance its status or protect it from perceived out-groups. The clustering of these terms reinforces that political behavior is rarely an individual choice but is channeled through group-oriented structures (Grünhage & Reuter, 2021).

The appearance of terms like “belief,” “conservative,” “liberal,” and “culture” adds a crucial ideological layer. These terms indicate that the literature recognizes religious identity as intertwined with a specific worldview and set of values. This worldview often aligns with broader political ideologies like “conservative” or “liberal.” Through SIT, this alignment can be explained: individuals are motivated to adopt the political attitudes that are normative within their in-group. Thus, a religious community’s “culture” and “beliefs” prescribe not only theological views but also political ones, simplifying the political landscape into an in-group (us, who believe this) versus out-group (them) framework.

In summary, the visual hierarchy of the word cloud, with “Politic” as the stage, “Religion” as the core identity, “Party/Leader” as the mobilizers, and “Vote/Elected” as the outcomes, illustrates the Social Identity Theory process in action. This data consistently portrays the voter not as an isolated actor but as a member of a faith community whose political actions are profoundly shaped by the desire to belong, to support the group, and to see its values affirmed in the public square. Therefore, the word cloud is not merely a collection of frequent terms but a portrait of religious social identity actively navigating and shaping the political world.

Integrative Qualitative Analysis

The bibliometric science mapping presented in Figures 3 and 4 reveals that religion plays a significant role in electoral processes. Utilizing Social Identity Theory (Tajfel et al., 2001), these visualizations suggest that political and electoral decision-making is influenced by a sense of unity and identity formed through religious affiliation. The maps show the co-occurrence of key terms such as “religion,” “election,” “politic,” “study,” “analysis,” “data,” “article,” “role,” “presidential election,” “candidate,” and “identity.”

Applying Social Identity Theory to the strong linkage between “religion,” “election,” and “politic” indicates that an individual’s choices are shaped by their affiliations to a religious group. Furthermore, the connection of “identity” with “candidate” and “presidential election” suggests how officials and candidates use religious identity as a means to gather influence, power, and support. This relationship is evident in the links between terms, demonstrating how core concepts in the literature interact.

However, while bibliometric mapping reveals these structural patterns and co-occurrences, it does not explain the substantive content of the studies themselves. Therefore, an integrative qualitative review is necessary to examine the underlying substance of the literature. This next phase of analysis will identify and examine the specific theoretical frameworks, methodological approaches, mechanisms of influence, and prominent religious denominations discussed across the selected studies on religion and electoral behavior.

Salient Theoretical Frameworks and Methodological Approaches

The analysis of the literature reveals a field defined by its theoretical pluralism and evolving methodological sophistication, both geared toward understanding the identity-based nexus between religion and politics.

Salient Theoretical Frameworks

These studies on religion and elections may be classified according to their key themes and theoretical frameworks. Certain works are grounded in sociological and psychosocial models, emphasizing how religion, ethnicity, and social identity shape voting behavior, as seen in the studies of Iqbal (2023) and Aidoo and Botchway (2021). Other studies adopt political identity and cleavage-based approaches, which examine how divisions based on religion and ethnicity become organized into voting patterns and party alignments. (Sircar, 2022), for instance, explains “religion-as-ethnicity voting,” where religious identity functions like an ethnic cleavage that structures electoral mobilization and voter preference. Many studies follow the political religion and populism framework, where religion is examined as a strategic tool for mass mobilization, identity formation, and populist appeal, as illustrated in the works of Mezzanotti and Løland (2024) and Iswandi & Abdullah (2020).

Additionally, constructivist and behavioral approaches are also evident in the literature. Protection Motivation Theory explains how perceived risk, vulnerability, and coping beliefs shape protective health behavior, while constructivist grounded theory explores how religious and cultural contexts influence how individuals make sense of community-based behaviors (Schiff & Sharon-Lavi, 2024; Vana et al., 2024). Furthermore, research within the religion-state relations framework, such as (Suntana et al., 2023), shift the focus away from traditional identity politics to examining the criticality of ideological district and perceived disharmony between the state and religion leads a greater demand for normalization and greater political demand and accountability, particularly when legal system overlooks the religious norms, link divine authority to leadership and state legitimacy.

Finally, recent analyses on Christian Nationalism and Religious Cleavages, exemplified by Perry et al. (2024) examine how faith and race intersect to shape ideological alignment and political identity. This taxonomic overview reveals that the field is characterized by significant theoretical pluralism. No single framework dominates; instead, scholars select theories based on whether their focus is micro-level behavior (e.g., psychosocial models), meso-level mobilization (e.g., populism frameworks), or macro-level legitimacy (e.g., political theology). Overall, these frameworks demonstrate that religion is not merely a moral or cultural construct but a powerful mechanism that forges political identity, collective action, and democratic participation across societies. Notably, the recurring emphasis across multiple categories, from psychosocial models to identity politics, on religion as a source of group identity aligns with and validates the use of Social Identity Theory as a unifying analytical lens for this review. In direct answer to the research question, Social Identity Theory (SIT) emerges as a pre-eminently salient framework for explaining the identity-based nexus. It directly models the core mechanism, how group belonging, a fundamental element of religious experience, translates into political cohesion and action, that underpins many of the other cited theories.

Complementary Methodological Approaches

The salience of identity-focused theories like SIT is reflected in, and necessitated by, the field's methodological evolution. The results organize 84 studies published between 2020-2025 into three main methodological categories: Quantitative, Qualitative, and Mixed Methods, as detailed in

Table 1. Methodological Approaches of studies from 2020 up to 2025

Year	Methods Applied	No. of Studies	Instruments
2020-2025	Quantitative	34	Survey questionnaires and statistical tools
2020-2022	Qualitative	33	Interviews, FDGs, ethnography and analysis
2023-2025	Mixed-Methods	17	Combined survey and questionnaire and case comparisons

Source: Processed by Author, 2026

Table 1 shows that religion and politics studies are evolving continuously from 2020-2025. Early studies during 2020-2022 mainly used qualitative methods to capture the lived experiences, moral narratives, and identity-based roles of religion in political life. Overtime scholars increasingly incorporated quantitative methods during 2020-2025, to measure correlations between ideology, religiosity, and electoral behavior using extensive data survey and statistical modeling.

By 2023-2025, mixed methods became more common. It already incorporates statistical data with contextual understanding to explain complex phenomena. This shift is not coincidental but indicative. The growing adoption of mixed-methods designs signifies the field's recognition that understanding a multifaceted phenomenon like identity-based political mobilization requires both the empirical precision to measure its patterns (quantitative) and the interpretive depth to understand its meanings (qualitative). This trend mirrors the methodological triangulation employed in this review and highlights the field's growing sophistication in studying multidimensional phenomena. Altogether, the Table 1 shows that there is a clear shift towards methodological pluralism because it already combines empirical precision with interpretive depth to better understand how religion shapes modern political dynamics.

Therefore, the most salient approach to studying the religion-electoral identity nexus is one that pairs a robust group-based theoretical framework, like Social Identity Theory, with integrative methodological strategies. SIT provides the explanatory model for why religious belonging translates into political action, while mixed-methods research provides the necessary toolkit to measure its prevalence and interpret its lived significance. Thus, this synergistic relationship between a salient theory and salient methods demonstrates the complexity of the phenomenon and charts a path for future research that is both theoretically grounded and methodologically rigorous.

Mechanisms and Roles of Religion in Elections

To answer the research question concerning the specific mechanisms through which religious group identity translates into electoral influence, the integrative review identifies four interconnected pathways: Moral Guidance, Social Belonging, Institutional Mobilization, and Sustained Civic Influence. These mechanisms demonstrate that religious identity does not automatically produce electoral behavior but operates through a series of social, normative, and organizational processes. Religious values can shape how individuals interpret political issues, evaluate candidates, and determine which political choices are considered consistent with their moral commitments. At the same time, collective religious affiliation provides a social environment in which political preferences can be reinforced through interaction, communication, and shared expectations.

The first pathway, Moral Guidance, refers to the process through which religious teachings, ethical principles, and normative interpretations influence political attitudes and electoral judgments. Religious leaders, institutions, and shared doctrines may provide frameworks for interpreting issues such as social justice, leadership, morality, public welfare, and community responsibility. These interpretations can shape perceptions of political candidates and policies by connecting electoral choices with broader moral considerations. Political preferences therefore become embedded within a normative framework in which voting may be perceived not merely as an individual decision but also as an expression of religiously informed ethical responsibility.

The second and third pathways, Social Belonging and Institutional Mobilization, explain how religious identity is transformed from an individual orientation into collective political behavior. Social belonging creates a sense of solidarity among members who share religious identities, values, and communal experiences. Through interpersonal networks, informal discussions, religious gatherings, and community interactions, political attitudes can circulate and become collectively reinforced. Institutional mobilization extends this process through the organizational capacity of religious groups, including leadership structures, communication networks, community

organizations, and coordinated activities. These institutional resources can facilitate political information dissemination, voter engagement, political participation, and the articulation of collective interests, thereby increasing the capacity of religious communities to influence electoral outcomes.

Table 2. Mechanisms and Roles Applied in Studies on Religion and Electoral Behavior (2020–2025)

Mechanism	Description	Example
Moral Guidance	Religion provides ethical standards that impact how a person evaluates candidates and issues, especially those involving morality, corruption, and governance.	Religious teachings guide voters to select candidates distinguished as honest and morally upright.
Social Belonging	Shared ideology forms a sense of unity and loyalty, setting up a culture where members follow collective voting behavior aligned with community values.	Bloc voting and church-endorsed candidates show how faith communities act collectively during elections.
Institutional Motivation	Religious organizations act as systems that coordinate and urge members to participate in political activities.	Churches strengthen civic engagement and organize voter education or endorsement campaigns.
Moral and Civic Influence Beyond Elections	Religion continues to shape public values, leadership ideals, and political discourse even outside election periods.	Churches engage in moral advocacy, education, and nation-building efforts that define ethical leadership and civic responsibility.

Source: Processed by Author, 2026

Religion shapes voter behavior through moral guidance, social belonging, and institutional mobilization. Religious teachings influence how citizens judge candidates and issues, particularly those tied to morality, corruption, and governance (Clarke, 2019). Shared faith also builds group solidarity. It encourages members to align their votes with community expectations, a pattern seen in bloc voting and pastoral endorsements (Querubin, 2016).

These mechanisms are deeply interconnected. This is a dynamic best explained through Social Identity Theory. The theory clarifies that people act to protect and enhance the status of their in-group. Therefore, Moral Guidance functions as the internalized value system of the group; adhering to it in political choices (e.g., voting for a “moral” candidate) affirms one’s in-group identity. Social Belonging is the engine of this process, where the desire for positive group esteem motivates alignment with collective behaviors like bloc voting. Institutional Mobilization provides the organizational structure that activates and directs this sense of belonging into concrete political action, such as get-out-the-vote drives. Finally, Sustained Civic Influence represents the long-term cultivation of the group's norms in public life, ensuring that religious identity remains a politically

relevant social identity beyond the electoral cycle. This interconnection reveals that electoral influence is not a product of any single mechanism but of their synergistic operation: group values (Moral Guidance) foster solidarity (Social Belonging), which institutions (Institutional Mobilization) harness for political action, within a cultural framework continuously shaped by faith (Sustained Civic Influence).

Religious organizations further act as mobilizing networks (Mayer & John, 2017). Furthermore, religious organizations shape voters' political awareness, and actively promote civic participation and endorse candidates, viewed as morally upright (Wulan et al., 2025). While this enhances engagement, it can also limit voter independence and challenge the church-state divide. Understanding these interconnected mechanisms is crucial for several reasons. First, it moves beyond simply observing that religion matters to explaining how it matters systematically. Second, it highlights that efforts to mitigate potential democratic risks, such as undue institutional pressure or polarized voting blocs, must address this interconnected system, not just one part of it. For example, a regulation focused only on formal endorsements (Institutional Mobilization) may miss the powerful, informal social pressures of Social Belonging. Thus, religion remains a moral and social force that continues to shape political participation and democratic behavior in the Philippines and other democracies.

Besides, religion's impact surpasses election seasons through its role in framing political discourse and anchoring long-term values (Shamhuna, 2025). Churches and faith-based groups constantly take part in nation-building efforts, education, and moral advocacy that define what is considered ethical leadership (Clarke, 2019). This Sustained Civic Influence ensures that the identity-based nexus between religion and politics is not episodic but permanent, continually preparing the ground for the other three mechanisms to activate during elections. These processes embed religion within democratic life, making it not only a moral authority but also a persistent instrument in the formation of political culture.

Denominational Patterns of Influence

Finally, the analysis of the literature provides answer as to which religious denominations are most prominently featured as sources of political identity and mobilization, and the specific contexts in which this occurs. Religion has been continuously influencing the social structure of the society and the identity of every individual member (Villaseñor Ibáñez et al., 2025). These social organizations foster a sense of moral obligation, framing societal views through the lens of religious values (Rashid, 2023). The results reveal that significant influential factors of religion in the electoral process are shaped by denominational identities. Both bibliometric co-occurrence analysis (Figure 3) and the integrative review converge to identify Islam and Catholicism as the two most prominent and influential denominations in the scholarly literature.

Islam as a Source of Political Identity and Mobilization

The literature prominently features Islam as a powerful political identity, particularly in Muslim-majority democratic contexts. In Indonesia, Islam is centrally featured as shaping electoral processes, with studies finding it used as a means to attract voter support (Effendi & Darma 2022). Religious organizations leverage their authority as political capital to shape electoral dynamics by utilizing resource mobilization, strategic framing, and social network activation (Falah, 2025). The scholarship describes a process where Islam is instrumentalized, or “weaponized,” to garner legitimate authority and mass support (Achfandhy et al., 2024; Sembiring et al., 2023), leading to a

strong in-group voting pattern where Muslim voters are more likely to support Muslim candidates (Mujani, 2020). The Indonesian context, therefore, exemplifies Islam functioning as a potent, community-defining social identity that is actively mobilized for political ends (Saputra et al., 2021). Similar patterns of Islamic identity shaping electoral competition are prominently noted in the literature concerning Nigeria, linking the denominational influence to specific national contexts as per the research question.

Catholicism as a Source of Political Identity and Mobilization

Catholicism is equally prominent in the literature but is shown to be influential across a more diverse set of national contexts, from majority-Catholic to religiously mixed societies. In the United States, Catholic denominationalism is construed to shape electoral processes because of the fact that it influences national debates on moral and doctrinal values and serving as an instrument of political capital (Campbell et al., 2021; Effendi & Darma, 2022). Studies note the complexity of this identity, with American Catholic voters often described as a “cross-pressured” group because it navigates between church teachings and partisan loyalties (Margolis, 2022).

Beyond the U.S., the literature highlights Catholicism’s influence in predominantly Catholic nations. In Peru, the Catholic hierarchy is described as shaping national elections and politics in its entirety (Lozada, 2023). Similarly, in Slovakia, political parties particularly Christian democratic parties leverage Catholic identity to garner support (Štefančík & Stradiotová, 2021). This underscores the enduring influence of religious identity in modern mobilization, a phenomenon whose role in governance continues to be actively studied (Vékony & Račius, 2024). These observations across literatures argue the Catholicism’s role as a political identity transcends a single region, featuring prominently in analyses of elections in both the Americas and Europe.

It is important to highlight these extracted answers from the literature because the concentrated scholarly focus on Islam and Catholicism is not coincidental but analytically significant. These denominations share key structural features, such as doctrinal unity, hierarchical or authoritative leadership, and clear in-group/out-group boundaries, that make them powerful and visible engines of social identity politics. Their prominence in the literature is a manifestation of a critical finding that religious traditions with strong, institutionalized identities are most readily activated and studied as forces in electoral politics. It directs analytical attention to the institutions and doctrines that best facilitate political mobilization and signals where the tensions between religious solidarity and democratic pluralism are most acute. Furthermore, this pattern validates the utility of Social Identity Theory, as these two globally prominent faiths exemplify how well-defined group boundaries foster the political cohesion and mobilization mechanisms the theory describes.

Conclusion

This review synthesized contemporary literature to reveal how religion functions as a potent social identity in electoral processes. The analysis identifies key research trends focused on voter psychology, institutional power, and polarization, with Social Identity Theory (SIT) emerging as a pre-eminent framework for explaining the identity-based nexus. The findings elucidate four interconnected mechanisms, moral guidance, social belonging, institutional mobilization, and sustained civic influence, through which group identity translates into electoral outcomes. Furthermore, Islam and Catholicism are highlighted as the most prominently studied and influential denominations, acting as political brokers in contexts like Indonesia, the United States, Peru, and

Slovakia. These results strongly affirm SIT's explanatory power. It argues that political behavior is often a manifestation of in-group loyalty and a desire for positive social identity, rather than purely rational calculation.

The primary contribution of this study lies in its novel dual-method design, which systematically consolidates a fragmented field through bibliometric mapping and integrative synthesis. This approach provides both a macroscopic view of the intellectual structure and a microscopic analysis of content. Also, this review establishes a clear agenda for future research. It calls for expanding linguistic and regional scope, deepening comparative case analyses, and investigating the digital transformation of religious mobilization. Ultimately, this work provides scholars, policymakers, and civil society with a consolidated evidence base to navigate the complex interplay between faith and electoral autonomy. This review affirms the religion's enduring significance as both a cohesive social force and a potential source of democratic tension.

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