The Bible Belt, the Black Belt, and Southern Politics: An Analysis of the Political Circus of the 2017 U.S. Senate Special Election in Alabama

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For those who are troubled by the election of Donald Trump and the unfolding of the first year of his presidency, the victory by Doug Jones in the U.S. Senate special election last December in Alabama foreshadows a wave election in the 2018 midterms which will give Democrats control of the House and Senate. For those who support Donald Trump, or at least tolerate him because he provides unified GOP control of the presidency and Congress, the election was an isolated event defined by the collapse of Roy Moore's campaign with no real long-term implications for our electoral politics. As with so many other developments in our polarized political system, the truth likely lies somewhere between these two points of view. For scholars of southern politics, the election teaches us two very important lessons: the significance of the evangelical vote for Republican candidates, even in the wake of questions about the character and family values of those candidates, and a reminder of the enduring power of the Black Belt in electing a Democrat to office.

We initially set the stage for Roy Moore vs. Doug Jones by describing the events that unfolded in the 2017 Alabama U.S. Senate special election. We explore the importance of the Bible Belt as well as the Black Belt in our study of southern politics. The heart of this study is a series of OLS models where we analyze the effect of race and religion on Roy Moore's vote share (Table 1), voter turnout (Table 2) and Roy Moore's place in history (Table 3). We conclude with a discussion of the implications of the election for the 2018 midterms, voter mobilization, and religion and politics in the Deep South.

Setting the Stage for Moore vs. Jones

From Jeff Sessions' endorsement of Donald Trump in February 2016 to the election of Doug Jones in December 2017, a political soap opera unfolded in the Yellowhammer state that would capture the nation's attention. At a rally in a football stadium on February 28, 2016, Alabama Senator Jeff Sessions would become "the first sitting senator to endorse Donald Trump" (Diamond 2016). Sessions would be rewarded for this strategic and early endorsement of Trump with a major appointment to the President's Cabinet. Roughly one year after the endorsement of Trump, Sessions would be confirmed by the Senate as the 84th Attorney General of the United States and Alabama Governor Robert Bentley followed up by quickly appointing Alabama Attorney General Luther Strange to the open seat (Smilowitz 2017). Citing the high cost to state taxpayers, Bentley declined to order a statewide special election even though an Alabama statute declares the governor will "forthwith order an election to be held" in the case of such vacancies (Andone 2017, 4). Senator Strange would be able to serve until the next scheduled election in 2018 (Andone 2017, 4). It was unclear if the 2018 election would mean a primary election or the November general election.

The anticipated smooth ride for "Big Luther" Strange to serve in the United States Senate throughout most of the first half of President Trump's term would be upended abruptly by the resignation of Governor Bentley. On April 10, 2017, Bentley resigned in the wake of a sex scandal involving his senior political adviser, Rebekah Caldwell Mason, which had "staggered the state, brought him to the brink of impeachment, and prompted a series of criminal investigations" (Blinder 2017, 1). Bentley was succeeded by Lieutenant Governor Kay Ivey who promptly scheduled a special election (Andone 2017, 5). Given that the Office of the Alabama Attorney General had been investigating the criminal complaints against Bentley, the

appointment of Strange and the refusal to schedule a special election in 2017 at least raised the eyebrows of many Alabamians and at worst gave the impression of some kind of quid pro quo (Andone 2017, 3-4). Governor Ivey effectively removed the concerns about the scheduling of the special election with an August 2017 primary and then a December 2017 general election.

The summer primary would be defined by Doug Jones facing six other challengers in the Democratic primary, while Big Luther Strange would square off against the combative, controversial, and Christian warrior Judge Roy Moore in the GOP primary. Doug Jones had "gained prominence as the former U.S. attorney who helped convict two of the remaining perpetrators of the 1963 bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham" (Bowman 2018). Doug Jones cruised to victory in the August primary with two-thirds of the vote (66.64%). With almost ten candidates in the crowded GOP primary, Moore and Strange would move to a runoff after the August 15, 2017, primary with Big Luther securing one-third of the vote and Judge Moore just short of 39% of the vote.

In the September runoff, Moore would win comfortably over Jones (55% to 45%). It was a noteworthy victory given that "Moore became the first Republican Senate candidate since the 2014 cycle to overcome a full-scale attack during the primary from allies of Republican leadership and the U.S. Chamber" (Scherer 2017). Although Trump endorsed Big Luther in August of 2017 and a super PAC aligned with Senate Majority Leader McConnell spent millions of dollars on behalf of Strange, Judge Moore consistently emphasized his shared vision with President Trump to Make America Great Again and parlayed the support of McConnell for his opponent as an opportunity to rail against the GOP establishment (Strauss 2017). Moore rode a wave of rural support to victory in the runoff election (Strauss 2017) just like his horse "Sassy" which the Judge has a penchant for riding to the polls on Election Day.

A bombshell would be dropped by the *Washington Post* on November 9, 2017, with a report that a 32-year-old Roy Moore, who was an assistant district attorney in 1979, approached a 14-year-old girl, Leigh Corfman, outside a courtroom in Etowah County, Alabama. He would ultimately ask the girl for her phone number, pick her up around the corner from her home, drive her to his home in the woods, and initiate a sexual encounter (McCrummen et al. 2017). The *Post* reporters noted that Leigh Corfman did not approach them with the story, she had been reluctant to discuss the events from almost 40 years ago, and the investigation uncovered three other women who had been pursued by Moore when they were between the ages of 16 and 18. By December of 2017, a total of nine women reported sexual misconduct by Roy Moore, and several of the women reported a pattern of behavior where a 30-something Moore would seek out and harass teenage girls at the mall (Ponsot 2017). While congressional GOP leaders quickly backed away from Roy Moore, President Trump would tweet on December 4, 2017, just a mere 8 days before the election, that "…we need Republican Roy Moore to win in Alabama. We need his vote on stopping crime, illegal immigration, Border Wall, Military, Pro Life, V.A., Judges 2nd Amendment and more. No to Jones, a Pelosi/Schumer Puppet!" (Andone 2017, 8).

Tucked between Thanksgiving and Christmas, the special election on December 12, 2017, would witness a dramatic victory by Doug Jones over Roy Moore by a little more than 20,000 votes (673,896 to 651,972 votes with 22,852 write-ins or 49.97% for Jones and 48.34% for Moore according to the Alabama Secretary of State). Staying with the bizarre theme of the

election, Roy Moore had not conceded more than a week after the election and he was posting conspiracy links to his Facebook page illuminating "How Muslims and Marxists delivered for Doug Jones" while also declaring that "Doug Jones's Gay Son is 'Thrilled' by the Alabama Win" (Smith 2017).

The Bible Belt, the Black Belt, and Southern Politics

Roy Moore was no stranger to the religious culture wars in the American South. He had famously fought for a Ten Commandments display from a wood carving in his Etowah County courtroom early in his career as well as a 5,200-pound granite display of the Commandments in the lobby of the state judicial building when he was Chief Justice of the Alabama Supreme Court (WBAC 2017; Chason 2017). In the wake of the Supreme Court decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges,* Moore issued an order prohibiting probate judges from issuing same-sex marriage licenses and he was suspended in September 2016 without pay for the remainder of his term as Alabama Chief Justice (Andone 2017, 2). Moore argued that "'God's law' can invalidate federal court decisions" (Scherer 2017). He would officially resign from the Alabama Supreme Court in April 2017 to run against Luther Strange in the U.S. Senate special election. Furthermore, he was removed as the Alabama Chief Justice a dozen years earlier for his defiance of a federal court order to remove the Ten Commandments monument (Goggin 2017). Moore even suggested that the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks were "God's punishment for legitimizing sodomy and abortion" (Strauss 2017). It is important to keep in mind that "Moore made his belief in the supremacy of a Christian God over the Constitution the central rallying point of his campaign" and he proudly proclaimed that he would "return the knowledge of God and the Constitution of the United States to the United States Congress" (Scherer 2017).

Luther Strange also earned his own stripes in the religious culture wars. As the Attorney General of Alabama, he had sued the Obama administration over transgender rights and the birth control mandate of Obamacare, and as a United States Senator he voted for the confirmation of Neil Gorsuch (Goggin 2017). On the other side of the trench warfare, Doug Jones had expressed his support for abortion rights and a woman's right to choose. As the sexual misconduct and even sexual assault allegations accumulated against Roy Moore in the month before the general election, a chorus of political pundits speculated than an alleged sexual predator might still win election to the United States Senate because his opponent had expressed such vocal support for abortion rights.

On the eve of the special election, Roy Moore injected steroids into the culture wars by accusing "liberals, gays, bisexuals, transgender people, and socialists of fabricating sexual harassment allegations against him in an effort to keep his conservative Christian views out of Washington" (Sacks 2017). In the final night of campaigning, in a bizarre statement addressing "fake news" and charges of bigotry against her husband, Kayla Moore defended her husband by proudly declaring that "one of our lawyers is a Jew" (Barbash 2017).

J. David Woodard (2013, 223) reminds us that "an understanding of religion and politics is essential to interpreting political behavior in the US South." The role of race, the civil rights movement, and the sorting out of the parties on civil rights legislation is a well-told explanation for the origins of the GOP realignment of the American South (Black and Black 1987; Black and

Black 1992), but one of the primary factors leading to southern realignment that began in the 1970s was the relationship developed between the religious right and southern conservatives. The first "Great White Switch" came in the 1960s in the wake of civil rights legislation with southern whites voting Republican in presidential elections, but the second Great White Switch unfolded with Reagan's presidency where southern whites came to think of themselves as Republicans rather than Democrats in terms of party identification (Black and Black 2002, 205). In the 1980s "Reagan especially sought to mobilize and win the votes of white religious conservatives—a new force in Republican politics" (Black and Black 2002, 214). The religious right became an integral part of the GOP electoral coalition which "helped the party solve its problem of attracting landslide majorities of white voters" (Black and Black 2002, 215). In his analysis of cross-sectional survey data over the last four decades, Schwadel (2017, 238) finds that "opposition to abortion, homosexuality, and welfare spending have become more robust predictors of Republican affiliation. By the twenty-first century, differences in Republican affiliation between evangelical Protestants and other religious affiliates are fully mediated by views of homosexuality, abortion, and welfare spending." The findings support the use of a culture wars lens to examine our contemporary politics (Schwadel 2017).

It has long been an accepted fact that the South is generally more evangelical and their evangelical values are expressed at the ballot box. However, the 2016 presidential election presented evangelicals with a dilemma after 94 church leaders wrote a letter condemning candidate Trump. Nevertheless, the presidential election in the eyes of many was a choice between two evils, which makes it hard to tease out the relationship between evangelical values and vote choice. However, the 2017 special election in Alabama gives us a chance to discern if southern evangelicals are appalled by a "morally bankrupt candidate" or if the conservative movement's long held ties to the Republican Party remain strong.

Just as evangelical voters comprise the most loyal core of the GOP electoral coalition, the fact that African American voters support Democratic candidates has become a truism in political science. Exit polls, nationwide surveys, and the research flowing from the southern realignment have confirmed this truth repeatedly over the last 50 years. Furthermore, the discipline has accepted that a myriad of factors affect voter turnout, notably race in the South (see Blais 2006; Glaser 1996; and Hill and Leighley 1999). Similarly, black voters tend to show up during presidential elections and stay home in midterm and special elections (Gilliam 1985). Frymer (2010) contends that black voters have been captured by the Democratic Party and are often given two options in general elections, neither of which will truly represent black voters, resulting in strong, albeit cautious, support for the Democratic Party candidate. Thus, we expect black voter turnout to be relatively low even though Doug Jones' candidacy may be counter to Frymer's assertion regarding representation (substantive rather than descriptive in this case).

Data and Methods

We used election data from the Secretary of State's office, demographic data from the U.S. Census, and religion data from the Association of Religion Data Archive (ARDA)[1]. Election and demographic data is fairly straightforward; the evangelical population required

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[1] http://www.thearda.com/rcms2010/selectCounty.asp

some data manipulation. The ARDA lists religion data for each county with "Evangelical Protestant" as a primary category along with a total list of adherents among all denominations. They also list "Unclaimed" as a category which are "those that are not adherents of any of the 236 groups included in the Religious Congregations & Membership Study, 2010. This number should not be used as an indicator of irreligion or atheism, as it also includes adherents of groups not included in these data" (ARDA). We divided the number of evangelical Protestants by the sum of total adherents and the unclaimed population to get the percent of evangelical Protestants in a given county.

We ran the six models and they are reported across three tables which we discuss in detail below. The first three models test the hypotheses that race and religion remain primary explanatory variables in southern elections. Model 1 is a bivariate model measuring the effect of evangelical Protestant on support for Roy Moore. Model 2 is also a bivariate model that tests the relationship between race and Moore support. Model 3 is a full model that includes percent evangelical, percent black, and various demographic controls (see Table 1 below for all three models). Table 2 contains models 4 and 5. These models test the relationship between religion and race on voter turnout change from 2016 to 2017 and turnout in 2017 alone, respectively. Lastly, model 6 in Table 3 considers Roy Moore's place in history by establishing a baseline of Republican support and testing it against the evangelical measure.

Findings

Table 1 evaluates Roy Moore's performance in the Bible Belt and the Black Belt. The first bivariate model (1) demonstrates that counties with a high evangelical population were likely to vote for Roy Moore. The relationship is both substantively and statistically significant revealing for every 1% change in evangelical population the support for Moore increased by 1.1%. Similarly, the second bivariate model (2) shows that counties in the Black Belt were less supportive of Moore. These results are also substantively and significantly different revealing every 1% increase in black population results in a .77% decrease in support for Roy Moore. Finally, model (3) is a full model that indicates race and education are the primary indicators for support (or lack thereof) of Roy Moore. Education does not indicate a substantive shift, but there is a statistically significant relationship. Race, on the other hand, remains both substantively and significantly important. Interestingly, religion in the full model is neither significant nor substantive, indicating that when we control for demographics the evangelical population is no longer a primary indicator. These models as well as Figures 1 and 2 confirm our hypotheses regarding the role of religion and race in the special election, although there is evidence to indicate that percent evangelical needs further exploration, which we conduct in the models below. The R^2 value is particularly important, indicating the strength of the relationship by showing the amount of variance captured in the model. All three models have a high R^2, which supports our claim that race and religion are the primary determinants in election outcomes in the South.

	Roy Moore's Vote Share		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Evangelical	1.094***		0.112
	(0.122)		(0.072)
Black		-0.776***	-0.749***
		(0.038)	(0.066)
Turnout			0.001
			(0.002)
Over 65			0.005
			(0.004)
College			-0.006***
			(0.002)
Median Household Income			0.001
			(0.002)
Constant	0.072	0.765***	0.637***
	(0.055)	(0.014)	(0.111)
Observations	67	67	67
R^2	0.554	0.868	0.937
Adjusted R^2	0.547	0.866	0.931
Residual Std. Error	0.127 (df = 65)	0.069 (df = 65)	0.050 (df = 60)
F Statistic	80.606*** (df = 1; 65)	425.797*** (df = 1; 65)	148.402*** (df = 6; 60)
Note:			p<0.1*; p<0.05**; p<0.01***

Table 1: Roy Moore, the Bible Belt, and the Black Belt
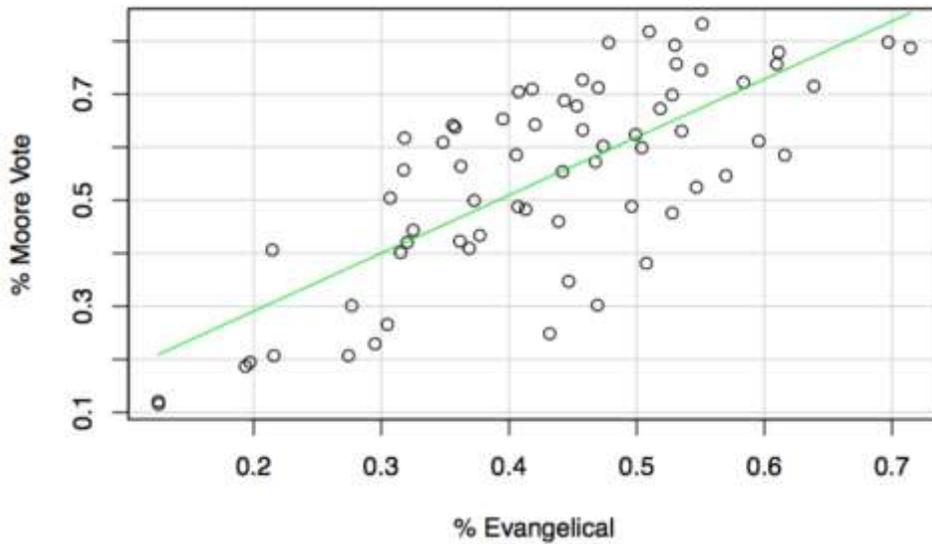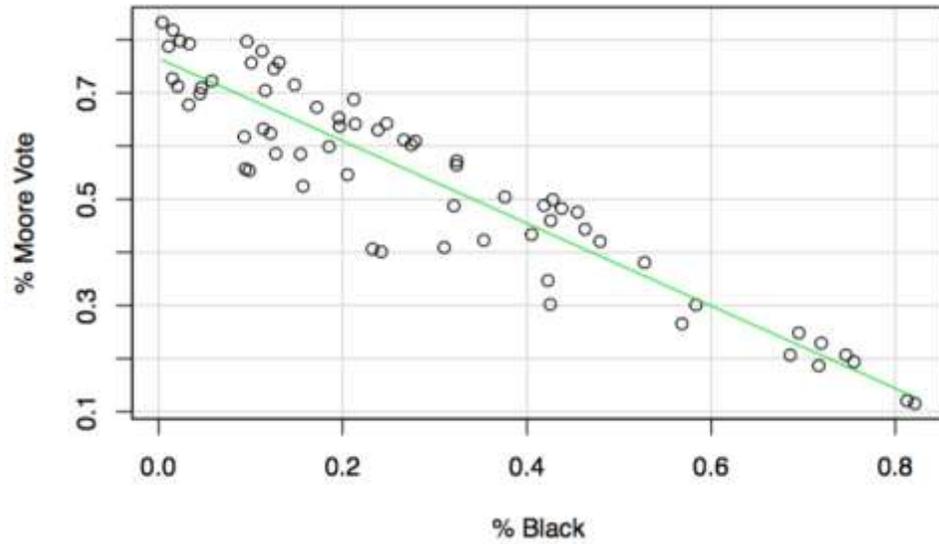

Figure 1: Roy Moore and the Bible Belt

Figure 2: Roy Moore and the Black Belt

Table 2 reports the results from two models related to turnout that we contend provide a better understanding of the relationship between the evangelical vote and Roy Moore's performance, particularly the insignificant finding in the full model in Table 1. Our first model in Table 2 measures voter turnout in 2017 and considers the effect of religion and race on voter turnout. This model is particularly important because one can reasonably expect for religion to not have a significant effect on turnout, or if it does, it would likely have a positive effect, at least in the South. On the other hand, race should be both significant and substantive with a negative relationship, i.e., as percent black increases one should expect turnout to decline. However, our findings, which support the claim regarding religion, are in stark contrast to what we would expect for race. Not only is there a significant difference, but there is a substantive difference as well. The race coefficient indicates that for every 1% increase in black population, turnout increased by 17%. This finding certainly offers an explanation behind Doug Jones's success, but does little to help us understand the role of religion in Roy Moore's failure to win the election.

	Dependent Variable	
	2017 Turnout	Turnout Change 2016-2017
	(1)	(2)
Percent Evangelical	-3.452	-8.201**
	(5.341)	(3.400)
Percent Black	17.027***	19.721***
	(3.028)	(1.928)
Constant	40.113***	-22.147***
	(3.001)	(1.911)
Observations	67	67
R^2	0.521	0.809
Adjusted R^2	0.506	0.803
Residual Std. Error (df = 64)	4.070	2.591
F Statistic (df = 2; 64)	34.765***	135.473***
Note:	$p<0.1$*; $p<0.05$**; $p<0.01$***	

Table 2: Turnout Models

Model 2 in Table 2 attempts to correct this by using turnout change from 2016-2017 as a dependent variable to measure the effect of religion and race on the shift in turnout. As stated above, one can expect race to have a significant, substantive effect on turnout change as minority populations tend to turn out at lower rates than they do for presidential elections. Like before, the results for race stand in stark contrast to this expectation and race has a slightly higher coefficient in model 2 than it did in model 1. Religion, on the other hand, is the most telling result as the model indicates that for every 1% increase in evangelical population voter turnout decreased by 8% from 2016 to 2017. This table indicates two things: Roy Moore lost the support of a large portion of evangelical voters and African Americans were motivated to turn out at a higher rate in 2017 than they did in 2016. The former is likely due to Moore's questionable past; the latter may be attributed to a Trump effect on minority communities.

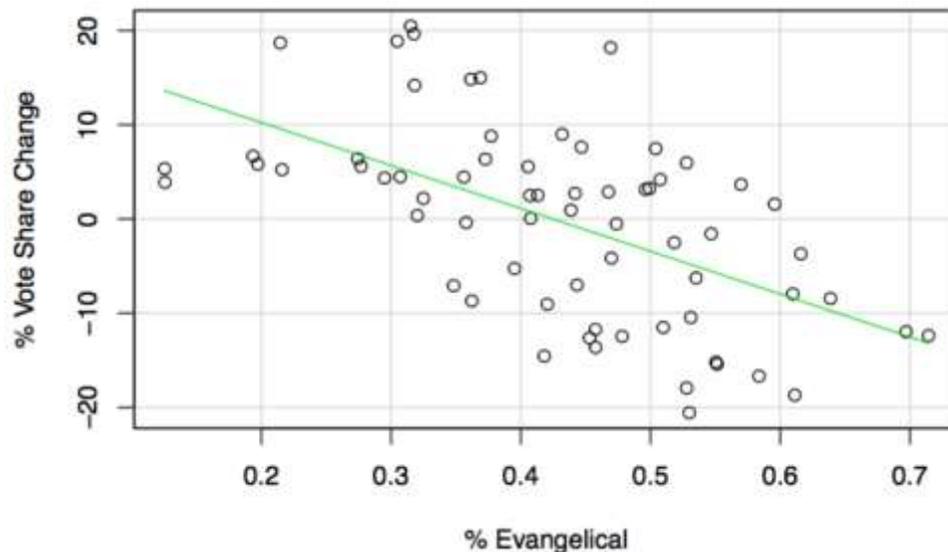|	Moore vs. Baseline Vote
Evangelical	-45.501***
	(8.139)
Constant	19.320***
	(3.649)
Observations	67
R^2	0.325
Adjusted R^2	0.314
Residual Std. Error	8.503 (df = 65)
F Statistic	31.254*** (df = 1; 65)
Note:	p<0.1*; p<0.05**; p<0.01***

Table 3: Roy Moore's Place in History

Figure 3: Roy Moore's Place in History

Lastly, we compare Moore's performance to past elections at the state-wide level. For this model, we averaged the last four gubernatorial elections to create a baseline vote.[2] We then subtracted the baseline vote from the vote share for Moore. A positive result indicates counties where Roy Moore outperformed the average; a negative result occurs where Moore underperformed. We only consider percent evangelical in this model in an attempt to nail down

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[2] We decided to use gubernatorial elections since they occur in a presidential off year. The last senate race that happened in a midterm election was for Jeff Sessions in 2014 and he ran unopposed. This allows us to compare across time without having to account for the coattail effect of presidential elections.

the role of religion in this election. The results in Table 3 and Figure 3 are astounding and indicate that there is a significant, substantive relationship between religion and Roy Moore's performance when compared to the Republican baseline, showing that Moore performed worse than average in counties with a high evangelical population.

Discussion

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, the 2017 United States Senate special election in Alabama reminds us of two key elements of southern politics: the critical role of evangelical voters in the Bible Belt to the ongoing electoral success of GOP candidates and the enduring power of African Americans in the Black Belt to deliver electoral victories for Democrats. On the first item, it has been a challenging time for evangelical voters in the 2016 presidential election as well as the 2017 special election in Alabama. For the second element, President Trump may unintentionally be mobilizing African Americans in the Black Belt, but we should not ignore local factors on the ground.

With Donald Trump's three marriages, his campaign reference to "Two Corinthians," and the revelations from the *Access Hollywood* tape, there was no shortage of material to give evangelicals plenty of heartburn, but Trump ultimately won 80% of the evangelical vote with evangelicals constituting 26% of the total electorate in the 2016 general election based upon national exit polls (Sabato 2017, 17). Trump overcame these qualms to garner four out of every five evangelical votes by dutifully expressing his opposition to abortion and heralding his intention to make a conservative pick to fill the vacancy on the Supreme Court created by the death of Justice Scalia. In the case of Roy Moore, he was certainly not a Johnny-come-lately to the culture wars. He had been a Christian warrior for decades, but the parade of sexual misconduct allegations involving teenage girls was devastating in the month before the general election. While percentage evangelical in a county is a powerful predictor of the Moore vote at the bivariate level in our study, it fails to achieve statistical significance in our multivariate model with percentage African American and percentage with a college degree or higher dominating the model. Trump garnered 42% of the vote of college graduates in comparison to 52% for Clinton (Sabato 2017, 15), and Moore lagged behind Jones in those counties with a high percentage of college graduates which constitutes an ongoing challenge for some GOP candidates. The turnout models in this study are especially revealing. While percentage evangelical in a county is not a significant predictor of turnout in the 2017 election model, it has a dramatic and negative impact in the turnout change model from 2016-2017. When comparing the Moore vote to GOP performance in the last four gubernatorial elections, percentage evangelical is a powerful negative predictor of Moore's place in history.

The results of this study make clear the powerful impact of the Black Belt in predicting the Moore vote as well as a driver of 2017 turnout and turnout change from 2016-2017. Much media attention was given to President Trump's comments about counterprotesters in Charlottesville roughly three months before the special election, and the President has a penchant for describing African American neighborhoods in highly negative and even apocalyptic terms. In the fall of 2017 he called for NFL players to be "fired" who do not stand for the National Anthem. While we may debate how much the first year of the Trump presidency has mobilized African Americans to vote in elections like the one in Alabama, we should not discount the old-

fashioned work of a ground game to mobilize African American voters in the Black Belt as conducted by the Jones campaign and the Alabama Democratic Party.

In his analysis of politics in Alabama, Cotter (2014, 84) notes that The Yellowhammer State has moved "from a competitive to a clearly one-party Republican state." Cotter (2014, 85) also observes that Democrats remain strong in the Black Belt and traditional urban areas which can aid the party in becoming more competitive statewide. The victory by Doug Jones in becoming the first Democrat in a quarter of a century to represent Alabama in the United States Senate speaks to the ability of Democrats to win statewide races, but Alabama of course remains a very red state. With more than 1.3 million votes cast in the special election, Roy Moore only lost by a little less than 22,000 votes despite a parade of sexual misconduct allegations in the month before the election. In fact, the number of write-in votes was essentially equivalent to Moore's margin of defeat. If Luther Strange had been the GOP candidate, rather than Roy Moore, it might well have been a Republican victory with the implications for future elections quickly fading away akin to the results of the special election in Georgia's sixth congressional district earlier in the year between Karen Handel and John Ossoff.

There is a tendency of partisans to overinterpret (Democrats in this case) or underinterpret (Republicans in this case) special elections like the one analyzed in this study. Democrats will likely gain seats in United States House elections in the 2018 midterms, although the terrain for Democrats is more challenging in Senate elections. The popularity of the President, strength of the economy, and the emergence of challengers in districts (many of whom are female candidates) that have previously been uncontested, along with other factors, will determine if 2018 is a wave election. Green et al. (2014, 309) argue "a resilient religio-electoral order puts high-commitment evangelicals as unquestioned leaders of the Republican coalition, opposed by black Protestants at the core of the Democratic voter alliance." The outcome of the 2017 United States special election in Alabama most clearly confirms that observation as we move forward.
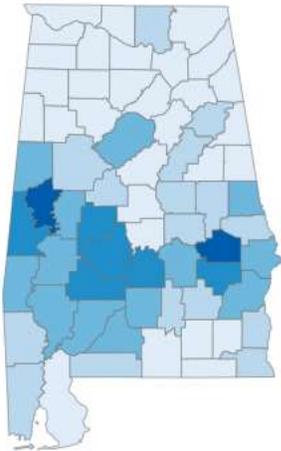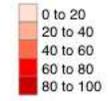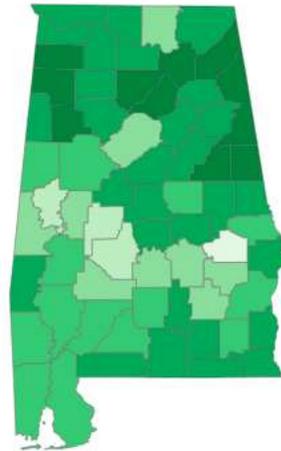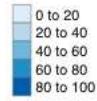
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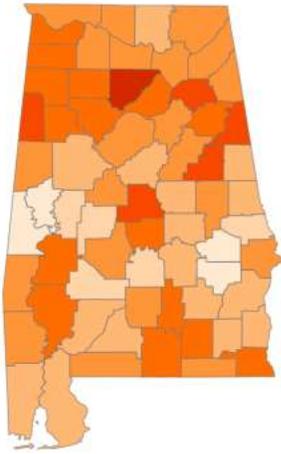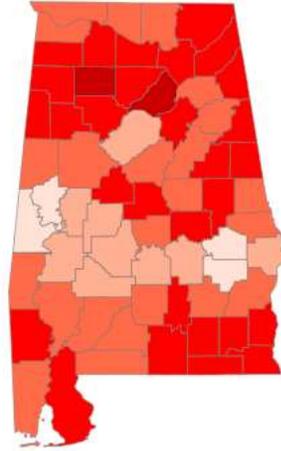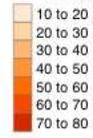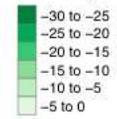
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