

The Bible Belt



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Source:

<http://www.dangeroustalk.net/images/billboard/bb-christian17.jpg>

Today we will try to answer three questions.

What is the Bible Belt?

How did the Bible Belt come about?

Where is the Bible Belt?



Source: strangecosmos.com.
<http://www.strangecosmos.com/images/content/135688.jpg>

The Bible Belt is a vernacular region.

A vernacular region is one that is, 'perceived to exist by their inhabitants and other members of the population at large.' and 'the composites of the mental maps of the population.'

The term was coined by the journalist and writer H. L. Mencken in 1924. He defined it as, "Those portions of the country in which the literal accuracy of the Bible is credited and clergymen who preach it have public confidence."

He did not mean it as a complement.



Source: Helian Unbound.
<http://helian.net/blog/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/mencken.jpg>

The region has mostly been defined by outsiders who have negative perceptions of it.

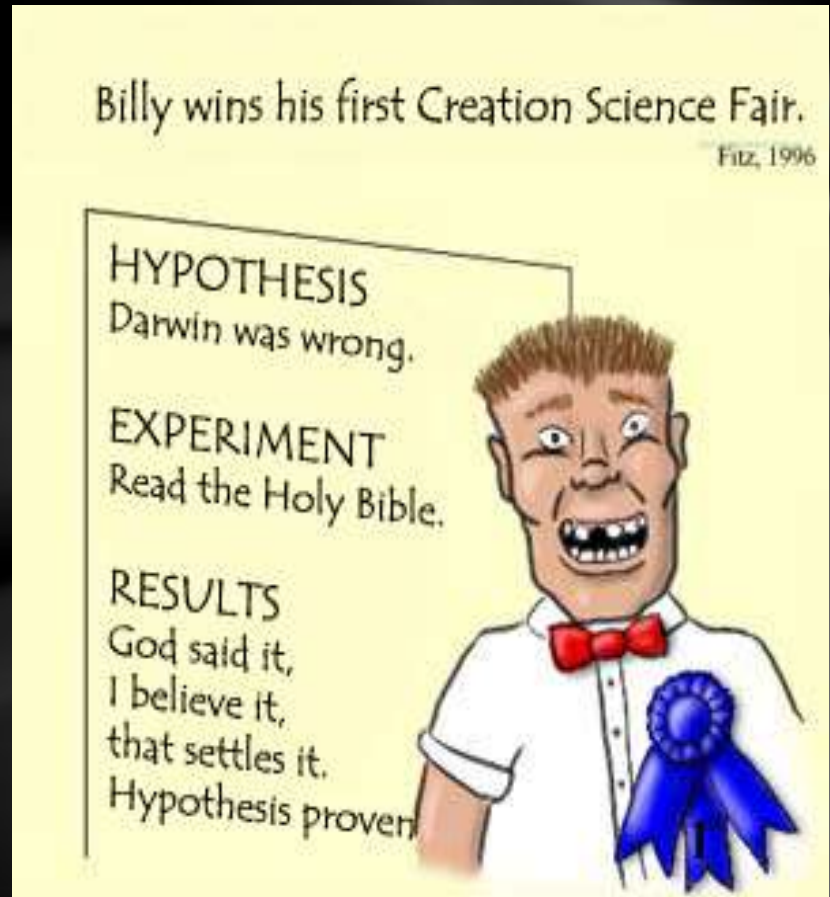
Mencken described it thus:

"In all those parts of the Republic where Beelzebub is still as real as Babe Ruth or Dr. Coolidge, and men drink raw fusel oil hot from the still - for example, in the rural sections of the Middle West and everywhere in the South save a few walled towns - the evangelical sects plunge into an abyss of malignant imbecility, and declare a holy war upon every decency that civilized men cherish."

Other, less mean, definitions:

"You witness in the malls and even the people who reject you quote the Gospel back." - Derek Barber from Chicago.

"The first thing they ask after you move to a new town is, 'What church are you going to?'
" - Vern Streeter from Montana.



Source: teachnotpreach.com.
<http://teachnotpreach.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/image-for-blog-science-fair1.jpg>

The term has been applied to other regions as well.

Other countries have their own Bible belts.

British Columbia and Alberta are often described as Canada's Bible Belt.

Far northeastern India, Jutland in Denmark and parts of Finland also have gained this designation.

One of the most prominent Bible belts outside of the U. S. is in the Netherlands, in a region where the Dutch Reformed Church is very strong.



Source: Radio Netherlands Worldwide.
<http://sites.rnw.nl/images/Biblebelt-religion-netherlands.jpg>

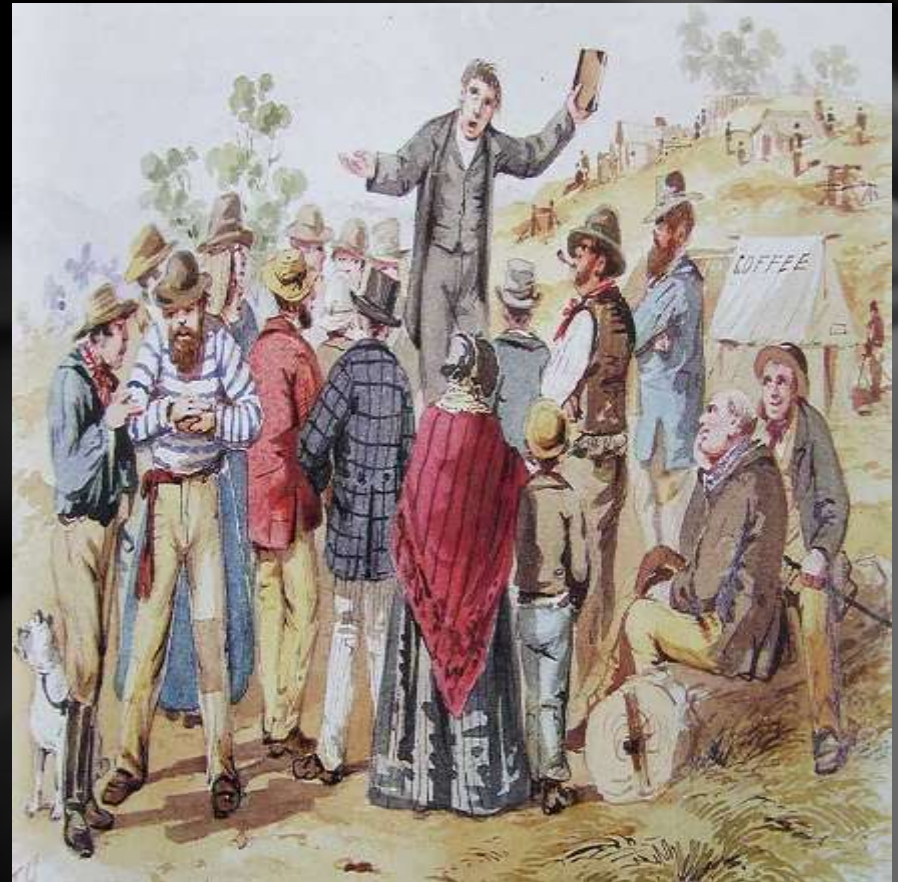
The Bible Belt has its roots in the Evangelical movement that began at America's founding.

Evangelical Christianity was an emotional, non-intellectual religion preached and practiced by frontier people.

It found expression at the camp meetings that became popular in the 1820's.

It was also a reaction to the perceived irreligion and atheism of the Eastern cities.

After Tom Paine published a book called *The Age of Reason*, he was attacked for being anti-Christian. It was said that the three great enemies of Christ were "The World, the Devil and Tom Paine."



Source: American History Now.
http://4.bp.blogspot.com/-pKfpYQhLI8k/UBRCCJt8NYI/AAAAAAAAABhA/WvdQN94aSbQ/s1600/gill_1852-3_camp-meeting.jpg

It was a rough and ready region from the start.

A story is told about a heathenish Appalachian blacksmith who was in the habit of whipping all Methodist preachers who came through his pass until, one day, an agile and muscular preacher 'beat the Hell' out of him and led him to Christ.

On the frontier, local self-government allowed these early settlers to define the social and political culture.

Conservative Protestantism became the dominate force in defining and sustaining Southern culture.



Source: godwordsecret.com. http://godwordsecret.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/jesus-christ-vs-satan-www.gothicwallz.com_.jpg

The Bible Belt is not exclusively Southern, however.

Menken: "You can heave an egg out of a train window and hit a Fundamentalist anywhere in the United States."

Donald Matthews calls strips of the Mid-West, "The suspenders of the Bible Belt." He also says that outside of the Northeast and Inter-Mountain West, the whole country is the Bible Belt.

Many places claim to be the 'buckle' of the Bible Belt, including Tennessee, Arkansas and Oklahoma.



Source: renrutkram.com.

<http://renrutkram.files.wordpress.com/2010/11/bible-belt.jpg?w=300&h=213>

In the latter part of the 20th Century, Evangelicism moved to the suburbs and began to take on a political character.

After WWII, many Evangelicals moved to the new suburbs of the South and Sun Belt and brought their rural values with them.

The legalization of abortion galvanized many of these people to political action. In 1973 opposition to abortion was bipartisan, but by the 1990's ideological and geographic lines had been drawn, with the South and parts of the Midwest becoming the base of the Republican party.



Source: National Organization of Iraqi Christians.

http://www.noaic.org/donations_bible-and-american-flag---bxp165938.jpg

So, just where the heck is the Bible Belt?

To try and quantify the location of the Bible Belt, I designed the State Bible Belt Location Index (SBBLI). It ranks all fifty states based on their score in five categories:

- Weekly church attendance.
- Percentage of population that is Evangelical Christian.
- Percentage of population that disbelieves in evolution.
- Restrictions on abortion rights.
- Unfriendliness to gay rights.

The higher the score, the more likely the state is to be in the Bible Belt. After ranking the states, I entered them into ArcMap.

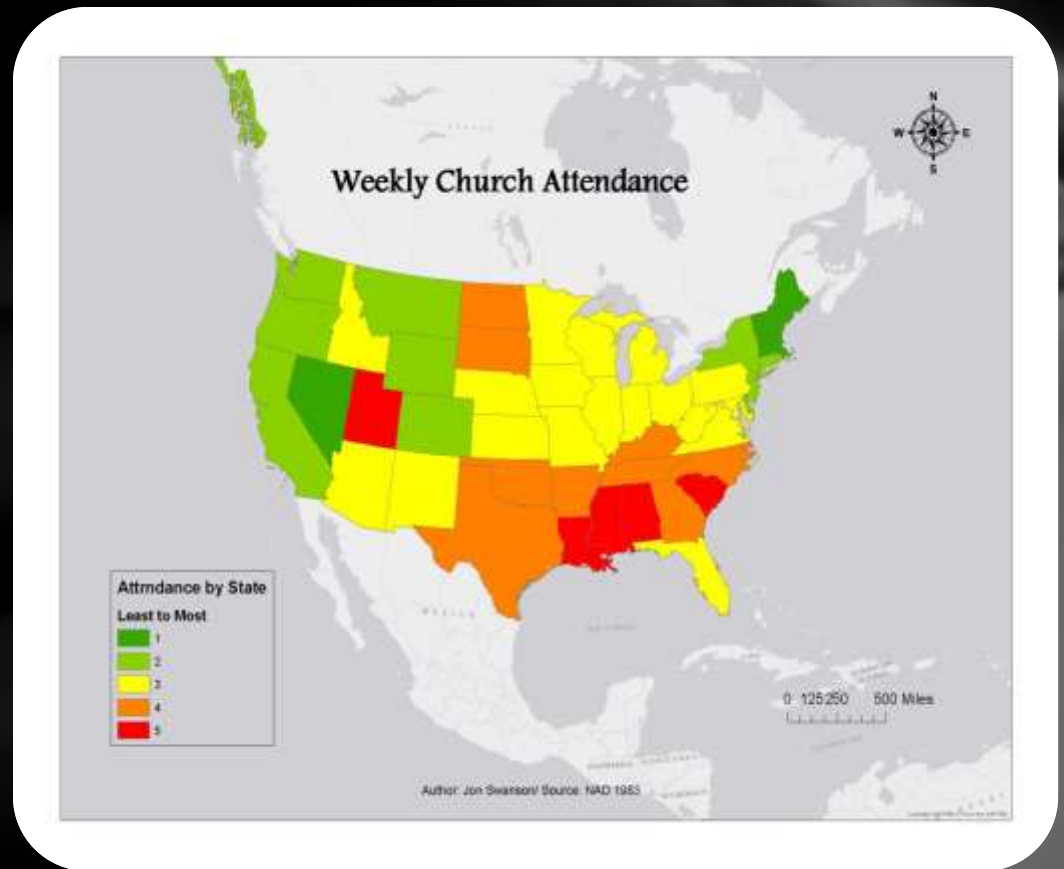


Source: webmechanix.
<http://www.seobywebmechanix.com/wp-content/uploads/google-map-maker-300x242.jpeg>

Weekly church attendance.

Using information from the Gallup Poll, I gave each state a score between 1 and 5 based on the percentage of its population that attends church every week. The higher the percentage, the higher the score. 42% of Americans overall go to church every week. Mississippi was the highest at 63%, Vermont the lowest at 23%.

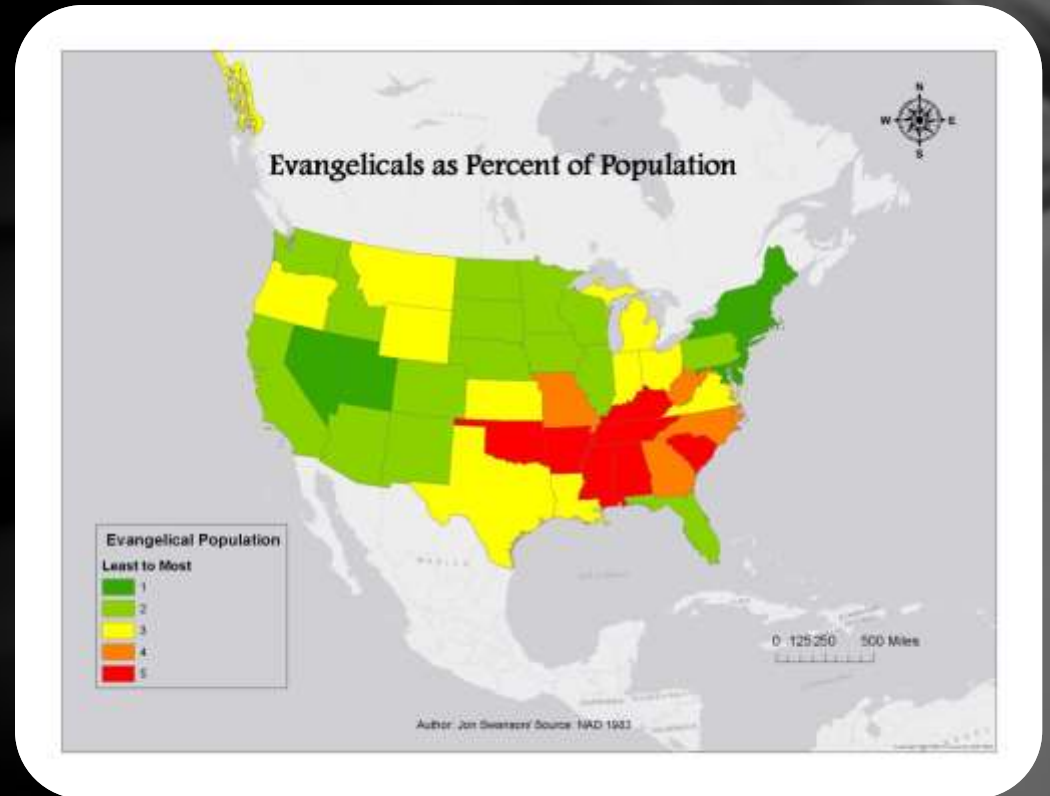
- Five states: 23%-30% = 1
- Thirteen states: 31%-38% = 2
- Eighteen states: 39%-46% = 3
- Nine states: 47%-54% = 4
- Five states: 55%-63% = 5



Evangelical Christians as a percentage of state population.

With numbers from the Pew Research Center, I again scored each state based on the percentage of its population that is Evangelical. The percentage does not include historically Black churches, which may also be Evangelical. Highest are Arkansas and Oklahoma at 53%; lowest is Utah at 7%. Nationally, 26% of Americans are Evangelical.

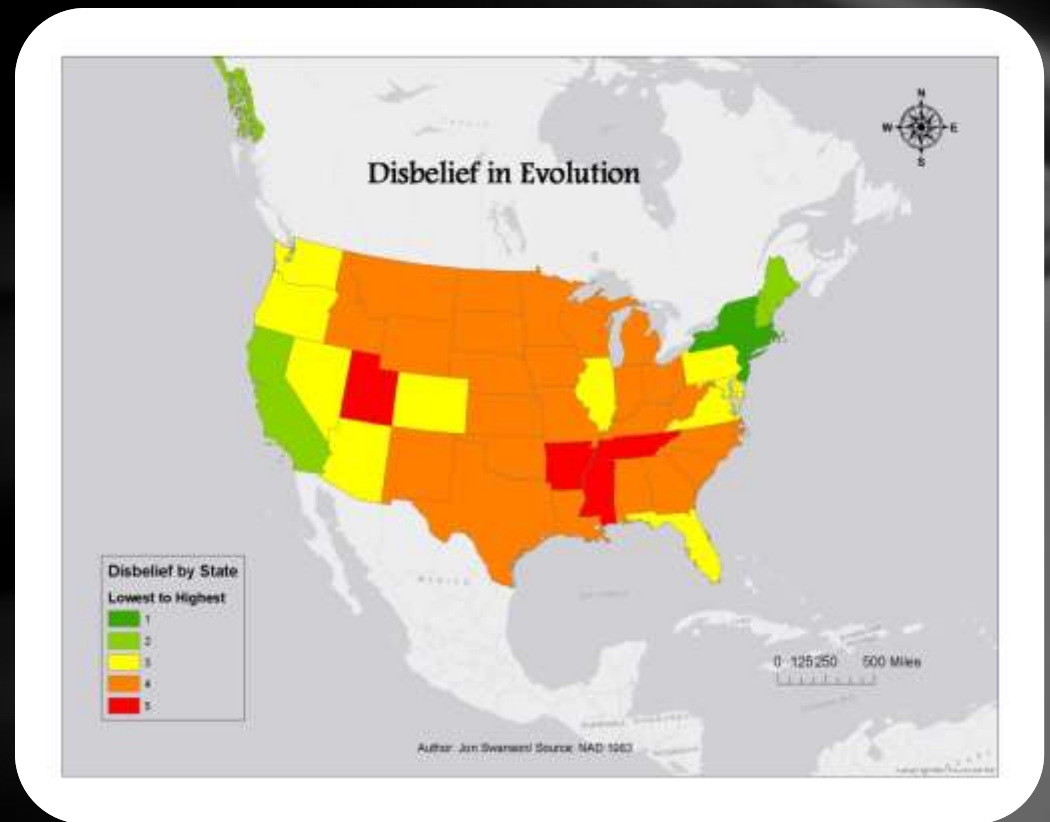
- Twelve states: 7%-16% = 1
- Fifteen states: 17%-25% = 2
- Twelve states 26%-34% = 3
- Four states: 35%-43% = 4
- Seven states 44%-53% = 5



Disbelief in Evolution.

For this, I used a graph I found on a site called Subnormal Numbers, which got its information from the Pew Center. The state where the most people disbelieve evolution is Arkansas at 66%, the least is Vermont at 26%. About 38% of Americans do not believe in evolution.

- Six states: 26%-33% = 1
- Four states: 34%-41% = 2
- Twelve states: 42%-49% = 3
- Twenty-Four states: 50%-57% = 4
- Four states: 58%-66% = 5



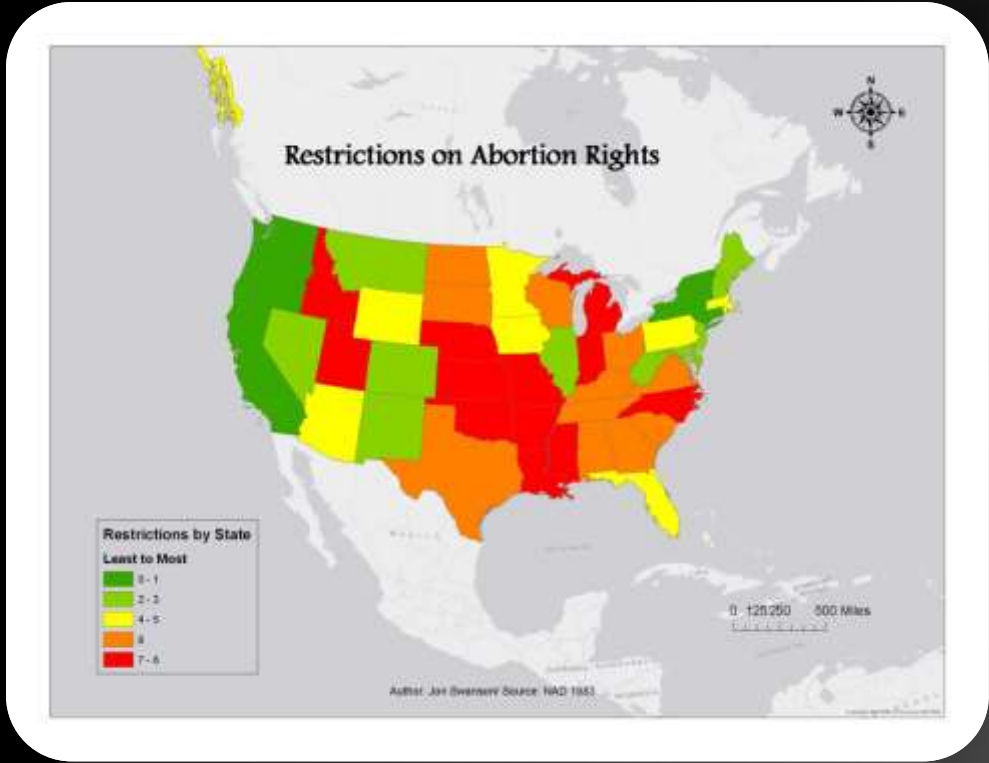
Restrictions on abortion rights.

In this category, I used a table compiled by the Guttmacher Institute that listed abortion laws in every state. I chose eight restrictions and gave each state one point for each restriction. The highest scoring states were: Arkansas, Indiana, Kansas, Louisiana and Nebraska with scores of 8; the lowest was Vermont with a zero.

- One state = 0
- Five states = 1
- Five states = 2
- Six states = 3
- Eight states = 4
- Two states = 5
- Eleven states = 6
- Seven states = 7
- Five states = 8

The restrictions I counted were:

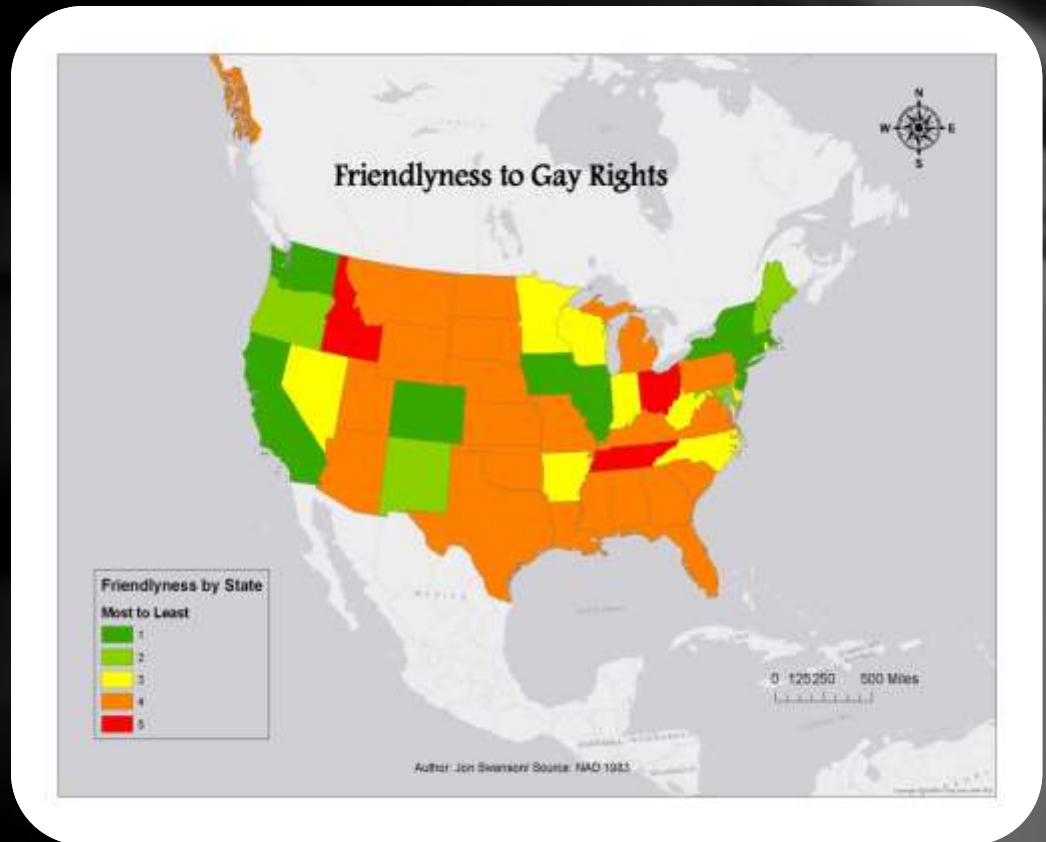
- A partial birth ban.
- Prohibited at twenty weeks or more.
- Must be performed by a physician.
- State funding is limited.
- Providers may refuse to participate.
- Mandated counseling.
- A waiting period.
- Parental consent required for minors.



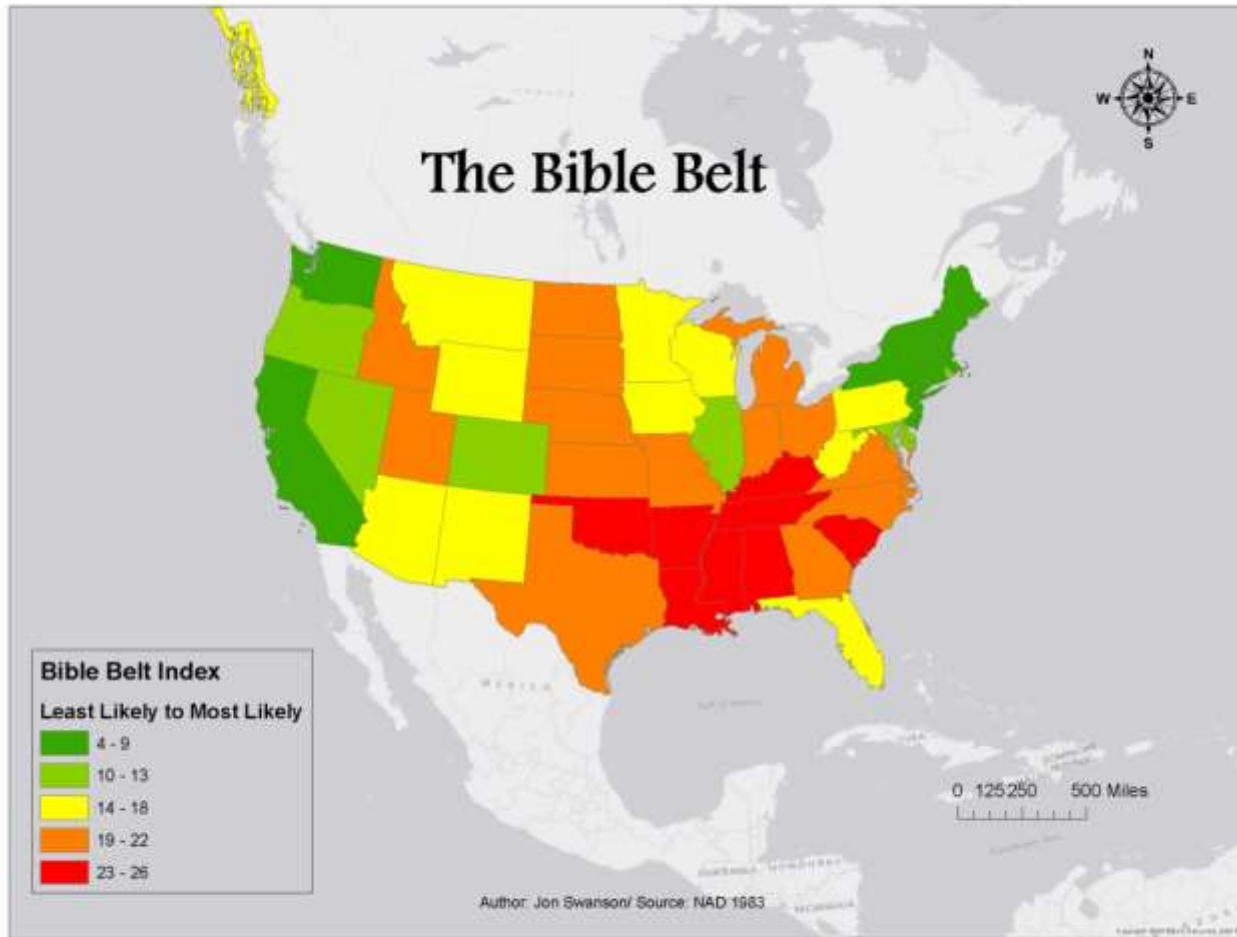
Friendliness to Gay rights.

Lastly, I used a table I found at eQualityGiving.org to score states on their unfriendliness to Gay rights. The table used various criteria to give each state a percentage friendliness score. I reversed it. The most friendly to Gay rights were Connecticut and Vermont at 100%; the most unfriendly were Idaho, Ohio and Tennessee at 17%.

- Ten states: 81%-100% = 1
- Six states: 61%-80% = 2
- Nine states: 41%-60% = 3
- Twenty-two states: 21%-40% = 4
- Three states: 0%-20% = 5



And finally, the result.



Conclusions

The results, in the above map, are fairly close to the popular conception of the Bible Belt's location. Referring to the map, the most 'Biblical' states are in the Deep South and Appalachia, although it is interesting that West Virginia falls into the middle rank, while Ohio is in the more likely category. In fact, one can see Professor Matthew's suspenders in Indiana, Ohio and Michigan on one side and Kansas, Nebraska and the Dakotas on the other. They are separated by Illinois, which means Chicago, which some people might think of as the belly of the secular beast. The Northeast and West Coast are in the least likely category while the Mormons of Utah and Idaho make those states a religious island in the libertarian sea of the West, a Book of Mormon Belt, if you will. Virginia, North Carolina and Georgia are not quite as conservative as the rest of the South and, as always, Florida stands out by being in the middle rank, with contending cultural forces in the north and south of that state.

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