

Essays on Christianity and Politics in early 21st Century America

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Prologue

Religion and politics have both been changing rapidly in early 21st century America. Religion has become more polarized, with major demographic shifts at the macro level (Burge 2021; Bullivant 2022) and increasingly disparate beliefs between religious groups (Smidt et al. 2009; Margolis 2018a). Politics, similarly, has become more polarized, with increasingly disparate views between parties and increasing distrust between Americans (Orr et al. 2023; Clifford et al. 2024; Mccarty 2019). Theories connecting the two subjects find mixed evidence as to which side drives the other—that is—whether religion drives politics or whether politics drives religion.

There are currently three main streams of thought on how religion and politics interact in the behavior of individuals. The first theory, the ethnoreligious theory of religion and politics, sees religious groups as discrete communities in which individuals are socialized. This theory, expanded upon by Kleppner and Jensen, treats religious groups as similar to ethnic groups in political behavior, such that behavior of religious individuals are “political expressions of shared values derived from the voter’s membership in, and commitment to, ethnic and religious groups” (Kleppner 1970 qtd. In Smidt, Kellstedt and Guth, 2009). Protestant groups were more likely to identify with the early Republican Party, whereas Catholics and Jews clung to the early Democrats (Smidt et al. 2009). Whereas this was seen as true in earlier decades, a newer theory from Robert Wuthnow instead posited that Americans become ideologically polarized first and then choose religious spaces based on existing conservatism or liberalism, in a process called restructuring (Wuthnow 1988). This theory seeks to capture the nature of religious changes in American society as well

as explain how individuals arrive at their present course of action. This is the alternative explanation for some religious groups being politically homogeneous—that social values of conservatism versus liberalism cause people to sort into both political and religious categories. A newer approach from scholars like Layman, Guth, Green, Kellstedt, and Smidt assume that both structures exist in American religion and politics, but that the restructuring model primarily pertains to the largest traditions, such as Evangelicals, Mainline Protestants, and Catholics whereas the ethnoreligious model explains the behavior of small traditions, such as Black protestant behave more as the ethnoreligious model suggests (Smidt, Kellstedt, and Guth, 2009).

Much support has been found suggesting that the restructuring hypothesis is correct, such as Margolis' major study in 2018. Examining panel data and conducting experiments, she finds that politics has explanatory power in how people engage with religion. Specifically, she finds that Democrats when primed with religious messaging are likely to lower the extent to which they use a religious perspective to evaluate a prompt (Margolis 2018a). She also finds that across a lifetime, people enter a state of religious flux in early adulthood, during which Democrats tend to leave religion and Republicans tend to return to religion. Earlier work by Putnam, Campbell, and Garrett (2010) also finds evidence of increasing polarization on the basis of religion between conservative Christians and liberal secularists. Work by Ryan Burge (2021) finds that the growing irreligious population is highly tied up with liberalism and other qualitative work by Bullivant (2022) identifies opposition to conservatism and apathy as major drivers of individual's decision making to leave religion.

This thesis adds to (and complicates) the religion and politics literature by focusing

more closely on relationships between different levels of religion and different types of politics. My first essay is on the mechanism through which religious voting happens. Candidates often perform Christian practices, such as praying or going to church. I find that Christian voters, however, care more about whether the policy platforms align with their own religious beliefs than what the candidates themselves do or how they portray themselves. This is evidentiary of particular points of view outweighing explicit religious practice among religious individuals. My second essay is on changes in church doctrine and public opinion. I find that in cases of both undemocratic and democratic denominations, when a high-level policy change in doctrine happens, the laypeople of those denominations are more in favor of that policy after the policy change compared to before. This demonstrates that in some cases, top-down changes in public opinion from religious organizations can lead individuals to change political viewpoints. My third essay is on using religious messages to change people's minds on a public opinion issue. I field a survey experiment in which I used a religious message to support the expansion of SNAP (food stamps) benefits. I find that Republican Christians who read a religious message about SNAP are more likely to be supportive of the policy. This demonstrates that religious attitudes can be used to influence people's policy preferences. Together, these essays provide evidence that religious attitudes drive political views.

1 Policy or Practice?

A lot of candidates focus on portraying themselves as pious Christians in order to win over voters (Chapp 2012). Theoretical explanations for religious voting suggest that voters may vote for co-religionists out of loyalty to a people group, that religious voters care

about advancing policy that supports their interests, or that voters vote in favor of people based on cultural ties (Wald 1983). The election of Donald Trump with support from conservative Christians demonstrates that a candidate does not need to be a particularly upstanding Christian in order to win Christian voters. I interview six conservative Christian voters around the 2024 election to elucidate why they chose to support or oppose Republicans or Donald Trump. Though it is possible that many Christian voters simply saw Trump through rose colored glasses and ignored his past improprieties, my interviews demonstrate that most Christian voters are well aware of his past history of sin and his current moral failings. I find that Christian voters vote for him anyways because they believe that he will enact policies that better align with the will of God. I find that they also evaluate very negatively the policies of Democrats, particularly those they believe as promoting gross violations of basic Christian moral principles. They cite abortion as the primary reason why they voted for Donald Trump, or more saliently, why they voted against Democrats. Even though Democrats may claim to be Christian, outwardly practice Christian rituals, and claim to support particular facets of Christian belief, such as caring for the needy and helping the poor, they are evaluated very negatively. Positive economic policies are less salient than violations of moral doctrine, and as such, many voters who may otherwise support parts of the Democrats' partisan platform still choose to vote Republican out of a sense of obligation to uphold basic moral values that they consider to be more immediately salient. Prevention of moral harm is more salient than creation of moral good.

A study of British voters proposes four avenues through which religion affects party identification (Wald 1983). The first avenue, Religion as an Interest Group, posits that organized religious institutions "enter politics in order to further or oppose policies which

might affect their standing as corporate bodies or masses of individuals” (109) and work with particular parties, pre-existing or their own, to advance policy interests. The second avenue, Religion as Subculture, sees religious attachment to particular parties as a reflection of the “habits and values” of the religious community, such that the cultural aspect of this community leaves one with an attachment to this community that constrains political party choice (111), similar to the ethnoreligious model of Kellstedt or relevant models in racial politics. The third avenue, Religion as Belief System, sees religion as a worldview that imparts values and mentalities that then align one with a particular party, an example raised being the Protestant Work Ethic. The fourth avenue, Religion as Surrogate, sees religion only as a reflection of a different social conflict, such that religious institutions are simply operatives for deeper problems of isolated groups (Wald 1983). These different frameworks may apply to different cases or work in tandem. Here I am debating the possibility that religion is acting as a subculture, in which people like to vote for co-religionists, or that religion is an interest group such that people vote in favor of policies ordered by religion. There is outstanding evidence that people do both of these things.

Johnston (1985) argues that a family aspect of socialization being the cause of religious voting is overstated. Using the example of Catholic voting in Canada, he demonstrates that other factors may better explain cohesive religious voting. Rather than socialization or family pressure, he argues that another important piece is voting in favor of policy positions that benefit a religious group, for example, the Liberal party’s support for expansion of the Catholic school system in Canada. He also argues that a religious group’s relative isolation and social cohesion as well as that group’s social contexts may also help explain a group’s cohesion to a political party. Thus, the clearer incentive here seems to be a policy outcome

though there also remain elements of community based politics.

A study on Christian voters in Central and Eastern Europe finds that nationalist thinking pre-empts traditional religious positions in the case of redistributive politics (Savage 2020). Because (for historical reasons related to rebuilding in the post-war era) the nation-state is associated with the strong welfare state in Central and Eastern Europe, conservative Christian Nationalist parties are able to “credibly bundle together religion with a redistributive economic policy platform” such that religious individuals are more likely to support redistribution than secular individuals, even though the opposite is true in Western European countries in which secular Social-Democratic parties tend to support redistribution (Savage 2020). This demonstrates that broader social and historical context change the relationship between religious values and policy positions.

However, support for candidates from co-religionists remains clear, though the American pantheon of what a co-religionist is has been widening. Christian voters still evaluate non-Christian (specifically Atheist and Muslim) candidates poorly on both character traits and issue competency. Muslim candidates specifically are evaluated poorly by both low and high religiosity Christians, though effects related to evaluating non-Christian candidates poorly are stronger for Christian voters with high religiosity (Madrid et al. 2022). Voters’ perceptions of candidates’ ideology is affected by the candidate’s religious affiliation (Jacobsmeier 2013). Voters use stereotypes to evaluate candidates for office based on those candidates’ religious affiliations (Jacobsmeier 2013).

Christian voters care what a candidate brings up during a campaign as well. For example, in the 2008 Republican Presidential primary, Mike Huckabee portrayed himself as the more heavily Christian candidate by explicitly mentioning God and his faith at every

turn and constantly talking about Christian-centered moral policies against abortion and gay marriage (Bradberry 2016). Consequently, voters who were more Christian and who attended religious services more often were more likely to vote for Huckabee (Bradberry 2016). This is an example in which a Christian candidate brought up both their own faith and Christian moral policy in the same breath, which makes it difficult to figure out if one or both appeals were important in winning the Christian vote.

Other studies of affective partisan polarization find that policies are usually more salient or important than group identity or socialization. For example, Orr, Fowler, and Huber (2023) find that policy congruence is more important than identity or loyalty when partisan Americans evaluate political parties, and that policy congruence is more important than identity when the two come into conflict. Similarly, Clifford, Simas, and Suh (2024) find that attitudes towards groups are largely influenced by the policy views of those groups.

1.1 Theory

Given that candidates often make a meal out of demonstrating Christian practice, it is possible that support for co-religionists is based on some sense of community with the candidate and one's desire to support fellow believers. However, it is also clear that religious voters care a lot about what the policy of a country is such that religion acts as an interest group which corrals preferences based on religious teaching that can be applied to public policy. Thus, it could be the case that when one sees a particular candidate talking about God, quoting the Bible, praying, or going church, these actions signal to a Christian that they are of the same cultural group and that therefore the voter ought to support a fellow member of their people-group. On the other hand, support for Christian candidates could be based

on high value religiously-charged issues such that a Christian voter votes for a candidate not because that person does things or out of a sense of commonality, but rather because they wish to see moral policies enacted such as to affect greater adherence to God's will in society, examples being abortion or gay marriage/transgender/LGBT policy. It is therefore important to elucidate whether a person who votes religiously does so based on the characteristics of the candidate or party, or the policies which that party represents. The 2024 United States Presidential Election (2024 election) provides a strong way to illuminate the relationship between religious beliefs and vote choice funneled through candidate religion, religious policy, or both. In the 2024 election, many Christians, especially the highest religiosity ones, preferred Donald Trump as their presidential candidate (Smith 2024). This is remarkable given how clearly un-Christian Trump's background is, as a person who has undergone multiple divorces (Brenner 1990), who has slept with prostitutes (Bubalo and King 2023), and who has bragged about sexually assaulting women (Nelson 2017). Given how antithetical his life has been to Christian values, it raises the question as to why many Christians, especially the most religious ones, would support him. Among the possibilities are that Christian voters simply did not care about the character of Trump himself because they believed that he would help implement Christian-aligned policies. Also possible is that these voters are dissociated from the actions of Donald Trump and still think of him as an upright Christian (citation).

Hypothesis: Christian voters who vote religiously do so based on a candidate's policy.

Rival Hypothesis: Christian voters who vote religious do so based on a candidate's actions and public practice.

Of course, it is possible that both hypotheses are true to some extent. However, because

Trump provides such a stark divide between implementation of Christian policy and public Christian practice, his support among conservative Christians is evidentiary of policy rather than practice being an important piece of the relationship between Christian belief and voting behavior.

1.2 Data and Methods

Because the questions are highly affective, I test these hypotheses qualitatively by interviewing 6 conservative Christian voters between August 2024 and August 2025. Christian interviewees who have supported or not supported Trump explain why they did so. These rich interviews help clarify what a person cares about when choosing a candidate and in what ways religion shows up in politics for themselves, and for their family and community. The data used to test these hypotheses is a re-analysis of interviews conducted for two other projects. The interview guides for both projects included optional questions related to evaluation of candidates' religiosity and mandatory questions about what people look for when they vote for a particular party or candidate. These conversations included various discussions of Donald Trump and the issue agendas of both parties. Of the 19 interviews from both projects, I selected cases in which I asked the optional questions and in which the interviewees are Christian, conservative-leaning, and vote. Six interviews fit these criteria. The first interview, comes from a project based at Texas Christian University in June 2024. The remainder of the interviews come from a project based at the University of Texas at Austin in the summer of 2025, funded by the UT-Austin Undergraduate Research Fellowship. Of the six participants, two are women and four are men, three are White, one is Hispanic, one is Asian, and one is Black, four are Baptist, one is

Pentecostal, and one is non-Denominational. Sampling for both studies are convenience sampled from local religious congregations and from my friends' social networks and are not representative. However, I have tried to find interviewees of sufficient diversity such that multiple perspectives across race, gender, and social context can be represented in rich data. These interviews are semi-structured, one hour long, and conducted either in-person or over zoom.

Descriptive Attributes of Interview Participants

Name	Race	Age	Gender	Denom.	Partisanship of Surrounding Area	Urbanity	2024 Vote
Mateo	Hispanic	25	Male	Baptist	Democratic	Suburb	None
Nicholas	Asian	20	Male	Non-Denom.	Democratic	Urban	None
Howard	White	40	Male	Baptist	Republican	Rural	Trump
Jonathan	White	35	Male	Baptist	Republican	Rural	Trump
Ruby	Black	40	Female	Pentecostal	Democratic	Urban	Trump
Charlotte	White	40	Female	Baptist	Republican	Rural	Trump

1.3 Results and Discussion

Mateo is a young Hispanic Baptist man living in a predominantly Democratic area. He goes to a predominantly immigrant and predominantly Republican Reformed Baptist Church in a suburb. He works as a schoolteacher and is single. He votes Republican, but declined to vote for Trump in the 2024 election. He and his family all regularly vote Republican. As Mateo says: “My entire adult household, that were citizens all voted Republican. And that is my mother, father, grandfather, grandmother, I think she voted as well as my aunt. A lot of people actually lived in this house. They voted Republican.” He describes the major political issues of theirs to be welfare system reform and border security. “[My family] believe[s] that welfare should have strict work requirements. They believe in a welfare state, a lot more than other Republicans do, to my knowledge. But then they also believe in border security. They have a sense that the immigrants coming in today have it easy and that they aren’t as committed to working hard or to loving this country as they were when they immigrated here, whether legally or illegally.” He also believes that abortion is a very important issue to him and to his family, which is, in his view, one of the moral failings of the Democratic Party. “They support abortion as a human right. They view it as an empowering and liberating thing. As a whole, the people who get attention in the Democratic Party are those who say that abortion is liberating, empowering, that it is the path to success for women who have been deprived of other kinds of things, like sex education. I really said a terrible moral failing.” He considers religion to be a very important part of his political decision-making: “Religion should guide our political thinking and our political action, because what is **true** is **true**, regardless of people’s opinions on it. I won’t vote for a candidate who supports abortion, supports teaching children different ideas about gender,

and also forwards these ideas in schooling and whatnot.” It is evident that for Mateo, moral negatives are more salient than moral positives. He clearly believes that the Democratic Party fails on the fundamentals, and sees the Republican party as the only option because of it.

Despite being a conservative Republican, he refused to vote for Trump in the 2016 or 2020 elections. This interview was taken prior to election day in 2024. “I did not vote for him in the last election; I voted for neither candidate. I voted down the ballot for every Republican except for Donald Trump. I don’t know why I’m warming up to him slightly. I still believe in the policies of the Republican Party being better as a direction. So not sure if I’ll vote for him, but if I were to vote for a candidate, it would be him.” Though he supports Republican policy, he clearly believes that Trump is a morally poor person who is not truly Christian. “I believe he’s using religion politically—pragmatically. I believe that Donald Trump believes in God and Jesus Christ. I don’t believe he has a sincere commitment to the Christian faith or to any specific tradition or to locally gathering every Sunday in some type of capacity. I do believe that [his religion] changed when he became a candidate. Donald Trump is not a Christian president, but he is aligned with Christian interests in very important respects.” He is certain that Donald Trump is not serious about his Christian faith and that Trump is simply using Christian messaging as a means to an end. He also did not personally like Trump’s rhetoric either. “I don’t like his rhetoric. I don’t like his attitude towards other people. I don’t like how he denigrates his opponent or other people, and it’s partly why I didn’t vote for him. But in terms of his policies, they’re still a little more aligned.” Here we see that even though Mateo is not a fan of Trump and did not like many of the things that he did, he still chooses the Republican party because he

views the policies of the Republican party as more aligned with his values. In the case of Mateo, his personal dislike of Trump was enough to ensure that Trump would not receive his vote. However, we still see that the policy preferences are more important to him than anything else here.

Nicholas is a young Asian non-denominational man living in a predominantly Democratic area. He goes to an ethnic minority church, but grew up Catholic. He works in IT, and he is engaged and wants to have children soon. He describes himself as having been conservative earlier in his life but having been disaffected by the rise of the MAGA movement. “So I would say in 2008, I would probably say I’m conservative, or when Barack Obama was president. I think with Donald Trump, I think he’s shifted the right to the right. I think the MAGA movement has gone kind of wild, to be honest. For example, I can’t empathize with the Epstein files. I can’t empathize with MAGA, how initially they didn’t want to disclose the Epstein files, but then now they’re saying like, it’s no big deal, because they’re supporting Trump. I think that the whole movement is kind of toxic and doesn’t make sense. And it’s basically following a cult.” He is not a fan of Donald Trump’s behavior: “With our current president, I don’t think he really shows Christ-like behavior. I disagree with him frequently on many issues and on his character.” Similar to Mateo, he does not believe that Trump is truly Christian and that his purported Christian faith is largely performative. “I think he is being a bad witness, being a bad quote-unquote Christian because I think he’s turning people away from the heart of Christianity.” Nicholas is, however, willing to bring Christian faith back into politics. “[Interviewer:] What do you think about when Trump goes, or when Trump’s campaign goes on the news with these pastors saying we’re going to take back America for God, for Jesus. [Nicholas:] If I

thought Trump was actually Christian, I would agree with it, but I don't think he is." His friends from church are mostly Republican Trump supporters, and they often disagree on various subjects, especially the border. "I say that we should, like the Bible says, treat the foreigner like yourself, like your own. So, for me, I think we should not be as strict on the border." However, he and all his friends consider abortion to be an important issue. "While I do understand there are many circumstances that might have a woman lean towards abortion, and planned abortion, because of my religious beliefs, I do place an emphasis on that human life. That human life starts at conception, and it should be taken seriously, and it should be treasured and valued." For Nicholas, Trump's personal unlikeability was one of the reasons that he has lost faith in the party system as a whole. However, we see that his policy preferences still drive his vote. Even though he has both liberal and conservative views, he considers abortion to be a major issue and thusly chooses to call himself conservative.

Howard is a middle-aged White Baptist man living in a predominantly Republican area. He is married and works in sales. He cares about how candidates present themselves. "I don't go by if they're Baptist or anything like that. The one thing I look for is if they're sincere, you know, just some of their comments. I would want to know if they're believers, and if they believe, I would want to know their testimony and stuff. There's been some really good candidates that are really good Christians, but they didn't do so well in the debates, and they just kind of fell out." He considers abortion and Israel to be major factors in who he supports. Regarding abortion, "I don't believe in abortion. I try to listen and understand the arguments. I hear them, and I try to understand it. But it's still something that if I'm going to vote, whoever I vote for, I look at, you know, that that's one of my

decision makers. I even went to the other parties [other than Republican] just to see what they believe, and they all had [supported] abortion.” He also cares about Israel and wants to see America continue to support them: “I cringe when I hear somebody talk against Israel. They weren’t the best of God’s people, but they’re still God’s people. I kind of cringe at the idea of our leaders or somebody going against Israel.” The interview with Howard adds another piece of the puzzle. Though the previous two interviews talked about Trump’s candidacy, Howard talks about how he evaluates other candidates. He makes it clear that the denomination is less important to him, and he does like candidates who are Christians. However, he still forefronts the policies that candidates support as important. He once again chooses to only consider the Republican party not because of the religion of individual candidates but rather because he sees the Republican party as the only party that will adequately represent his policy preferences.

Jonathan is a middle-aged White Baptist man living in a predominantly Republican area; he is married, works as a trucker, and is studying to become a minister. The Southern Baptist church he attends is rural and very conservative. “The church is mostly conservative, especially in the Baptist realm. Most of them are pro-Trump right now, and we [he and his family], of course, voted for Trump.” Jonathan believes in a strong separation of church and state and is against Christian nationalism. “The majority of people who say they’re Christians are cultural Christians. In one breath, they say they’re Christian, but then they promote Christian nationalism or a theocracy, and they don’t even know what those terms mean. It’s kind of the opposite of what the kingdom of God is and what is in the Bible.” He believes generally that the government should not infringe on individuals’ rights, “I believe that everyone’s free. The government isn’t the ultimate authority

on ethics and morality. The government isn't God, and the government is not perfect." He does, however, believe that abortion is not an individual right and makes clear that abortion ought to be illegal, "I would say abortion's definitely a huge [issue] for me. If a candidate supports abortion, I will not vote for them because it is murder to me. I think that the argument that they're not humans is a poor argument since I don't believe any human, whether they're in a wheelchair, or they're in a coma, or they're a star athlete, has to earn their value. They're given their value by God, which is in the documents that founded this country. Abortion's horrible; I will never support a candidate who supports abortion." He doesn't care so much how a candidate carries themselves in relation to Christian practice, "I'm less concerned if the candidate is a Christian or not. Based on what the Bible says, they're vain. [referencing Matthew 6:1-6] Jesus says that the path to destruction is wide and many will go down it, and the path to life is narrow. So a lot of people claim a lot of things, and it turns out not to be true." Regarding Trump, he is skeptical towards Trump's character despite having voted for Trump. "When you claim to be a Christian, and you're running for one side, and you've given money to the other side for years, and all of a sudden you're for us, and you've never supported any of the stuff you say you support now, which Christians would support. It's like, I don't really believe you." Jonathan is clearly very skeptical towards Trump's past in the Democratic party, but he still chose to vote for Trump anyways. He rejects the notion that he is a Christian nationalist, and characterizes his vote as related to his personal beliefs on abortion. He makes it clear that he thinks most candidates are being vain and shallow when they claim Christian practice anyways, so he only cares about what a candidate supports. In Jonathan's case, this opposition to abortion is so strong that he is willing to overlook Donald Trump's past because Trump was the only

candidate in the presidential election who was against abortion.

Ruby is a middle-aged Black Pentecostal Christian woman living in a predominantly Democratic area. Ruby identifies as a Republican and voted for Trump three times. Ruby is not the biggest fan of Trump's rhetoric; however, she voted for him largely because she believes Trump's agenda is closer to what God would want. "I had to look at [Trump] and his platform and evaluate what he was trying to do and doing, with the Bible and what God's intention is, as opposed to looking at what he says on Twitter or his flippant mouth or his arrogance or his overall personality. His platform aligned more with my faith beliefs." Among the issues most important to her are restoring Israel, protecting the lives of unborn children, and preventing transgenderism among the youth and American moral decline generally. She believes Israel is very important to God, "Establishing their embassy in Jerusalem and looking at Israel as a nation that is strong, as is spoken about in the Bible. Donald Trump doesn't necessarily speak to it in that manner, but he shows that he is committed to being an ally to Israel." She also believes that preventing the murder of babies in the womb is important. "He is for saving babies in the womb, even at conception. I don't know that he said that, but the rights of the unborn are very important to me because, quite frankly, aborting a baby is no different than what they did in the Old Testament by passing their babies through the fire so that they could get wealth and health and all this other stuff. I call it murder." She also cares a lot about preventing homosexuality and transgenderism in society, especially in schools. "He is also very much interested in putting the Ten Commandments and Bible reading and faith-based things back into the government and into the schools. Which is very important these days, considering how off the rails the schools have gone in the last 10 to 20 years." She especially evaluated Trump's opinion on

homosexuality and transgenderism in schools in comparison to Harris's agenda. "You're either male or you're female. You're not A to Z. You're not a man and a woman. You're not, we call it binary, non-binary, all of that jibber jabber. Men marrying men and women marrying women. I'm not down for that. [Trump's] platform didn't push those issues, and the Harris campaign did." Ruby's view is similar to other interviewees insofar as she considers both candidates' platforms before their religious rhetoric. She again sees more in the Republican-Democratic dichotomy than she does in individual candidates' religious practices. She identifies some of the same problems with Trump's personality that Nicholas and Mateo did, but she chose to vote for Trump because she was far more concerned about what policies the Democrats would implement if elected. This is another example of policy superseding outward practice.

Charlotte is a middle-aged Baptist Christian woman living in a predominantly Republican area. She centers her religion in the way that she votes. "If a candidate is going to earn my vote, it's going to have to align with my faith and my beliefs and what the Bible says. If it goes against what God says in the Bible, then I can't be for that." For her, major issues that she cares about are abortion and same-sex marriage, which are more important than lower taxes or other issues. She believes these are important both because the Bible gives her guidance and because of the economic aspect of voting, "It kind of goes together because of what my dollars go to fund, and it comes back to those two issues. Especially with abortion." When she evaluates Democrats, she is highly skeptical of their religious messaging because they are supportive of issue positions that she believes are against the Christian faith. "I find [Democrats] very confusing because if they were really following the principles of what God set forth, then they wouldn't be running on things that are not

of God.” She has Democratic friends and sympathizes with their point of view, but ultimately disagrees with them because she forefronts Biblical values. “They’re running on things of tolerance and acceptance, and although we can say that it’s good, it’s not good because it’s not what God says.” She identifies this as the main reason why she would not vote for Democrats. “If the Democrats fell in line with the issues that I find my values in, then I would be that way [Democrat]. But it’s just that I align my vote and who I support with my faith and my values and what God says.” She also believes that Christian policies are more important to her than candidates’ outward Christian attributes, “As long as their platform and the things that they support match the things that I support, their faith and what they do is not as important to me, other than the fact that I’m glad that they’re that they are doing those things. [Going to church or praying] But it wouldn’t affect my vote, as long as their vote and their platform match what I value.” Charlotte is another example of abortion being more salient than other beliefs. She admits that she would be willing to support Democrats if they were not supportive of social issues that she opposes. She makes it clear that the only heuristic she can truly evaluate candidates along is whether or not they violate religious precepts in the Bible.

The evidence from interviews suggests that, for the most part, Christian voters are aware that Donald Trump is not inwardly Christian and that they are also generally aware of his personal failings. Mateo cited Trump’s brand of insulting others as a major reason he did not vote for Trump. Even Ruby, the most conservative of the respondents, herself talked about Trump’s poor behavior and having to look past it. One consideration that I did not think about in theory was how Trump’s religious policy agenda would be weighed against that of Harris. I did not consider the extent to which religious attitudes would cause

negative, rather than positive, valuation. Howard, for example, said that he tries hard to listen to candidates of other parties to make an informed decision, but that he simply could not bring himself to support any party that wants to pass legislation expanding abortion. Charlotte similarly often prefers Democrats' policy positions on substantive issues but instead evaluates the Democrats negatively because she cannot see eye-to-eye with them on abortion and gay marriage. Given that America has a two party system, all of the respondents could only evaluate the policy platforms for their adherence to Biblical proscriptions. Even though Democratic policy may be better than Republican policy on some religious issues, such as feeding the hungry or providing medical care, these supports for positive policies are outweighed by Democrats' support for policies that explicitly break what some Christians hold as deeply important commandments. Put more bluntly, 'Love thy neighbor' is less salient than 'Stop killing babies'. The salience of abortion alone is remarkable among these voters; however, from an affective or emotional perspective, if one views abortion as literal murder, then it is practically impossible for any other policy to surpass abortion in salience.

Thus, it seems that Christian voters primarily care about policy when voting religiously. They are not particularly interested in outward displays of religiosity from candidates but are instead obligated to vote against policies they see as violating God's will as interpreted by themselves or by their faith communities. The maintenance of a society in which grave sins are impermissible and in which individuals are secure in their belief that America is not constantly pissing off the all-powerful God is part of this policy-related consideration. However, I would not necessarily characterize the opinions of these people as being in favor of a theocratic state in which anything displeasing to God as understood by Christian

doctrine ought to be outlawed. I would instead characterize their belief as using their vote to support the will of God. Just as a devout Christian may go throughout many of their daily actions taking into consideration the adage 'What would Jesus do?', they consider their vote as 'Who would Jesus vote for?'. The pious act of submitting oneself to God's will includes submitting their vote to what they think God would want.

1.4 Conclusion

In sum, Christian voters do not focus on a candidate's outward practice. They instead consider the policy platforms of various candidates or parties and choose which platform they believe God would want them to vote for. In the American case, and given American Christians' stubborn adherence to the belief that abortion is equivalent to murder, this means that conservative Christians almost exclusively vote in favor of those against the expansion of abortion, regardless of how candidates may behave. Additionally, it is the prevention of widespread negative violation of moral principles that is more salient than positive support for virtuous governmental actions. Christian voters are more concerned about bad policies being widespread in a society than good policies.

Thus it seems clear that in the case of Donald Trump, Christians supported him not because of his outward presentation of Christian practice but instead because of his platform which they believe prevents widespread harm to Christian moral values. These voters care far more about what policies a candidate or party supports than about how a party or candidate presents themselves. The implication of this finding is that religious appeals to conservative Christians from Democrats who support legalization of abortion will fall on deaf ears. Regardless of how a candidate identifies, conservative Christians do not partic-

ularly care what outward presentations of Christian practice a candidate performs. They instead care about implementation of policy that aligns with their values, or more saliently, preventing policy that conflicts with their moral values. Thus, appeals to Christian belief from Democrats simply won't work for a portion of voters so long as those voters believe that Democrats' policy does not align with God's will.

2 When The Church Moves

The Christian tradition is complex because it includes people who are members of denominations and those denominations all have unique beliefs and governance structures. Some denominations (Catholic Church, Orthodox Churches, LDS) are ruled undemocratically by church elites who spend their entire lives climbing the ladder of the denomination's hierarchy. Other churches, especially those founded in America (Episcopal Church, United Methodist Church, Southern Baptist Convention), are ruled democratically by elections among church laity and through conventions by delegates elected by church communities. One example of this is mainline Protestant churches moving to allow gay marriages through convention votes (Helmore 2023; Encyclopedia Britannica 2026). Evidence from individual congregations finds a counter-intuitive way that religious doctrine affects public opinion of congregants. Church congregants largely choose what issues to talk about on their own, without the input of clergymembers (Djupe and Gilbert 2009). The laypeople of the church react negatively when clergymembers present them with views that they disagree with (Djupe and Gilbert 2009). Thus, even though at the highest level, denominational opinion on certain topics is set by power people, at the lowest level, opinions are set by laypeople and not by clergy. Given that laypeople react badly when clergymem-

bers attempt to change laypeople's beliefs, it remains an open question as to what happens when the entire denomination tries to change laypeople's beliefs. What happens when denominations change their opinion? Especially, when those opinions represent traditional doctrines based on Biblical text, such as support or opposition for gay marriage?

One possibility is that a church simply splits in half. This is especially prevalent in mainline Protestant denominations which have a history of schism; many major denominations themselves split from older churches in the 19th century ¹. Examples of such recent schisms include the schism of The Episcopal Church and the United Methodist Church. The Episcopal Church (TEC), for example, is a historically significant denomination because of its origins as a democratic alternative to the Church of England in the Anglican tradition, founded in the infancy of the United States (Encyclopedia Britannica 2026). The episcopate of the church elected an openly gay bishop in 2003, leading to a messy schism of conservative bishops starting in 2006 and the formation of a rival conservative Anglican denomination called the Anglican Church in North America (ACNA), which took with it many congregations in the American South (Encyclopedia Britannica 2026). This schism in Anglicanism is still ongoing and has spread worldwide after the appointment of Sarah Mullally as the Archbishop of Canterbury (leader of the Church of Anglican and the international Anglican Communion), leading to many congregations and national denominations forming an alternative Anglican faction (Paulsen 2025). The United Methodist Church (UMC) underwent a similar split in 2020, when conservative congregations in the global south and in the United States amicably removed themselves from the UMC over the denomination's move to allow same-sex marriage and the ordination of openly gay

¹For example, the creation of many new churches after "The Great Disappointment" and the Millerite movement (Boyer 1994)

clergymembers, forming a rival Global Methodist Church (Helmore 2023).

On the other hand, churches ruled undemocratically and with less history of schism, such as the Roman Catholic Church (Catholic) and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS) have largely been immune to these changes while giving little on LGBT issues. The Roman Catholic Church made major doctrinal changes during the papacy of Francis including the issuing of major policy documents taking official stances on environmental issues (*Laudato si'*) (Francis P.P. 2015) and the blessing of same-sex relationships (*Fiducia supplicans*) (Dicasterium pro doctrina fidei 2023). Popes Francis and Leo XIV have also taken stronger stances in support of migrants and refugees, including celebrating mass for migrants on the Italian island of Lampedusa (Stampa 2026). Catholic Bishops in the United States also issued a statement in support of immigrants (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops 2025). In comparison, the LDS makes very few changes in doctrine over time, the most major of which are Official Declaration 1 in 1890 banning polygamy and Official Declaration 2 in 1981 allowing Black people to become full members of the church (Smith 2026).²

2.1 Theory

In all of the preceding cases, changes in policy happened from the top down, largely without the input of community members. It is possible that there is some reverse causality insofar as church leaders may wish to change doctrine based on changing opinion of their congregants, but this may be unlikely given how many congregants in the Protestant churches

²Prior, Black people were not allowed to receive LDS Ordinances (sacraments) or enter the Celestial Kingdom (the highest level of heaven) because they were not allowed to join the “Priesthood”, which all males are expected to join in adolescence.

disagreed with changes so sharply that they caused schisms. In the case of the Catholic Church or LDS, it may also be the case that individuals who disagree with church doctrine or changes in it may leave individually without the creation of a new church.

These examples leave mixed results. In some cases, schisms happen frequently because members of a denomination refuse to change their minds. In other cases, where schisms are impossible, it is unclear whether people change their minds or not. Given that leaving a church with a higher amount of control, such as Catholicism or Mormonism, is such a drastic move, I don't find it likely that people in practice leave those churches. I don't think anybody was so angry at Francis for saying he supports environmental policy that they changed their religious affiliation. In the cases of a church in which schism is possible, it seems reasonable to suggest that the remaining members after the schism are those who agreed with the church elites' view on a particular opinion and that therefore the remaining people in the church will on average be more in favor of that new opinion. In cases where schism is not possible, church members may move to adopt the opinion of church elites because those denominations in which schisms are not possible are more controlling than others, or out of genuine reverence for church leaders. (Djupe's study was based on Protestant churches)

Hypothesis 1: When an undemocratic denomination changes their opinion on an issue, members of that denomination are more likely to change their opinion on that same issue than people who are not members of that denomination. Hypothesis 2: When a democratic changes their opinion on an issue, members of that denomination that remain after a schism are more likely to have the opinion of the denomination.

In both cases, the outcome is the same, the laity of the denomination after the policy

change is more supportive of the policy than it was prior.

2.2 Methods

To test the hypotheses, I find several cases of major issue opinion changes for denominational churches that happened from the top-down, meaning that those issue opinion changes were largely made by church leaders without the input of laypeople in the congregations. Then I find public opinion data from before and after this change and treat the change as a quasi-experimental treatment. I use a difference-in-differences (DiD) design to test whether the pre-treatment and post-treatment opinions on an issue are different for people of the denomination in question. This design is useful because it accounts for some of the confounding power of wider societal change. The differences-in-differences design finds the Average Treatment Effect on the Treated (ATT) accounting for changes in both the treated and untreated groups from the pre-treatment to the post-treatment wave. This design finds the unique effect of the treatment on the treatment group. I use the doubly robust difference-in-differences estimator (DRDiD) (Sant’Anna and Zhao 2020) with both panel and cross-sectional specifications. The panel specification of the ATT estimator is

$$\tau^{panel} = \mathbb{E} \left[\left(\frac{D}{p} - \frac{\frac{\pi(X)(1-D)}{1-\pi(X)}}{\mathbb{E}[\frac{\pi(X)(1-D)}{1-\pi(X)}]} \right) (\Delta Y - \mu_{0,\Delta}^{panel}(X)) \right]$$

Where τ^{panel} is the ATT, $\frac{D}{p}$ is the weight of the treated units, $\pi(X)$ is a propensity score model for the likelihood that a unit is treated and $\mu_{0,\Delta}^{panel}$ is a model for the ΔY for untreated units based on covariates X . This estimator is doubly robust because it considers both the likelihood that a unit is treated based on its covariates and the expected outcome of

untreated units adjusted by the same covariates.

The repeated cross sectional estimator for ATT is a two step process where the first estimator is

$$\tau_1^{rcs} = \mathbb{E} \left[\left(\frac{D \times 1\{T = t\}}{\mathbb{E}[D \times 1\{T = t\}]} - \frac{\frac{\pi(X)(1-D) \times 1\{T=t\}}{1-\pi(X)}}{\mathbb{E}[\frac{\pi(X)(1-D) \times 1\{T=t\}}{1-\pi(X)}]} \right) (Y - \mu_{0,Y}^{rcs}(T, X)) \right]$$

where τ_1^{rcs} is the ATT, and $\mu_{0,Y}^{rcs}(T, X)$ is the outcome model that takes into account survey wave. The second estimator builds on the first as

$$\begin{aligned} \tau_2^{rcs} = & \tau_1^{rcs} + (\mathbb{E}[\mu_{1,1}^{rcs}(X) - \mu_{0,1}^{rcs}|D = 1] - \mathbb{E}[\mu_{1,1}^{rcs}(X) - \mu_{0,1}^{rcs}|D = 1, T = 1]) - \\ & (\mathbb{E}[\mu_{1,0}^{rcs}(X) - \mu_{0,0}^{rcs}|D = 1] - \mathbb{E}[\mu_{1,0}^{rcs}(X) - \mu_{0,0}^{rcs}|D = 1, T = 1]) \end{aligned}$$

which corrects for changes in the distribution of the covariates in the outcome models between the two survey waves. I estimate the propensity score with Inverse Probability Weighting and the outcome model with weighted least squares.

2.3 Laudato si'

Laudato si' is an important book written by Pope Francis lamenting the destruction of natural habitats, recognizing the human impact of climate change, assigning moral weight to reversing such change, and committing the Catholic Church to helping the environment. It was released in 2015. To test whether Catholics changed their mind on climate change after Laudato si', I use two sources of data to measure the difference in American Catholics' support for environmental policies before and after the release of the book.

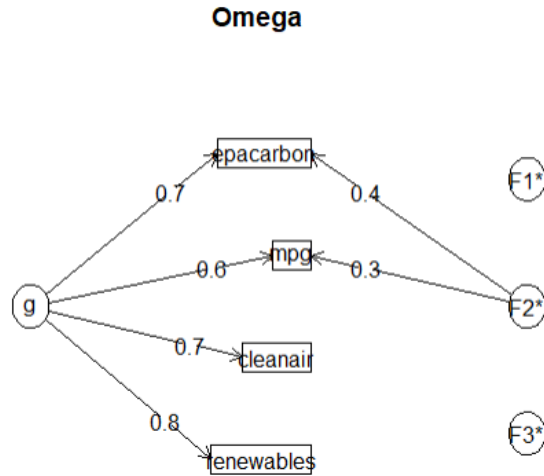
The first source I use is the Voter Study Group panel (Democracy Fund Voter Study Group 2021), which has a survey wave in 2011 and another survey wave in 2016. The dependent variable used is a likert scale question on the salience of environment policy: "How important are the following issues to you? - The environment 1) Very important 2) Somewhat important 3) Not very important 4) Unimportant". This question is scaled before input into the DRDiD model. The *D* term is Catholic and the covariates are gender, race, age, education, income, and ideology. The placebo is Protestant. Estimates are bootstrapped 999 times.

DRDiD estimates for change in opinion on Environment
Voter Study Group panel 2011 - Dec. 2016

	Catholic		Protestant	
total n = 5686	n = 1258		n = 2227	
Outcome: Salience of Environment (scaled likert)				
ATT	0.073	0.073	-0.0419	-0.0419
SE	0.023	0.024	0.021	0.020
<i>p</i>	0.002	0.002	0.043	0.034
Bootstrap?	N	Y	N	Y
Controls?	Y	Y	Y	Y

After the release of *Laudato si'*, Catholics are significantly more likely to rate the environment as an important issue to them, as can be seen by the positive coefficient (0.073***) for Catholics. The same effect is not found among Protestants. However, a negative coefficient (-0.04**) is found for Protestants, which make up a large proportion of the sample, so this finding may not be robust, as Protestants' negative change in Y variable may manifest a positive result for Catholics in comparison. Thus, I test this relationship again with cross-sectional data.

I use the 2014 and 2016 waves of the Cooperative Election Study (CES) (Kuriwaki 2024) to test for support for environmental policies after the release of *Laudato si'*. The CES waves have four relevant questions related to environmental policy, all of which are binary: "Do you support or oppose each of the following policies?: 1) Environmental Protection Agency regulating carbon emissions, 2) Raise required fuel efficiency for the average automobile from 25 mpg to 35 mpg, 3) Your state requiring the use of a minimum amount of renewable fuels (wind, solar, and hydroelectric) in the generation of electricity even if electricity prices increase a little?, 4) Environmental Protection Agency strength-



ening enforcement of the Clean Air Act even if it costs US jobs”. I combine the binary responses of these questions into a scale using McDonald’s ω .

These four variables are tested separately using the DRDiD and are also combined into an index using the g vector of McDonald’s ω .

McDonald’s ω is significant and 0.82 and Chronbach’s α is 0.79, making the index of the four variables an internally consistent score. The placebo is Baptist.

DRDiD estimates for change in opinion on environment

	Catholic	Baptist
total n = 106000	n = 22648	n = 12129
Environment Index (scaled)		
ATT	0.031	0.031 -0.0138
SE	0.013	0.0133 0.0164

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<i>p</i>	0.0175	0.0199	0.4024
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Support for Clean Air Act

ATT	0.018		-0.0115
-----	--------------	--	---------

SE	0.0074		0.0096
----	--------	--	--------

<i>p</i>	0.0158		0.2317
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Support for EPA carbon regulation

ATT	0.0128*		-0.0114
-----	---------	--	---------

SE	0.0622		0.0089
----	--------	--	--------

<i>p</i>	0.0622		0.1996
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Support for mpg restriction

ATT	0.0038		
-----	--------	--	--

SE	0.0071		
----	--------	--	--

<i>p</i>	0.5873		
----------	--------	--	--

Support for minimum renewables

ATT	0.0099		
-----	--------	--	--

SE	0.0074		
----	--------	--	--

<i>p</i>	0.1801		
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Bootstrap?	N	Y	N
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(Continued)

Controls?	Y	Y	Y
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From the CES data, Catholics are found to be significantly more likely to support various environmental policies after the release of *Laudato si'*. Catholics are more likely to score more highly on the scale after the release of *Laudato si'* than before it, though this effect size is small given that the scale has a standard deviation of 1. Catholics are also found to be more likely to support the Clean Air Act and EPA carbon regulation $^*(p=0.06)$. Other groups, such as Baptists, are not more likely to support any policy or score more highly on the scale after the release of *Laudato si'*.

2.4 *Fiducia supplicans*

The *Fiducia supplicans* (Dicasterium pro doctrina fidei 2023) is a document released by the Dicastery of the Doctrine of the Faith that allows for priests to bless same-sex couples in a non-marriage capacity. This comes after Francis' various news interviews in which he has signaled warming support for LGBT people and especially non-discrimination rights, while remaining opposed to incorporating same-sex marriage into doctrine (Winfield 2023). Other high-ranking officials, such as Cardinal Hollerich, began to support gay rights more openly (Katholische Nachrichten-Agentur 2022). This caused some division in the College of Cardinals, leading to the anonymous release of the *Demos* letter (Holman 2023), later learned to have been written by Cardinal George Pell, criticizing Francis for various actions including warming support for homosexual relationships and calling on cardinals to elect a more conservative pope in the next conclave. *Demos* means "people" and Pell also claims that Francis' increasing liberalism was making the church increasingly out of touch with a

DRDiD estimates for change in opinion on gays

Catholic

Support for gay marriage (scaled)

ATT	-0.0232	-0.0232
SE	0.0486	0.0544
<i>p</i>	0.6328	0.67

Feeling thermometer gays and lesbians (scaled)

ATT	-0.0593	-0.0593
SE	0.0445	0.0483
<i>p</i>	0.1828	0.2188

Support for anti-discrimination laws for gays and lesbians

ATT	-0.0061	-0.0061
SE	0.0175	0.019
<i>p</i>	0.725	0.7467

Bootstrap? N Y

Controls? Y Y

more conservative base of laity. Because the Catholic Church is so big, there is already a lot of diversity of opinion in its adherents, including on the issue of gay marriage that may go against the Church's official teaching.

I test whether the Fiducia supplicans changed Catholics' minds on gay rights by using the 2020 and 2024 wave of the American National Election Studies' time series study (American National Election Studies 2025). I use the same controls and cross sectional estimator as the CES model. I test three Y variables: support for gay marriage, the feeling thermometer for gays and lesbians (respondents are asked to rate 'gays and lesbians' on a scale from 1 to 100), and support for anti-discrimination laws for gays and lesbians.

No coefficients are found to be significant for support for LGBT people. This may be

the case because there was already diversity of opinion on the topic among the laity and among church leaders.

2.5 UMC Schism

The United Methodist Church underwent a schism between 2020 and 2023, with several thousand congregations around the world, especially those in more conservative parts of the U.S. and in the global south, splitting from the UMC to form the Global Methodist Church (GMC) (Helmore 2023). This was mainly over the ordination of openly gay clergymembers and changing the Wesleyan Book of Discipline to allow homosexual relationships and marriages. I use ANES data between 2020 and 2024 to test change in the same three policies as the Fiducia Supplicans model. I code anyone who claims to be any type of Methodist (except for members of Black Methodist Denominations)³ as Methodist for the purposes of this model.

³American Black Methodism is a separate tradition from Mainline Methodism.

DRDiD estimates for change in opinion on gays		
	Methodist	
total n = 10450	n = 523	
Support for gay marriage (scaled)		
ATT	0.1682	0.1682
SE	0.0853	0.0854
<i>p</i>	0.0487	0.0488
Feeling thermometer gays and lesbians (scaled)		
ATT	0.0826	0.0826
SE	0.0773	0.0811
<i>p</i>	0.2847	0.3082
Support for anti-discrimination laws for gays and lesbians		
ATT	0.0237	0.0237
SE	0.0305	0.0339
<i>p</i>	0.4377	0.4855
Bootstrap?	N	Y
Controls?	Y	Y

Methodists are found to be more likely to support gay marriage in 2024 compared to 2020. They are not found to be more likely to rate gays and lesbians more highly or support anti-discrimination laws for gays and lesbians, though those particular questions were not at the forefront of the UMC schism and the n size is very low.

2.6 Discussion

I find mixed but moderately strong support for both hypotheses.

In the case of the Catholic Church, which is too large and undemocratic to undergo a schism, individuals changed their opinion on issues of environmental policy. This finding is the most robust as it is confirmed twice from two different datasets against a placebo. The finding that the *Fiducia supplicans* did not significantly change opinion on rights is not necessarily disconfirming evidence, as there was pre-existing diversity of opinion on

the subject. I would say that Hypothesis 1 is reasonably supported by the evidence.

Despite a very small sample size, I find that Methodists (of any church) were more likely to support gay marriage after a change in the policy of the UMC. This suggests that Hypothesis 2 is true, though Hypothesis 2 may not necessarily be the only mechanism through which this change took place. It could also be the case that the mechanism from Hypothesis 1 is the reason why Methodists were more supportive of gay marriage after the UMC schism, or also that some number of conservatives simply stopped identifying as Methodists and instead joined non-denominational or other churches.

2.7 Conclusion

Given that previous work suggests that congregants set the agenda of public opinion and political socialization at the low level, it is an interesting finding that high level changes have an effect on congregants' opinion. It is somewhat evident that congregants' opinion does still matter, given that every time a democratic Protestant church has tried to introduce same-sex marriage, it has led almost immediately to schism. However, the dynamics of other undemocratic churches and the dynamics of a schism make it such that the public opinion of the denomination as a whole can be set by high level church officials, even if that setting may cause the loss of some laypeople. For future research, it would be good to figure out if there's a way to measure people leaving churches as well with cross-sectional data.

3 Loving your neighbor?

There is an active debate in social science as to whether religious belief precedes political beliefs or whether political beliefs precede religious belief (Smidt et al. 2009; Margolis 2018a; Putnam et al. 2010; Wuthnow 1988). I theorize that even though strong beliefs toward social issues drive sorting in churches, religious beliefs can still precede political beliefs on issues less related to religion. I hypothesize that religious messaging can be used to convince people to support particular policies. I test my hypotheses by fielding a survey experiment in which I show Republican Christians one of two messages supporting the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, one of which uses religious messaging to justify support for the program. I find that those shown the religious message are significantly more likely to agree with a statement against the reduction of SNAP benefits. Those in the treatment group, who are shown the religious message, are more likely to agree with a message supporting SNAP and are more likely to support a candidate who supports SNAP. This finding demonstrates that religious belief can still be useful in informing public opinion and that political belief does not always supersede religious belief.

Given that much theory already speculates on the relationship with religion and politics being bidirectional, it is worth considering what is being measured when experimenting with religious primes and political outcomes. Though the arrow of causality is often seen as unambiguous in experimental research, it is reasonable to believe that when a person reacts to a religious prime with more or less conservatism, it is possible that the conservative belief already existed, and that the religious prime only reflects an existing predilection towards tying conservative ideology with politics.

Much research has already been done regarding religion and politics on candidates and on policies. Also, experimental research is prevalent in religion and politics as religion as an affective identity is both easily tested experimentally and can be incorporated very easily into experimental treatments. I review much of the experimental work that has been done in religion and politics in the last ten years focusing on America, much of this comes from the Oxford Encyclopedia of Politics and Religion article on the subject (Djupe and Smith 2020). Johnson, Rowatt, and LaBouff (2010) find that when one primes Christian words, such as Bible, faith, Christ, church, gospel, heaven, Jesus, Messiah, prayer, and sermon, people are more likely to be prejudicial and report negative affect towards African Americans. They argue that this is the case because the Protestant Work Ethic makes people distrustful of African Americans, who are often stereotyped as lazy. This study is interesting because they use a Lexical Decision Making task to prime individuals with Christian concepts in the treatment group. However, their sample is only 43 students likely at Baylor University (a very conservative Baptist school with a history of racism) so it is possible that this finding may not be as relevant to the general public. Hsiung and Djupe (2018) find from a nationally representative survey that when priming people with different visions for what their religion should be like, individuals change their trust in government. Here, the treatment presented is two different primes for religious belief, one which emphasized breaking down barriers and boundaries to reach new people, and another which emphasized remaining pure against the world's influence and avoiding sin. The inclusive vision made religious respondents more likely to trust others and the government and the exclusive vision made religious respondents less likely to trust others and the government. I think this study is interesting because it considers how different versions of a religious

message affect behavior, which is similar to what I am doing. The different treatments activate different portions of religious belief to lead to opposite outcomes in religious adherents. Adkins et al. (2013) find that when primed with a disagreement between religious and non-religious leaders on a particular issue, people are less likely to agree with religious leaders when those religious leaders present a more conservative view. Additionally, when primed with a difference between a liberal Catholic leader and a conservative Evangelical leader, people are more likely to agree with the liberal Catholic leader. This effect is only specific to Democrats and some independents, whereas for Republicans, the treatments did not make their positions more or less conservative. Albertson (2010) uses an Implicit Association Test (IAT) to determine whether religious priming makes a person more implicitly supportive of a political candidate. She recruited college students to do an experiment which contained four conditions which were George Bush or Bill Clinton giving a speech that either did or did not include a religious message. She finds that when a Christian is treated with the religious prime, they are far more likely to unconsciously see that candidate more positively. She finds that this effect only applies to Christian students. Albertson (2014) tests two different religious appeals' effects on a religious and mixed audience. In one appeal, the messaging involves covert dogwhistles that a general audience would not have a reaction to. In the other appeal, the religious messaging is overt and understandable to the whole audience. She finds that the overt appeal is more costly in the diverse audience but that the benefit associated with religious messaging to religious individuals is preserved in the dogwhistle condition, without being costly due to others' negative reaction to religious messaging. Be'ery and Ben-Nun Bloom (2015) find that when primed with a religious message about God's control over government, samples of Israeli Jews,

American Jews, and American Catholics are more likely to believe that the government is responsible for wealth redistribution. However, when the same prime is applied to a question on welfare state expenditure, the American groups are not more likely to support expenditure on the welfare state. Margolis (2018b) finds that among White Born-Again Christians, mobilizing evangelical belief leads to a higher probability of a person supporting immigration reform. She uses the well-publicized Evangelical Immigration Table's lobbying efforts as a cut point for a quasi-experimental design using panel data. She finds that White born-again's' opinions after the EIT's Evangelical-leaning ad campaign swung in favor of immigration. She also finds that when born-again Christians are experimentally treated with Christian messaging in favor of immigration, they are more likely to support immigration reform. McDermott (2007) finds that Catholic candidates are presently perceived as more conservative, whereas they used to be perceived as more liberal, and that this shift follows a trend in the Catholic electorate towards the right. Additionally, she uses a quasi-experimental design around a Republican senator's conversion to Catholicism to test whether voters would perceive him as more conservative. She finds that when the senator converted to Catholicism, that senator experienced a partisan sort in which Democratic voters were more likely to oppose him and Republican voters were more likely to support him. This sort was not seen among other Republican senators during the same election. McDermott (2007) finds that when participants are primed with descriptions of two candidates with different religious beliefs, Evangelicals are more likely to be perceived as conservative. Additionally, among Evangelical respondents, Evangelical candidates are seen as more competent, trustworthy, responsive and favorable. Also, ideological distance from conservative to liberal moderates the opinion of a participant on the candidate. Peo-

ple who are more conservative are more likely to vote for the candidate and people who are liberal are less likely to vote for the candidate. This finding is interesting because it considers both directions of religious support. Whereas many studies consider how conservatives are activated by religious messages, this study also considers how liberals are deactivated by religious messages. Another study that looks at alienating voters through religious cues is McLaughlin and Wise (2010). They find that among most voters, overt religious cues actually decrease favorability and voting support. However, they find that this effect is moderated by religiosity and that people who are more religious are unlikely to have a negative effect from religious priming. They also test the difference between subtle and overt religious cues and find that subtle cues do not do very much for any group. This dichotomy between subtle and overt cues is similar to Albertson's 2014 study, but Albertson made sure that the religious audience involved understood the subtle cues whereas McLaughlin and Wise did not. Wlezien and Miller (1997) find that individuals who evaluate Republican-leaning groups more highly, including Evangelicals, are more likely to be Republican and to support Republican candidates. They use their findings to support reference group theory, which suggests that people use certain groups as references in order to arrive at support or opposition for particular parties and candidates. They find that support for groups associated with the Democrats (gays and lesbians, blacks) are correlated with support for Democrats and that support for group associated with Republicans (Evangelicals, big business) are correlated with support for Republicans. McKeown and Carlson (1987) test the attribution of support for certain issues on Catholics and Evangelicals (college students). They test five different policy domains: nuclear deterrence, creation of jobs, storage of missiles, tax reform, and public assistance programs on these groups vary-

ing whether proposals supporting each policy come from Catholic or Evangelical leaders. They find that generally, priming for a religious leader of the same religious group does not have an effect on the policy opinion of individuals. These conditions were primarily written to test how a message from a religious elite, such a Catholic bishop or Billy Graham affects the political opinion of a student. My study does things a little differently, but I will keep this null result in mind. McLaughlin and Thompson (2016) consider how race affects religious priming on candidate opinions. They vary the race of the candidate and whether or not those candidates' bios contain religious cues. They find that in general, religious cues lead people to believe that a candidate is more conservative. However, when Black participants are shown bios from Black candidates that contain religious cues, Black participants are not likely to consider the Black religious candidate to be more conservative. They also find that among White participants, religious cues are more likely to cause them to rate candidates more highly. However, among Black participants, religious cues are not more likely to cause individuals to rate candidates more highly and that for Black participants, racial cues are more convincing than religious cues for candidate favorability. Karpowitz, Monson, and Patterson (2016) field a survey experiment with the entire sample of the CCES to determine how people will react to remarks that disparage a religion, both in terms of the remarks themselves and the person delivering the remark. They find that in the sample, people were most likely to be uncomfortable with rhetoric disparaging Jews and least likely to be uncomfortable with rhetoric disparaging Muslims, Mormons, or Mitt Romney. This effect is however moderated by partisanship, as Democrats are very likely to be uncomfortable with statements and commentators that disparage Muslims. Democrats are also more likely than other groups to support sanctioning someone who makes dis-

paraging comments about a religious group. Weber and Thornton (2012) prime religious belief in ads for a senate candidate. They find that when individuals are exposed to religious priming in a senate candidate's messaging, they are more likely to support that candidate. They are also more likely to consider that candidate trustworthy and are more likely to see themselves as politically close to the candidate. They also find that when people are given more information about the candidate rather than a short ad, the religious priming effect is reduced. These experimental studies tell us several things about the way religious primes work. They are (rather obviously) most effective among people who are religious (Albertson 2011) and who have higher religiosity (McLaughlin and Wise 2010). When dealing with candidates, they can bring out other psychological effects, like more likeability (McDermott 2009). Rather importantly, a religious prime also causes people to think of themselves as aligning more closely with a candidate (McDermott 2009). Thus, to make the experiment I propose more robust, I should focus on Christians to see if the priming, that previously cause people to see themselves as closer to a political candidate, may also cause people to see themselves as closer to a policy position. There is, however, some evidence that there might be no effect when individuals are confronted with policy positions supported through religion (McKeown and Carlson 1987), which I will keep in mind.

3.1 Theory

There is thus substantial evidence that religion affects politics in interesting ways. Evidence that religious belief causes one particular outcome or another exists in both experimental and observational evidence. All of these theories attempt to explain homogeneity

among people of the religion and group behavior in politics from religious groups. The ethnoreligious model of religion and politics posits that religious groups' homogeneous behavior is explained by social ties within religious groups and individual members' loyalty to the people of that group (Smidt, Kellstedt and Guth, 2009). This explains religion and politics in a similar way to how social scientists explain why racial groups behave homogeneously. As noted in the literature review, another major explanation is the restructuring theory, which instead explains the homogeneity of religious ingroup behavior through sorting. Individuals, as they grow up, gain certain beliefs that make them more conservative or liberal. These beliefs then cause people to change their religious belief by moving to religious spaces that align more closely with their beliefs. Thus, present religious spaces actually represent pre-existing conservatism and liberalism rather than constraining individual political behavior. This theory seems to be more supported by political science work, like Margolis (2018a). Other work has suggested that most people who are Republicans fit into churches that appear to have restructured (Bellinger 2026). Republicans, who are predominantly White, have fewer social constraints with regard to where they choose to church, so they tend to be free to attend religious spaces in which there is heterogeneity of political belief among members. There is, however, heterogeneity in this outcome and arguments have been made for the arrow of causality between religion and politics going both ways. Even though many policy issues demonstrate strong sorting based on religion (such as abortion), other policy issues are less religiously charged and therefore may be less considered in the decision-making process of individuals. I theorize that social issues, (abortion, gay marriage), drive restructuring for Republican people, but that substantive issues (healthcare, social security) that are not as religiously charged are

less likely to be involved in the restructuring process. Thus, Republican individuals may be able to be convinced of different positions on these side issues through religion.

Hypothesis: For Republicans, individuals are able to be convinced to change their opinion on non-religious issues through religious messaging.

3.2 Methods

To test my hypothesis, I field a survey experiment through Prolific with funding from the COLA Undergraduate Research Scholarship and the Undergraduate Research Fellowship. A representative sample of Republicans is selected from the Prolific pool using prescreeners. I then test whether or not those individuals change their support of social programs after reading a religiously charged message about them. I choose social programs, specifically SNAP, as the policy of interest because it is uncontroversial, has support and opposition within the Republican Party (40% of Republicans oppose cutting SNAP (FMI 2025), and lends itself easily to Christian messaging, given Jesus' frequent teaching on feeding the hungry. I then ask three sets of questions. The first is a set of pre-treatment questions that include demographics and feeling thermometers for other social programs. The prior beliefs on social programs are aggregated into an index to determine the pre-existing beliefs on social programs if they are collinear. If not, the thermometers will be left as is in the regression estimation. The participants are then treated with the following messages:

Legislation has recently been introduced that restricts the ability to receive SNAP benefits for able-bodied adults who are not actively looking for work. As a Christian, I believe that it is important to help the poor in our society

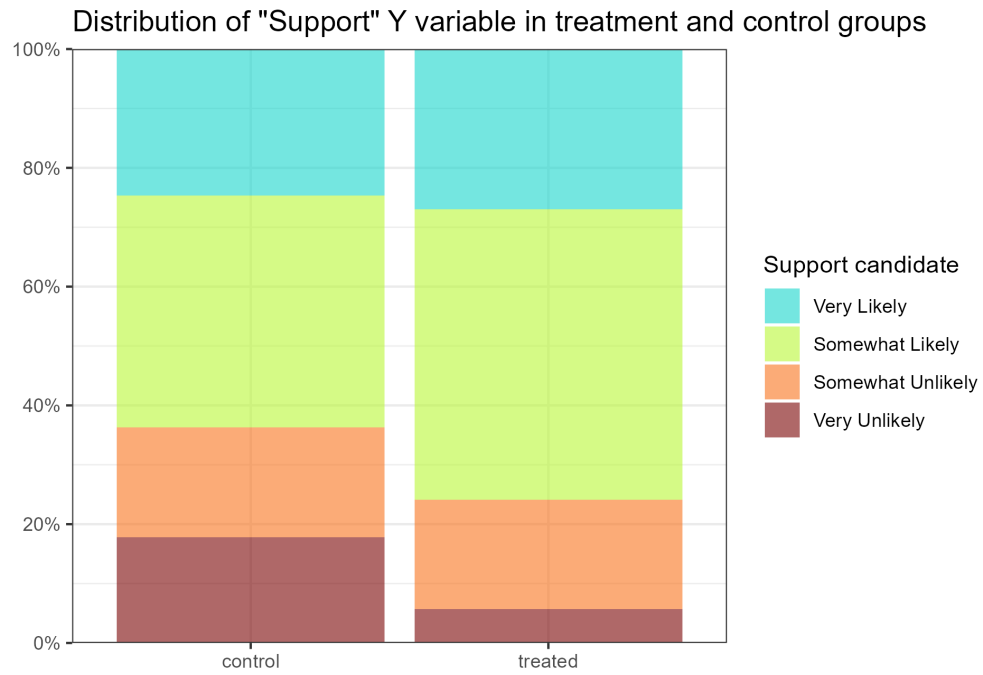
and share food whenever we have it. People who have food should share with people who do not. (Luke 3:11) We must continue to offer SNAP benefits to those who need them because we should not allow others to go hungry.

Legislation has recently been introduced that restricts the ability to receive SNAP benefits for able-bodied adults who are not actively looking for work. I believe that it is important to help the poor in our society and share food whenever we have it. People who have food should with people who do not. We must continue to offer SNAP benefits to those who need them because we should not allow others to go hungry.

in which one message is religious in nature and the other is not. These messages are short to save cost on the experiment and are very similar in wording except for a couple of religious primes, so that any other factors explaining difference between treatment and control groups are minimized. Participants are then asked whether they would support a candidate who said this statement and whether they agree with this statement. These questions are asked separately because individuals may be sufficiently apathetic to the issue such as to be able to support a candidate with whom they disagree on SNAP benefits because of their opinions on other issues. On the other hand, asking whether a person directly agrees with the statement adds another data point to measure how a person reacts to the experiment. I use an ordered logistic regression to test whether the treated group responded differently. There is a total sample size of 281 with 141 people in the control group and 140 people in the treatment group.

3.3 Findings

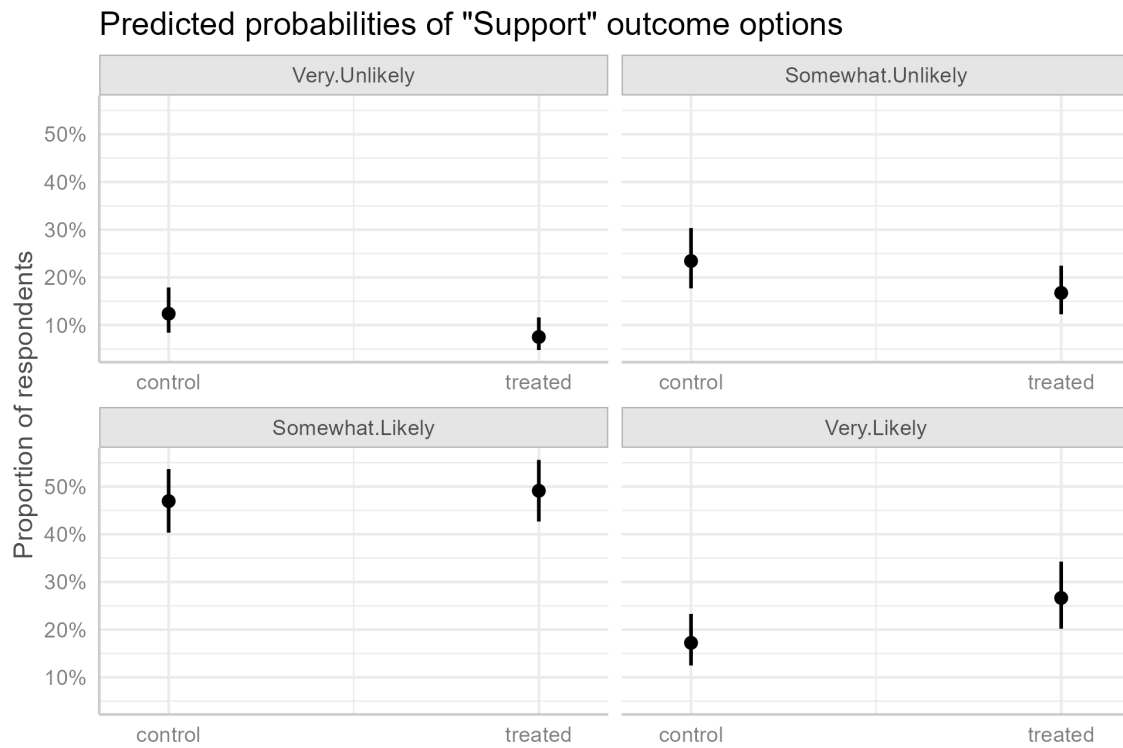
The first outcome variable is worded as: "How likely are you to support a candidate that said this?" with a discrete response scale of "Very Unlikely" to "Very Likely".



As can be seen from the figure, fewer individuals in the treatment group marked the "unlikely" options for the outcome variable than those in the control group.

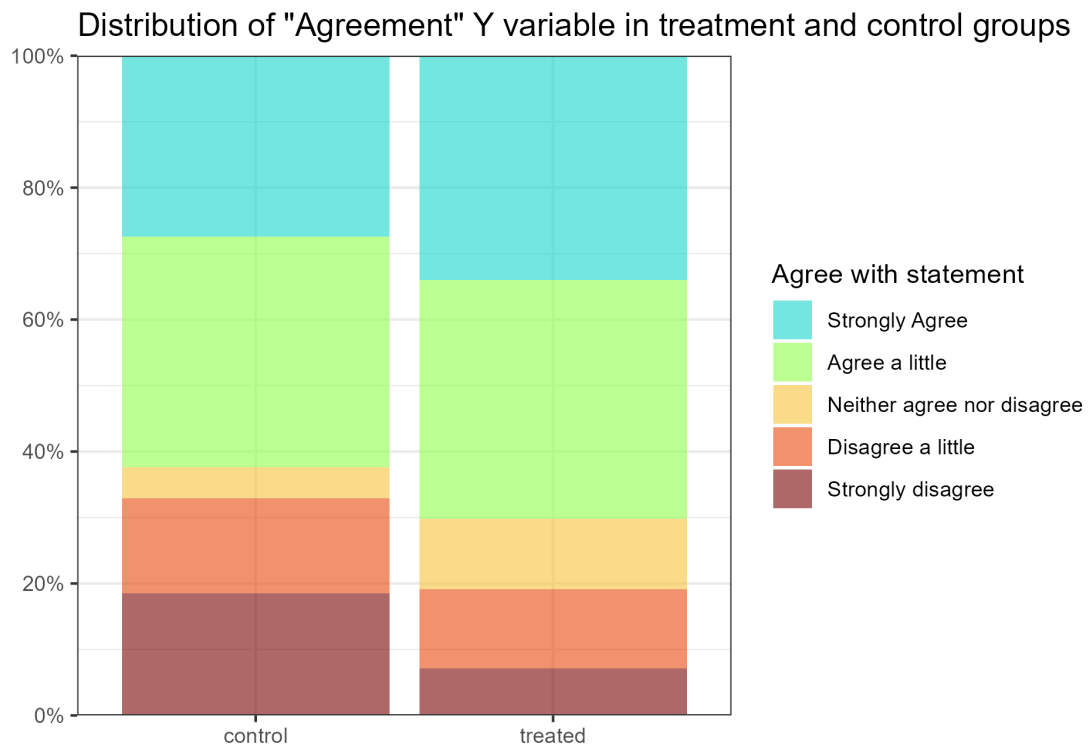
	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	Support for Candidate
Treated	0.556** (0.230)
Social Security FT	0.005 (0.006)
Obamacare FT	0.018*** (0.005)
Section 8 FT	0.006 (0.005)
Black	0.771* (0.405)
Hispanic	0.062 (0.369)
Woman	0.087 (0.238)
Age	-0.013 (0.010)
Observations	281
<i>Note:</i>	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

I find that those shown a religious message are more likely to choose more supportive options on the ordinal scale. The ordered logistic model finds a positive coefficient for the treatment group, and this coefficient is stronger than most other coefficients in the model. This coefficient is significant and in the expected direction. This means that being shown a religious message is a strong predictor for choosing a more support option on the ordinal scale.



Even though being in the treatment group is associated with marking a higher option in the overall model, the difference in predicted possibilities is not significant for any level. This means that even though the treatment is associated with scoring higher on the ordinal scale, it is not associated with a higher likelihood for any given option.

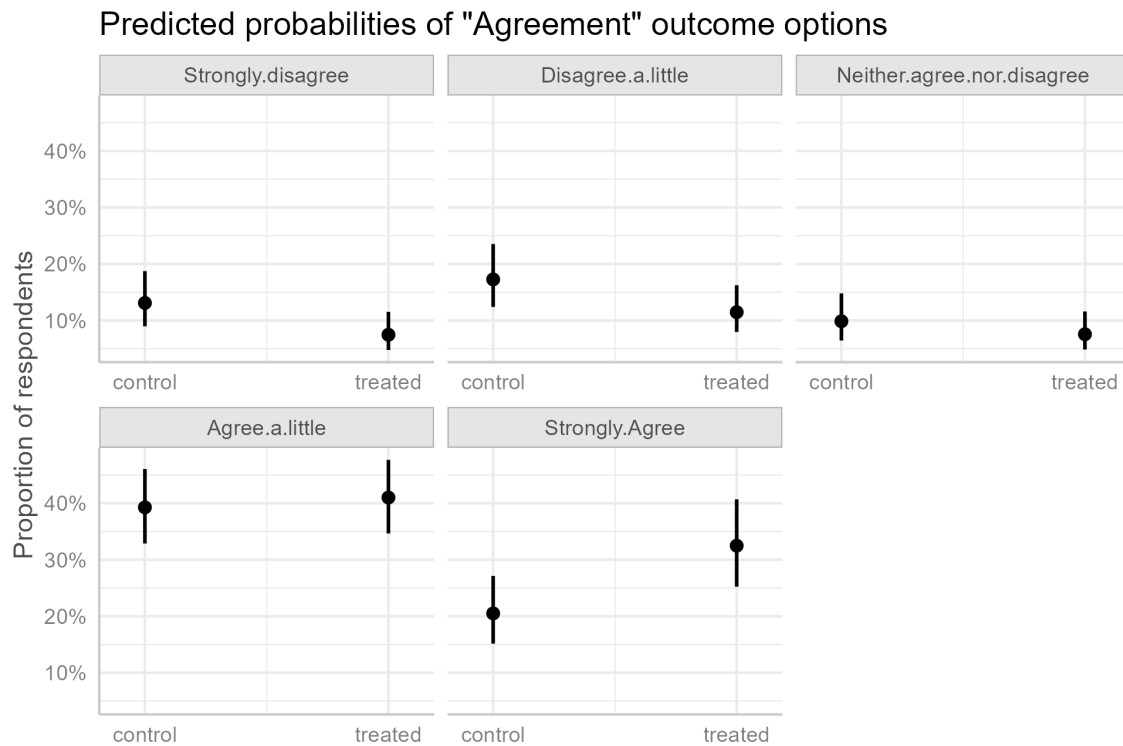
The second outcome variable is worded as: "To what extent do you agree with this statement?" with options ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree".



As can be seen from the figure, those in the treated group are less likely to disagree with the statement that has the religious message. 33% of those in the control group chose to disagree with the statement whereas only 19% in the treated group chose to disagree with the statement.

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	Agreement
Treated	0.624*** (0.229)
Social Security FT	0.013** (0.006)
Obamacare FT	0.015*** (0.005)
Section 8 FT	0.007 (0.005)
Black	1.623*** (0.443)
Hispanic	0.453 (0.371)
Woman	0.032 (0.234)
Age	-0.014 (0.010)
Observations	281
<i>Note:</i> *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01	

The results for the model on the "Agreement" outcome variable are very similar to those on the "Support" outcome variable. Being in the treatment group is associated with choosing a higher option on the ordinal scale for agreement. This effect size is larger than the effect sizes for all other coefficients except for being Black, which is the same as the first model.



Similarly to the first model, the differences in predicted probabilities are in the direction we expect, but insignificant. Respondents seem less likely to choose "disagree" options are more likely to choose the "strongly agree" option though the confidence interval is too large to make a robust conclusion. This means that even though being in the treatment group is a useful predictor for predicting higher scores on the overall model, it is not useful in predicting a higher likelihood for one of the five outcome variables individually.

3.4 Discussion

The outcome of the experiment shows that using religious messaging to support a policy makes people more likely to support that policy. As theorized, using a religious message makes religious individuals more receptive to a policy message. As noted before, I used two outcome variables, one which references a candidate and another which represents a person's personal view in order to allow for someone to disagree with the statement but still support the candidate. However, this discordance did not happen very often in the data. Being shown a religious message is associated with choosing more supportive scores for both outcome variables. Differences in the probabilities for singular outcomes are in the direction I expect but are insignificant, perhaps due to sample size. The overall models, however, confirm that being shown a religious message is a useful predictor for both outcome variables. As I theorized, appealing to one's religious perspective makes one more likely to accept a policy outcome. This is made clear from the descriptive distributions of the outcome variables of both groups. For both variables, those in the treatment group are at least 10% less likely to choose a negative option relating to the message. Returning to the theoretical explanations for religion and politics, this finding means that the restructuring narrative is not always true. Even though more recent studies on religion and politics in the United States have found that political beliefs usually precede and inform religious beliefs, my experiment demonstrates that it is also possible that a religious belief precedes a political belief. I theorized that even though there is evidence of restructuring, religious belief can still be used to convince people of policies that have not been caught up in the restructuring phenomenon. The major limitation of this experiment is that I did not have a social issue to compare the SNAP message to. Even so, the outcome of this experiment

demonstrates that religious rhetoric is still useful in informing public opinion.

3.5 Conclusion

Even though changes in American religion are defined by political beliefs (Margolis 2018a; Wuthnow 1988), political beliefs do not always supersede religious belief. Even though major shifts in religion have fallen along pre-existing ideological boundaries, religious messaging can be shown to pierce this ideological boundary. Therefore, there still exists a more complex relationship between religion and politics in which religion can still cause changes in political views. Even among self-described conservative Republicans, using only a few words related to religion shifted opinion on a policy by 10% and caused more support for that policy, controlling for other demographics. Given the clearly identified limitation of this paper, a good follow-up study would include more survey experiments testing multiple issues, some of which might be more clearly identified with religion. However, this paper gives a starting point for understanding the view of religion and politics in which religion comes before politics, and not the other way around.

Epilogue

This thesis sought to clarify existing theoretical explanations for the relationship between religion and politics by looking more closely at particular relationships between different levels of religion and politics. I found mixed evidence that supports different ideas from different theories. From the first study, I found that deeply held immutable policy positions, such as those related to abortion, clearly affect how people evaluate political parties. I find that even though some conservative Christians may agree with the Democratic party

on some policy positions, they refuse to even consider that party because of their existing religious beliefs being incongruent with those of that party. From the second study, I find that when religious denominations change their opinion on a policy, the people in those denominations often change their opinion on that same issue in response. This demonstrates that, to some extent, high-level religious elites can socialize changes in mass public opinion among their laypeople. From the third study, I find that using religious messaging to support a less-religious policy point causes Republican Christians to favor that policy point to a greater degree. This experiment shows that religious messaging and appeals to religious principles can still be used to influence individuals' opinions on certain issues.

Even though prevailing evidence has suggested that political beliefs precede religious beliefs (Margolis 2018a; Djupe and Gilbert 2009; Wuthnow 1988; Smidt et al. 2009), my studies demonstrate that the relationship is not as clear. All three of my studies provide evidence that religious beliefs, religious changes, and religious messaging can all be shown to affect political outcomes. Thus, the relationship between religion and politics is more complex than one causing the other.

In my thesis, I have explored the ways in which religion might shape how people engage with politics. It is clear that there still remains an outstanding influence that religion has on party identification and public opinion. A more complete theory of religion and politics must consider both directions of causality. Given that there are different religious contexts and different types of political participation in the United States, future work exploring how each religious context might affect different types of politics would add much to the existing literature. Additionally, further clarifying the mechanisms through which religion might affect different types of political behavior would make clearer relationships between

religious engagement and political actions.

In sum, my thesis has demonstrated that religion is still a very important component of American politics. Religion is very salient in choosing candidates and parties to vote for. Religion is also very salient in setting and changing public opinion among religious people. Therefore, theories of religion and politics must remain open to multiple directions of influence to better understand the relationship between these two salient social identities.

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