

Research Statement

In the wee small hours of Election Night 2016, an exit poll was released: over 80% of evangelicals had cast their ballot for Donald Trump. I had already observed that something was afoot in conservative Christianity—my local homeschool co-op encouraged moms to bring firearms on field trips, pastors warned of imminent religious persecution, my Christian neighbors began to talk about “illegals”—but the exit poll was still shocking. Some early pieces on Christian nationalism provided insight into what I was observing but left many questions about the motivations of Christian nationalism support, its effects, and the potential for softening religiously-connected attitudes unanswered. My work aims to address these questions by applying insights from social psychology to the study of political attitudes using diverse methodologies.

Much of my work on underlying causes of support for Christian nationalism draws attention to its intersection with race. “Fear and Loathing” uses a survey experiment to explore the effects of racial and religious demographic change. Among White Christians, racial change yielded null results, but religious change evoked strong negative emotions. Those respondents who experienced disgust registered stronger Christian nationalism support and beliefs in Christian persecution, but respondents who experienced fear expressed were less supportive of Christian nationalism. Although “Fear and Loathing” did not find an effect of racial demographic change, race still matters in the story of Christian nationalism. “Christian Nationalism So White” tests the effects of racial priming: when White respondents are asked the Perry and Whitehead Christian nationalism index presented with pictures of Black people (compared to White people), they express stronger support for Christian nationalism. This effect is especially strong for respondents who do not believe that Black Americans possess characteristically-American traits. In other words, for White Americans, Christian nationalism becomes a reaction to a racially-diversifying. The causes of Christian nationalism support among Black Americans, though, follows a different trajectory. In “Holy Nations”, Black respondents were exposed to either a civic nationalism, ethnonationalism, or control prompt. When excluded from national belonging on account of their racial identity in the ethnonationalism treatment, Black Christians’ support of Christian nationalism increased. Christian nationalism became a mechanism to stress their own prototypicality in a Christian America. Finally, elites play an important role. A content analysis of social media posts reveals that Christian nationalist thought leaders and groups advance a particular vision of the country, distinct from other religious and patriotic groups. These messages are saturated with fear language and elicit strong responses from their readers (“Words and Attitudes”, dissertation chapter).

My work also shows that Christian nationalism matters. Christian nationalists are more likely to engage in conspiracy thinking, and this effect is especially strong for biblical literalists (“Christ, Country, and Conspiracies?”). The heightened suspicion of others is consistent with a felt need for self-protection. Christian nationalists are more likely to have a gun owner identity and to believe that violence is an effective method to resolve political conflicts (“An Army for God”).

Christian nationalism does not have the same effect for all people, however. “Jesus and John Wayne Wannabees” demonstrates that Christian nationalism is not most prevalent among masculine men, but rather among men who describe themselves as feminine. Support of a hyper-masculine Christian nationalism compensates for a felt lack of masculinity. Christian nationalism has significant effects for feminine men, amplifying their support for hostile sexism, violent protection of their group, and political violence. Christian nationalism’s effects also vary by race. “Religion is Sometimes Raced” argues that Christian nationalism sacralizes defense of the ingroup. As long as the interests of racial groups are not explicitly at stake, as is the case on cultural issues, Christian nationalism has the same effect for White, Black, and Latino respondents. But when racial groups’ interests are directly implicated, as they are for racialized issues like voting rights and policing, Christian nationalism’s effect is moderated by race.

As illustrated above, Christian nationalism itself often has an anti-social effect—increased conspiracy thinking, hostile sexism, support for political violence, etc. But religion is also associated with greater political participation, generosity, and community engagement. Can religion itself become a mechanism through which some of the negative effects of Christian nationalism can be ameliorated? “Framing Religious Liberty in Debates over Public Schooling” finds that framing education policies on sexual orientation and gender identity in religious liberty terms does not shift support for those policies generally or affect towards religious groups. Rather, partisan identities and beliefs about the nature of politics interact with the identity of messengers. Republicans generally find Muslim claims of religious liberties to be unconvincing unless they believe that LGBT policies necessarily pit Christians against the LGBT community. When politics is a zero-sum battle, Muslims claiming religious liberties become Republicans’ political allies and Republicans.

While I continue to be interested in the causes and effects of Christian nationalism, I have become increasingly curious about the ways in which other aspects of religion might be leveraged to ameliorate some of its anti-social effects. Religion is associated with anti-LGBT activism and with strong pressure to conform to the group. Public opinion surveys indicate that Christians are much more supportive of LGBT rights than the Christian elite’s role in anti-LGBT legislation would suggest. During the summer of 2023 I fielded a survey experiment to test whether exposure to Christian support for pro-LGBT policies can increase pro-LGBT attitudes by activating conformity pressures among Christians (“Groupthinking LGBT Attitudes”). I see continued application of positive psychology to religion and politics as the next stage of my research agenda. For example, I am currently designing an experimental project that explores whether growth mindset theory can be applied to culture war groups in ways that might ameliorate group conflict, issue polarization, and propensities for political violence, which is scheduled to be fielded for the fall of 2024.

Since November 2016, I’ve developed skill sets that allow me to answer my questions about the role of religion in political attitudes. My diverse research questions have called for me to independently seek out resources to learn new methods, like structural equation modeling and quantitative content

analysis. Completing my graduate work from a distance and then employment at a community college has required that I develop creative strategies to maintain my research agenda, including intentional investment in a professional network and ferreting out academic resources. Beyond the typical frustrations of academic research, these additional challenges have contributed to my endurance on research projects that encounter snags along the way. But, most importantly, my work contributes to our field's understanding of how religious identities and worldviews shape orientations towards government and social groups, relationships that have only grown more consequential since 2016.