

Religious Identity, Political Trust, and Religious Texts: How Religion Influences
Presidential Politics.

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Introduction

Presidential leadership of public opinion is elusive. For decades, scholars thought that presidential public addresses could be used to change public attitudes. One view argued that when Congress is unwilling to act on presidential priorities a President could appeal to the public and motivate congressional support for his preferred legislation (Kernell 1986). Others argue that public opinion is too stable for a presidential speech to significantly alter existing attitudes (Edwards 2003, 2009). Presidents give speeches to alter the policy or news agenda (Cohen 2010; Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake 2011; Miles 2014), mobilize support among their base (Eshbaugh-Soha and Rottinghaus 2013; Wood 2009), or influence their approval ratings (Canes-Wrone and de Marchi 2002; Canes-Wrone 2004).

Yet, trust in and approval of the President are not singularly dependent on the quality or content of presidential speeches. Not every President is a gifted orator capable of motivating support through presidential addresses. As such, it is interesting to know how if presidents can produce public trust or approval apart from presidential speeches and if support derived from these other sources could help presidents generate support for ideas contained in public speeches. This reverses the logic of the dominant approach. Rather than looking for the influence of speeches on public approbation of the President or public support for specific policies, this paper poses two distinct questions. First, does the descriptive representation model explain public trust in the President? Second, does this trust influence public support for ideas contained in a public address.

Religion has long been a potent force in American politics. At present, most non-religious Americans affiliate with the Democrats and most religious Americans are Republican.

As such, much of the American public uses religious cues to determine the political ideology of candidates when needed (Jacobsmeier 2013). However, Claassen (2015) argues that there are plenty of non-religious Republicans and religious Democrats in America today. If so, religious identity might be more important in public evaluations of the President and his proposals than partisan identity; at least for some Americans. As the American public becomes more ideologically sorted into the dominant political parties and partisan motivated reasoning more strongly influences partisan attitudes about presidents from the opposing political party, it becomes more important to understand how competing social identities influence public attitudes about the president.

This paper develops a framework for understanding how the descriptive representation model influences public attitudes about the President. Specifically, I argue that people who think that they share a religious identity with the President will be more likely to trust him, all else equal. Using a national survey conducted in June, 2015 I demonstrate that religious identity motivates greater trust in President Obama and that this is distinct from trust derived through a shared partisan identity. Then, I test whether those who share a religious identity with the President are more likely to agree with religious statements he made during a National Prayer Breakfast speech in March, 2014. After discussing the implications of the findings, I conclude.

Descriptive Representation

From an institutional design perspective, there are a variety of ways to think about representation. The dominant view is that representation occurs when the interests of a population are congruent with the policy outcomes of the body that represents them. However, this is not the only perspective on representation. Pitkin (1967) argued that a representative body is best characterized as a sample of the population it aspires to represent. In this sense,

representation is less about the outputs of a representative body and more about how well the representative body is a representative sample of the population being represented. The emphasis is —on ~~being~~ something rather than doing something.” (Pitkin, 1967 p. 61).

Descriptive representation can lead to other positive outcomes even when it does not lead to substantive representation. This is because descriptive representation ensures that —~~on~~ any given topic every opinion, or every worthwhile opinion, in the country finds its spokesman.” (Griffiths and Wollheim 1960). Considerable empirical evidence suggests that when minorities are better represented in legislative bodies, it results in a measurable shift in what is discussed. An increase in minority representation often leads to different kinds of bills being introduced, which alters the policy agenda (Bratton 2002; Haider-Markel 2007). In addition, minority women in Congress use their floor time to speak against stereotypes of welfare mothers as irresponsible and incapable of providing for their families (Hawkesworth, 2003), and may feel a responsibility to advocate for the interests of poor, minority women (Wong, 2006). As a result, minority groups are more likely to have their voices heard when members of their group win elections. Laws may not change immediately, but those in power are introduced to the concerns of minority groups through descriptive representation (Bratton and Haynie 1999).

In turn, this influences minority attitudes and behavior. In the United States, increased minority representation is associated with higher public evaluations of the legitimacy of Congress. When represented by members of their own minority groups, people are more likely to think that their views are being represented in the legislature and to participate in politics (Banducci, Donovan, and Karp 2004) . In part, this is because minority legislators work to mobilize new minority voters and include them in the political process (Gay 2002), and in part because minority representation increases minority trust in government (Bobo and Gilliam 1990;

Howell and Fagan 1988). Combined, this leads to greater minority approval of the elected officials from minority groups (Banducci, Donovan, and Karp 2004).

Representation is more than policy congruence. People who trust their elected representatives are more likely to support them even when they disagree about the particulars of policy (Eulau and Karps 1977). As such, members of Congress often develop a home-style orchestrated to create greater trust among their constituents (Fenno 1978). The home-style consists of language, apparel, symbols, and mannerisms that are familiar to the constituents in the Representatives' home district and is designed to convince them that their member of Congress is like them. People who perceive commonality between themselves and those who represent them are more likely to trust, and support them notwithstanding divergence on policy preferences (Eulau and Karps 1977; Fenno 1978).

Although the dominant view of descriptive representation emphasizes the advancement of minority group interests, the principles are general enough to apply to any group. Fenno (1978) demonstrated that members of Congress spend considerable effort fitting in with majority groups in their home district. It makes sense that every ambitious politician would try to elicit trust from any group of voters in society. This allows them to develop support that does not depend on specific policy outcomes. Moreover, it makes sense that the same processes that lead minority groups toward greater trust in elected officials from their social groups would lead to greater public support for anyone from any social group. When group membership is not readily visible descriptive representation continues. Even when people can conceal group membership in the closet, members of the social group are more supportive of elected officials who share the group identity (Haider-Markel 2007).

Religion as a Social Identity

Religious identity is complex. Generally, the strength of attachment to a religious identity is measured by the importance of religion to an individual, but this may not be entirely appropriate. The strength of attachment to any social identity is contextual. The definition of social categories depends on the group to which one is comparing. When compared to atheists, belief in God becomes the relevant distinguishing feature; when compared to men, gender is relevant; when compared to Russians, nationality is relevant; and when compared to Catholics, denomination is relevant.

For many, religious identity is less about what one believes and how one practices their religion and more about the church into which one was baptized as a child (Day 2011). Day (2011) estimates that as many as three-quarters of North American Christians do not attend church weekly and in Europe the figure could be as high as ninety percent. For these Christians, religious identity comes not from shared beliefs or practices, but from being raised in a church. Many of these people described religion as “an ascribed identity from which they could not disassociate themselves.” (Day, 2011 p. 180).

For others, religion is defined by shared beliefs, symbols, and rituals. This is because historically, religious belief has been essential for group survival. One of the primary challenges in pre-modern society involved encouraging people to sacrifice their own self-interest for the greater good of the group. Secular communes often failed because appeals to altruism were insufficient to motivate members of society to sacrifice for the common good. By contrast, religious communes were more successful because group members were more willing to sacrifice (Sosis 2000; Sosis and Alcorta 2003). This is because religious rituals and behaviors that are costly to cooperating group members signaled the presence of devotion and intentions to

cooperate with the group. This allowed group members to reliably detect the presence of freeloaders and buffer the group against defection and freeriding (Norenzayan and Shariff 2008).

Particularly when the group believed in Deities that punished immoral behavior, the fear of retribution motivated group members to sacrifice their own self-interest for the group interest (Johnson and Bering 2006). As a result, religions create a moral code based on symbols, shared destiny, and shared beliefs that bind people into tight knit communities (Graham and Haidt 2010). This can blind people to the shortcomings of their own religion and the positive features those who belong to other religious groups (Haidt 2012). Recent cross-national research from eight diverse societies of hunter-gatherers, herders, horticulturalists, and fully market-integrated populations with beliefs ranging from ancestor and garden spirits to Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity demonstrated that people who share a belief in moralistic gods are significantly more likely to respond favorably toward each other (Purzycki et al. 2016). People are more willing to sacrifice their self-interest to benefit those with whom they share belief in a common Deity. Although these participants lived in varied cultural, economic, and social situations and had never had direct social contact with each other, shared religious belief motivated cooperation. Affiliation with a religion creates a powerful social identity that strongly influences attitudes about those who are and are not affiliated with one's own religious group (Altemeyer and Hunsberger 1992).

Often, the symbols and attire that demonstrate affiliation with a religious group can be hidden from public view. In this way, religious group membership is a social identity that can be hidden. This means that religious social identification will not always be the dominant social identity influencing attitudes. Sometimes, religious and national identification are so intertwined that many see an attack on religion as an attack on national identity (Muldoon et al. 2007).

Sometimes, religious and national identity conflict with each other. Verkuyten and Yildiz (2007) study of Dutch Muslims demonstrates that individuals can have strong identification with conflicting social groups. Dutch Muslims who think that Islam is persecuted by the Dutch government were found to have weaker national identification and a stronger identification with their religion. This is consistent with studies of social identity among Greek and Italian immigrants in Australia. When these immigrants were with Australian friends or at school, the Australian national identity was dominant. However, when these immigrants were with family, relatives, other immigrants, or at weddings, the Greek/Italian identity was dominant (Rosenthal and Hrynevich 1985). Context influences when one social identity becomes more relevant than another.

Internal commitment to the norms of the social group also influence how one's social identity influences attitudes. When faced with a threat to one social identity from those who belong to another social group with which one also identifies, most people will adopt the view consistent with the high-status social group (Verkuyten 2004). However, when one's internal commitment to the social group being threatened is stronger, it can lead to dis-identification with the high-status group. Dutch Muslims with strong social and behavioral Muslim identities were more likely to abandon their national identities when they thought that Dutch society persecuted Muslims (Verkuyten and Yildiz 2007).

This suggests that the strength of religious identity in a particular context depends on how committed one feels toward their religion, and the costs and benefits associated with religious identification at a given moment. One might not ever attend church, yet feel strong identification with their religion because it was fundamental to their childhood or home experience (Day, 2011). Similarly, religious identity might weaken among strict adherents to particular faith in

contexts where religion does not seem relevant. For example, religious identity is unlikely to influence group work in math courses, because religious beliefs are not the most relevant identity in that context.

In early American political life, it was difficult to be elected to public office without affiliating with a religious group (Tocqueville 1835). And, while religion has a strong history of independently influencing US political outcomes, recently members of religious groups have tended to affiliate with one political party or the other (Layman 2001). As such, religious identity is often relevant in American political life. One of the consequences of this is that the public uses religious affiliation as a cue for the political ideology of candidates and elected officials. As American Catholics have become more Republican, the public has come to see Catholic candidates as more conservative, the same is true of Evangelical Protestants (McDermott 2007, 2009). These effects are strongest among the most religiously committed. The stronger the affiliation with a religious tradition, the more likely someone is to evaluate an elected official's political ideology on the basis of their religious identity, rather than their voting record (Jacobsmeier 2013).

This suggests that religious identity can have a politically relevant, independent influence on public attitudes about elected officials. In American society, we should expect that most of the time, partisan identity does not conflict with religious social identity (Layman 2001). As such, it is likely that attitudes motivated by religious social identity will appear similar to attitudes motivated by partisan social identity. However, because the two identities are distinct, and can be more or less dominant in different contexts, we should be able to distinguish support motivated by one from support motivated by the other. Given what we know about descriptive representation, partisan identity should influence trust in and approval of elected officials who

share a partisan identity. However, no matter how strongly religious affiliation is used as a cue for political ideology, partisan affiliation should not influence trust in or approval of elected officials derived from a shared religious identity; these attitudes are motivated by religious identities. As such, controlling for partisanship, I expect higher public trust in and approval of elected officials who share a religious identity.

Political Trust

Representation can be thought of in terms of trust in elected officials. Modern Americans are much less trusting of their government today than they were a half century ago. When asked the biggest problem facing the country, the government was the number one response throughout 2014 and 2015 (Saad 2016). In 1958, 73% of Americans reported that the trust the government in Washington to do the right thing most of the time. However, by February, 2014 only 24% of Americans reported the same level of trust in Washington. Partisanship explains some of the variation in reported trust in Washington. Early in the George W. Bush administration—when Republicans controlled the House, Senate and White House—trust in Washington among Republican Americans was close to the 1958 level of trust. Similarly, in April 2010—when Democrats controlled the House, Senate and White House—trust in Washington among Democrats was near 40% ("Public Trust in Government: 1958-2014" 2014). Yet, partisanship alone cannot explain the decades-long steady decline in trust that the American public expresses in the government.

Hetherington and Rudolph (2015) argue that political polarization in the US electorate is largely responsible for the decline in political trust. They argue that as the two political parties in America have become more ideologically distinct, ordinary people from one party have developed strong, negative feelings towards members of the other political party. As a result,

when a representative from one party gives a speech, ordinary people of the opposing party have angry responses to policy proposals from the speech. These negative feelings towards opposing party identifiers have also led partisans to become much less trusting in government. As a result, the government is less likely to pass significant legislation, which perpetuates the view that the government is dysfunctional (Hetherington and Rudolph 2015).

Yet, individual evaluations of government trust are complex (Citrin and Green 1986). While most agree that trust evaluations reflect a “basic evaluative orientation toward the government founded on how well the government is operating relative to people’s normative expectations.” (Miller 1974), policy outputs certainly influence public trust evaluations. Miller (1974) found that the Vietnam War and Civil Rights legislation eroded public trust in government among white respondents, but the Civil Rights legislation increased public trust among African Americans. Institutional performance also influences trust in government. Citrin and Green (1986) argue that presidential approval strongly influences trust in government, while others have noted that both congressional (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002) and social service organization (Keele 2007) performance can also influence public trust in government.

These alone cannot explain why citizens in advanced democracies are becoming less trusting of both government leaders and government institutions (Norris 1999). Dalton (2005) argues that as democracies work to improve the human condition, public expectations of their government change. Those who are least trusting of government tend to be those highest in education and social status. The cognitive skills that accompany greater education and wealth motivate people to expect more from their political system. As such, public trust in government may be on the decline because expectations are rising (Dalton 2004, 2005). If so, declining

political trust may be a feature of democratic systems of government, and people should become comfortable with governments operating without the trust of their constituents.

However, consistent with the general argument, shared religious identity might influence trust in elected officials. Among the first survey items shown to predict trust in government was a battery of questions that measured the ethical qualities of elected officials. Those who thought that hardly any elected officials were “crooked” were more likely to trust government than those who thought that quite a few people running government were. This suggests that for many people trust in government is not much different than individual trust. When people think that another person is dishonest or self-centered, they are less likely to trust that person. Finally, belief in God is a strong predictor of interpersonal trust (Gervais, Shariff, and Norenzayan 2011). The same processes that motivate those who believe in God to distrust those who do not could function at a lower level. If so, people might be more likely to trust someone (or a President) with whom they share a common religious belief.

The hypotheses are tested using a national survey conducted in June 2015. Clear Voice Research recruited 2,118 participants in their online panel to participate in a research project about political attitudes, of those 1,935 completed the entire survey. Respondents were 50.7% male, 80.6% white, 33.7% Democrat, and 24.7% Republican. Most of the respondents had completed at least some college (78.1%) and 86% of them reported an annual income of less than \$100 thousand. Using language from Gallup surveys, respondents were asked to identify the religious identity of President Obama. Much to our initial surprise, close to 25% of the respondents thought Obama was Muslim. By September 2015, surveys conducted following a Trump rally found similar proportions of Americans believing that Obama was Muslim, which alleviated our initial concerns. In addition, respondents were asked about their own religious

affiliation. I matched individual responses on these two questions, without regard for the accuracy of the information about the President's religion. That is, if a Muslim thought Obama is Muslim, I count that as a shared religious identity because descriptive representation is matter of perception. Table 3 shows the number (and percent) of respondents who match religious identity with the President based on their perception of his religious identity. A handful of respondents who identify with minority religions also believe that Obama shares their religious belief, but most people thought that Obama was protestant (correct), Catholic, non-religious or something else.

I asked participants the standard question about how often they think that they can trust the government in Washington to do what is right. The next question asked, "How much of the time do you think you can trust President Obama to do what is right?" Individual evaluations of how much they trust government are influenced by policy related concerns (Citrin 1974; Miller 1974) Citrin 1974, Miller 1974, institutional performance evaluations, and public expectations. It is likely that trust in President Obama depends on public expectations of the President, his performance, and some policy related concerns. However, because the question of trust deals with an individual, these evaluations are less likely to be motivated by strict policy concerns and are more likely to be influenced by personal characteristics. The correlation between responses on these two questions is moderate ($r=0.44$) and twice as many people report trusting Obama (39.66%) as trusting Washington (20.22%). This suggests that the two trust evaluations are distinct and influenced by different considerations. I expect that people who share a religious identity with president Obama to be more likely to trust him, all else equal (H1).

I predict trust in President Obama with a multinomial probit regression model with never as the baseline category. In addition, I control for the same demographics. Party

identification is coded 1-3 with 1 representing Democrats, 2 for Independents and 3 for Republicans; political ideology is scaled 1-7 with 1 representing very liberal. I also include education levels coded 1-5 where 1 represents less than high school and 5 graduate school of some kind; and race has six categories including those who identify as multi-racial.¹ The importance of religion question is worded differently; but it is coded 1-4 where 1 represents a response that religion is extremely important and 4 indicates that it is ‘not at all important’.

¹ While this allows for simpler tables, it is usually not a good idea to change categorical variables to numbers and treat them as if they are continuous. Each of the models was run both ways. The results from the analyses where categorical covariates are treated as such are the same and available by request.

Table 1: Predicting Trust in President Obama

	Just About Always	Most of the Time	Some of the Time	Just About Always	Most of the Time	Some of the Time	Just About Always	Most of the Time	Some of the Time
Religion match	0.506*** (0.167)	0.186 (0.144)	0.234* (0.138)	-0.867* (0.471)	-0.821* (0.423)	-0.447 (0.418)	-0.258 (0.610)	-0.254 (0.551)	-0.299 (0.546)
Age	-0.087* (0.050)	0.003 (0.042)	-0.081** (0.040)	-0.082 (0.051)	0.006 (0.042)	-0.079** (0.040)	-0.082 (0.051)	0.006 (0.042)	-0.080** (0.040)
Political ideology	-0.659*** (0.117)	-0.759*** (0.100)	-0.310*** (0.099)	-0.661*** (0.117)	-0.760*** (0.100)	-0.310*** (0.099)	-0.648*** (0.118)	-0.748*** (0.101)	-0.308*** (0.099)
Income	0.034 (0.039)	0.005 (0.033)	-0.009 (0.031)	0.035 (0.040)	0.004 (0.033)	-0.011 (0.031)	0.030 (0.040)	0.001 (0.033)	-0.012 (0.031)
Education	0.124 (0.085)	0.147** (0.070)	0.103 (0.066)	0.120 (0.085)	0.144** (0.071)	0.102 (0.066)	0.118 (0.085)	0.142** (0.071)	0.101 (0.066)
Race	-0.330*** (0.063)	-0.218*** (0.060)	-0.024 (0.062)	-0.348*** (0.063)	-0.231*** (0.060)	-0.033 (0.062)	-0.348*** (0.064)	-0.230*** (0.061)	-0.033 (0.062)
Gender	-0.404*** (0.156)	-0.164 (0.129)	0.213* (0.123)	-0.409*** (0.156)	-0.169 (0.130)	0.211* (0.123)	-0.394** (0.157)	-0.157 (0.130)	0.214* (0.123)
Party Identification	-1.206*** (0.134)	-0.985*** (0.108)	-0.191* (0.101)	-1.485*** (0.171)	-1.126*** (0.125)	-0.274** (0.115)	-1.470*** (0.171)	-1.116*** (0.125)	-0.271** (0.115)
Importance of Religion	-0.170** (0.075)	-0.003 (0.061)	0.063 (0.058)	-0.180** (0.075)	-0.009 (0.062)	0.059 (0.059)	-0.102 (0.090)	0.053 (0.072)	0.072 (0.068)
Party Identification *				0.772*** (0.254)	0.512** (0.211)	0.319 (0.194)	0.743*** (0.255)	0.484** (0.212)	0.308 (0.196)
Religion match *							-0.244 (0.157)	-0.220 (0.134)	-0.056 (0.129)
Religion Important									
Constant	5.281*** (0.611)	4.570*** (0.532)	1.200** (0.518)	5.856*** (0.647)	4.940*** (0.555)	1.443*** (0.539)	5.612*** (0.663)	4.733*** (0.567)	1.405** (0.550)
Observations	1,441	1,441	1,441	1,441	1,441	1,441	1,441	1,441	1,441
Pseudo R-Square	0.171	0.171	0.171	0.174	0.174	0.174	0.175	0.175	0.175

Source: Author's Data, truncated to exclude those who think Obama is Muslim.

Note: Entries are regression coefficients from a multinomial probit model, standard errors are in parentheses. —Never is the baseline category. *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01, two-tail test.

Each of the columns in Table 1 display regression coefficients from a model predicting the probability of someone selecting that response relative to never. Since belief that President Obama is Muslim is associated with extreme conservatism and opposition to Obama, the models were run both with and without respondents who thought Obama was Muslim and the results do not change. The reported models used the truncated data, because the size of the effects are smaller. The first three columns are from the base model that does not include any interaction terms. The coefficients in the first model are consistent across response categories and are in the expected direction. All else equal, someone who shares a religious identity is significantly more likely to respond that they trust President Obama just about always and some of the time than to say that they never trust him, the same is true for liberals and democrats. As one becomes more liberal and attachment to the Democratic Party increases, they are significantly more likely to trust President Obama. By contrast, older people are significantly less likely to trust President Obama. There are significant racial differences that are not readily visible in Table 4, but in the categorical regression model, it is clear that racial minorities are more likely to trust President Obama than white people. Finally, those for whom religion is important are less likely to say that they trust Obama just about always; they are more likely to respond that they never trust him.

The next three columns in Table 1 display the regression coefficients from the model that includes an interaction between partisanship and religion match. This model explains a little more variation than the first model. In this model, the main effect of religion match and importance of religion are not statistically significant, but the interaction between partisanship and religion match is significant for the first two response categories. This suggests that the relationship between partisan identity and trusting President Obama to do what is right is

moderated by a shared religious identity. The next section probes the size and direction of this effect.

The final three columns show the results from the final model, which includes an interaction between the importance of religion and shared religious identity. I expect findings consistent with the House approval analyses; respondents for whom religion is important will be more likely to trust Obama if they share a religious identity. Overall, the findings in this model are similar to those in earlier models. In addition, the coefficients on the interactions are statistically significant. However, while the model r-square is slightly higher than those from the previous two models, the coefficients on the interaction between religion match and importance of religion fail to achieve statistical significance. As such, I conclude that matching religious identity does not moderate the relationship between the importance of religion and trusting president Obama. In sum, there is a significant main effect between shared religious identity and the probability of trusting President Obama. In addition, a shared religious identity moderates the relationship between partisanship and the probability of trusting the president.

Table 2: Predicted Trust in President Obama by Shared Religious Identity and Race

Trust Obama		Never	Only Some of the Time	Most of the time	Just About Always	Total
Religion	Shared Religious Identity	0.084 (.013)	0.395 (.019)	0.399 (.020)	0.12 (.010)	0.998
	Different Religious Identity	0.124 (.014)	0.401 (.029)	0.398 (.029)	0.075 (.019)	0.998
Race	African American	0.053 (.021)	0.215 (.045)	0.485 (.049)	0.215 (.038)	0.968
	Multi-Racial	0.103 (.049)	0.328 (.089)	0.364 (.092)	0.204 (.085)	0.999
	White	0.125 (.013)	0.451 (.019)	0.358 (.018)	0.066 (.009)	1

Note: Entries are the model predicted probability of trusting President Obama, standard error in parentheses. Calculated with the effects package in R 3.12. Total column less than 1 due to rounding.

Just how much does shared religious identity influence public trust of President Obama?

Table 2 displays the predicted probability of trusting President Obama for racial categories and for shared religious identity categories. Conventional wisdom holds that African Americans overwhelmingly support, approve of, and trust President Obama. All else equal, the probability of an African American reporting that they trust Obama ‘just about always’ is 0.22, ‘most of the time’ is 0.49, ‘only some of the time’ is 0.22 and ‘never’ is 0.05. By contrast the probability of a white person reporting that they trust Obama ‘just about always’ is 0.07, ‘most of the time’ is 0.36, ‘only some of the time’ is 0.45 and ‘never’ is 0.13. As expected, racial identity is associated with quite a gap in trust of the President. Though not as large, the trust gap based on religious identity is quite substantial. All else equal, someone who shares a religious identity is 60% more likely to report trusting the President ‘just about always’ and 32% less likely to ‘never’ trust President Obama than someone who does not. These findings suggest that when people share a religious identity with public officials, they are more likely to trust them (H1).

Table 3: Predicted Trust in Obama by Party Identification and Shared Religion

Shared Religious Identity		<u>Trust Obama</u>				Total
		Never	Only Some of the Time	Most of the time	Just About Always	
Yes	Democrat	0.05 (0.02)	0.24 (0.04)	0.49 (0.04)	0.21 (0.04)	0.99
	Independent	0.13(0.03)	0.44 (0.04)	0.36 (0.04)	0.06 (0.02)	0.99
	Republican	0.15 (0.04)	0.59 (0.07)	0.13 (0.05)	0.12 (0.05)	0.99
	Democrat	0.03 (0.01)	0.23 (0.02)	0.57 (0.03)	0.17 (0.02)	1

No	Independent	0.19 (0.02)	0.45 (0.03)	0.33 (0.03)	0.03 (0.01)	1
	Republican	0.26 (0.03)	0.57 (0.05)	0.15 (0.04)	0.02 (0.01)	1

Note: Entries are the model predicted probability of trusting President Obama, standard error in parentheses. Calculated with the effects package in R 3.12. Total column less than 1 due to rounding.

Finally, religious identity significantly moderates the relationship between partisanship and trust in President Obama. For Democrats, the probability of trusting President Obama does not change much when respondents share a religious identity with the president. However, for Republicans the difference is substantial. The predicted probability of a Republican trusting President Obama ‘just about always’ is 0.12 if they share a religious identity with Obama whereas it is 0.02 if they do not. It may seem like a small difference, but these numbers suggest that Republicans who share a religious identity with Obama are 500% more likely to trust him than Republicans who do not. Republicans are 42% less likely to ‘never’ trust the president than Republicans who do not share a religious identity with President Obama. Perhaps because religious Americans are largely divided along party lines, the influence of religious descriptive representation on trust in Obama is much larger among Republicans than among Democrats and Independents.

In total, the findings presented in this paper suggest that religious identity influences approval of and trust in elected officials. The dominant view of descriptive representation is that public officials who share demographic characteristics with their constituents can represent these groups, even when they disagree about policy specifics. The central question of this paper is whether religious identity is strong enough to allow for descriptive representation. The findings presented here suggest that shared religious identity strongly influences support for elected

officials. The second question is if religious based descriptive representation is independent of racial and partisan based identities. Again, these findings suggest that religious identification has a substantial independent influence on support for elected officials. It is difficult to think of a group that would be less likely to trust President Obama in 2015 than Republicans. Yet, a Republican who shared a religious identity with the president was substantially more likely to trust him than one who did not.

Study II

Those who share a religious identity with the President may be more likely to trust him, but does this trust result in persuasion? Using actual text from a National Presidential Prayer Breakfast speech given in 2014, I randomly assigned participants to one of three experimental conditions to test the capacity of the President to motivate greater religious beliefs among the US population. For reasons discussed earlier, I expect those who share a religion with President Obama to be more likely to agree with his religious statements than those who do not (H2). However, recent research suggests that in politically polarized environments partisan motivations may have a stronger influence than source cues (Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013). Yet, Druckman et al (2013) were interested in elite cues on political discourse, not religious. It is possible that those who trust the President may be more likely to follow his lead on religious issues.

Respondents were instructed to read the following text:

—What follows is exact text from a speech OR [given by a public official] OR [given by President Barack Obama] on February 6, 2014. Please read this speech excerpt. It is important that you read all of the information provided, understand what you have read, and keep the information in mind as you finish the questionnaire. You may refer back to the speech while answering the questions. We will be asking you to read the remarks and make judgments about the information. Today, we profess the principles we know to be true. We believe that each of us is —wonderfully made” in the image of God. We, therefore, believe in the inherent dignity of every human being -- dignity that no earthly power can take away... Our faith teaches us that in the face of suffering, we can’t stand idly by and that we must be that Good Samaritan. In Isaiah,

we're told ~~to~~ do right. Seek justice. Defend the oppressed." The Torah commands: "Know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt." The Koran instructs: "Stand out firmly for justice."... And as we pray for all prisoners of conscience, whatever their faiths, wherever they're held, let's imagine what it must be like for them. We may not know their names, but all around the world there are people who are waking up in cold cells, facing another day of confinement, another day of unspeakable treatment, simply because they are affirming God. Despite all they've endured, despite all the awful punishments if caught, they will wait for that moment when the guards aren't looking, and when they can close their eyes and bring their hands together and pray. In those moments of peace, of grace, those moments when their faith is tested in ways that those of us who are more comfortable never experience; in those far-away cells, I believe their unbroken souls are made stronger. And I hope that somehow they hear our prayers for them, that they know that, along with the spirit of God, they have our spirit with them as well, and that they are not alone."

The text of the speech remains the same for all groups, but the source of the speech is either attributed to nobody, a public official, or President Obama. Respondents' were instructed to think about the content of the speech and use a scale where 1 means "completely disagree" and 10 means "completely agree", to indicate how much they agree with the following statements from the speech: 1) Every person is created in the image of God; 2) People are endowed with dignity from God that cannot be taken away by earthly powers; 3) Each of us has a duty to defend the oppressed; 4) I admire people who are willing to suffer for their faith; 5) I admire those who pray to God whenever they get the opportunity; 6) Praying for prisoners of conscience does some good; and 7) It is appropriate for someone to give this speech.

The second hypothesis implies a moderated effect. The relationship between a shared religious identity and agreement with religious statements from the speech depends on who is giving the speech. As such, shared religious identity and experiment treatment condition are modeled with an interaction term. The first series of models predicts agreement with the first three statements by experiment group and shared religious identity with President Obama.

Table 4: Predicted Support for Religious Statements by Treatment and Shared Religious Identity

	(1) Image of God	(2) God Endows People with Dignity	(3) Duty to Defend the Oppressed
Treatment Group	0.080 (0.112)	0.062 (0.107)	0.104 (0.085)
Shared Religious Identity	0.593** (0.231)	0.517** (0.228)	0.337* (0.198)
Treatment Group * Shared Religious Identity	-0.070 (0.177)	-0.080 (0.177)	-0.213 (0.151)
Constant	7.485*** (0.142)	7.192*** (0.134)	7.566*** (0.108)
Observations	1,379	1,397	1,445
R-squared	0.009	0.006	0.002

Source: Author's Data

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$, two-tail test.

Table 4 shows virtually no support for the second hypothesis. Those who were exposed to different treatments are statistically just as likely as each other to agree with the statements. It seems that varying the source of the religious statement did nothing to change religious attitudes in the American public. Moreover, the model r-squares are so low that even the statistically significant coefficient for shared religious identity does not suggest a substantively large effect.

Of course, much like Jimmy Carter's "Crisis of Confidence" speech caused a public opinion backlash, it is possible that many respondents are simply opposed to any public official speaking on religious topics. Perhaps some Americans support a stronger division between public officials and private religious beliefs. The next series of models include the typical control variables along with an additional control for those who think that it is inappropriate for a public official to give a religious speech.

Table 5: Predicted Support for Statements in the Speech

	(1) Index of Religious Statements	(2) Inappropriate to Give Speech	(3) Inappropriate to Give Speech
Experiment	0.969*** (0.220)	-0.277*** (0.081)	-0.288*** (0.078)
Party Identification	1.075*** (0.206)	0.150 (0.098)	-0.013 (0.097)
Gender	0.909*** (0.295)	0.124 (0.133)	0.080 (0.130)
Income	0.052 (0.078)	0.011 (0.035)	0.007 (0.034)
Race	-0.517*** (0.102)	-0.116** (0.052)	0.013 (0.053)
Education	-0.098 (0.162)	0.108 (0.075)	0.092 (0.073)
Age	0.056*** (0.010)	0.021*** (0.004)	0.021*** (0.004)
Trust Obama	0.064*** (0.021)	-0.010 (0.010)	-0.012 (0.009)
Religion Match	1.497*** (0.469)	0.360** (0.145)	0.223 (0.143)
Appropriate to give this speech	1.480*** (0.071)		
Religion Match x Appropriate to give the Speech	-0.642* (0.356)		
Religiosity			2.863*** (0.312)
Constant	6.234*** (1.084)	5.852*** (0.487)	5.052*** (0.474)
Observations	1,308	1,396	1,396
R-squared	0.375	0.038	0.092

Source: Author's Data

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$, two-tail test.

The first model in Table 5 explains much more variation than the models in Table 4. In short, the model performs as expected controlling for those who think that it is appropriate to give the speech. Perceptions of whether the speech should be given by a public official explains

most of the variation (roughly 32%) in support for the religious statements in the text. Thus, while the evidence seems to suggest that those who share a religious identity with President Obama are more likely to agree with his religious statements, the entirety of the evidence finds very little empirical support for this (H2).

What explains attitudes about whether the speech is appropriate? Age, religiosity and experimental effects are significantly associated with attitudes about whether it is appropriate to give the speech. The more religious and older the respondent, the more likely they are to think that the National Prayer Breakfast speech is appropriate. In addition, those in the control group were significantly more likely to think the speech was appropriate than those in the “Obama” or “public official” groups. All else equal, people do not think that it is appropriate for public officials or the President to speak on the topic of religion.

Conclusion

This paper illustrates both positive and negative influences of religion in presidential politics. Americans today are not supportive of presidential speeches on religion. Religious speeches do not motivate greater public support for the ideas contained in the speech, even among those who share a religious identity with the President. In addition, Americans are significantly less likely to think that it is appropriate for President Obama to give a speech on a religious topic than they are a general member of the American public. In this sense, Americans seem to favor a strong separation of religion and official public behavior.

However, religious identity motivates greater support for the President. Those who believe that they share a religious identity with the President are significantly more likely to trust him. Moreover, this trust is independent of partisanship. This is encouraging because as the

partisan American public becomes more ideologically distinct, Presidents may have greater policy flexibility among those who share a religious identity. Democratic Presidents might be able to pursue conservative policies without losing the support religious Democrats (Claassen 2015) and they can support a liberal agenda without alienating all cross-partisans. Republicans who share a religious identity with President Obama are significantly more likely to trust him than Republicans who do not.

Finally, this may explain why so many Republicans report a mistaken belief that President Obama is Muslim. Religious social identity has a strong influence on attitudes about others. Acknowledging that a President with whom one disagrees politically shares a religious worldview may cause psychological discomfort. Given the choice between a weakened religious social identity, positive attitudes about President Obama, or belief that Obama is a member of a completely different religious persuasion; selecting the latter may cause the least dissonance. If so, this is simply another example of people adopting unusual beliefs to avoid cognitive dissonance.

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