

# Courting Christians: How Political Candidates Prime Religious Considerations in Campaign Ads

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*Religion occupies a central role in American politics. From being an impetus behind numerous political movements, to shaping how political candidates are considered, scholars and pundits alike have emphasized the role of religion for political behavior and attitudes. Yet, there has been a scarcity of empirical work examining the consequences of religious appeals in campaigns. Drawing on recent work that contends views about religious traditionalism have replaced many interdenominational differences in vote choice and issue attitudes, we argue that religious cues activate religious traditionalism, which subsequently influences how political candidates are considered. In a priming experiment administered to a representative cross-section of adults, we examine whether religious priming occurs. By manipulating the participant's information environment, we also examine whether there are limits to priming. We find strong evidence religious traditionalism is activated when religious cues are embedded in campaign ads, but we find priming effects are reduced when participants are provided information about the candidate. While religious cues have the potential to shape how candidates are evaluated, we argue the consequences of religious cues are dampened among those who learn more about political issues and candidates.*

Religion plays a central role in American society and politics.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, a driving force behind realignment of the parties has been religious, most notably the mobilization of the religious right and the gravitation of religious traditionalists toward the Republican Party coupled with secularists and progressives increasing alignment with the Democratic Party (Dionne 1991; Layman 2001; Putnam and Campbell 2010). Scholars and pundits alike contend religion plays an essential role in structuring how the parties (Layman 1997), issues (Cassese 2007; Putnam and Campbell 2010), and candidates (Domke and Coe 2008) are considered. Over the past several decades, there has been an uptick in the politicized role of religion and social issues relative to fiscal voter concerns (Abramowitz 1995; Frank 2004; Layman and Carmines 1997; for counterevidence, see Bartels 2008). At the same time, religious research into denominational differences suggests religious differences are now predominately *intradenomina-*tional, rather than *interdenominational* (Layman 2001), and a potent predictor for a host of political

behavior has been contrasting those who endorse a more traditional approach to religious doctrine relative to those who endorse a more liberal, progressive approach (Guth et al. 2006; Hammond, Shibley, and Solow 1994; Layman 2001).

Voters' increasing reliance on religion to formulate political decisions comes as political elites have dramatically increased use of religious themes and symbols in elite rhetoric. Since the 1980s, for example, American presidents have invoked God far more than in prior decades (Domke and Coe 2008). Many appeals are likewise "narrowcasted," wherein elites use coded language and symbols that resonate with the faithful while not alienating less religious voters (Calfano and Djupe 2009; Domke and Coe 2008). Extending this literature as well as recent work on priming in psychology and political science, we contend religious language and symbolic imagery may activate religious beliefs that are then used in subsequent evaluation (Huber and Lapinski 2006; Mendelberg 1997, 2001; Valentino, Hutchings, and White 2002). Yet, we argue there are limitations to

<sup>1</sup>An online appendix including a description of the estimation procedure can be found at [www.cambridge.org/cjo/priming\\_religion](http://www.cambridge.org/cjo/priming_religion). The data can be downloaded from <http://www.tessexperiments.org/previousstudies.html>.

priming effects; primes will only resonate with voters when they are both applicable and accessible (Althaus and Mie Kim 2006; Higgins 1996).

The primary aim of this article is to better understand when and under what conditions religious considerations are activated in the context of a political campaign. Do religious code words and symbols embedded in campaign ads activate religious considerations, which are subsequently used in candidate evaluation; of equal importance, when and under what conditions does religious priming occur? Relying on an experiment administered to a representative cross-section of adults, the analysis presented makes clear that religious traditionalism—adhering to a liberal or conservative interpretation of religious doctrine and tradition—can be a potent predictor of candidate evaluation when primed in campaign advertisements. We demonstrate, however, that these effects are bounded. Specifically, environments rife with secular information substantially reduce religious priming effects. Prior to detailing these results, we review the now expansive literature on the role of religion in contemporary American politics and describe how religious language embedded in campaign advertisements has the potential to impact evaluations of political leaders.

## Communicating The Culture Wars

Religion, and the role it plays in politics, has changed in recent years. Divisions between major religious traditions in the United States have been displaced by differences within religious denominations (Hunter 1991). Following Hunter's (1991) "culture wars" hypothesis, recent work has demonstrated that between-denominational variations have been overshadowed by within-denominational differences, where "orthodox" and "progressive" factions within the major religious traditions now exert a powerful role over sociopolitical beliefs (Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2006; Gold and Russell 1994; Green and Guth 1991; Wuthnow 1988). The potency of religion now resides in one's interpretation of religious doctrine and tradition (Hunter 1991; Layman 1997; Putnam and Campbell 2010).

Empirical work has detailed various political differences between those who favor a more traditional religious worldview relative to those who endorse a more liberal perspective (Green, Guth, and Fraser 1991; Layman 2001; Wuthnow 1988). Religious traditionalists are more likely to hold fundamentalist religious beliefs and believe the Bible

is the literal word of God. In politics, they typically hold conservative issue positions, especially on culturally divisive policy, and traditionalists have increasingly aligned with the GOP (Hunter 1991; Layman 2001). Partisan polarization has also been linked to religion, as religious traditionalists and secularists have sorted themselves into the Republican and Democratic parties, respectively (Domke and Coe 2008; Layman 2001). Relative to the predictive power of denominational identification, religious traditionalism has increasingly predicted party identification, issue positions, vote choice, and presidential approval over the past several decades (Layman 1997, 2001; Layman and Carmines 1997; Olson and Warber 2008). While disagreement remains over whether cultural issues have displaced economic factors as dominant political considerations in the mass public (Bartels 2008; Frank 2004; Weber and Federico 2007), cultural issues have been particularly resonant among religiously traditional voters (Hunter 1991).

In addition to the increasing role of religion in the mass public, political elites have pivoted to religious voters. Domke and Coe (2008) demonstrate that American presidents increasingly visit locations sacred to the religiously committed, such as the Vatican and religious universities; presidents have also declared more days of prayer and imbue speeches with religious terms and imagery. Similarly, party platforms are now more likely to draw on cultural issues—such as abortion, homosexual marriage, and school prayer—that resonate with religious voters (Domke and Coe 2008). Coe and Domke (2006) note a marked increase in religious rhetoric beginning with Ronald Reagan, with more recent presidents relying even more heavily on religious themes. Guth (2004), for instance, finds that President George W. Bush employed religious themes considerably more than his predecessors, primarily to court conservative Christian voters.

Many religious appeals draw on coded themes and images that do not alienate secular voting blocs, but nonetheless resonate with religious voters (Albertson 2006; Calfano and Djupe 2009; Domke and Coe 2008; Kuo 2006; Weiss 2010). Calfano and Djupe elaborate on "the code," a "highly sophisticated communication strategy that is designed to appeal to an in-group without rousing out-group suspicions" (2009, 329). In political speeches Republicans have drawn on biblical passages, such as "An America that recognizes the infinite worth of every individual and leaves the ninety-nine to find the one stray lamb" and "we have this land and are told to be good stewards of it and to be good stewards of each other" (Kuo 2006, 60, cited in Calfano and Djupe 2009, 329). In a novel experiment,

Calfano and Djupe (2009) demonstrate that elite rhetoric drawing on “the code” enhanced favorability of candidates among evangelical voters. Though these appeals resonate with religious traditionalists, they go largely undetected by less religious voters, simultaneously appealing to the faithful, yet not alienating secularists.

We extend this line of inquiry by examining whether religious cues prime religious preferences. Drawing on priming literature in political science and communication, we anticipate that religious cues should serve as an information shortcut, helping individuals navigate political information environments thereby efficiently reaching decisions about political candidates. We also test whether there are bounds to priming, by examining the extent to which secular information mitigates priming effects.

### **(De)Activating Religious Traditionalism**

A corpus of work demonstrates that imagery and coded language in political messages shape how political issues and candidates are considered (among others, Huber and Lapinski 2006; Krosnick and Kinder 1990; Mendelberg 2001; Miller and Krosnick 2000; Peffley and Hurwitz 2007; Valentino, Hutchings, and White 2002). Much of this work hinges on *priming*—the psychological process by which a stimulus activates a particular “knowledge structure,” which is in turn consulted in subsequent evaluation (Higgins 1996). Iyengar and Kinder (1987) extend this process to politics, describing how aspects of one’s environment may alter how political parties, candidates, and issues are considered.

Typically, priming effects have been explained by cognitive accessibility, where frequently activated knowledge structures are more likely to move from long term to working memory (Domke, Shah, and Wackman 1998; Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Zaller 1992). In addition to *accessibility*, scholars have also noted the centrality of *applicability* (Althaus and Mie Kim 2006; Higgins and Brendl 1995). Knowledge structures deemed more appropriate and relevant in a particular context are more likely to be relied on in evaluation (Higgins 1996). Althaus and Mie Kim (2006) demonstrate, in the context of the first Gulf War, recently aired news stories, which they use an indicator of accessibility, *and* the cumulative number of news stories, an indicator of applicability, both contributed to priming effects. Similarly, Devine (1989)

finds that accessible racial attitudes alter the standard by which a target is evaluated, but only when individuals do not have the motivation and opportunity to suppress their negative racial beliefs, a finding congruent with Mendelberg’s (2001) research on the electoral consequences of the 1988 Willie Horton advertisement. In many contexts, primes are more potent when participants are unaware of their presence (Higgins 1996).

Priming effects have been documented in numerous political domains, ranging from race (Huber and Lapinski 2006; Mendelberg 2001) to trait evaluations (Iyengar and Kinder 1987), to defense policy (Krosnick and Kinder 1990; see also, Althaus and Mie Kim 2006), and value orientations (Feldman and Stenner 1997; Stenner 2005). Yet, we know of no work examining the extent to which religious beliefs are activated in electoral politics, an issue that warrants further scrutiny given the onslaught of the “culture wars” (Hunter 1991). To explore this, we rely on a simple experiment in which we vary the presence or absence of religious cues in an advertisement. This serves as a direct manipulation of *accessibility*. Our first expectation is that *religious symbols embedded within campaign advertisements will make salient religious traditionalism, which will be subsequently used in candidate evaluation*. We call this hypothesis the *priming hypothesis*. Consistent with previous literature (Huber and Lapinski 2006; Mendelberg 2001; Valentino, Hutchings, and White 2002), we expect to find a two-way *Religious Cue x Religious Tradition* interaction in predicting candidate evaluations. Religious considerations will be a stronger predictor of candidate evaluation insofar as general words and phrases aligned with Christianity (e.g., “Worship” and “The Sanctity of Life”) are present.

Recent work has also documented bounds to priming. In particular, priming is more likely to occur among those who are political novices (Huber and Lapinski 2006; Krosnick and Kinder 1990). Krosnick and Kinder (1990) contend experts are less susceptible to priming primarily because they have more complex belief structures that are less susceptible to a single piece of information.

A given construct may be *accessible*, but in order for a prime to activate a predisposition, that predisposition must also be *applicable* (Althaus and Mie Kim 2006; Higgins 1996; Krosnick and Brannon 1993). Since experts are able to draw on a richer bin of considerations, this decreases the probability that a single piece of information is applicable (Zaller 1992; Zaller and Feldman 1992). Huber and Lapinski (2006) offer a somewhat different explanation for why expertise moderates priming: experts rely on a

predisposition in the absence of a prime, primarily because they do not need a prime to connect their predisposition to evaluation. On the other hand, political novices are “relatively ripe for priming, since they will not automatically bring predispositions to bear in constructing opinions” (Huber and Lapinski 2006, 433).

Extending this line of inquiry, we manipulate the participant’s information environment to examine whether diverse knowledge about a candidate affects susceptibility to religious primes. While we do not claim to manipulate expertise, a relatively stable individual difference factor, we can vary the amount of information participants know about the candidate. This allows us to ascertain whether the presence of politically relevant information alters priming. As such, our second hypothesis is: *individuals exposed to a religious cue in a rich information environment should be less susceptible to priming—they should view religious traditionalism as less applicable—than individuals exposed to a religious cue in an impoverished information environment.* That is, exposure to nonreligious political information will moderate religious priming effects, which we call the *information hypothesis*. Given the importance of religion in politics, we expect ads drawing on religious symbols will activate, or prime, traditional versus progressive religious considerations, which will then be used in evaluation. However, we anticipate limitations to these effects. Priming should be reduced in contexts among individuals who possess a larger array of secular information about the candidate. To test these expectations, we rely on a priming experiment administered to a representative sample of U.S. adults.

## The Experiment

**Pretest.** We developed a simple experiment to test these two hypotheses. In the pretest, participants completed a short battery of questions on their degree of religious traditionalism.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, we ask a question on Biblical literalism drawn from the General Social Survey: “Which of the following best describes your feelings about the Bible? The Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken literally, word for word; The Bible is the inspired word of

God, but not everything in it should be taken literally, word for word; The Bible is a book of fables written by men and is not the word of God.” We also assess participants’ views of tradition based on question from the Fourth National Survey of Religion and Politics (2004): “Which description best describes your views about religious tradition? We should strive to preserve beliefs and practices; we should strive to adapt beliefs and practices to new times; we should strive to adopt new beliefs and practices.” A fundamentalist versus progressive orientation was asked with a single item: “Which of the following best describes your religious views? Fundamentalist/Evangelical; Traditional/Conservative; Mainline/Moderate; Progressive/Liberal; Not Religious.” Finally we ask participants, “How certain are you that Jesus Christ is the Son of God?”<sup>3</sup>





**Treatment.** After completing the pretest questionnaire, participants were instructed they would be exposed to campaign information released by Saxby Chambliss for Senate. We chose a senate race, as opposed to a presidential race, as we did not want a heavily polarizing figure to overshadow our information manipulation (Taber and Lodge 2006). We anticipated that it would be easier to manipulate a participant’s information environment with a less polarizing figure. Respondents were then randomly assigned to one of four treatment conditions following from a 2 (Information: Present, Absent) x 2 (Prime: Present, Absent) between-subjects design. Figure 1 displays our manipulations. The first factor—the information factor—was designed to manipulate the information environment. Participants were either exposed to a modified version of the 2008 Chambliss for Senate web site,<sup>4</sup> or they did not view this site. The information manipulation was intended to provide voters with the candidate’s position on the economy, taxes, energy, education, and gun control, and, although we modified the webpage to fit within the confines of our study, the positions are generally consistent with the candidate’s actual issue positions in 2008. We intentionally excluded references to religion or issues typically associated with religion

<sup>2</sup>The pretest questions may have primed religious traditionalism. Yet, including these in a posttest may have resulted in an effect of the treatments on these beliefs. The pretest questions were also equivalent across groups, rendering cross group comparisons reasonable.

<sup>3</sup>In the pretest we also asked additional religion questions. Since much of the literature agrees that religious traditionalism is a more diagnostic indicator of political attitudes (Hunter 1991; Layman 2001), we do not include analyses of these items.

<sup>4</sup>Although we used a modified version from Chambliss’s actual campaign web site, as accessed in 2008, it is important to note the modified web site manipulation offers ideologically similar information with Chambliss’ issue positions in 2008. The issue positions detailed in the web site manipulation are also similar to Chambliss’ current positions, which can be found on his senate web site available at: <http://chambliss.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/issues>.

FIGURE 1 Experimental Conditions

Candidate Information (present, absent)	Advertisement (Cues: present, absent)
<p data-bbox="467 279 618 300"><b>Meet the Candidate</b></p> <p data-bbox="188 300 898 359">This is the website of Saxby Chambliss for U.S. Senate. Please read Saxby's views on the issues. Once you have finished reading the website, you will watch a political advertisement and complete some questions about Saxby Chambliss.</p>  <p data-bbox="386 596 703 617"><b>SAXBY CHAMBLISS for U.S. SENATE</b></p> <p data-bbox="492 621 597 642"><b>On the Issues</b></p> <p data-bbox="183 642 253 663"><b>Economy</b></p> <p data-bbox="183 663 902 722">I believe we must make certain that we promote American manufacturing and work to benefit the small business community in this country, as that is where the majority of the jobs in this country are created. Most importantly, I am opposed to raising taxes and increasing the size of government.</p> <p data-bbox="183 722 232 743"><b>Taxes</b></p> <p data-bbox="183 743 902 842">I support lower taxes to put more money back into the pockets of working American families. We must continue working to eliminate the marriage penalty, the capital gains tax on investments, the death tax, and further lower marginal tax rates across the board for working men and women. I also support implementation of the FairTax, which would shift the federal government's method of revenue collection from income to personal consumption.</p> <p data-bbox="183 842 240 863"><b>Energy</b></p> <p data-bbox="183 863 902 942">If we are to have national security and economic independence, we need to reduce our dependence upon foreign sources of energy. I will support policies that increase the diversification of energy sources and develop domestic sources of energy, including drilling for oil, mining coal, and developing hydroelectric, wind, and alternative energy sources.</p> <p data-bbox="183 942 261 963"><b>Education</b></p> <p data-bbox="183 963 902 1043">As the husband of a teacher who worked for more than 30 years in the classroom, I know there is no more important job than educating America's young people. I'm a proud supporter of the landmark education reform law, No Child Left Behind, which seeks to ensure America's children are reaching their learning potential.</p> <p data-bbox="183 1043 331 1064"><b>Second Amendment</b></p> <p data-bbox="183 1064 902 1123">As an avid sportsman, I have been and will always be a staunch supporter of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Amendment. Throughout my career I've always defended the rights of law abiding Americans to bear arms for not only recreation, but also protection.</p>	<p data-bbox="1292 268 1360 289"><b>Ad Copy:</b></p> <p data-bbox="1203 306 1446 386">"I believe the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution are as relevant today as when they were written.</p> <p data-bbox="1203 407 1446 466">I believe the American Dream is more possible today than ever before.</p> <p data-bbox="1203 487 1446 625">I believe in hard work, and I believe individuals should be able to keep the money they earn rather than having it taken away from them in the form of high and unfair taxes. I believe in personal choices, not government dictates.</p> <p data-bbox="1203 646 1446 726">I believe Americans should be able to choose their doctors, choose their schools <b><i>and choose how they worship.</i></b></p> <p data-bbox="1203 747 1446 806">I believe in capitalism and competition. <b><i>I believe in a loving and all-powerful God.</i></b></p> <p data-bbox="1203 827 1446 1003">My beliefs and values require me to fight for smaller government, lower taxes, <b><i>the sanctity of life,</i></b> the rights of individuals, for personal freedoms and responsibilities and the right of each of us to help our children seek their dreams without government trying to control our lives.</p> <p data-bbox="1203 1024 1446 1083">I'm Saxby Chambliss, and I approve this message. I ask for your vote on November 4<sup>th</sup>."</p>   

Source: This figure was adapted from Chambliss's 2008 campaign web site and "values" advertisement.

so as to not prime religious traditionalism in the information manipulation. The purpose of this manipulation was to ascertain whether providing secular information reduces the marginal impact of the prime.

Next, participants were exposed to an advertisement released by Saxby Chambliss. All participants viewed Chambliss' "Values" advertisement.<sup>5</sup> The ad was selected based on three important criteria: it uses religious cues, it lacks identifiable partisan cues, and it is an advertisement from an actual campaign. The only factor that varies across conditions was the presence of religious cues in the ad. In one condition, participants viewed the ad in its original form, which included three phrases: Americans should "be able to choose how they worship," "I believe in a loving and all powerful God," and my beliefs force me to fight

for, "the sanctity of life." The original advertisement is on the right side of Figure 1 and includes the bold font. While participants in the treatment condition were exposed to the complete advertisement in its original form, participants in the control condition were exposed to the commercial with the three religious cues removed (the ad without the bold font in figure 1). Thus, in one condition the religious cues were present, in the other they were absent. Save for these subtle modifications, the ads were equivalent and provided an appropriate baseline, control condition.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup>The "Values" ad was originally obtained from Chambliss' 2008 campaign web site. The ad remains available for viewing in its original form on his YouTube channel available at: [http://www.youtube.com/user/SenatorChambliss?blend=10&ob=5#p/f/11/Z3\\_8zOd\\_6Zk](http://www.youtube.com/user/SenatorChambliss?blend=10&ob=5#p/f/11/Z3_8zOd_6Zk).

<sup>6</sup>The video was edited in three places using a video-editing program. The first two edits were straightforward. Chambliss was not talking to the camera, so we only cut "B-roll" rendering a smooth transition between frames. We also edited the audio to fade at these places. The third edit was more difficult. We were forced to leave the cue or edit the cue using a subtle "jump cut." We opted for the latter, since it was more important for us to purge the ad of religious cues. Also, Chambliss expressed nearly identical facial expressions between and after the phrase, so the image does not appear modified. We did not add any information to the cue condition.

**Posttest.** Following exposure to the treatments, participants then completed a posttest survey intended to measure reactions to Chambliss. Vote choice was ascertained with a single question, “On a scale of 0 to 10, how likely is it that you would vote for Saxby Chambliss, if you could?” A general evaluation of Chambliss was asked with a feeling thermometer question, “On a scale from 0 to 100 where 0 means ‘dislike very much’ and 100 means ‘like very much,’ how much do you like Saxby Chambliss?” We rescaled both vote choice and evaluations to vary from 0 to 1, where high scores denote a greater propensity to vote for Chambliss and a more positive evaluation, respectively. Four trait items were also asked, “Thinking about Saxby Chambliss, in your opinion how well does the term [QUALIFIED/MORAL/DISHONEST/STRONG] describe Saxby Chambliss?” The trait items were asked on a 5-point scale from “Not Well at All” to “Extremely Well” ( $\alpha=0.86$ ). We use a graded response model to scale respondents according to their degree of positive evaluations toward Chambliss. The scores vary from 0 (negative evaluation) to 1 (positive evaluation).

Finally, because voters should prefer candidates who hold similar political preferences (Downs 1957), we also include two subjective proximity measures. *Religious Proximity* was measured with “How much do you agree or disagree with the statement: Saxby Chambliss shares my religious views,” and *political proximity* was measured with “Saxby Chambliss shares my political views.” Both proximity items were asked on a 4-point Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree scale.

## Results

The experiment was hosted by *Knowledge Networks* and was fielded from early to mid-August 2010. We also used a *Knowledge Networks* panel: 562 adults recruited through random-digit dialing completed the survey.<sup>7</sup> We restrict our analyses to Christian identifiers, since the religious beliefs items we employed were targeted to detect variation in attitudes towards religious doctrine and tradition within Christianity (e.g., “Which of the following best

describes your feelings about the Bible?”; “Which of the following pairs of terms describe your religious views—Evangelical/Fundamentalist, Traditional/Conservative, Mainline/Moderate, Progressive/Liberal, Not Religious,”<sup>8</sup> and, “How certain are you that Jesus Christ is the Son of God?”). Moreover, the religious cues embedded in the campaign advertisement were designed to appeal to a Christian rather than non-Christian viewer.

### Latent Religious Traditionalism

Table 1 indicates that Americans exhibit diverse attitudes towards religious practice and beliefs. A majority of Christian identifiers adopt a moderate position towards religious doctrine, with 57.5% believing the Bible is the inspired word of God. Yet, most respondents held relatively conservative positions on religious tradition. Fifty-four percent identified themselves as fundamentalist/evangelical or traditional/conservative. Sixty percent believed we should preserve religious beliefs, and, finally, the vast majority (73%) stated they were absolutely certain that Jesus is the Son of God.<sup>9</sup>

We included these four items in the survey to generate a single religious traditionalism score for each respondent. The items demonstrated considerable internal consistency ( $\alpha=0.73$ ;  $\alpha$  [standardized]=0.77). Because the traditionalism items were all asked on a different metric, we created a scale of religious traditionalism using an item response theory model (IRT) (Ayala 2009; Embretson and Reise 2000; Samejima 1969). The approach we use is functionally similar to several ideal-point estimation strategies used in other political science literature and is described in the online appendix (Clinton, Jackman, and Rivers 2004; Treier 2010; Treier and Jackman 2008).<sup>10</sup> We use the estimated latent religious traditionalism scores in all subsequent models. The scores were scaled to vary from 0 (religious progressivism) to 1 (religious traditionalism).

<sup>8</sup>The results are substantively similar when including non-Christian identifiers. However, our questions focused on Christianity, so we felt it inappropriate to include non-Christians.

<sup>9</sup>For this question, we collapsed the “Jesus is not the Son of God” and “Not at all Certain Jesus is the Son of God” into a single category. Since there were very few observations in these categories, we had difficulties estimating an IRT model treating these as separate categories.

<sup>10</sup>We use an IRT model primarily because our items are on different scales.

<sup>7</sup>We selected 1,298 participants from the Knowledge Networks (KN) panel; 64.7% agreed to participate ( $n=840$ ). The reported KN recruitment rate for this study was 18.8%; the profile rate was 59.2%; and the response rate of 4.7%. See Callegaro and DiSogra (2008) for information on response rates in online panels.

TABLE 1 Religious Traditionalism

Which pair of terms below best describes your religious views?	<b>Fundamentalist, Evangelical</b> 11.9	<b>Traditional, Conservative</b> 42.3	<b>Mainline, Moderate</b> 16.5	<b>Progressive, Liberal</b> 12.1	<b>Not Religious</b> 15.3	<b>DK/Missing</b> 1.9
Which description best describes your views about religious tradition?	<b>Preserve Beliefs</b> 60.0	<b>Adapt Beliefs</b> 27.4	<b>Adopt new Beliefs</b> 5.6	<b>Don't Believe</b> 5.8	<b>DK/Missing</b> 1.2	
How certain is your belief that Jesus Christ is the Son of God?	<b>Absolutely Certain</b> 73.4	<b>Somewhat Certain</b> 15.0	<b>Not Certain</b> 5.9	<b>Not at all Certain</b> 3.4	<b>Jesus is not Son of God</b> 2.3	<b>DK/Missing</b> 0
Which of the following best describes your feelings about the Bible?	<b>Literal Word</b> 34.2	<b>Inspired Word</b> 57.5	<b>Book of Fables</b> 5.8	<b>DK/Missing</b> 2.5		

Note: Entries represent the percentage of respondents in each category, and add to 100% across the columns.

### Priming Religious Traditionalism

Prior to testing our two hypotheses, we examine whether the experimental conditions influence our dependent variables—vote choice, positive evaluations, trait evaluations, and religious and political proximity. Table 2 displays the F-values from a two-way analysis of variance. The *Religious Cue* and *Information* rows represent the main effects of each treatment condition, and the interaction tests whether there are mean differences across the four treatment cells. We find no evidence to suggest that the religious cue varies across the information condition. The two-way interaction is nonsignificant for each independent variable. Likewise, the main effect of information is always nonsignificant, suggesting that providing information to voters does not affect how the voter is evaluated. For two of the five dependent variables—trait evaluations and religious proximity—we find a significant difference between respondents exposed to the cue versus no-cue condition. Specifically, respondents were more positive in their trait evaluations of Chambliss in the cue condition ( $\bar{M}=0.69$ ,  $SD=0.01$ ) than in the no-cue condition ( $\bar{M}=0.64$ ,  $SD=0.01$ ;  $t_{422}=2.42$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Likewise, respondents in the cue condition were more likely to state that Chambliss shares their religious values ( $\bar{M}=3.00$ ,  $SD=0.01$ ) relative to the no-cue condition ( $\bar{M}=2.68$ ,  $SD=0.05$ ;  $t_{422}=4.32$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). On the whole, there is a slightly more positive evaluation of Chambliss in the religious cue condition than in the no-cue condition.

Recall, however, that our two hypotheses correspond to whether these cues activate religious

traditionalism. Our first expectation (the priming hypothesis) posits that religious cues should activate religious traditionalism, which is then heavily relied upon in candidate evaluation. Evidence for priming comes in the form of a two-way interaction between religious traditionalism and the presence of religious cues embedded within the campaign advertisement. Political advertisements that include religious symbols and rhetoric should heighten the impact of religiosity on subsequent candidate evaluation. Absent those cues, however, religiosity should play less of a role. To test this, a dummy variable corresponding to one's inclusion in the religious cue condition (1) or the no-cue condition (0) was interacted with religious traditionalism. A positively signed interaction is taken as evidence of religious priming.

According to our second hypothesis (the information hypothesis) the priming effect should be attenuated among individuals previously exposed to information about the candidate. We thus include a treatment variable identifying whether one was exposed to information (1) or no information (0). Insofar as priming is heightened among the uninformed, yet dampened among those exposed to more information, it follows that we should observe a negatively signed three-way *Information x Cue x Tradition* interaction and a positively signed *Cue x Religious Traditionalism* interaction. Since we specify a three-way interaction in our models, we also control for all lower-order interactions (Brambor, Clark, and Golder 2006; Cohen et al. 2003).

To test these two hypotheses, we estimated a series of regression models. *General evaluations*, *vote preference*, *trait evaluation*, and two subjective perceptions of proximity were regressed on a dummy

**TABLE 2** Treatment Effects for General Evaluation, Vote Choice, Trait Evaluations, and Religious and Political Proximity

	Evaluation	Vote	Traits	Religious Proximity	Political Proximity
Religious Cue	F(1,432)=0.36	F(1,436)=1.24	F(1,440)=4.57, $p < 0.05$	F(1,420)=7.41, $p < 0.01$	F(1,428)=0.67
Information	F(1,432)=0.96	F(1,436)=0.00	F(1,440)=0.44	F(1,420)=0.25	F(1,428)=0.34
Cue X Info	F(1,432)=0.42	F(1,436)=0.01	F(1,440)=0.31	F(1,420)=0.18	F(1,428)=0.22

Note: F-values are nonsignificant, unless noted otherwise.

variable corresponding to the experimental prime manipulation, the candidate information manipulation, religious traditionalism, and all subsequent two- and three-way interactions.

Table 3 displays the regression estimates for these models. The first three models are Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) estimates. Since the two proximity dependent variables are categorical, the final two columns are estimates from an ordered logistic regression. Standard errors are in parentheses.<sup>11</sup>

Because of the way the variables are coded, the *Cue x Religious Traditionalism* interaction is the priming effect in the no-information condition. For all five models, this interaction is significant, suggesting a religious priming effect in the no-information condition. The *Information x Cue x Tradition* coefficient can be used as evidence to test whether the effect of traditionalism changes in the presence of added information. We view this as a test of *applicability*: Is the priming effect attenuated when participants are exposed to secular information? Except for the religious proximity model, the three-way interaction is significant, and signed such that providing added, secular information reduces the priming effect. In the absence of additional information, the effect of religiosity on candidate evaluation is greater—there is a much stronger link between religiosity and candidate evaluation in the presence of the religious cues in the advertisement. The three-way *Information x Cue x Tradition* interaction suggests that this effect is offset by providing the individual with additional information.

We further explicate these effects by a simple slopes analysis (Cohen et al. 2003), allowing us to examine the conditions in which traditionalism predicts candidate evaluation. As previously noted, a priming effect necessitates finding a significant interaction between an activating stimulus and one's predispositions—i.e., a *traditionalism x cue* interaction. In the *no-information*

condition, this interaction is statistically significant for vote preference ( $b=0.42$ ,  $SE=0.18$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), positive evaluations ( $b=0.40$ ,  $SE=0.16$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), trait evaluations ( $b=0.22$ ,  $SE=0.12$ ,  $p < 0.10$ ), religious proximity ( $b=3.19$ ,  $SE=1.20$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), and political proximity ( $b=3.23$ ,  $SE=1.18$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

We parse these two-way interactions further by estimating the effects of traditionalism in the four experimental conditions for our five dependent variables. Absent candidate information, traditionalism is more tightly bound with evaluations in the cue condition (vote preference:  $b=0.53$ ,  $SE=0.13$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ; general evaluations:  $b=0.54$ ,  $SE=0.12$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ; trait evaluations:  $b=0.37$ ,  $SE=0.08$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ; religious proximity:  $b=5.92$ ,  $SE=0.89$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ; political proximity:  $b=4.34$ ,  $SE=0.86$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Traditionalism is less bound with evaluation in the no-cue condition (vote preference:  $b=0.11$ ,  $SE=0.12$ , *ns*; general evaluation:  $b=0.14$ ,  $SE=0.11$ , *ns*; trait evaluations:  $b=0.15$ ,  $SE=0.08$ ,  $p < 0.10$ ; religious proximity:  $b=2.74$ ,  $SE=0.84$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ; political proximity:  $b=1.12$ ,  $SE=0.83$ , *ns*). Across these five dependent variables, there is clear evidence of religious priming in the no-information condition.

In the *candidate information* condition, there is little evidence of priming, as the two-way *religious traditionalism x cue* interaction is never distinguishable from zero. This interaction is small and negatively signed for vote preference ( $b=-0.23$ ,  $SE=0.18$ , *ns*), general evaluations ( $b=-0.17$ ,  $SE=0.16$ , *ns*), trait evaluations ( $b=-0.13$ ,  $SE=0.12$ , *ns*), and political proximity ( $b=-0.71$ ,  $SE=1.10$ , *ns*); it is positive, albeit nonsignificant, for religious proximity ( $b=0.74$ ,  $SE=1.12$ , *ns*). We take this to suggest religious traditionalism is only primed in the absence of political information about the candidate. Exposing the participant to information about the candidate reduces the effect of religious code words and symbols embedded within campaign advertisements.

Since the two proximity questions are categorical, we generate the predicted probabilities of being in the most extreme category—"strongly agreeing" that Chambliss

<sup>11</sup>The substantive results are unchanged when the IRT and regression model are jointly estimated.



**TABLE 3** Models Predicting Candidate Evaluation, Vote Choice, Trait Evaluation, and Religious and Political Belief Proximity

	Positive Evaluation	Vote	Traits	Religious Proximity	Political Proximity
Religious Cue Information	-0.22 (0.11)	-0.22* (0.12)	-0.08 (0.07)	-1.21 (0.79)	-1.73 (0.77)
Religious Traditionalism	-0.11 (0.27)	-0.19* (0.11)	-0.06 (0.06)	-0.27 (0.71)	-1.07 (0.70)
Cue x Traditionalism	0.14 (0.11)	0.11 (0.12)	0.15* (0.08)	<b>2.73 (0.84)</b>	1.12 (0.82)
Information x Traditionalism	<b>0.40 (0.15)</b>	<b>0.42 (0.18)</b>	0.22* (0.12)	<b>3.19 (1.20)</b>	<b>3.23 (1.18)</b>
Information x Cue	0.19 (0.15)	0.32* (0.17)	0.17 (0.11)	0.42 (1.08)	1.66 (1.08)
Information x Cue x Tradition	0.40 (0.16)	<b>0.41 (0.17)</b>	0.20* (0.11)	1.53 (1.09)	<b>2.46 (1.08)</b>
Constant	<b>-0.57 (0.23)</b>	<b>-0.65 (0.25)</b>	<b>-0.36 (0.17)</b>	-2.45 (1.64)	<b>-3.94 (1.61)</b>
Threshold 1	<b>0.51 (0.08)</b>	<b>0.49 (0.08)</b>	<b>0.49 (0.05)</b>	—	—
Threshold 2	—	—	—	-1.36	-1.96
Threshold 3	—	—	—	1.10	-0.43
N	—	—	—	3.83	2.11
R <sup>2</sup>	436	440	444	424	432
	0.09	0.08	0.09	—	—

Note: Bold entries= $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.10$ , two-tailed.

shares one's religious and political values. Figure 2 illustrates the relationship between religious traditionalism and political proximity; Figure 3 illustrates the effects of religious traditionalism on religious proximity. The shaded gray area represents the 95% confidence intervals around the point estimates.<sup>12</sup> Across these models, it is clear the link between traditionalism and candidate evaluation is greatest when a cue is present and additional information is absent.

The relationship between traditionalism and proximity is more pronounced in the cue condition absent political information. The difference between the dashed and solid line is much greater in the left column of these figures. For instance, in the no-information condition, religious traditionalists are much more likely to believe that Chambliss shares their political values in the presence of cues ( $pr[y=4]=0.62$ , 95% CI: 0.46-0.78). Absent these cues, religious conservatives are less likely to believe Chambliss shares their political preferences ( $pr[y=4]=0.28$ , 95% CI: 0.15-0.46). The right-most column, however, demonstrates that cues do not resonate nearly as much with voters when additional information is present. In the information condition, traditionalists are still more likely to believe that Chambliss shares their political values with the presence of a cue ( $pr[y=4]=0.41$ , 95% CI: 0.25-0.49), but

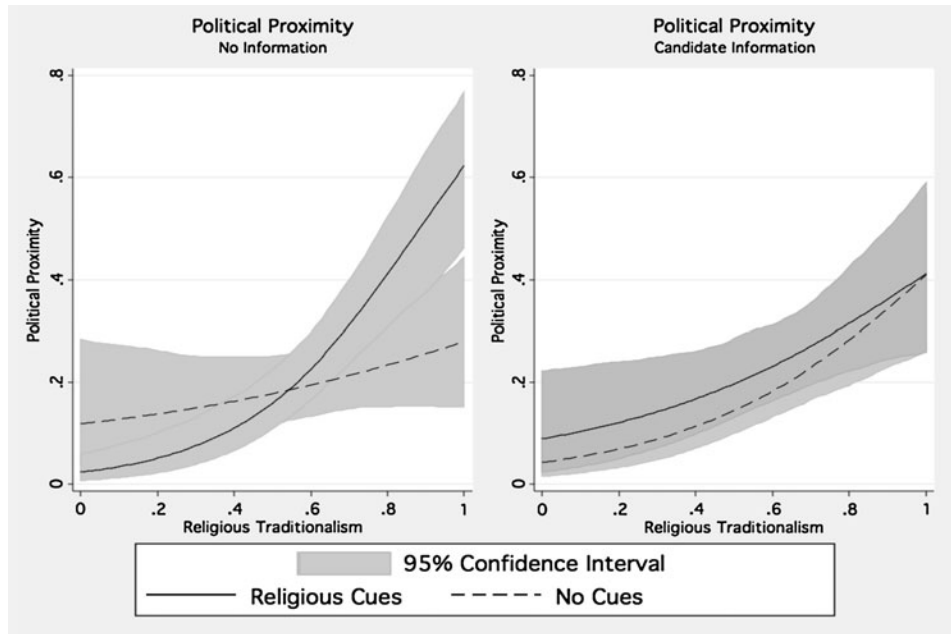
there is little evidence of priming, since religious traditionalists are about equally as likely to believe that Chambliss shares their values *in the absence of a cue* ( $pr[y=4]=0.40$ , 95% CI: 0.25-0.55). The prime is more consequential when secular information is absent; religious traditionalism is brought to the fore when individuals are not provided with additional information to evaluate the candidate.

### The Consequences of Information

Clearly, religious references prime latent religious traditionalism, and this effect is pronounced in the *no candidate information* condition. The effect is lessened, however, when secular information is offered. Table 3 casts doubt on the explanation that information itself strengthens the relationship between religious traditionalism and candidate evaluation. Examining the *Information x Traditionalism* interaction—which represents the difference between religious traditionalism in the information conditions absent religious cues—the coefficients are nonsignificant for general evaluations ( $b=0.40$ ,  $SE=1.10$ , *ns*), trait evaluations ( $b=0.17$ ,  $SE=0.11$ , *ns*), religious proximity ( $b=0.42$ ,  $SE=1.08$ , *ns*), and political proximity ( $b=1.65$ ,  $SE=1.07$ , *ns*). The interaction is marginally significant for vote preference ( $b=0.32$ ,  $SE=0.17$ ,  $p < 0.06$ ). In other words, secular information alone does not strengthen the relationship between religious beliefs and evaluations.

<sup>12</sup>Estimates were obtained using *Clarify* (King, Tomz, and Wittenberg 2000).

FIGURE 2 Religious Priming, Information, and Political Proximity

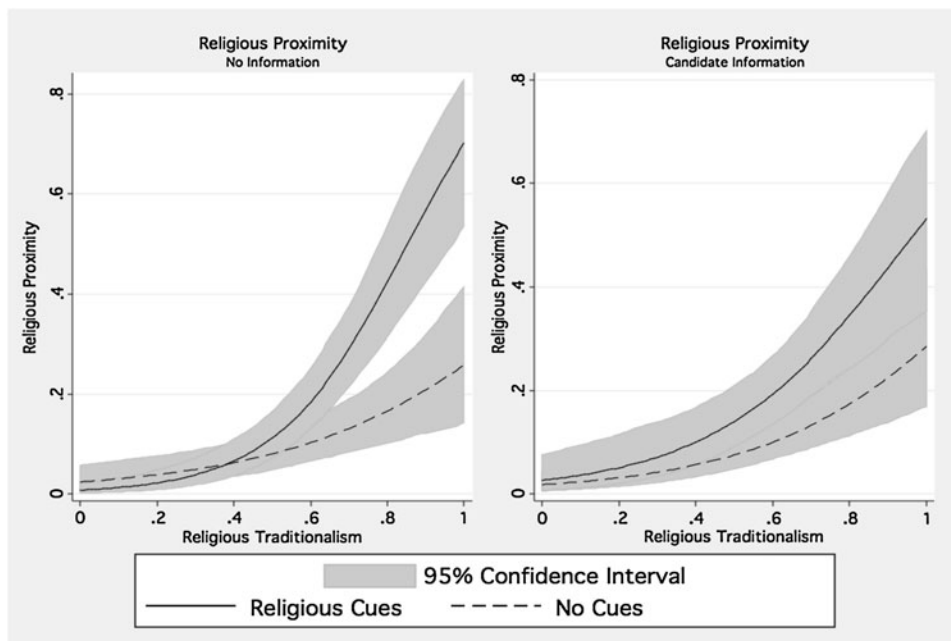


While it is relatively clear that secular information blunts the impact of subtle religious cues, rendering traditionalism less applicable in richer information environments, it is less clear whether high information voters completely dismiss religion as an important consideration *or* whether traditionalism remains a predictor of evaluations. To explore this question, we

conducted additional simple slopes analyses, examining whether religious traditionalism predicts candidate evaluation in high-information conditions.

We find it consistently the case that, if candidate information is provided, traditionalism is attached to evaluation, regardless of whether a religious cue was present. This is consistent with Huber and Lapinski

FIGURE 3 Religious Priming, Political Information, and Religious Proximity



(2006) who find that educated respondents are more likely to attach predispositions to evaluations in the absence of a prime. In the *no-cue* condition, traditionalism predicts vote preference ( $b=0.43$ ,  $SE=0.11$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), general evaluation ( $b=0.33$ ,  $SE=0.11$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), trait evaluations ( $b=0.32$ ,  $SE=0.07$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), religious proximity ( $b=3.15$ ,  $SE=0.72$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), and political proximity ( $b=2.78$ ,  $SE=0.70$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). In the *cue-condition*, again with *candidate information* present, traditionalism is aligned with trait evaluations ( $b=0.19$ ,  $SE=0.09$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), religious proximity ( $b=3.89$ ,  $SE=0.90$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), and political proximity ( $b=2.07$ ,  $SE=0.86$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). However, the *cue* in the presence of *information*, results in a nonsignificant impact of traditionalism with respect to general evaluations ( $b=0.17$ ,  $SE=0.13$ , *ns*) and vote preference ( $b=0.20$ ,  $SE=0.14$ , *ns*). In sum, if additional information is present, the effects of religious traditionalism on evaluation are significant for all five variables in the *no-cue* condition, and significant for three of the five variables in the *cue* condition.

These results are informative in considering the consequences of religion in a secular democracy. While religion is an important consideration among Christian participants who possess additional secular information, religion appears more consequential among less informed voters primed with religious cues. Hence, candidates will be more effective in activating traditionalism among voters possessing less information. At the same time, we find weak evidence suggesting religious cues may actually reduce the applicability of religious traditionalism in candidate evaluation.

This is not to say, however, that religious traditionalism is unimportant for the relatively informed. Indeed, we find evidence that religion does matter for these individuals, though it plays a more modest role than is the case among the relatively uninformed.

## Discussion

While religion has been a potent predictor of political attitudes and behavior in American politics, the ways in which religion exerts an impact has changed. Interdenominational differences have been largely displaced by differences within the major religious traditions, and the ways whereby religion informs political decisions transcend denominational identification (Hunter 1991; Layman 2001). Currently, divisions now focus on biblical interpretation and the appropriate role of religion in politics, or what some call a “Great Divide” and others a “Culture War” (Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2006; Hunter

1991; Layman 2001). These divisions have promoted a new set of political priorities. A large number of voters are predominately influenced by cultural issues—such as right-to-life, abortion, and stem-cell research, rather than fiscal concerns (Frank 2004).

These divisions have contributed to the realignment of the Republican and Democratic parties, with Republicans taking conservative and Democrats liberal issue positions (Domke and Coe 2008; Layman 2001). Similarly, both parties have appealed to activists by relying on religious appeals and promoting cultural issues in party platforms (Layman 2001). This has accompanied a similar, though not nearly as pronounced degree of polarization in the electorate (Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2006).

Despite the clear increase in elite-led religious rhetoric and voters’ increasing reliance on religion to inform political decisions, there has been a scarcity of work detailing the consequences of religious cues in campaign advertisements. We believe our study partially fills this void by answering two questions: (1) to what extent do campaign ads that rely on subtle religious cues prime religious traditionalism? (2) are there limits to priming effects? In support of our first expectation, our results demonstrate that religious traditionalism is a strong predictor of candidate preference in the presence of subtle religious cues, but this effect is reduced the more one knows about the candidate in the advertisement. Thus, supporting our second expectation, religious cues may focus attention on the candidate’s religious credentials; however, these credentials are less relevant in the presence of additional nonreligious issue positions. Across a range of evaluative questions—vote choice, positive evaluations, trait evaluations, and political and religious proximity—religious cues activated religious predispositions, but only in the no-information condition. The primes served an information function, leading to a stronger relationship between religious traditionalism and the belief that the candidate shares similar religious and political views. In the information condition, on the other hand, religious cues did not raise the salience of religious traditionalism, and religious traditionalists were no more likely to support the candidates in the religious cue condition than in the no religious cue condition. Knowing more about the candidate reduces one’s susceptibility to religious priming.

These results raise a series of important considerations. The vast majority of research on priming has attributed priming to cognitive accessibility, not applicability. Recently, however, scholars have also emphasized applicability (Althaus and Mie Kim 2006;

Higgins 1996). Our findings underscore the importance of these two psychological mechanisms. Though we demonstrate that religious cues activate religious considerations—a consequence of accessibility—these considerations are far less important for those who can rely on secular considerations. Religious considerations come to the fore among those who cannot rely on alternative, nonreligious standards to evaluate a candidate.

This is congruent with previous work in other domains, notably racial priming (Huber and Lapinski 2006; Krosnick and Kinder 1990; Krosnick and Brannon 1993); those who were more informed were relatively immune to priming effects. Yet, unlike previous priming work, we manipulated the participant's information environment directly, thereby allowing us to explore the consequences of political information. Even in the presence of minimal information (a candidate web site), religious cues resonated less, suggesting people do not uniformly respond to religious appeals. However, providing participants secular information does not render religious considerations inappropriate. Rather, the influence of religious traditionalism was muted, and voters were less susceptible to the influence of religious cues embedded in a political message.

It is important to underscore the differences between religious priming and priming in other domains, most notably, race (Mendelberg 2001). Given widespread racial egalitarianism in the United States (Kinder and Sanders 1996), racial priming is typically bound by the extent to which the construct is applied outside of conscious awareness (Devine 1989; Mendelberg 2001). Political candidates who explicitly play the "race card" are less effective in activating racial considerations that are in turn consulted in judgment (Mendelberg 2001; Valentino, Hutchings, and White 2002), an effect that varies at levels of expertise (Huber and Lapinski 2006).

While racial considerations are less applicable to evaluation when participants are made consciously aware of their presence, in the United States, we expect there is a much higher threshold of applicability for religious primes. Religion plays a markedly different role in American electoral politics. A vast majority of Americans identify with religious organizations, and more effective politicians in the last several decades have drawn heavily on religion (Domke and Coe 2008). Though some have argued the potency of religious appeals rest in their subtlety (Kuo 2006), where religious appeals variably resonate with different denominations (Calfano and Djupe

2009), we suspect voters who are made aware of a candidate appealing to the "religion card" will not backlash to the same degree as occurs when a candidate appeals to the "race card." Indeed, the centrality of religion to many Americans (Putnam and Campbell 2010) and the intimate relationship between religion and politics (Layman 2001) implies that religious appeals may be appealed to at a more explicit level. Exploring the consequences of implicit versus explicit religious appeals marks an important area of future research.

From a practical vantage, our study addresses the limits associated with religious campaign strategy. To the extent a constituency is comprised of a significant population of religious traditionalists, a strategy employing religion-themed messaging should be politically beneficial. As our results indicate, however, a candidate should not expect these appeals to resonate equally with religious traditionalists and progressives. As voters become more informed—perhaps by visiting candidate web sites and through exposure to campaign information—the marginal returns of religious appeals are reduced. Simply put, religion becomes a less applicable consideration.

While our results emphasize the importance of secular information, they simultaneously reaffirm that religion remains a powerful consideration in the voter's decision calculus. Religious considerations continue to resonate with informed voters in the presence of information. Religion simply exerts a reduced effect, and voters are less susceptible to religious appeals in political messages. Thus, our project contributes to previous work showing religion has played an important role in American politics (Dionne 1991; Domke and Coe 2008; Layman 1997, 2001; Putnam and Campbell 2010). However, we wish to point out an important caveat: even among those who adhere to strict and traditional interpretations of biblical doctrine, these considerations are attenuated in the presence of secular information. We believe this distinction is important, as it contributes to a better understanding of the role of religion in a secular democracy.

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