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ARTICLE

How Religious Affiliation and Race/Ethnicity Shape Presidential Policy Approval

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Abstract
Does religious affiliation affect evaluations of the president's policy performance? We examine support for President Barack Obama's handling of seven policy areas using data from the Pew Research Center. We show that the intersection of race/ethnicity and religion drives support for Obama's policy performance and that religion's impact transcends that of partisanship. Compared to Black Protestants, Evangelical Protestants, non-Hispanic Catholics, and (to a lesser extent) seculars and mainline Protestants are significantly less approving of Obama's policy performance. The most striking result in this study concerns the differences between Black Protestants and evangelicals, as the latter group is consistently opposed to Obama's handling of policy, whether domestic or international. Taken together, our findings reveal that the political significance of religious affiliation on presidential policy approval intersects powerfully with race/ethnicity.

Keywords: Religion; public opinion; presidential policy approval; Barack Obama

Introduction

Over the course of his two terms in office, President Barack Obama faced an increasingly extremist Republican Party that wanted nothing more than to see his policy initiatives—and him personally—fail at every turn. In an illustrative episode from January 2009, Republican House members at a policy retreat

> were convinced that even if Obama kept winning policy battles, they could win the broader messaging war simply by remaining unified and fighting him on everything. Their conference chairman, … Mike Pence, underscored the point with a clip from *Patton*, showing the general rallying his troops …: 'We're going to kick the hell out of him all the time! We're going to go through him like crap through a goose!', [exemplifying their] strategy of kicking the hell out of Obama

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> all the time, treating him not just as a president from the opposing party but an extreme threat to the American way of life (Grunwald 2016).

This hostile obstructionism was communicated directly to the electorate as elite portrayals of Obama as "a socialist tyrant intent on destroying America" (Grunwald 2016) took hold. The Tea Party movement quickly came into being after Obama's 2009 inauguration, and conservative media outlets remained laser-focused on anti-Obama messaging. Surveys indicated that Republicans who disapproved of Obama's job performance were inclined to disapprove of it *strongly* (Heimlich 2011). By 2016, Obama's approval ratings were more polarized along partisan lines than they had been for any other president in the modern era.[1]

A significant subtext in the story of anti-Obama sentiment among elite- and mass-level Republicans concerns the roles that religion may have played in reinforcing assessments of the president and his policy initiatives (Guth 2011; Tope et al. 2017). Religion is rarely a central aspect of the Democratic "brand" for strategic political reasons (Tam 2020), but Obama stands out for how germane religious themes were in his campaign and to his overall image. The personal religious backgrounds of presidential candidates have always been a matter of political relevance and intense interest (e.g., Smith 2015). As he was the first Black American elected to the presidency, though, Obama's religious identity drew even more attention from voters than usual (Block 2011).[2] As befitted someone who cut his political teeth in faith-based community organizing, candidate Obama worked hard to make inroads with various religious constituencies and did so to some success (Guth 2011). Nevertheless, his religious commitments became a major controversy during his first run for the presidency (Walker and Smithers 2009). His infamous "they cling to guns or religion" comment about working-class Americans on the campaign trail raised questions—and ire among conservative Christians—about what he really thought about people of faith.[3] Also, Obama's middle name (Hussein) and exposure to Islam as a child made him susceptible to the conspiracy theory that he is secretly a Muslim (Hollander 2010; Layman et al. 2014; Tope et al. 2017). To correct misperceptions about his religion and respond to criticism of his pastor at the time, Rev. Jeremiah Wright, then-Senator Obama spent a great deal of time sharing the details of his religious beliefs with the public. Even so, he failed to generate much support among the most conservative people of faith in the United States, especially evangelical Protestants.[4]

In this paper, we examine the effects of religious variables on Obama's *policy-related* job performance by modeling approval of his handling of seven different policy areas. We emphasize *policy* approval as opposed to general job approval because as president, Obama was keenly focused on public policy, almost to the exclusion of politics (Zelizer 2018). Specifically, we ask: How do individual-level religious differences influence Americans' evaluations of Obama's policy-specific performance? Is approval affected by different dimensions of religion (i.e., religious affiliation versus religiosity)? Does religion's influence vary across policy areas? And how does religion's effect on policy approval intersect with the effects of race and ethnicity?

We expect that religious affiliation plays a central role in shaping Americans' attitudes about Obama's policy-specific job performance. Even when the public lacks details about a specific policy, they are capable of judging the results of that policy by

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drawing upon heuristics (Mondak 1993; Popkin 1991; Sniderman et al. 1991; Sniderman et al. 1986; Zaller 1992). In this context, religion, especially religious affiliation, is a powerful and often-used heuristic (e.g., Madrid et al. 2022; Westfall and Russell 2019). The specific content and effects of religion-based heuristics should differ by religious tradition. We expect adherents of two religious groups—White evangelical Protestants and Black Protestants—to stand out in their evaluations of Obama's handling of public policy. Due to their moral and social traditionalism as well as their overwhelmingly Republican partisanship, evangelicals are likely to have embraced a particularly critical view of Obama's policies. Black Protestants, on the other hand, should have been especially supportive of Obama's handling of policy across the board due to their preference for an activist government and the traditional significance of race in US politics.

We test these contentions using data from the 2013 "America's Place in the World" General Public Survey fielded by the Pew Research Center and the Council on Foreign Relations. Instead of limiting our analysis to Obama's handling of a broad public policy domain (domestic or international), we examine the determinants of support concerning seven specific policy areas spanning both policy domains: healthcare, the economy, foreign policy in general, terrorism, immigration, international trade, and climate change.

Our findings demonstrate that religious affiliation ("belonging") plays a crucial role in shaping public evaluations of the president's policy performance on matters that extend well beyond socio-moral "culture wars" issues. Compared to Black Protestants, evangelicals, non-Hispanic Catholics, and (to a lesser extent) mainline (i.e., more progressive) Protestants and the religiously unaffiliated are less likely to approve of Obama's domestic and international policy performance, even in the face of significant partisan, demographic, and socioeconomic controls. We conclude that religious affiliation as a basic social identity has its own distinct impact (separate from partisanship, even in this polarized era) on presidential policy approval and that the intersection of race/ethnicity and religion also shapes support for Obama's handling of policy. In addition, religious participation (measured as worship attendance) is significant in four of our seven models, suggesting that social exposure to religious cues (whether from clergy or fellow practitioners) can play an important role in shaping public attitudes about presidential policy performance.

Theory and Hypotheses

Religion's political influence in the United States is evident on the campaign trail, in elite policy positions, and in public opinion. This influence is driven by the fact that in general, religiously committed Americans perceive politics in a systematically different—and, at least in the present era, more conservative—way than do less religious and secular Americans (Green 2007; Layman 2001; Putnam and Campbell 2010). Religious affiliation is politically significant because it is both a membership-based social network (Kertzer and Zeitzoff 2017; Sinclair 2012) and a core social identity (Castle and Stepp 2021). Even in the face of rapidly declining rates of religious affiliation, a sizable majority of Americans continue to see themselves as religious people (Smith et al. 2025).

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Organized religion shapes believers' moral values, which in turn shape their assessments of politics (Goren 2005; Kertzer et al. 2014). A voluminous literature documents strong relationships between religious variables and attitudes about economic, international, moral, social, and cultural issues (Arbuckle and Konisky 2015; Baumgartner et al. 2008; Castle and Stepp 2021; Guth et al. 1995; Guth et al. 2005; Olson et al. 2006; Taydas and Olson 2022; Taydas et al 2012; Whitehead and Perry 2020). Many Americans also depend on their religious identities when evaluating candidates and political parties; political elites encourage this tendency by including religious references in their public messaging (Claassen 2015; Claassen et al. 2021; Domke and Coe 2008; Madrid et al. 2022; McLaughlin and Wise 2014; Westfall and Russell 2019). Against this backdrop, it is natural also to expect religion to influence how people judge political elites' handling of various policies once they are in office.

Another considerable body of scholarship analyzes factors that shape general and policy-specific presidential approval (Cohen 2002a, 2002b; Donovan et al. 2020; Druckman and Holmes 2004; Edwards et al. 1995; McAvoy 2006; Newman and Otto 2022; Rogowski 2023), but little work has been done on how religion might contribute to public evaluations of how well the occupant of the Oval Office is doing their job (but see Olson and Warber 2008). Even less is known about whether and how religion might affect policy-specific presidential approval. Yet, given how tightly religious identity is woven into the fabric of political polarization in the United States (Castle and Stepp 2021; Perry 2022), we should expect it to play a systematic role in evaluations of the president's handling of public policy. Moreover, the ways in which religion shapes political outlooks are hardly uniform (Claassen 2015; Green 2007; Layman 2001), so we should expect variation in how members of different religious traditions evaluate the president's handling of public policy.

Religion as a Political Heuristic

A touchstone finding in the literature on public opinion is that citizens lack political knowledge (Carpini et al., 1996). Despite not knowing much about politics, citizens—even those who pay minimal attention to politics—navigate its complexities to develop consistent points of view and structured policy preferences (Popkin 1991; Sniderman et al. 1991; Sniderman et al. 1986; Zaller 1992). While this fact is particularly relevant to elections (e.g., Lau and Redlawsk 2001), it also holds true in other contexts. For example, the public regularly renders judgments about complex foreign policy matters even when they have neither sufficient information nor strong interest (Kertzer and Zeitzoff 2017).

Individuals form political attitudes absent large quantities of information by using heuristics to guide their decisions. Heuristics are means of simplification that allow citizens to "figure out what they think about political issues without necessarily knowing very much about them" (Sniderman et al. 1986: 406). Party identification is a common heuristic; party labels help people make decisions in the voting booth without knowing much about the candidates and their policy positions (Conover & Feldman 1984; Rahn 1993). Another important cognitive shortcut citizens use when forming political opinions is alignment between their own personal background and

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those of candidates (McDermott 2007, 2009; Westfall & Çelik Russell, 2019). Characteristics including race/ethnicity (Matsubayashi and Ueda 2011), gender (McDermott 1997), and even accent (Amira et al. 2018) can serve as effective political heuristics.

Drawing on heuristic models of belief formation, we join others (Madrid et al. 2022; McDermott 2007, 2009; McLaughlin and Wise 2014; Westfall and Russell 2019) in arguing that religion—especially religious affiliation—can ease the process of making political judgments, including evaluations of the president's policy performance. People of faith rely on religious heuristics when they perceive connections between their religious identity and political matters (Layman and Green 2005). In the broader context of deficient political knowledge, a large portion of the public may be assumed to lack detailed information about the president's policy priorities and initiatives. Evaluating presidential performance on specific policy areas is a Herculean task under such circumstances. To simplify information processing and avoid engaging in time-consuming analysis of the president's policies, people may resort to the value-laden heuristics that arise from their religious commitments.

How Race/Ethnicity Shapes Religion's Heuristic Influence

For many Americans, the impact of religious heuristics is dependent in one way or another on race and/or ethnicity. In fact, some scholars argue that religion's effects on attitudes and actions must not be studied outside the intersectional context(s) of race and ethnicity (Wilde 2018; Wilde and Glassman 2016). From this standpoint, research on religion and politics must take "religion as a starting point and [acknowledge] that one cannot study religion independently of race ... in the United States" (Wilde and Glassman 2016: 409). Indeed, there is ample empirical evidence that religious identities intersect with race and class to shape political attitudes (Bruce 2020; Lockerbie 2013; O'Brien and Abdelhadi 2020; Perry and Schleifer 2022; Schnabel 2020; Zingher 2021).

We suspect that this intersection would have been especially relevant regarding attitudes about the US first Black president. As Williams observes, "what many Americans [saw] in Obama's racial and religious status was a *disruption* of a ... connection among religion, race, and national identity.... Obama's election encapsulated for many people their fears regarding social changes that threaten those connections" (2013: 243, emphasis in original). Previous studies illustrate the complicated ways in which Black and White people reacted to Obama's race (Abrajano and Burnett 2012; Block 2011; Piston 2010; Redlawsk et al. 2010; Walters 2007; Williams 2013). Consider the fact that Black Protestants were much more likely than other Americans to think "God chose Obama to become president because God approved of Obama's policies," while evangelical Protestants—70 percent of whom today are White (Smith et al. 2025)—were much more likely than others to say the same about Donald Trump's first election (Pew Research Center 2020).

At least two in three Black Americans are Protestant (Diamant and Besheer 2021),[5] and the vast majority of Black Protestants voted for Obama in both 2008 (94 percent) and 2016 (95 percent) (Pew Research Center 2012). Black support for Obama was widespread despite some observers' contention that as president, he did little to

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advance the specific policy concerns of Black Americans (Harris 2012). Black Americans are, of course, heavily Democratic in their party identification (Smith et al. 2025). This partisanship reflects the long-standing political significance of the fact that Black Protestants "have adopted the worldview that individual freedom can be realized only within the context of collective freedom" (Dawson 1994: 100; see also Harris 2000; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Owens 2007).[6] While Black congregations are hardly all the same, religion and politics traditionally have been tightly interwoven in a way that points in a progressive direction (e.g., O'Brien and Abdelhadi 2020). This prophetic, explicitly political impulse has long set Black Protestantism apart from the rest of American religion, and progressive preferences persist among Black Americans despite their theological conservatism (O'Brien and Abdelhadi 2020).

Black Protestantism has additional political influence on its adherents due to its powerful history as one of the only social institutions over which Black Americans consistently have wielded control (Lincoln & Mamiya 1990). Black churches have acted as centers of both political organization and political power; the most significant manifestation of this fact was when Black clergy led the civil rights movement from strength to strength (Harris 2000; Morris 1984; Owens 2007; Smith et al., 2025). People who attend Black churches are often mobilized for civic participation to fight injustice and improve the circumstances of their everyday lives (Brown and Brown 2003; McClerking and McDaniel 2005; Smith et al., 2025).

Hispanic[7] ethnicity also intersects with religion in politically consequential ways (Bartkowski et al. 2012; O'Brien and Abdelhadi 2020). Catholics are one of the largest religious groups in the United States, and more than a third of American Catholics are Hispanic (Smith et al. 2025). Hispanic Catholics are substantially more progressive and Democratic in their political orientations than are White Catholics (Gayte et al. 2018; Hoover 2014; Matovina 2012; Smith et al. 2025). The Pew Research Center (2012) found that more than seven in ten Hispanic Catholics—compared to less than half of White Catholics—voted for Obama in 2008 and 2012. The differences between Hispanic and non-Hispanic Catholics are sufficiently large that some scholars imply that the two traditions are distinct (e.g., Calvillo and Bailey 2015; O'Brien and Abdelhadi 2020).[8]

Though Hispanic Americans differ politically and along many other lines (Corral and Leal 2020; Martínez and Gonzalez 2020; Pérez and Cobian 2024), including country of origin, proximity to the immigrant experience, and educational attainment, a significant political divide separates Hispanic Catholics from Hispanic Protestants (Corral and Leal 2020; Espinosa et al. 2005; Kelly & Morgan Kelly, 2005; Mulder et al. 2017; Smith et al. 2025; Valenzuela 2014). Hispanic Americans are much more likely to be Catholic than Protestant, but the share of Catholics is declining while the percentage of Protestants is staying steady (Krogstad et al. 2023; Mulder et al. 2017 contend that the percentage of Hispanic Protestants is growing). Hispanic Protestants are markedly more conservative and Republican than their Catholic counterparts, reflecting the fact that most are evangelical (Kelly & Morgan Kelly, 2005; Krogstad et al. 2023; Mulder et al. 2017; Valenzuela 2014). In short, Hispanic Catholics constitute an ethno-religious group that is both sizable and politically distinctive (Calvillo and Bailey 2015; O'Brien and Abdelhadi 2020).

From the standpoint of religious affiliation, Obama's greatest detractors were White evangelical Protestants, a highly mobilized group of Americans who identify

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strongly with the Republican Party and prefer public policy that reinforces a traditional social order and protects the homeland (e.g., Claassen and Povtak 2010; Putnam and Campbell 2010; Smith et al. 2025). Today, evangelicals comprise the core of the White Christian nationalist movement that swept Trump into power (Everton 2024; Whitehead and Perry 2020; Zhou 2023). Not all White evangelicals are Christian nationalists (Whitehead and Perry 2020), but it is well established that those who holds negative views toward racial minorities (Davis and Perry 2021; McDaniel et al. 2022; Perry et al. 2019).

Even before he won the 2008 presidential election, Obama was a target of suspicion among White evangelicals, who questioned his background and aims; they remain wary of him to this day (Benson et al. 2012; Guth 2011; Tope et al. 2017; Williams 2013). When the Tea Party emerged during the early days of Obama's first term, its leaders and adherents included large numbers of evangelicals (Bonikowski and DiMaggio 2016; Braunstein and Taylor 2017; Deckman 2016; Parker and Barreto 2014). In the aggregate, White evangelicals were even more likely than Republicans to believe the false account that Obama is a Muslim: during the early years of his presidency, 17 percent of Republicans in two Pew Research Center polls said they believed Obama was a Muslim, as did 19 percent of evangelical Protestants (Rosentiel 2009; see also Layman et al. 2014). In short, many White evangelicals "viewed Obama as the embodiment of their broader concerns about social change" (Tope et al. 2017: 52; see also Guth 2011; Williams 2013). As traditionalist conservatives, evangelicals are skeptical of social change, and Obama represented just that both in his overt personal characteristics and his campaign theme, "change we can believe in."

The intersectional role of race/ethnicity cannot be overlooked when considering how religion affected approval of Obama's policies. Abrajano and Burnett (2012) document substantial racial differences in Obama's general approval ratings, with White Americans judging him more harshly than they had judged Bill Clinton, and Black Americans doing the opposite. Likewise, Hispanic Catholics were largely supportive of Obama (Matovina 2012; Pew Research Center 2012). Several studies specifically document White evangelical Protestants' tendencies toward racial resentment and disapproval of policies designed to help ethnic minorities (Layman 2001; McDaniel et al. 2022; Tope et al. 2017; Whitehead and Perry 2020). In addition, racial resentment directly predicted negative evaluations of Obama (Pyszczynski et al. 2010), and racial prejudice hurt him substantially at the polls (Piston 2010).

Based on the foregoing discussion, we propose three hypotheses about how religion intersects with race/ethnicity to influence attitudes about Obama's handling of various policies:

H1: Black Protestants will be *most* likely to approve of Obama's handling of public policy

H2: Hispanic Catholics will be likely, but not as likely as Black Protestants, to approve of Obama's handling of public policy

H3: Evangelical Protestants will be *least* likely to approve Obama's handling of public policy

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Data and Methods

To evaluate these hypotheses, we analyze survey data gathered by the Pew Research Center in conjunction with the Council on Foreign Relations. Their survey titled "America's Place in the World" was in the field from late October until early November 2013; the resulting dataset includes responses from 2,003 US adults who were asked to assess Barack Obama's handling of a variety of policy areas.[9] We selected this dataset because in addition to a rich variety of dependent variables concerning approval of Obama's policies, the survey includes measures of respondents' religious commitments, partisanship, and demographic characteristics. We use the weighted sample recommended by Pew to ensure that the demographics of the sample closely approximate those of the national population.

Dependent Variables

We analyze the effect of religion on seven dependent variables measuring public support for Obama's policies. Recall that we are not modeling general approval of Obama's job performance; we focus instead on policy-specific approval. Our first two dependent variables (healthcare and the economy) measure how respondents view Obama's *domestic* policy performance.[10] The remaining dependent variables assess respondents' attitudes about Obama's handling of several matters pertaining to *foreign* policy: overall foreign policy, the threat of terrorism, immigration, international trade, and climate change. Each dependent variable is a dichotomous measure of respondents' approval of Obama's handling of that policy area (approve = 1; disapprove = 0).[11] Because our dependent variables are all dichotomous, we estimate logistic regression models.

Independent Variables

We include two of the four major dimensions of religion (Saroglou 2011) in our analyses, both of which have been shown to have powerful effects on political attitudes (e.g., Smidt et al. 2009).[12] One of these measures is a categorical indicator of religious affiliation (religious "belonging"). The other is an ordinal measure of how often the respondent attends worship services (a common form of religious "behaving"). To measure religious "belonging," we generate a series of variables indicating the organized religious tradition with which the respondent identifies: *evangelical Protestant*, *mainline Protestant*, *Black Protestant*, *Hispanic Catholic*, *non-Hispanic Catholic*, *other Christian*, any *other religion*, or *no religion* (unaffiliated). *Evangelical Protestants* are those who self-identify as Protestant or "just Christian," describe themselves as evangelical or "born again,"[13] and are not Black. *Mainline Protestants* identify as Protestant or "just Christian," do not describe themselves as evangelical or "born again," and are not Black. Meanwhile, *Black Protestants* are just that: Protestant (or "just Christian") and Black.[14] Because of the salience of ethnicity within US Catholicism today (Calvillo and Bailey 2015; O'Brien and Abdelhadi 2020) and the political differences between White and Hispanic Catholics (Gayte et al. 2018; Hoover 2014; Matovina 2012), we follow the Pew Research Center's practice of splitting Catholic respondents into separate "Hispanic" and "non-Hispanic" categories.[15]

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"*Other Christian*" respondents include those who identify with a Christian tradition apart from Protestantism and the Catholic Church, including Eastern Orthodoxy, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and a few more groups. Respondents are classified as "*other religion*" if they said they are Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, or Unitarian Universalist. We classify respondents having *no religion* if they identify as being atheist, agnostic, or "nothing in particular." All categories are mutually exclusive.[16]

We exclude *Black Protestant* respondents from our models as the reference group, so results for each religious tradition should be interpreted as the difference between that group and Black Protestants. Comparing all other groups to Black Protestants allows us to directly test the theoretical intersection of religion and race on presidential policy approval. We decided to make Black Protestants the contrast group for two reasons.[17] First, H1 contends that this group of Americans will be most likely to support Obama's policies. As discussed above, Black Protestants, in the aggregate, are strong Democrats who voted overwhelmingly for Obama in both 2008 and 2012. Second, general presidential approval ratings of Obama were systematically higher among Black Americans than other groups (Abrajano and Burnett 2012). It is therefore sensible to compare other US religious groups to Black Protestants given the historic significance of Obama being the first Black president. Most Black Protestants are also accustomed to a uniquely progressive connection between religion and politics.

To capture religious "behaving," we include an ordinal measure of how often respondents report attending religious services. Worship attendance is one of the best indicators of overall religiosity in a majority-Christian country like the United States,[18] and the political cues clergy provide during worship services do not fall on deaf ears (Djupe and Gilbert 2009; Smith 2008; Smith and Harris 2005). Regardless of affiliation, Americans who attend religious services more frequently are systematically more conservative and more politically participatory than those who attend less faithfully or not at all (Olson and Green 2006; Smith et al. 2025; Smith & Demetrius Walker, 2012). Survey respondents were asked how often they attend religious services (aside from weddings or funerals) on a scale ranging from never (coded as a 1) to more than once a week (coded as a 6). We include this ordinal measure in each of our models to account for the possibility that greater religiosity might affect evaluations of Obama's policy performance.

Control Variables

We control for several attitudinal and demographic characteristics that are known to affect general presidential approval and should therefore also shape assessments of a president's handling of various policy areas (Donovan et al. 2020). These controls include partisanship, ideology, age, gender, education, and income. Previous research demonstrates that in recent times, US presidential approval has been dominated by partisanship (Donovan et al. 2020; Lebo and Cassino 2007). We use separate dummy variables that classify respondents' party identification as being a *Democrat,* an *Independent*, or a *Republican*. Following current scholarship on Independents (Klar and Krupnikov 2016), we code individuals who first identified as Independent but

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then reported a partisan leaning as affiliates of the party toward which they lean. Thus, *Independents* are those who chose the "Independent" label and did not report leaning toward either party. We also classify respondents as Independent if they reported no preference between the parties or if they selected "other party." We measure *ideology* using a question asking respondents to describe their political views on a five-point scale ranging from very liberal (1) to very conservative (5).

We include key demographic controls as well. Our *age* variable captures respondents' age in years. To measure gender, we include a dichotomous *male* variable. To measure individuals' *education*, we use responses to a question asking respondents to indicate the highest level of school they have attended or the highest degree they have earned. This ordinal variable ranges from "less than high school" (coded as 1) to "postgraduate or professional degree" (coded as 8). Finally, we include an ordinal control for total family *income* in the previous year before taxes; this question's response set has nine categories ranging from 1 (less than $10,000) to 9 ($150,000 or more).

Results and Discussion

Table 1 presents the results of logistic regression models testing the effects of the independent variables on each of our dependent variables measuring attitudes about Barack Obama's handling of seven policy areas: healthcare, the economy, foreign policy in general, terrorism, immigration, international trade, and climate change.[19] The table reports logistic regression coefficients; significant results for religion variables are indicated in boldface. In every model except for the one concerning terrorism, at least two of the religion variables reach statistical significance at the .05 level, revealing the important role religion plays in influencing attitudes toward Obama's handling of public policy.

As expected, religious variables—especially "belonging"—have significant, independent effects on approval of Obama's handling of both domestic and foreign policy. The significance of the religious variables is especially noteworthy given the presence of other strong predictors of approval in our models: partisanship, ideology, and demographic controls. We find ample support for *H1* in the 14 instances where a religious group is significantly less likely than Black Protestants to approve Obama's handling of a policy area. These results reflect both the strong support Obama enjoyed among Black Americans in general (Abrajano and Burnett 2012) and a lack of support for Obama and his policies among White Christians, especially evangelical Protestants and non-Hispanic Catholics (Benson et al. 2012; Guth 2011; Tope et al. 2017; Williams 2013). In only one instance is a religious group significantly *more* supportive than Black Protestants of Obama's handling of a policy area: Hispanic Catholics are more supportive of Obama's handling of international trade. Perhaps this is so because while Obama's record on Latin America received mixed reviews, he was a strong supporter of free trade with countries in the region (Reid 2015). This result supports *H2*, as does the fact that non-Hispanic Catholics are more likely than their Hispanic counterparts to support Obama's handling of policy (in comparison with Black Protestants). In four of our seven models (healthcare, the economy, foreign policy in general, and immigration), non-Hispanic Catholics—but never Hispanic

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Table 1. Approval of Barack Obama's handling of seven policy areas

	Domestic policy		Foreign policy				
	Healthcare	Economy	Foreign policy (in general)	Terrorism	Immigration	International trade	Climate change
Religion variables							
Evangelical Protestant	**−1.46 (.38)*** **	**−1.51 (.42)*** **	**−1.15 (.42)** **	−.36 (.35)	**−1.00 (.37)** **	−.51 (.36)	**−.94 (.33)** **
Mainline Protestant	**−.86 (.36)***	**−.95 (.45)***	−.29 (.44)	.32 (.33)	−.63 (.39)	−.15 (.37)	.22 (.35)
Hispanic Catholic	−.04 (.58)	−.14 (.57)	.10 (.56)	−.15 (.52)	−.16 (.48)	**1.47 (.60)***	.29 (.52)
Non-Hispanic Catholic	**−.82 (.40)***	**−1.09 (.41)** **	**−.93 (.43)***	−.31 (.37)	**−.83 (.38)***	−.31 (.38)	−.18 (.37)
Other Christian	−1.49 (.99)	−.69 (.88)	.11 (.67)	.11 (.58)	−.52 (.63)	−.90 (.81)	−.14 (.53)
Other religion	.85 (.52)	**−1.75 (.67)** **	−1.03 (.68)	.53 (.52)	−.72 (.56)	.21 (.60)	−.56 (.56)
Unaffiliated	−.04 (.37)	**−1.56 (.47)** **	**−.97 (.48)***	.26 (.38)	−.63 (.39)	.44 (.38)	−.02 (.38)
Worship attendance	**.18 (.09)***	−.15 (.09)	−.001 (.09)	**.17 (.07)***	−.02 (.08)	**.21 (.08)** **	**.25 (.08)** **
Controls							
Democrat	2.72 (.29)***	2.14 (.29)***	2.27 (.29)***	1.75 (.23)***	1.07 (.25)***	1.51 (.25)***	1.65 (.26)***
Independent	.88 (.39)*	.61 (.45)	.83 (.47)	.33 (.31)	.33 (.41)	.71 (.35)*	.83 (.35)*
Ideology	−.28 (.12)*	−.62 (.13)***	−.42 (.13)**	−.22 (.11)*	−.34 (.11)**	−.23 (.11)*	−.18 (.12)
Age	.002 (.01)	.003 (.01)	−.001 (.01)	−.004 (.01)	−.004 (.01)	−.01 (.01)	.000 (.006)
Male	.44 (.23)	.52 (.23)*	−.13 (.22)	.54 (.20)**	−.19 (.20)	.05 (.21)	−.02 (.20)
Education	.08 (.07)	.05 (.07)	.006 (.07)	.02 (.06)	.04 (.06)	−.01 (.07)	−.02 (.06)
Income	−.04 (.05)	.13 (.05)**	.14 (.05)**	.07 (.04)**	.04 (.04)	−.01 (.05)	−.01 (.05)
Constant	−1.59 (.68)*	.04 (.89)	−.36 (.83)	−.79 (.62)*	.46 (.70)	−.54 (.65)	−.82 (.67)

(*Continued*)

Table 1. (*Continued*)

	Domestic policy		Foreign policy				
	Healthcare	Economy	Foreign policy (in general)	Terrorism	Immigration	International trade	Climate change
N	823	805	760	814	783	710	721
Wald Chi^2	151.67***	172.30***	155.97***	112.41***	86.62***	91.17***	100.39***
Pseudo R^2	.33	.29	.26	.16	.12	.16	.16
Log pseudolikelihood	−1260.88	−1258.98	−1303.91	−1615.49	−1581.89	−1401.73	−1417.46

Note: Logistic regression models, reporting coefficients with standard errors are in parentheses. Reference group: Black Protestant.
* = p < .05, ** = p < .01, *** = p < .001.
Data source: Pew Research Center and Council on Foreign Relations, "America's Place in the World," October 30–November 6, 2013.

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Catholics—are significantly less approving of Obama's handling of policy compared to Black Protestants. Evidence in support of *H3* appears in Table 1 as well, with evangelical Protestants significantly less likely than Black Protestants to approve of Obama's handling of five policy areas (terrorism and international trade are the exceptions). We find it surprising that the evangelical variable is *not* significant in two of our models: terrorism and international trade, as other studies show that evangelicals tend to be concerned about terrorism and skeptical of globalization (e.g., Taydas and Olson 2022).

While we did not pose a hypothesis concerning domestic versus foreign policy approval, it is noteworthy that the effects of religious affiliation are much more pronounced in the domestic policy models. For both healthcare and the economy, Black Protestants are significantly more supportive of Obama than are evangelical Protestants, mainline Protestants, and non-Hispanic Catholics, with the largest difference existing between Black Protestants and evangelicals. These findings support all three of our hypotheses. The model statistics also reflect the relative strength of the domestic policy models. Perhaps, our domestic policy results reflect previous research establishing that domestic policy issues are more immediately "accessible" in voters' minds (Lavine et al. 1996) and that publicly salient issues are most likely to shape presidential approval (Edwards et al. 1995).

Differences in religion's effect on approval of policy performance are not universal. It is worth considering the religious groups about which we did not pose hypotheses, but which nevertheless stand out for their disapproval of Obama's handling of one or more policy areas. Mainline Protestants are less approving than Black Protestants are of Obama's handling of both domestic policy issues, but the two groups do not differ on any of the foreign policy matters.[20] In the aggregate, mainline Protestant laity sit to the right of Black Protestants both theologically and politically, but there is plenty of diversity, even division, among mainline rank and file around domestic policy matters. Smith and colleagues (2025) find that while a bare majority of mainline Protestants are Republicans, relatively few identify as conservative. Small majorities of mainline Protestants voted against Obama in both 2008 and 2012 (Pew Research Center 2012). Although mainline clergy are largely liberal, they have great difficulty conveying progressive political priorities to their congregations (Djupe and Gilbert 2009; Guth et al. 1997; Lichterman and Williams 2017). Our results here suggest that mainline Protestant conservatism arises in the domain of domestic, but not foreign policy, which is consistent with previous work establishing that mainline Protestants are relatively progressive concerning foreign policy (Taydas and Olson 2022).

The similarity evident in Table 1 between evangelicals and *non-Hispanic Catholics* is not unexpected. White Catholics have become more conservative and Republican over time,[21] even finding some degree of common cause with the religious right (Gayte et al. 2018). Here, we find non-Hispanic Catholics significantly less likely than Black Protestants to approve of Obama's handling of healthcare, the economy, foreign policy in general, and immigration. These results are evidence of the distance between rank-and-file non-Hispanic American Catholics and core Catholic doctrine. Catholic Social Teaching emphasizes human dignity, the common good, and the "special option for the poor and vulnerable" (US Conference of Catholic Bishops n.d.). Catholic leaders did not agree with Obama on abortion, but on the surface his efforts

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to expand access to healthcare and create a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants (the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival program) should have been appealing to Catholic clergy and laity alike. The reality, however, is much more complicated. US Catholic bishops can be hesitant to send direct signals on political issues, and even when they do, most parishioners ignore them (Gayte et al. 2018; Smith 2008). Recent research shows that Catholic Americans tend to align their issue positions with those of their preferred political party, not the Church (Smith 2020). In addition, Catholic leaders strongly objected to the so-called "birth control mandate" in the Affordable Care Act, criticizing Obama for a perceived affront to religious freedom (Griffin 2015). These complex dynamics combine to explain some of the skepticism we find among non-Hispanic Catholics for Obama's handling of policy.

Non-Christians (here designated as "*other religion*"), a majority of them are Jewish, are significantly less supportive of Obama's handling of the economy than the Black Protestants. Religiously *unaffiliated* respondents are also significantly less supportive of Obama's handling of the economy, as well as foreign policy overall, compared to the Black Protestants. These results have a basis for support in existing literature because we know that non-Christians and religiously unaffiliated Americans are markedly more liberal than their Christian counterparts (e.g., Campbell et al. 2021; Wald 2015). Large shares of both groups voted for Obama in 2008 and 2012 (Pew Research Center 2012). Since we control for respondents' ideology, we can argue that the progressivism inherent in *not* being part of the Christian majority in the United States has its own independent effect regarding Obama's handling of the economy and foreign policy.

Finally, we find a complete absence of significant results for "*other Christians*." It is surprising that there are no apparent differences in assessments of Obama's handling of policy between the Black Protestants and Christian respondents who are neither Protestant nor Catholic. As noted earlier, this group consists mainly of Eastern Orthodox and Mormon respondents (in our sample, the majority are Mormons). Most Mormons are conservative and Republican; their political uniformity is like that of evangelical Christians (Campbell et al. 2014). There is some suggestion that the relationship between the LDS Church and the Obama administration was never hostile (Walch and Taylor 2017), and while "Mormons generally follow their church over their party" (Campbell et al. 2014: 23), the whole Mormons were not fans of Obama or his policies. Meanwhile, a plurality of Orthodox Christians voted for Obama in 2008, but not 2012 (Burge 2021), and Eastern Orthodoxy is growing in the United States thanks to a trend of conversion by political conservatives (Namee et al. 2024). Thus, there are few reasons to suspect that "other Christians" would have been supportive enough of Obama's policies to not differ significantly from Black Protestants. We attribute the absence of significant findings in these instances to small sample size.

Another noteworthy finding pertains to worship attendance, an ordinal measure of how often respondents reported attending religious services. Worship attendance is significant in four of seven models: healthcare, terrorism, international trade, and climate change. In each instance, more frequent attendance contributes to *greater* approval. Substantively, these findings are surprising, especially because other studies show that increased frequency of worship attendance is associated with greater political conservatism (e.g., Olson and Green 2006). However, since we control for

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ideology and partisanship, these significant and positive effects of worship attendance are independent of conservatism. We suspect that our findings for worship attendance might be, at least in part, an artifact of the powerful negative effect of evangelical Protestant affiliation, as evangelicals are twice as likely as Americans at large to attend services on a weekly basis (Smith et al. 2025).[22] Sermons contain a fair amount of political content, and by no means does all of it reflect conservative political orientations (Boussalis et al. 2021; Guth et al. 1997; Olson and Quezada-Llanes 2024). One large-scale study of sermon content, however, shows that healthcare, terrorism, international trade, and even climate change are relatively less likely than other issues to be included in sermons (Boussalis et al. 2021). The significant effects of worship attendance on approval of Obama's handling of these four policy areas may therefore reflect some embeddedness in religious social networks other than the influence of what clergy say.[23]

As for our control variables, we find strong, statistically significant effects of both partisanship and ideology across most, if not all, models. Not surprisingly, respondents who identify as Democrats are significantly more supportive of Obama's handling of all policy areas than are Republicans. We also find that Independents (who report no partisan leaning) are significantly more supportive than Republicans are of Obama's handling of healthcare, international trade, and climate change.[24] Likewise, liberal respondents are significantly more supportive than moderates and conservatives are of Obama's handling of every policy area except for climate change. These strong, consistent findings with respect to partisanship and ideology are unsurprising given the wide partisan presidential approval gaps that have emerged in recent years (Donovan et al. 2020; Lebo and Cassino 2007).

Finally, religion variables perform significantly better than most demographic measures do in all models; our demographic control variables are rarely significant. This result provides additional support for Converse's claim: "there is fair reason to believe that [religious differences] are fully important, if not more important, in shaping mass political behavior than class differences" (1964: 248). Male respondents are significantly more supportive of Obama's handling of the economy and terrorism but are statistically indistinguishable from female respondents concerning the other five policy areas. We find no effect of age or education on support for Obama's handling of any of the seven policy areas. We also find that income is significant and positive in our economy, overall foreign policy, and terrorism models; higher-income respondents have higher levels of approval of Obama's handling of these issues.

We generate predicted probabilities using CLARIFY (Tomz et al. 2001) and plot the means and 95 percent confidence intervals for each of our nine religion variables in separate figures for each dependent variable.[25] Due to space considerations, we include only one domestic and one foreign policy figure (see Figures 1 and 2). For each figure, we set party identification as Democratic and all controls at their mean or modal values. The overall level of predicted support for Obama is buoyed by our choice to set party identification as Democratic, but the patterns and differences would be the same (albeit at lower levels) if we set it as Independent or Republican.

Our results demonstrate that in addition to finding statistically significant effects of religion—especially "belonging"—on policy-focused presidential approval as shown above, we also find that many of these effects are substantively large for most of our

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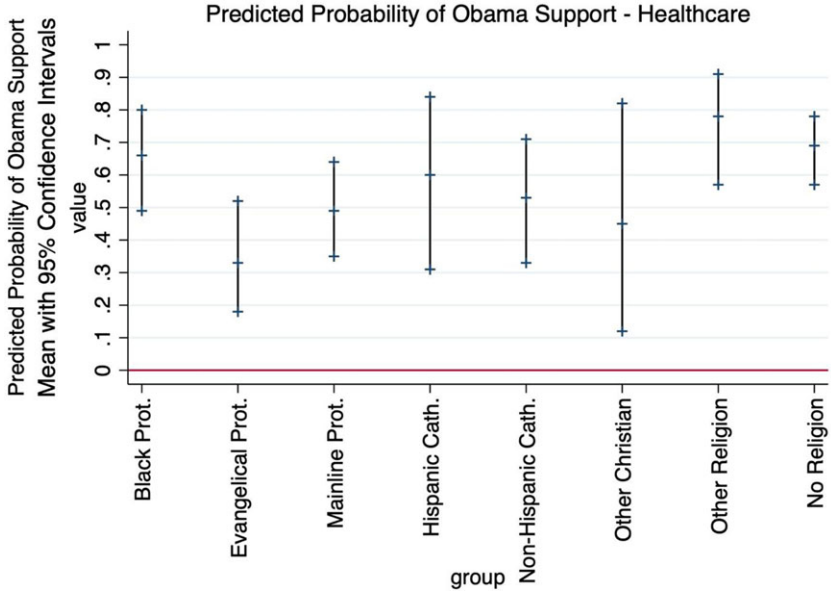


Figure 1. Predicted probability of Obama support on healthcare.

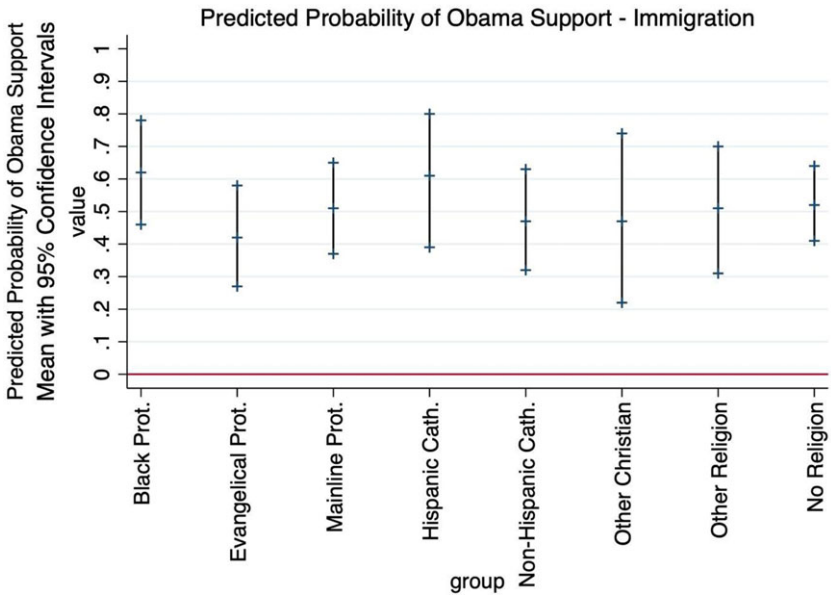


Figure 2. Predicted probability of Obama support on immigration.

dependent variables. Figures 1 and 2, and again in the figures presented in the Appendix, show the differences in expected support for Obama's handling of policy among various religious groups. Black Protestants have a roughly 20 to 33 percent higher expected probability of reporting support for Obama on healthcare, the

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economy, overall foreign policy, immigration, and climate change than evangelical Protestants (the effects on terrorism and trade are not statistically significant and substantively smaller).

Our results also demonstrate consistent differences in support between non-Hispanic Catholics and Black Protestants. These differences are significant in assessments of Obama's performance on healthcare, the economy, foreign policy, and immigration. These differences range from an expected 13 percent difference in support for Obama's handling of healthcare to a roughly 21 percent difference in expected support for Obama on foreign policy. As we note above, there is only one area in which another religious group is significantly more approving of Obama's policy performance than Black Protestants: Hispanic Catholics on trade. That effect is substantively large—the expected probability of support among Hispanic Catholics is roughly 22 percent higher than support among Black Protestants.

The discussion above focuses on differences in support for Obama's policy performance between the Black Protestants and each other religious group. In analyses not reported, we have run models that exclude each of the other religious groups. Our large number of dependent variables and religious groups makes it impractical to present all those models here. We present two parallel sets of models for Table 1 in our online Appendix, where the excluded groups are (a) evangelical Protestants (Table A4) and (b) religiously unaffiliated (Table A5). Those results also lend support for our hypotheses overall.

Conclusion

Does religious affiliation play a role in shaping the public's evaluations of the president's policy performance? The goal of this study has been to answer this question by analyzing support for President Barack Obama's handling of a range of domestic and foreign policy areas. Using survey data from the Pew Research Center and the Council on Foreign Relations, we have investigated the roles religious variables—"belonging" (religious affiliation) and "behaving" (frequency of worship attendance)—play alongside other factors that drive support for Obama's handling of seven policy areas. Our findings demonstrate that religious affiliation has a powerful and independent impact on the public's evaluation of President Obama's policy performance. Compared to Black Protestants, evangelical Protestants, non-Hispanic Catholics, and (to a lesser extent) mainline Protestants and seculars espouse significantly less-approving attitudes regarding Obama's policy performance. Across seven models, we find only one instance where a religious group—Hispanic Catholics—is more approving than Black Protestants are of Obama's management of policy (international trade). In addition to the effects of religious affiliation, frequency of worship attendance predicts greater approval of Obama's policy performance in four of our models.

The effects of religion on support for Obama's handling of policy are substantively large, lending credence to the argument that people rely on religious identities as heuristics in evaluating politics (Madrid et al. 2022; Westfall and Russell 2019). Our findings also support the argument that the political significance of religious affiliation intersects powerfully with race and ethnicity (Wilde 2018; Wilde and Glassman 2016).

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Evangelical Protestants and non-Hispanic Catholics stand out for their distaste for Obama's handling of public policy in comparison with non-White-Christian religious groups. Taken together, our findings underline the central role of social identities—religious, racial/ethnic, partisan, and ideological—in the formation of political attitudes and in the reinforcement of religion's importance to public opinion and US politics in general.

The most striking results in Table 1 (and Figure 1) concern the differences between Black Protestants and evangelicals, as the latter group is consistently opposed to Obama's handling of most policy areas, whether domestic or international. Few evangelicals voted for Obama (Pew Research Center 2012), and to some degree they hold negative attitudes toward racial minorities (Davis and Perry 2021; McDaniel et al. 2022; Perry et al. 2019) and Obama as an individual (Benson et al. 2012; Guth 2011; Tope et al. 2017; Williams 2013). Non-Hispanic Catholics also display a pattern of disapproving of Obama's handling of policy, including in areas that the Catholic Church highlights as priorities for progressive action: healthcare and immigration. In the aggregate, non-Hispanic Catholics voted against Obama both times he stood for election (Pew Research Center 2012), reflecting their movement away from the Democratic Party (Gayte et al. 2018). Another Majority-White group of American Christians, mainline Protestants, disapprove only of Obama's handling of domestic policy. This result reflects previous research establishing mainline progressivism on foreign policy issues (Taydas and Olson 2022).

As important as these findings are for understanding the relationship between public opinion and religion, further research on the topic is needed. First, while we explore multiple dependent variables, we examine the effect of religion on attitudes about the president's handling of public policy at a single point in time. Expanding this study to analyze data from other years and about other presidents to see whether our results hold in different contexts would be a fruitful avenue for future research. For example, examining the role religion plays in shaping people's views about President Joe Biden's handling of domestic and international policies would provide additional insights, as he served as Obama's vice president for eight years.

The results of this study also indicate that the impact of religious affiliation on public opinion (at least in the context of policy-specific presidential support) is distinct from the impact of party affiliation. However, religion's influence on public attitudes might be mediated by partisan orientations. We hope future studies will explore the possibility of this indirect effect. Moreover, our analysis is limited to the questions Pew and the Council on Foreign Relations chose to ask. Incorporating assessments of presidential performance in other policy areas such as education, taxation, and criminal justice would enrich our understanding. Finally, we could not test the impact of the strictness of religious beliefs due to data limitations. Those who design survey instruments should be aware of the importance of nuanced religious measures and incorporate them in survey questionnaires in the future.

Supplementary material

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Competing interests.

None.

Notes

1. According to Gallup (n.d.), Obama's average general job approval rating over his eight years in office was 48 percent; during the first term, the average rating was 49 percent, and during the second term, it was 47 percent. See also Tyson (2016).
2. Although Obama received overwhelming support from the Black community during both of his campaigns, there was much discussion of his race, including a public controversy over his degree of "Blackness" (Sullivan and Johnson 2008; Walters 2007). For example, columnist Stanley Crouch (2006) wrote in the *New York Daily News*: "other than color, Obama did not—does not—share a heritage with the majority of black Americans, who are descendants of plantation slaves" (see also Redlawsk et al. 2010; Walters 2007). While many observers, including the authors of this study, thought this discourse was inappropriate, we highlight these controversies to explain our reasoning for focusing on Obama in this paper.
3. Much later, evangelical political leader Tony Perkins (2020) reemphasized the "guns and religion" trope while reminding his readers that "As most white evangelicals know, Barack Obama has never been able to control his disdain for Bible-believing Americans."
4. Evangelical Protestantism entails an active sharing of the word of God with others (evangelism), the "born-again" experience (in which the believer accepts Christ as personal savior), piety, and strict scriptural interpretation (i.e., a "high view" of scripture).
5. In our sample, 71 percent of Black respondents are Protestants.
6. This also remains so despite the increasing influence of the prosperity gospel—the teaching that with piety comes material success—within Black Protestantism, which has reoriented some congregations away from emphasis on race and racism; cf. Harris (2010, 2012); Owens (2007).
7. Throughout the paper, we use the term "Hispanic" rather than "Latino" to match the Pew Research Center's naming convention. We acknowledge that "Hispanic" and "Latino" are not necessarily equivalent terms. For a good discussion, see Martínez and Gonzalez (2020).
8. There is a case to be made that Asian Americans ought to be analyzed separately as well (e.g., Yi 2022; Yi and Phillips 2019). However, the dataset we used includes just 43 Asian American respondents, only 14 of whom identify as Christian.
9. Landline and cellular random digit dialing methods of sample selection were used. The response rates were 10 percent for the landline portion of the sample and 6 percent for the cellphone portion.
10. Please note that questions (i.e., dependent variables) about President Obama's policy performance were asked of only half the sample. This fact, as well as respondents' selection of "don't know/refused" responses, explains variation in sample sizes across our models.
11. More detailed information about the operationalization of variables, including question wording and descriptive statistics, may be found in Tables A1 and A2 of the online Appendix.
12. We could not include the "believing" and "bonding" dimensions of religion in our analysis due to data limitations.
13. We acknowledge that using the "born-again" measure to categorize Protestants is not an optimal approach (Smidt 2019), but it is the best option we have given the questions included in the survey.
14. Woodberry and colleagues (2012) contend that the Black Protestant category should be coded based on denominational affiliation rather than race. However, the Pew survey we use does not provide information about denominational affiliation.
15. In supplementary nalyses presented in Table A6 of the online Appendix, we separated Hispanic and non-Hispanic evangelicals and mainline Protestants. Although the sample sizes of Hispanic Protestants are quite small, the results of these analyses bolster the robustness of the findings we present below, as both

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groups of Hispanic Protestants are by and large indistinguishable from Black Protestants, while non-Hispanic evangelicals and mainline Protestants are relatively less approving of Obama's handling of most policy areas.

16. The data we utilize in this study are face valid in terms of religious affiliation (cf. Pew Research Center 2015). Evangelical Protestants comprise the largest religious group in our sample (22.8 percent). The second and third largest groups are Catholics (21.2 percent) and mainline Protestants (17.1 percent); the smallest group is "other Christians" (2.6 percent).

17. Results using (a) evangelical Protestant and (b) religiously unaffiliated respondents as the reference group are presented in Tables A4 and A5 of the Appendix, respectively.

18. Even though worship attendance by itself captures just one dimension of individual religiosity, it is the most externally valid (and most used) indicator of religiosity in the US context (Green 2007; Leege and Kellstedt 1993). In our sample, 37 percent of respondents report attending worship services at least once a week.

19. Multicollinearity does not present a challenge to any of these models, as all mean variance inflation factor (VIF) scores are below the conventional standard of 2.

20. This difference is also evident when we run models using either evangelical Protestants or religiously unaffiliated as the excluded group (see Appendix for details).

21. After a slow but steady repudiation of their historical Democratic partisanship (Greeley 1977), today 60 percent of White, non-Hispanic Catholics are Republicans (Smith et al. 2025). Exit polls indicate that 63 percent of White Catholics voted for Donald Trump in 2024 (CNN 2024). See also Gayte et al. (2018).

22. In analyses not reported, we include interactions between religious affiliation and worship attendance; one model interacts our evangelical Protestant variable with worship attendance, and another interacts our Hispanic Catholic variable with worship attendance. We found no significant effects for interactions between affiliation and attendance in any of our models. These results are available from the authors upon request.

23. It is also plausible that worship attendance may be capturing the communitarian impulse those who attend services may develop over time. We thank the reviewer for suggesting this point.

24. Our main results are consistent regardless of how we classify partisans and leaners. The significant differences between Democrats and Republicans are unchanged. The results for Independents are the same for most of our models, though there are some small differences in our economy, foreign policy, and trade models. These supplemental results are available upon request from the authors.

25. The rest of the figures may be found in the Appendix.

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