

# God Talk

## Religious Cues and Electoral Support

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It was revealed in 2006 that Republican candidates employ a type of religious code in their political speeches. Their intention is to cue the support of religiously conservative voters without alienating other voters who may not share the same social issue agenda. The authors assess the efficacy of this GOP Code on the support of voters in specific religious traditions in an experimental setting. As expected, the code proves to be an effective cue for white evangelical Protestants but has no effect on mainline Protestants and Catholics. The form and function of the code expands our understanding of religious influence and broadens the spectrum of cues the electorate uses.

**Keywords:** *heuristics; shared social identity; party candidates; religion; Republican code*

A cursory look at the national political campaigns of the past thirty-five years suggests that Republicans are skilled at using religiously laden appeals to woo certain voters. Nixon's Southern Strategy, Lee Atwater's masterminding of the Reagan landslides, and Karl Rove's present-day efforts suggest that GOP candidates have achieved tremendous success by turning elections into referenda on their opponents' morality (Leege et al. 2002). In his book *Tempting Faith*, former White House staffer David Kuo (2006) revealed that Republicans use highly selective cues to appeal to religious conservatives. These cues, or what we term "the code," signal the in-group status of a GOP candidate to white evangelical voters. However, because the cues are so specific to evangelical culture, they are intended to pass unnoticed by other voters and therefore allow GOP candidates to avoid broadcasting very conservative issue positions that might alienate more moderate voters. Thus, the code is a highly sophisticated communication strategy that is designed to appeal to an in-group without rousing an out-group's suspicions.

Linking politics and morality often requires appeals to (1) religion, because Americans are such an exceptionally religious people, and (2) religious groups, which are important organizational nodes for the electorate. We believe that both aspects of religion—its social and psychological aspects—are important, although the religion and politics literature has been less than concrete about how each matters in terms of candidate choice (Regnerus, Sikkink, and Smith

1999). Although each perspective suggests that a theory incorporating both the social and psychological aspects would be particularly salutary, little progress has been made. For instance, while almost every study of Christian Right support notes that links between individuals and the movement are made through grassroots mechanisms, that is, churches (e.g., Wilcox and Larson 2006), most studies focus their measurement strategies on individual identifications (Jelen 1993; Wilcox 1989; Wilcox, Jelen, and Leege 1993). Alternately, the religious commitment perspective uses religious traditions, such as evangelical Protestant or Catholic, as an operationalization of a common set of political information conveyed to members (Green et al. 1996), an assumption that Djupe and Gilbert (2004) demolished with their demonstration of the tremendous diversity within those categories.

Still, there is value in thinking about religious influence from a perspective that takes religious traditions seriously and explains how religious identifications

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might matter—one that takes religion’s social and psychological aspects into account. While it has never been clear whether a religious tradition refers to geographic, ethnic, religious belief, or other factors (Kellstedt and Green 1993), there are elements that those in religious traditions hold in common and that can serve as the basis for establishing identity. For instance, the language employed in evangelical churches to describe how God works in the world will be quite different compared to what is typically heard in Catholic or mainline Protestant churches. The specific political meaning of these words will surely vary from church to church, but individuals from a religious tradition would recognize each other through at least their general speech habits.

This use of language, therefore, functions as a heuristic—an automatic or unconscious problem solving strategy that “keep[s] the information processing demands of the task within bounds” (Abelson and Levi 1985, 255). This process does not link religious language to politics directly but cues evangelicals’ social identity. If called to do so, those already cued may apply ample and available stereotypes to assess the politics of the newly perceived in-group member. The old stereotype that Catholics are Democrats has faded, but certainly the most common contemporary stereotype is that evangelicals are Republicans (or at least conservative). In the course of a campaign, the politics of the newly perceived in-group member, in this case a candidate for political office, will become solidified—confirmed by discussion, media reports, and further campaigning. However, on initial contact with a candidate where limited information is available, we can learn something about the political efficacy of targeted religious cues.

## Connecting Evangelical to Politics

The social and psychological components of religion are particularly robust among most evangelicals, both white and black. Evangelicals hold their faith more strongly than do others and cluster more tightly in religious communities, making them attractive targets for political parties (Wald 2003; Wilcox and Larson 2006). On the heels of a determined campaign, white evangelicals have aligned with the GOP at the national level since the late 1970s (Rozell and Wilcox 1995; Cleary and Hertzke 2005; Wald 2003). The Republican Party has been all too happy to have its support, even as party leaders have been slow to turn evangelical concerns into tangible policy (Wills 1990; Fowler, Hertzke, and Olson 2004; Oldmixon 2005). Despite these disappointments (see Thomas and Dobson 1999), white

evangelical support for the GOP remains fairly consistent (Kellstedt and Smidt 1993; Calfano, Oldmixon, and VonDoepp 2005), and it is not hard to understand why, especially with the Democratic Party’s more liberal stance on social issues. While some Democrats have attempted to cast economic issues, including the plight of the poor, as religious concerns, Republicans continue to hold the dual aces of abortion and gay marriage in their appeals to conservative religious voters (Haider-Markel 1998, 2001).

Why, then, has the GOP been slow to translate conservative cultural positions into tangible policy? One possibility is the electorate’s generally overlooked preference for diversity on social issues, even among evangelicals (Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2006). As such, it may take a generous measurement strategy to find a majority of the public that falls under the late Jerry Falwell’s conception of “moral.” Moreover, evangelicals, although an important GOP primary constituency, are not a large enough voting bloc to unilaterally deliver elections for Republicans. Clearly, the trick for a mass party is to maintain the zealous support of important elements in its base without alienating pivotal, moderate voters. That is, the Republican Party must keep evangelicals supportive and mobilized while continuing to appeal to moderates.

Kuo (2006) unveiled one attempt to realize this strategy. Ratifying Wilcox’s (1996) claim that “candidates do best when they win the support of the Christian Right without being perceived as part of the movement” (p. 83), Kuo (2006) noted that Republican candidates developed a set of sophisticated cues to alert evangelicals that they are one of them without arousing suspicion from other portions of the electorate (pp. 59–61). If evangelical voters, in turn, employ the common stereotype that evangelicals are social conservatives, it would largely eliminate the need for Republican candidates to provide specific policy positions on issues that might alienate other voters, such as abortion and gay rights. Thus, speaking in code may provide a partial solution to this mass party dilemma, although not one that is particularly reflective of democratic norms.

Kuo (2006) identified several distinct themes that Republicans have historically used to cue evangelicals. Three stand out because they were the most complete examples Kuo referenced, and we have assigned a specific term to each for reference throughout this analysis. We refer to them collectively as “the code.”<sup>1</sup>

- “We have this land, and we’re told to be good stewards of it, and each other” (land statement).
- “I believe in an America that recognizes the worth of every individual, and leaves the ninety-nine to find the one stray lamb” (worth statement).

- “There is power, wonder working power, in the goodness and idealism and faith of the American people” (power statement).

Despite the assumption that citizens are miserly and wish to expend little energy in gathering political information (Fiske and Taylor 1991), it is by no means the case that heuristics are employed only by the politically unaware (Converse 1964; Cutler 2002; Lau and Redlawsk 2001). The traditional assumption is that the poorly informed—those without ability or interest (Mondak 1993)—have the most to benefit by using heuristics (Downs 1957), although heuristics may be most fruitfully employed by the already informed (Lau and Redlawsk 2001). The stereotypes associated with these heuristics function as a political brand of sorts. Voters rely on this brand to make assumptions about a candidate, given their “acquired knowledge structures”—personal information and beliefs that can be projected or cued (Conover and Feldman 1989, 914).

For instance, in the absence of other information, voters use personal appearance to infer traits or use party identification to infer issue compatibility (Rahn 1993; Riggle et al. 1992). The types of heuristics voters might employ are limitless, but the literature has focused on five general categories first laid out more than forty years ago (Converse 1964) and amplified in multiple outlets since. These are ideology, the party label, group endorsements, polls, and candidate appearance (see Lau and Redlawsk 2001, 953-54). Arguably, the most influential of these are candidate party identification and ideology (Lodge and Hamill 1986; Rahn 1993; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991). The code, however, does not fit well in any of the general categories on heuristics. It is more complicated than making an appearance in overalls or trotting out an ideological or group label, and it takes effort to notice and extract it. The code is hidden in plain sight.

The mere existence of heuristics does not directly translate into their public use. Converse (1964) noted that to use group cues, citizens must “be endowed with some cognitions of the group as an entity and with some interstitial ‘linking’ information indicating why a given party or policy is relevant to the group. Neither of these forms of information can be taken for granted” (pp. 236-37). Clearly, the systematic effectiveness of heuristics depends on ideas with firm roots, which indicates why the structure of the information environment is so crucial (Bartels 1996). Here, code effectiveness depends on the common experiences found in the evangelical community, which are many despite the community’s diversity in some respects (e.g., Smith 1998). Two are engaged

here. The first is the language, drawn from a variety of religious sources such as the Bible and hymns, which are common to evangelicals. The second is the commonly shared political connection that evangelicals have come to identify with the GOP. In essence, our argument is that the code is an attempt to provide relevant information for white evangelicals to know that a candidate is a member of their group, allowing a connection to the Republican Party given their history of electoral support for it.

Therefore, the code functions first as a heuristic to assign shared social identity—a tool by which, among other functions, in-group members can be identified in the absence of other information. A long line of research has shown the power of social categorizations (Turner et al. 1987), with social identity often resulting in positive in-group bias and negative views about the out-group (Sherif et al. 1961; Tajfel 1970; Tajfel and Turner 1986), even under trivial conditions. As Huddy (2001) explained, “according to social identity theory, additional motivational factors are needed to account for the development of inter-group discrimination, but mere categorization is sufficient to explain the creation of social identity” (p. 133). Individuals appear to compare themselves to a prototypical member (Lakoff 1987), and the degree to which characteristics are shared affects identity formation (Turner et al. 1987).

In this case, self-identity as an evangelical was established by the respondent through the survey response. The question is whether said identity is projected onto the candidate. Two motivations may play a role in driving that assessment—the existence of threat (Brewer 1979) and the desire to reduce uncertainty about their views (Mullin and Hogg 1998)—both may be in play here. Central to evangelicalism is a tension with the world mandating a constant vigilance to avoid succumbing to its temptations. This imbues the choice of a candidate with larger spiritual implications for these voters and may lead to an extensive search for an in-group candidate.<sup>2</sup> Yet, the choice of candidates below the presidential level is also filled with uncertainty, especially in the experimental conditions explored here, where details about the candidate are quite vague. Thus, participants may search for any information, including a shared social identity, that may help reduce the uncertainty of what a candidate stands for and determine whether support should be granted to a candidate.

Shared social identity can affect candidate support directly and indirectly. Directly, voters may allow more support for an in-group candidate, even without specific information about the candidate’s politics;

this effect may be implicit (Albertson 2005). More likely in our view is that a social identity will serve as a heuristic for determining the candidate's politics, and shared politics will lead to support. Of course, this operation is more likely (and easier to assess) when there is an established relationship between the group and a political stance, such as exists between evangelicals and the Republican Party. Second, the code is clearly a heuristic to identify in-group members. For the code to produce political effects, however, in-group members have to engage in additional stereotyping—that anyone who uses it is of a particular political persuasion. Without a clear political tie, the in-group connection may have limited applicability. However, since evangelicals have become so closely identified with the Republican Party since 1980, it is highly likely that evangelicals themselves will adopt the stereotype, thereby energizing the code.

Perhaps most interesting is that the code should only function for the in-group. It does not use symbols that are easily recognized by any voter but instead draws on word sequences that are generally known only to evangelicals. Thus, we suspect that only evangelicals will use the code to identify candidates as Republican and will boost their support of those candidates. Nonevangelicals will not recognize the code and, therefore, will not have an identity cue that could be useful in identifying the party of the candidate or determining support levels. In this way, the code differs from other group-based explanations of political choice (e.g., Brady and Sniderman 1985). The code is not generally available; it does not involve a comparison of opposites, and because only the in-group will recognize it, mass affect does not play a role.

The code also differs from the historic and common use of cultural symbols that Leege and colleagues (2002) detailed in their expansive treatment. The symbols they discussed are rooted in and trigger difference about "our conduct and social obligations" (p. 80). The symbols Leege et al. detailed are the stuff of traditional campaigning, helping voters engage in the campaign and form their choices. By contrast, the code is an attempt to evade overt campaign deliberation by sending out appeals to a specific group and avoiding salient group differences.

## Data and Method

We test for the efficacy of code cues in survey experiments administered to students in three introductory American government courses at Texas A&M University in late April 2007. Students were

asked to participate in an experiment in which they were presented speech excerpts from mock political candidates. Prior to receiving the treatment, participants were asked a series of questions concerning their demographics, political interests, political knowledge, and political attitudes. Participants were then exposed to a picture and brief biographical sketch of a male candidate that included basic personal information (including age, family status, career background, etc.; see the appendix for details of the statements employed). Candidates varied on two dimensions: (1) race (white or black) and (2) code statement, creating a  $2 \times 4$  design. Equal portions of the speeches contained one of three verbatim statements (land, worth, or power) from Kuo's (2006) description of the code, while one equal portion, the control group, was not exposed to a code statement.

Participants were then asked to identify the candidate's party (all candidates were male) and whether they would vote for him (see the appendix for full variable coding). These measures allow us to assess the validity of the code's effect—evangelical voters more likely to identify him as Republican should also be more likely to support him. Roman Catholics are a self-contained tradition and are easy to identify; Protestants are not. Thus, we rely on Steensland et al.'s (2000) denominational approach to categorize Protestants as either white evangelical or mainline.<sup>3</sup> The overwhelming number of participants in the A&M sample belongs to one of these three traditions—only six students belonged to another religious tradition, and they were excluded. We also include an attendance measure for participants when they are living at home (not when at the university, which can affect attendance rates for a variety of reasons unrelated to religious commitment). As Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens (1994) showed, going away to college is one of the most significant disruptions in a person's religious life, often severing religious attachments altogether until the person has kids. Therefore, asking about attendance at the home church, instead of the constrained variance situation at school, may tell us more about religious socialization. That said, one could make the argument that a student's existing religious socialization would be challenged and altered by his or her college experiences. This possibility might require further consideration depending on the effects found for the stimuli. Finally, we include participants' party identification, sex, and race as controls.

Importantly, to provide a clean test of these religious appeals, we do not assign the candidate a political party, although it is clearly the Republican Party that has used these specific cues in the recent past. The

**Table 1**  
**Difference of Means Test for Participant Perceptions of Candidate Party Identification (ANOVA)**

	Evangelicals		Catholics		Mainline	
	<i>F</i>	Probability > <i>F</i>	<i>F</i>	Probability > <i>F</i>	<i>F</i>	Probability > <i>F</i>
Candidate worth statement	6.318	.013	0.213	.645	6.346	.014
Candidate land statement	28.084	.000	1.290	.258	6.298	.014
Candidate power statement	6.434	.012	1.078	.301	5.366	.023
Candidate is black	0.362	.548	0.169	.681	2.121	.149
Model	7.144	.000	0.540	.803	3.036	.022
Adjusted <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>		.121		-.018		.082
<i>n</i>		179		184		79

party identification of a candidate is a powerful heuristic itself, of course, and might cue people to look for (or assume) religious ties. Any boost in support for a candidate employing religious language could be the result of a partisan stereotype instead of religious socialization or an interaction between them. Moreover, revealing a candidate's partisan identification removes the possibility of testing whether the code motivates the stereotype of identification with the GOP in the first place. Therefore, with an eye on a specific form of religious influence, we test whether those with particular religious ties recognize the code to apply a partisan stereotype and therefore support code-using candidates at greater rates.

## Results

To assess a difference in means between the experimental conditions, we run ANOVA tests within each of the three religious traditions. The first set of tests (see Table 1) shows whether differences exist between the experimental conditions and participant perception of candidate party identification. The *p* values for the first ANOVA tests show striking and significant differences in means between the three code statements among white evangelicals. Mainline Protestants respond to all three statements (although the effect is less statistically crisp than it is for evangelicals), but Catholics respond to none. Therefore, among Protestants, the code encourages voters to identify the candidate as a Republican.

Table 2 presents ANOVA tests for differences in candidate support when presented with the three code statements and candidate race. Among evangelicals, all three statements and candidate race generate

support for the candidate. Only the worth statement is significant among Catholics, while there are no differences in means among mainline Protestants. Taken together, the code demonstrates to evangelicals that a candidate is Republican and is worth supporting. It is important to remember that the biographies are free from political stance and affiliation, meaning fluctuations in support come only from experimental treatments. Among those in other traditions, only a few other Protestants might recognize the import of the code, but overall, its presence does not systematically alter support for the candidate. That is, the code works according to plan—it allows a targeted in-group to identify and attach support to a candidate without affecting support among other groups.

## Perceptions of Party Affiliation

In Tables 3 and 4, we incorporate further statistical controls in ordinary least squares regression models to verify the links found in the ANOVA analysis. In each, we examine effects within the same three religious traditions used in the previous tables. In Table 3, we examine perceptions of the candidate's party identification. Clearly, white evangelicals perceive candidates using the code as Republican. The worth statement boosts Republican identification by less than two points (1.67), the land statement boosts it by greater than three points (3.61), and the power statement by two points (2.02). Were the evangelical voter unsure of a candidate, the presentation of familiar religious cues would certainly tip the balance toward one party affiliation.

In contrast to their effect on evangelicals, none of the code statements are significant predictors for Catholics, indicating that Catholics either do not recognize these cues or simply do not associate them

**Table 2**  
**Difference of Means Test for Participant Candidate Support (ANOVA)**

Participant Support for Candidate	Evangelicals		Catholics		Mainline	
	<i>F</i>	Probability > <i>F</i>	<i>F</i>	Probability > <i>F</i>	<i>F</i>	Probability > <i>F</i>
Candidate worth statement	15.809	.000	5.307	.022	1.299	.258
Candidate land statement	32.527	.000	1.010	.316	1.072	.304
Candidate power statement	12.497	.001	0.001	.978	0.138	.712
Candidate is black	3.629	.058	0.104	.747	0.001	.976
Model	9.436	.000	1.662	.161	0.437	.782
Adjusted <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.159		.014		-.029	
<i>n</i>	179		184		80	

**Table 3**  
**Estimates of Participant Perceptions of Candidate Party Identification, by Religious Tradition (Ordinary Least Squares Regression)**

	Evangelicals		Catholics		Mainline	
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>
Candidate worth statement	1.674	0.740***	-0.097	0.504	2.180	0.830**
Candidate land statement	3.606	0.814**	0.231	0.464	2.425	0.907***
Candidate power statement	2.016	0.803***	0.267	0.475	2.741	0.908***
Candidate is black	-0.236	0.551	0.415	0.354	0.900	0.620
Participant party	0.209	0.146	0.220	0.089**	0.258	0.127**
Participant is female	-0.766	0.569	0.031	0.382	-0.705	0.634
Participant is nonwhite			-0.322	0.417	1.100	0.704
Political knowledge	0.034	0.162	0.256	0.084***	0.162	0.126
Encourages participation	-0.181	0.100*	0.020	0.066	0.178	0.107
Church attendance	0.397	0.193**	0.023	0.107	0.218	0.207
Constant	3.522	1.110	5.455	0.839***	1.364	1.450
Model (probability > <i>F</i> )	.000		.108		.023	
Adjusted <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.118		.033		.142	
<i>n</i>	213		180		78	

Note: All coefficients are unstandardized.

\**p* ≤ .10. \*\**p* ≤ .05. \*\*\**p* ≤ .01 (two-tailed).

with the GOP. On the other hand, and in accord with the ANOVA results, the cues do make sense to mainline Protestants. When presented with any statement, mainline Protestants see the candidate as more Republican at roughly the same rates as evangelicals; see Figure 1, which shows the effect of the experimental conditions holding all other variables from Table 3 constant at their means. Without any statement provided, both mainline and evangelical Protestants gauge the candidate at about a five on the ten-point scale, which signifies they have no inclination of the candidate's party affiliation. The code statements provide an inclination, pushing perceptions

of a Republican affiliation. A difference of means test ratifies the perception that the land statement has a greater effect than either the worth or power statements, but only among evangelicals.

The participants' individual characteristics sporadically affect their baseline perceptions of candidate party affiliation. Higher church attendance among evangelicals increases the baseline perceptions of the candidate as Republican by .315 per point (the most frequent church attendees, therefore, perceive the candidate as 1.6 points more Republican than nonattendees). Although we hesitate to extend this particular finding to the American electorate, it is suggestive. At

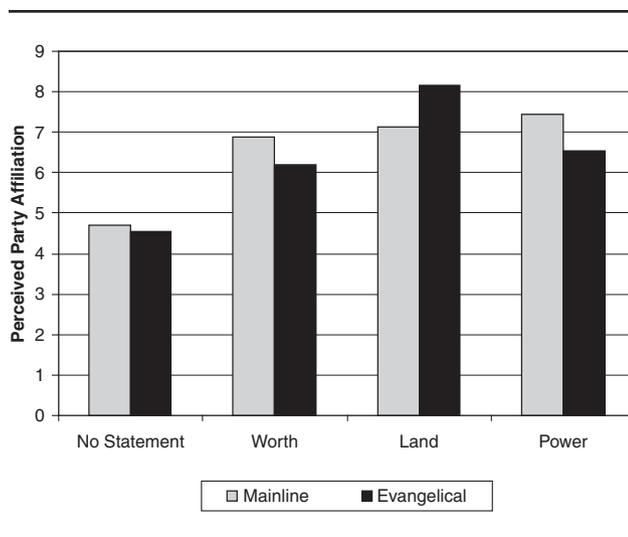
**Table 4**  
**Estimates of Candidate Support, by Religious Tradition (Ordinary Least Squares Regression)**

	Evangelicals		Catholics		Mainline	
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>
Candidate worth statement	1.416	0.339***	0.719	0.429*	0.578	0.784
Candidate land statement	2.080	0.372***	0.452	0.394	1.226	0.833
Candidate power statement	1.438	0.369***	0.392	0.404	0.468	0.830
Candidate is black	0.629	0.253**	0.329	0.301	-0.121	0.574
Party difference	-0.237	0.058***	-0.205	0.071***	-0.289	0.129**
Participant is female	0.288	0.261	0.157	0.326	-0.347	0.578
Participant is nonwhite			-0.518	0.353	0.458	0.650
Political knowledge	0.063	0.075	-0.337	0.073***	-0.475	0.105***
Encourages participation	0.125	0.045***	-0.066	0.056	-0.017	0.098
Church attendance	-0.002	0.088	0.356	0.091***	0.163	0.191
Constant	5.189	0.564***	6.360	0.580***	7.783	1.139***
Model (probability > <i>F</i> )		.000		.000		.000
Adjusted <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>		.285		.445		.267
<i>n</i>		170		180		78

Note: All coefficients are unstandardized.

\* $p \leq .10$ . \*\* $p \leq .05$ . \*\*\* $p \leq .01$  (two-tailed).

**Figure 1**  
**Perceived Party of the Candidate Given Each Treatment Condition for Mainline and Evangelical Protestants**



first blush, the church attendance effect may seem like it reinforces a Republican electoral advantage because Americans are such religious people, but it is important to note that church attendance does not affect the baseline views of those in the other two traditions. Therefore, more sophisticated religious cues are necessary to move the electorate compared to a bluntly general religious appeal by the candidate. At the same time, the effect highlights the difficulty Democrats

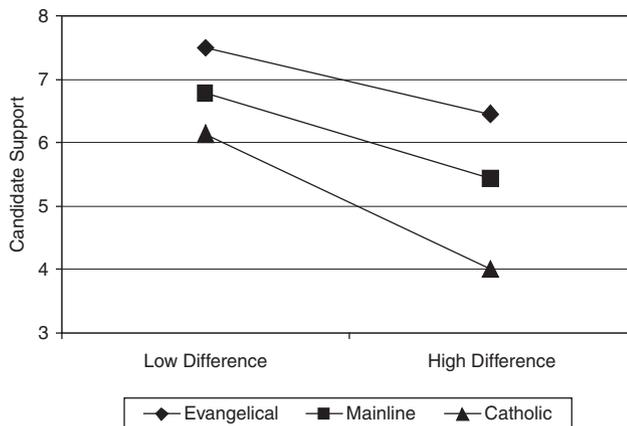
may have in attempting to peel away evangelicals from the Republican Party.

Those who identify themselves as Republican are more likely to perceive the candidate to be one of their own, regardless of the statement stimulus (the effect among evangelicals is of marginal significance). Because the party variable is a ten-point scale, the effect here is considerable. All things equal, mainline Protestant strong Democrats vary from the perception of strong Republicans by four points; Catholics on opposite ends of the party spectrum vary by more than two points. In the absence of other information, traits of an upstanding, prototypical citizen urge partisans to claim the candidate as their own. The other difference in baseline perception driven by individual predispositions is rooted in political knowledge among mainline Protestants—the effect is statistically imprecise although close to conventionally significant among the other two traditions. The politically knowledgeable perceive the candidate to be a Republican versus their politically unaware peers who rate him as a Democrat. Perhaps the less aware map their professors' perceptions onto the candidate, but regardless, the controls are necessary to impose.

### Candidate Support

In Table 4, we examine whether the statement treatments affect the degree of support for the hypothetical candidate. The dependent variable is coded from 0 to 10, where 10 signifies that the participant

**Figure 2**  
**Effect of Perceived Political Party Differences on Candidate Support for Each Religious Tradition**

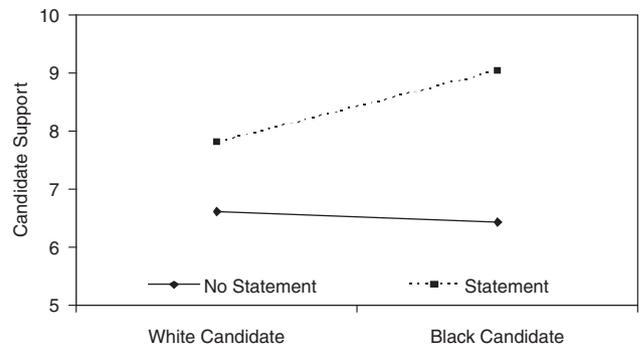


strongly agrees that “other things equal, I would vote for him in an election.” In what amounts to good news for Republican strategists, all three code statements in Table 4 are associated with a consistent increase in electoral support among white evangelicals. Specifically, the worth statement shows an increase in support of 1.42, the land statement an increase of 2.08, and the power statement an increase of 1.44 points.

Moreover, the statement effects can be seen through the party difference variable, as the code helps participants perceive a nonneutral party affiliation (as shown in Figure 1). The perceived difference between participant and candidate party affiliation weakens support more substantially among evangelicals and about equally between mainliners and Catholics. Figure 2 shows this graphically, with the endpoints of party difference defined by the mean  $\pm$  the standard deviation in each tradition. On average, evangelicals have a higher threshold of support for these candidates, which reflects the impact of the code statements. Mainliners and Catholics start in the same place when they perceive themselves sharing the same partisanship as the candidate. All three groups drop in support by roughly a point (but only a point) when they see the candidate as on the opposite end of the partisan spectrum, although mainline Protestants drop their support by closer to two points.<sup>4</sup>

The other experimental condition, the candidate’s race, is also a factor in evangelical support, with the

**Figure 3**  
**Conditional Effect among Evangelicals of the Land Statement, Given the Candidate’s Race**



African American candidate enjoying a 0.7 point increase in support. The more interesting question is whether white evangelicals respond in a different way to a black candidate who uses the code, which many prominent black Republican and Democratic candidates do. We reran the model inserting three interactions composed of the candidate’s race and the code statements. The results do not change for mainline Protestants and Catholics, but they are positive and significant for evangelicals. Figure 3 dissects the result for one of the statements (the land statement), which is representative of the interaction effects for all three statements. The candidate’s race has no effect when the participant is confronted with only the generic biography but generates a more positive reaction when a statement is used by a black candidate versus a white candidate. A black candidate receives about one more point in support than the white candidate.

Given the tense history, especially in the South, between white evangelicals and blacks (e.g., Calhoun-Brown 1997), we were suspicious of this effect and tried multiple avenues to undermine it. The most promising was an item assessing affirmative action attitudes (as well as various functional forms of the variable, such as squared and collapsed) that we interacted with candidate race and that had no effect on evangelical support. The finding is indeed robust, suggesting that a black candidate who speaks like an evangelical (such as J. C. Watts, Alan Keyes, or Ken Blackwell) could draw support from white evangelicals, other things equal. Just what those “other things” are must remain a topic for future research.

Several other effects help to distinguish evangelicals from those in the other traditions in fundamental

ways. Political knowledge, often called “political awareness” or “sophistication,” has no effect on evangelical support but drives down both Catholic and mainline Protestant support for the candidate. The politically sophisticated outside of evangelicalism have a lower baseline level of support until all the facts are known, and here we urged them to tell us their support level with very little political information. In a similar vein, those evangelicals who “encourage others to be involved in the political process” have a higher baseline of support for the candidate. Although only very tentative conclusions can be reached, it seems that evangelicals have a different value hierarchy when searching for information about political candidates and making decisions about them.

## Conclusion

Overall, these findings suggest that as GOP strategists envisaged, white evangelicals identify candidates using the code as Republicans and indicate their likely support for such candidates. Roman Catholics and mainline Protestants are generally not affected by the code, although mainline Protestants do link candidates using the code to the GOP. Instead, support for such candidates among mainline Protestants is driven largely by party affiliation and other concerns, not by the code itself. This is almost precisely the way the code is intended to work—to gain the recognition and support of the in-group evangelicals and pass unnoticed by others, or at least not engender opposition from other likely supporters.

Interestingly, African American candidates enjoy a boost in support when employing the code. While this may be the result of evangelicals’ consciously embracing candidates who speak their religious language, they may also be making assumptions about the likely issue positions the candidates would take. Thus, it is not clear whether just any candidate, white or black, who uses the code would benefit unless something or someone over the course of a campaign confirms the stereotype. Of course, that is very likely to happen in a homogeneous, cohesive congregation rather than in one where diversity reigns.

The code is a different kind of heuristic than is typically discussed in the social psychology literature. There, heuristics are generally available symbols, even though differentially used, that can be used as information shortcuts to make sense of the political world. Here, while the code is generally available, it is only accessible to a narrower slice of the population. Instead of helping to

separate in- and out-groups, the code is helpful only to the in-group. Whether this dynamic is detrimental to the interests of the in-group is worthy of some reflection, and evangelical leaders have chewed, generally, on the value of the link with the Republican Party for years.

While we have not presented or tested a general theory of religion and politics, we have started to lay bare some of the connections between religion and political choices. Long-standing religious connections do more than shape value systems that impinge on political attitudes. In addition, religious symbols, shaped by religious traditions, help some voters connect with impending political choices. This is surely not the only way in which religion helps voters make sense of their political world. For instance, congregations often help to process significant political issues through presentation and discussion (Djupe and Gilbert 2002). This collective processing may be particularly salient in light of the tentative judgments voters make when presented with minimal information.

We recommend pursuing this line of research further, probing for the range of stereotyping that voters employ when presented with a variety of religious cues that candidates typically use and how those translate into support. In particular, a campaign environment with at least two candidates would provide a helpful opportunity to assess information value hierarchies, especially in specifying a weight to religious cues.

## Appendix Variable Coding

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Candidate Biography (with worth statement italicized): Age: 45; Occupation: Financial Analyst; Family Status: Married, 3 Children. “There is important work to be done in this country. We must be prepared to meet the challenges of tomorrow, while not forgetting the needs of today. My hope is that our great nation will always remember that we have promises to keep and responsibilities to fulfill, and that greatness comes in rising to these challenges. Indeed, my friends, *I believe in an America that recognizes the worth of every individual, and leaves the ninety-nine to find the one stray lamb.* This country cannot forget this important truth if it expects to remain great.”

Candidate Party: “Based on this information, I believe this candidate is a . . . .” Responses range from 0 to 10, where 0 = *Democrat* and 10 = *Republican*.

Candidate Support: “Other things equal, I would vote for him in an election.” Responses range from 0 to 10, where 0 = *disagree strongly* and 10 = *agree strongly*.

Participant Party: “I consider myself a . . . .” Responses range from 0 = *Democrat* to 10 = *Republican*.

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(continued)

## Appendix (continued)

Political Knowledge is an index ranging from 0 to 10, including open-ended responses asking for the holder of the following positions: Democratic Party's candidate for governor of Texas in the 2006 election; chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court; the vice president; Democratic Party's candidate for president of the United States in 2004; Speaker of the House of Representatives; Senate majority leader; lieutenant governor of Texas; German chancellor; president of Mexico; senior U.S. senator from Texas.

Encourages Participation: "I encourage others to be involved in the political process." Responses range from 0 to 10, where 0 = *disagree strongly* and 10 = *agree strongly*.

Church Attendance: "I attend church when I am at home. . . ." 0 = *do not attend*, 1 = *a few times per year*, 2 = *every few months*, 3 = *about every month*, 4 = *a few times per month*, 5 = *once per week*.

## Notes

1. Although these statements may sound innocuous, to the trained ear, they reference a classic biblical parable (in the case of the one stray lamb, see Matthew 18:12-13) and a hymn ("wonder working power" comes from a hymn called "There Is Power in the Blood"). At the same time, stewardship has been an important historical theme in American Christianity (Miller and Johnson 1938; Bushman 1967), one that ties in nicely with calls for personal responsibility and self-reliance, which are both GOP hallmarks.

2. That threat, among other motivations, has generated an entire Christian economy that is also largely hidden in plain sight. In it, specific symbols (such as the *ichthys* or "Jesus fish") are used to cue believers in to the authenticity of the product or service and to maintain the exclusion of others (Finke and Stark 1992).

3. We used a combination of denomination and a belief item to divide evangelical and mainline Protestants. Those with clear denominational membership were classified without reference to the belief item. American Baptist Church, Disciples of Christ, Episcopal Church USA, Congregationalists/United Church of Christ, Presbyterian Church USA, Reformed Church in America, United Methodist Church, and Evangelical Lutheran Church in America were considered mainline. All other Baptists, Church of Christ, Church of God, non-Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Lutherans, Evangelical Free, Evangelical Covenant, Nazarene, Seventh Day Adventists, and non-Presbyterian Church USA Presbyterians were coded as evangelicals. For those who listed their denominational affiliation as a general denomination with no further specifics, for example, "Lutheran," we consulted a religious belief item asking about agreement with, "A person's belief in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior is the only way to heaven." Those who gave an answer closer to the evangelical mean than to the mainline mean were grouped with evangelicals (the significant difference was about four points on a ten-point scale). Unfortunately, due to low numbers, we had to exclude members of less populous groups, including the Latter-Day Saints.

4. A dummy interaction term of mainline Protestant and the party difference variable in a combined model of candidate support just misses significance ( $p = .115$ )—it is close to a significantly different effect compared to that for the other traditions.

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