



The Religion Factor in Voting Decisions: Inspecting Its Influence via Emotion, Moral Evaluation, and Issue Congruence in the 2024 Presidential Election

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ABSTRACT

This study examined whether and how people's religious affiliation affected their voting choices in the 2024 presidential election. A nationwide survey of a representative sample ($N=1,486$) was conducted prior to the election. Social Identity Theory and the Michigan model of voting behavior provide the theoretical linkage between religious belonging and mediators of its influence on voting choice. We also test issue congruence and perceptions of each candidate's morality as mediators. Finally, we include political party identity to see how these identities interact. The intentions of voters from four major religious affiliations—Protestants, Catholics, other religions, and people without religion—were compared, with party identification's moderation included in the model. Emotions voters harbor toward candidates, perceived issue congruence, and moral evaluation were also incorporated as mediating factors of religion's influence. Results show that religious affiliation played a significant role in forming voting choices. Political ID moderated religious affiliation's influence—particularly, Democrat's positive influence on Catholics in supporting Harris and Republican's negative influence on people of other religions in supporting Trump. Enthusiasm and fear were significant emotions for mediating religious belonging's influence on support for both candidates; yet fear was significantly positive for predicting Trump support for voters with religion affiliation. Moral evaluation and issue congruence were also significant mediators of religion for both candidates.

KEYWORDS

emotion; issue congruence; moral; party identification; presidential election; religion; voting

Faith can profoundly shape people's views and actions in politics. Numerous news reports before the 2024 election indicated wide support of Donald Trump among Christians—particularly Evangelicals were considered a stronghold for the Trump camp (French 2023; Mansfield 2017). Evangelical leaders have directly and openly urged their congregations to vote for Trump for religious reasons, one of which was attributed to his stances on abortion and gender issues (Maqbool 2024). Even Pope Francis advised Catholics to choose the lesser evil between Harris and Trump before the election (Faguy 2024). Although the phenomenon of religious influence in electoral campaigns is not new—as in the case of 2004 presidential election (Green, Rozell, and Wilcox 2006) and in earlier elections where invocation of religious themes were prominent (Domke and Coe 2010), the latest development between religious belonging and political party merits a new investigation. Rarely has the division of religion and politics advocated by the founding fathers been this blurry and ignored. The adage to “never discuss politics or religion in polite company” apparently lost its appeal in this campaign cycle. The overt religious overture in the 2024 election appears apt to examine if voters indeed made their choices under the influence of their religious affiliation.

The present study on voters' religious belonging and their voting preference draws on two theories—Social Identity Theory and the Michigan model of voting behavior—to understand whether and how voters' religious affiliation played a role in shaping their voting choices between Kamala Harris and Donald Trump. In addition to verifying the influence of religious affiliation on candidate support, we sought to explore other relevant predictors of voting decisions found in the existing political communication literature that may be linked to religion. For example, voters' sense of candidates' morality (Billingsley, Lieberman, and Tybur 2018; Enke 2020) and of their congruent stances on key issues that concern them (Costello et al. 2021; Wu and Coleman 2014) can be directly influenced by their religious belonging. Religion¹, after all, provides moral standards and ethical emphases by which religious voters may have been oriented and based in evaluating presidential candidates. People who are immensely concerned about abortion issues may diverge into either the pro-choice or pro-life camp, thus voting for the Democratic or Republican candidate.

The emotions political candidates engender in voters also can exert a notable influence on voting decisions (Coleman and Wu 2015; Grüning and Schubert 2021). This route of campaign effect on voting decision is evidenced by the existing literature of emotional agenda-setting and priming effects—the former focusing on the transmission of salient emotions from the media to the audience, while the latter zeroing on the salient criteria with which voters use to form their evaluations of the candidates. As the aforementioned anecdotes indicated, religion may affect how their followers *feel* about political candidates just as they shape their views about the important issues facing society. Therefore, religion's potential connection with the emotions voters harbor toward presidential candidates and with their perceived candidate morality and issue congruence should be examined together to render a more holistic understanding of religion's impact on voters' decision-making.

Literature review

We based our study of voting prediction on two theories—the Michigan model of voting behavior (Campbell et al. 1980) for its psychological factors that influence voters' decision making, and Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner 1979) for its theorization of group membership, in this case, religious belonging, which moderates voters' emotions and candidate evaluation.

The Michigan model

To explain voter behavior, a theoretical model known as the Michigan model² (Campbell et al. 1980) dominated the study of elections for decades. It helped the researchers to theorize three psychological factors that voters draw upon when making their electoral choices, ordering them hierarchically in a “funnel of causality.” The most important of the factors are attitudes toward candidates, attitudes toward issues, and the role of partisanship.

The *candidate factors* include what voters like and dislike about political candidates. Candidate evaluations may represent specific traits or overall attractiveness (Markus and Converse 1979), candidate morality (Kinder et al. 1980), competence (Popkin et al. 1976) as well as voters' attitudes toward the personal qualities and performance of the candidates (Lawrence 1978).

Issue orientation is defined as a voter's position on social topics and policies in a campaign. It is defined as comparisons between the policy positions of the candidates and the voter (Page and Jones 1979).

Party identification is the cornerstone of the Michigan model, defined as a person's psychological attachment to a particular political party. The model sees party identification as resulting from the early phases of an individual's political socialization, the result of influence of one's parents. Partisanship provides heuristic cues, requiring less information to process complex issue positions in order to come to a voting decision.

The Michigan model concentrates on political identification but notes that religious beliefs are acquired in much the same way and also represent a sense of attachment, as do one's gender, social class, and racial group (Hutchings and Jefferson 2018). However, research using the Michigan model relegated these other social groups to a secondary role (Beck 1986).

While the Michigan model has fallen out of favor and been replaced with new theoretical perspectives, these original concepts continue to shape studies of electoral behavior (Beck 1986). We draw from these three categories for the mediating and moderating mechanisms of this study, hypothesizing that religious belonging will have indirect effects on vote choice through the impact of attitudes and emotions toward candidates and issues, and these will be moderated by partisanship. The more recent concept to inform our inquiry about religious belonging and voting decision is grounded in voters' social identity.

Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory (SIT) focuses on how people incorporate membership in a group into their concept of self and how that then influences their behavior (Tajfel and Turner 1979). Social identity is defined as a person's "self-awareness of one's objective membership in the group and psychological sense of attachment to the group" (Conover 1984, p 761). Social groups consist of people who see themselves as members of the same category, known as the in-group. Those who are not members are seen as the out-group. Group membership has both cognitive and emotional value and is integral to a person's sense of self (Tajfel 1981). It helps people to maintain a positive sense of self-esteem (Tajfel and Turner 1979), well-being (Haslam, Reicher, and Platow 2020), and a bond with others within the same group (Cameron 2004). SIT-inspired research originally focused on racial group membership as well as gender, nationality in the U.S., and in countries outside the U.S, social class. Fewer studies have examined religious affiliation (Ysseldyk, Matheson, and Anisman 2010) (for an exception see Campbell et al. 1980).

These social groups shape a wide range of behaviors and responses to circumstances (Tajfel and Turner 1979). In SIT, the most commonly studied behavioral consequence is bias—people favor members of their in-group and derogate members of the out-group (Tajfel 1982). But studies have also examined its influence on voter turnout (Smith and Walker 2013). People in these membership groups tend to have shared political attitudes, as the group promotes conformity, with certain religions and political conservatism overlapping (Jost, Nosek, and Gosling 2008). It has been proposed that religion fills a gap that political conservatism lacks (Ysseldyk, Matheson, and Anisman 2010).

Religion as a social identity has been posited to exert a powerful function on one's social identity as it is grounded in guiding beliefs and offers a "sacred" worldview with "eternal" group membership unlike other group identities (Ysseldyk, Matheson, and Anisman 2010). Religious belonging may be explained by the emotional value this group membership brings. Its unique characteristics include providing moral authority (Djupe and Calfano 2013; Wellman and Tokuno 2004), guiding beliefs to distill meaning from lived experience (Park 2007), and bestowing a sense of significance that is greater than that of other groups (Kinnvall 2004). In this study, we account not only for the direct effects of religious belonging on voting choice (Djupe and Calfano 2013), but also for the indirect effects through candidate and issue evaluations.

Religion and politics

Despite the common belief and practice of separation between church and state in most Western democracies, there has been a resurgence of their intertwining influence in the last few decades in the U.S. Starting in the 1970s, Christian conservatives, led by Jerry Falwell Sr., formed the Moral Majority to advocate and lobby for issues they were concerned with in that political arena, ultimately helping elect Ronald Reagan to the White House (Liebman,

Wuthnow, and Guth 1983). In the 1990s, the Christian Coalition was active in mobilizing its members and vitally successful in lobbying for their causes within the Republican Party (Clifton 2004). Evangelical leaders or televangelists—for example, Pat Robertson and Jimmy Swaggart—have directly been involved in political activities around the same time-period. Billy Graham, a Baptist minister, was attributed to the rise of the Republican base in the South (Miller 2011). Mega churches across the country have become major venues for launching political marketing programs. More and more Christian leaders openly unveil their political views to sway their followers' opinion on critical issues the nation faces—such as abortion and gender issues.

Likewise, political leaders and candidates—keenly aware of religion's power in political marketing—employed religious language and themes in their campaigns to seek support from religious devotees (Chapp and Coe 2019). More and more political campaigners invoked religious messages and proposed to install religious practices into public policies (i.e., public prayers and Ten Commandments displayed in schools) to woo Christian constituencies. In response, religious leaders also disclosed their preference for political candidates in races and urged their congregations to follow suit. A study of pastors' sermons showed that a third of religious sermons discussed politics (Boussalis, Coan, and Holman 2021). Even Pope Francis advised American Catholics to choose a “lesser evil” candidate prior to the 2024 presidential election (Faguy 2024). Many Christians liken Trump to King Cyrus in ancient Jewish history, believing his role as the nation's leader as the chosen one (Many Trump supporters believe God has chosen him to rule 2023). Given the widespread and increasing trend of religion's direct engagement in political campaigns, we believe it is imperative to gauge its impact in the 2024 election.

Party identity (ID) is another critical determinant of political attitude and behavior and has consistently been shown by political scientists to affect people's voting decisions (Miller 1991; Winther Nielsen and Vinæs Larsen 2014). Thus, our goal to examine religion's influence would not be sensible without including this stable factor. With escalating polarization in the U.S., party ID remains a significant predictor of voting.³ However, individuals' party ID may or may not align well with their religion affiliations. Given the predictive power of party identity in elections, it seems worthwhile examining the impact of religion belonging on party ID in this election. Therefore, we form our first hypothesis as:

H1: Religious affiliation's influence on voters' decisions is moderated by their party identity.

Religion's potential impact on voters' decision-making should be examined with other relevant factors other than party ID. Religion may not only influence voting decisions but also mediates through many determinants political marketers often include in their analyses. People's religious affiliation can affect how they perceive and decide on the criteria with which to assess political candidates. Religion was found to influence how people express positive or negative emotion in political circles (Kim-Prieto and Diener 2009). It is likely that religion may also lead to specific emotions toward political candidates such as anger, disgust, fear, and enthusiasm, all of which political communication scholars have found highly relevant to political decisions (Coleman and Wu 2024; Marcus 2023).

Emotions toward political candidates

Voters are certain to feel one way or another about candidates—enthusiastic or disgusted, for example. Yet whether voters' religious affiliation (or lack thereof) may influence their emotions toward candidates is less certain. There is much evidence that is tangential to this question, for example, how voters respond emotionally to messages with religious appeals (Albertson 2015; Chapp and Coe 2019; Weber and Thornton 2012), and how the religion and religiosity of candidates affects voters' preferences (Clifford and Gaskins 2016; McDermott 2009). More closely aligned with our research interest are studies of how religiosity and religious affiliation of voters'

influence their views and responses to political issues and public policies (Grillo 2014). There is scant scholarship we could find about how voters' religious affiliation affects their feelings toward political candidates, as most research on emotions and politics examines how these differ by political ideology and party membership (Brenner and Inbar 2015; Inbar et al. 2012) rather than by religious affiliation. Nevertheless, because highly religious Americans are more often conservative or Republicans (Margolis 2022), we can only draw from these studies to guide our research.

Disgust

Much of the existing literature on emotions concerns disgust. Disgust is considered one of the “basic” emotions (Rozin et al. 1999) because it engenders involuntary physio-psychological responses. It is defined as feeling repulsed by objects that are rotten or spoiled, both literally and figuratively. It functions to keep us free from disease by helping us avoid toxic substances (Oaten, Stevenson, and Case 2009) and is one of the emotions that motivate people to act ethically, known as the “moral emotions” (Haidt 2003). Disgust operates in various domains, the two of most interest to the religion domain being sexual disgust (Tybur et al. 2018) and moral disgust (Giner-Sorolla, Kupfer, and Sabo 2018). These two types of disgust can be highly relevant in evaluating candidates. Negative attitudes about sexual issues that involve political candidates also are related to moral purity (Tybur et al. 2018) and often defended with religious claims such as passages from the Bible (Stewart, Adams, and Senior 2020).

Some research shows disgust operates indirectly through religious beliefs and attitudes *via* fear of sin (Olatunji 2008). Sociomoral or moral disgust relates to behaviors that harm others such as lying, cheating, stealing, betrayal, disloyalty, and hypocrisy (Giner-Sorolla, Kupfer, and Sabo 2018), which tend to be associated with politicians' attributes. The primary purpose of sociomoral disgust is to protect society (Rozin et al. 1993) by avoiding exposing the public to immoral actions (Chapman et al. 2009)—of presidential candidates, in this case.

Most studies found that political conservatives and Republican are more sensitive to disgust than liberals and Democrats (Altemeyer 1981; Inbar, Pizarro, and Bloom 2009; Inbar et al. 2012) and that this holds across the major regions of the world (Inbar et al. 2012). Research using fMRI technology has also shown that the brain structures of liberals and conservatives are different (de Bruin et al. 2023; Schreiber et al. 2013). However, other research has shown that partisan reactions are based on specific elicitors rather than greater disgust sensitivity in general (Elad-Strenger, Proch, and Kessler 2020). Inbar, Pizarro, and Bloom (2009) similarly found that out of 10 political issues, disgust sensitivity was consistently related to conservatives on only gay marriage and abortion, which are issues of spiritual purity and frequently supported with religious arguments. Furthermore, other studies either found the opposite trend among various religious groups (Rold and Honeycutt 2016) or concluded moral disgust fails to predict fear of sin or of God (Stewart, Adams, and Senior 2020).

This body of empirical evidence leads us to predict that religious affiliation influences how people feel disgust toward the candidates in the 2024 election, which subsequently affects their voting preferences.

H2: Moderated by party ID and mediated by disgust, religious affiliation predicts voters' support for a) Harris b) Trump.

While there is much research showing disgust is important to political considerations, Hatemi and McDermott (2012) argue other emotions, such as fear and anger, are also important, pointing out that emotions are issue specific—talk of war may trigger fear while endorsing transgender rights could activate anger. These are also specific to individuals; while gay marriage is disgusting to some, it makes others enthusiastic. Next, we review the other politically relevant emotions of anger, fear, and enthusiasm.

Anger

Along with disgust, anger is another basic emotion that is related to morality. Both anger and disgust are frequently activated together in response to moral violations (Gutierrez and Giner-Sorolla 2007; Russell and Giner-Sorolla 2013) although the outcomes may be different (Lerner and Keltner 2000). Politicians are often accused of committing moral violations *via* policy-related or personal issues, which makes anger highly relevant.

Anger is an intense, negative response to threat or injustice that signals something is wrong (Holmes 2004); it also comes with its own distinct facial expressions (Ekman 1999). Anger has been referred to as “the essential political emotion” (Lyman 1981, p. 61) because it often is a response to perceived injustice (Holmes 2004). Where anger becomes problematic for politics is in the degree of its expression, whether it leads to constructive dialog or extreme rage and violence (Holmes 2004). Anger is instrumental in motivating political action (Grüning and Schubert 2021) and propels people to “do politics” (Holmes 2004, p. 130).

Disgust and anger elicit different forms of information processing (Calder, Gruder, and C. N.U. Kellogg School of Business 1988), and lead to different outcomes. Most relevant to this study of religion is the role of anger in the realm of moral violations, where anger has been shown to be activated by harm or fairness violations while disgust is elicited by purity or bodily norms (Graham, Haidt, and Nosek 2009). The feelings of anger and disgust also hinge on the target individual’s physical strength and attractiveness (Tybur et al. 2020).

In Christianity, expressions of anger are discouraged and can even be regarded as a sin (Bateman and Jensen 1958; Ekman, Sorenson, and Friesen 1969; Marsh and Dallos 2000). One early study found that people who were exposed to Christian teaching were more likely to inhibit expressions of anger than those who were not (Bateman and Jensen 1958). Likewise, Marsh and Dallos (2000) found that religious practices reduced the intensity of experienced anger. Recent studies in political communication, however, unveiled the more emotional and uncivil trend (Jacobs, Close, and Pilet 2025; Molders & Quaquebeke, 2017) and profound polarization in U.S. society (Druckman et al. 2021). Additionally, harboring anger toward political candidates may differ from publicly expressing it. Thus, we hypothesize:

H3: Moderated by party ID and mediated by anger, religious affiliation predicts voters’ support for a) Harris and b) Trump.

Fear

Another discrete emotion that is highly relevant in political communication—and electoral decisions in particular—is fear (Ekman, Friesen, and Ellsworth 1972). It is defined as a defensive reaction (LeDoux 1996) that involves responses to something threatening (Witte et al. 1996). Fear is one key emotion that motivates voters to learn about political issues and candidates by alerting and alarming them (Marcus and MacKuen 1993). Effective political advertisements—such as the legendary “Daisy” television commercial in the Johnson campaign against Goldwater in 1964 implying threat of nuclear war—were known to base their central messages on fear to persuade voters (Vargo and Hopp 2020).

In the populist era which American voters currently are in, fear has been a constant element in the electoral arena. Palaver (2019) argues that fear is instrumental to populist politics, fostering the “us *vs.* them” mentality. In other words, fear in populism leads to polarization of society. Fear—and religious affiliation that endorses absolute exclusivity—responds to sociopolitical uncertainty by either seeking scapegoats—accusing other people of causing crises—or returning to conventions as ways of coping with fear. In 2004, the reelection of George W. Bush was widely attributed to fear created by fundamentalists including the Rev. Jerry Falwell (Green 2007). Likewise, Baker and Whitehead (2026) found that Christian nationalism—the idea that the U.S. was founded as a Christian nation and should remain so (Goldberg 2007)—was strongly

related to fear about certain social issues with underlying concerns about ethno-racial purity and loss of individual autonomy. Given the uncertainty and unconventional campaign in 2024, we speculate that religion is positively related to the level of fear toward political candidates.

H4: Moderated by party ID and mediated by fear, religious affiliation predicts voters' support for a) Harris b) Trump.

Enthusiasm

Enthusiasm is defined as a feeling of elation, excitement, and interest and is frequently measured as a combination of hope and pride, and sometimes sympathy (Marcus and MacKuen 1993). The term “enthusiasm” is derived from a Greek word that refers to a religious experience manifested by trances, miracles, and speaking in tongues, or a form of religious madness (Laborie 2022). In the political realm, citizens' feeling of enthusiasm is translated to sharing the same convictions as the candidate and throwing themselves into the cause. It directly affects voter preference to the point of the vote choice itself and increases involvement in a campaign. It does not, however, stimulate attention to politics and the intention to learn more about critical issues (Marcus and MacKuen 1993). We could find no studies that specifically looked at the intersection of voters' religious affiliation and enthusiasm toward politics or candidates. However, people's perceived candidate congruence with their religious tenets, in terms of political platforms or images, may engender enthusiasm. Therefore, we form the following hypothesis:

H5: Moderated by party ID and mediated by enthusiasm, religious affiliation predicts voters' support for a) Harris b) Trump.

Religion and moral evaluation

Religion is an important foundation for people to form their moral criteria with which they conduct their lives and evaluate others, including political candidates. Different religions and denominations (and lack thereof) may differ on central values and emphasize different aspects of their believers' ideals and desirable deeds, but in general they are expected to exert a strong influence on the moral compass of devoted followers. Empirical evidence of electoral studies indicates that there is a strong and positive association between candidate's perceived morality and voters' preference (Enke 2020). Opinion surveys also indicate that Americans want their presidents to be moral and ethical (Rotolo, Smith, and Evans 2024). Given these, we hypothesize that religious affiliation will influence how people evaluate candidates' moral violations, and subsequently, these evaluations will lead to their voting decisions.

H6: Moderated by party ID and mediated by evaluation of either candidate's morals, religious affiliation influences voters' support for a) Harris b) Trump.

Religion and issue congruence

People's religious affiliation provides guidance to their concerns about public issues and to the acceptable solutions to resolve those issues (Walker and Haider-Markel 2024). Consequently, during electoral periods, voters may base their religious guidance on assessing a candidate's stances on the issues that concern them and subsequent vote decisions. Research also indicates the higher the issue congruence there is between a voter and a political candidate, the more likely the candidate will receive the voter's support (Wu and Coleman 2014). Connecting these relevant variables together, we hypothesize:

H7: Moderated by party ID and mediated by perceived issue congruence with candidate, religious affiliation influences voters' support for a) Harris b) Trump.

Method

U.S. registered voters who were Connect panel participants in CloudResearch were surveyed during September 1–24, 2024. A total of 1,534 responded. We purged 51 for being duplicates bots, non-completes, failing attention checks or not being registered voters for a final N of 1,483. Participants took 12 min on average to finish the survey and were paid \$3.75 each. Overall, the sample represents well the overall U.S. population—with roughly similar percentages of gender, race, age group, and party identification.

After reading the informed consent and agreeing to the study, participants were asked if they were registered to vote; they were excused from participating if they answered no. They were asked what political party they were registered in, with response choices of Republican, Democrat, Independent, and other. Another key variable this study includes is religion. There were a total of seven religions from which participants could choose, plus an open-ended option with answers human coded into one of four large religious groups: Protestants, Catholics, other religions (including Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Muslim, etc.), and people without religion. The original answers to the closed-ended religion question also were recoded into the above four religion groups. Among the surveyed respondents, Protestants constitute 35.3%, Catholics 23.2%, other religions 4.1%, people with no religion 37.3%. These percentages roughly reflect the religious pattern of the overall U.S. population, according to a study conducted by the Pew Research Center (2025). The dependent variable of vote choice was measured with the question: “If the candidates in the 2024 presidential election were Donald Trump and Kamala Harris, and you have to choose, whom would you vote for?”

Measures

All responses to the variables of four discrete emotions, moral evaluation, and issue congruence assessment were measured with Likert scales of 1 to 5, with 5 being the most agreement. These variables were measured for both Harris and Trump. The order in which each candidate was presented in the survey was randomly rotated to avoid potential ordering bias. The detail of the emotions perceived moral violation, and issue congruence with either candidate is as follows.

Four discrete emotions that constitute voters’ affect toward candidates were included. Because anger and disgust are moderately correlated (Giner-Sorolla, Kupfer, and Sabo 2018), to maximize statistical power it is best to use measures that discriminate them with synonyms (Giner-Sorolla, Kupfer, and Sabo 2018). Thus, participants were asked two questions for each of the four discrete emotions. The question began “How much has <each candidate> made you feel the following.” For disgust: grossed out, repulsed (Cronbach’s α : Trump; Harris). For anger: hateful, bitter (Cronbach’s α : Trump .909; Harris .889). For anxiety: scared, worried (Cronbach’s α : Trump .957; Harris .946). For enthusiasm: Hopeful, proud (Cronbach’s α : Trump .959; Harris .965).

Issue congruence

Participants were asked how similar their individual stance on 16 issues was to that of either candidate. The rationale of this appraisal of issue congruence is based on each voter’s subjective sense rather than their knowledge-based evaluation. The issues included are: the economy, foreign relations, health care, immigration, taxes, the environment and climate change, crime, jobs and unemployment, abortion, voting rights, gun policy, LGBTQ issues, cost of living and rising prices, the war in Gaza, the war in Ukraine, and national security (Cronbach’s α : Trump .985; Harris .981).

Moral violations

We asked about 12 moral violations that represented the bodily/core and sociomoral dimensions. These were customized to each candidate based on the topics pertaining to each covered in the

news during the campaign period. They were intended to be as exhaustive and representative as possible. The question began, “How disgusted does <each candidate> make you feel because of...” “followed by, for Trump: His age, the blood on his face, sexual harassment charges against him, his sexual affairs (bodily/core); his business deals, collusion with other countries’ governments, handling of classified documents, felony and misdemeanor charges, calling people names, stance on whether the 2020 election was legitimate, views on immigrants, and selling the Bible (sociomoral). (Cronbach’s α .961). For Harris: The way she laughs, being too sexy, her ethnic identity, sexual affairs (bodily/core); plagiarism and stealing ideas, being a bully and hard to work for, being tough on crime, her intellect, repeating herself, antisemitism, being childless, and her ideas on immigration and border-crossing (sociomoral) (Cronbach’s α .929).

Analysis

SPSS PROCESS model 5 was used to test the religion factor on voting decision with party identification as a moderator and six mediators (Hayes 2022). The religion factor (four groups: people without religion, Protestants, Catholics, people with other religions) was hypothesized to lead to people’s voting decisions *via* four discrete emotions (fear, anger, disgust, and enthusiasm) toward either candidate, perceived moral violation of either candidate, and perceived level of congruence with candidate’s issue stances, i.e., a total of six mediating variables. We used the multicategorical function with the reference group as people without religious affiliations. Because party membership has been identified in the existing literature as an influential predictor of voting decisions, it is thus included in the prediction model as a moderator of the religion factor.

Result

The voting pattern of Americans with four major religion affiliations is the most fundamental question this study explores. It is, therefore, important for us to depict the overall landscape first. Voters’ intentions for supporting either Harris or Trump in the 2024 election across the four religious groups differed significantly ($X^2 = 142.16$ $df=3$ $p < .001$), with Protestants (63.8%) and Catholics (55.1%) significantly more likely to support Trump. Whereas people of other religions (52.5%) and with no religious affiliation (71.3%) were more likely to support Harris. The pattern is illustrated in Figure 1 below.

When voting probability across the four religious groups and party membership was examined together, the difference within each of the religious groups provides another layer of findings. As Figure 2 indicates, Democrats who are Protestants and those without religious affiliations

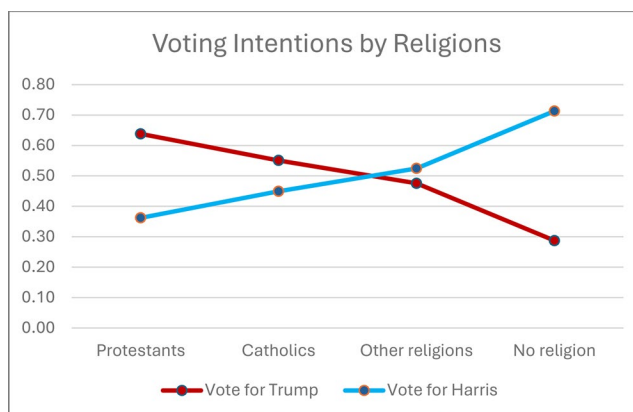


Figure 1. Voting average for either candidate⁴ across religion groups.

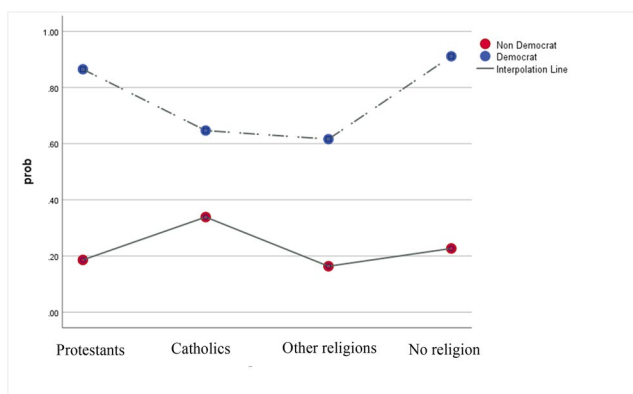


Figure 2. Voting for Harris probability across religion groups.

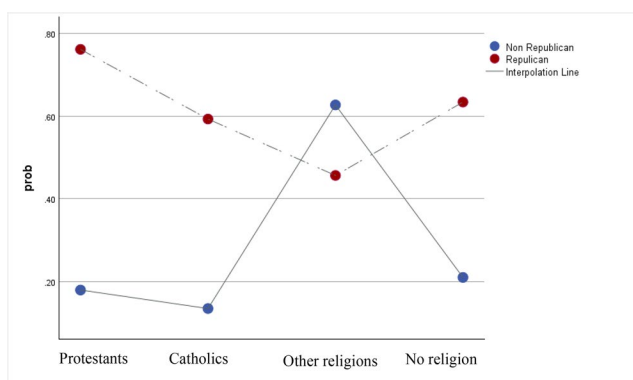


Figure 3. Voting for Trump probability across religion groups.

are not only more likely to vote for Harris than non-Democrats but also more likely than Democrats who are Catholics or identify with other religions. The trend for Trump support appears slightly different (see Figure 3). While Republicans who are Protestants, Catholics, and without religious affiliations are still more likely to support Trump, Republicans affiliated with other religions are slightly *less likely* to support him than non-Republicans. Among the four religion groups, Protestant Republicans' support for Trump stands out as the highest in probability.

The prediction models executed with PROCESS method for predicting voting for either political candidate in the 2024 election are statistically significant overall ($p < .0001$). In addition, for both models the three pseudo-R-squared metrics used to assess the model's goodness-of-fit, including McFadden, Cox Snell, and Nagelkerke, are substantial (for Harris model: McFadden = .8029, Cox Snell = .6710, Nagelkerke = .8952; for Trump model: McFadden = .8270, Cox Snell = .6818, Nagelkerke = .9096, see Figures 4 and 5). These statistics suggest that the religion factor-centered voting prediction model that incorporates 6 moderators and 1 mediator works well. The evidence for examining each of the hypotheses is as follows.

The religion factor's influence on voting decisions is indeed moderated by people's party ID. As the coefficients for the Harris model ($B=3.3313$, $p < .01$) and for the Trump model ($B=2.6807$, $p < .01$) (see Figures 4 and 5) indicate a statistically significant influence on vote choice. Based on the above overall results, H1 is supported. When the four religious affiliations were compared, two notable findings are worth reporting—being Democrat generates a positive impact on Catholics' support for Harris (compared to people without religion); and being Republican generates a negative impact for people with other religions to vote for Trump (again, compared to people without religion).

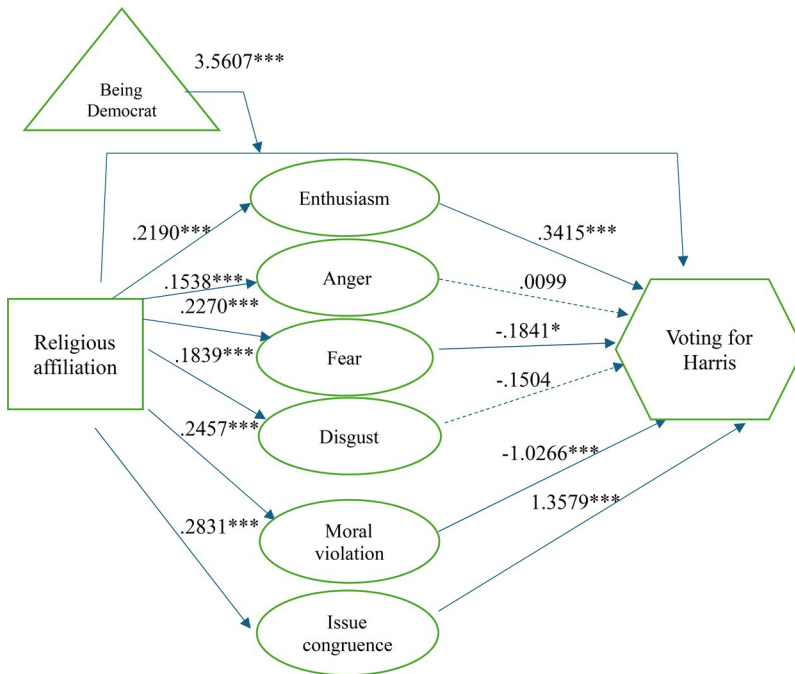


Figure 4. Predicting voting for Harris.

Coefficients derived exclusively from religion affiliation=model R; the rest=B coefficient.

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$.

-2LL = 401.6785 ModelLL = 1654.6239 $df=13$ $p < .0001$.

McFadden = .8047 Cox Snell = .6718 Nagelkerke = .8962.

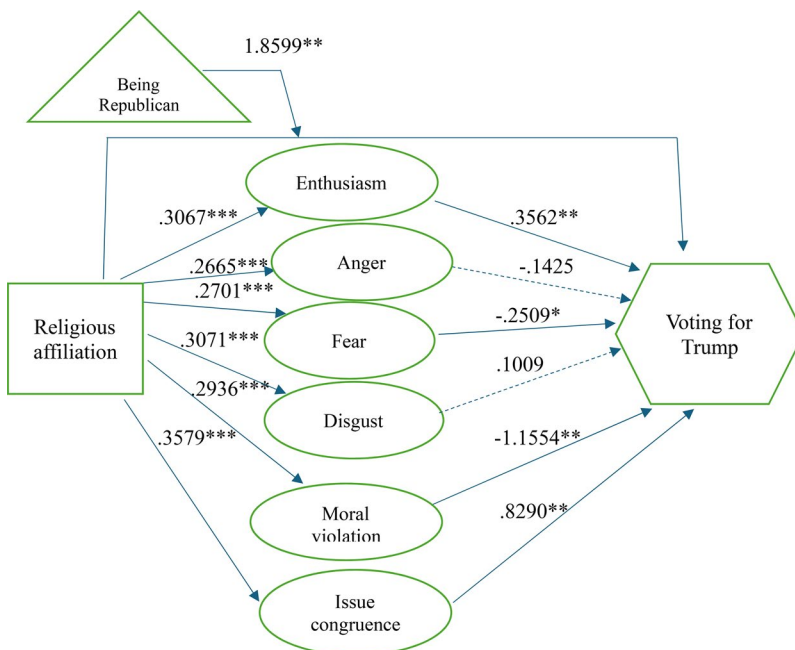


Figure 5. Predicting voting for Trump.

Coefficients derived exclusively from religion affiliation=model R; the rest=B coefficient.

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$.

-2LL = 349.4178 ModelLL = 1706.8846 $df=13$ $p < .0001$.

McFadden = .8301 Cox Snell = .6832 Nagelkerke = .9114.

The next six hypothesis tests are based on the results presented in Figures 6–11, which illustrate the comparisons of vote choice among the people who identify with four religious affiliations, with people without religious affiliation as the reference group, mediated by each of the six factors.

H2a: Moderated by party ID, people’s religious affiliation influences their voting decisions for Harris, mediated by disgust, compared to people without religious affiliation. This part of the second hypothesis was **not supported**. Disgust did not mediate the relative indirect effect of religious affiliation on voting for Harris (Protestant B=-0.1582, SE = .1104, 95% CL=-0.3988/.0357; Catholic B=-0.1312, SE = .0939, 95% CL=-0.3404/.0294; Other religions B=-0.0861, SE = .0924, 95% CL=-0.3231/.0337).

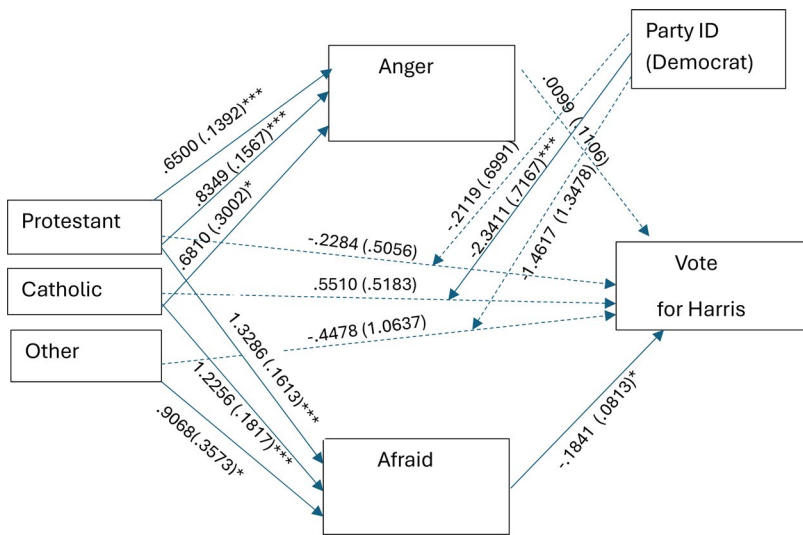


Figure 6. Relative conditional effects of religious affiliation predicting voting for Harris mediated by anger and fear, moderated by party ID.
N = 1483. Reference category is No Religion. Relative direct effects and standard errors in parentheses. Dashed lines represent nonsignificant paths. Based on 5,000 bootstrap samples, 95% bias-corrected confidence interval. PROCESS Model 5.

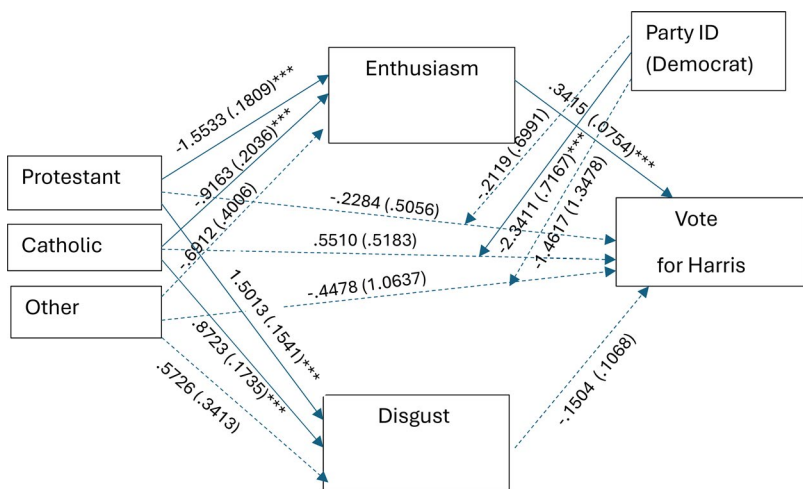


Figure 7. Relative conditional effects of religious affiliation predicting voting for Harris mediated by enthusiasm and disgust, moderated by party ID.
N = 1483. Reference category is No Religion. Relative direct effects and standard errors in parentheses. Dashed lines represent nonsignificant paths. Based on 5,000 bootstrap samples, 95% bias-corrected confidence interval. PROCESS Model 5.

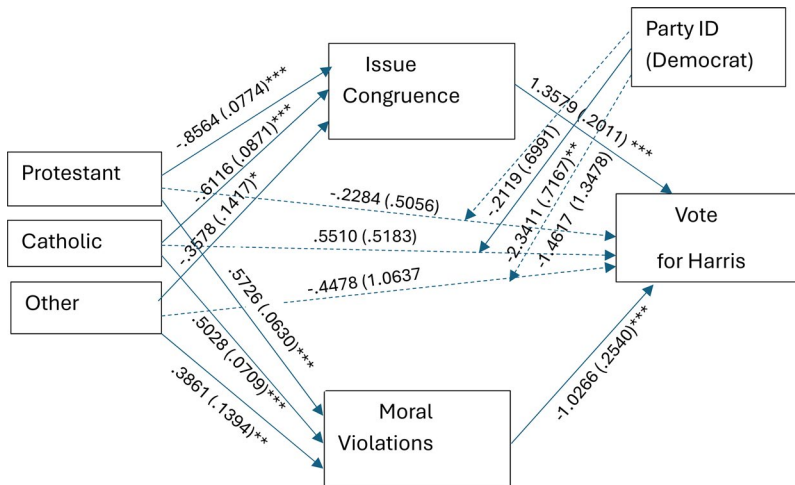


Figure 8. Relative conditional effects of religious affiliation predicting voting for Harris mediated by issue congruence and moral violations, moderated by party ID.

N = 1483. Reference category is No Religion. Relative direct effects and standard errors in parentheses. Dashed lines represent nonsignificant paths. Based on 5,000 bootstrap samples, 95% bias-corrected confidence interval. PROCESS Model 5.

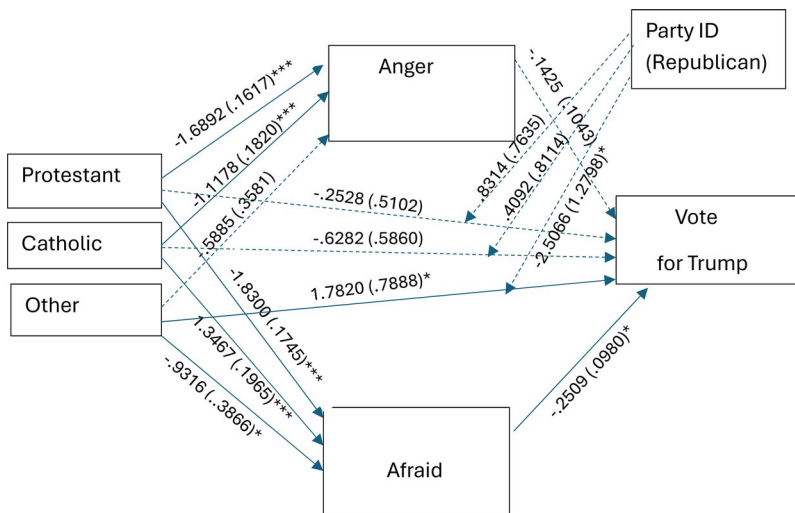


Figure 9. Relative conditional effects of religious affiliation predicting voting for Trump mediated by anger and fear, moderated by party ID.

N = 1483. Reference category is No Religion. Relative direct effects and standard errors in parentheses. Dashed lines represent nonsignificant paths. Based on 5,000 bootstrap samples, 95% bias-corrected confidence interval. PROCESS Model 5.

H2b: Moderated by party ID, people's religious affiliation influences their voting for Trump, mediated by disgust, compared to no religion. This was **not supported**. Disgust did not mediate the relative indirect effect of religion on voting for Trump (Protestant $B = -0.2288$, $SE = .2526$, 95% $CL = -0.7295/.2618$; Catholic $B = -0.1689$, $SE = .1882$, 95% $CL = -0.5513/.1936$; Other religions $B = -0.1007$, $SE = .1312$, 95% $CL = -0.4061/.1233$).

H3a: Moderated by party ID, people's religious affiliation influences their votes for Harris, mediated by anger, compared to no religion. This was **not supported**. (Protestant $B = .0064$, $SE = .0768$, 95% $CL = -0.1595/.1536$; Catholic $B = .0082$, $SE = .0983$, 95% $CL = -0.1991/.1975$; Other religions $B = .0067$, $SE = .0886$, 95% $CL = -0.1859/.1802$).

H3b: Moderated by party ID, religious affiliation influences voting for Trump, mediated by anger, compared to no religion. This was **not supported**. (Protestant $B = .2407$, $SE = .2037$, 95% $CL = -0.1202/.6809$; Catholic $B = .1593$, $SE = .1389$, 95% $CL = -0.0791/.4707$; Other religions $B = .0839$, $SE = .1036$, 95% $CL = -0.0658/.3441$).

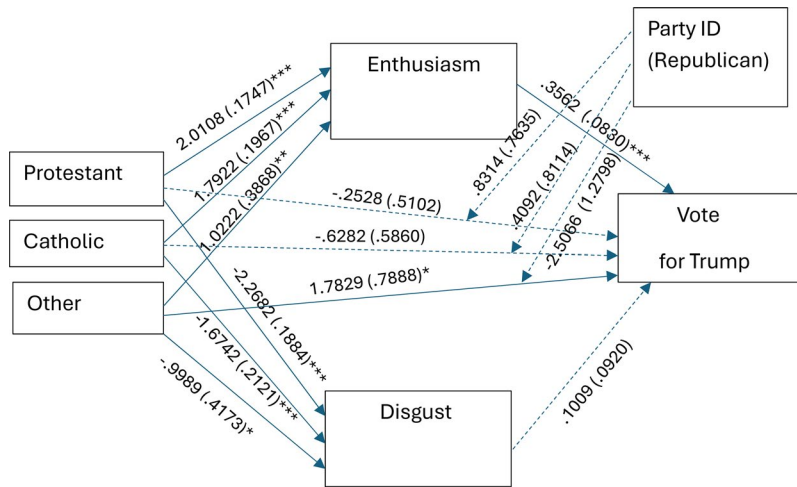


Figure 10. Relative Conditional effects of religious affiliation predicting voting for Trump mediated by enthusiasm and disgust, moderated by party ID.

N = 1483. Reference category is No Religion. Relative direct effects and standard errors in parentheses. Dashed lines represent nonsignificant paths. Based on 5,000 bootstrap samples, 95% bias-corrected confidence interval. PROCESS Model 5.

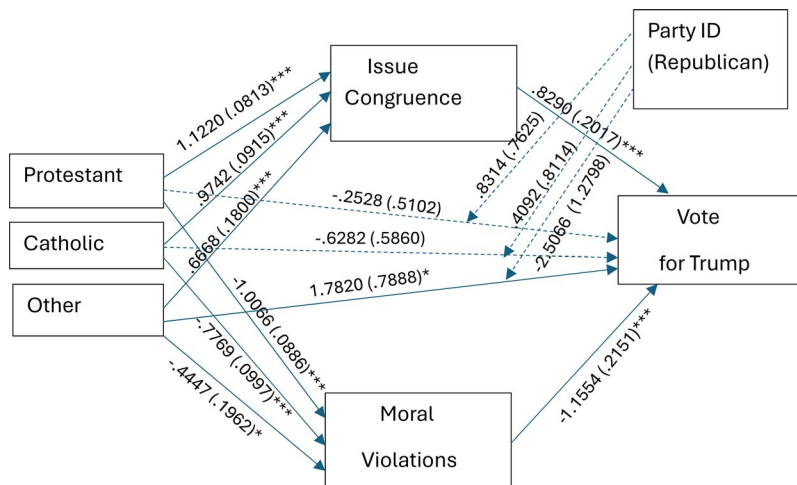


Figure 11. Relative conditional effect of religious affiliation predicting voting for Trump mediated by issue congruence and moral violations, moderated by party ID.

N = 1483. Reference category is No Religion. Relative direct effects and standard errors in parentheses. Dashed lines represent nonsignificant paths. Based on 5,000 bootstrap samples, 95% bias-corrected confidence interval. PROCESS Model 5.

H4a: Moderated by party ID, religious affiliation influences voting for Harris, mediated by fear, compared to no religion. This was **supported**. (Protestant $B = -0.1941$, $SE = .1177$, 95% $CL = -0.4422/.0230$; Catholic $B = -0.1806$, $SE = .1109$, 95% $CL = -0.4134/.0220$; No religion $B = -0.1369$, $SE = .1093$, 95% $CL = -0.4000/.0185$).

H4b: Moderated by party ID, religious affiliation influences voting for Trump, mediated by fear, compared to no religion. This was **supported**. (Protestant $B = .4591$, $SE = .1938$, 95% $CL = .1191/.8739$; Catholic $B = .3379$, $SE = .1495$, 95% $CL = .0848/.6696$; Other religions $B = .2337$, $SE = .1499$, 95% $CL = .0111/.5938$).

H5a: Moderated by party ID, religious affiliation influences voting for Harris, mediated by enthusiasm, compared to no religion. This was **partially supported**. Two of the three religious affiliations were significantly mediated by enthusiasm in voting for Harris—for Protestants and Catholics, but not for other religious

groups. (Protestant $B = -0.5304$, $SE = .1583$, 95% $CL = -0.9012/-0.2725$; Catholic $B = -0.3129$, $SE = .1180$, 95% $CL = -0.6011/-0.1355$; Other religions $B = -0.2360$, $SE = .1661$, 95% $CL = -0.6190/.0481$).

H5b: Moderated by party ID, religious affiliation influences voting for Trump, mediated by enthusiasm, compared to no religion. This was **supported**. (Protestant $B = .7163$, $SE = .1961$, 95% $CL = .3790/1.1567$; Catholic $B = .6385$, $SE = .1827$, 95% $CL = .3293/1.0547$; Other religions $B = .3642$, $SE = .1764$, 95% $CL = .0787/.7586$).

H6a: Moderated by party ID, religious affiliation influences voting for Harris, mediated by candidate's morals, compared to people without religion affiliation. This was **supported**. (Protestant $B = -0.5878$, $SE = .1877$, 95% $CL = -0.9956/-0.2620$; Catholic $B = -0.5162$, $SE = .1707$, 95% $CL = -0.8918/-0.2262$; Other religions $B = -0.3964$, $SE = .2095$, 95% $CL = -0.8838/-0.0779$).

H6b: Moderated by party ID, religious affiliation influences voting for Trump, mediated by candidate's morals, compared to no religion. This was **supported**. (Protestant $B = 1.1630$, $SE = .2615$, 95% $CL = .7227/1.7450$; Catholic $B = .8976$, $SE = .2187$, 95% $CL = .5308/1.3984$; Other religions $B = .5138$, $SE = .2681$, 95% $CL = .0605/1.1160$).

H7a: Moderated by party ID, religious affiliation influences voting for Harris, mediated by their perceived issue congruence with candidate. This was **supported**. (Protestant $B = -1.1629$, $SE = .2369$, 95% $CL = -1.6944/-0.7684$; Catholic $B = -0.8305$, $SE = .2001$, 95% $CL = -1.2944/-0.5058$; Other religions $B = -0.4859$, $SE = .2637$, 95% $CL = -1.0606/-0.0267$).

H7b: Moderated by party ID, religious affiliation influences voting for Trump, mediated by their perceived issue congruence with candidate. This was **supported**. (Protestant $B = .9302$, $SE = .2244$, 95% $CL = .5752/1.4552$; Catholic $B = .8077$, $SE = .2020$, 95% $CL = .4898/1.2890$; Other religions $B = .5528$, $SE = .2135$, 95% $CL = .2192/1.0579$).

Discussion & conclusion

The complex connection between religion and politics is nothing new but the present study based on the 2024 presidential election updates the political communication scholarship by providing new empirical evidence about the trend of voters' religious affiliation and their inclination to favor either of the two vying parties. The four major religious groups in the U.S. demonstrate distinct voting preferences across the two presidential candidates in 2024, thus confirming prior studies about Christianity's (Protestants and Catholics, in particular) influence on candidate choice or party preference in the American electoral system. Even though the religion influence on voting decisions was mediated by party membership, it still played a significant role in shaping American voters' evaluations of candidate morality and perceived issue congruence, both of which significantly influenced candidate support. In addition, the religion factor influenced how voters feel about the candidates, particularly in terms of enthusiasm, anger, disgust, and fear. Of the four, enthusiasm turned out to be a boon for both Harris and Trump, while fear, a significant predictor for both candidates, overall had a negative influence on candidate support. For Trump, interestingly, fear was more positive a factor for those voters with religion affiliations.

Even though overall our proposed religion-centered model to predict voting decisions in the 2024 election is satisfactory, several hypothesized links that did not result in statistical significance merit some discussion. Based on the original affective intelligence theory (AIT) (Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen 2000) and the updated version of AIT (Coleman and Wu 2024), negative emotions such as anger, disgust, and fear are supposed to exert a greater influence on people's cognitive as well as conative decisions in political arena. They did not pan out as mediators of religious belonging in the 2024 election—except for fear that predicted not supporting Trump. Only the positive emotion, enthusiasm—which, according to the existing AIT scholarship, does not stimulate further thinking or action—was proved consistently significant in religious voters' decision-making. This is worth pondering if the force of negative emotions waned during that election, or they were simply overshadowed by the extreme polarization in the U.S. and/or the pressing issues the electorate held strongly.

The unveiled pattern of the intersection of religion and political identity in the 2024 presidential election may serve as a historical witness that culminated after decades of shifts and turns across political, religious, and other identities among Americans. The coalition between Christianity (particularly, Protestants or Evangelicals) and the Republican Party may present a formidable force not only for the political field but also for sociocultural and business fields. This Evangelical/GOP nexus may also appeal to and resonate well with people with certain demographics, lifestyles, and in geographic enclaves, making it even more potent—and hard to break up.

On the other hand, it would be interesting to gauge and monitor if the Christianity/GOP coalition can sustain its impact on elections in the long run—especially without a galvanized politician like Trump. The religion landscape in the U.S. has evolved significantly too—more and more Americans are religiously unaffiliated (Smith et al. 2025). Therefore, the findings generated from this study may provide ample implications in political communication for policy makers and strategists in both Republican and Democratic Parties.

There are limitations of the study that need to be addressed. As in cross-sectional studies, the time sequence of the predictors and outcome (voting decision) may not be confirmed to render a causal relationship—even with the PROCESS analytical method. In addition, the four religious affiliations this study is based on are understandably broad. They may not necessarily include all the distinct attributes of religious segments and denominations within each category; also, religious groups with varied identities may actually share similar sentiments toward a candidate or political party. The Evangelicals within Protestants, for example, are worth further examining to understand better about their unwavering support for Trump (French 2023, 2024). Yet there are varied names and self-identities for this broad Christian assembly, and the surveyed respondents chose and used varied terms for their beliefs, both of which hindered the researchers from effectively classifying and inspecting this religious group. Related to this limitation is the group we created that includes all other religions, including Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Muslim, and other religions. Each of them deserves individual attention and investigation but we had to compromise due to their low counts. Researchers may investigate any of these religions for specific regions or critical constituents in the future. It is our hope that our endeavor will lead to more attention to examining the influence of religion on politics.

Notes

1. It is noteworthy that this study aims to address voters' religion affiliation rather than their level of religiosity.
2. It was named and developed in the early 1960s by four political scientists at the University of Michigan.
3. CNN's exit polls showed that 95% Democrats and 94% Republicans voted for their in-party candidate. More Protestants (63%) and Catholics (59%) voted for Trump than Harris. See <https://www.cnn.com/election/2024/exit-polls/national-results/general/president/0>.
4. The γ -value is mean of voting for (1 = yes, 0 = no) a candidate derived from each of the religion groups.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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