

Religious Freedom Backlash: Evidence from Public Opinion Experiments about Free Expression

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Religious-freedom conflicts are prominent throughout US history (Sehat 2011); however, for much of the past century, religious freedom represented a pluralist, egalitarian aspiration. This corresponded with growing levels of religious tolerance and support for the broad contours of religious liberty (Putnam and Campbell 2010). In recent decades, consensus has turned to division because religious freedom has taken center stage in our partisan culture wars and constitutional disputes (Bennett 2017; Lewis 2017; Wilson and Djupe 2020). Although activists and elites are at the helm of these debates over religious liberty, the mass public also is polarized over prominent religious-freedom issues, especially concerning LGBTQ rights and COVID-19 policies (Castle 2019; Mitchell 2016; Nortey 2022).

In describing the polarization of religious liberty, academic and journalistic accounts have argued that support for religious freedom is related to preference from group-based exclusivity, such as Christian nationalism, social dominance, and traditionalism (Castle 2017; Gillman and Chemerinsky 2020; Goidel, Smentkowski, and Freeman 2016; Whitehead and Perry 2020). Although these ideological and psychological factors often are attributed to the mass public's support for religious freedom, the mechanisms have not been tested directly. This study used an experimental survey design to examine how presenting vignettes that emphasize egalitarianism, religious nationalism, and social dominance affects support for three type of religious freedom. We found that reading messages about equality, nationalism, and social dominance does not increase support for religious freedom; however, it does spark backlash in certain cases, particularly among Independents and the non-religious.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND PREDISPOSITIONS

Support for religious freedom is surely multidimensional. As Patterson (2008) pointed out, perceptions of freedom take on different forms. For Patterson, two forms of freedom are at odds with one another: (1) *personal*—the power to do as one pleases, free of constraints; and (2) *sovereign*—freedom from constraints but also the power to put constraints on others. As such, personal freedom is sought by marginalized people and sovereign freedom is sought by the dominant group.

There are several potential approaches to explaining public support for (or opposition to) religious freedom, and they often map onto these sovereign and personal approaches that Patterson described. We focus on three prominent ones: egalitarianism (personal), social dominance (sovereign), and religious (Christian) nationalism (sovereign). Each belief system has received attention regarding the attitudes of Americans related to issues of race, class, and gender. With the exception of Christian nationalism, however, little attention has been given to their relationship to religious freedom.

Religious freedom has long been considered a pillar of liberal rights in the United States and elsewhere. Supporters of religious freedom have drawn on this egalitarian and pluralistic vision of religious freedom (McConnell 1999; Nussbaum 2008; Tebbe 2017; Uddin 2019), and there is empirical evidence for strong support of religious freedom based on egalitarian grounds and political tolerance (Gibson 2008; Jelen and Wilcox 1995; Lewis 2017; Putnam and Campbell 2010).

Although there are increasing levels of political tolerance in the United States, evidence also suggests that support for civil liberties—such as religious freedom—is not without qualification. For example, individuals favor civil liberties for in-groups but not for out-groups (Davis 2007; Gibson 2013; Strother and Bennett 2021). This has been particularly true regarding the religious-freedom rights of Muslims, which have been considered by some to be outside the bounds of First Amendment protections (Shortle and Gaddie 2015; Uddin 2019). The in-/out-group approach to religious freedom suggests that social dominance orientation—that is, “preference for inequality among social groups” (Pratto et al. 1994, 741)—may be linked to support for the sovereign version of religious freedom. Studies suggest that social dominance decreases support for human rights (Hummel 2012; McFarland and Mathews 2005). In addition, higher levels of authoritarianism (Castle 2017) and traditionalism (Goidel, Smentkowski, and Freeman 2016)—concepts that are closely related to social dominance—predict greater support for religious freedom and the free exercise of religion.

In addition to social dominance orientation, other scholarship suggests that support for religious freedom in the US context is linked to Christian nationalism (McDaniel, Nooruddin, and Shortle 2011; Whitehead and Perry 2020). Religious freedom may be shorthand for preferring Christian

nationalist culture, where the nation was founded by Christians and Christians should be favored. This leads to invoking religious freedom in attempts to stop desegregation, the expansion of LGBTQ rights, public health decrees, and the spread of secularization (Jones 2016; Whitehead and Perry 2020).

Similar to social dominance orientation, Christian nationalism emphasizes the maintenance of a hierarchy.¹ Because of

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this similarity, Christian nationalists likely are seeking sovereign freedom to be able to control and constrain the activities of those perceived as challenging a white conservative Christian agenda. Therefore, both the underlying ideological and psychological dimensions, as well as the issue attitude in question, might affect an individual's view about religious freedom.

Because the meaning of religious freedom has been sorted into partisan camps—and because partisan identity is so potent to understanding politics and religion (Margolis 2018; Mason 2018)—we expected these effects to be filtered through partisanship for many. As such, the egalitarian, social dominance, and Christian nationalism predispositions of religious liberty may be understood differently by Democrats and Republicans. In particular, sovereign approaches might bolster Republican support for majoritarian religious-freedom claims and trigger Democratic backlash, whereas personal (or egalitarian) approaches would have the opposite effect, sparking Democratic support for minority claims.

HYPOTHESES

To directly test the ideological and psychological dimensions underlying support for various types of religious freedom, we deployed a set of experimental vignettes that emphasized egalitarianism, social dominance, and Christian nationalism. We developed the following five hypotheses related to partisanship, belief systems, and support for religious freedom, which were preregistered with the Open Science Framework:

- H1: When egalitarianism is emphasized, respondents will be more supportive of protecting the religious freedom of religious minorities and less supportive of expanding the freedoms of religious majorities.
- H2–H3: When religious nationalism (H2) and social dominance (H3) are emphasized, respondents will be less supportive of protecting the freedoms of religious minorities and will be more supportive of expanding the freedoms of religious majorities.
- H4: When egalitarianism is emphasized, Democratic respondents will be more supportive of general and minority religious freedom.

- H5: When nationalism and social dominance are emphasized, Republican respondents will be more supportive of general and majority religious freedom.

DATA AND TREATMENTS

To test our hypotheses, we imbedded a survey experiment in the Knight Foundation's 2021 Free Expression Survey (Knight Foundation 2022). The survey is an online, probability-based

sample of 5,000 US adults taken from the Ipsos Knowledge-Panel.[®] To increase the breadth of the sample, the survey was administered in English and Spanish. We randomized three treatments plus a control group, which were presented to half of the sample. In each treatment, respondents read a news story covering a keynote address to policy makers. In the address, the speaker outlined a vision for America emphasizing egalitarianism, Christian nationalism, or social dominance. In addition to the arguments emphasizing the various dimensions, each speaker attributed a quote supporting the argument to a Founding Father, giving each vignette a similar communication style.

The egalitarianism frame emphasized the need for citizens to achieve equal opportunity and address disparities. The speaker argued that “we must work for each other” and highlighted the need to provide “equal protection” and “equal opportunities.” The Christian nationalism frame emphasized US religious history, which paints Christianity as the dominant religion. The vignette referenced the “religion of our forefathers” and ties greatness as holding to “religious lessons.” The Christian nationalism frame is the only one that directly mentioned religion because it is the only dimension with a specific religious character. The social dominance frame emphasized the need to move away from equality in order to lift up the exceptional. The frame argued that “ability to achieve greatness is by uplifting exceptional people.” Following are excerpts from these vignettes:

Egalitarianism Frame: We must work for each other and expect the government to provide equal protection. Our ability to achieve greatness is in our adherence to equal opportunity, not ignoring disparities. As a Founding Father stated, “Defend the cause of the weak and fatherless; maintain the rights of the poor and oppressed.”

Christian Nationalism Frame: We must never move away from the religion of our forefathers. Our ability to achieve greatness is in our adherence to their religious lessons, not ignoring them. As a Founding Father stated, “Defend our city upon a hill and let its divine light shine upon its people and the world, so that they may see our divine calling.”

Social Dominance Frame: Our futile efforts at equality have severely harmed national progress. Our ability to achieve greatness is by uplifting exceptional people, not ignoring

them. As a Founding Father stated, “It is through acknowledging and uplifting the superior that will allow our nation to compete with others.”

The full treatments and questions are included in the online appendix. The number of responses ranged from 721 to 747 for each treatment. ANOVA tests (see the online appendix) indicate that the randomization was effective across the treatments, with no significant differences in treatment groups for key demographic or political indicators. As such, all models were specified using ordinary least squares with population weights and robust standard errors, without additional control variables (Lewis and McDaniel 2022).

DEPENDENT VARIABLES

Following the priming vignettes, participants responded to questions measuring three areas of religious freedom: (1) general religious freedom; (2) majority religious freedom; and (3) minority religious freedom.

General religious freedom is measured using three items gauging the importance of religious freedom to securing the rights of citizens; the belief that religious freedom can be used to harm groups; and the perception that religious freedom is endangered. Majority religious freedom focuses on specific religious-freedom issues, using two questions about support for policies that are linked to cultural divisions: (1) allowing private businessowners to refuse services to same-sex couples because of their religious beliefs; and (2) allowing the

government to restrict religious gatherings to protect public health. Minority religious-freedom measures support for religious freedom in cases that are specific to religious minorities: (1) providing freedom for Muslims to establish houses of worship; and (2) the need to respect Native American customs through limiting property development.

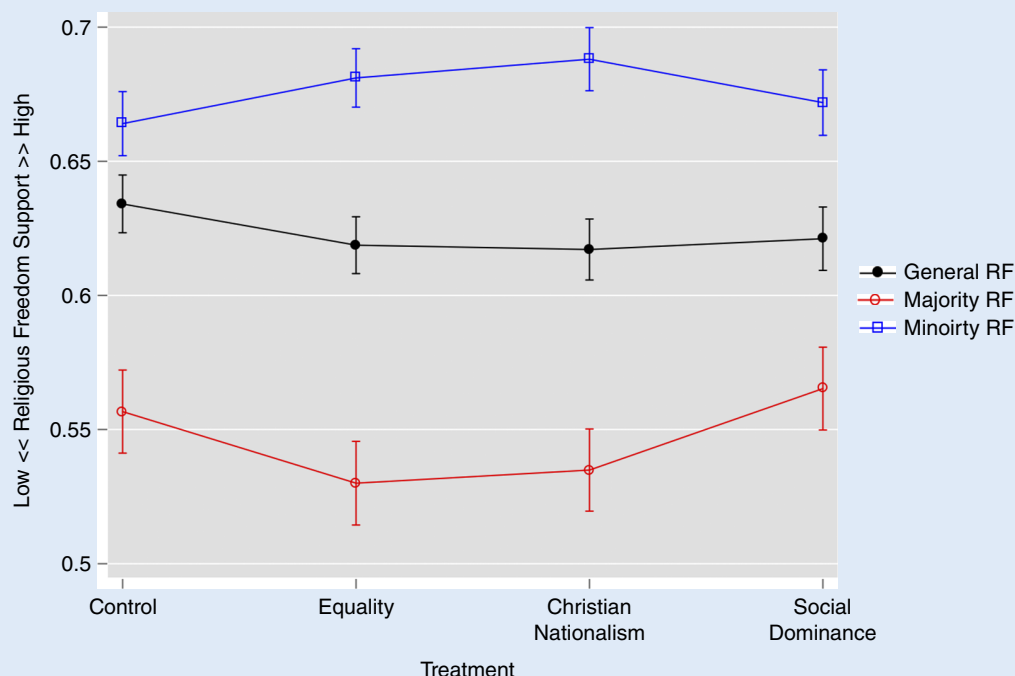
All items were coded so that the higher values represent more support for religious expression. Additive scales for each of the three groups then were created, with each rescaled from 0 to 1 with corresponding values in between. The three scales are conceptually distinct, which is supported through statistical tests. The general religious-freedom and majority religious-freedom scales are the most highly correlated at 0.52, which makes sense because those who support the specific policies at the center of the cultural battles over religious freedom are likely supportive of religious freedom in general. The general religious-freedom and minority religious-freedom scales have a weak and negative correlation of -0.07, whereas the minority and majority scales have a somewhat stronger negative correlation of -0.21, which indicates that they are the most different from one another.

ADDITIONAL VARIABLES AND MODEL SPECIFICATION

To test our secondary hypotheses regarding the role of partisanship in moderating the effect of the treatments, we used party identification.² In addition to the potential moderating role of partisanship, we investigated the role of religious affiliation and attendance, looking particularly at white Protestants and the non-religious—groups that would perceive

Figure 1

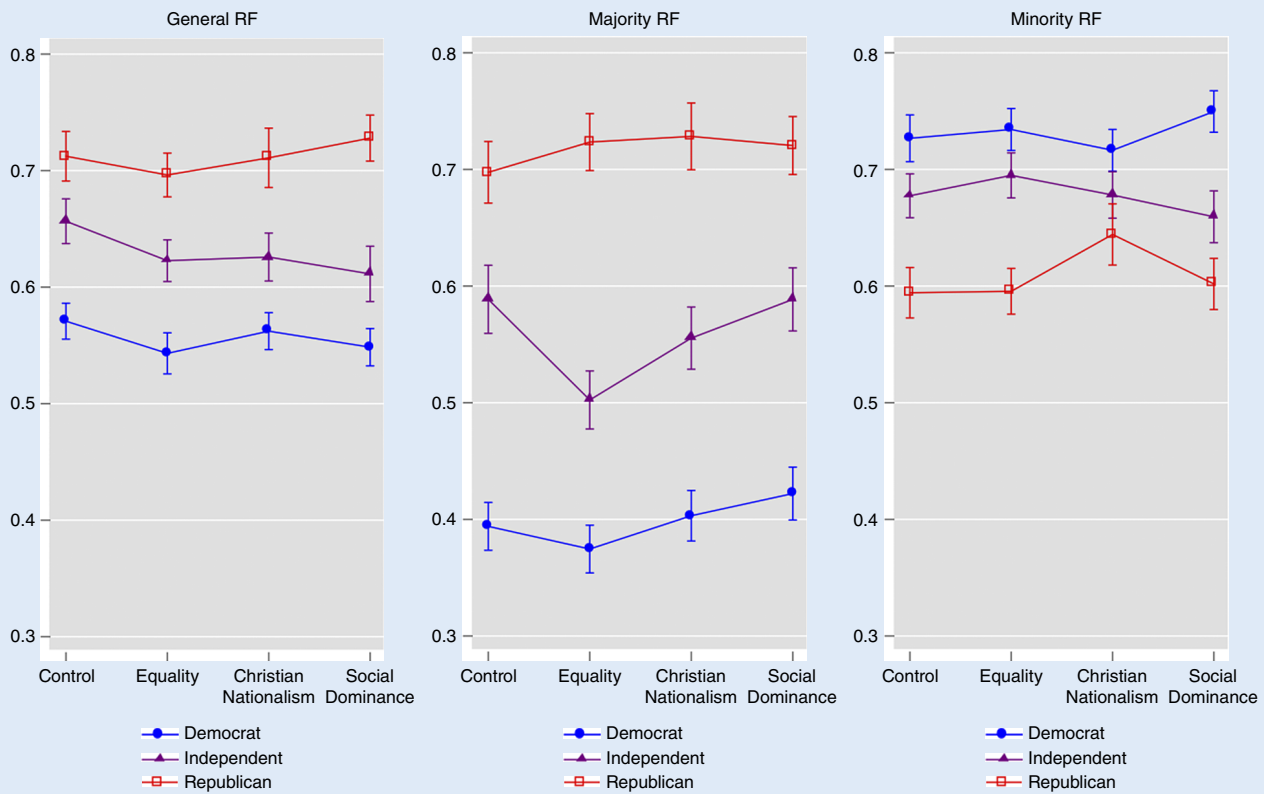
Effect of Treatments on Support for Three Types of Religious Freedom



Comparing two confidence intervals produces a 90% test.

Figure 2

Effect of Treatments by Party Affiliation on Support for Three Types of Religious Freedom



religious liberty differently.³ We included separate models with interactions among the treatments and party identification or religiosity, as specified.

RESULTS

Across the sample, respondents scored highest on the minority religious-freedom scale and lowest on the majority religious-freedom scale, with general religious freedom landing in between. Democrats scored highest on the minority religious-freedom scale; Republicans scored equally highly for the majority and general religious-freedom scales.

When looking only at the treatments, the effects of being exposed to them were minimal for the three dimensions of religious liberty, lending little support for hypotheses 1–3. Exposing people to arguments about equality, Christian nationalism, and social dominance, and when compared to a control condition, has little effect on support for various types of religious freedom, as shown in figure 1. That said, the slopes suggest that all of the treatments may depress support for religious freedom in general (black circles), whereas the Christian nationalism treatment may actually increase support for minority religious-freedom claims (hollow squares). However, these effects are on the border of standard levels of

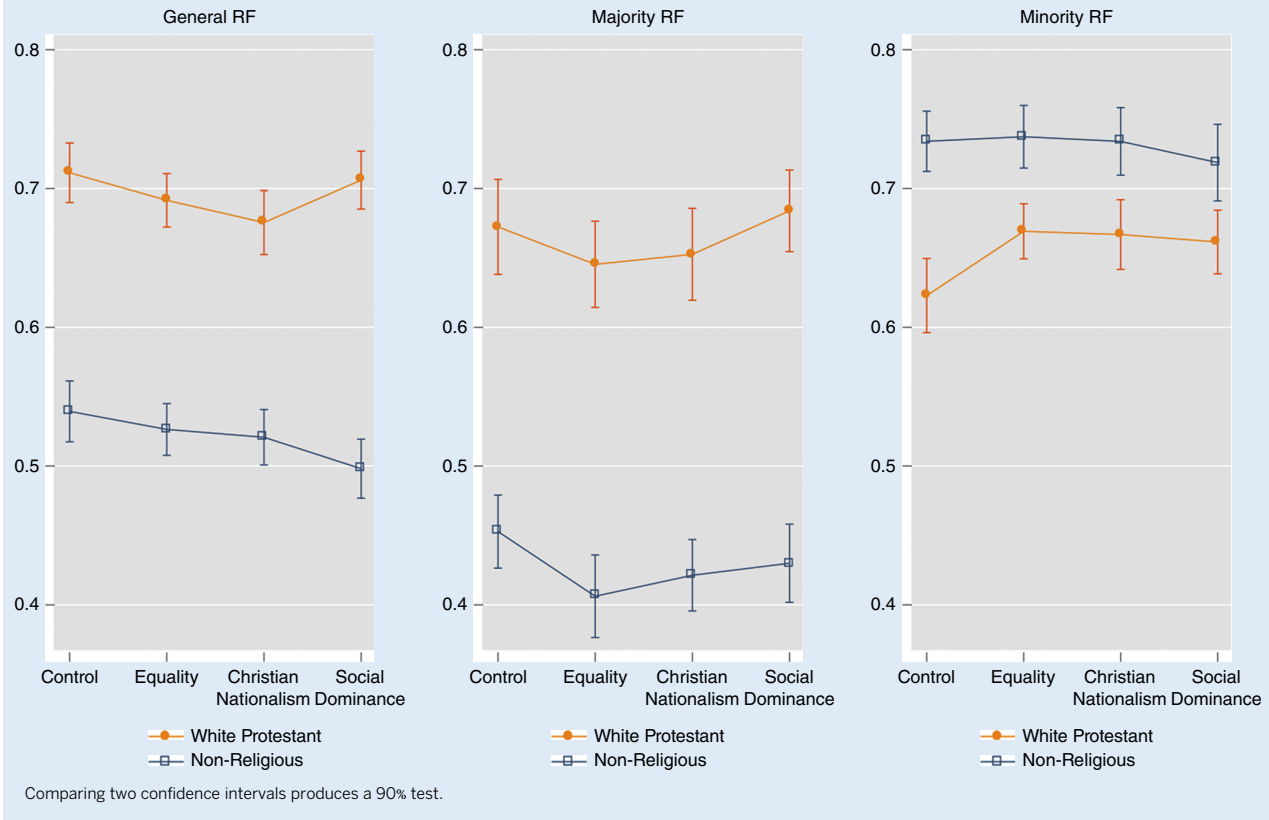
statistical significance. (See the online appendix for the full tables.)

Whereas the equality, Christian nationalism, and social dominance treatments produced limited and counterintuitive effects on support for religious freedom, the impact may flow through partisanship, as posited by hypotheses 4 and 5. Figure 2 displays the treatment effects by partisan identity in a separate panel for each type of religious freedom. The clearest takeaway is that—compared to partisans—Independents were more likely to respond to the treatments via backlash, becoming less supportive of religious freedom. When Independents were exposed to any of the treatment conditions, their support for religious freedom in general declined (panel 1). The effects among Democrats are suggestive of a similar response.

The largest effect is shown in panel 2 of figure 2. When Independents received the equality treatment, their support for majoritarian religious-freedom claims (e.g., support for religious businesses to deny certain services to gays and lesbians) decreased by about 15% (panel 2). This effect is almost as big as the difference between Independents and Republicans who were in the control group. Although there was backlash among Independents who received the equality treatment, being exposed to Christian nationalism and social dominance did not produce the same backlash.

Figure 3

Effect of Treatments by White Protestant and Non-Religious Affiliations on Support for Three Types of Religious Freedom



The only significant effect for Republicans is shown in panel 3 of figure 2, and it is the opposite of expectations. When Republicans were exposed to the Christian nationalism treatment, their support for minority religious freedom increased significantly—about half the size of the difference between Independents and Republicans in the control group. This effect for Christian nationalism is similar to the effect shown in figure 1. It seems that rather than sparking exclusivity, the Christian nationalism treatment may be generating a religious consciousness. In general, Republican support for religious freedom was steady and largely unaffected by the treatments.

Figure 3 is similar to figure 2 except that it analyzes the treatment effects by religious identity instead of partisan identity. Overall, the patterns are similar to partisanship. The non-religious were less supportive of general religious freedom after seeing the social dominance treatment, and they were less supportive of majority religious-freedom claims when shown the equality treatment. As with Independents, there was statistically significant backlash under these treatment conditions. For white Protestants, their support was high and quite steady. The only significant effects were for the minority religious-freedom items, in which all of the treatments led to greater support. Again, rather than

depressing support for minorities, the exclusivist Christian nationalism and social dominance treatments were linked to modest increases.

Religious attendance had similar effects (see the online appendix), although high attenders who were exposed to the social dominance treatment were much more supportive of majority dominance religious-freedom policies, with larger effects than the control or the Christian nationalism treatment. Social dominance may play a role in prompting in-group support among some very religious individuals, but there was scant evidence that it depresses support for minorities in this study.⁴

CONCLUSION

Because debates over religious liberty have entered the culture wars, academics and commentators have made inferences regarding the causes of public support for religious freedom. A typical narrative is that white evangelicals (and Republicans) support religious freedom for Christian groups and they do so out of an expression of Christian nationalism or cultural authoritarianism. To date, there has been a paucity of work investigating these posited mechanisms. Our public opinion experiments, which begin to fill this gap, provide nuance and caution to these conclusions.

In our results, Republicans and white Protestants have fairly high levels of support across types of religious-freedom issues, and their attitudes are not easily swayed by messages related to egalitarianism, Christian nationalism, or social dominance. If anything, Christian nationalist statements may increase support for minority religious-freedom claims—at least in the survey context. The one exception was the social dominance condition for high attenders, which yielded increased support for items related to the religious-freedom culture wars but no effect for minority religious-freedom claims.

Whereas Republican support for religious freedom was difficult to move, Independents were more likely to respond—in the negative. All three messages weakened Independent (and Democratic, to a lesser extent) support for religious freedom in general. Emphasizing equality sharply reduced Independent support for religious-freedom claims tied to the culture wars. There is a similar pattern for the non-religious.

Our results, although based on only one study, run counter to typical narratives and some of the hypotheses that we proposed. Further investigation into priming nationalism, social dominance, and equality is warranted. A limitation of this study is that we were unable to explicitly assess that the messages served as a prime. To rectify this, future survey experiments should include measures of Christian nationalism, social dominance, and egalitarianism, as well as more thorough partisanship and religiosity items. Nevertheless, for now, caution is warranted regarding the causal narrative about the influence of Christian nationalism and social dominance on the conservative mass public's support for religious freedom.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research documentation and data that support the findings of this study are openly available at the *PS: Political Science & Politics* Harvard Dataverse at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/CX7DEW>.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <http://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096522001251>.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■

NOTES

1. McDaniel, Nooruddin, and Shortle's (2022) examination of the American religious nationalism found that those who scored high on their measure also scored high on social dominance orientation and lower on egalitarianism.

2. Party identification was measured only as Republican, Democrat, Independent, or Something Else. Future studies should investigate strength of partisanship and independents who lean toward one party.
3. The religious-affiliation items in the survey were limited and did not match typical approaches to classifying religion by affiliation or self-identification, especially for evangelical Protestants (Smith et al. 2018). Nevertheless, the items could be used to identify white Protestants and the non-religious.
4. In models that interact religious attendance with the treatments, the results are similar to figure 3, with two exceptions. Those who attend religious services weekly or more were significantly more supportive of majority religious freedom when exposed to the social dominance treatment. In addition, on the minority religious-freedom scale, there was no difference between the control and treatment groups for high attenders. By contrast, white Protestants increased their support for minority religious freedom in each treatment as compared to the control. The figure is included in the online appendix.

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