Negotiating the Conflict Between Religious Beliefs and Political Attitudes

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Abstract

This paper seeks to explain how conservative Christians reconcile a belief in the inerrancy of the Bible with fiscal conservatism. Using a survey-embedded experiment, I test whether conservative Christians alter their support for spending on social services when primed with Biblical passages that promote generosity towards the poor. More broadly, I seek to understand the influence of religious beliefs on the policy preferences of the American public. This paper involves a pilot study using Amazon’s Mechanical Turk, while the final project will include data from the 2014 Cooperative Congressional Election Study.
Introduction and Question

A long line of research has shown that important social identities, such as race, ethnicity and religion shape political attitudes and behaviors. Many scholars assume a one-way relationship between these identities and political attitudes; however, what if the reverse is also true? Might political attitudes instead influence religious beliefs? In this paper, I investigate how religious beliefs moderate political attitudes. More specifically, I focus on the political attitudes of evangelical Christians, who predominantly identify as Republican. Many of these Christians believe in the inerrancy of the Bible, as dictated by evangelical doctrine, and hold fiscally conservative attitudes in line with the ideology of the modern Republican Party. This set of religious and political beliefs presents an interesting contradiction, as the Bible overflows with passages that promote generosity towards the poor and encourage the promotion of social justice, yet evangelical Christians have been shown to oppose government spending on welfare programs (Benabou and Tirole 2005; Midgley 1990; Barker and Carman 2000), and those identifying as Protestant biblical-literalists have been shown to tolerate higher levels of inequality (Emerson and Smith 2000). As such, the religious and political identities of evangelical Christians appear to be at odds. I seek to understand how these individuals reconcile this discrepancy, if at all, when it is made apparent? In psychological terms, how do these individuals resolve the cognitive dissonance that arises when two important beliefs conflict? Of course, most people probably do not give much thought to the consistency of their beliefs on a daily basis. Therefore, I have designed an experiment to make this inconsistency apparent. Using a survey experiment run on Amazon’s Mechanical Turk, I test whether those who believe in the inerrancy of the Bible are more likely to alter their religious or political beliefs when presented with passages from the Bible that promote generosity towards the poor. There is, of course, always the possibility that individuals do not perceive the tension that glares at us as scholars; people may be perfectly capable of holding seemingly contradictory attitudes even when made aware of the incongruency. Nonetheless, the results of this paper can shed light on the causal ordering of religious beliefs and political attitudes - that is, when we are faced with incompatible beliefs, both equally important to our identity, which takes priority? The insights gained in attempting to answer this question
may have significant implications for our understanding of the belief systems of the mass public. While the following analysis focuses on how evangelical Christians prioritize their beliefs as demonstrated by their chosen strategy (or lack thereof) for dealing with dissonant beliefs, the findings are broadly applicable to scholars of studying the dynamics of political and religious beliefs.

It is important to note that the definition of the “evangelical” Christian has been clearly delineated. Some scholars have aggregated a number of denominations into their conception of evangelicals,\(^1\) while others use evangelical as an all-encompassing term to describe those who adhere to a doctrine that stresses the inerrancy of the Bible, the divinity of Christ, and the necessity of evangelizing, or spreading the Word of God (Green 1996; Hunter 1983; Layman 2001). For the purposes of this paper, I am primarily interested in capturing those evangelicals who believe in the inerrancy of the Bible regardless of denomination; therefore, I will rely on the latter definition - those who self-identify as evangelical and adhere to evangelical doctrine, specifically a belief in biblical inerrancy. In turn, as I reference evangelicals throughout this paper, I am referring to those who identify as such and believe in the inerrancy of the Bible.

**History of Christian Conservatism**

Research has shown that those who espouse conservative religious beliefs are more likely to identify as members of the Republican party (Layman 2001; Fiorina, Abrams and Pope 2005), and that Christians who believe in the inerrancy of the Bible have been steadily moving to the right end of the political spectrum in the last few decades (McDaniel and Ellison 2008). However, evangelical and fundamentalist Christians have not always identified with the Republican Party, nor have they always been a politically involved group; rather, their involvement in political issues has been intermittent, with certain issues like the abolition of slavery providing a sufficiently compelling cause to draw them into the political arena. As

\(^1\)Including, but certainly not limited to, Southern Baptist Convention, the Church of God, the Assemblies of God, the Church of the Nazarene, and numerous nondenominational and Bible fellowship Churches, to name a few (Barker and Carman 2000). Others have also included Pentecostals, Fundamentalists, and Charismatics, though whether these groups qualify as evangelicals is still a topic of debate.
recently as the 1950s and early 60s the group remained politically dormant, due in great part to the urging of religious leaders like Jerry Fallwell that matters of political life distracted from matters of salvation (Harding 2001). However, the 1960s and 70s brought significant cultural changes that proved salient enough to spur evangelical mobilization. This period of cultural upheaval culminated in the dissolution of traditional party coalitions. Previous research suggests that during periods of stable party coalitions, individuals and groups within the parties are relatively unified in their attitudes regarding the most salient issues (Layman and Carsey 2002; Petrocik 1987). When a newly salient issue emerges that cuts across existing party cleavages, certain groups may find their views on the given issue incommensurate with their respective party’s stance, weakening their traditional partisan attachments (Abramowitz and Saunders 1998; Carmines and Stimson 1989; Layman and Carsey 2002). The realignment of the 1960’s and 70’s, initiated by newly salient racial issues, provides an illustrative example of the forces of party coalitional change (Carmines and Stimson 1989; Layman 2001).

Prior to the cultural upheaval of the 1960s, evangelical voters had traditionally been a Democratic stronghold, owing to their concentration in the South and lower socioeconomic status. However, as the Democratic Party began to establish itself as the more tolerant party regarding racial issues, evangelical voters found their views on racial matters increasingly incompatible with the party’s policies (Carmines and Stimson 1989; Valentino and Sears 2005; Sundquist 1983). The emerging party cleavages regarding racial views were further deepened by cultural changes independent of race, namely the debate over abortion and the role of religion in the classroom. With the counter-culture movement of the 60s came a rebellion against the traditional moral views of society through increasingly secular public policy and liberal legal cases. These institutional shifts represented a serious threat to the evangelical conception of a society founded on traditionalist Christian morality (Guth 1983; Oldfield 1996). As the Democratic Party embraced liberal stances on the cultural and racial issues of the day, evangelicals began shifting towards the Republican Party, which embraced conservative stances on these issues in an effort to court the evangelical vote and expand their base of support (Phillips 1969). Cultural issues remained politically salient throughout the 1980s and 90s, solidifying evangelical loyalites to the Republican Party. In fact, in the
1992 elections, religious traditionalism was the best predictor of Republican identification, and a vote for George H.W. Bush (Layman 1997; Ross, Lelkes and Russell 2012). By the 2000 election, evangelicals had become the most reliable and active wing of the Republican electoral base (Layman 2001).

The Dilemma of Fiscal Conservatism

While the definition of evangelical Christianity is notoriously hard to nail down, several scholars have converged on a definition of evangelical doctrine that includes four distinct concepts: the divinity of Christ, the inerrancy of the Bible, or the belief that the Bible is the word of God and should be taken literally, the requirement of “born-again” experiences for salvation, and the importance of evangelizing (Green 1996; Hunter 1983; Layman 2001). The belief in biblical inerrancy, in particular, may present a dilemma for evangelical Christians who identify with the Republican Party. The party’s tradition of fiscal conservatism clearly emphasizes a preference for limited government spending on social welfare programs, yet a central theme of the Bible’s teachings is the importance of showing generosity and care for the poor on the part of citizens and governments alike. However, in keeping with the economic conservatism of their current party, evangelicals have been shown to prefer limited social services (Barker and Carman 2000; Midgley 1990). Some scholars have suggested that the salience of racial issues in the 1960’s and the Republicans’ adoption of less racially tolerant policies provided a strong enough motivation for evangelicals to desert their traditional Democratic home and join the Republicans, despite the fact that accepting the fiscal policies of the Republican Party meant undermining their own economic interests. To this point, Carsey and Layman’s (2006) theory of conflict extension explains the tendency of individuals and groups with strong partisan beliefs regarding certain issues to adopt the stances of their party on less salient issues even if the party’s position does not seem to serve the group’s interests. This theory is instructive in helping to understand why evangelicals switched party loyalites in the first place and why this switch stuck. Since the 1960s and 70s, cultural issues have become increasingly salient, so much so that many scholars suggest we are in the midst of a “culture war” that has pitted the religious against the non-religious
- an increasingly partisan division - with a fault line, or perhaps an abyss, separating the
two camps on a host of social issues (Fiorina, Abrams and Pope 2005; Layman 1999). What
this implies is that evangelical Christians have prioritized the protection of their cultural and
moral interests over their economic interests, unifying behind the Republican Party as an
organized and powerful counter to society’s encroaching secularization. Additionally, accord-
ing to Carsey and Layman’s theory, this implies that conservative Christians have adopted
the party’s principle of fiscal conservatism because, in the face of social changes like increased
access to abortion and legalization of gay marriage, economic concerns are just simply less
salient. However, this also suggests that many evangelical Christians hold political attitudes
regarding fiscal issues that are in conflict with biblical principles of charity and altruism,
and could arguably challenge their commitment to a belief in biblical inerrancy.

Evangelical Beliefs, Motivated Reasoning, & Cognitive
Dissonance

Long a hallmark of cognitive psychology, the theory of cognitive dissonance has produced a
vast body of literature which suggests that people experience psychological discomfort when
they hold conflicting views on important issues, or when their views on a certain issue conflict
with those of an admired or trusted source (Festinger 1957), and that this dissonance can be
reduced by changing one’s attitudes regarding given issue or altering the behavior that causes
the dissonance, adding new cognitions to reduce the dissonance, or leaving the environment
that gives rise to the dissonance (Elliot and Devine 1994; Mahaffy 1996). Specifically, Fes-
tinger (1957) posits that the greater the importance of the dissonant beliefs or identities to
the individual, the greater the dissonance experienced. The central question in this paper is
how individuals mitigate the dissonance that arises when two or more long-standing beliefs
regarding a given issue conflict with one another. In such instances, with regards to the
given area of cognition, no single opinion can be held that is not dissonant with at least one
of these beliefs. Especially in today’s religiously polarized political landscape, as opinions
on political issues increasingly fall along religious/non-religious lines, the likelihood of disso-
nance seems higher for religious individuals who identify strongly with a political party; it is unlikely that one’s religious and political identities correlate perfectly.

To this point, several studies have shown that evangelical Christians display high levels of cognitive dissonance regarding moral issues like homosexuality. Mahaffy’s (1996) study of lesbian Christians showed that those who solidified their evangelical identity prior to coming out as a lesbian showed higher degrees of cognitive dissonance than non-evangelical Christians, and those who experienced high levels of internal dissonance, meaning they attribute the source of the tension to their own beliefs, were more likely to alter their religious beliefs, by re-interpreting problematic biblical passages or acknowledging that their religious beliefs and sexuality are separate, than those who attributed the tension to external sources, or to other people’s beliefs rather than to their own (these women were more likely to leave the Church than the former group). Thumma (1991) studied the dissonance reduction strategies of gay evangelicals and found that these men overwhelmingly sought to adopt a new identity that reconciled their Christian beliefs and homosexual feelings. While these studies point to dissonance that stems from competing beliefs regarding cultural issues that have typified the religious/non-religious divide, there is evidence that some Christians experience cognitive dissonance that stems from non-social issues, like fiscal conservatism.

Ross, Lelkes and Russell (2012) investigated the ways that liberal and conservative Christians reconcile the contradiction between the dictates of their faith and the political attitudes of their chosen party. They found that both liberals and conservatives were aware of the contradictions between their faith and political attitudes, with liberals acknowledging the discrepancies regarding moral issues, like abortion and gay marriage, and conservatives acknowledging the discrepancies regarding issues like redistribution and immigration, or “fellowship” issues, in the words of the authors. More importantly, they found that both groups were similar in their use of projection as means of dissonance reduction; liberals reported that a contemporary Jesus would be more liberal than themselves on these moral issues, while conservatives claimed Jesus would be more conservative than themselves regarding these "fellowship” issues. Additionally, both groups reported placing a higher priority on issues of their faith with which their political attitudes align. While the manners of dissonance reduction highlighted by the authors differ from the manner I propose, the results strongly
suggest that in the absence of congruency of political and religious beliefs, individuals will devise a number of strategies to reconcile their competing beliefs, or to bring them in line with the beliefs of a trusted source. In this paper, I test whether conservative Christians, when presented with the potential contradiction of their beliefs, will report less fiscally conservative attitudes in order to bring their political beliefs in line with the biblical injunction to provide for the poor and needy.

In the cases highlighted above, individuals were motivated to make judgements regarding certain objects of cognition that affirmed their prior beliefs or identities. This tendency has been identified in psychological literature as motivated reasoning, or the psychological motivation to reach conclusions that affirm rather than contradict or challenge prior beliefs (Kunda 1990). If competing beliefs give rise to cognitive dissonance, then motivated reasoning can be understood as the psychological “path of least resistance” where individuals discount information that challenges their existing beliefs or evaluations of a political object (Kim, Taber and Lodge 2010; Lodge and Taber 2013; Redlawsk, Civettini and Emmerson 2010). In Ross, Lelkes and Russell’s (2012) study, respondents discounted the areas of their faith with which their political attitudes did not align, while in Mahaffy’s (1996) study, individuals caught between their sexuality and religious beliefs were motivated to discount biblical passages that denounced homosexuality and emphasize other teachings of Christianity that center on God’s unconditional love for all people. In this paper, I take a slightly different approach in exploring the effects of cognitive dissonance and the avenues of motivated reasoning; the studies of Mahaffy (1996) and Thumma (1991) examine the reduction strategies of individuals facing tension between sexuality and spirituality, while Ross, Lelkes and Russell (2012) examine the tension between general teachings of one’s faith and one’s ideology. My design has several key differences which I suggest will produce a difference in the reduction strategies used by respondents; first, attitudes regarding the provision of social welfare have been shown to be less salient to evangelicals than moral issues like homosexuality; and, secondly, instead of considering the tension between the teachings of respondents’ faith in general terms, I am interested in a fundamental aspect of evangelical doctrine - the belief that the Bible is the word of God and should be taken literally, word for word. In essence, I am reversing the relative weight of political and religious beliefs, comparing
less salient political beliefs and more salient religious beliefs. In doing so, I suggest that individuals motivated reasoning will act in the opposite direction; respondents will be more inclined to “compromise” their political beliefs to affirm their religious beliefs rather than discounting their belief in the inerrancy of the Bible in order to affirm their beliefs regarding a less divisive political issue, effectively prioritizing their religious beliefs over their political attitudes.

It is worth noting here that opposition to government spending on welfare programs is not a phenomenon that is limited to evangelical Christians; they are not outliers in their beliefs. Study after study has revealed an American public that is deeply skeptical of the idea that the government ought to provide social services, especially welfare programs. However, those Christians who adhere to the doctrine of biblical inerrancy find themselves in a unique position because of the seemingly contradictory nature of their religious and political beliefs. This is an important point to consider and will be addressed in the next two sections.

**Americans’ Attitudes Towards Welfare**

A large amount of scholarship has been devoted to Americans’ attitudes toward welfare and social spending. On the whole, our attitudes have been marked by general ambivalence at best (Patterson 1994). Feldman and Zaller (1992) found that because Americans draw on a wide variety of values and principles when justifying their attitudes toward welfare policy, many display high levels of ambivalence resulting from competing and often contradictory attitudes. For example, Feldman found that most Americans express support for certain welfare policies, while simultaneously endorsing values of economic individualism. Additionally, many Americans support helping the impoverished and those that cannot help themselves, but are concerned by the potential for abuse and misuse of government assistance (Gilens 1999; Kluegel and Smith 1986; McClosky and Zaller 1984). Furthermore, it has been shown that some people dislike welfare recipients based on their racial attitudes (Sniderman and Piazza 1995; Sniderman and Carmines 1997; Kinder and Sanders 1996; DeSante 2013), or because they view welfare recipients as lazy and undeserving of government assistance, or that those on welfare could actually get jobs if they looked hard enough (Page and Shapiro...

It is also true, however, that a majority of Americans consistently support certain government programs like Social Security and Medicare that provide the paying public benefits later in life and those programs that entail strict work requirements (Page and Shapiro 1992; Shaw 2009; Cook, Jelen and Wilcox 1992). Public opinion trends seem to indicate that the programs most susceptible to public opposition and suspicion are those that provide direct income relief to needy families because of their perceived potential for abuse (think “welfare queens”) (Gilens 1999; Gilliam Jr 1999; Hancock 2004; Kinder and Sanders 1996; Page and Shapiro 1992). Other researchers have noted the distinct differences in connotations evoked by the wording of survey questions regarding welfare programs (Schiltz 1970; Will 1993). Smith (1987) found that simply substituting “welfare” for “poor” in questions regarding spending for social programs showed great differences in distribution of responses. Additionally, he found that the “welfare” invoked notions of waste and abuse by recipients. In sum, it would not be surprising if many or most evangelicals hold negative views toward government-provided welfare in that most survey respondents express such attitudes. However, by presenting respondents with actual Biblical passages that promote a community responsibility for welfare, evangelical Christians may be tempted to update their political beliefs in order to bring them in line with the teachings of the Bible.

Evangelical Beliefs and Opposition to Welfare Spending

It is clear that Americans’ welfare attitudes are influenced by a number of social, political, cultural and economic factors. Therefore, it is easy to expect that religion may also be an important factor in determining welfare attitudes of the American public. Religion has been shown to be a crucial factor in shaping one’s attitudes toward social issues, like abortion, gay marriage (Ansolabehere, Rodden and Snyder Jr 2006; Cochran and Beeghley 1991; Fisher et al. 1994; Olson, Cadge and Harrison 2006; Wilcox 1992). Some work has been done investigating the influence of religion on attitudes regarding non-social issues, like Guth et al.’s (1995) study on the relationship between evangelical beliefs and environmental attitudes. Traditional Christians were found to be significantly less supportive of policies
to protect the environment than those of other major religious denominations. Guth et al. suggest that these Christians took very seriously the anthropocentric view of creation, which suggests that the world was created for human use, perhaps even our exploitation - a common element of evangelical doctrine. These findings suggest that religious belief, especially aspects of doctrine, hold important sway over political attitudes. However, with regards to welfare attitudes, the effect of religion has not been investigated to the degree of other factors.

A few scholars have investigated possible explanations for evangelical Christians’ opposition to government welfare spending among conservative Christians, often pointing to the conflict between Christian values such as hard work and personal ambition and a belief that government welfare programs encourage dependency and laziness (Lakoff 1995). Lakoff writes that the traditions of evangelical and fundamentalist denominations instruct members to perceive the world as a division, or a moral dichotomy, between good and evil. Consequently, values which run counter to traditional Christian teachings of the Scripture are considered evil and an affront to morality, and should be rejected. According to this paradigm, liberal economic policies which include government spending on welfare programs, which are often perceived by conservatives to incentivize laziness and dependence, are considered morally impermissible. This construction of morality leaves no room for consideration of social, cultural, or environmental factors that may contribute to one’s position as a recipient of government welfare that extend beyond simply lacking a will to work hard and contribute to society.

Other scholars attribute the fiscally conservative attitudes of evangelical Christians to the efforts by leaders of the Religious Right to emphasize symbolic issues in order to sway evangelical loyalties in their favor (Lienesch 1982; Midgley 1990). Lienesch (1982) writes that the organizers of the Religious Right “present[ed] social issues using symbolic catch words and phrases - ‘crime in the streets,’ ‘welfare chiselers’ - which arouse deep anxieties and call forth strongly held convictions.” Frequently, religious leaders like Jerry Falwell, linked capitalism and free markets with Christian values of individualism and a Protestant work ethic in an effort to associate Christian identity with opposition to state intervention in economic affairs. As the outspoken leader of the Moral Majority in the 1980s, Falwell
often emphasized the centrality of individual ambition, protection of free markets, and the
dangers of welfare dependency, claiming the goal of his organization was to “defeat welfarism
in America.” That is, prominent leaders of the Religious Right made clear that government
redistribution efforts ran contrary to their interests by distorting the divine flow of supply
and demand in the marketplace. Furthermore, Emerson and Smith (2000) suggest that the
theological tradition of white, Protestant biblical literalist denominations tend to place a
strong emphasis on individualism and the divinity of work ethic; therefore, members accept
higher levels of inequality and often oppose economic and social policies designed for the
benefit of specific social groups. In a similar vein, there is a great deal of evidence that
suggests that American Protestants are less likely to support redistribution (Benabou and
Tirole 2005; Alesina, Glaeser and Sacerdote 2001; Guiso, Sapienza and Zingales 2003), and
that those who adhere to a Protestant doctrine are more likely to attribute poverty to a lack
of effort and believe that success can be achieved through hard work alone (Guiso, Sapienza
and Zingales 2003; Rubin and Peplau 1975). Additionally, Midgley (1990) describes the
traditional history of evangelical churches as the providers of social insurance, asserting that
since the New Deal, many evangelical and fundamentalists have felt their historical role has
been taken over by the government, implying a dimension of morality that should not be
assumed by such a secular entity.

In sum, the conservative leanings of evangelical leaders during the past half-century are a
possible explanation for the tendency of evangelical survey respondents to reject government-
provided welfare despite the altruistic message of Christ’s teachings. However, there is also
ample evidence that people are motivated to reduce the cognitive “discomfort” that arises
when their competing beliefs on a given issue are brought to bear. Therefore, it is very pos-
sible that evangelical survey respondents, when presented with actual biblical teachings that
promote community responsibility for social welfare, will be tempted to re-evaluate their
beliefs in order to bring their political preferences in line with the dictates of their faith.
Data & Methods

Using a survey-embedded experiment as part of a pilot study using Amazon’s Mechanical Turk, I test whether Christians who believe in the inerrancy of the Bible, alter their support for government spending on social services when primed with passages from the Bible that promote giving to the poor. The design of the survey is as follows: respondents are asked a series of demographics questions and other standard control variables, including their political ideology, preferences for government spending on social services, and belief in the inerrancy of the Bible. Subjects are then randomly assigned to one of three groups - two treatment and one control. All three groups received three “general knowledge” questions about Biblical figures: the name of the angel sent to Mary (Gabriel), the name of the man who led the Israelites out of Egypt (Moses) and the book that contains the verse “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John). The main purpose of these questions was to simply get the respondents in all three groups to think about the Bible. Next, two of the three groups then received two additional “treatment” questions; the liberal treatment saw two verses encouraging generosity towards the poor, and were asked to identify which book of the Bible contains each verse. Those in the conservative treatment saw two ideologically conservative verses, one of which condemns homosexuality and the other supports the submission of women, and were asked to identify the books containing these verses. (see Appendix for demographic questions and Bible verses). For further clarity, the design is shown below in Table 1.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Treatment</th>
<th>“Liberal”</th>
<th>Control</th>
<th>“Conservative”</th>
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<td>Prime 1</td>
<td>Gabriel</td>
<td>Gabriel</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prime 3</td>
<td>Moses</td>
<td>Moses</td>
<td>Moses</td>
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<tr>
<td>Treatment</td>
<td>“Help the poor”</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>“Homosexuality is a sin”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Treatment</td>
<td>“Aid the poor”</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>“Wives submit to husbands”</td>
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Following these questions, respondents were asked to indicate what percentage of the Bible they believe to be true, as well as a battery of questions regarding their opinions on government spending on a variety of programs, including welfare and aid to the poor, and their feelings towards different social groups.

This survey design allows me to measure a baseline level of support for government spending on social services against post-treatment levels of support for specific programs and compare the results to a control group, with any change attributed to the experimental manipulation. Additionally, the randomization of the treatment groups allows me to compare the post-treatment spending preferences across the three groups. The participants are presented with the “liberal” and “conservative” passages in question form for consistency’s sake; since the survey contains other questions that relate to the Bible, I included the treatment passages in question format so as to not give away the passage as simply a “primer” - whether participants correctly identify the book of the Bible is irrelevant. As mentioned earlier, the primary purpose of the general knowledge biblical questions is to get all respondents to think about the Bible, but they are also used as manipulation check, to tease out those respondents who rushed through the survey or have no pre-existing knowledge of the Bible (those who missed all three). The effectiveness of the experiment relies on respondents a) having some knowledge of the Bible and b) reading the treatment verses carefully; therefore, I feel it is a fair assumption that those participants answering all three general knowledge questions incorrectly do not satisfy the stated criteria.

In order to measure my independent variable, a belief in the inerrancy of the Bible, I rely on two measures examined separately: a dichotomous measure of self-identification as evangelical and a three-point ordinal variable that measures what portion of the Bible one believes to be the truth, to be taken word for word.\textsuperscript{2} There are several benefits to these measures: first, in using a simple measure of evangelical identification, I will avoid the possibility of including those within a certain denomination that do not identify as an evangelical, and I will capture those who do identify as such but do not belong to a traditionally evangelical denomination. Using a measure of biblical literalism allows me to differentiate between different degrees of belief in biblical inerrancy within evangelical respondents, and to capture

\textsuperscript{2}For exact wording of questions, see appendix.
those respondents who consider themselves biblical literalists but do not identify as evangeli-
cal. Additionally, this measure is more precise; while self-identification as an evangelical can
be used as proxy for a belief in the inerrancy of the Bible, many evangelicals may not actually
consider themselves biblical literalists. Therefore, precision is surely bolstered by including
an actual measure of respondents’ views of the Bible. To control for ideology, I included a
3-point self-identification variable, with 1 being liberal, 2 moderate, and 3 conservative.

My dependent variable, support for government spending on social welfare programs, is
measured by responses to 5-point spending questions regarding one’s support for increas-
ing or decreasing spending on welfare and aid to the poor, with 1 being in favor of greatly
decreasing spending, 3 keeping spending levels the same, and 5 greatly increasing spend-
ing. Additionally, I included a pre-treatment measure of general support for increasing or
decreasing government spending on social services as a whole, measured on a 7-point scale
with 1 being greatly in favor of increasing spending and 7 greatly in favor of decreasing
spending. For ease of analysis, all spending questions, both pre- and post-treatment were
recoded from -1 to 1, with -1 being in favor of greatly decreasing spending and 1 in favor
of greatly increasing spending. As a general rule, in examining the results in the following
section, negative values indicate a desire to decrease spending, zero a desire to keep spending
levels the same, and positive numbers a desire to increase spending for any given measure.

Given the existing literature regarding the need for cognitive consistency of one’s beliefs,
and the apparent contradiction between many evangelical Christians’ and biblical literalists’
religious and political beliefs, I propose the following hypotheses:

$H_1$: Evangelical Christians, who believe in the inerrancy of the Bible, will be more
supportive of government spending on social services after exposure to a biblical passage
that promotes generosity towards the poor, compared to the “conservative” and control
groups.

$H_2$: Evangelical Christians, who believe in the inerrancy of the Bible, will be less sup-
portive of spending on social services after exposure to a biblical passage that espouses
conservative values regarding a social issue like gay marriage, compared to the “liberal” and
control groups.
The purpose of the “conservative” biblical passages is to reinforce the views of conservative evangelicals; in other words, the verses are intended to prime these respondents with material that reinforces, rather than contradicts, their “politico-religious” stance. I expect the effect of the “conservative” treatment to be weaker than that of the “liberal” treatment because the conservative treatment requires respondents to make the connection between a conservative stance on a social issue advocated by Bible verse and the corresponding conservative stance on fiscal issues, while the liberal treatment, on the other hand, engages a Bible verse regarding a fiscal issue, which I anticipate will make the discrepancy between religious and political beliefs regarding the provision of social welfare more obvious.

In other words, I suggest that, for evangelical respondents, the experiment will place their commitment to a doctrine of biblical inerrancy in competition with their fiscally conservative attitudes, and require them to employ a means of dissonance reduction, given they recognize the discrepancy in their beliefs. This conflict of interest, in theory, is constantly present for evangelical Christians who identify as conservative, assuming one’s party identification and belief that in Biblical inerrancy are stable over time; however, it is likely that most people do not give much thought to the congruency between their beliefs on a day-to-day basis, since most people rarely encounter circumstances, outside of experimental surveys, in which the contradiction in their beliefs is made apparent (Zaller and Feldman 1992). This experiment is designed to bring this conflict of beliefs to the forefront, requiring respondents to either alter their political attitudes to bring them in line with their religious commitments. There is, however, the possibility that respondents will simply accept the incongruency. It may be that, despite the fact that partisanship and religion are important social identities, respondents’ specific beliefs regarding welfare spending are simply not salient enough to warrant the mental energy needed to reconcile the resulting dissonance. However, I suggest that this outcome seems unlikely given the results of past research in cognitive dissonance, as mentioned earlier.

There is an alternative dissonance reduction strategy that merits discussion. Participants may respond to the discrepancies in their beliefs by altering their religious beliefs, or how strongly they believe in the inerrancy of the Bible, instead of their political attitudes.
However, I suggest this method will be far less common, if it occurs at all, for two reasons; first, biblical inerrancy represents a fundamental and consistent aspect of evangelical doctrine, while the party identification of evangelical Christians as a whole has changed over time, suggesting that religious commitments tend to be stronger than partisan attachments, and, by extension, less likely to be altered in response to something as insignificant to the respondent as a single political survey. Secondly, evangelical denominations have a history of charity and altruism towards the poor, as mentioned earlier, especially prior to the enactment of New Deal policies, when government sponsored social programs were largely non-existent. Therefore, although many evangelicals today express distrust of the government’s ability to efficiently and fairly redistribute, I anticipate they will recognize the connection between the Biblical injunction to give to the poor and the altruistic traditions of Christianity, and be more inclined to change their support for welfare spending than alter their belief in the inerrancy of the Bible.

Lastly, there is the possibility that respondents perceive no conflict between their religious beliefs and political attitudes. Existing literature investigating evangelical beliefs and attitudes toward welfare suggests that many evangelical Christians feel that the government should not assume the role of the charitable provider; historically, the church was the primary source of aid for the poor. This role reversal implies that the provision of welfare is no longer guided by the morality of the church (Midgley 1990). This rationale was echoed in a small focus group held with members of a local evangelical church. A near consensus emerged among participants, all of whom acknowledged the potential incongruity between the teachings of the Bible and fiscal conservatism, that the duty of charitable giving applied only to the church and the individual, not to the government. The most common justification for this stance was the inability of the government to discern deserving recipients from those who were abusing the system. In the words of one of the participants, “they turn around and hand it to these people that haven’t worked a day in their life, and that kind of goes against my grain real bad. I worked all my life [...] and I don’t want my money going to someone who’s sittin’ at home doing nothing.” Put another way, these participants viewed the biblical injunction to give to the poor as a command directed only at individuals or the church; therefore, their opposition to government provided social services did not clash with
the teachings of their faith. According to this logic, the belief in the inerrancy of the Bible and fiscally conservative attitudes regarding redistribution seem perfectly coherent. It may be that evangelical respondents perceive the teachings of the Bible in the same way. If this is the case, the treatment passages will have no effect, and no dissonance will arise.

Once again, it is important to note that this project is phase one of a larger study. The same experiment was fielded on the 2014 Cooperative Congressional Election Study and the data will be presented in a similar paper at the 2015 meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association; I chose to use Mechanical Turk because of ease and convenience. It is commonly known that mTurk presents several challenges to the validity of the results that are worth considering before continuing. First, the sample size is inherently small and, therefore, unlikely to be representative of the true population (Berinsky, Huber and Lenz 2012). To this point, the sample utilized in this paper is overwhelmingly white and liberal; of 452 respondents, 326 are white, 226 identified as liberal while only 70 identified as conservative, and only 167 women participated. Very few respondents, only 42, identified as an evangelical, which clearly presents shaky ground for making any generalizations about trends in evangelical attitudes in the population.

Results

Results from the pilot study on Mechanical Turk show certain treatment effects in the expected direction, however they do not reach statistical significance. Again, this is not surprising given the small sample size. I have chosen not to include the statistics for the following results because this is a working paper, intended primarily to provide insight into possible trends in the data and to highlight issues to consider when analyzing the CCES data.

Table 2 shows the mean pre-treatment spending preferences of respondents in each group. The pre-treatment spending measure is designed to capture respondents’ overall favorability of government spending on social services. All three groups report positive pre-treatment spending preferences; however, the “conservative” treatment group shows significantly lower support for spending than the control and “liberal” treatment groups. Again, the “liberal” and “conservative” groups are labeled so as to differentiate between the “partisanship” of
the treatment Bible verses, not the party identification of the respondents. The respondents were randomly assigned to one of the three groups; therefore, the fact that the “conservative” treatment group reports lower levels of support for spending on social services indicates a failure of randomization.

Table 2: Initial Spending Preferences, by Treatment Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>“Liberal”</th>
<th>“Conservative”</th>
<th>Control</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Initial Spending</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Post-Treatment Spending Preferences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>“Liberal”</th>
<th>“Conservative”</th>
<th>Control</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Welfare</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aid to Poor</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>0.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spending Avg.</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spending Avg. 2</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Responses were recoded from -1 to +1; -1 in favor of greatly decreasing spending, 0 preferring no change, +1 in favor of greatly increasing spending.

Table 3 shows post-treatment preferences for four spending variables: 3 spending on welfare programs, spending on aid to the poor, and two measures of average spending preferences, which reflect respondents’ preferences for spending on defense, environment, education, poor and welfare, in average 1, and only defense, environment, education and aid to the poor in average 2. 4 I chose to calculate both averages to reflect the effect of spending preferences for welfare programs on overall spending favorability for spending on social services. All three groups show distinct differences in preferences for spending on welfare and

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3 The same measure was not used pre- and post-treatment to avoid the possibility that participants would recognize the repeated question and fail to alter their preferences even if the treatment would have induced them to do so.

4 By averaging responses to these five (three) spending variables, I created an index of spending preferences that comprises the traditional categories of spending asked on national surveys that can be compared with initial spending preferences. I feel the average of the five categories of federal spending reflect the general opinion on federal spending tapped in the pre-treatment question.
aid to the poor; while respondents prefer increasing spending for aid to the poor and welfare programs, they prefer a much greater increase in spending for aid to the poor than for welfare programs. This trend is not surprising given the negative connotation often associated with welfare programs. The control and “liberal” groups show similar differences in their levels of support for spending increases between their initial preferences and preferences for welfare programs; they are approximately .06 points less supportive of an increase in spending on welfare programs than their pre-treatment general spending preferences. The “conservative” group shows much lower support for an increase in spending on welfare programs, but this may be due to the fact that they were more conservative to begin with, which indicates a failure of randomization; I expect that the large sample size of the CCES data will prevent this from happening again. However, when looking at all three groups’ support for an increase in spending for aid to the poor, levels of support look much more equal. Additionally, despite the “conservative” treatment group’s low initial levels of support for an increase in spending, all three groups show remarkable consistency in their average support for spending increases for the five spending variables mentioned above, reflected in the “spending average” row. Furthermore, the effect of removing the welfare programs from the average spending score is exactly the same for all three groups - minus .03 points.5

Examining the results from the three groups without consideration for evangelical identification suggests that the treatment passages have no discernable effect on support for spending on welfare and aid to the poor; in fact, the patterns are remarkably consistent considering initial levels of support. The notable exception is the large jump in the “conservative group” between initial levels of support and support for spending on aid to the poor. This could suggest that rather than associating a biblical passage with a partisan stance on fiscal issues, it simply acted as a reminder of biblical principles and triggered a recognition of the Christian values of altruism and generosity towards the poor. However, one would expect the same of the “liberal” group, which did not show nearly as great an increase as the “conservative” group; in fact, the “liberal” treatment group showed a very similar increase between initial spending preferences and preferences for aid to the poor as the control group.

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5Again, spending average is the average of respondents responses for spending on defense, education, environment, welfare, and aid to the poor, while spending average 2 is preferences for all of the above, save welfare.
which saw no Biblical passages.

Table 4 presents evangelicals’ initial spending preferences, which are significantly lower for the “liberal” and control groups than the spending preferences of respondents as a whole, which may reflect evangelicals’ tendencies towards fiscal conservatism.

Table 4: Evangelicals’ Initial Spending Preferences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>“Liberal”</th>
<th>“Conservative”</th>
<th>Control</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Initial Spending</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5: Evangelicals’ Post-Treatment Spending Preferences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>“Liberal”</th>
<th>“Conservative”</th>
<th>Control</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Welfare</td>
<td>-0.12</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aid to poor</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>0.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spending Avg.</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Responses were recoded from -1 to +1; -1 in favor of greatly decreasing spending, 0 preferring no change, +1 in favor of greatly increasing spending.

However, all three groups show similar increases in support for spending on aid to the poor compared to their initial support for spending on social services, which mirrors the results for overall group preferences. While all three groups show a much lower support for an increase in spending on welfare programs, the “liberal” group stands out for the significant level of support for decreasing spending on welfare programs. The “conservative group” shows no significant difference from the control group in support for welfare spending. While these findings clearly contradict $H_1$ and $H_2$, these results should be viewed with serious skepticism due to the tremendously small sample size - there are only 12 evangelical respondents in the “liberal” treatment group, 16 in the “conservative” group, and 14 in the control group; given such small sample sizes, none of the differences in means approached statistical significance.

Tables 6 and 7 present the results for self-identified biblical literalists, or those who believe that the Bible is the actual word of God and should be taken literally, word for word. Before
proceeding, it is important to note that the sample size for this group as a whole is very small (N=29), and when further broken down by treatment, we reach single digits in some cells. Additionally, none of the differences are significant, however it is worth examining general trends to get an idea of what to expect in the larger CCES sample. Table 6 shows biblical literalists’ initial preferences for spending on social services in general. Not surprisingly, like the preferences of the evangelical group, these are significantly lower than the the initial preferences of the respondents as a whole, reflecting the conservative tendencies of those who believe in the inerrancy of the Bible.

Table 6: Biblical Literalists’ Initial Spending Preferences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>“Liberal”</th>
<th>“Conservative”</th>
<th>Control</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Initial Spending</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7: BiblicalLiteralists’ Post-Treatment Spending Preferences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>“Liberal”</th>
<th>“Conservative”</th>
<th>Control</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Welfare</td>
<td>-0.39</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aid to poor</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>0.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spending Avg.</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>0.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spending Avg. 2</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>0.20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Responses were recoded from -1 to +1; -1 in favor of greatly decreasing spending, 0 preferring no change, +1 in favor of greatly increasing spending.

Table 7 shows post-treatment preferences for the “liberal”, “conservative” and control groups. The liberal group shows the most support for decreasing spending on welfare programs, which, again, clearly refutes \( H_1 \). It is interesting to note, however, that when considering initial spending preferences, those in the control group are in favor of decreasing spending on social services in general, yet display a preference for increasing spending on welfare programs post-treatment - the only group to reverse the direction of their preferences post-treatment and to report similar preferences for spending on welfare and aid to the poor. While one can speculate as to why this may be (perhaps the Bible verses had the adverse effect, suggesting religious and political beliefs are so intimately linked that a reminder of religious principles triggers a recognition of one’s conservative values), this trend is likely
a result of pure chance, given the small number of respondents (N=7). In any case, even results that refute my hypotheses present questions that are ripe for further research.

All three groups are in favor of increasing spending on aid to the poor, which suggests again that these programs are considered distinct from welfare programs, perhaps with the exception of the control group. The conservative group appears to be much more supportive of spending on welfare programs than the “liberal” group, but much less supportive than the control group, once again giving no support to $H_2$. The second spending average reflects the effect low levels of support for welfare among the “liberal” and “conservative” groups - average preferences with welfare included are much lower than preferences with welfare excluded. However, the large differences in all three groups’ initial spending preferences and post-treatment spending preferences point to one of our most well-documented paradoxes - we are symbolically conservative yet operationally liberal, meaning many of us, in theory, support a smaller government that provides fewer services, but when forced to reveal our preferences for specific programs, we tend to be quite liberal, in that we support increasing spending on a wide range of services (Ellis and Stimson 2007). It seems that for two of the three groups, welfare programs are the one area where respondents are loyal to their stated ideology, showing less favorability for an increase in spending on these programs.

**Discussion**

While the above results failed to reach statistically significant levels, they suggest several possibilities regarding the effects of a Biblical “primer”, and provide important considerations for the second phase of my project. Firstly, without accounting for ideology, all three groups reported similarly high levels of support for spending on aid to the poor. These three groups were all asked general knowledge questions regarding Biblical figures, which suggests that perhaps simple questions relating to the Bible may serve as a sufficient reminder of Biblical principles to spur a large increase in support for aid to the poor across all groups. However, without a clear measure of respondents’ support for spending on aid to the poor pre-treatment, we cannot be sure that this result is a function of the treatment, and not the wording of the service (i.e. “aid to the poor” instead of “welfare”, “income assistance”,
etc.). This is certainly an area of the experimental design that could be improved upon; however, designing a survey that tests this effect more precisely without revealing the aim of the experiment is difficult. Perhaps the most realistic explanation of this trend is that people are simply more supportive of spending on aid to the poor and consider it separately when determining their overall levels of support for spending on social services. The fact that every group reported a great deal of support for increasing spending on the poor suggests that this government service is likely immune to partisan considerations - that it stands outside the debate over the proper size of the government. However, as noted earlier, the sample is overwhelmingly liberal, which implies that the results generally overestimate the support for spending on social services across the board. The fact that support for spending on welfare programs seemed to decline across the board, while support for spending to aid the poor increased or support for a further decrease became less drastic, indicates that the wording of the questions taps into very different connotations. This is unsurprising given the past research that has consistently shown differential support for government social programs depending on how the program is framed, as mentioned earlier.

A final possibility, given these results, is that the Bible passages have no effect on respondents’ preferences for spending on social services; it may be that they are unable to make the connection between the teachings of the Bible and associated political preferences, or that the intervening questions create too much distance between the Bible verses and the post-treatment spending questions, making it difficult for participants to keep the passages in mind when responding to the questions regarding spending on social programs. More importantly, for evangelicals and biblical literalists, it may be that skepticism of government welfare programs and the deservingness of recipients outweigh any Biblical injunction of altruism, despite the fact that Biblical inerrancy represents an important component of evangelical doctrine. This sentiment was summed up nicely by a participant in the local focus group - “It doesn’t say in the Bible that the government should... it tells Christians we should follow what our government says, but it doesn’t tell the government to support these people... it’s telling the individual Christians and churches.” Another participant added “And [the churches] see to it that they get [the aid] to the right people that need it, and that they don’t get too much.” It may also be the case that, as proposed by past work, that
the Protestant doctrine that emphasizes individualism is a more sancrosanct value to evangelical Christians than altruism. In sum, once I am able to identify the means of dissonance reduction (or lack thereof) employed by biblical literalists and evangelical Christians, further research can be geared towards understanding why this reduction strategy was chosen.

Conclusion

While the results of this paper do not seem to lend support to my hypotheses, they highlight several potential trends in preferences for welfare spending. In general, questions about welfare spending generate very different responses than questions about aid to the poor. It is likely this trend will manifest itself in the CCES data, and perhaps blunt the effect of the treatment. Additionally, they suggest that evangelical respondents may not view their stances on fiscal issues as problematic. It is possible that economic issues are simply not as salient as social and moral issues for evangelical Christians, and that cultural issues will continue to define the politics of evangelical churches. Nonetheless, this paper represents a starting point for future research.

In the second phase of my project, I plan to investigate several remaining questions. I will test my alternative hypothesis that evangelicals will alter their belief in the inerrancy of the Bible instead of their support for spending on welfare programs and aid to the poor. A larger sample size that includes more evangelicals and biblical literalists, as well as a pre- and post-treatment measure of biblical literalism, will make this test much more valid. Additionally, I plan to examine partisan differences in support with a larger and more representative sample. I expect that, with the data I will gather from the CCES, I will be able to discern treatment effects, or lack thereof, much more clearly. Regardless of whether my hypotheses are supported or rejected by the data, this project will shed light on the dynamics of religion and policy preferences that has important consequences for researchers of public opinion; my hope is that this project can be a novel first step in understanding the causal ordering of religious beliefs and political preferences. If I am able to induce a significant change in support for spending on social services with exposure to Biblical principles of altruism
for conservatives and evangelicals, it may be that religious values indeed outweigh political considerations and partisan attachments. If the reverse is true, that religious beliefs are instead altered, then it may be that party identification is simply too strong and ideological commitments too engrained for even the most devout Christians to overcome.
Survey Prompt and Measures

- Ideology
  3-point scale: Liberal, Moderate, Conservative

- Education
  7-point scale: (1) “Grade school” to (7) “Advanced Degree”

- Church attendance: “Lots of things come up that keep people from attending religious services even if they want to. Thinking about your life, do you ever attend religious services, apart from occasional weddings, baptisms or funerals?”
  6-point scale: (1) “No, I do not attend services” to (6) “Yes, more than once a week”

- Affiliation with a denomination: “Regardless of whether you now attend any religious services do you ever think of yourself as part of a particular church or denomination?”
  Dummy variable: (1) “Yes” and (2) “No”

- Denomination

- Born-again/evangelical identification
  Dummy variable: (1) “Yes” (2) “No”

- Pre-treatment spending preferences: “Some people think the government should provide fewer services, even in areas such as health and education, in order to reduce spending. Suppose these people are at one end of a scale, at point 1. Other people feel that it is important for the government to provide many more services even if it means an increase in spending. Suppose these people are at the other end, at point 7. Where would you place yourself on this scale?”
  7-point scale: (1) “Government should provide many fewer services: reduce spending a lot” to (7) “Government should provide many more services: increase spending a lot”
• Pre-treatment Biblical literalism
(1) “The Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken literally, word for word.”
(2) “The Bible is the word of God but not everything in it should be taken literally, word for word.”
(3) “The Bible is a book written by men and is not the word of God.”

• General knowledge Bible questions
(1) “What was the name of the angel who visited the Virgin Mary?”
(2) “According to the book of Exodus, who led the Israelites out of Egypt?”
(3) “Please identify the book of the Bible which contains the following verse: ‘For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”

• “Liberal” treatment Bible verses
(1) “He who gives to the poor will never want, but he who shuts his eyes will have many curses.”
(2) “When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. You will be blessed, because they cannot repay you.”

• “Conservative” treatment Bible verses
(1) “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination?”
(2) “Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church.”

• Percentage of Bible thought to be true
0-100 scale: (0) “The Bible does not contain any truth” to (100) “the Bible is completely true”

• Opinion on government spending on various policies: Spending on defense, spending on public education, spending on aid to the poor, spending to protect the environment, spending on welfare
5-point scale: (1) Increased a lot, (3) kept about the same, (5) decreased a lot
References


Lakoff, George. 1995. “Metaphor, morality, and politics, or, why conservatives have left liberals in the dust.” *Social Research* pp. 177–213.


