

ARTICLE

An ecclesiastical court: Christian nationalism and perceptions of the US Supreme Court

Miles T. Armaly¹ | Jonathan M. King² | Elizabeth A. Lane³ | Jessica A. Schoenherr²

¹Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Mississippi, Mississippi, USA

²Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia, USA

³Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, North Carolina, USA

Correspondence

Elizabeth A. Lane, Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, NC 27695, USA.

Email: elizabeth_lane@ncsu.edu

Abstract

Recently, scholars have increasingly examined the unique blending of Christian and political ideology known as Christian nationalism. During this period, the US Supreme Court has increasingly ruled in ways that favor Christian nationalism, and Court watchers have criticized several justices for showing bias toward Christianity at best and Christian nationalism at worst. We use two large, nationally representative samples to examine the connection between Christian nationalism and attitudes about the Court. Observationally, we ask if this ideology relates to support for the Court's decision to overturn abortion rights and agreement with the use of nonlegal and religious logic in decisions. Experimentally, we test whether exposure to a story about Justice Alito flying a Christian nationalist flag can legitimate the use of religious decision-making logic. We find support for all three propositions, indicating the Court's recent turn has real effects on its supporters, its legitimacy, and, potentially, its future behavior.

Given the Roberts Court's propensity for producing opinions that are pro-business (Tribe & Matz, 2014), anti-abortion (Ziegler, 2023), anti-affirmative action (Coyle, 2013), and pro-gun (Winkler, 2011), journalists and the public typically identify it as conservative (Kaplan, 2018). Viewed in this light, contemporary decisions favoring Christianity appear to simply follow this conservative path (Biskupic, 2023). More recently, however, journalists and scholars suggested the Court was doing more than entrenching conservative religious doctrine (Greenhouse, 2022); they charged the Court with supporting and enabling Christian nationalism, a political movement seeking "a fusion of American civic life with a particular type of Christian identity and culture" favoring White supremacy, patriarchy, heteronormativity, and conservative politics (Whitehead & Perry, 2020, p. xix). They defended their claims

with seemingly endless stories explaining the Court's shift, from the advent of the Court's religiously conservative majority and its subsequent cascade of pro-Christian decisions (Greenhouse, 2022), to the elimination of abortion rights (Ziegler, 2023), to reports that Justice Samuel Alito flew flags associated with Christian nationalism outside of his home (Dias & Lerer, 2024). Journalists and scholars alike declared the Court was chasing religious and ideological preferences at the expense of the rule of law, and they predicted the Court's reputation would suffer as a result. Did people believe the Court was enabling and empowering Christian nationalism? And if yes, were its actions also affecting the way people thought about both the Court and religion's proper role in American government?

We believe the answer to the first question is yes, and we suspect the Court's actions lead to more

Verification Materials: The materials required to verify the computational reproducibility of the results, procedures, and analyses in this article are available on the *American Journal of Political Science* Dataverse within the Harvard Dataverse network, at: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/X87YY2>.

The Cornell Center for Social Sciences verified that the data and replication code submitted to the AJPS Dataverse replicates the numerical results reported in the main text of this article.

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/) License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited and is not used for commercial purposes.

© 2025 The Author(s). *American Journal of Political Science* published by Wiley Periodicals LLC on behalf of Midwest Political Science Association.

acceptance than outrage. The Constitution tasks the Supreme Court with protecting individual rights, and it consequently has an outsized say over religion's constitutional place in the public sphere (Greenhouse, 2022). Because people typically accept the Court's decisions whether they like them or not (Ura, 2014), it also has an outsized *influence* over people's perceptions of religion's place in American public life (Stewart, 2019). Thus, whether purposeful or not, the justices' decisions favoring Christianity in explicitly religious cases—allowing prayer on school grounds, religious symbols in public spaces, and government funding for religious educations—and implicitly religious cases—involving abortion and anti-discrimination laws—should increase popular acceptance of the idea that religion has a prominent place in American life, as should off-bench activities that underscore the justices' religious affiliations. For Christian nationalists, the justices' actions lead to policy wins and popular validation of its core tenants (Corbin, 2020), and we suspect Christian nationalists' support for the Court and its processes grows when the Court looks favorably on its causes. But the Court's legitimating power can also go a long way toward advancing the movement's ideals among the masses (Johnson & Martin, 1998), especially when so many people are willing to tolerate some of its core ideas (Whitehead et al., 2018). We thus also expect the justices' decisions and actions lead to broader public acceptance of religious reasoning, which can have dire consequences for a society long built around the goals of pluralism and equality.

To test these hypotheses, we take a two-pronged approach to examining the relationship between Christian nationalism and public attitudes toward the Supreme Court. First, we examine how support for Christian nationalism translates to support for Supreme Court decisions that favor the movement's core tenants. We suspect Americans harboring Christian nationalist attitudes will be more supportive of Court decisions that affect religious life, and they will be more accepting of the justices using religious logic to reach those decisions. Using data from two surveys covering 5,000 participants, we find that Christian nationalism is positively related to support for *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* (2022) overturning *Roe v. Wade* (1973). This effect outpaces those of standard religious indicators, and only ideology and ex ante support for abortion rival its size. We also find that Christian nationalism has an outsized effect on support for the use of political and religious logic in Court cases. Taken together, these results confirm that a Court that supports Christian nationalist goals gains Christian nationalists' support.

In the second part of our study, we examine public response to the concern the Court is sympathetic to Christian nationalism. Journalists and Court watch-

ers believe the public will respond poorly to knowledge the Court aligns itself with Christian logic and outcomes, but we suspect the Court's unique ability to legitimize unpopular decisions, known as legitimization theory (see Caldeira, 1991; Johnson & Martin, 1998; Ura, 2014), extends to the reasoning the justices use to reach those decisions. To test this theory, we use an original survey experiment built around the *New York Times* report on Justice Alito's Christian nationalist flag to examine how adherence to Christian nationalism influences support for different judicial decision-making factors (Kantor et al., 2024). Our results suggest that exposure to a story about Alito's display increases popular support for the Court using religious considerations in its opinions, though it has no impact on support for using legalistic factors. Christian nationalism conditions this effect; participants with low adherence to Christian nationalism who read about the flag were significantly more likely to support the Court's use of nonlegal factors in its decision-making process than were participants in the control group. We thus conclude the Court can legitimize the use of religious logic in its decisions, despite it being unpopular and running counter to the Court's legal mandate.

These results are important for our understanding how institutions build and maintain their legitimacy. The Supreme Court has always relied on popular goodwill for its authority to rule (Caldeira & Gibson, 1992), and that goodwill stems at least partially from popular belief that the Court treats people fairly under the law (Bartels & Johnston, 2013). When the justices' decisions align with Christian nationalists' goals, however, they necessarily issue decisions that favor one group over another and thus abrogate their commitment to fairness (Corbin, 2020; Zilis, 2021). If they deploy religious logic to reach those decisions, they also destroy popular belief in their adherence to the rule of law (e.g., Baird, 2001; Farganis, 2012). Consequently, appearing to support Christian nationalism should negatively affect the Court's legitimacy. We do not find that to be true. Instead, our results indicate support for religious logic increases when people see the Court connected to Christian nationalism. This finding suggests the justices can legitimate the use of religious logic and maintain their stores of support, and thus might have external incentives to keep ruling the way they are.

With that said, our findings also provide a cautionary tale for appearing to side too closely with Christian nationalism. We find the Court currently draws significant support from Christian nationalists, who tend to be more supportive of political violence (Armaly et al., 2022), and the use of violence against fellow citizens (Perry et al., 2019). The Court's support could embolden Christian nationalists to visibly abuse the people who lost at the Court, including non-Christians, women, racial and ethnic minorities,

and immigrants (Corbin, 2020), which few Americans would support in practice. Beyond that, the perception the justices sympathize with Christian nationalism is problematic in itself, as it suggests the justices believe in a vision of America that conflicts with the public's. Such connections can affect the seriousness with which the public takes the Court and its work. While Americans might learn to support the use of religious logic in Supreme Court opinions, they might be less willing to support a broader dismantling of American ideals or the institution leading them there.

CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM AND THE SUPREME COURT

Dating back to at least the 1970s, when Phyllis Schlafly brought together conservatives and religious groups to stall the Equal Rights Amendment (Spruill, 2017), and the nascent Moral Majority convinced the Republican party to outwardly oppose abortion (Stewart, 2019), Christian-aligned groups have amassed the political power to push for policies that prioritize and defer to Christianity (Greenburg, 2007). While the media refer to these groups as a unified "Religious Right," they are actually a loose coalition of ideologies using similar arguments to achieve different endgames. Some are White evangelicals, who want to turn America into a Christian theocracy governed by the Bible (Whitehead & Perry, 2019). Others are Christian nationalists, who seek a return to the "Christian" America they believe existed at the founding, which they recognize as nativistic, patriarchal, heteronormative, and White (Whitehead et al., 2018). Both groups seek to replace the secular and pluralistic America with their version of a more "traditional" society (Green, 2015), and their members often overlap, but their different approaches and political goals distinguish them (Whitehead & Perry, 2020). Importantly, Christian nationalism's more exclusive vision of America and its focus on "divine militarism" makes it uniquely dangerous to the American experiment (Corbin, 2020), as its adherents will physically fight to implement their preferred system of government and its associated hierarchies (Armaly et al., 2022).

Christian nationalism is a "unique and independent ideology" that focuses on "a symbolic defense of the United States' perceived Christian heritage" (Whitehead et al., 2018, p. 147). It is distinct from other dimensions of religiosity, such as attending religious services or prioritizing religion, because it blends Christianity and American history (Stewart, 2019); for example, Christian nationalists believe God inspired the Constitution and other founding documents, and thus revere it in ways theocrats do not (Whitehead & Perry, 2020). Christian nationalists also adhere to a contemporary apocalyptic perspective regarding per-

ceived threats to America's White Christian tradition, including rapid changes in demographics, the law, and liberal policies (Gorski, 2018). Its followers seek a social hierarchy that favors White American Christian men and relegates others to the subservient positions their groups held at the founding, and they advocate using violence to achieve that goal (Corbin, 2020). Given these tenants, Christian nationalism distinctly combines religious, racial, gendered, and political identities into a single ideology that is more political than religious. While research indicates Christian nationalists make up a small portion of the American population, it also suggests Christian nationalist rhetoric can unite groups around shared goals (Whitehead et al., 2018), which allows the ideology to thrive.

When fighting for their vision of America, adherents of Christian nationalism often find themselves facing the Supreme Court, because the Court's mandate to protect individual rights uniquely enables it to help or hinder their goals (Whitehead & Perry, 2020). When the Warren Court removed religion from classrooms and public spaces, and the Burger Court sanctioned abortion and the Internal Revenue Service's ability to revoke religious groups' tax-exempt statuses (Stewart, 2019), the Court sent the message that Christianity did not control American society, and its ability to legitimize societal change through its decisions ensured the public upheld that position (Ura, 2014). In response, Christian groups broadly denounced the Court and vowed to align it with their goals through legal fights and membership changes; they knew if the Court aligned with them, their views would become the abiding ones (Bennett, 2017; Calmes, 2021). Christian nationalists also lambasted the Court for implicitly religious rulings that empowered women, racial and ethnic minorities, immigrants, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) individuals (Whitehead & Perry, 2020), and they too sought to supplant the Court's pluralistic approach with their own (Corbin, 2020). Their message was clear: If the Court came over to their side, it would legitimize their views in ways voting never could.

THE COURT'S PUBLICLY RELIGIOUS PROFILE

Over the course of three decades, the Court directly played into Christian nationalists' hands by issuing opinions that aligned with their explicitly religious goals. The Rehnquist Court moved slowly but surely, allowing religious groups to use public spaces for their meetings in *Lamb's Chapel v. Center Moriches Union Free School District* (1993), endorsing states' provisions of publicly funded vouchers for private religious education in *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris* (2002), and blessing legalistic public displays of the Ten Com-

mandments in *Van Orden v. Perry* (2005) (Toobin, 2008). But they also put up guardrails, notably forbidding public prayer at football games in *Santa Fe Independent School District v. Doe* (2000) and obviously religious public displays in *McCreary County v. ACLU of Kentucky* (2005) (Greenburg, 2007). The Roberts Court quickly and systemically removed those guardrails (Greenhouse, 2021), allowing Christian prayers at town assembly meetings in *Town of Greece v. Galloway* (2014); publicly funded religious displays in *American Legion v. American Humanist Association* (2019); and, in a decision that overturned fifty years of protections against public displays of religion, public prayer on football fields in *Kennedy v. Bremerton School District* (2022) (Biskupic, 2023).

The Roberts Court also issued a litany of implicitly religious decisions that spoke to other tenants of Christian nationalism. For example, the Court's decision to overturn abortion rights in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* (2022) ended a decades-long moral campaign to eliminate the practice (Ziegler, 2023). Religious groups like the Alliance Defending Freedom then started targeting women's access to birth control (Rinkunaus, 2025), which Christian nationalists praised as a step toward reinstating traditional family structures (Stewart, 2022). Similarly, the Court ruled in *303 Creative LLC v. Elenis* (2023) that a Colorado Christian website designer did not have to make wedding websites for LGBTQ individuals, a move that drew Christian nationalist praise for placing religion over civil rights (Lavietes & Yurcaba, 2023).

We would typically expect that the masses are relatively unaware of the Court's actions and popular perceptions of the Court remain untouched by its daily work (e.g., Delli Carpini et al., 1996; Gibson & Caldeira, 2009; Zaller, 1992). But public discourse leads us to believe the public cannot help but pay attention to these rulings. The media moved quickly to document the Court's decisions and the changes they brought. Supreme Court commentator Kate Shaw, for example, observed that the Court favored religious plaintiffs in *literally* every major religion case heard after Justice Amy Coney Barrett joined the bench (Shaw, 2023). Journalists wrung their hands over the Court "[selling] its soul to the Christian right" (Michaelson, 2023). Law professors similarly voiced concerns about the shift toward government-sanctioned Christianity (Baumgardner, 2021; Feldman, 2022; Russo & Thro, 2023). Other interested parties raised concern that the Court was promoting a particular brand of White Christian nationalism, with the founder of the nonpartisan Public Religion Research Institute arguing, "What we're seeing is a desperate power grab as the sun is setting on white Christian America. In the courts, instead of moving slowly and systematically, it's a lurch" (Smith, 2022).

Simultaneously, the media began dissecting the justices' personal religious beliefs' effects on their

decision-making processes. Between 2017 and 2020, the Court gained three conservative justices whose records promised increased public religiosity and an end to abortion rights (Calmes, 2021). Conversations about these justices focused on their religious affiliations in ways that had not been relevant in decades (Badas & Schmidt, 2024),¹ with a specific focus on how Justices Brett Kavanaugh and Amy Coney Barrett's public dedication to Catholicism would affect their decisions (Greenhouse, 2022). News reports on sitting justices also addressed religiosity, from one on Justice Clarence Thomas' wife, Ginni, supporting Christian interest groups that approached the Court (Mayer, 2022), to the front-page story that Justice Samuel Alito flew a Christian nationalist flag outside his summer home in New Jersey (Kantor et al., 2024). Some Christian groups also bragged they prayed with the very justices who cited their amicus brief when overturning *Roe v. Wade* (Voght & Dickinson, 2022). These stories implied Christians had influence if they wanted it.

Data suggest the broader public has caught on to the Court's religious turn. The Pew Research Center finds the share of Americans who think the Court is "friendly" to religion about doubled between 2019 and 2022, from 18% to 35%. Similarly, 44% of participants believe the justices rely on their religious beliefs "too much," but this value is lower among religious "winners," like Protestants (29%) and evangelicals (15%).² A separate Pew study indicates those who are religious have a more favorable opinion of the Court, with favorability among Christians at 7% higher than all adults and among evangelicals at 10% higher.³ These results are striking in their suggestion that people know about the Court's work and express concern the justices are diverting from legal principles to make decisions.

CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM AND SUPPORT FOR THE JUDICIARY

Popular discourse regarding the Court's Christian nationalist sympathies should, at a minimum, draw support from religiously minded individuals pleased by the decisions. Research by Badas and Schmidt (2024) suggests individuals who believe the justices share their religious leanings are more supportive of the judiciary. Their findings indicate perceptions of religious representation, not actual representation, drive support for the institution; they find evangelicals believe the Court represents their interests despite the Court lacking evangelical members at the time of

¹ Presidents ensured certain religions were on the bench in the early part of the 20th century, and the first few non-Protestant nominees drew concern over their ability to separate their religion from their work (Nemacheck, 2007). Presidents switched their focus to racial and gender diversity when those factors became electorally important in the 1970s (King et al., 2025), and a justice's religion received little attention until the late 2010s.

² <https://tinyurl.com/3jkc2a6v>

³ <https://tinyurl.com/43buzmwn>

their experiment. Thus, people may feel substantively represented by the Court simply because they believe the justices share their religious affiliations. But having information about the Court's approach to religious issues should also increase the likelihood that religious people support the Court. Work on religiously extreme sentiment shows that elite rhetoric and cues effectively mobilize followers (Armaly et al., 2022; Perry, 2023; see also Rahko & Craig, 2024), and any coverage of the justices' religious leanings or the Court's decisions could be considered elite cues supportive of Christian nationalism, whether the justices intended for that or not. Consequently, both subjective and objective contexts should lead anyone who wants more religion in the public sphere to support the Court when it releases explicitly religious decisions.

The Court's implicitly religious decisions in areas like abortion and discrimination should be particularly important for drawing Christian nationalist support. Attitudes about the Court are a function of group attachments and beliefs about the Court's treatment of different groups (Zilis, 2018, 2021). As Davis (2018) suggests, religion "divides humanity into tribal groups of members and outsiders," leading "many Americans [to] utilize religious beliefs as a, if not the, key factor in the construction of their worldview" (p. 300). Christian nationalism's explicit goal is preferential treatment for its members (Broeren & Djupe, 2024), and its adherents "feel threatened by those outside their group, thus creating their own victimhood" (p. 45). Indeed, a growing movement argues contemporary society is a "negative world" for Christians, and that "Being a Christian...is a social negative" (Graham & Hordinski, 2025). As Armaly and Enders (2021) argue, people who feel victimized support leaders and institutions they believe can "fix" their status (see also Armaly et al., 2022; Iyengar, 1989); consequently, Christian nationalists seek to empower those who treat their issues or make their negative world more positive. When the Supreme Court appears to support explicitly religious outcomes and reject claims made by the groups threatening their goals, Christian nationalists should support the Court's decisions in implicitly religious areas in ways that others, even religious people, might not.

CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM AND COURT LEGITIMATION

With that said, we believe the Court's apparent embrace of religion extends beyond opinion support to the legitimation of the mechanisms the Court uses to reach those opinions. Decades of scholarship indicates the public wants judges to justify their decisions using a strict set of "fair" standards (see Bartels & Johnston, 2013; Wells, 2007). The public believes "legalist"

interpretations, like reliance on text and precedent, are value free (Chemerinsky, 2002; Rivero & Stone, 2023); alternatively, people consider factors like personal beliefs and ideology less legitimate, and view religious or moral logic as fully illegitimate (Farganis, 2012). When it comes to Christian nationalism, we suspect its adherents also support the use of text and precedent in Supreme Court decisions—after all, they believe the Court can uniquely legitimize their cause and they want the Court to do so (Stewart, 2019). But Christian nationalism also depends on logic stemming from religious sources, and its adherents are willing to accept political and religious reasoning that validates their preferred outcomes (Whitehead et al., 2018). Thus, we surmise Christian nationalists will also support the Court's use of religious and extralegal logic in opinions.

We suspect, however, that the Court's unique ability to force mass acceptance of its decisions may ease some of these concerns and, in fact, draw approval for them. While mass policy attitudes are typically a top-down affair (Zaller, 1992), the judiciary is uniquely situated to validate unpopular policies (Johnson & Martin, 1998). The judiciary can confer legitimacy onto policies it prefers, because "the Supreme Court's close association with the Constitution and powerful symbols of institutional legitimacy will pull Americans' attitudes toward positions adopted by the Court" (Ura, 2014, p. 110).⁴ That is, the Court's rulings can change "people from segregationists to integrationists, from pro-lifers to pro-choicers" (Caldeira, 1991, p. 305). Importantly, this legitimation should go beyond mere legal approval of a decision, as research suggests decisions by the Supreme Court actively mold public perceptions of an issue and confer normative approval on certain policies that may promote greater social acceptance of the issue at hand, even in the face of initial backlash (see, e.g., Hoekstra, 2000; Tankard & Paluck, 2017). Put differently, the Court's rulings and the justices' actions serve as a powerful endorsement for ideas. Their decisions signal that the law—and, thereby, social consensus—supports these decisions.⁵

Because the theory of legitimation relates to individuals with whom policies are unpopular, research suggests individuals *low* in Christian nationalism should eventually accept the Court's turn toward religiosity. While those individuals may not approve of the Court favoring public prayer and funding for playgrounds in

⁴ Some studies suggest the Court's decisions can induce negative popular reactions (Allen & Haider-Markel, 2006; Rosenberg, 2008; Stoutenborough et al., 2006), but this is more due to *ex ante* public opinion than the Court's involvement (see Brickman & Peterson, 2006). Johnson and Martin (1998) suggest a landmark Court ruling permanently shifts public opinion on an issue and Ura (2014) shows that long-term legitimation often follows short-term backlash, while other work indicates attitude strength and information about the Court's actions underlie legitimation, too (Hoekstra, 2000; Mondak, 1994).

⁵ Of course, some universally unsupported decisions, such as *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* (2022), may have the opposite effect, see Clark et al. (2024) and Gibson (2024a, 2024b).

religious schools, eliminating abortion rights, or overturning anti-discrimination laws for the sake of religious freedom, they should eventually accept them. Importantly, we believe this legitimizing effect will carry over to the logic the justices use to reach those decisions. While the public clearly prefers the justices defend their decisions using the law and not politics or religion (Farganis, 2012), the justices' favoring of religious issues could signal that religious logic is another valid legal approach.⁶ If the justices, enshrined in the trapping of the institution and respected for being a part of it, are comfortable with religion having a place in the public sphere, then religious logic must necessarily be just another valid legal approach. Just as with policies, the close association between the Court, the Constitution, and other symbols of legitimacy should legitimate the Court's logical processes, too.

OBSERVATIONAL STUDIES: CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM AND THE COURT

We begin our analysis by first addressing the relationship between Christian nationalism and attitudes toward the Court. To do this, we utilize two sources of observational data. The first is the 2023 Christian Nationalism Survey, jointly collected by the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) and the Brookings Institution ($N = \sim 4,500$),⁷ which we use to understand Christian nationalist response to the Court's decisions. Our second data source is an original survey conducted via Cint Theorem (previously Lucid Theorem) in August 2024 ($N = 1,009$), which we use to study Christian nationalists' support for different mechanisms of legal interpretation. We consider each data source and question in turn.

Christian nationalism and support for *Dobbs*

As we suggested earlier, we suspect Christians will broadly support the Court's explicitly religious decisions, but adherents of Christian nationalism will be distinctly supportive of the Supreme Court's implicitly religious decisions. To examine this supposition, we use data from the 2023 Christian Nationalism Survey to identify the relationship between adherence to Christian nationalism and support for overturning *Roe v. Wade* (1973), the Supreme Court decision

that determined abortion was an individual right.⁸ The Court overturned *Roe* in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* (2022), so we equate support for overturning *Roe* with support for *Dobbs*. Thus, we hypothesize the following:

CN-Dobbs Support Hypothesis: Individuals high in Christian nationalism will be more supportive of the Supreme Court deciding to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, even when accounting for other measures of religious devotion.

Participants were asked, using a four-point scale running from "strongly oppose" to "strongly favor," how much they favor or oppose "The Supreme Court overturning *Roe* versus *Wade*, the 1973 Supreme Court decision that affirmed a constitutional right to abortion." We use these responses for our dependent variable, coding it such that higher values indicate support for overturning *Roe v. Wade*, and we expect it to have a positive relationship with Christian nationalism. The language of the survey item is important because it explicitly references the Court and does not discuss abortion on its own. Instead, it combines attitudes about abortion—specifically, *ex ante* support for its legality—with attitudes about the Supreme Court, allowing us to draw inferences about attitudes regarding the institution, which is key for understanding Christian nationalism separately from religious preferences.

Following Whitehead et al. (2018), we measure adherence to Christian nationalism using a series of eight well-validated questions (e.g., Armaly et al., 2022; Perry et al., 2024; Saiya & Manchanda, 2024).⁹ Using a four-point scale ranging from "completely disagree" to "completely agree," participants rated how much they agree with statements such as "U.S. laws should be based on Christian values" and "God has called Christians to exercise dominion over all areas of American society." These items form a reliable and unidimensional scale, so we utilize a summated rating scale of the eight items.¹⁰

Alongside our key independent variable Christian nationalism, we control for several other important

⁶ The justices make this connection with some regularity. For example, the Court's building has a marble frieze of notable lawgivers that includes Moses holding the Ten Commandments, and the justices say his presence has legal, not religious, significance (Kaplan, 2018).

⁷ <https://tinyurl.com/yckpuu6e>

⁸ We provide a list of all questions used for this analysis on p. ii in the Online Appendix.

⁹ As Davis (2023) explains, scales of Christian nationalism that include questions on the public display of religious symbols and prayer in public schools may not accurately measure attitudes regarding Christian nationalism and suggests checking results using a two-item scale to ensure validity (see also Djupe et al., 2023). These items were not included on the PRRI survey, so we do not employ the two-item measure here. We did, however include the two items in question on the Cint Theorem survey used later in this paper. When appropriate, we ensure the comparability of results using alternative measurement. See p. ii of the Online Appendix for the full question wording of the Christian nationalism items used.

¹⁰ The full list of these items, summary statistics, and psychometric properties appear on p. iv in Table A1 in the Online Appendix.

factors in our models. First, because Christian nationalism is not a measure of one's adherence to Christianity, we account for participants' religiosity. To do this, we employ items that ask about the importance of religion in one's life. Using a four-point scale from "not important" to "the most important," participants indicated the role religion plays in their lives. Relatedly, we use a six-point scale ranging from "never" to "more than once a week" to identify how often, in the previous year, participants attended religious services (excluding weddings or funerals) or volunteered for a religious organization.

We also control for ex ante support for the legality of abortion. Participants answered this question using a four-point scale ranging from "illegal in all cases" to "legal in all cases." We considered a host of political variables as well, including favorability ratings for Joe Biden and Donald Trump, partisanship, ideology, and the strength of those predispositions. We also include demographic controls for education, gender, income, age, and race.¹¹

Finally, existing scholarship on religion and Court attitudes specifically considers evangelicalism (e.g., Badas & Schmidt, 2024). While scholars suggest those seeking to understand Christian nationalism should not solely focus on evangelicals (Gorski & Perry, 2022; Whitehead & Perry, 2020), we control for it to ensure adherence to Christian nationalism is not capturing something exclusively connected to evangelical participants.¹²

Empirical results

To examine the relationship between adherence to Christian nationalism and support for the Supreme Court overturning *Roe v. Wade* in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, we utilize ordinary least squares regression. Because we want to compare coefficient magnitudes, we rescaled our main (e.g., non-demographic control) variables to range from 0 to 1 before estimating the regression. We provide the results of this analysis in Table 1. Positive coefficients

TABLE 1 Ordinary least squares regression, support for *Dobbs*.

	Coefficient (standard error)
Christian nationalism	.114** (.042)
Religious importance	.038 (.027)
Service attendance	.073 [†] (.041)
Legal abortion support	-.277** (.032)
Biden favorability	-.093** (.031)
Trump favorability	.120** (.031)
Self-identified ideology	.235** (.043)
Partisan identification	.063 [†] (.036)
Ideological strength	.072** (.022)
Partisan strength	-.005 (.023)
Evangelical strength	.006 (.018)
Education	.003 (.007)
Female	-.040** (.013)
Income	.001 (.005)
Age	.000 (.000)
Black, non-Hispanic	.070** (.026)
Other, non-Hispanic	.057 (.042)
Hispanic	.024 (.02)
Multiracial, non-Hispanic	.075 [†] (.042)
Constant	.274** (.048)
Observations	4,385

Notes: Coefficient estimates for regression of support for *Dobbs* decision based on adherence to Christian nationalism. Survey weights used in estimation.

[†] $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

¹¹ See Table A2 on p. v in the Online Appendix for all participant demographics.

¹² We also include fixed effects for self-identified religion because the propensity to support Christian nationalism may vary across religious groups. We use PRRI's categorization, which asks participants to identify as Catholic, Protestant, other religion, or no religion. Given our focus is on a particular ideological variant of Christianity, the lack of granularity for non-Christian religions is not a concern. For the sake of completeness, we also examined interactive effects between Christian nationalism and ideology, as well as between Christian nationalism and evangelical identity. The results suggest these factors are significant but behave the way we expect—as adherence to Christian nationalism grows, both ideology and evangelical identity matter less as independent factors. See Table A3 on p. vi in the Online Appendix for these results.

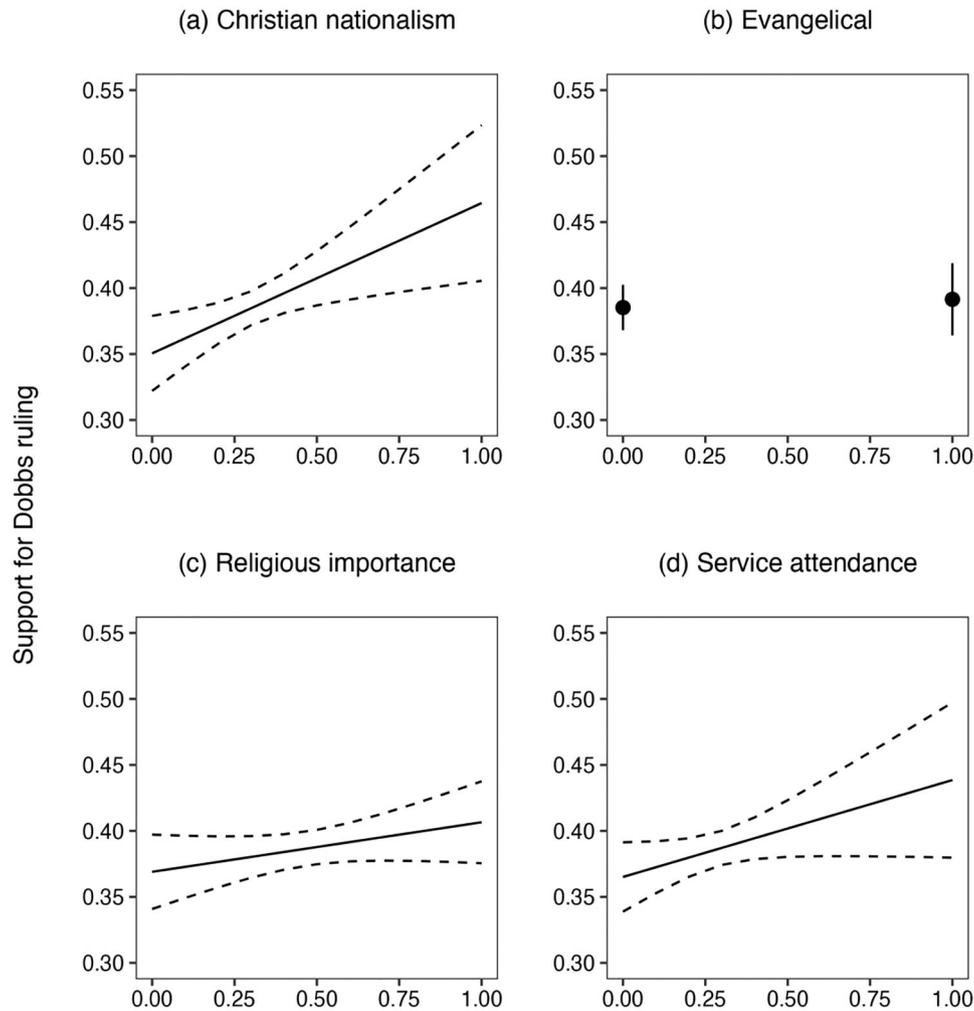


FIGURE 1 Effect of each religious variable of interest on support for *Dobbs*. *Notes:* Model-based predictions of effect of each variable of interest, with 95% confidence intervals. Predictions from Table 1 estimates.

are related to support for *Dobbs*, while negative values are related to opposition to the decision.

As Table 1 shows, adherence to Christian nationalism has a positive and significant effect on support for *Dobbs*.¹³ Importantly, we find the effect of adherence to Christian nationalism on support for the *Dobbs* ruling (.11) is greater than the effects of religious attendance (.07) and self-assessed religious importance (.04), and the only significant predictor of support among the three. This is consistent with our theory that Christian nationalism has a unique influence on support for decisions the Supreme Court makes.

To better illustrate Christian nationalism's impact, Figure 1 compares support for *Dobbs* across four different factors that could affect support for the decision: Christian nationalism (top left), identification as an evangelical Christian (top right), importance of reli-

gion in one's life (bottom left), and religious service attendance in the last year (bottom right). Starting first with Christian nationalism, moving from low to high levels of adherence to the ideology increases support for *Dobbs* by 32.5%. Comparatively, moving from low to high belief in the importance of religion only increases support by 10.1%, and moving from low to high religious service attendance increases support by 20.1%. Additionally, we find that identifying as an evangelical Christian does not significantly affect support for *Dobbs*, a finding that further emphasizes Christian nationalism is not simply a stand-in for evangelicalism.¹⁴ Taken together, we find support for our hypothesis that individuals high in Christian nationalism will be more supportive of the Supreme Court's decision in *Dobbs*, even when accounting for other aspects of religiosity and evangelicalism. And, by

¹³ All discussions of significance or significant differences are with respect to a two-tailed test where $p < .05$.

¹⁴ See Table A4 on p. vii in the Online Appendix for analysis regarding multicollinearity concerns.

using *Dobbs*—an implicitly religious case—as opposed to explicitly religious cases (e.g., school prayer), we demonstrate the unique role Christian nationalism plays in support for Court decisions.

Christian nationalism and support for judicial decision-making factors

Having demonstrated that adherence to Christian nationalism affects support for overturning *Roe v. Wade*, we next ask if adherence to Christian nationalism also impacts support for the Court's approach to the law. Specifically, we ask if Christian nationalists are more likely to support the Court's use of different decision-making factors—from broadly accepted legal factors, to less valid political factors, to unacceptable religious factors. We expect they do. To address this question, we utilize data from an original survey of 1,009 participants conducted via Cint Theorem in August 2024.¹⁵ Cint Theorem offers quota-based nationally representative samples based on age, sex, race and ethnicity, and educational attainment.¹⁶ We return to these data later in this paper when experimentally testing the theory of legitimation.¹⁷

For this part of our analysis, we asked participants, “Do you agree with Supreme Court justices using the following factors to decide cases?” We listed eight different factors with which participants could agree or disagree using five-point, Likert-type scales.¹⁸ Figure 2 summarizes each of these factors by showing mean participant support for them. Notably, participant responses break down into two statistically distinct categories. We see that, in accordance with past work (Rivero & Stone, 2023), participants are supportive of the Court using apolitical and legalistic tools to make decisions, including scientific evidence, laws

passed by Congress, and Supreme Court precedent. Also consistent with past research, participants are less supportive of using religious and personal considerations, interest group and politician opinions, and partisan preferences (Farganis, 2012).

To create our dependent variables for this analysis, we subject these eight items to factor analysis to determine if individuals structure their attitudes regarding the decision-making factors Supreme Court justices use.¹⁹ Consistent with the response patterns in Figure 2, we find these items sort into two factors, which we call “political” and “expertise.” The “political” factor includes explicitly political decision-making items, such as opinions from elected officials and interest groups, religious and personal considerations, and partisan preferences. The “expertise” factor contains items such as past Supreme Court precedent, laws written by Congress, and scientific evidence. We use these predicted factor scores as dependent variables in our subsequent analyses. Additionally, because we are specifically interested in support for religious factors, we also analyze the religious considerations item as its own dependent variable. With these variables in hand, we hypothesize the following:

Expertise Factor Hypothesis: Individuals higher in adherence to Christian nationalism will be no more or less supportive of the use of expertise factors in judicial decision making.

Political Factor Hypothesis: Individuals higher in adherence to Christian nationalism will be more supportive of the use of political factors in judicial decision making.

Religious Factor Hypothesis: Individuals higher in adherence to Christian nationalism will be more supportive of the specific use of religious factors in judicial decision making.

The independent variables we use for this analysis are similar to those we employed in our previous analysis. To measure adherence to Christian nationalism, we utilize a summated rating scale of six questions participants answered using an odd-point scale with a neutral, “neither agree nor disagree” mid-

¹⁵ We remove “speeders” from our analysis, which we define as spending less than 6 min on a survey that was designed to—and, for the average participant, did—take 15 min. We acknowledge this distinction is arbitrary, but note that it omits only 127 of 1,136 possible participants. Additionally, following Read et al. (2022), we control for the time it took a participant to complete the survey.

¹⁶ For more information on sample characteristics, see Table A5 on p. viii in the Online Appendix. We also compare our sample to the most recent US Census. Cint Theorem, though not a probability sample, tends to capture attitudes of the US population (Coppock & McClellan, 2019). To further ensure the quality of our data, we follow the advice of Berinsky et al. (2014) and use both Theorem's techniques as well as our own. Theorem utilizes internal methods (such as reCAPTCHA) to screen for inattentive participants. We required participants to pass several attention checks. Individuals who failed the first attention check were immediately removed from the survey and replaced with a demographically similar participant.

¹⁷ Our survey contained multiple experimental treatments. Because it was an “omnibus” survey, several of these treatments were intended for separate projects. In expectation and empirically, these treatments are unrelated to the dependent variables of interest in this paper. For these models, we control for exposure to treatment category and exclude the participants who were exposed to the Christian nationalist treatment; we consider those participants separately in the next section of the paper.

¹⁸ We provide a list of all questions used for this analysis on pp. ix–xi in the Online Appendix.

¹⁹ The results of this factor analysis appear in Table A6 in the Online Appendix. Part A of Table A6 demonstrates that a two-factor solution fits these data well, which is consistent with the response patterns in Figure 2. The eigenvalues for the first and second factors are both greater than 1.0, and each explains a meaningful proportion of variance. Additionally, implementing Horn's parallel analysis—a statistical technique useful in determining the appropriate number of factors to retain—indicates the two-factor solution is appropriate.

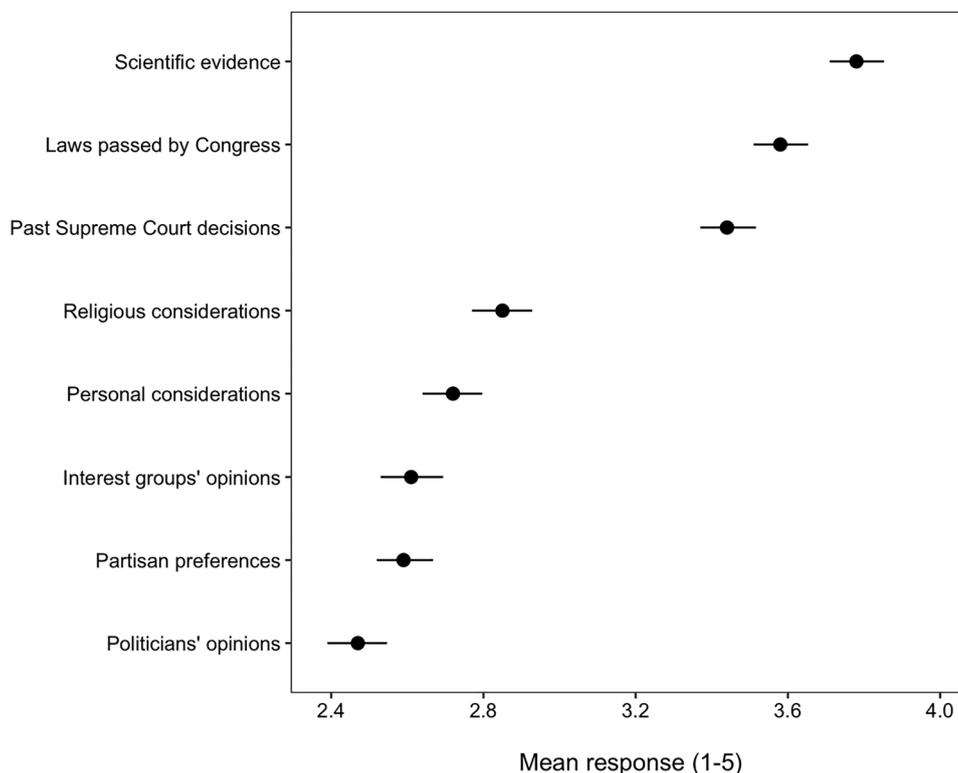


FIGURE 2 Decision-making factors used by Supreme Court justices. *Notes:* Point estimates are mean responses on five-point, strongly disagree to strongly agree scale to questions about Supreme Court decision-making factors. Horizontal lines represent 95% confidence intervals.

point.²⁰ We also control for political predispositions, several Court-centric attitudes (perceived ideological distance from the Court, knowledge of the judiciary, perceived politicization, diffuse support), religiosity, and sociodemographic factors. Finally, we include a control variable that records exposure to other experimental treatments included on the survey but not utilized in this paper.

Empirical results

To test our hypotheses regarding decision-making factors, we separately regress each dependent variable onto adherence to Christian nationalism and the host of control variables described above. Once again, we rescaled our main (e.g., non-demographic control) variables to range from 0 to 1 to allow us to compare magnitudes. Model estimates appear in Table 2.²¹ To ease interpretation, we display model-based predictions of the relationship between adherence to Christian nationalism and each of our dependent variables in Figure 3.

As Figure 3 shows, we find support for all three hypotheses. Looking first to the top left side of the figure, we see that individuals with high adherence to Christian nationalism are as supportive of the justices relying on expertise as anyone else. Notably, the top right side of Figure 3 suggests Christian nationalists are also significantly more willing to accept the Court's use of political factors,²² and the bottom of the figure shows they are also more willing to accept the use of religious factors in the judicial decision-making process. Taken together, these results indicate that Christian nationalists want the Court to employ the types of logic they believe will lead to instrumental gain for their group and its cause, even if people typically view that type of logic as illegitimate.

The size of the effect across decision-making factors is worthy of note. First, as we expected, support for judicial dependence on expertise is high, and high levels of adherence to Christian nationalism do not lead to significant increases in support for it. But, across the range of adherence to Christian nationalism, we see a significant 59% increase in support for the use of political factors. And, most importantly, there is a whopping 192% increase in support for the use of

²⁰ Results remain substantively the same if we utilize the two-item Christian nationalism measure, see Table A7 on p. xii in the Online Appendix.

²¹ Full model estimates with controls for demographics and experimental treatment group are available in Table A8 on p. xiii in the Online Appendix.

²² We also estimated the partisan factor with the religious factor excluded, as we show in Table A9 on p. xiv in the Online Appendix. The effect is substantively similar, and model predictions are correlated at .99.

TABLE 2 Christian nationalism and support for judicial decision-making models.

	Religious	Political	Expertise
Christian nationalism	.436** (.057)	.181** (.044)	.043 (.040)
Partisanship	-.006 (.040)	.002 (.031)	-.067* (.028)
Ideology	.082 (.051)	-.030 (.040)	.040* (.036)
Partisan strength	-.002 (.036)	.011 (.028)	.014 (.025)
Ideological strength	.028 (.033)	.001 (.026)	.047* (.023)
Supreme Court ideological disagreement	-.081 [†] (.043)	-.085* (.033)	-.033 (.030)
Knowledge	-.063 (.049)	-.172** (.038)	.150** (.034)
Politicization	-.129* (.051)	-.120** (.040)	-.067 [†] (.036)
Legitimacy	.119* (.051)	.169** (.040)	.022 (.035)
Religiosity	.107** (.030)	.046 [†] (.024)	-.017 (.021)
Age	.042 (.055)	-.072 [†] (.043)	.024 (.039)
Education	-.090* (.042)	-.075* (.033)	.016 (.029)
Female	.037 [†] (.021)	-.007 (.017)	-.029 [†] (.015)
Duration	.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)	.000* (.000)
Constant	.186* (.080)	.507** (.062)	.596** (.056)
Racial category	✓	✓	✓
Other treatment controls	✓	✓	✓
Observations	729	727	727

Notes: Coefficient estimates for ordinary least squares (OLS) regression of support for judicial decision-making factors based on adherence to Christian nationalism.

[†] $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

religious factors as adherence to Christian nationalism increases. Importantly for the religious factor, the predicted value surpasses .5, or the neutral midpoint, among those high in Christian nationalism. Thus, it is not simply that there is an increase in support. Rather, Christian nationalists are supportive of religious decision-making logic in Court decisions. Our results demonstrate the significant role that Christian nationalism plays in support of the Court using religious rationale in its decisions. While the mass public views the Court with skepticism after religious-

adjacent cases (e.g., Gibson, 2025a), our findings show the potential for future support of increased religious logic with the growth of the Christian nationalist movement.

EXPERIMENTAL STUDY: LEGITIMATING CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM

Having demonstrated that extant levels of Christian nationalism relate to support for the actions of

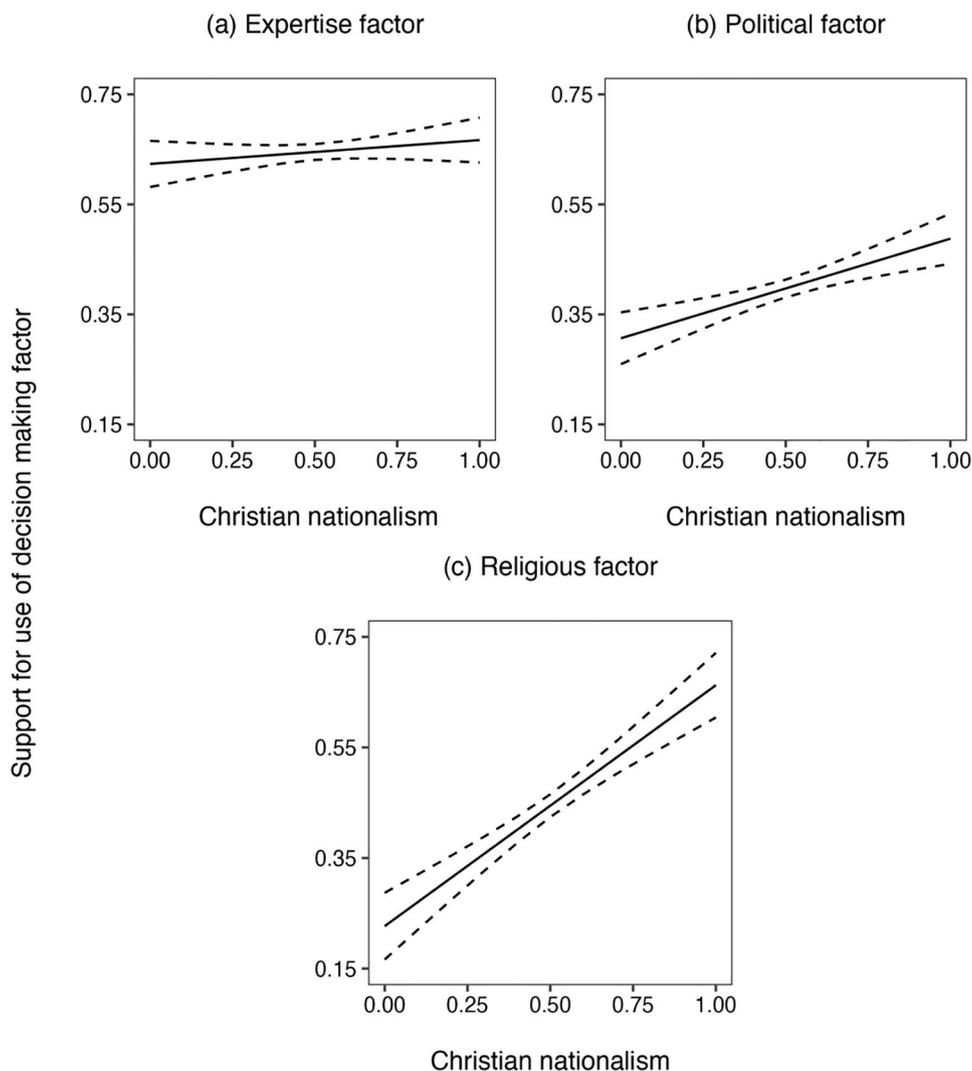


FIGURE 3 Predicted support for use of factor in judicial decision making, by adherence to Christian nationalism. *Notes:* With 95% confidence intervals. Predictions from Table 2 estimates.

the Court, particularly those that are implicitly religious, we next ask whether a justice's seemingly pro-Christian nationalist sentiment influences the mass public. Here, we rely on the theory of legitimation to argue that explicitly Christian nationalist behavior can validate the use of religious logic in Supreme Court decisions. Recall that legitimation is likeliest to occur among those low in Christian nationalism. It is those low in support for a policy that need it legitimated by the actions of the Court. Here, we contend that the same logic should apply to justices' behavior and Christian nationalism.

Data and methodology

To examine the legitimation of certain decision-making factors at the Supreme Court, we employ a separate subset of the Cint Theorem data we

used in our previous analysis. Participants who were randomly sorted into a control group read the following statement:

In 1972, Chief Justice Warren Burger changed the shape of the U.S. Supreme Court's bench from a straight bench to a U-shaped bench. The Court still uses this U-shaped bench today.

Participants randomly sorted into the treatment group read the following:

Recently, Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito was recorded at a Supreme Court gala agreeing with a reporter who said "people in this country who believe in God have got to keep fighting for that, to return our country to a place of godliness."

Justice Alito responded, “I agree with you, I agree with you.”

Justice Alito was recently in the news when media outlets discovered a flag with a Christian nationalist symbol flew outside his vacation home.

Both stories are true (see Black et al., 2018; Kantor et al., 2024; VanSickle, 2024). We opted to discuss the Court in the control vignette for two reasons: First, we wanted to ensure we had the same baseline in the event that simply mentioning the Court evokes a reaction; and second, we had already mentioned the Supreme Court in pretreatment questions and wanted to ensure all participants read about the Court the same number of times before addressing our outcomes of interest.²³

For our dependent variable, we utilized participants’ responses to the religious factor version of “Do you agree with the Supreme Court justices using the following factors to decide cases?” Answers ranged from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” on a five-point Likert-type scale. To estimate the treatment effect, we regress this variable onto an indicator for presence in the treatment category (0 if control, 1 if treatment). We utilize the same Christian nationalism scale we used in the previous part of the analysis.²⁴ Because our theory is conditional on Christian nationalism, we also include a multiplicative interaction between treatment and adherence to Christian nationalism.²⁵ We hypothesize the following:

Conditional Legitimation Hypothesis: Conditional on adherence to Christian nationalism, exposure to the Alito treatment will increase support for the use of religious factors in Court decision making, relative to those in the control group.

Ceiling Effect Legitimation Hypothesis: Because legitimation happens among those for whom a policy or decision-making factor is unpopular, we will observe a significant legitimation effect among treated participants low in adherence to Christian nationalism, relative

TABLE 3 Alito treatment on support for religious logic in Supreme Court decisions.

	Coefficient (standard error)
Treatment	.213* (.084)
Christian nationalism	.789** (.109)
Treatment × Christian nationalism	−.329* (.151)
Constant	.055 (.061)
Observations	272

Notes: Coefficient estimates for ordinary least squares (OLS) regression of support for religious logic in Supreme Court decisions based on treatment group and adherence to Christian nationalism.

† $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

to both similarly situated control group participants and treated participants high in adherence to Christian nationalism.

Empirical results

Our regression analysis results for participant support for religious logic in decisions, given treatment, are in Table 3. For the final time, we rescaled our variables to range from 0 to 1 to allow for easy comparison. We show a graphical representation of the results in Figure 4, with participants’ level of adherence to Christian nationalism on the x -axis and predicted support for the use of religious logic on the y -axis. As Figure 4 shows, we find support for both our hypotheses, lending credence to our theory that Supreme Court justices can legitimate the use of certain decision-making factors. First, we see that there is a legitimation effect. On average, participants who read about Justice Alito’s agreement with Christian nationalists are more supportive of the justices using religious logic than are people in the control group. Second, this is primarily true of those low in adherence to Christian nationalism, suggesting that a support ceiling does, in fact, exist.

These results align nicely with legitimation theory. Our results suggest that the participants who are not predisposed to support the use of such factors are the ones more likely to accept their use. As Figure 4 shows, we observe statistically significant differences for treated individuals relative to those in the control for participants with low to middling adherence to Christian nationalism; almost half of the treated individuals fall into this category. In other words, learning that a member of the Court adheres to Christian nationalism legitimates the use of religious logic

²³ We conducted manipulation checks to ensure the treatment worked; as we show in Tables A10 and A11 on p. xv in the Online Appendix, the vast majority of participants got the manipulation check question correct.

²⁴ Results remain substantively the same if we utilize the two-item Christian nationalism measure, see Table A12 on p. xviii in the Online Appendix.

²⁵ We want to note here that while Christian nationalism and partisanship are correlated, one is not a proxy for the other; in our data, the Pearson correlation between the two variables is a moderate .43. Nevertheless, we investigate the robustness of our results by including partisanship, as we discuss in detail in the Online Appendix and show in Figures A1 and A2 on pp. xvi and xvii. In brief, we do not find heterogeneity across partisanship; Christian nationalism appears to operate the same for both Republicans and Democrats.

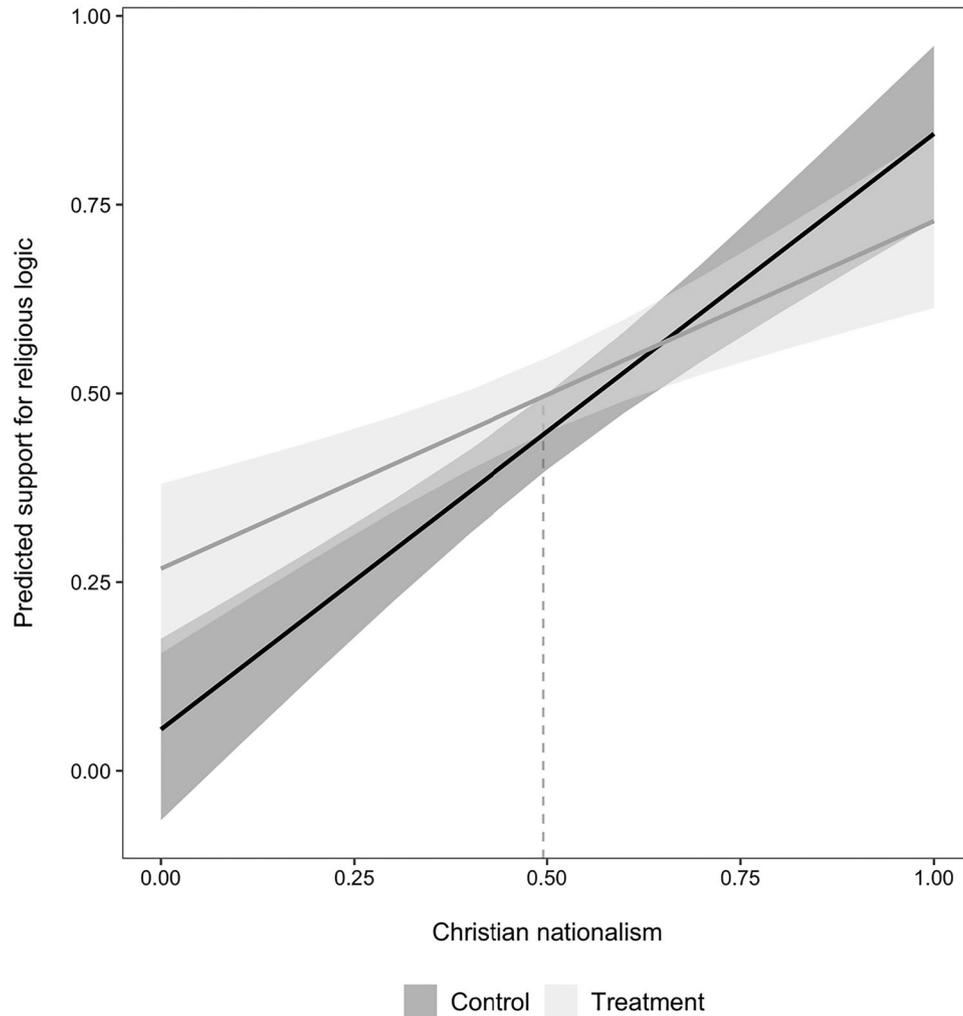


FIGURE 4 Predicted support for the use of religious logic in Supreme Court decisions, across Christian nationalism, by control and exposure to Alito treatment. *Notes:* Dashed vertical line indicates point at which difference between control and treatment estimates is no longer statistically significant. Predictions from Table 3 estimates.

in Supreme Court decisions. There are two important caveats. First, we do not argue that half of Americans will suddenly support religious logic in court decisions after exposure to a single story; the treatment effect itself is enlightening even if the magnitude does not port to the real world. Second, those for whom legitimation “worked” are still not supportive of the use of religious logic, just less hostile toward it. To wit, on the 0–1 scale, average support is .32.

Our findings suggest that the legitimation theory stretches beyond judicial decisions and toward the methods the justices use to reach them. Specifically, our results highlight the persuasive power Supreme Court justices have over public perceptions of acceptable decision-making logic, even in polarizing contexts such as the use of religious reasoning. These findings also demonstrate that the Court’s support among the mass public is not a fixed attribute, but

rather can be strategically cultivated (or eroded) based on the framing and dissemination of the Court’s decisions and actions.

DISCUSSION

In recent years, scholarship on religion, sociology, and politics has turned focus away from devotional and denominational concerns and toward the unique ideology of Christian nationalism. This ideology has been linked to a host of attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs about the political world, including things like support for violence, generally, and the January 6 Capitol attack, specifically (Armaly et al., 2022); blind patriotism (Perry & Schleifer, 2023); support for Russia’s war in Ukraine (Perry et al., 2023); people’s willingness to uphold civil rights (Davis et al., 2024);

and violence against religious minorities (Saiya & Manchanda, 2024). In this paper, we applied this new focus to attitudes regarding the Supreme Court. We find that Christian nationalism is related to Court attitudes in three ways: (1) support for specific case outcomes; (2) support for the use of particular types of decision-making logic, particularly nonlegal logic; and (3) legitimization of the use of religious logic among even those opposed to Christian nationalism.

Given these results, we argue it is critical to understand exactly which dimensions of religion and religiosity relate to attitudes about courts. While some research demonstrates the mass public is not particularly fond of the use of religion in Supreme Court cases (e.g., Farganis, 2012), other scholarship identifies greater satisfaction among those perceiving religious overlap with the Court (Badas & Schmidt, 2024). Our findings show religious ideology plays an important role in evaluations of the institution and its behavior. We believe this is particularly noteworthy because religion is presently “central to the Court’s public profile” (Badas & Schmidt, 2024), and because the “unbroken streak of wins for Christian plaintiffs” does not appear to be ending any time soon (Shaw, 2023). Put simply, should the Court keep ruling on these issues in ways that align with Christian nationalism’s core tenants, each new decision offers opportunities to increase support from Christian nationalists and for the use of religious logic. Such decisions could ultimately threaten the rights and liberties of people who do not adhere to these beliefs (Corbin, 2020).

Of course, our study is not without limitations. While we have considered both case-specific attitudes and broader views about how judges should make legal decisions, Christian nationalism may not relate to all judicial attitudes. Consider, for example, that House Speaker Mike Johnson—who hung a Christian nationalist flag outside his House office and has long sympathized with Christian nationalism (Whitehead & Perry, 2023)—advocated for the elimination of some federal courts after the judiciary blocked key Trump administration priorities from enactment (Wong et al., 2025). But, Christian nationalism touches far more than just implicitly and explicitly religious topics; research suggests Christian nationalism is linked to feelings about gun rights (Whitehead et al., 2018), racial separatism (Perry & Whitehead, 2015), and gender traditionalism (Whitehead & Perry, 2019), as well as broader issues such as immigration (Baker et al., 2020b) and economic policy (Gaskins, 2024). The Court routinely hears cases on issues such as these. More broadly, reporters and scientists have accused the Court of being “anti-science”—a point of view also linked with Christian nationalism (Baker et al., 2020a; Paramet, 2022). Thus, while it is occasionally difficult to conceive of how Christian

nationalism may relate to some of the more mundane cases the Court hears, it is an ideology that appears to underlie all manner of attitudes (but see Smith & Adler, 2022). We encourage other scholars to theorize about how ideology may apply to nonreligious court cases.

We believe our results open the door for additional scholarship relating Christian nationalism and support for the Court, its decisions, and its off-bench actions. As Armaly et al. (2025) find, support for a nominee has a downstream effect on support for the institution as a whole. Given nominees are often pressed on and voluntarily discuss their religion at confirmation hearings (see Badas & Schmidt, 2024), answering religious queries “the right way” at hearings could ultimately provide a boost in support for the Court. Similarly, Rivero and Stone (2023) show that individuals prefer case outcomes when judges employ particular legal principles (such as “plain meaning” and “the likely consequence to society”). Perhaps Christian nationalists view other principles as hurting their cause. We encourage future scholarship to consider these questions.

We also wonder about the lastingness of Christian nationalism’s presence at the Court. The Court’s current slate of pro-Christian decisions stems from decades of activism, during which a well-funded and well-organized Christian Legal Movement strategically approached the Court with well-crafted legal campaigns to change its rulings across a multitude of areas (Bennett, 2017). While that work may be paying off, such successes may taper off as the Court identifies each movement’s limits (Marshall & Hale, 2014; Scott et al., 2025). Moreover, research suggests the justices are aware of popular backlash and try to head it off where possible (King & Schoenherr, 2024), and the justices cannot help but hear the noise surrounding their institution and undoubtedly want to calm it. Continuing to monitor the relationship between Christian nationalism and the Court will provide insight into one movement’s immediate success as well as broader information about legal movements’ successes and failures. Such research is surely useful, given varied interests continue to learn from each other on their way to legal wins.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This paper was previously presented at the 2025 Annual Meeting of the Southern Political Science Association, the 2025 Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, and the Workshop on Archival Research at the University of South Carolina. We thank Christine Bird, Ryan Black, Liz Connors, Rachael Houston, Tim Johnson, Krissy Lunz Trujillo, Katie Searles, Todd Shaw, and Marcy Shieh for their help on this project.

REFERENCES

- Allen, Mahalley D., and Donald P. Haider-Markel. 2006. "Connecting Supreme Court Decisions, Media Coverage, and Public Opinion: The Case of *Lawrence v. Texas*." *American Review of Politics* 27(3): 209–30.
- Armaly, Miles T., and Adam M. Enders. 2021. "'Why Me?' The Role of Perceived Victimhood in American Politics." *Political Behavior* 44(4): 1583–609.
- Armaly, Miles T., Christopher N. Krewson, and Elizabeth A. Lane. 2025. "The Influence of Descriptive Representation on Support for Judicial Nominees and the U.S. Supreme Court." *Political Behavior* 47(2): 661–87.
- Armaly, Miles T., David T. Buckley, and Adam M. Enders. 2022. "Christian Nationalism and Political Violence: Victimhood, Racial Identity, Conspiracy, and Support for the Capitol Attacks." *Political Behavior* 44(2): 937–60.
- Badas, Alex, and Eric R. Schmidt. 2024. "Social Imagery and Judicial Legitimacy: Evidence from Evangelical Christians." *Political Research Quarterly* 77(1): 137–51.
- Baird, Vanessa A. 2001. "Building Institutional Legitimacy: The Role of Procedural Justice." *Political Research Quarterly* 54(2): 333–54.
- Baker, Joseph O., Samuel L. Perry, and Andrew L. Whitehead. 2020a. "Crusading for Moral Authority: Christian Nationalism and Opposition to Science." *Sociological Forum* 35(3): 587–607. <https://doi.org/10.1111/socf.12619>
- Baker, Joseph O., Samuel L. Perry, and Andrew L. Whitehead. 2020b. "Keep America Christian (and White): Christian Nationalism, Fear of Ethnoracial Outsiders, and Intention to Vote for Donald Trump in the 2020 Presidential Election." *Sociology of Religion* 81(3): 272–93.
- Bartels, Brandon L., and Christopher D. Johnston. 2013. "On the Ideological Foundations of Supreme Court Legitimacy in the American Public." *American Journal of Political Science* 57(1): 184–99.
- Baumgardner, Paul. 2021. "Immunizing the Flock: How the Pandemic Court Rewrote Religious Freedom." *Laws* 10(1): 12.
- Bennett, Daniel. 2017. *Defending Faith: The Politics of the Christian Conservative Legal Movement*. Lawrence: University of Kansas Press.
- Berinsky, Adam J., Michele F. Margolis, and Michael W. Sances. 2014. "Separating the Shirkers from the Workers? Making Sure Respondents Pay Attention on Self-Administered Surveys." *American Journal of Political Science* 58(3): 739–53. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12081>
- Biskupic, Joan. 2023. *Nine Black Robes: Inside the Supreme Court's Drive to the Right and Its Historical Consequences*. New York: William Morrow.
- Black, Ryan C., Timothy R. Johnson, and Ryan J. Owens. 2018. "Chief Justice Burger and the Bench: How Physically Changing the Shape of the Court's Bench Reduced Interruptions during Oral Argument." *Journal of Supreme Court History* 43(1): 83–98.
- Brickman, Danette, and David A. M. Peterson. 2006. "Public Opinion Reaction to Repeated Events: Citizen Response to Multiple Supreme Court Abortion Decisions." *Political Behavior* 28(1): 87–112. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-005-9003-0>
- Broeren, Zachary D., and Paul A. Djupe. 2024. "The Ingroup Love and Outgroup Hate of Christian Nationalism: Experimental Evidence about the Implementation of the Rule of Law." *Politics and Religion* 17(1): 40–57.
- Caldeira, Gregory A. 1991. "Court and Public Opinion." In *The American Courts*, edited by John B. Gates and Charles A. Johnson, 303–34. Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly.
- Caldeira, Gregory A., and James L. Gibson. 1992. "The Etiology of Public Support for the Supreme Court." *American Journal of Political Science* 36(3): 635–64.
- Calmes, Jackie. 2021. *Dissent: The Radicalization of the Republican Party and Its Capture of the Court*. New York: Twelve.
- Chemerinsky, Erwin. 2002. "The Rhetoric of Constitutional Law." *Michigan Law Review* 100(8): 2008–35.
- Clark, Chelsey S., Elizabeth Levy Paluck, Sean J. Westwood, Maya Sen, Neil Malhotra, and Stephen Jessee. 2024. "Effects of a U.S. Supreme Court Ruling to Restrict Abortion Rights." *Nature Human Behaviour* 8(1): 63–71.
- Coppock, Alexander, and Oliver A. McClellan. 2019. "Validating the Demographic, Political, Psychological, and Experimental Results Obtained from a New Source of Online Survey Respondents." *Research and Politics* 6(1): 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053168018822174>
- Corbin, Caroline Mala. 2020. "The Supreme Court's Facilitation of White Christian Nationalism." *Alabama Law Review* 71(3): 833–65.
- Coyle, Marcia. 2013. *The Roberts Court: The Struggle for the Constitution*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Davis, Joshua. 2018. "Enforcing Christian Nationalism: Examining the Link between Group Identity and Punitive Attitudes in the United States." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 57(2): 300–317.
- Davis, Joshua T., Samuel L. Perry, and Joshua B. Grubbs. 2024. "Liberty for Us, Limits for Them: Christian Nationalism and Americans' Views on Citizens' Rights." *Sociology of Religion* 85(1): 60–82.
- Davis, Nicholas T. 2023. "The Psychometric Properties of the Christian Nationalism Scale." *Politics and Religion* 16(1): 1–26.
- Delli Carpini, Michael X., and Scott Keeter. 1996. *What Americans Know About Politics and Why It Matters*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Dias, Elizabeth, and Lisa Lerer. 2024. "Alito's 'Godliness' Comment Echoes a Broader Christian Movement." *The New York Times*, June 11. <https://tinyurl.com/5feau6w>
- Djupe, Paul A., Andrew R. Lewis, and Ananda E. Sokhey. 2023. *The Full Armor of God: The Mobilization of Christian Nationalism in American Politics*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Farganis, Dion. 2012. "Do Reasons Matter? The Impact of Opinion Content on Supreme Court Legitimacy." *Political Research Quarterly* 65(1): 206–16.
- Feldman, Noah. 2022. "Supreme Court Is Eroding the Wall between Church and State." *Bloomberg*, June 27. <https://tinyurl.com/7xca669e>
- Gaskins, Ben. 2024. "Exceptional Times for an Exceptional People: How the Prosperity Gospel, Christian Nationalism, and Race Affect Americans' Economic Attitudes and Behavior." *The Forum* 21(3): 385–410.
- Gibson, James L. 2025a. "Do the Effects of Unpopular Supreme Court Rulings Linger? The Dobbs Decision Rescinding Abortion Rights." *American Political Science Review* 119(1): 1–8.
- Gibson, James L. 2025b. "Losing Legitimacy: The Challenges of the Dobbs Ruling to Conventional Legitimacy Theory." *American Journal of Political Science* 68(3): 1041–56.
- Gibson, James L., and Gregory A. Caldeira. 2009. *Citizens, Courts, and Confirmations: Positivity Theory and the Judgements of the American People*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Gorski, Philip. 2018. "Why Evangelicals Voted for Trump: A Critical Cultural Sociology." In *Politics of Meaning/Meaning of Politics: Cultural Sociology of the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election*, edited by Jason L. Mast and Jeffrey C. Alexander, 165–83. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gorski, Philip S., and Samuel L. Perry. 2022. *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Graham, Ruth, and Madeleine Hordinski. 2025. "He Gave a Name to What Many Christians Feel." *The New York Times*, March 6. <https://tinyurl.com/yc7uukx6>
- Green, Steven K. 2015. *Inventing a Christian America: The Myth of the Religious Founding*. New York: Oxford University Press.

- Greenburg, Jan Crawford. 2007. *Supreme Conflict: The Inside Story of the Struggle for Control of the United States Supreme Court*. New York: Penguin Press.
- Greenhouse, Linda. 2022. *Justice on the Brink: The Death of Ruth Bader Ginsburg, the Rise of Amy Coney Barrett, and Twelve Months that Transformed the Supreme Court*. New York: Random House.
- Hoekstra, Valerie J. 2000. "The Supreme Court and Local Public Opinion." *American Political Science Review* 94(1): 89–100.
- Iyengar, Shanto. 1989. "How Citizens Think About National Issues: A Matter of Responsibility." *American Journal of Political Science* 33(4): 878–900.
- Johnson, Timothy R., and Andrew D. Martin. 1998. "The Public's Conditional Response to Supreme Court Decisions." *American Political Science Review* 92(2): 299–309.
- Kantor, Jodi, Aric Toler, and Julie Tate. 2024. "Another Provocative Flag Was Flown at Another Alito Home." *The New York Times*, May 22. <https://tinyurl.com/3jf9fv2j>
- Kaplan, David A. 2018. *The Most Dangerous Branch: Inside the Supreme Court's Assault on the Constitution*. New York: Crown.
- King, Jonathan M., and Jessica A. Schoenherr. 2024. "A Matter of Opinion? How Unexpected Opinion Authors Influence Support for Supreme Court Decisions." *Journal of Law and Courts* 12(1): 144–64.
- King, Jonathan M., Jessica A. Schoenherr, and Ian Ostrander. 2025. "Anchoring or Expanding? Gender and Judicial Nominations." *Political Research Quarterly* 78(1): 135–50.
- Lavietes, Matt, and Jo Yurcaba. 2023. "What the Supreme Court's Gay Wedding Website Ruling Means for LGBTQ Rights." *NBC News*, June 30. <https://tinyurl.com/3nr3spbs>
- Marshall, Anna-Maria, and Daniel Crocker Hale. 2014. "Cause Lawyering." *Annual Review of Law and Social Science* 10: 301–20.
- Mayer, Jane. 2022. "Is Ginni Thomas a Threat to the Supreme Court?" *The New Yorker*, January 21. <https://tinyurl.com/2u38spfc>
- Michaelson, Jay. 2023. "The Supreme Court Sold Its Soul to the Christian Right." *Rolling Stone*, June 30. <https://tinyurl.com/44bfumf8>
- Mondak, Jeffery J. 1994. "Policy Legitimacy and the Supreme Court: The Sources and Contexts of Legitimation." *Political Research Quarterly* 47(3): 675–92.
- Nemacheck, Christine. 2007. *Strategic Selection: President Nomination of Supreme Court Justices from Herbert Hoover Through George W. Bush*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.
- Paramet, Wendy E. 2022. "The Antiscience Supreme Court Is Hurting the Health of Americans." *Scientific American*, May 17. <https://tinyurl.com/26253uyv>
- Perry, Samuel L. 2023. "Mating Call, Dog Whistle, Trigger: Asymmetric Alignments, Race, and the Use of Reactionary Religious Rhetoric in American Politics." *Sociological Theory* 41(1): 56–82.
- Perry, Samuel L., and Andrew L. Whitehead. 2015. "Christian Nationalism and White Racial Boundaries: Examining Whites' Opposition to Interracial Marriage." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 38(10): 1671–89.
- Perry, Samuel L., Andrew L. Whitehead, and Joshua B. Grubbs. 2024. "Race Over Religion: Christian Nationalism and Perceived Threats to National Unity." *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 10(2): 192–210.
- Perry, Samuel L., Andrew L. Whitehead, and Joshua T. Davis. 2019. "God's Country in Black and Blue: How Christian Nationalism Shapes Americans' Views About Police (Mis)treatment of Blacks." *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 5(1): 130–46.
- Perry, Samuel L., and Cyrus Schleifer. 2023. "My Country, White or Wrong: Christian Nationalism, Race, and Blind Patriotism." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 46(7): 1249–68.
- Perry, Samuel L., Sarah Riccardi-Swartz, Joshua T. Davis, and Joshua B. Grubbs. 2023. "The Religious Right and Russia: Christian Nationalism and Americans' Views on Russia and Vladimir Putin before and after the Ukrainian Invasion." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 62(2): 439–50.
- Rahko, Stephen E., and Byron B. Craig. 2024. "Prophetic Dissent in Dark Times: The New Poor People's Campaign and the Rhetoric of National Redemption." *Review of Communication* 24(1): 4–16.
- Read, Blair, Lukas Wolters, and Adam J. Berinsky. 2022. "Racing the Clock: Using Response Time as a Proxy for Attentiveness on Self-Administered Surveys." *Political Analysis* 30(4): 550–69.
- Rinkunaus, Susan. 2025. "Far-Right Group That Helped Overturn 'Roe' is Officially Going after Birth Control." *Jezebel*, April 16. <https://tinyurl.com/48a5a9ek>
- Rivero, Albert H., and Andrew R. Stone. 2025. "The American Public's Attitudes Over How Judges Use Legal Principles to Make Decisions." *Political Science Research and Methods* 13(1): 167–82.
- Rosenberg, Gerald N. 2008. *The Hollow Hope: Can Courts Bring About Social Change?* 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Russo, Charles J., and William E. Thro. 2023. "A New Dawn: The Supreme Court Upholds Religious Liberty in Education." *Religion & Education* 50(1): 3–18.
- Saiya, Nilay, and Stuti Manchanda. 2024. "Christian Nationalism and Violence Against Religious Minorities in the United States: A Quantitative Analysis." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 64(1): 3–18.
- Scott, Jamil S., Elizabeth A. Lane, and Jessica A. Schoenherr. 2025. "You Better Shop Around: How Litigant Characteristics Influence Support for Supreme Court Decisions." *The Journal of Politics* 87(3): 1012–1027.
- Shaw, Kate. 2023. "The Supreme Court's Disorienting Evaluation of Religion." *The New York Times*, July 8. <https://tinyurl.com/pec9jh3z>
- Smith, David. 2022. "Alarm as U.S. Supreme Court Takes a Hatchet to Church-State Separation." *The Guardian*, July 2. <https://tinyurl.com/5x2pruca>
- Smith, Jesse, and Gary J. Adler Jr. 2022. "What Isn't Christian Nationalism? A Call for Conceptual and Empirical Splitting." *Socius* 8: 1–14.
- Spruill, Marjorie J. 2017. *Divided We Stand: The Battle Over Women's Rights and Family Values that Polarized American Politics*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Stewart, Katherine. 2019. *The Power Worshipers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Stewart, Katherine. 2022. "Christian Nationalists Are Excited about What Comes Next." *The New York Times*, July 5. <https://tinyurl.com/3dz3xk2b>
- Stoutenborough, James W., Donald P. Haider-Markel, and Mahalley D. Allen. 2006. "Reassessing the Impact of Supreme Court Decisions on Public Opinion: Gay Civil Rights Cases." *Political Research Quarterly* 59(3): 419–33.
- Tankard, Margaret E., and Elizabeth Levy Paluck. 2017. "The Effect of a Supreme Court Decision Regarding Gay Marriage on Social Norms and Personal Attitudes." *Psychological Science* 28(9): 1334–44.
- Toobin, Jeffrey. 2008. *The Nine: Inside the Secret World of the Supreme Court*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Tribe, Laurence, and Joshua Matz. 2014. *Uncertain Justice: The Roberts Court and the Constitution*. New York: Henry Holt and Co.
- Ura, Joseph Daniel. 2014. "Backlash and Legitimation: Macro Political Responses to Supreme Court Decisions." *American Journal of Political Science* 58(1): 110–26.
- VanSickle, Abbie. 2024. "In Secret Recordings, Alito Endorses Nation of 'Godliness.' Roberts Talks of Pluralism." *The New York Times*, June 10. <https://tinyurl.com/t8yx4ps3>
- Voght, Kara, and Tim Dickinson. 2022. "SCOTUS Justices 'Prayed With' Her—Then Cited Her Boss to End Roe." *Rolling Stone*, July 6. <https://tinyurl.com/3thbjud8>

- Wells, Michael L. 2007. "Sociological Legitimacy in Supreme Court Opinions." *Washington and Lee Law Review* 64: 1011–70.
- Whitehead, Andrew L., Landon Schnabel, and Samuel L. Perry. 2018. "Gun Control in the Crosshairs: Christian Nationalism and Opposition to Stricter Gun Laws." *Socius* 4: 1–13.
- Whitehead, Andrew L., and Samuel L. Perry. 2019. "Is a 'Christian America' a More Patriarchal America? Religion, Politics, and Traditionalist Gender Ideology." *Canadian Review of Sociology* 56(2): 151–77.
- Whitehead, Andrew L., and Samuel L. Perry. 2020. *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Whitehead, Andrew L., Samuel L. Perry, and Joseph O. Baker. 2018. "Make America Christian Again: Christian Nationalism and Voting for Donald Trump in the 2016 Presidential Election." *Sociology of Religion* 79(2): 147–71.
- Whitehead, Andrew, and Samuel L. Perry. 2023. "The Christian Nationalism of Speaker Mike Johnson." *Time*, October 27. <https://tinyurl.com/55dctdmj>
- Winkler, Adam. 2011. *Gunfight: The Battle Over the Right to Bear Arms in America*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company.
- Wong, Scott, Melanie Zanona, and Rebecca Kaplan. 2025. "Speaker Mike Johnson Floats Eliminating Federal Courts as GOP Ramps up Attacks on Judges." *MSNBC*, March 25. <https://tinyurl.com/2xzmjt3b>
- Zaller, John R. 1992. *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ziegler, Mary. 2023. *Roe: The History of a National Obsession*. New Haven, C: Yale University Press.
- Zilis, Michael A. 2018. "Minority Groups and Judicial Legitimacy: Group Affect and the Incentives for Judicial Responsiveness." *Political Research Quarterly* 71(2): 270–83.
- Zilis, Michael A. 2021. *The Rights Paradox: How Group Attitudes Shape U.S. Supreme Court Legitimacy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

How to cite this article: Armaly, Miles T., Jonathan M. King, Elizabeth A. Lane, and Jessica A. Schoenherr. 2025. "An ecclesiastical court: Christian nationalism and perceptions of the US Supreme Court." *American Journal of Political Science* 1–18.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.70024>