

In God We Act: Exposure to the Prosperity Gospel as a Stimulant of Political
Participation

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Abstract

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Research has shown that the politically relevant values and cues provided by religious messages influence adherents' political attitudes. Yet, there has been little empirical analysis of how explicitly self-affirming religious messages such as those typical of the growing prosperity gospel movement affect political outcomes. I explore how religious messages typical of the prosperity gospel movement and the Protestant social gospel affect individuals' internal efficacy, vote intention, political ideology and partisan affinities and how these effects vary by religious affiliation, prior partisanship and political knowledge. Employing an online experimental design, I find that exposure to messages typical of the self-affirming prosperity gospel have no effect on participants' internal political efficacy and have a dampening effect on vote intention. Contributing to the body of research examining the political effects of non-political messages, I also find evidence that religious messages that provide politically relevant cues that are incongruent to one's prior partisanship may be uncritically accepted, even by high-political knowledge individuals. I discuss implications for political communication research and suggest avenues for future research.

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1. Introduction

The political implications of American religious communications – either through implicit values priming in religious messages or through the explicit electioneering of religious congregations – have been well-documented in recent history, from the civil rights movement anchored by mainline African American churches to the Christian Right’s more recent advocacy on abortion and same-sex marriage. But American religion is dynamic, and experimental social science has left largely untouched a growing theology that may be of political consequence: the so-called prosperity gospel, a movement that reaches millions through megachurches across the country, best-selling books and widely viewed television broadcasts. Building on groundbreaking work by McClendon and Riedl (2015), the present endeavor examines the effects of exposure to the prosperity gospel on individuals’ political attitudes and behaviors in the United States.

The prosperity gospel is a movement of loosely affiliated Christian churches prevalent in African American Protestantism, white Pentecostalism and across traditions in televangelist preaching (Wald and Legee 2009). The defining feature of the prosperity gospel is its sacralization of material wealth. Though its messages reach millions every week in church pews, on bookshelves and through television airwaves, little is known about how prosperity communications affect political attitudes and behavior. In what appears to be the first experimental test of the prosperity gospel’s effects on political outcomes, McClendon and Riedl (2015) examine how messages typical of the prosperity gospel affect Christians in Nairobi, Kenya, and find that exposure increased participation in a political text message campaign.

The present research endeavor builds on McClendon and Riedl’s methodology but also differs from it in several notable ways – principally, in that it offers the first experimental test of the prosperity gospel’s political effects in the United States. Additionally, whereas McClendon and Riedl limit their experiment to testing the effects of message exposure on Christians, I consider the effect of prosperity gospel messages on individuals regardless of their religious affiliation. There are two reasons for doing this. First, because of the preliminary phase of the research into the prosperity gospel, I believe it is valuable at this stage to develop an understanding of how its messages affect individuals broadly. Second, because of its relationship with televangelism and the prominent role its preachers are playing in the Trump administration (prosperity televangelist Paula White serves as a faith adviser to the Trump White House [Peters and Dias 2019]), the prosperity gospel is more likely to reach an audience of non-Christians than are more traditional Christian messages. Finally, my research differs methodologically from McClendon and Riedl’s in the choice of treatments: Whereas they employ a four-treatment study with two religious messages (typical of the prosperity and social gospels) and two secularized versions of those messages, I use two treatments (prosperity and social) and a placebo. I introduce a placebo to establish a baseline against which to measure the treatment effects. The presence of the secularized versions of the prosperity and social gospel messages in McClendon and Riedl’s work serves to ascertain whether political outcomes are affected by (a) the self-affirming nature of the prosperity gospel message and its underlying values, apart from its explicit religious quality or (b) the interaction of its explicit religious nature with the self-affirming quality and underlying values. In the present endeavor, results show that, despite the prosperity gospel’s self-affirming nature, it has no discernable effect on participants’

internal politically efficacy. I am, however, unable to address whether a secularized version of the prosperity gospel treatment employed here might have differently impacted political outcomes.

The present endeavor contributes to a growing body of research on how the content of religious messages affects political outcomes and to the ongoing scholarly debate about the root causes of religion's political influence. Though there has been much scholarship into religion and politics, social scientists disagree on religion's pathway of influencing political outcomes (Margolis 2018, Smidt, Kellstedt and Guth 2009, Driskell, Embry and Lyon 2008, Wald and Smidt 1993). One school of thought, tracing its roots to Max Weber ([1930] 1992), analyzes religion as a mental phenomenon as embodied in beliefs (Smidt, Kellstedt and Guth 2009). Research from this camp has tended to focus on the content of religious messages, the "associated package of values" they carry and the way beliefs are held (Smidt, Kellstedt and Guth 2009, 32). A second school of thought, tracing its roots to Emile Durkheim (1915), analyzes religion as a social phenomenon, operationalizing religious commitment through measures of denominational affiliation, involvement in religious organizations and psychological identifications (Wald and Smidt 1993). The distinction between the two schools of thought is important, because it suggests different pathways upon which religion impacts political outcomes. In the mental framework, religion's impact on political behavior and attitudes is understood to be direct, whereas in the social framework, religion's impact on political outcomes is indirect.

The precise relationship between religion as believing (mental phenomenon) and belonging (social phenomenon) remains unclear, with some scholars arguing belief

precedes denominational affiliation, others arguing belonging precedes believing and still others suggesting the two interact in an iterative fashion (Wald and Smidt 1993).

The study of religion and politics can also be categorized by the theoretical domains on which religious messages are conveyed. Developing one such typology, Djupe and Calfano (2014) identify four theoretical domains of examining religion's influence on political outcomes: inside and outside congregations and among religious and political elites. In this typology, for instance, research on religion and politics inside congregations among religious elites may investigate clergy effects on the political attitudes of their congregants, and research on religion and politics outside congregations among political elites may examine how candidates for political office utilize religious rhetoric to court voters.

By considering the content and underlying package of values of religious messages, the present endeavor approaches religion as a mental phenomenon within the domain of religious elite communications inside and outside congregations. By examining the manner in which the content of religious messages can differentially influence individuals' political attitudes and behavior, this research focuses on the influence of exposure to religious messages, rather than, for instance, the role organized religion plays in developing civic skills that can be applied in a political context or how social ties associated with religious practice contribute to fostering political engagement. While existing research has shown the worthwhileness of examining religion as a social phenomenon (see, for instance, Wald, Owen and Hill Jr. 1988 for pioneering work on the subject), the key goal animating the present work is analyzing the causal relationship between the specific content of religious messages and political outcomes. In the Section 4, I discuss avenues for future research to

examine the prosperity gospel from the theoretical perspective of religion as a social phenomenon.

In the following subsections, I detail the existing research on religion and politics, beginning with research on religion's effects on political attitudes and moving to religion's effects on political behavior. Next, I discuss evidence from the limited existing research on the prosperity gospel's effect on political outcomes and discuss how this theology might fit into the existing religion-and-politics research framework. Finally, I provide background on the prosperity gospel for context. In Section 2, I list my hypotheses, discuss the experimental methodology for testing them and detail how I operationalize the outcome variables. In Section 3, I analyze and discuss findings. And in Section 4, I discuss the findings' implications and limitations of the present study, as well as suggest avenues for future research.

1.1 Political Attitudes: Religion as Cue-Providing and Value-Priming

Despite the ongoing trend toward secularism in America (Pew Research Center 2019), religious association remains one of, if not the, most frequent form of voluntary organizational affiliation in the United States (Wald 1993), and hence a major source of politically relevant cues. Understanding how individuals organize their beliefs and develop attitudes about the world is a critical prerequisite for examining the influence of religious messages on political attitudes.

Through the study of ideology, political scientists have come to better understand how people are exposed to, process and internalize politically relevant information. Individuals tend to resist information that is incongruent with their political predispositions and

uncritically accept congruent information (Zaller 1992, Taber and Lodge 2006). The ability and tendency to counterargue incongruent information varies across individuals based on their prior partisanship and level of political knowledge (Zaller 1992, Taber and Lodge 2006). Zaller (1992) finds that moderately aware individuals are the most susceptible to external influence, because they are more likely to be exposed to new information than are the highly unaware, but are less able than are the highly aware to effectively counterargue incongruent information. Individuals whose partisan and religious identities are misaligned (and who perceive that misalignment) may feel compelled to bring them into alignment to avoid cognitive dissonance and as a result of homophily, or social sorting (Margolis 2018).

When limited-information individuals are faced with uncertain political decisions, they frequently turn to mental cues or heuristics as shortcuts for forming opinions (Bartels 1996, Lupia 1994, Djupe and Calfano 2014). These shortcuts may include leaning on the political opinions of those in one's own social network, mimicking the political opinions of political (or religious) elites and considering group endorsements. Messages received at church and congregation endorsements provide powerful cues (Pearson-Merkowitz and Gimpel 2009), in part, due both to the apparent political disinterestedness and to the source credibility churches have due to the high esteem in which they are held in American society (Wald, Kellstedt and Legee 1993). There is also evidence that people are less likely to counterargue and "critically scrutinize" messages that aren't overtly political, and hence may be more likely to internalize those messages (Kim 2018, 5). This effect is of critical importance for the growing body of research showing that non-political media can have meaningful political effects (Kim 2018, Baum 2002, Mutz & Nir 2010, Mutz 2016).

1.1.1 Religion's Role in Shaping Political Attitudes

Religious clergy can influence the political attitudes and behaviors of their congregants by either directly involving themselves and churchgoers in electoral or issue campaigns or by providing messages through teaching and leadership authority to cue congregants (Olson 2009, Pearson-Merkowitz and Gimpel 2009). Whether these cues prove to be politically meaningful or not depends on congregants' perceptions of their pastors (Zaller 1992). Research has shown that perceptions of the political relevance of clergy messages vary systematically across religious congregations and families. Strict, sect-type church leaders, for instance, are perceived by their followers as offering a greater number of and more authoritative cues as well as cues on a wider range of issues, as compared to leaders of more liberal, church-type congregations (Leege, Kellstedt & Wald 1990). Existing research on clergy influence on congregants' attitudes has shown relatively little direct clergy effect, but more recent research has offered evidence that clergy influence congregants' attitudes indirectly by priming religious values that may be salient to political issues (Djupe and Calfano 2014). As Djupe and Calfano write: "If sermons are often attempts to elevate particular principles to guide decision making, then, in social science parlance, they are priming individuals to evaluate decisions according to particular values" (2014, 167).

If this is the case, then the nature of the religious message should affect the types of political issues for which the message is salient and the direction in which it tends to move political opinions. It is important, therefore, to analyze the underlying values and themes present in religious messages. Religious messages vary on the degree to which they promote individual or communal thinking; suggest a personal relationship with God or prioritize human interaction; constrain or liberate behavior; and spur action or maintain the

status quo by providing justification and consolation for social conditions (Benson and Williams 1982). Research has shown that the images people associate with God serve as strong predictors of political values (Wald and Smidt 1993); for instance, those who view God as engaged and judgmental are more likely to adopt conservative policy stances, while those who view God as standoffish and nonjudgmental are more likely to adopt liberal policy stances (Froese and Bader 2010). Religious messages that cue inclusive values (emphasizing openness) as opposed to exclusive values (emphasizing group boundaries) have been found to affect individuals' views on foreign policy, making them more amenable to foreign intervention (Djupe and Calfano 2014). And individuals' views on Biblical inerrancy and literalism have proven predictive of vote choice and partisan identification for evangelicals (Kellstedt and Smidt 1993).

Research has also examined how measures of religious behavior, affiliation and identification can be used to predict political attitudes and vote choice. Frequency of church attendance has emerged as a valid predictor of partisan vote choice since the 1980s – most likely a result of the increasingly clear distinction the political parties have drawn on religious matters since that time, by means of “official party positions, candidate rhetoric, and the salience of moral issues” (Margolis 2018, 35). There is evidence from some research that group identification with terms like fundamentalist, evangelical and charismatic can be a useful predictor of political attitudes (Wilcox, Jelen and Legee 1993), while other research has shown that group consciousness – which entails both identification and a cognitive assessment of differences between one's own group and others' – has more of an effect on political attitudes than does mere group identification (Wilcox 1989). Wilcox, for instance, found that fundamentalists' partisan attachments are generally

indistinguishable from other evangelicals until they are exposed to messages from religio-political elites seeking to develop a politicized group; this group of fundamentalists is more likely to identify as Republicans than are non-fundamentalist evangelicals (1989).

The setting in which religious messages are delivered also plays an important part. Religious congregations are typically bound by affective ties and characterized by frequent social interaction, making them well-suited to “influence the transmission” of cues (Pearson-Merkowitz and Gimpel 2009, 175). Parenti attempted to explain variations in political orientation among the religiously affiliated with what he called the “religio-political value derivatives” of a church’s culture (1967, 261). He found that a congregation’s views on intellectualism (the degree to which divine teaching is considered fixed or susceptible to modification) and redemption (as being either personal or social) were correlative with either political conservatism (anti-intellectual/personal redemption) or political liberalism (intellectualism/social redemption). In pioneering research on congregation-level effects on political outcomes among churchgoers, Wald, Owen and Hill Jr. found that the “theological climate of opinion in the church has a greater impact than personal theology” (1988, 541). The congregation-level effects they analyzed came both from (explicit and implicit) communication of political messages and from opportunities for congregants to gauge the reactions of their peers to those messages, and thus to bring their own views and behavior into conformity with the community. They find that churchgoers tend to “bend to the political guidance offered by the congregational environment” (1988, 546). Certain religious congregations, that is, provide the social bonds that constrain behavior and lead to conformity (Stark 1984).

1.2 Political Participation: Religion as Opiate or Stimulant?

There is a longstanding scholarly debate about whether religion tends to mobilize or demobilize political participation. One school of thought, drawing heavily from Marx ([1844] 1975), argues that religious devotion leads to lower levels of political involvement by “deflecting temporal concerns toward otherworldly pursuits (Harris 1994, 43). The opposing school of thought contends that religious commitment stimulates political participation through its psychological, social, organizational and cultural dimensions. Understanding what factors influence whether individuals choose to engage in politics is necessary before examining the influence of religious messages on political behavior.

In the model of civic voluntarism developed by Verba, Scholzman and Brady (1995), political participation is a function of motivation, capacity and networks of recruitment. Put plainly, individuals choose to participate in politics because they want to, because they can and because someone asks them to. Motivation to engage in politics involves cognitive and psychological factors such as political efficacy, strength of partisanship, political knowledge and interest in politics, as well as issue preferences, having a direct stake in political outcomes and “the psychic gratification of having fulfilled a duty” (Verba, Scholzman & Brady 1995 272; see also Rosenstone & Hansen 1993). Capacity to participate is inclusive of free time, income, language facility and civic skills. The latter can be developed in the workplace, particularly for those who hold high-skill jobs, and to a lesser degree through participation in voluntary associations and religious organizations.

If motivation and capacity collectively address the question of *who* participates in politics, networks of recruitment address the question of *when* they choose to participate. Networks of recruitment through which individuals may be mobilized provide information that lowers the cost of participating and creates social benefits (sanctions) for participation

(inactivity) (Rosenstone & Hansen 1993). Institutional membership in nonpolitical voluntary associations and religious organizations can also underwrite the cost of political participation by providing direct exposure to political officials.

Different participatory acts require different mixes of motivation, capacity and access to networks of recruitment, as well as different forms of each (Verba, Scholzman & Brady 1995). Donating to a political campaign, for instance, requires some forms of capacity (income) but little of others (civic skills, free time); voting requires motivation (political efficacy and interest), but little capacity beyond some language facility and free time.

1.2.1 Religion's Role in Motivating Political Participation

The effect of religiosity on political participation “depends on the type of religiosity involved,” as well as congregation-level effects (Marx 1967, 72). Membership in strict, sect-like congregations tends to be negatively correlated with civic involvement (Iannaccone 1994), and religion may provide little or no salient consideration on political engagement, even among active worshipers, in areas where the majority is irreligious (Stark 1984). At the congregational-level, Bauman (2016) suggests a fourfold typology whereby churches fall on a continuum of prosperity to social theology on one axis and on a continuum of priestly (inward-focused) and prophetic (outward-focused) on the other; prophetic churches, he suggests, tend to foster political participation, whereas priestly churches tend not to. An alternative church typology varies churches along continuums from traditional-modern and community-individual, where modern-community churches tend to be most accommodating of and involved with political matters (Hammond 1961).

Churches spur political action by providing congregants with opportunities to develop civic skills that can be translated for use in the political realm. Olson defines these congregations as “skills-producing churches” (2009, 377). Verba, Scholzman and Brady (1995) find that religious institutions play a unique counterbalancing role in American politics by offering the historically disadvantaged – the poor and under-educated, as well as women, African Americans (Harris 1994) and Latino/as (Jones-Correa and Leal 2001) – opportunities to develop civic skills they may not otherwise have. Churches are conduits of political information, and they provide access to social capital and networks of recruitment (Jones-Correa & Leal 2001, Lam 2002). Congregations that Olson calls “politically mobilizing churches” tend to encourage political participation by directly exposing congregants to politics (2009, 377). These religious organizations lower the barriers of entry to participate “by providing reliable and regular contact with elected officials, political information, opportunities for mobilization and advice about identifying political interest” (Harris-Lacewell 2007, 182). Politically mobilizing and skills-producing churches do not necessarily fall under the same roof. Verba, Scholzman and Brady (1995) suggest that the internal structure of the institution dictates opportunities to develop civic skills (less hierarchal organizations tend to offer more opportunities for development), while the interests of the institution’s leaders affect direct political exposure. Furthermore, there is evidence that congregation-level effects on political behavior are conditioned by whether or not there is congruence between an individual’s partisan identity and their perception of the partisan identity of other congregants (Margolis 2018). When individuals believe their partisan identity is congruent (incongruent) with that of other churchgoers, there is a positive (negative) correlation between political and religious engagement.

Empirical studies exploring the relationship between religion and political participation have returned a mixed bag of results, in part due to the inconsistency of religiosity measures used by researchers and the different roles those measures play in theories of religion and politics (Guth and Green 1993, Kellstedt and Smidt 1993). Harris (1994) found that measures of internal religiosity (such as frequency of prayer, feelings of closeness to God, etc.) had an insignificant effect on voting, but a positive effect on other forms of communal collective action. In the same study, church attendance had a positive effect on voting but a negative effect on collective action, and membership in church-affiliated groups had no independent effect on voting. Harris also found variance in the effects of internal religiosity between ethnic groups, with “the impact of internal religiosity on collective-action behavior ... greater among whites than among blacks” (1994, 64). In a study on religion and politics among Latinx populations, Jones-Correa and Leal (2001) similarly found variance in the predictive capacity of church attendance and denominational affiliation on electoral and nonelectoral political participation between ethnic groups. They posit that this is due to the fact that a disproportionate percentage of Latino/as’ civic participation is conducted through church organizations, whereas whites’ civic participation is more evenly spread across religious, charitable, social and political associations.

Other research has found that church attendance alone is not predictive of political participation, but that participation in church activities like choir practice or upkeep and maintenance is predictive of electoral participation (Driskell, Embry and Lyon 2008), but not nonelectoral participation (Wald, Kellstedt and Legee 1993). Driskell, Embry and Lyon (2008) also found that beliefs in an inactive God and those whose prayer topics focus on this-worldly concerns are more likely to participate politically. Of this finding, they write:

“It can be reasoned that if one believes God determines worldly affairs, then there is little reason for individuals to participate in civic events; God is taking care of things” (Driskell, Embry & Lyon 2008, 305-6). Lam (2002) found that membership and participation in religious organizations are positively associated with civic voluntarism, but that religious attendance is slightly negatively associated – suggesting a tradeoff effect in devoting a finite resource (time) between religious and political causes. And research has also shown that internal religiosity may promote one’s feeling of political efficacy (Harris 1994), which could lead to increased political engagement (Verba, Scholzman and Brady 1995).

1.3 The Prosperity Gospel and Political Outcomes: A Question of Causality

Research on the prosperity gospel’s effects on political attitudes and behavior has been limited, and what research there is has predominantly utilized survey methodology. Therefore, there is little evidence from which to draw causal inferences about the prosperity gospel’s effects on political outcomes.

Mimicking the debate in the broader study of religion and politics, scholars of the prosperity gospel have posited two, conflicting ideas about how prosperity gospel exposure might affect political participation among adherents: (a) its individualist message will disincline worshipers from getting involved in politics by downplaying the perceived role of the communal; or (b) its this-worldly, self-affirming message will increase internal efficacy and hence increase worshipers’ inclinations to participate in politics. In what is, to my knowledge, the first and, prior to the present endeavor, only study to experimentally test the effect of exposure to the prosperity gospel on political behavior, McClendon and Riedl (2015) found evidence for the latter theory. Consistent with political psychology research that demonstrates self-affirmation of the form common to the prosperity gospel

can encourage proactive behavior (Hall, Zhao & Shafir 2013), McClendon and Riedl (2015) found that, among a sample of Christian adults in Nairobi, Kenya, exposure to prosperity gospel messages resulted in greater rates of political participation than did exposure to a secular self-affirming message or a social gospel message. Other experimental research has found preliminary evidence that exposure to the prosperity gospel increases financial risk-taking – a finding that could have implications for certain forms of participation, such as donating to political candidates or causes (Hobson, Kim and MacDonald 2018).

While unable to address the question of causality, other research offers meaningful, if inconsistent, insights into the association of prosperity adherence and political outcomes. Koch (2009) constructed an index of prosperity adherence and found that prosperity followers vote in rates comparable to the general population. However, he acknowledges shortcomings in the index he constructed, as there was significant inconsistency among respondents, some of whom identified that they were supportive of the prosperity movement but failed to identify with some of its core tenants, or vice versa. Bowler found that the “ambitious visions of most prosperity congregations” provide prosperity adherents ample opportunities to develop civic skills that could facilitate political engagement (2013, 192), but did not empirically test that relationship.

McDaniel and Philpot (2017) used one original and one nationally representative survey to analyze the relationship between prosperity gospel adherence and voting behavior and found some evidence that adherence to the prosperity gospel is associated with lower levels of political participation among blacks. They posit three psychological explanations why this might be, though their methodology did not enable direct testing: the

prosperity gospel emphasizes “divine blessings rather than political struggle;” it suggests that “the best way to fix problems is through increasing religious activity” instead of political activity; and it “provides the economically marginalized a nonpolitical explanation” for their social position (McDaniel and Philpot 2017, 9). Harris-Lacewell contends the prosperity gospel quells political participation by promoting “an individualized, dispositional understanding of the world” (2007, 187). Examining the organizational qualities of African American prosperity churches, Wilson suggests these congregations tend to “deemphasize organized political activism,” which has been a staple of many southern black churches (2009, 206).

Because the prosperity gospel promotes an engaged and judgmental God, existing research on religious value-priming effects on political attitudes would suggest that it should promote conservative political stances (Froese and Bader 2010). Existing research has found some evidence for this, with findings indicating support for the prosperity gospel is positively correlated with social conservatism and Republican identification among blacks (McDaniel 2016). Existing research has also found that support for the prosperity gospel is negatively correlated with racial solidarity among blacks (McDaniel, Dwidar and Calderon 2018). However, this research cannot ascertain the direction of causality. Thus, it is possible that the association between prosperity gospel adherence and political ideology could be owing to conservatives self-selecting into the prosperity gospel movement rather than exposure to the prosperity gospel inculcating conservative ideology. In order to address the question of causality, experimental testing is needed.

1.4 Context: Background on the Prosperity Gospel

The prosperity gospel – sometimes referred to as the faith or word of faith gospel – is a movement of loosely affiliated Christian churches prevalent in African American Protestantism, white Pentecostalism and across traditions in televangelist preaching (Wald and Legee 2009). The central tenant of the prosperity gospel is that God grants followers physical and financial well-being (Bowler 2013, Hladky 2012, Koch 2009). Adherents to the prosperity gospel believe that “one’s faith in Christ can be measured by one’s prosperity because faith and prosperity are directly proportional” (Walton 2009, 95). Wealth is a sign of God’s blessing – as well as a reward for the fulfillment of one’s tithe – and its absence is a sign of a lack of faith (Wald & Legee 2009). Positive confession, declaration of faith and seed time (donating money, typically to one’s church, in order to collect a multiplied harvest of riches in return) are embraced as the usual mechanisms for securing God’s favor (Bowler 2013, Hladky 2013, Walton 2009). Some prosperity preachers espouse a contractual relationship with God (Bowler 2013), believing that through the ritualistic completion of these acts, they are entitled to sharing in God’s power to grant riches. This belief is anchored in a particular interpretation of the Christian gospels – with prosperity preachers and adherents often quoting 3 John 1:2 (“Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health even as thy soul prospereth”) or John 14:14 (“If ye shall ask anything in my name, I will do it”) – to establish scripture as a contract between God and the faithful (Bowler 2013, Walton 2009). Some also interpret Jesus himself as having been rich and hence understand God’s will for all faithful to be financially prosperous in terms of Christians’ duty to live like Jesus (Koch 2009). Other prosperity gospel preachers tend to strike a tone more like a self-care guru than a traditional priest in

preaching that “a rightly ordered mind [leads] to rightly ordered finances” (Bowler 2013, 125).

1.4.1 Research Challenges with the Prosperity Gospel

Defining the prosperity gospel in concrete terms presents a scholarly challenge, in part because most of its largest congregations maintain nondenominational status. Absent a centralized, hierarchical structure present in other religious organizations (MacGregor 2007), the prosperity gospel is best understood as an “emerging, loosely organized fellowship of churches” (Walton 2009, 93). This lack of an overarching hierarchy has led to theological and denominational ambiguity in defining the prosperity gospel and a lack of scholarly consensus on how to label different preachers (Hladky 2012, Mitchem 2007, Walton 2009). The futility of using denominational markers to define the prosperity gospel movement also makes it difficult to get a precise count of its adherents, as evidenced by the wide range of estimates. Koch (2009) estimated there are more than 16 million prosperity adherents in the United States; a *TIME* report from 2006 concluded that 17 percent of U.S. Christians identify as prosperity followers (Van Biema & Chu 2006); and MacGregor (2007) estimated between 4.6 and 4.8 million adherents. Correspondingly, there is also a lack of data on the demographics of prosperity adherents. Scholars have not yet accurately measured the income levels of prosperity adherents (Bowler 2013) – a potentially interesting question given the faith’s emphasis on material riches. Qualitative scholarship has predominantly found high degrees of multiculturalism and ethnic diversity among prosperity congregations (Hladky 2012, Bowler 2013).

For scholars of religion and politics, quantifying exposure to the prosperity gospel has also proved difficult – stemming in part from the movement’s historic relationship with

televangelism. Through the leadership of early broadcasting pioneers like Oral Roberts and Paul and Jan Crouch, the prosperity gospel was able to define itself as a distinct movement and sustain itself with a base of support – both spiritual and financial – throughout the 1970s and televangelism’s heyday of the 1980s (Stephens). Today, major networks that dedicate significant airtime to prosperity preachers, including the Trinity Broadcast Network, Word Network, Christian Broadcasting Network and Black Entertainment Television, continue to be kingmakers, as the most surefire way to rise to prominence in prosperity preaching circles is through appearances on these networks (Walton 2009).

Taken together, the prosperity movement’s widespread use of television broadcasting and its lack of denominational markers has important research implications. Many of the religion-and-politics research discipline’s traditional measures, such as church attendance and denominational affiliation, are of little use in measuring exposure to and adherence in the prosperity gospel. This difficulty sheds some light on why attempts by researchers to construct indexes for prosperity adherence from national surveys have met with mixed results (Koch 2009). In fact, prosperity preaching often serves as a supplement rather than a replacement to membership in a mainline or evangelical Protestant or Catholic congregation – what Bowler calls “Monday-through-Saturday followers” (2013, 76). As Mitchem writes: “It is not unusual to hear of someone headed for a Sunday service at a traditional black church, but keeping the television on one or another prosperity preacher while getting dressed” (2007, ix). Its popularity outside the four walls of a church has also led to a bleeding effect of its theology gaining roots in the teachings of mainline Baptist and Methodist congregations, among others (Bowler 2013), further complicating the definition of what is and is not representative of the prosperity gospel theology.

1.4.2 Prosperity Gospel and Politics

Prosperity gospel preachers have tended not to discuss politics as explicitly as clergy from many other congregations (Bowler 2013). Joel Osteen, among the most well-known prosperity preachers, for instance, rarely addresses contentious political issues like homosexuality and abortion – issues that are staples of the Christian Right (Koch 2009). T.D. Jakes, another well-known prosperity gospel preacher, draws a “sharp line” between religion and politics (Walton 2009, 114-116).

However, while seemingly not the norm, some prosperity preachers have shown themselves willing to weigh in on political matters. Eddie Long led a march against gay marriage in 2004 and called for invading Iraq after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (Walton 2009). In his two presidential campaigns, George W. Bush flaunted his connections with prosperity gospel preacher Frederick Price as he sought to court black religious voters (Harris-Lacewell 2007, 180). Benny Hinn preaches a distinctly Zionistic version of the prosperity gospel that flirts with the overtly political (Bowler 2013). And in certain countries where the prosperity gospel has been a successful American export, it has manifested itself in a “spiritually-legitimated nationalism” (Coleman 1993, 359). Furthermore, Donald Trump’s relationship with high-profile prosperity gospel preachers has been noted by media. Televangelist prosperity preacher Paula White endorsed Trump during the 2016 Republican primary (Lehmann 2016) and joined the Trump administration as a faith adviser in 2019 (Peters and Dias 2019). White, together with Gloria and Kenneth Copeland, Trinity Broadcasting Network co-founder Jan Crouch and other prosperity preachers, met with Trump during the height of the Republican primary, while evangelical leaders largely remained cool to the candidate (Schreckinger 2015).

2. Methodology

Building on work by McClendon and Riedl (2015), I conducted an online survey experiment on September 25, 2019, in which randomly assigned participants, who were recruited using Amazon's Mechanical Turk platform, listened to one of three pre-recorded audio messages. Two audio recordings were representative of either the prosperity gospel or the traditional social gospel common among certain Protestant churches. The third audio recording served as a placebo.

While the primary interest of the present endeavor is ascertaining the effect on political outcomes of exposure to the prosperity gospel message, the inclusion of a second treatment message in the form of the social gospel functions as a way to compare the effects of the two treatments and examine whether it is the mere inclusion of a religious message, regardless of the underlying values it connotes, or the specific nature of the two religious messages that influence participants' political outcomes. That is, if the prosperity and social gospel treatments influence participants' political outcomes uniformly, it will suggest that the specific nature of the religious message and the values and politically relevant cues it provides are immaterial.

In the following four subsections, I will posit hypotheses, discuss how I operationalize measures for the outcome variables and covariates, describe the subject pool and detail how the treatment audio recordings were constructed.

2.1 Hypotheses

I preregistered my research design and hypotheses on EGAP (ID number: 20190924AC) prior to collecting data. As stated in the preregistration: The principal

hypotheses are that exposure to the prosperity gospel audio clip will increase internal efficacy, conservative ideology, affinity toward the Republican Party and intent to vote, compared to the placebo case and to the social gospel treatment case. I expand on each hypothesis here.

The themes of self-affirmation and empowerment are staples of the prosperity gospel (Walton 2009, McClendon and Riedl 2015). Insofar as exposure to the prosperity gospel increases adherents' feelings of capableness, research in political psychology has shown that those feelings can promote proactive behavior even in realms unconnected to the source of self-affirmation (Hall, Zhao & Shafir 2013). Thus:

H1: I hypothesize that exposure to the prosperity gospel message will increase internal political efficacy among participants, above and beyond exposure to the social gospel treatment or the placebo.

Logically connecting to the hypothesis on internal efficacy, which research has shown is a strong predictor of political participation (Verba, Scholzman and Brady 1995), I predict that exposure to the prosperity gospel will increase political participation. Since I am unable to measure actual voting behavior, I use stated vote intention as an imperfect proxy. Thus:

H2: I hypothesize that exposure to the prosperity gospel message will increase vote intention among participants, above and beyond exposure to the social gospel treatment or the placebo.

In keeping with McClendon and Riedl (2015), who included several verifiable behavioral measures in their study on the effects of prosperity gospel exposure in Nairobi,

I also include a verifiable behavioral measure to directly test the prosperity gospel's effects on political behavior. At the end of the survey experiment, participants were presented with one of two sets of links. Participants who indicated they were not registered to vote were presented with a link to the United States government's vote.gov site and invited to register to vote. Participants who indicated they were already registered to vote were presented with links to find their local polling place or request an absentee ballot (both on vote.org), and to sign up to volunteer with the Democratic and Republican parties (which linked to the websites of the Democratic National Committee and Republican National Committee, respectively). JavaScript coding was used to record whether links were clicked, though I am unable to track participants' behavior on the external sites. Therefore, I cannot say what percentage of participants who clicked links in my survey actually requested an absentee ballot, signed up to volunteer with a political party, etc.

There are two *ex-ante* reasons to doubt the effectiveness of this measure, both of which I identified in my preregistration.¹ First, the 2020 presidential election, as of the date participants completed the survey experiment, was still over a year away, making it relatively unlikely that anyone would request an absentee ballot or want to locate their polling place. Second, and perhaps more significantly, workers on Amazon's Mechanical Turk platform have a financial incentive to complete tasks quickly and move on to the next

¹ An additional *ex-post* reason to doubt the effectiveness of this measure is the unusual pattern of clicking the links observed in the data. For instance, of the 14 respondents who clicked the link to learn about volunteer opportunities with the RNC, nine also clicked the link to learn about volunteer opportunities with the DNC. A similar pattern was found for respondents clicking both the link to request an absentee ballot and to locate their polling place. In fact, of the 44 respondents who clicked *any* link, nine clicked *all four* links presented them (these respondents had indicated they were already registered to vote, so they were not presented with that link). This suggests participants may have been motivated by a normative belief that the *correct* action was to click these links – and hence they clicked the links out of an interest in ensuring they receive compensation rather than out of a genuine desire to participate.

task, so they can maximize their ratio of compensation earned to time spent on the platform. Thus, I do not count this behavioral measure among my core hypotheses. Rather, this measure can be thought of as a particularly robust test of prosperity gospel exposure's effect on political behavior: The absence of a treatment effect on this measure could likely be chalked up to experimental design shortcomings, but the presence of a significant treatment effect would offer preliminary evidence of a positive, causal relationship between exposure to prosperity messages and political engagement.

The remaining hypotheses pertain to attitudinal measures. Because the individualistic values it conveys and its portrayal of an engaged and judgmental God suggest the prosperity gospel message will be more congruent with conservative than liberal political values (Froese and Bader 2010), I expect it will influence participants' political attitudes in a conservative direction. I measure this in several ways and detail the operationalization of these measures in the Subsection 2.2. Thus:

H3: I hypothesize that exposure to the prosperity gospel message will increase support for the Republican Party among participants, above and beyond exposure to the social gospel treatment or the placebo.

H4: I hypothesize that exposure to the prosperity gospel message will increase support for Donald Trump's reelection among participants, above and beyond exposure to the social gospel treatment or the placebo.

H5: I hypothesize that exposure to the prosperity gospel message will make participants' views on the economy and government regulation more conservative, above and beyond exposure to the social gospel treatment or the placebo.

2.1.1 Heterogeneous Effects

Previous research has shown that individuals tend to resist information that is incongruent with their political predispositions and uncritically accept congruent information, and that the ability to counterargue incongruent information is contingent on having the political awareness to perceive the incongruency (Zaller 1992, Taber and Lodge 2006). Therefore, one might reasonably suspect that the effects of the treatments could be different for subjects with different partisan priors, levels of political knowledge and religious commitments. While Zaller (1992) found that those of moderate political awareness were most susceptible to influence, in large part because they were more likely to be exposed to political communications than were the highly unaware, exposure is built in to the experimental methodology. Therefore, I expect the greatest treatment effect to be found among the least political knowledgeable. To explore the possibility of heterogeneous effects, I analyzed treatment effects separately for self-identified Republicans and Democrats and those scoring low and high on the political knowledge scale.

As I wrote in my preregistration: I expect that exposure to the prosperity gospel message will lead to increased feelings of internal efficacy and hence increased self-declared intent to vote in 2020 – as well as espousing more conservative viewpoints – among strong Republican-identifiers and those low in political knowledge. I do not have strong expectations about how the prosperity gospel treatment will affect high-political knowledge, strong Democrats. Thus:

H6: I hypothesize that the prosperity gospel treatment effects predicted in H1-5 will be greater among Republican than among Democrats.

H7: I hypothesize that the prosperity gospel treatment effects predicted in H1-5 will be greater among those low in political knowledge.

I also examine treatment effects separately for self-identified Christians and non-Christians. Because members of certain Christian sects are more likely to be comfortable and familiar with messages typical of the prosperity gospels, I expect Christian participants are more likely to uncritically accept the politically relevant cues of the prosperity gospel message. I also separately analyze the treatment effects on self-identified Christians broken down by religious tradition – white evangelical Protestant, mainline Protestant and Catholic congregations² – though, as I write in my preregistration, I do not have strong expectations about how the treatment will affect members of different Christian traditions. Thus:

H8: I hypothesize that the prosperity gospel treatment effects predicted in H1-5 will be greater among self-identified Christians.

Finally, one might also expect a heterogenous effect of religiosity – church attendance, participation in religious activities outside worship, prayer, reading the Scripture outside church, etc. – on the treatment effects. To explore this possibility, I will separately analyze the Christian subsample by variance in measures of private devotionism (Scripture reading) and religious behavior (church attendance). I do not have strong expectations about how the treatment will differently affect Christian participants based on these measures.

2.2 Operationalization: Dependent Variables

² There were insufficient numbers of black mainline Protestants to separately examine this subsample.

Participants were asked a battery of post-treatment questions to measure their internal efficacy, political attitudes, vote intention and a behavioral measure. In this subsection, I discuss how these measures were operationalized.

Internal efficacy: Internal efficacy was measured using the standard item: “Sometimes politics seem so complicated that a person like me can’t really understand what’s going on” (Moeller et. al. 2014). Participants were asked to what degree they agreed or disagreed with this statement, and responses were measured on a five-point scale ranging from strongly agree (coded as 0) to strongly disagree (coded as 4).

Vote intention: Participants were asked if they intend to vote in the 2020 U.S. presidential election. Subjects recruited from MTurk were limited to those in the United States, and respondents who completed the survey with IP addresses located outside the U.S. were excluded from the analysis. The percentage of non-U.S. citizens, who are ineligible to vote, in the sample was assumed to be negligible.

While some research suggests internet survey experiments are less susceptible (Holbrook and Krosnick 2010) to the well-observed social desirability bias in self-reported measures of vote intention (Phillips and Clancy 1972), I acknowledge the shortcoming of this measure. However, because I am not interested in the absolute value of vote intention across the sample, but rather the difference in values of vote intention across treatment groups, the self-reported measure should suffice.

Behavioral measure: This measure was coded as a binary, with those having clicked no links coded as 0 and those having clicked *any* of the links coded as 1 (meaning that those who clicked one link were coded the same as those who clicked two or more links).

Role of government: Participants' views on the role of government were measured, with preference for a strong federal government representing a liberal ideology and preference for an unregulated free market representing a conservative ideology. Language for this measure and the next were taken from the American National Election Studies. Participants were asked which of the following two views most closely matched their own opinion: "We need a strong government to handle today's complex economic problems" (coded as 1) or "The free market can handle these problems without government being involved" (coded as 0).

Government regulation: Participants' attitudes on government regulation were measured using language from the ANES. Participants were asked "How much government regulation of business is good for society?" and responses were recorded on a five-point scale that was collapsed to form a measure that ranges from "a great deal" (coded as 1) to "none at all" (coded as 0).

The preceding two measures were combined into one ideological measure that ranges from 0 (most conservative) to 2 (most liberal).

Candidate preference: Participants were asked who they would vote for, were the 2020 presidential election held "today," presented with the options of "Donald Trump," "The Democratic nominee" and "Other."

Party feeling thermometers: The final outcome variable measures attitudes about the Republican and Democratic parties using a standard 0-100 feeling thermometer (Kuo, Malhotra and Mo 2016, Coppock, Green and Porter 2018). Participants were asked "On a

scale of 0 to 100, where 0 represents a completely negative opinion and 100 represents a completely positive opinion, how would you rate the Republican and Democratic parties?”

2.3 Pre-Treatment Measures: Partisan Identity, Religiosity and Political Knowledge

Standard controls: Age, sex, race/ethnicity, education and income were measured pre-treatment as standard control variables. Participants were asked their current state of residence, and a binary variable for living in the South (as defined by the U.S. Census) was included as a control variable in some models. A measure for the length of time participants have lived in their current neighborhood was also collected. This measure is included in models for voting behavior, as the strength of one’s community ties has been found to be positively associated with tendency to engage politically (Verba, Scholzman and Brady 1995). Participants were also asked if they were registered to vote.

Partisan identity: Following language used by the American National Election Studies, participants’ partisan identities were measured using a two-part question. Participants were first asked “Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?” followed by one of two probing questions, depending on their response to the first: “Would you call yourself a strong (Republican/Democrat) or a not very strong (Republican/Democrat)?”; or “Do you think of yourself as closer to the Republican or Democratic party?” Fifty nine and a half percent of participants identified as Democrats or lean-Democrat, 30.0 percent of participants identified as Republicans or lean-Republican and 10.6 percent identified as independents who lean toward neither party.

Political knowledge: Political knowledge was measured using the standard, five-item measure developed by Delli Carpini and Keeter (1993), and guessing was discouraged

using the following language: “Many people don't know the answers to these questions. If there are some you don't know, just skip them.” Measures of political knowledge on online surveys may be compromised if participants consult an external source (i.e. search the internet) to answer these items. To discourage the use of external resources, I employ language suggested by Clifford and Jerit (2016) to reduce cheating. Participants were presented with the following prompt and asked to select “yes” or “no:” “It is important to us that you do NOT use outside sources like the Internet to search for the correct answer. Will you answer the following questions without help from outside sources?”

Consistent with previous research that has found that scores for political knowledge items tend to be higher in online surveys (Jensen & Thomsen 2014, Shulman and Boster 2014, Ansolabehere and Schaffner 2014, Coppock and McClellan 2019), levels of political knowledge among my sample appear high ($M = 3.90$, $SD = 1.41$). Respondents searching the web for answers, however, is not necessarily the culprit. Clifford and Jerit (2016) found that rates of cheating are low on MTurk, where workers have a financial incentive to finish tasks quickly. Other research has suggested difference in composition between internet users and non-internet users (Ansolabehere and Schaffner 2014), oversampling of politically knowledgeable individuals on internet survey-hosting platforms (Jensen & Thomsen 2014) or familiarity with standard knowledge batteries among frequent survey-takers (Coppock and McClellan 2019) as being responsible for higher political knowledge scores. More research is warranted on this topic but falls outside the scope of the current endeavor.

Religiosity: Following research that has cautioned against using single-measure indications of religiosity, such as church attendance or denominational affiliation (Driskell, Embry and

Lyon 2008, Wald and Smidt 1993, Wald, Kellstedt and Leege 1993), participants' relationship with religion was measured in several ways. Private devotionism was measured using a question on respondents' frequency of reading scripture outside of church over the last month (McClendon and Riedl 2015). Participation in religious activities outside of worship (e.g. choir practice, church upkeep, prayer meetings, missionary outreach programs) was measured using language from the fifth wave of the Baylor University Religion Survey (Baylor University 2017). Language from the same Baylor University (2017) survey was employed to measure participants' religious tradition and denominational affiliation. My sample overall is 51.2 percent Christian, 1.6 percent Jewish and 1.0 percent Muslim. Roughly 3.7 percent identified with another religion, and 41.8 percent identified with no religion. In the heterogeneous effects analysis by religious affiliation, I mapped congregation-level responses for Christian identifiers onto broader religious traditions (e.g. white evangelical Protestant, white mainline Protestant, black mainline Protestant and Catholic) using Kellstedt and Green (1993) and Pew Research Center (2015) as guides. Among the total sample, 19.0 percent identified as belonging to a Catholic congregation, 1.7 percent identified as belonging to a black mainline Protestant congregation, 5.4 percent identified as belonging to a white mainline Protestant congregation and 14.8 percent identified as belonging to a white evangelical Protestant congregation.

Measures for church attendance employed language first utilized by the 1989 ANES survey to reduce social desirability bias that had skewed responses in favor of overreporting church attendance (Leege, Kellstedt and Wald 1990). The church attendance item was prefaced with language that excuses infrequency of attendance: "Lots of things come up

that keep people from attending religious services even if they want to. Thinking about your life these days, do you ever attend religious services, apart from occasional weddings, baptisms or funerals?” Finally, participants’ views on Biblical authority were measured using language from the American National Election Studies: “The Bible is the actual Word of God and is to be taken literally, word for word,” “The Bible is the Word of God but not everything in it should be taken literally, word for word,” “The Bible is a book written by men and is not the Word of God” or “Don’t know.”

2.4 Subject pool

Eight hundred fifty eight participants were recruited using Amazon’s Mechanical Turk platform on September 25, 2019. I removed 18 responses that had duplicate IP addresses and 14 responses whose IP addresses were associated with locations outside the United States. I also followed the process outlined by Dennis, Goodson and Pearson (2019) for identifying responses with duplicate GPS locations that are associated with data collocation centers and that had suspect data quality – relying primarily on answers to the open-ended political knowledge questions to gauge data quality – as these responses appear likely to come from individuals using virtual private servers to fill out MTurk HITs multiple times. Removing these left 804 responses used in the subsequent analysis.

Compared to the U.S. population as a whole, my sample is over-representative of several categories: men (my sample: 55.4 percent; U.S. population: 49.1 percent)³; the highly educated (my sample: 56.2 percent with a college degree or higher; U.S. population: roughly 33 percent); and white non-Hispanic (my sample: 75.0 percent; U.S. population:

³ U.S. population data taken from the U.S. Census Bureau

60.4 percent). The sample is 9.24 percent black, 5.24 percent Hispanic, 5.99 percent Asian American, 0.37 percent Native American or Pacific Islander and 4.5 percent two or more races. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 78, with a median age of 35 years (versus U.S. population median of 38 years). My sample also appears to be over-representative of the religiously unaffiliated – those who identify as agnostic, atheist or being affiliated with no faith in particular. In my sample, 41.8 percent identify with no religion. By comparison, an October 2019 Pew Research Center survey found that, nationwide, 26 percent of Americans are religiously unaffiliated (Pew Research Center 2019).

2.5 Treatments

Participants were randomly assigned to listen to one of three audio recordings – one that incorporated language from the prosperity gospel, one that incorporated language from the Protestant social gospel and a third that acted as a placebo and was devoid of any religious or political rhetoric. The two treatment messages were written by the researcher, using phrases from actual homilies. Language for the prosperity gospel recording was taken from sermons delivered by Joel Osteen and hosted on his congregation’s website dated March 10-24, 2019. I drew language for the social gospel recording from sermons delivered by various preachers at the Metropolitan African Methodist Episcopal Church in Washington, D.C., dated February 17-March 10, 2019. These sermons were accessed via the congregation’s YouTube channel. The placebo language was lifted verbatim from a recipe for chicken tetrazzini on the website of *The Food Network*. The scripts are available in appendices A.1, A.2 and A.3, and the audio clips are available upon request. All three audio clips were recorded in the researchers’ own voice.

In keeping with what is typical of the two gospels, the two treatment messages differ along several characteristics. The prosperity gospel message offers more explicit self-affirming rhetoric (“People are going to see the greatness [God] put in you in Jesus’ name”). The social gospel message touches more explicitly on politics than does the prosperity gospel message (“There are spirits that seem to animate our legislation, that seem to animate our politics ... and pull them away from God’s intent”). The social gospel message emphasizes care for the poor (“God commands His people to care for the poor, to loose the chains of injustice and to set the oppressed free”). The social gospel demands active labor from the faithful to bring about God’s will (“There is no struggle without blessing, and there is no blessing without struggle. ... We speak of blessing as if it is God doing something nice and sweet and all we have to do is unwrap the blessing. ... God knows in order for us to be faithful, we’ve got to learn how to deal in ugly places with ugly realities”) whereas the prosperity gospel emphasizes keeping the faith, rather than performing concrete acts, as followers’ duty (“Because you’re honoring Him, because you say, ‘as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord,’ God is speeding things up. ... You keep sowing seeds in God’s name, He will bring you a harvest. Right now, God is working behind the scenes in your life”).

The recordings were written to be comparable in length (between 1:37-1:54 minutes long, and between 274-327 words), complexity (characters per word ranged from 4.0-4.4) and reading ease (each message was at or under a seventh-grade reading level). I shared the treatment scripts with several scholars of religion and politics prior to conducting the experiment and received feedback that the texts were fair representations of the prosperity

and social gospels and advice for improving the treatments, which I incorporated into the final iterations.⁴

3. Analysis and Discussion

Average treatment effects and minimum detectable effects for all outcome variables are listed in Table 1. All values for minimum detectable effects throughout the analysis were calculated based on one-sided hypothesis tests with significance level of 0.05 and 80 percent power unless otherwise specified (Bloom 1995), as laid out in my preregistration. In instances where the observed treatment effects were in the direction opposite from that hypothesized, two-sided hypothesis tests were used to produce a more conservative value for the minimum detectable effect. The treatment effects and values for statistical significance in Table 1 were calculated from simple regressions of outcome variables on prosperity and social treatment, without any covariates. Results from covariate-adjusted models are presented throughout this section.

To minimize the likelihood of Type 1 error due to the multiple treatments and outcome variables analyzed here, I adjust the threshold level for statistical significance using a Bonferroni correction. Given the five primary hypotheses, I divide the typical alpha value of 0.05 by 5 and fail to reject the null hypothesis at any p value above 0.01. Table 1 reports the unadjusted p values, but I note in the text where statistical significance levels withstand or fail to withstand Bonferroni correction. The only average treatment effect in Table 1 that

⁴ Copies of correspondence with scholars of religion and politics can be found in appendices B.1, B.2 and B.3. Correspondents' contact information was removed.

withstands Bonferroni correction and retains statistical significance at $\alpha = 0.01$ is the prosperity gospel treatment effect on vote intention.

Average Treatment Effects				
	<i>Prosperity Treatment</i>	<i>Prosperity Minimum Detectable Effect</i>	<i>Social Treatment</i>	<i>Social Minimum Detectable Effect</i>
Outcomes				
Internal Efficacy	.0806	.2856	.1152	.2918
Vote Intent	-.0830***	.0676 ^t	-.0469	.0681 ^t
Behavioral Measure	.0142	.0442	.0162	.0446
Role of Gov't	-.0139	.1050	.0871**	.1060
Regulation	-.0226	.0521	.0117	.0558
Combined Ideology	-.0365	.1398	.1012*	.1417
Vote Trump	-.0625	.1204 ^t	-.0609	.1077
Vote Democrat	-.0284	.1070	-.0098	.1216 ^t
Republican Party	-3.8695	7.5580 ^t	-5.0266*	6.8126
Democratic Party	-4.1784	6.6525	-2.7679	7.4979 ^t

* $p < 0.1$ ** $p < 0.05$ *** $p < 0.01$

^t Minimum Detectable Effect calculated using a two-sided hypothesis test

Table 1: Average Treatment Effects and Minimum Detectable Effects for All Outcome Variables

3.1 Vote Intention and Internal Efficacy

The most striking finding is that prosperity treatment decreased vote intention among participants. Roughly 91 percent of participants in the control group expressed an intent to vote in the 2020 U.S. presidential election, compared to 83 percent of participants in the prosperity gospel treatment group and 87 percent in the social gospel treatment group. The average treatment effect of prosperity exposure on vote intention, calculated using a regression with no covariates, is -0.08 ($p = .004$). This treatment effect has adequate power (minimum detectable effect is 0.07, calculated using a two-sided hypothesis test). The prosperity treatment's dampening effect on vote intention remains robust to controlling for

a host of individual-level covariates⁵, including sex, age, race, education, income, a binary variable for living in the South, partisanship, political knowledge and duration of living in one's neighborhood (estimator for this model = -0.07, $p = .02$). Thus, I reject hypothesis *H2*. For comparison's sake, the social gospel treatment also decreased intention to vote, but did not reach statistical significance.

Examining the treatment effects on vote intention separately for self-identified Christians and non-Christians shows that the demobilizing effect on vote intention appears to be limited to the non-Christian subsample (see Figure 1). Prosperity treatment (-0.12, $p = .003$) and social treatment (-0.07, $p = .04$) both decreased vote intention among non-Christians, while the two treatments had little discernable effect on the Christian subsample. The data thus fail to support hypothesis *H8* for vote intention.

Because the politically relevant cues conveyed by the prosperity gospel were expected to be congruent with Republicans' partisan priors and incongruent with Democrats' partisan priors, existing research on motivated skepticism (Zaller 1992, Taber and Lodge 2006) would suggest these cues would be uncritically accepted by high-knowledge Republicans and low-knowledge individuals regardless of partisanship, given their inability to counterargue. High-knowledge Democrats would be expected to counterargue the politically relevant cues of the prosperity gospel. Thus, I hypothesized (*H6* and *H7*) that the (positive) effect of exposure to the prosperity gospel on vote intention would be greatest among Republican-identifiers and those scoring low on the political knowledge

⁵ Here and throughout the analysis, when adjusting for pre-treatment covariates in regression models, I followed the regression analysis methodology suggested by Lin (2013). Lin proposed centering all pre-treatment covariates, interacting them with treatment variables and regressing outcome variables on the treatments, centered covariates and all interaction terms to improve precision.

scale regardless of partisan identity. The data offer little support for this hypothesized relationship.

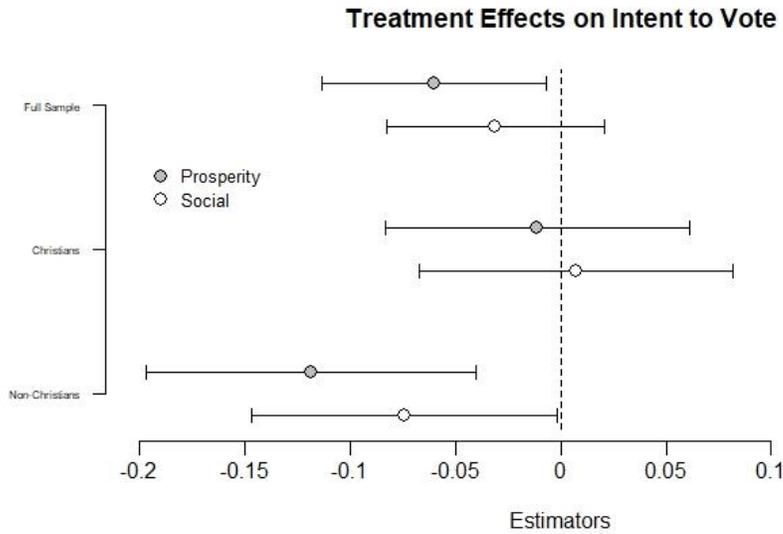


Figure 1: Treatment Effects on Vote Intention by Religious Affiliation

Prosperity gospel exposure had a negative effect on vote intention among high-political knowledge Republicans (-0.05, $p = .48$) and low-political knowledge Republicans (-0.05, $p = .90$) – defined here and throughout the analysis as those scoring a 5/5 or a 2/5 or below on the political knowledge scale, respectively – though neither effect is statistically significant. Prosperity gospel exposure decreased vote intention among high-political knowledge Democrats (-0.06, $p = .04$) and increased vote intention among low-political knowledge Democrats (0.14, $p = .46$), suggesting that the latter group was unable to counterargue the politically relevant cues of the prosperity message. However, interpretation must be made with caution. Because the subject pool overall skews high in political knowledge ($M = 3.90$, $SD = 1.41$), the results are weaker for the low political knowledge subsamples due to smaller sample size. Of perhaps greater importance, political knowledge is correlated with partisan identification among the subject pool: The difference

between the mean political knowledge among Republicans ($M = 3.69$, $SD = 1.60$) and Democrats ($M = 4.01$, $SD = 1.31$) is statistically significant ($diff = 0.32$, $p = .004$). Thus, multicollinearity is a concern when making claims about the variance in treatment effects by political knowledge and partisanship.

I hypothesized (*H1*) that exposure to the prosperity gospel would increase internal efficacy. The data do not support this hypothesis: No clear difference between exposure to the self-affirming prosperity gospel and the non-self-affirming social gospel emerged in measures of internal efficacy. In fact, neither treatment had a discernable effect on internal efficacy, with neither the average treatment effect of the social gospel (0.12 , $p = .98$) nor that of the prosperity gospel (0.08 , $p = .70$) reaching statistical significance. The minimum detectable effect of both treatments is 0.29 . Controlling for a host of individual-level effects (sex, age, race, education, income, political knowledge and partisan identification) further diminishes the magnitude of the treatment effects and in fact reverses the direction of the prosperity treatment effect (estimator in this model = -0.003 , $p = .98$). Thus, I reject hypothesis *H1*.

A clear, albeit modest, distinction emerged between the treatments' effects on internal efficacy among Christians and non-Christians in the covariate-adjusted model. Among the subset of the sample that identified as Christian, the prosperity treatment (0.10 , $p = .48$) and social treatment (0.12 , $p = .46$) both increased internal efficacy, though neither treatment effects were statistically significant. Among the subset of the sample that identified as non-Christian, the prosperity treatment (-0.15 , $p = .33$) and social treatment (-0.02 , $p = .88$) both decreased internal efficacy, though again neither effects were

statistically significant. This offers weak evidence that the self-affirming cues of the prosperity gospel are internalized differently by Christians and non-Christians.

The direction of the prosperity gospel treatment effect also differs between Democrats and Republicans. Prosperity exposure modestly increases Republicans' internal efficacy in the covariate-adjusted regression model (estimator = 0.14, $p = .45$) and decreases Democrats' internal efficacy (-0.12, $p = .37$).

Taken together, results indicate that exposure to the prosperity gospel message not only fails to increase internal efficacy among participants, but it also decreases vote intention among non-Christians. That exposure to the prosperity gospel demobilizes a non-Christian audience is significant because of the nature of transmission of prosperity gospel messages; through best-selling books, television broadcasts on popular networks like Black Entertainment Television and preachers who are also social media sensations, the prosperity gospel is able to reach an audience with substantial numbers of non-Christians. In addition, as the Trump administration's faith outreach is shaped by Paula White, a prosperity gospel televangelist and White House faith adviser, it is likely that rhetoric typical of the prosperity gospel will find a prominent place in political rhetoric. These results beg two questions: (1) Why the demobilizing effect on non-Christians; and (2) why the lack of effect on Christians?

The data do not allow me to say with certainty why exposure to the prosperity gospel decreased non-Christians' vote intentions, but I posit two explanations. First, it is possible that the prosperity gospel treatment produced counter-partisan effects whereby it reminded non-Christians and Democrats of the rhetoric of conservative Christian politicians, which

could have turned them off from wanting to participate in politics. If this were the case, I would expect high-political knowledge non-Christians to be most demobilized – as low-political knowledge individuals are less likely to perceive a connection between religious rhetoric and political rhetoric (Margolis 2018, Zaller 1992). The data make this difficult to examine, as there is a strong collinearity between Christian affiliation and political knowledge. In the sample, the difference in political knowledge between non-Christians ($M = 4.22$, $SD = 1.04$) and Christians ($M = 3.59$, $SD = 1.63$) is statistically significant ($diff = 0.63$, $p = 0.000$). Analyzing prosperity treatment effect separately for non-Christians scoring a 5/5 on the political knowledge scale ($n = 209$) and those scoring a 4/5 or below ($n = 183$) shows a stronger treatment effect on the latter (-0.20 , $p = .01$) than the former (-0.08 , $p = .05$), offering tepid support for the counter-partisan effect hypothesis.

Second, it could be that non-Christians did, in fact, internalize certain cues from the prosperity gospel, but not the cues I hypothesized. The prosperity gospel promotes individualistic values as well as self-affirmation, and so if individuals internalized the former, that could be responsible for the demobilizing effect on vote intention. Previous evidence already showed that Christians and non-Christians internalized the cues of the prosperity gospel differently, so it's possible that non-Christians would reject the self-affirming cues while uncritically accepting the individualistic cues, while Christians show some evidence of accepting the self-affirming cues.

Regarding the question of why the prosperity treatment had such little effect on Christians, I posit that *repeated* exposure or exposure in the social setting of a religious congregation may be necessary to prompt the internalization of the self-affirming cues of the prosperity gospel in a way that renders them politically relevant. Furthermore, in

Section 3.5, I examine if prosperity exposure's effects on vote intention vary across members of different Christian traditions. Findings from this analysis indicate that internalization of the politically relevant cues of the prosperity gospel may depend on a perceived congruence between prosperity gospel messages and messages one has been previously exposed to through worship.

These findings pose a third question as well: Why are the results different from those found by McClendon and Riedl (2015)? Here, differences in the religio-political context between Kenya and the United States are most likely responsible for a different causal relationship between prosperity gospel exposure and political outcomes in the two countries. If the perceived relationships between religious organizations and political parties in the two countries is different, then one would expect the cues provided by religious rhetoric to have different effects on political considerations.

3.2 Party and Candidate Affinity

I hypothesized that exposure to the prosperity gospel would increase affinity for the Republican Party (*H3*) and support for Donald Trump in the 2020 presidential election (*H4*). The data fail to support hypotheses *H3* and *H4*.

The data show that exposure to the prosperity gospel had a dampening effect on measures of support for the Republican Party and for its top elected official, Donald Trump. Prosperity treatment decreased participants' feeling thermometer ratings for the Republican Party (-3.87, $p = .15$) and intention to vote for Donald Trump (-0.06, $p = .11$) in the simple regressions with no covariates, effects that persisted in the covariate-adjusted models for both the party affinity (-1.89, $p = .33$) and candidate preference (-0.05, $p = .08$)

outcomes. The minimum detectable effects for prosperity treatment are 7.56 (two-sided hypothesis test) on support for the Republican Party and 0.12 (two-sided hypothesis test) on support for Trump.

While the prosperity treatment effect on affinity for the Republican Party, like vote intention above, appears to be conditioned by participants' religious identification, the prosperity treatment effect on support for Trump is independent of participants' religious affiliation. Prosperity exposure decreased Christians' feeling thermometer ratings of the Republican Party ($-3.90, p = .17$) but increased non-Christians' ratings ($1.42, p = .58$) in the covariate-adjusted model, though the difference between the two effects is not statistically significant. Prosperity gospel exposure decreased both Christians' ($-0.03, p = .53$) and non-Christians' ($-0.06, p = .06$) stated intent to vote for Trump in the 2020 presidential election.

Based on the politically relevant cues provided by the prosperity and social gospels, I anticipated the two treatments would influence participants' views on the Republican and Democratic parties as well as their candidate preferences in different directions. Findings offered only weak support for this. Prosperity gospel treatment decreased support both for the Republican Party ($-1.89, p = .33$) and for the Democratic Party ($-4.01, p = .04$) in the covariate-adjusted model; and it decreased support both for Trump ($-0.05, p = .08$) and the eventual Democratic nominee ($-0.04, p = .18$) in the covariate-adjusted model. No effects withstood Bonferroni correction. Likewise, social gospel treatment decreased support both for the Republican Party ($-4.13, p = .03$) and for the Democratic Party ($-2.02, p = .31$) in the covariate-adjusted model; and decreased support both for Trump ($-0.05, p = .06$) and the eventual Democratic nominee ($-0.01, p = .74$) in the covariate-adjusted model. Again,

no effects withstood Bonferroni correction. The minimum detectable effect for the social treatment on Democratic Party ratings is 7.50 (two-sided hypothesis test), and the minimum detectable effect for the social treatment on support for the Democratic presidential nominee is 0.12 (two-sided hypothesis test).

It is worth noting that the strongest negative effects here occur where there is incongruence between the underlying, politically relevant cues of the treatment message and the partisan direction of the outcome measure. Prosperity gospel treatment decreased support for the Democratic Party more than it decreased support for the Republican Party. Likewise, social gospel treatment decreased support for the Republican Party and for Trump more than it decreased support for the Democratic Party and its eventual presidential nominee. However, since none of these effects retain statistical significance after Bonferroni correction and are underpowered, this interpretation must be made with caution.

Of further note is that the prosperity treatment has a larger (more negative) effect on support for Trump than it does on the Democratic nominee, suggesting there is an independent effect on support for Trump in particular, rather than attitudes about Trump being conflated with his status as a representative of the Republican Party. While future research is needed to explicate this, it is possible that, despite the strong support Trump enjoys among evangelical Christians that is frequently noted by media, the presence of a religious message could prime evaluations of the twice-divorced and famously adulterous Trump on moral grounds, which could diminish support.

Treatment effects do not appear to be strongly mediated by political knowledge and pre-treatment partisan identity (see Figure 2). There was no discernable treatment effect on

support for Trump from exposure to either the prosperity or social gospel among high-political knowledge Republicans and Democrats, likely due to these individuals' already baked-in views on the president. While prosperity exposure affected low-knowledge partisans' support for Trump in different directions (see top right panel of Figure 2), these effects were not statistically significant.

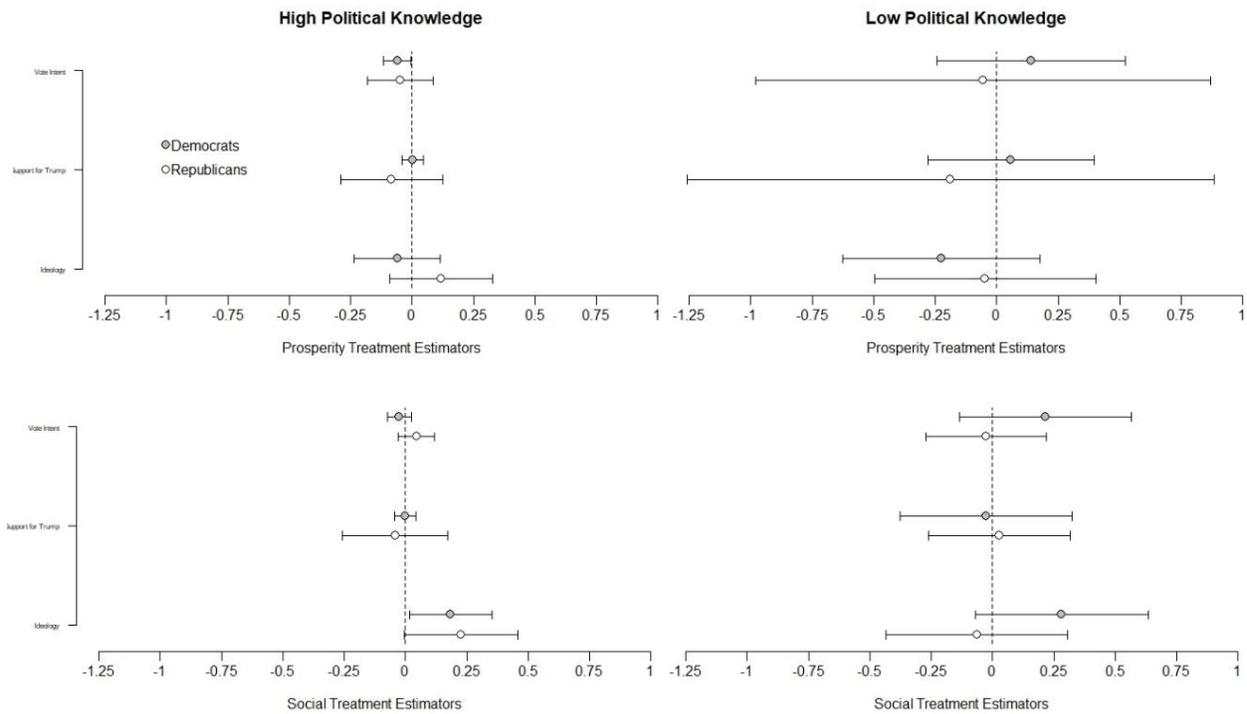


Figure 2: Treatment Effects on Various Outcomes by Political Knowledge and Partisan Affiliation

3.3 Political Ideology

While affect toward political parties has been found to be more malleable (Coppock, Green and Porter 2018) than partisan affiliation itself (Niemi and Jennings 1991), the two attitudinal measures analyzed in Section 3.2, by referencing political party, are fairly robust tests of the prosperity and social gospel treatment effects. The attitudinal outcome analyzed

in this section measures participants' ideological views on questions that can be mapped onto a conservative-liberal scale. Participants were asked about their views on the role of government (preference for "strong government" is coded as 1 and taken to be the liberal position; preference for the "free market" is coded as 0 and taken to be the conservative position) and government regulation (ranging from "a great deal" of regulation, which is coded as 1 and taken to be the liberal position, and "none at all," which is coded as 0 and taken to be the conservative position). I hypothesized that exposure to the prosperity gospel would move participants' views on these ideological measures in a conservative direction (*H5*). The data offer modest support for hypothesis *H5*.

Prosperity gospel exposure weakly moved participants' attitudes in a conservative direction on the role of government measure ($-0.01, p = .74$) and the government regulation measure ($-0.02, p = .29$) based on regression models without any covariates, though neither treatment effect is statistically significant. By comparison, social gospel exposure moved participants' attitudes in a liberal direction on the role of government measure ($0.09, p = .04$) and the government regulation measure ($0.01, p = .59$) based on the no-covariate regression model. In a covariate-adjusted regression model controlling for age, sex, race, income, education, a binary for living in the South, political knowledge and partisan affiliation, the only of the four effects that reaches statistical significance and withstands Bonferroni correction is the social gospel treatment effect on attitudes about the role of government ($0.10, p = .01$), though even this is slightly underpowered (minimum detectable effect is approximately 0.11).

Because these two outcome variables both aim to measure political ideology, I combine them into an ideological index that ranges from 0 (most conservative) to 2 (most liberal).

Neither the prosperity treatment effect ($-0.03, p = .58$) nor the social treatment effect ($0.12, p = .03$) on this measure in the covariate-adjusted model withstands Bonferroni correction. The minimum detectable effect on this index measure is approximately 0.14 for both treatments.

While the data do not permit me to confidently accept the hypothesis that the prosperity gospel has an independent effect on participants' political ideology, the data do clearly show that the prosperity and social gospels act on participants' political ideologies in distinctly different directions. I am unable to say with certainty why the social gospel treatment has a larger effect than the prosperity gospel treatment, but I suspect it is because the politically relevant cues this message provides are more overt than the politically relevant cues provided by the prosperity gospel. While the social gospel treatment makes explicit mention of politics ("There are spirits that seem to animate our legislation, that seem to animate our politics ... and pull them away from God's intent"), the prosperity gospel makes no such explicit reference, in keeping with what is typical of most prosperity gospel rhetoric. Therefore, it seems reasonable to expect that individuals would, in general, have a harder time mapping the prosperity gospel message to their political ideology.

Political knowledge and pre-treatment partisan identity appear to condition the treatment effects on the ideological index measure. The most striking finding is that high-political knowledge Republicans appear to move more in response to the treatments than do low-political knowledge Republicans. Whereas there is little discernable effect from either the prosperity ($-0.04, p = .83$) or social ($-0.06, p = .73$) treatment among low-political

knowledge Republicans⁶, both the prosperity (0.18, $p = .03$) and the social (0.22, $p = .06$) treatments move high-political knowledge Republicans in a liberal direction on the political ideology index measure. I proceed with caution in interpreting these results, since none of the effects withstand Bonferroni correction and the small sample size in the low-political knowledge Republican subgroup ($n = 29$) renders statistical inference more difficult.

I expected highly politically knowledgeable Republicans to successfully counterargue the political implications of a religious message that is incongruent with their partisan ideology. That they do not appear to counterargue the politically relevant cues of the social gospel may be because they are less likely to critically analyze the implications of messages that are not overtly political (Kim 2018) or because the social gospel message is congruent with another salient identity – such as a religious one. This latter theory has face validity, since the majority (67 percent) of the high-political knowledge Republicans who were randomly assigned to the social gospel treatment group identified (pre-treatment) as Christians. This finding has potentially significant implications for political campaigns that may wish to appeal to traditionally Republican voters with liberal messages.

The prosperity and social treatment effects on the ideological index also appear to be conditioned by participants' religious affiliation. Prosperity gospel exposure has little discernable effect on Christians' political ideology (0.01, $p = .87$) and a modest effect in a conservative direction on non-Christians' political ideology (-.07, $p = .37$) in the covariate-adjusted regression, though neither are statistically significant. Social gospel exposure

⁶ Low-political knowledge Democrats, on the other hand, show modest evidence of uncritically accepting the implicit political cues of both the prosperity and treatment gospels and moving in the corresponding directions: Prosperity treatment moved low-political knowledge Democrats in a conservative direction on the ideology index (-0.22, $p = .26$) and social treatment moved low-political knowledge Democrats in a liberal direction on the ideology index (0.28, $p = .11$), though neither achieved statistical significance.

moves both Christians' (0.18, $p = .01$) and non-Christians' (0.06, $p = .39$) ideologies in a liberal direction, though only the former is statistically significant and withstands Bonferroni correction.

3.4 Behavioral Measure

Rates of clicking links at the end of the survey were very low, so this measure should be examined with caution. No clear distinction between exposure to the prosperity gospel treatment and the social gospel treatment emerged in the behavioral measure. Both treatments increased likelihood of clicking links, with the average treatment effect of the social gospel (.02, $p = .82$) slightly edging out the effect size of the prosperity gospel average treatment effect (.01, $p = .73$), though neither effects were statistically significance. The minimum detectable effect size for both the prosperity gospel and social gospel treatment is .04.

3.5 Heterogeneous Effects by Christian Tradition and Religiosity

While the strength of an experimental methodology is that it allows for treatments to be delivered to randomly assigned participants in a manner that is orthogonal to their religious affiliation and preferences, one might nonetheless wonder whether treatment effects were moderated by variance in those characteristics. I test for this possibility by analyzing outcomes separately for participants across three religious traditions: white evangelical Protestant ($n = 119$), white mainline Protestant ($n = 43$) and Catholic ($n = 153$) congregations. Note that these labels apply to the congregations themselves and not necessarily the individual members of the congregation. That is, not all members of traditionally white evangelical Protestant churches identify as Caucasian, etc. Due to the

smaller sample sizes, results must be examined with caution. Unfortunately, the sample did not have a sufficient number of participants to analyze separately the treatment effects among black mainline Protestants ($n = 14$). Figure 3 displays prosperity and social gospel treatment effects on vote intention, support for Donald Trump's reelection and views on the role of government for the three Christian traditions.

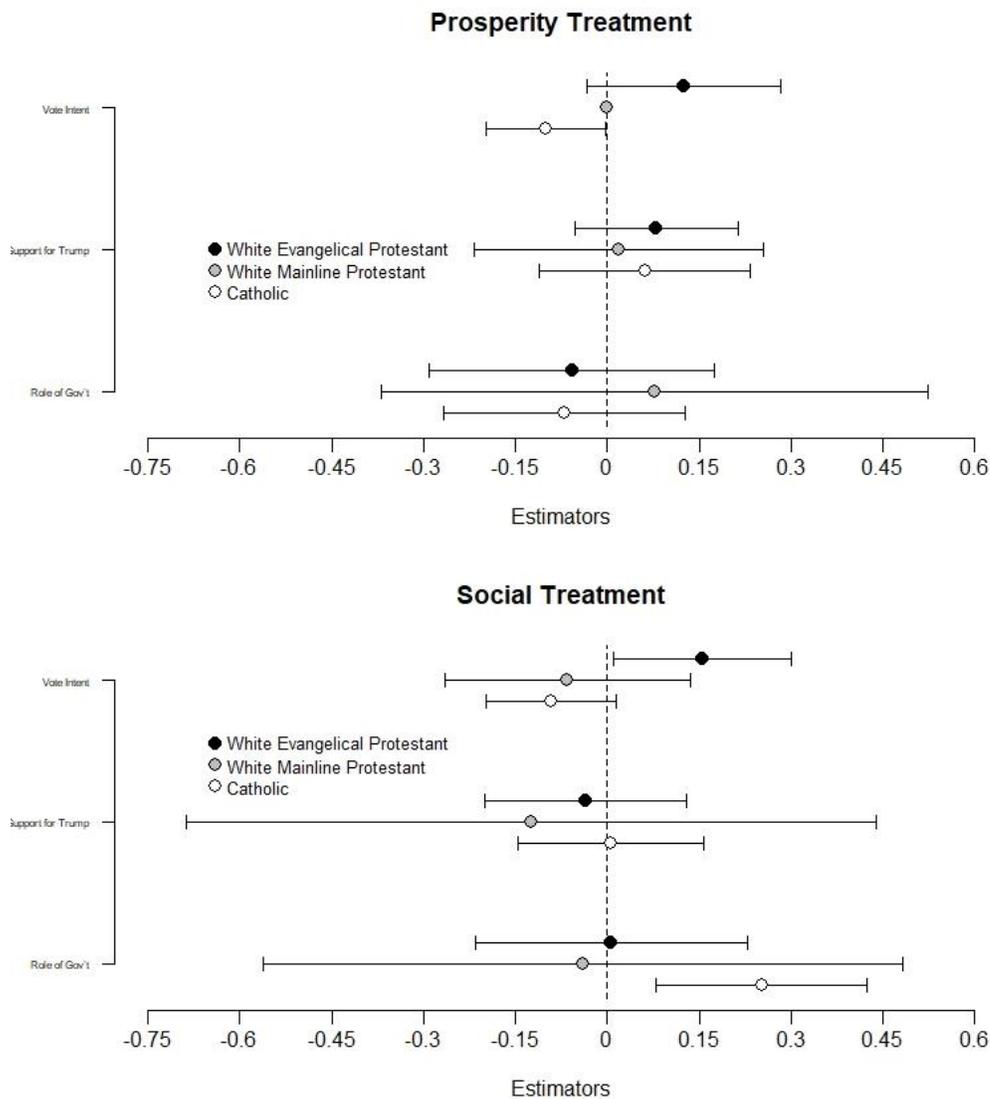


Figure 3: Prosperity and Social Treatment Effects by Religious Tradition⁷

⁷ Because all ($n = 16$) members of white mainline Protestant congregations in the prosperity treatment group indicated they intended to vote in the 2020 presidential elections, I was unable to fit a regression model for this outcome variable.

Some differences emerge in both the strength and direction of treatment effects across members of the three Christian traditions. While in Section 3.1, I found that the prosperity gospel's dampening effect on vote intention was limited to non-Christians, the heterogeneous effects analysis by Christian tradition suggests that this conclusion masks variance across Christian traditions. While the prosperity gospel treatment (0.12, $p = .12$) had a weakly positive effect on vote intention among members of white evangelical Protestant congregations, the prosperity gospel treatment decreased Catholics' vote intention (-0.11, $p = .03$). Because prosperity gospel messages are more common among Pentecostal and other evangelical congregations than they are among Catholic congregations (Wald and Legee 2009), one way to interpret this finding is that internalization of the politically relevant cues of the prosperity gospel may depend on one's familiarity with messages typical of this theology, or more specifically on a perceived congruence between these messages and messages one has been previously exposed to through worship. Given that prosperity and social gospel exposure both decreased Catholics' vote intentions, another interpretation is that Catholics may be less politically motivated by religious messages in general. Future research is needed to explore this.

While the treatment effects did not have a discernably different effect on support for Trump across the three Christian traditions, differences emerge in the treatment effects on attitudes about the role of government. Prosperity treatment modestly moved Catholics' attitudes in a conservative direction (-0.07, $p = .49$), while social treatment moved Catholics' attitudes in a liberal direction (0.25, $p = .005$) in the covariate-adjusted model. The latter effect withstands Bonferroni correction. Neither prosperity nor social treatment

significantly moved members of white evangelical or mainline Protestant congregations' attitudes about the role of government.

While in Section 3.2, I found that prosperity gospel exposure uniformly decreased Christians' and non-Christians' stated intent to vote for Trump in the 2020 presidential election, the covariate-adjusted models for the three Christian traditions here show that prosperity treatment weakly increases support for Trump among members of white evangelical Protestant congregations (0.09, $p = .21$), white mainline Protestant congregations (0.06, $p = .45$) and Catholic congregations (0.06, $p = .49$). Due to the smaller sample sizes and lack of statistical significance, these results could just be noise. However, it suggests that the negative effect on support for Trump among Christians may be driven by Christians who fall outside the three dominant traditions analyzed here.

One might also wonder whether treatment effects were moderated by individuals' religiosity. I tested for this by analyzing prosperity treatment effects by variance in measures of religious participation (church attendance) and private devotionism (reading Scripture outside church) (see Figure 4). The data suggest a weak difference in treatment effect between frequent and infrequent church attenders. Whereas prosperity gospel exposure modestly decreases vote intention among Christians who attend church less than once per year (-0.08, $p = .22$), prosperity treatment has a modestly positive effect on vote intention among Christians who attend church once per month or more (0.09, $p = .16$), though the difference in treatment effect sizes is not statistically significant. There is little discernable prosperity treatment effect on attitudes about the role of government among frequent churchgoers, but prosperity treatment modestly moves infrequent churchgoers' attitudes on the role of government in a liberal direction (0.14, $p = .08$), though the effect

is not statistically significant. Again, due to the smaller sample sizes, I cannot confidently draw conclusions from these differences in treatment effects. But the difference in

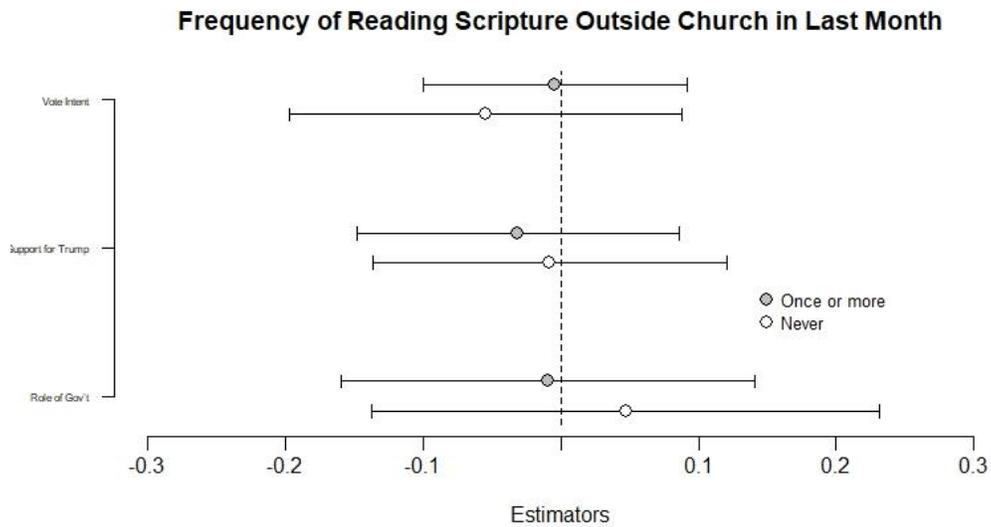
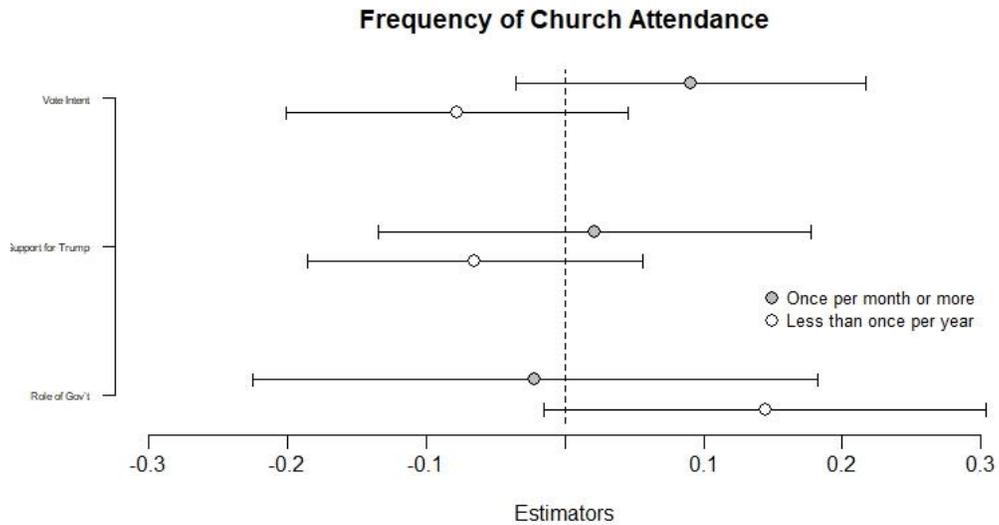


Figure 4: Prosperity Treatment Effects on Vote Intention, Support for Donald Trump and Attitudes about Role of Government by Measures of Religiosity

treatment effects on the ideological measure suggests that the novelty of the religious message may impact the strength of the treatment effect – those Christians who attend

church less frequently are, in general, less likely to be exposed to religious messages, and hence could be more likely to be swayed by them. Alternatively, those Christians who attend church less frequently may rely less on religious motivations in guiding their worldview and hence may have their political outcomes affected less by religious messages in general. Because I did not measure the degree to which participants look to religion to shape their worldview, I cannot directly test this.

The effect of exposure to the prosperity gospel message does not appear to depend on participants' frequency of reading Scripture outside church, as there is little discernable difference in effect on vote intention, support for Trump or attitudes about the role of government between those who have not read Scripture outside church in the last month and those who have read Scripture once or more.

4. Conclusion

Trends toward secularism notwithstanding, the ubiquitous role religion plays in American society makes understanding the influence religion has on political attitudes and behavior an important endeavor. Given the growing popularity of the prosperity gospel movement, it is important to explore the influence it has on political outcomes among those exposed to its messages.

In this research endeavor, I used an experimental approach to explore the influence two types of religious messages – the prosperity gospel and the social gospel – have on political attitudes and behaviors. I exposed participants recruited on Amazon's Mechanical Turk platform to audio recordings pieced together from actual prosperity and social gospel sermons and measured political attitudes and behavior using several outcome variables.

Contrary to previous research findings (McClendon and Riedl 2015), I found no evidence that the self-affirming prosperity gospel increases feelings of internal political efficacy above and beyond exposure to the not-explicitly self-affirming social gospel. I also found that exposure to the prosperity gospel dampens intention to vote among participants (an effect that was driven by non-Christians and Catholics) and found weak evidence that it decreases affinity to the Republican and Democratic parties and increases conservative views on the role of government and attitudes about government regulation. These findings are in keeping with a larger political science literature showing that the underlying values conveyed by non-political messages may affect political outcomes. Findings are also in keeping with literature showing that messages that are incongruent with one's worldview are critically analyzed and counterargued whereas congruent messages are uncritically accepted – with a potentially significant exception for religious messages with liberal political undertones seemingly being uncritically accepted by high-political knowledge Republicans.

4.1 Implications

As the prosperity gospel has increased in popularity among black Christians (Koch 2009) and, to a lesser degree, Latinx Christians (Bowler 2013), scholars have asked whether prosperity gospel adherence among black and Latinx churchgoers could open the door for conservative political influence (Harris-Lacewell 2007, Wilson 2009). While I did not find evidence that prosperity gospel exposure moved black participants toward conservative political attitudes or greater affinity with the Republican Party and its current flagbearer above and beyond other participants, I did not have a sufficient number of black mainline Protestants in my sample ($n = 14$) to allow for examination of the prosperity

gospel's effect on this population in particular. Future research should oversample from this group to improve the ability to make statistical inferences. Given the prosperity gospel's disproportionate popularity in southern states such as Georgia and Texas with large black and Latinx populations and shifting electoral maps, this line of research could have potentially major electoral implications. It will be of great interest to examine whether and, if so, how these messages interact with salient social identities to shape civic participation.

My findings also have potential implications for understanding the phenomenon of religious disaffiliation and de-identification. Margolis (2018), in an enterprising work, found evidence that partisans make decisions about denominational affiliation and whether or not to remain active in/return to a church community based on partisan considerations – a notable finding because it is contrary to the popular wisdom in social science that partisan decisions are affected by religious considerations, but not the other way around. Other research has shown that differences, political and otherwise, within congregations are principally responsible for patterns of disaffiliation (Djupe, Neiheisel and Sokhey 2017), that choice of denomination is increasingly voluntary (Leege 1993) and that the increased salience of religio-political groups leads to higher rates of de-identification (Djupe, Neiheisel and Conger 2018). As the prosperity gospel continues to grow in popularity – especially among groups such as black mainline Protestants whose political identities tend to be incongruent with prosperity rhetoric's politically relevant cues – could it contribute to increasing levels of religious disaffiliation and de-identification? Future research should examine this.

Though the present research examines the prosperity gospel's effects on political outcomes, it is also an open question how *politics* itself is molding the prosperity gospel. The theology has long been a black sheep of the Christian family (Bowler 2013), but under President Donald Trump, it is gaining an increasingly prominent place in the religio-political elite of the Republican Party (Schreckinger 2015, Peters and Dias 2019). To date, many of the most famous prosperity gospel preachers have tended to refrain from overtly political rhetoric or electioneering of their sizable congregations (Bowler 2013, Koch 2009, Walton 2009). As prosperity preachers take an increasingly prominent role in the politics of the day, could this change? And if prosperity preachers become increasingly politically active, will this lead to the creation of a new religio-political bloc analogous to today's Christian Right? Future research should examine these questions as well.

4.2 Limitations and Avenues for Future Research

The experimental methodology employed in the present research has several limitations that could be addressed in future research. Participants' partisan identities were measured immediately pre-treatment, thus potentially tipping off participants to process the treatments and answer the post-treatment questions in a way that would maintain consistency with their pre-treatment answers (Coppock, Green and Porter 2018, McClendon and Riedl 2015). Future research could attempt to replicate and expand on this work by using a multi-wave experimental design in which a period of several days serves as a buffer between participants completing the pre-treatment battery of questions and the treatment/post-treatment measures.

A multi-wave experimental design could also help address a question that the present endeavor is unable to answer: Do the treatment effects persist? Treatments that make

subjects' preexisting knowledge more accessible tend to be fleeting, whereas treatments that make preexisting knowledge more applicable (for instance, by making connections between concepts) or especially treatments that introduce new information are more likely to persist (Coppock 2017). The present research would most likely fall into the applicability camp, but future research is needed to confirm this and to ascertain for how long the treatment effects persist.

Future research should look to improve upon the behavioral measures used in the present endeavor, either by using voting records to verify whether participants voted in an upcoming election or by developing a superior behavioral measure than my measure for clicking links at the end of the survey experiment. McClendon and Rield (2015), for instance, in their pioneering experimental work on the prosperity gospel's effects on political outcomes in Nairobi, partnered with two nongovernmental organizations that promote political activism. Participants in the experiment were given the opportunity to take a pamphlet of information about the organizations, sign up to join their mailing lists and participate in a text-message campaign organized by one of the groups. Future research should attempt to identify similarly verifiable and externally valid measures of political behavior in exploring the prosperity gospel's effects on political outcomes in the American context.

Random assignment and control strengthen the internal validity of drawing causal inferences in experiments, but external validity can pose a challenge (see, for instance, Chong and Junn 2011). Notwithstanding the prevalence of prosperity preachers on the airwaves and on bookshelves, the primary venue for exposure to the prosperity gospel for many worshippers is still likely to be inside a congregation among fellow adherents. In

light on this, future experimental research could expand on the present endeavor by attempting to improve the external validity through tweaking the manner in which the treatment is delivered. Strategies utilized by other experimental social scientists can be instructive here. For instance, in conducting in-person studies, political scientists have embedded their treatment into a natural medium (e.g. into a television broadcast) to improve external validity and to create a better cover story for the experiment, thereby potentially decreasing the likelihood participants would sniff out the purpose and alter their responses accordingly (see, for instance, Iyengar, Peters and Kinder 1982 and Ansolabehere, Iyengar, Simon and Valentino 1994).

The present endeavor attempted to maximize external validity of the treatments by drawing language from actual social and prosperity gospel sermons in constructing the treatments, but it did not examine exposure to these types of religious messages in a natural setting. Future research could do this by investigating religious broadcasting's effect on voting, for instance, by examining how consuming religious broadcasting influences vote choice (borrowing from the methodology developed by Martin and Yurukoglu 2017) and political attitudes (borrowing from the methodology, for instance, of Kim 2018).

Finally, as detailed above, the present research falls squarely into the theoretical framework of examining religion as a mental phenomenon. The benefit of the experimental methodology employed here is that it allows me to isolate the effect of the religious message from the social and organizational elements of churches. However, as Wald, Owen and Hill Jr. write: "Individuals do not simply reason through the political implications of their religious views in a vacuum" (1988, 546). Exposure to and acceptance and internalization of religious messages results in part from cognitive/psychological

processes, but social processes also play a significant role. Future research should explore the prosperity gospel's effects on political outcomes from the theoretical perspective of religion as a social phenomenon. This could be done through field surveys of prosperity churchgoers that take into effect congregation-level effects. Experimental methodologies can also be adapted to factor in the social element of information processing by giving participants an opportunity to deliberate on religious messages (Druckman 2004).

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Appendices

Appendix A.1: Prosperity Gospel Treatment Message

The scripture says God takes us from glory to glory, from victory to victory. If you will walk in humility and always give God the credit, there is no limit to how high He will take you. Because you're honoring Him, because you say, 'as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord,' God is speeding things up. What should have taken your whole life, is going to happen in a fraction of the time. There are things that should take you years to accomplish. Years to get out of debt, years to break an addiction, years to set a new standard. But God is going to catapult you ahead. You keep sowing seeds in God's name, He will bring you a harvest. Right now, God is working behind the scenes in your life. God wants to make you an example of His goodness. You've worked hard, you've been faithful. Get ready, the curtain is about to come up. God is about to show people who you really are. You are coming into a new level of prominence, a new level of influence, a new level of income. God is about to endorse you. People are going to see the greatness He put in you in Jesus' name. When you keep the right attitude, all things will work for your good. Then, when you face dreams that look too big, obstacles that seem insurmountable, scary places, you can look back and see how God brought you through in the past. How He made a way where you didn't see a way. How He gave you peace that surpassed understanding, gave you strength to do what you couldn't do on your own. Life is too short to settle for things that are less than what you know is in you. You were created to soar.

Appendix A.2: Social Gospel Treatment Message

One thing that the Gospel is not is escapist. The Gospel is contending with the world as it is. Don't try to hide from the painful realities with which you are wrestling. Know that though you are delayed, you may not be moving, but God is still moving. You may be bound in one location, but God is moving all around in ways that you see and in ways that you cannot see. Blessing is God saying, 'I am moving you toward my new reality.' But the blessing is not without struggle. There is no struggle without blessing, and there is no blessing without struggle. The problem with us, is we've learned how to live in blessing, but we've forgotten how to live in struggle. We speak of blessing as if it is God doing something nice and sweet and all we have to do is unwrap the blessing. But the Bible says, "Whoever has a bountiful eye will be blessed, for he shares his bread with the poor." God commands His people to care for the poor, to loose the chains of injustice and to set the oppressed free. God knows in order for us to be faithful, we've got to learn how to deal in ugly places with ugly realities. There are spirits that seem to animate our legislation, that seem to animate our politics, that seem to animate our economy, that seem to animate our theology and pull them away from God's intent. Our spiritual work is to name the unclean spirits inside of us, and outside of us, and to tell them to get out of the church, to get out of the people, to get out of all of the things that they use to manipulate and destroy us. Do you know how to live in the midst of struggle? You live by keeping joy in your heart and knowing that God will not abandon you in the midst of your journey.

Appendix A.3: Placebo Message

Spread 1 tablespoon of butter over a 13 by 9 by 2-inch baking dish. Melt 1 tablespoon each of butter and oil in a deep large nonstick frying pan over medium-high heat. Sprinkle the chicken with 1/2 teaspoon each of salt and pepper. Add the chicken to the hot pan and cook until pale golden and just cooked through, about 4 minutes per side. Transfer the chicken to a plate to cool slightly. Coarsely shred the chicken into bite-size pieces and into a large bowl. Meanwhile, add 1 tablespoon each of butter and oil to the same pan. Add the mushrooms and sauté over medium-high heat until the liquid from the mushrooms evaporates and the mushrooms become pale golden, about 12 minutes. Add the onion, garlic and thyme, and sauté until the onion is translucent, about 8 minutes. Add the wine and simmer until it evaporates, about 2 minutes. Transfer the mushroom mixture to the bowl with the chicken. Melt 3 more tablespoons butter in the same pan over medium-low heat. Add the flour and whisk for 2 minutes. Whisk in the milk, cream, broth, nutmeg, remaining 1 3/4 teaspoons salt, and remaining 3/4 teaspoon pepper. Increase the heat to high. Cover and bring to a boil. Simmer, uncovered, until the sauce thickens slightly, whisking often, about 10 minutes. Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil. Add the linguine and cook until it is tender but still firm to the bite, stirring occasionally, about 9 minutes. Drain. Add the linguine, sauce, peas, and parsley to the chicken mixture. Toss until the sauce coats the pasta and the mixture is well blended.

Appendix B.1: Correspondence with Bradley Koch on Treatment Authenticity

Hi Brad,

Thank you so much for your thoughtful response. I tend to think exposure to the treatments will trigger preexisting beliefs or identities, and so I expect the treatments' effect to be moderated by strength and direction of partisanship and by political knowledge. I will follow your advice and incorporate more Prosperity-specific jargon into the message; I will be sure to add in some of those words in appropriate places.

Thank you again!

Best,
David

On Wed, May 1, 2019 at 10:27 AM Bradley Koch wrote:

Hi David,

It's great that you're moving this area forward! The messages look good to me. One question, though, is whether you think exposure to the treatments will have an immediate cognitive effect or if it will trigger preexisting beliefs or identities. If the latter, you might consider incorporating more argot into the Prosperity treatment. For example, words like "sow," "seed," and "claim" would be recognizable to those who are already a part of the Prosperity Gospel movement. I hope that's helpful. Don't hesitate to let me know if I can offer anything else. Good luck with the project!

Best,
Brad

Bradley A. Koch, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Sociology
Georgia College
Department of Government and Sociology
Milledgeville, GA 31061
<http://www.bradleykoch.com>

On Mon, Apr 29, 2019 at 8:47 PM David Beavers <dbeavers@gwmail.gwu.edu> wrote:

Hi Professor Koch,

I'm a graduate student at George Washington University in Washington, D.C., and I'm currently working on a thesis looking at how exposure to the prosperity gospel affects individuals' political attitudes and behavior. As part of my research, I'm designing an

experiment where I'll expose participants to sample treatment prosperity and social gospel messages, then survey their political beliefs.

I read and took inspiration from your doctoral dissertation. Given your knowledge in this area, I was hoping you may take a glance at the sample prosperity and social gospel messages I intend to use in my experiment and let me know if you think they're a fair reflection? I crafted both from snippets of actual sermons.

Thank you very much for your time and attention.

Kind regards,
David Beavers

Prosperity

The scripture says God takes us from glory to glory, from victory to victory. If you will walk in humility and always give God the credit, there is no limit to how high He will take you. Because you're honoring Him, because you say, 'as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord,' God is speeding things up. What should have taken your whole life, is going to happen in a fraction of the time. There are things that should take you years to accomplish. Years to get out of debt, years to break an addiction, years to set a new standard. But God is going to catapult you ahead. You keep honoring God, being your best, He will open doors you never dreamed would open. Right now, God is working behind the scenes in your life. God wants to make you an example of His goodness. You've worked hard, you've been faithful. Get ready, the curtain is about to come up. God is about to show people who you really are. You are coming into a new level of prominence, a new level of influence, a new level of income. God is about to endorse you. People are going to see the greatness He put in you in Jesus' name. When you keep the right attitude, all things will work for your good. Then, when you face dreams that look too big, obstacles that seem insurmountable, scary places, you can look back and see how God brought you through in the past. How He made a way where you didn't see a way. How He gave you peace that past understanding, gave you strength to do what you couldn't do on your own. Life is too short to settle for things that are less than what you know is in you. You were created to soar.

Social

One thing that the Gospel is not is escapist. The Gospel is contending with the world as it is. Don't try to hide from the painful realities with which you are wrestling. Know that though you are delayed, you may not be moving, but God is still moving. You may be bound in one location, but God is moving all around in ways that you see and in ways that you cannot see. Blessing is God saying, 'I am moving you toward my new reality.' But the blessing is not without struggle. There is no struggle without blessing, and there is no blessing without struggle. Jesus says to the poor people all around him: 'God is still moving.' To the hungry people: 'God is still moving.' To the weeping people: 'God is still moving.' The problem with us, is we've learned how to live in blessing, but we've forgotten how to live in struggle.

We speak of blessing as if it is God doing something nice and sweet and all we have to do is unwrap the blessing. God knows in order for us to be faithful, we've got to learn how to deal in ugly places with ugly realities. There are spirits that seem to animate our legislation, that seem to animate our politics, that seem to animate our economy, that seem to animate our theology and pull them away from God's intent. Our spiritual work is to name the unclean spirits inside of us, and outside of us, and to tell them to get out of the church, to get out of the people, to get out of all of the things that they use to manipulate and destroy us. Do you know how to live in the midst of struggle? You live by keeping joy in your heart and knowing that God will not abandon you in the midst of your journey.

Appendix B.2: Correspondence with Eric McDaniel on Treatment Authenticity

Prof. McDaniel,

My turn to apologize for the slow response. This is really helpful feedback, I appreciate you taking the time to look through these and offer your perspective. I'll tinker with the Social Gospel message to make more explicit the need for Christians to act to protect the marginalized.

Thank you again your time and attention.

Best,
David

On Mon, May 6, 2019 at 2:08 PM McDaniel, Eric L wrote:

David,

Sorry for taking so long to get back to you about your treatments. I believe the Prosperity Gospel message is on point. The Social Gospel message is close but no fully there. I suggest adding language about the need for Christians to act and to protect the marginalized. And linking that to the main teachings of Christ.

To put it another way, I think of the Prosperity Gospel as putting everything on God, whereas the Social Gospel puts it on us.

Let me know if you have any other questions.

Best,
Eric L. McDaniel

Associate Professor
Department of Governmet
University of Texas at Austin

From: David Beavers <dbeavers@gwmail.gwu.edu>

Sent: Thursday, May 2, 2019 8:57 AM

To: McDaniel, Eric L

Subject: Re: Prosperity gospel research

Prof. McDaniel,

Thanks in advance for taking a look at this. And thanks for sharing that article; I'm largely basing my research design off of that piece. I'm glad to know I'm on the right track by borrowing from it!

Best,
David

Sent from my iPhone

On May 1, 2019, at 09:06, McDaniel, Eric L wrote:

David,

Thank you for contacting me. I will take a look at it. I also suggest you take a look at an article in JOP, which ran an experiment using prosperity gospel language.

<https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/abs/10.1086/682717?mobileUi=0&journalCode=jop>

Sent via the Samsung Galaxy S8+, an AT&T 5G Evolution capable smartphone

----- Original message -----

From: David Beavers <dbeavers@gwmail.gwu.edu>
Date: 4/29/19 7:34 PM (GMT-06:00)
To: "McDaniel, Eric L"
Subject: Prosperity gospel research

Hi Professor McDaniel,

I'm a graduate student at George Washington University, and I'm currently working on a thesis looking at how exposure to the prosperity gospel affects individuals' political attitudes and behavior. As part of my research, I'm designing an experiment where I'll expose participants to sample treatment prosperity and social gospel messages, then survey their political beliefs.

I've read and taken inspiration from several of your papers on religious beliefs and political attitudes and behavior. Given your knowledge in this area, I was hoping you may take a glance at the sample prosperity and social gospel messages I intend to use in my experiment and let me know if you think they're a fair reflection. I crafted both from snippets of actual sermons.

Thank you very much for your time and attention.

Kind regards,
David Beavers

Prosperity

The scripture says God takes us from glory to glory, from victory to victory. If you will walk in humility and always give God the credit, there is no limit to how high He will take you. Because you're honoring Him, because you say, 'as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord,' God is speeding things up. What should have taken your whole life, is going to happen in a fraction of the time. There are things that should take you years to accomplish. Years to get out of debt, years to break an addiction, years to set a new standard. But God is going to catapult you ahead. You keep honoring God, being your best, He will open doors you never dreamed would open. Right now, God is working behind the scenes in your life. God wants to make you an example of His goodness. You've worked hard, you've been faithful. Get ready, the curtain is about to come up. God is about to show people who you really are. You are coming into a new level of prominence, a new level of influence, a new level of income. God is about to endorse you. People are going to see the greatness He put in you in Jesus' name. When you keep the right attitude, all things will work for your good. Then, when you face dreams that look too big, obstacles that seem insurmountable, scary places, you can look back and see how God brought you through in the past. How He made a way where you didn't see a way. How He gave you peace that past understanding, gave you strength to do what you couldn't do on your own. Life is too short to settle for things that are less than what you know is in you. You were created to soar.

Social

One thing that the Gospel is not is escapist. The Gospel is contending with the world as it is. Don't try to hide from the painful realities with which you are wrestling. Know that though you are delayed, you may not be moving, but God is still moving. You may be bound in one location, but God is moving all around in ways that you see and in ways that you cannot see. Blessing is God saying, 'I am moving you toward my new reality.' But the blessing is not without struggle. There is no struggle without blessing, and there is no blessing without struggle. Jesus says to the poor people all around him: 'God is still moving.' To the hungry people: 'God is still moving.' To the weeping people: 'God is still moving.' The problem with us, is we've learned how to live in blessing, but we've forgotten how to live in struggle. We speak of blessing as if it is God doing something nice and sweet and all we have to do is unwrap the blessing. God knows in order for us to be faithful, we've got to learn how to deal in ugly places with ugly realities. There are spirits that seem to animate our legislation, that seem to animate our politics, that seem to animate our economy, that seem to animate our theology and pull them away from God's intent. Our spiritual work is to name the unclean spirits inside of us, and outside of us, and to tell them to get out of the church, to get out of the people, to get out of all of the things that they use to manipulate and destroy us. Do you

know how to live in the midst of struggle? You live by keeping joy in your heart and knowing that God will not abandon you in the midst of your journey.

Appendix B.3: Correspondence with Randall Stephens on Treatment Authenticity

Prof. Stephens,

Thank you for your thoughtful response. I made sure Kate Bowler's book on the topic was among the first things I read before embarking on this research project, and it's been a tremendous resource. Thank you as well for sharing those recent articles and for suggesting Rauschenbusch's book; I will add that to my reading list!

Best regards,
David

On Thu, May 2, 2019 at 6:16 AM Randall J. Stephens wrote:

Dear David:

This sounds like a great project and one that is esp relevant now with the current political implications of the prosperity message. Kate Bowler's book on the topic is, I think, the best thing out there on the ethnographic/religious studies perspective.

I think these are fair summaries of both. I suppose specific passages from scripture could be used to give it some extra grounding. Seems to me that even though Walter Rauschenbusch's A Theology for the Social Gospel is now over 100 years old, it still pretty effectively lays out the key themes well.

Best of luck on the project and I hope it goes well. Your project also reminded me of some recent reporting on the topic, like this from the Financial Times:

<https://www.ft.com/content/3990ce66-60a6-11e9-b285-3acd5d43599e> and this from the Harvard Political Review: <https://harvardpolitics.com/culture/tevangelistinchief/>

Best,
Randall Stephens

Associate Professor of British and American Studies
Niels Treschows hus
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Author's page: <http://www.hup.harvard.edu/results-list.php?author=9850>

Organization of American Historians Distinguished Lectureship Program:
<http://www.oah.org/lectures/lecturers/view/1730>

From: David Beavers <dbeavers@gwmail.gwu.edu>

Sent: 30 April 2019 02:44

To: Randall J. Stephens

Subject: Prosperity gospel thesis research

Hi Professor Stephens,

I'm a graduate student at George Washington University in Washington, D.C., and I'm currently working on a thesis looking at how exposure to the prosperity gospel affects individuals' political attitudes and behavior. As part of my research, I'm designing an experiment where I'll expose participants to sample treatment prosperity and social gospel messages, then survey their political beliefs.

I've read and taken inspiration from several of your papers on American Pentecostalism. Given your knowledge in this area, I was hoping you may take a glance at the sample prosperity and social gospel messages I intend to use in my experiment and let me know if you think they're a fair reflection? I crafted both from snippets of actual sermons.

Thank you very much for your time and attention.

Kind regards,
David Beavers

Prosperity

The scripture says God takes us from glory to glory, from victory to victory. If you will walk in humility and always give God the credit, there is no limit to how high He will take you. Because you're honoring Him, because you say, 'as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord,' God is speeding things up. What should have taken your whole life, is going to happen in a fraction of the time. There are things that should take you years to accomplish. Years to get out of debt, years to break an addiction, years to set a new standard. But God is going to catapult you ahead. You keep honoring God, being your best, He will open doors you never dreamed would open. Right now, God is working behind the scenes in your life. God wants to make you an example of His goodness. You've worked hard, you've been faithful. Get ready, the curtain is about to come up. God is about to show people who you really are. You are coming into a new level of prominence, a new level of influence, a new level of income. God is about to endorse you. People are going to see the greatness He put in you in Jesus' name. When you keep the right attitude, all things will work for your good. Then, when you face dreams that look too big, obstacles that seem insurmountable, scary places, you can look back and see how God brought you through in the past. How He made a way where you didn't see a way. How He gave you peace that past understanding, gave you

strength to do what you couldn't do on your own. Life is too short to settle for things that are less than what you know is in you. You were created to soar.

Social

One thing that the Gospel is not is escapist. The Gospel is contending with the world as it is. Don't try to hide from the painful realities with which you are wrestling. Know that though you are delayed, you may not be moving, but God is still moving. You may be bound in one location, but God is moving all around in ways that you see and in ways that you cannot see. Blessing is God saying, 'I am moving you toward my new reality.' But the blessing is not without struggle. There is no struggle without blessing, and there is no blessing without struggle. Jesus says to the poor people all around him: 'God is still moving.' To the hungry people: 'God is still moving.' To the weeping people: 'God is still moving.' The problem with us, is we've learned how to live in blessing, but we've forgotten how to live in struggle. We speak of blessing as if it is God doing something nice and sweet and all we have to do is unwrap the blessing. God knows in order for us to be faithful, we've got to learn how to deal in ugly places with ugly realities. There are spirits that seem to animate our legislation, that seem to animate our politics, that seem to animate our economy, that seem to animate our theology and pull them away from God's intent. Our spiritual work is to name the unclean spirits inside of us, and outside of us, and to tell them to get out of the church, to get out of the people, to get out of all of the things that they use to manipulate and destroy us. Do you know how to live in the midst of struggle? You live by keeping joy in your heart and knowing that God will not abandon you in the midst of your journey.