Flexibility in American religious life: an exploration of loyalty and purity

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Abstract

American social policy decisions are deeply intertwined with the religious lives of its citizens. Here we apply the tiered beliefs described in the Advocacy Coalition Framework to the views of several American Christian communities on social policy questions that involve (religiously defined) notions of sexual purity. We find a surprisingly large amount of variation in the policy beliefs, although this varies by denomination, and for Catholics varies by levels of loyalty to authority as well. We conclude that despite deep core beliefs about the fundamental nature of the world, and a scriptural orientation and notion of loyalty to authority defined by denomination, that there may be more policy flexibility at lower tiers of belief than the conventional wisdom would suggest.

Keywords

Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF)

Christianity

Religion

Sexuality

Social policy

Electronic supplementary material

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Introduction

Americans’ religious beliefs shape the outcomes of the national public policy process. This is particularly true for policy domains relating to matters on which religious authority figures may directly comment—most notably, normative questions linking public policies and individual moral behavior. Despite Lasswell’s 1943 call for “the integration of morals, science and policy” (Lasswell et al. 2003), it is rare for contemporary studies of politics and policy to go much beyond denominational descriptors (such as “born-again” or “Catholic”) to explore the complex beliefs of religious individuals (as noted in Dillon 2014). A more sophisticated view of religious Americans’ detailed policy preferences, and the extent adherence to religious authority and broader worldview shape those preferences, can highlight opportunities for policy “entrepreneurs” (North 1998) in many domains of public life. To demonstrate this complexity, and provide a way of thinking about opportunities for policy entrepreneurs, we fit an exploration of the preferences of specific American Christian communities on sexuality-related social policy into the Advocacy Coalition Framework (see Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1988; Sabatier 1988).

Scholars of religion and public policy have much to learn from one another. Church statements on issues of public policy are often cited as denominational standards even if some congregants in the pews think differently. A majority of white American Christians opposed Barack Obama in 2012 even though the positions of some mainline Protestant churches endorsed his stances on key issues such as war, health care, abortion, same-sex marriage, and so on (National Council of Churches 1999, 2014; Episcopal Church USA 2015; Newport 2012). Many political polling operations include religious denomination and church attendance without follow-up substantive questions in the standard control variables (see Richie 2013; Kniss and Numrich 2007; Kaplan 2004; Fox 2013). While appropriate for many research questions, this approach can also obscure meaningful variation. Dillon (2014) observes notable diversity of opinion within the “values voter” coalition on issues—specifically, gay marriage and abortion—even though this group is often perceived as a monolithic whole predetermined by denomination. More critically, public policy scholars simplify, from lack of engagement or textual knowledge, the deep religious impulses and Scriptural interpretations that inform and motivate religious Americans in their policy decisions (Ingersoll in Brint and Schroedel, vol II. 2009; Brint and Abruyten in Brint and Schroedel, vol. II, 2009; Sekulow 2006).

Nevertheless, literature in the policy process does take beliefs seriously. Somewhat ironically, the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF)—with coalitions organized around hierarchies of beliefs—has mostly been applied in environmental and energy policy (Weible et al. 2009, 126). Despite this, the ACF fits many areas of social policymaking quite well; in some sense, religious interpretation can play the role of technical information, and the hierarchies of beliefs help explain why something so profound as religious affiliation can sometimes go hand-in-hand with temporary political alliances and mutable policy preferences. Within the ACF, scholars simplify policy problems by looking within two competing coalitions at their *deep core beliefs*, which are very difficult to alter, the *policy core beliefs*, which are “of moderate scope and span the substantive… breadth of a policy subsystem,” and then *secondary beliefs* about policy that are “most likely to change over time” (Weible et al. 2009, 123–124). Although other models of the policy process also include an over-time component (see Kingdon 1995 on “policy windows” and Workman et al. 2009 on information in “punctuated equilibrium”), the ACF explicitly models the way all of these tiers of beliefs can practically form coalitions for one period but then experience change for the next. Exploring policy preferences among religious Americans in this domain, and then examining the extent those preferences are linked to more fundamental beliefs about the nature or the world and loyalty to authority, illustrates the extent of opportunities for coalitional rearrangements in future periods.

The following section lays out in more detail our argument linking literature on religious belief to literature on the public policy process. We then describe our data, methods, and results: we find considerable diversity of specific policy preferences among denominations while only for the Catholics in our sample do perceptions of loyalty strongly relate to an aggregate total of sexual purity positions. One of the advantages of our survey methodology is that our respondents come from particular congregations, allowing us to supplement our statistical results with clergy interviews and focus group discussions; following the statistical results, we highlight the extent that the focus groups support and qualify our quantitative findings. We conclude with some thoughts, both substantive and methodological, on future research.

Framing in the literature from two fields

Many studies of American elections include religious affiliation as a control variable, contemplating only average effects for broad categories, without exploring in detail the complexity of the connections to policy preferences.[1](http://eproofing.springer.com/journals/mainpage.php?token=OUlZ4SsDk_J1zbVJSFMe6nEZZBL6vz_S0sSI1J1B-ocP49kiJgYCcQ#Fn1) While statistically useful, and often appropriate for many research purposes, such approaches still miss divisions within denominations on specific policy proposals and interesting variation that may reveal room for social negotiation; and, since social negotiation will involve discussion between church members and church authority figures, the relationship (or absence of it) between issue positions and process positions (loyalty to authority) should shape our expectations about the path to social change. The policy process literature does include frameworks for incorporating more sophisticated beliefs, but research in this area has tended to focus on non-religious policy domains. Scholars of religion have much to contribute substantively to explanations of social policy dilemmas using those frameworks. Of particular interest is the relationship between loyalty to authority and preferred social policy: as American politicians look for opportunities to gain competitive electoral advantages, it should be particularly useful to know not only about the content of religious voters’ beliefs but also the relationship between the mass religious public and the elite participants.

Leaders, beliefs, and social policy in American elections and the policy process

The policy process in a democratic society ultimately involves, at some stage, elections—a mechanism for translating complex policy beliefs into choices among at most a handful of distinct candidates.[2](http://eproofing.springer.com/journals/mainpage.php?token=OUlZ4SsDk_J1zbVJSFMe6nEZZBL6vz_S0sSI1J1B-ocP49kiJgYCcQ#Fn2) Even sophisticated analysis of past voting behavior, given the relatively few choices, risks over-generalizing the direct link between denominational creed and policy preferences, potentially implying denominational consistency and policy inflexibility.[3](http://eproofing.springer.com/journals/mainpage.php?token=OUlZ4SsDk_J1zbVJSFMe6nEZZBL6vz_S0sSI1J1B-ocP49kiJgYCcQ#Fn3) In a fairly typical approach to thinking about religion in American electoral politics, Hagen et al. (2000, 38) used a simple denomination classification to frame an observation on the 2000 Republican presidential primary:

… from the start of the year, Evangelical Protestants favored Bush over McCain by a wider margin than did other Protestants. This may reflect… events that already had transpired: asked in a debate in Des Moines on 13 December to name the philosopher or thinking with whom he most identified, Bush responded, “Christ, because he changed my heart.”

Similarly, Campbell uses Evangelical religious identity to study the impact of “religious threat”—whether “Evangelicals are… threatened by the presence of secularists”—on voting behavior (2006, 104). This is a familiar story: in the broadest terms, individuals identifying with groups whose religious orthodoxy is socially conservative have tended in recent elections to favor Republicans and thus are assumed to favor a whole host of specific social policy positions found in party platforms.[4](http://eproofing.springer.com/journals/mainpage.php?token=OUlZ4SsDk_J1zbVJSFMe6nEZZBL6vz_S0sSI1J1B-ocP49kiJgYCcQ#Fn4) As we illustrate here, on specific issues, and in aggregate, there is a considerable amount of variation within denominations. We expand Dillon’s (2014) finding that positions on abortion and gay marriage vary independently within religious groups. We place several policy questions into a framework, the ACF, which helps to make sense of these apparent inconsistencies. In the context of the ACF, we should expect variation with lower-tiered policy beliefs because individual participants should be less certain about how to apply their deep core beliefs to the particular policy problems of the moment. This conundrum connects beliefs about the value of authority to lower-tiered social policy positions as well: the type of future coalitional possibilities based in this variation depends on individual loyalty to authority.

Individuals do not form policy-actionable preferences in a vacuum: religious Americans are participants in a web of often intersecting communities that have some sort of social organization. For those meaningfully engaged in Christian churches, leaders of many types will be part of their social organization. Zaller’s (1992) model of public opinion highlights the role of elite discourse in forming public opinion.[5](http://eproofing.springer.com/journals/mainpage.php?token=OUlZ4SsDk_J1zbVJSFMe6nEZZBL6vz_S0sSI1J1B-ocP49kiJgYCcQ#Fn5) Social scientists dispute the depth and sophistication of policy beliefs, the extent leaders influence those beliefs, how the beliefs can be recovered by survey research, and how beliefs in different policy domains interact with each other, especially if they are in conflict (Haidt 2012; Ammerman and Nancy 2009; Corbett and Corbett 1999; Green and John 2009).

Problems of competing values are particularly relevant for an analysis of religious imperatives. There are substantive sources of conflict (e.g., policies pitting compassion and fairness against purity), but also potentially conflict between sources of authority (individual judgment against various sources of external authority). In a careful evaluation of conflict on abortion policy, Alvarez and Brehm find that “conflicting core beliefs lead to ambivalence about policy choices” (1995, 1055). They conclude that it is imperative for further research to focus on “how core beliefs fit together” (1995, 1077). At least in a policymaking context, the ACF provides an elegant way of incorporating beliefs into thinking about problems of the policy process.

To apply the ACF in a religious context, we contemplate religious identification as the consequence of deep core beliefs, general social policy preferences as the policy core beliefs, and then specific applications as the lower-order and most easily altered beliefs. In our conception here, following in line with Haidt’s (2012) observations about the fundamental link between loyalty and authority, loyalty to the church and the acceptance of its authority can also be considered a component of the deep core belief, as can be a judgment about the fundamental nature of good and evil in the world. We will examine the alignment across multiple difficult questions, all regarding lower-tiered beliefs on specific policy questions relating to sexual purity, with views expressed on these other core beliefs.

Our approach is a bit different than many other applications of the ACF, in the sense that others have also focused more on the model’s improvements over a stages heuristic or focus on the use of technical information (for example, see: Ellison 1998, covering intergovernmental relations and Denver water politics). Some applications of the ACF contemplate religion, but of a different kind: Sabatier, Loomis, and McCarthy, in an application focused on forestry policy, construct an attitudinal scale based on the “‘timber religion’ of professional foresters” (1995, 223). The ACF is a powerful and flexible concept, though, used previously in applications as diverse as school language in Canada, airline regulation, water politics, FCC rules about television, and energy politics (Jenkins-Smith and Sabatier 1994). It can helpfully illuminate problems of religion and social policy as well.

While there have been some applications of the ACF to questions related to religion, these tend not to formalize the tiers of belief and instead focus on other aspects of the framework (Schorn 2005; Lugg and Robinson 2009). The question as framed by Jenkins-Smith et al. (2014) is: What counts as a deep core belief in the relevant coalition? Schorn (2005) applied the ACF to emergency contraception, but does not delve very deeply into the belief structure of an anti-abortion orientation. Here, we suggest in contrast that a decision on a particular question, like emergency contraception, should be considered as a lower-tiered belief, an application of deeper beliefs built into a denominational view of the world as sinful and loyalty to authority. This would be consistent with the guidance for applying the ACF in Jenkins-Smith et al.: deep core beliefs should be limited to “the ordering of primary values” (2014, 485).

American society faces both long and short-term decisions about social policy. In the ACF, the action within the policy subsystem produces short-term policy outputs and these cycle through external system events (Weible et al. 2009, 123) that ultimately reset the conditions for the two main coalitions in the policy subsystem. Many applications, like Schorn (2005), focus on a short-term outcome, in which the difference between levels of belief may not be very important. In the long run, as Americans become increasingly secularized (Fisher and Hout 2014), the “coalition opportunity structures” may be quite different and the interaction of lower-tiered policy beliefs may become less reliable.[6](http://eproofing.springer.com/journals/mainpage.php?token=OUlZ4SsDk_J1zbVJSFMe6nEZZBL6vz_S0sSI1J1B-ocP49kiJgYCcQ#Fn6) Our approach here focuses on current divides within a coalition of self-identified religious Americans, often presumed to be on average interested in a particular set of social policies. If we make some realistic assumptions about human behavior—policy actors are making decisions with some limited information[7](http://eproofing.springer.com/journals/mainpage.php?token=OUlZ4SsDk_J1zbVJSFMe6nEZZBL6vz_S0sSI1J1B-ocP49kiJgYCcQ#Fn7)—and accept North’s (1998) framework that policy entrepreneurs are constantly seeking new opportunities, then an exploration oriented toward the tiers of belief can provide insights about what types of opportunities might exist.

Policy beliefs and religious authority in modern American Christian life

It is well within the policy sciences tradition to take seriously lessons from sociology, psychology, and broader social science when examining policy choices (Lasswell et al. 2003). In particular, in application of the ACF, we need to explore the formation and durability of beliefs (or preferences) that are often taken as a primitive (that is, taken-as-given) of micro-economic models of political behavior.[8](http://eproofing.springer.com/journals/mainpage.php?token=OUlZ4SsDk_J1zbVJSFMe6nEZZBL6vz_S0sSI1J1B-ocP49kiJgYCcQ#Fn8) The ACF provides a way to link across types of beliefs from those most abstract, and yet most fundamental, to those most specific and subject to negotiation. At the higher level, we focus on certain key values that include a respect for and acceptance of authority, deep loyalty to the larger community, a rejection of impurity and desire for the sacred, care and compassion that derive from an expanded parental concern, and a commitment to fairness (Koleva et al. 2012, 185). These appear both directly (self-identified loyalty to authority, self-described belief about the nature of the world) and indirectly (through denomination preference, which serves as a proxy for theological and cultural perspectives); our conception of these core beliefs includes both ways that these can be expressed.

As a framework for approaching any kind of policy problem, the ACF leaves considerable room for debate about the exact nature of the tiers of belief and the level of their application. Many ACF applications focus on elite participants alone, where here we are contemplating the role of the elite participants (sources of religious authority) and the larger community (the congregants). Especially when focusing on the belief systems of the community at large, it is useful to fill the beliefs component of the ACF with concepts borrowed from “Moral Foundations Theory” (see Graham et al. 2012). Building on five core values, Graham et al. (2012) claim that Liberals prioritize Care and Fairness while conservatives prioritize loyalty, authority, and sanctity. These deep core beliefs are fundamental to the very moral foundations of each side:

…arguments about culture-war issues such as gay marriage, abortion, art and welfare spending should not be expected to influence or convince people on the other side, because attitudes about specific issues are based on deep intuitions, not on the specific reasons put forth during debate (Graham et al. 2012, 16).

The concept of tiers of beliefs in the ACF, though, would have us challenge the *complete* intractability of the objects of moral claims. We take Graham et al.’s (2012) point for the deeper core of beliefs, but find in our results the kind of variability at the lower tier consistent with the idea that applying these beliefs to policy problems can be difficult.

Nevertheless, we should not mistake variability in the application of lower-tiered beliefs for unimportance of deep core beliefs. Jenkins-Smith et al. (2014) argue in particular for the pairing of the ACF with the work of Mary Douglas and Aaron Wildavsky, emphasizing cultural worldviews. In this policy domain, the key insight comes from Douglas’ (2010, 181), who conceptualized religious communities as groups constructed around deeply held taboos of purity and impurity. For many American Christians, the Bible provides a very clear and commanding code of purity. For example, the Priestly theology of Leviticus grounds Christian traditions of purity and sin. It posits the existence of one supreme God who contends neither with a higher realm nor with competing gods or demons; there are no heavenly autonomous foes. Even the fallen angel, Satan, ultimately, is obedient to the one omniscient God. If God is perfect and there are no alternative gods or demons, from whence arises evil?

Only one creature remains with “demonic” power – the human being. Endowed with free will, his power is greater than any attributed to him by pagan society. Not only can he defy God but… he can drive God out of the sanctuary. In this respect, humans have replaced the demons (Milgrom 1991, 43).

Humans equipped with the demonic capacity to defy the divine plan can drive God not only out of the sanctuary, but out of the society, literally, out of the world. That is the cost of abandoning the sacred and endorsing contamination (Douglas 2010, 133).

This version of defining the problem admits “the right to invoke government power” because it is not merely a private affair (Stone 1989, 282). For these believers, the sin is not limited to the sinners alone. As Milgrom (2004, 15) explains:

When the evildoers are punished, they bring down the righteous with them. Those who perish with the wicked are not entirely blameless, however. They are inadvertent sinners who, by having allowed the wicked to flourish, have also contributed to the pollution of the sanctuary.

In this version of the theology, the implications of which are consistent with Bean’s observation that Evangelicals “refused to privatize their moral beliefs” (2014, 13), concerns about purity should dominate lower-order policy applications; of course, the extent that this is an important component of a deep core belief should vary across denominations with their corresponding interpretations.

For those denominations emphasizing this notion as a key component of their deep beliefs, applying purity principles to policy problems is an expression of one’s commitment to maintain and enforce deeply held beliefs about what is impure (Merolla et al. 2009, 161–162). Douglas adds another key point to better understand how views on specific policy issues may change over time, as has certainly been true for many Americans considering same-sex marriage, abortion or condoms in school. She notes that individuals and communities may claim to treat traditions as unchanging and, therefore, that which is pure and that which pollutes as immutable. But that is not the case except for communities that are dying (or, using the broad terminology of the ACF: impacted by external events). She adds: “It is part of our condition that the purity for which we strive and sacrifice so much turns out to be hard and dead as stone when we get it” (Douglas 2010, 162). Unlike Graham et al. cited above, Douglas asserts that while belief in sin or that the world is filled with evil or goodness may be unchangeable (for a focus on purity is a core value), its objects may well change over time (much as many biblical “pollutants” were abandoned over the past millennia). A way to fit this into the ACF is to consider the application of the rule about what is impure to be a secondary belief.

There will certainly be denominational variation in the deep core beliefs and guidance from religious leaders and authorities as to how to apply the denominational beliefs to particular problems. The minister from a small border state Pentecostal church we interviewed explained that same-sex marriage is not a beginning “but rather a concluding climax of compromise that will inevitably and ultimately result in divine judgment and human despair.” Similar views were expressed by Catholic authorities in the post-Obergefell statement that “It is profoundly immoral and unjust for the government to declare that two people of the same sex can constitute a marriage” (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops 2015). Conversely, some liberal churches applied their beliefs and sought to mobilize on behalf of those same-sex couples that want to marry (Putnam and Campbell 2010, 386; Johnson 2012). The president of Auburn Seminary calls out for marriage equality: “As people of faith, we believe that every human being is created in the image of God and has sacred worth. Laws that grant rights and protections to some but not to others, simply because of gender or sexual orientation, are moral outrages” (Henderson 2015). In 2015, the canons of the Episcopal Church USA were changed to make the rite of marriage available to all people, regardless of gender: “To our lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender brothers and sisters: The Episcopal Church welcomes you!” (Episcopal Church USA 2015). Better yet, in terms of applying deep core beliefs, is the United Church of Christ’s new motto “God Is Still Speaking” (United Church of Christ 2015).

Views can change as individuals apply their deep beliefs to the problems that confront them, with our without the sanction of their leaders. As one Methodist we interviewed from New England noted: “Same-sex marriage or homosexuality—at one time I was very judgmental. I didn’t know enough about the issue. But after someone that I worked with told me that he was gay, I thought to myself how could I judge this person. He didn’t change—he’s the same person I loved before. It opened my eyes a lot to this issue.” Popular perceptions of both Protestants and Catholics can be mixed in terms of the extent they march in step with their leaders: despite a theological grounding of a greater role of the individual in theological interpretation in Protestant denominations, on policy questions, Protestants can sometimes demonstrate great homogeneity (see Bean 2014) and Catholics can be influenced by the individualism of the dominant Protestant culture (see D’Antonio et al. 1996). From the point of view of looking forward to potential future coalitional opportunities, it is important to evaluate the way loyalty to authority interacts with deep core beliefs (enmeshed in denomination) to produce lower-tiered policy decisions.

There are also some components of deep core belief, directly tied to the concepts in this particular policy domain, which transcend denominations. Rather than measuring intensity of religiosity by frequency of church attendance (see Putnam and Campbell 2010, 390–394), we try to capture a different dimension, a dimension about emphasis for components of belief systems. Core beliefs about the nature of pervasive sin versus fundamental human goodness impact political engagement. As Gorski (2009, 101) notes, “there are some deep and nonnegotiable disagreements here, as regards the reality of divine Providence and the goodness of human nature” that cannot be bridged easily. This is a different kind of core belief than those centered on loyalty to authority, in the context of the ACF, because this is not subject to easy social negotiation, whereas loyalty to religious authority potentially empowers leaders to shift secondary beliefs. Secondary beliefs include stated positions on specific policy tradeoffs, as we illustrate here, and could include support for specific candidates or ballot measures in future applications. The key to distinguishing secondary beliefs from higher level beliefs is the extent that they involve a specific application rather than a general vague rule.

Data and approach

Our methodological approach is fundamentally different, with corresponding advantages and weaknesses, relative to other research in this area. Researchers generally cite such resources as the General Social Survey or the 2006 Faith Matters Survey, which rely on a nationally representative sample, with its attendant considerable strengths for statistical inference about national population-level beliefs. In contrast, we targeted specific congregations—obtaining a detailed sample around which we can have a great deal of contextual information to aid interpretation of the results. We then only consider certain groups, focus only on religious individuals (forgoing comparisons to non-religious, non-Christian Americans), have some limitations on generalizability, and face some practical implementation challenges—limitations all discussed below. Nevertheless, we can explore these layers of beliefs in ways that the other surveys simply cannot since they will not have large enough samples within congregations. These approaches supplement each other; as Lasswell observed, “the question is no longer whether a method is ‘justifiable,’ but how its data are interrelated with the results obtained by other methods” (Lasswell et al. 2003, 74). The religious life of Americans can be particularly difficult to study because it takes place in very small communities where context should matter. This approach also allowed us to conduct interviews and focus groups to allow the congregants to discuss these issues in their own words and to also talk separately to the church leaders. We first display some of the quantitative results and then return to the contextual information in the conclusion.

Our survey includes six hundred respondents from twelve churches, split across several church types: a northeast (relatively wealthy) Catholic church, two more racially and economically diverse Catholic churches in Southern California, five “mainline” Protestant churches, a Midwest urban and predominately black Protestant church, and three Evangelical churches.[9](http://eproofing.springer.com/journals/mainpage.php?token=OUlZ4SsDk_J1zbVJSFMe6nEZZBL6vz_S0sSI1J1B-ocP49kiJgYCcQ#Fn9) We attempted to get as many of the members of each congregation to respond to the surveys as possible; we obtain (by comparison to other survey work) reasonable response rates, which partially compensates for concerns about potential participation bias (present in any survey approach).[10](http://eproofing.springer.com/journals/mainpage.php?token=OUlZ4SsDk_J1zbVJSFMe6nEZZBL6vz_S0sSI1J1B-ocP49kiJgYCcQ#Fn10) We then held interviews and focus groups in each of the churches.

The surveys were administered online following solicitations to participate at each church. With the support of Christian denominational leaders and follow-up personal contact with local clergy, we located churches that fit our demographic goals of regional, racial and political diversity from within the Protestant and Catholic communities in the USA. When a list of email addresses is available, or other list paired with means of reaching the contact population, internet surveys may be superior to phone solicitations (Schonlau et al. 2002). In this case, we also wanted to efficiently use resources to capture as many responses as possible.

We use the survey data to analyze the relationship among several potential explanatory characteristics—age, worldview, religious affiliation, loyalty to church and community authority—and views on sexual purity. An ordered logistic regression model allows us to investigate which of the explanatory characteristics corresponds with increasing valued responses on the purity scale, without making assumptions about the magnitude of the increases. That is, we recognize and allow for disparate theological and personal importance for each of these questions and merely require that any increase at all in the purity scale indicate an increasing preference for sexual purity over other values.

We construct an additive scale for responses on sexual purity, which ranges from a value of zero to a value of 5 based off coding five questions from our survey. The questions cover a variety of related topics and are coded into affirmative (coded as 1) or negative (coded as 0) responses by question as follows:

Strongly agreeing or agreeing that “there is something fundamentally sinful about two people having sex outside of marriage because sex is a sacred act.”

Strongly agreeing or agreeing that “there is something fundamentally wrong about providing condoms or other forms of birth control to high school students.”

Strongly agreeing or agreeing that “we should be teaching abstinence in schools because sex between a man and a woman is sacred.”

Choosing that “what influences me most in thinking about homosexuality is that it seems unnatural and against what God wants of human beings” rather than “it is just and right to give same-sex couples the same rights as heterosexual couples” or declining to answer.

Choosing “children should not be raised in a home where two people of the same sex are in a sexual relationship” over “it is only compassionate to allow same-sex couples the right to have a family.”

We sum the answers to these questions to produce the scale; Table 1 provides summary statistics for the scores by denominational type. While imperfect, as any measure would be, this scale allows us to capture and consolidate this information to build a profile of views on sexual purity *in aggregate*. In terms of identifying opportunities for action at lower tiers of belief, the important observation is *not* that some Christians believe some things that are often associated with social conservatism in this policy domain. The important observation is how frequently individuals within denominational groups pick *only some* and *not all*, even though these questions seem quite related.

| **Table 1**Purity scale responses and church types (row percentages) |
| --- |
| **Church type (Number)** | **Purity scale score** |  |
| **0 (%)** | **1 (%)** | **2 (%)** | **3 (%)** | **4 (%)** | **5 (%)** | ***N*** |
| NE wealthy Catholic (1) | 28 | 17 | 13 | 15 | 17 | 11 | 95 |
| Diverse Catholic (2) | 7 | 11 | 18 | 19 | 18 | 28 | 135 |
| Mainline Protestant (5) | 36 | 28 | 17 | 8 | 5 | 5 | 258 |
| Black Protestant (1) | 7 | 7 | 9 | 30 | 41 | 6 | 54 |
| Evangelical(3) | 4 | 1 | 7 | 10 | 28 | 51 | 132 |

The individual responses provide an alternative perspective, explaining the variation in Table 1 by illustrating the mixture of responses to the specific policy questions. Figure 1 displays the proportion of each congregation type giving the affirmative answer to these policy questions. The ranges of proportion can be quite striking: for the wealthier Catholic church in the northeast, more than twice as many respondents selected “teach abstinence only” than agreed that sex outside marriage was fundamentally sinful. For the more diverse Catholic churches, under half thought it “fundamentally wrong” to provide condoms to high school students, although nearly 80% also preferred “teach abstinence only.” Although the levels are much lower for mainline Protestants on all of the issues positions (as one would expect, given the variety of church doctrines), some of the questions (high school condoms, the two questions about homosexuality) have affirmative answers at half the rates of the others (sinfulness of sex outside marriage, teaching only abstinence). In the predominately black Protestant church, only about 20% of respondents thought providing condoms in high school was wrong while over 80% thought homosexuality “seems unnatural and against what God wants.” Even in the Evangelical Protestant category, with affirmative proportions above half of respondents for all questions, there is a striking gap between the question about condoms in high schools and several of the others.

**Fig. 1**

Agreement proportions within denomination categories

We seek to use information about the deep core beliefs to explain levels of lower-tiered beliefs. We have three main hypotheses to explain variation in questions of purity. These are rooted in different conceptions of, and levels of, belief.

***H1: Evil, sinful world requires purity***

We expect that individuals who see the world as filled with evil and sinful forces, rather than as a place of goodness, care, and cooperation, will be more likely to value purity—even holding denomination and loyalty to religious authority and community constant.

***H2: Denomination matters***

Denominational affiliation should affect purity preferences through a number of pathways, including the theology to which the respondents are exposed, the type of denomination that attracts the respondents, and their upbringing.

***H3: Loyalty to authority filters by denomination***

We expect views on loyalty to authority or community to affect views on purity; since different church types have different theological perspectives—both on the meaning of loyalty and on the meaning of purity—we expect degrees of loyalty to interact with denomination to affect opinions on questions of purity.

Loyalty to religious authority (and community standards) likely has a different meaning depending on the specific theology of each denomination. H3 must be interpreted literally as an interaction between denomination and these concepts. The loyalty scale, constructed out of a series of questions about loyalty to authority (in a similar fashion to our purity scale; see the Appendix), has potential values from 0 to 13, although no respondents gave a full set of answers totaling greater than 12; for each church type, the answers are quite unimodal and centered close to the middle of this distribution. The diverse Catholic churches had the highest mean of 7.1; the other types lagged behind with Evangelicals and the black Pentecostal church each at 5.8, the wealthy northeast Catholic church at 5.2 and the mainline Protestants at 4.7. Rather than a measure of depth of commitment, this is a measure of the diversity or characterization of sources of legitimate authority. Rather than measuring “how loyal are you,” this gets a sense of in how many different ways individual secondary policy beliefs are potentially influenced by sources of authority in the community, ranging from reporting influence from the congregation or denomination on judgment about contraception to the literal acceptance of the validity of religious leaders’ authority. Of course, greater numbers of sources of authority imply a lesser scope for individual autonomy. The survey instrument included a wide variety of angles on authority to capture a general concept (in the way of core beliefs) as broadly as possible; more affirmative responses in the scale represent an increase in the types of authority or influence acknowledged.

Results

Table 2 displays the results of our main model. Since this is an ordered logistic regression, rather than a linear model, it is difficult to directly read off the coefficients to understand the practical meaning of the results; an interpretive figure follows. Nevertheless, it is possible to get a sense of the dynamics and to evaluate the strength of our hypotheses. We use age as a simple control variable for the general era in which the respondents’ individual views were formed; surprisingly, we do not find a relationship between age and policy preferences in this domain.[11](http://eproofing.springer.com/journals/mainpage.php?token=OUlZ4SsDk_J1zbVJSFMe6nEZZBL6vz_S0sSI1J1B-ocP49kiJgYCcQ#Fn11) The other denomination-specific results in Table 2 should be read in reference to the excluded category of mainline Protestants.

| **Table 2**Results, main ordered logit model |
| --- |
| **Variable** | **Coef.** | ***Z*** | ***p* value** |
| Age | −0.013 | −0.46 | 0.64 |
| Age, squared | 0.000 | 1.24 | 0.22 |
| World sinful | 0.428 | 2.39\*\* | 0.02 |
| Loyalty scale | −0.003 | −0.03 | 0.97 |
| Evangelical church | 3.261 | 4.52\*\* | 0.00 |
| Black (Pentecostal) | 2.196 | 2.66\*\* | 0.01 |
| NE wealthy Catholic | −2.039 | −3.00\*\* | 0.00 |
| Diverse Catholic | 1.001 | 1.39 | 0.17 |
| Evangelical × loyalty | 0.092 | 0.72 | 0.47 |
| Black × loyalty | 0.047 | 0.33 | 0.74 |
| NE Catholic × loyalty | 0.475 | 3.83\*\* | 0.00 |
| Diverse Cath. × loyalty | 0.210 | 1.79\* | 0.07 |
| *N* = 600; dependent variable is “purity scale” ranging from 0 to 5, increasing in preference for responses relating to sexual purity. Excluded reference category is “Mainline Protestant” |

[**AQ5**](http://eproofing.springer.com/journals/mainpage.php?token=OUlZ4SsDk_J1zbVJSFMe6nEZZBL6vz_S0sSI1J1B-ocP49kiJgYCcQ)

The types of beliefs built into denominational affiliation clearly influence policy preferences (in line with H2). Only for Catholics, however, do views on loyalty and authority correspond with changes in policy preferences. The Evangelical Christians we surveyed and the members of the black Pentecostal church were more likely to give purity-oriented answers than were mainline Protestants, regardless of beliefs about loyalty and authority. Members of the wealthy northeast Catholic church were less likely to give purity-oriented beliefs than the mainline Protestants, all else equal. For both types of Catholics, however, loyalty to authority and community interacted with church type and corresponded with increasingly high purity scores as loyalty scores also increased. Figure 2 displays the predicted probabilities for giving an affirmative answer on all five purity questions (the highest category of the dependent variable in the ordered logistic regression) for the congregation types included in our study—assuming the overall mean age and a belief that the world is primarily sinful rather than good. For most groups, the lines are largely flat (and, the results in Table 2 suggest we should treat them as such: no significant effect). Evangelical Christians have the highest probability of ending up with a top purity score (over 50%), the black Pentecostal respondents about half as likely, and the mainline Protestants are not likely at all (barely registering above 0% chance). At low levels of the loyalty scale, the Catholics are estimated to be like the mainline Protestants; as values over the loyalty scale increase, they become quite similar to Evangelical Christians on policy-related questions.[12](http://eproofing.springer.com/journals/mainpage.php?token=OUlZ4SsDk_J1zbVJSFMe6nEZZBL6vz_S0sSI1J1B-ocP49kiJgYCcQ#Fn12) The absence of an effect for loyalty to authority for the other groups, even though this loyalty scale is broadly constructed to include a variety of kinds of loyalty (and not just those types relevant for Catholic theology), is a theme we return to explore in more detail with the focus group responses.

**Fig. 2**

Probability of fullest (affirmative on all five questions) purity response, all denomination types

From the quantitative evidence, though, it is important to carefully unpack the meaning of “no effect” for the loyalty scale on purity-related policy outcomes. This is not simply a story about higher Catholic loyalty to authority, although, for example, the congregants from the northeast wealthy Catholic congregation reported the lowest rate of looking to Scripture in case of conflict (relative to Evangelical Protestants).[13](http://eproofing.springer.com/journals/mainpage.php?token=OUlZ4SsDk_J1zbVJSFMe6nEZZBL6vz_S0sSI1J1B-ocP49kiJgYCcQ#Fn13) Overall, the respondents from the Diverse Catholic category did indeed have higher loyalty score responses than the others, while the Mainline Protestant category has the lowest average loyalty scores.[14](http://eproofing.springer.com/journals/mainpage.php?token=OUlZ4SsDk_J1zbVJSFMe6nEZZBL6vz_S0sSI1J1B-ocP49kiJgYCcQ#Fn14) While these sorts of rankings are to be expected on the loyalty scale, the interactive effects in H3 are about the denominational-specific interpretation of the aggregate loyalty to authority characteristics. What we are finding, in other words, is that the most independent-minded Evangelical Christian is as likely to have high purity scores as the least independent-minded Evangelical Christian. They will vary from other groups, and vary within their group, but the variation on the loyalty scale does not explain the variation in the purity scores for this group. That result should be surprising, even if the average differences are not surprising across denominations.

These types of beliefs can be modified by others. Across denominations, an orientation toward the belief that the word is “primarily a dangerous place filled with the potential for sinful and evil forces” rather than “primarily filled with the potential for goodness, care, and cooperation” is associated with higher scores on the policy-related purity scale (consistent with H1). This question is indeed capturing variation in belief (and, we posit, deeply held beliefs) that a denominational indicator does not catch; although this view is more common in some denomination types than others, even in the most unlikely group to agree (mainline Protestants), 16% viewed the world as primarily sinful.[15](http://eproofing.springer.com/journals/mainpage.php?token=OUlZ4SsDk_J1zbVJSFMe6nEZZBL6vz_S0sSI1J1B-ocP49kiJgYCcQ#Fn15) Figure 3 shows the difference in the predicted probability of obtaining the highest purity score, using the Evangelical and wealthy Catholic groups as examples (one largely flat and one curved trend), for switching the hypothetical individual used to create Fig. 2 from one who believed the world is primarily sinful to one who believed the world was primarily good. As the results in Table 2 indicate, this shift in belief produces a downward shift in the probability of obtaining the higher purity score outcomes.

**Fig. 3**

Consequences of fundamental worldview, displayed for the NE wealthy Catholic and Evangelical categories

The purity scale is by design an aggregate score of multiple particular policy questions. The same patterns hold for specific questions. Figure 4 illustrates the predicted probabilities from a logistic regression (with binary outcomes) of specific answers for two of the questions that are part of the purity scale. The regressions are specified with the same independent variables as the main ordered logistic regression reported in Table 2.[16](http://eproofing.springer.com/journals/mainpage.php?token=OUlZ4SsDk_J1zbVJSFMe6nEZZBL6vz_S0sSI1J1B-ocP49kiJgYCcQ#Fn16) The observable dynamics are the same for the individual questions as for the aggregated purity scale: while levels might differ for particular questions the most dramatic movement in the dependent variable as the loyalty scale shifts comes from the Catholic groups.[17](http://eproofing.springer.com/journals/mainpage.php?token=OUlZ4SsDk_J1zbVJSFMe6nEZZBL6vz_S0sSI1J1B-ocP49kiJgYCcQ#Fn17)

**Fig. 4**

Breaking up the purity scale into component parts; displays predictions for questions covering condoms in high school and an understanding of homosexuality. Estimated as Separate logit models for binary outcomes; Predictions using same hypothetical individuals as Fig. 2

It is appropriate, in the context of the ACF, to focus more attention on the total scale rather than these individual questions. If we conceptualize these specific answers to questions, each of which includes a considerable amount of framing for their potential responses, as similar to the type of conundrum and messaging involved in the policy process, using an aggregate of these questions avoids placing too much emphasis on any single response.

Focus group responses

The focus groups give us a way to look at the diversity of opinion, without having to constrain the responses to a particular set of possible answers included in a survey instrument. The focus group meetings took place between April and July of 2014; the group ranged from 18 to almost 50 participants; in some cases, this meant more than half of the congregation participated in the focus group. We met independently with clergy leaders and congregants to avoid the potential tension of having one’s religious leader in the room and having congregants hear the assessments of their leaders. We sought to clarify how congregants and clergy link core beliefs with policy issues, particularly in cases of disagreement.

The surveys in many ways confirmed popular views of religious Americans with Catholics and Evangelicals taking hard stances on many contentious issues such as same-sex marriage, abortion, condoms in schools and premarital sex and the liberal church members on the whole reflecting opposing views. Yet, while the “Moral Foundations Theory” claims that traditional communities will sustain a deep sense of loyalty to the community and accept the authority of its leaders, there is anecdotal evidence that, at least in some traditional Evangelical and Catholic churches, an ethos of autonomy challenges those expected norms. The focus groups and interviews allowed us to better understand the sources and rigidity or malleability of these policy stances and, in particular, to explore the absence of a relationship between policy preferences and various sources of loyalty to authority found in the statistical results.

Mainline Protestants such as Methodists, Presbyterians, United Church of Christ, Lutherans and Episcopalians eschew literal reads of the Bible and rigid religious norms (Evans 2009) and are viewed as more liberal, in the American context, on social issues: the survey responses reflect this overall perspective. The church doctrine allows congregants great latitude in belief and practice while avoiding the acceptance of doctrinal or clerical authority (Evans 2009, 46–47). To the extent that denomination captures some broad but yet deep core beliefs, those beliefs do not contain the same level of conflict with more secular values in this domain. A deacon we interviewed at a liberal multi-racial university town church in the Midwest explained:

Hearing my pastor’s sermons over the years has influenced me, made me more informed, a deeper understanding of Scripture, the spirit of Scripture, not the letter of the law. This does influence the ways I see the world and my political views. But I still see things from both sides, making an intelligent decision – he is not a dictator or overbearing, telling me what I should think. He is very open to multiple viewpoints.

The Mainline Protestant respondents did display high levels of uniform agreement on some of the particular issues; for example: 81% did not express disapproval of same-sex parents, 78% did not prefer the “unnatural” and “against God” frame over the rights frame on homosexuality in general, and 81% did not agree that provision of condoms in high school was wrong. The focus group responses emphasize, though, that even high levels of agreement are consequences of the views represented by the denomination’s broader viewpoint rather than views from the leaders.

Although some of the more conservative church types displayed even more homogeneity in responses to specific policy questions, the most conservative congregants and leaders with whom we met expressed views that valued autonomy over loyalty to and acceptance of the authority of the church and its leaders. Particularly in the Protestant tradition, this is to be expected theologically, but perhaps not in practice—especially given the wide-ranging types of questions about loyalty we asked. At the black Pentecostal church on the Southside of Chicago, we heard from a congregant:

I read the Scriptures, I need to be able to understand it myself – yet I also believe we need to be taught, to learn from our pastor. Like eating and getting nourished, so you need to read the Bible on your own even as you come to church and learn here…If I read it differently, I would be enlightened by my pastor. And that’s just fine.

The pastor we interviewed of the Georgia church agreed with the views that, ultimately, congregants have to seek their own discernment:

I would want to see the congregation leaning on each other for how they arrive at certain issues. I would like them to know how Scripture connects to their own free-thinking in the survey. It is especially true in the Pentecostal tradition, that the individual, biblically-informed conscience, is a very strong component.

The notions of loyalty we included in our scale, of course, included not just leaders but also communities to capture this idea of “leaning on each other.”

What about welcoming those who disagree? Even in the conservative Evangelical and Catholic churches, congregants share a language of openness that, based on common portrayals of religious conservatives, stands in tension with hardened views of how to treat sin and faith and who is welcome. The Catholic priest we interviewed of the ethnically mixed population Catholic church in southern California gave a parallel reflection on inclusion and welcome:

When there are challenges to living healthily, the ways the Church would teach, you remain loving, you may say you are angry and yet forgive. So the people will understand there are varying degrees of health – you may make tradeoffs, that using a condom is better than pregnancy and abortion. We all sin and so we are open to all.

What became increasingly apparent is that congregants and clergy carefully distinguish their deep core belief in and commitment to sacred Scripture and, secondarily, how they interpret Scripture in addressing policy issues. While so many of the faithful show extraordinary conformity in their attitudes and behaviors to the value expectations of their churches, congregants consistently protested making a determinative causal connection.

Are concepts of loyalty best treated as deep core beliefs? To the extent that they frame actions on subsequent policy questions, this is appropriate in the context of the ACF. During one focus group interview in the New England Presbyterian church we visited, we witnessed this dialogue:

Speaker 1: I would never want to be part of a congregation where we all believed in what the minister said. Sometimes we agree and sometimes we don’t. I think that’s a crucial part of growth and religion.”

Speaker 2: Who says he’s right? (In reference to the religious leader)

Speaker 3: Different is beautiful. I think it’s wholesome to have different ideas and share them.

This view was repeated in multiple settings. One conversation in conservative Georgia illustrates what we heard, a religious voice for sure, but one that takes responsibility for his own beliefs and actions:

There always are issues of disagreement. Pastor is there to guide, to teach, not give the final word. You may not agree, but you listen – he is God’s instrument, but not God… Pastors are leaders, but I have a responsibility and obligation to read Scripture and interpret it literally and then figure it out through prayer and listening to God’s word to make my decision, with consideration for the Pastor, but guided by the Holy Spirit.

There are practical concerns for the policy process as well. There was unanimity among all the clergy and almost all the focus group participants across the religious spectrum that a church that attempts to control, to threaten, to prescribe thinking, will not succeed. This was articulated quite well by one conservative pastor we interviewed in Tennessee:

If I am preaching sanctity of life, pro-life and not pro-choice, if I flipped on that issue, they would not just flip because of me – they would question me…We will say here is what the Word says, here is the issue, this is the word of God, and then we let them go from there. We are strong about addressing the issues…we say what we see in the Bible and then tell them to make their minds up.

So while, as noted above, it is true that religious elites and official denominational proclamations may speak in absolutist declaratives about public social and political issues, and that political conservatism often is paired with a sense of the sacred that is was woven into the fabric of everyday life (Bean 2014, 14), the core value of congregants is not any one policy. Scripture, turning to the Bible as the singular source of clarity and inspiration, within denominational bounds, sets the terms for lower-order applications.

This kind of independent thinking was true for the Catholics as well who, even knowing Church policies, separated their belief in Bible and Church policy. D’Antonio et al. (1996) suggest that this can be a consequence of living in a larger society dominated by Protestantism; in our quantitative data, although majorities did not report looking to Scripture in the case of conflict, a sizeable fraction certainly did. One respondent, in Spanish at a Catholic church in southern California, articulated her belief in God and the Bible, yet felt comfortable stating:

The church should not put aside people that aren’t married and I have a friend who is gay and has a lot of faith. The church should not kick him out; he is a good man. In the world, the only one that is to judge is God. For Catholics in particular, these sorts of sentiments seem directly connected to level of belief on the value of authority.

The overall theme, the value of autonomous decision-making, has specific implications for research in monotheist religious settings where we often presume that claims of absolute truths are translated into catechismic beliefs and reflexive behavior at the level of lower-tiered policy beliefs. There were dissenters on nearly every question in nearly every group we surveyed, even if there were overall strong denominational trends. The focus group respondents disputed the notion that religious adherents accept the dicta of their faith community independent of their own reasoning, even in cases where there appears to be great agreement on policy application at the moment. Waterman (1981, 762) cites evidence that

…holding of individualistic values, far from promoting social estrangement, greatly enhances the likelihood that persons will engage in productive and satisfying interdependent behavior. The U.S. is known for its individualist culture where individuals tend to view themselves as autonomous and unique (they have an independent self-construal celebrating independence and creativity) as opposed to a collectivist culture.

The focus groups suggest that one reason variations in loyalty responses are not predictive of variations in the purity scale for the Protestants (including the most uniformly aligned), is that they hold many preferences in common without intervention from their leaders.

Conclusion

The Advocacy Coalition Framework is a useful practical tool for assessing many types of policy problems. As with any theoretical framework, the challenge in the application is figuring out the way to fit the parts to the situation at hand and, afterward, to figure out what useful predictions can be made for the future. The hierarchy of beliefs is critical to the concept behind the entire framework and the construction of coalitions. In no domain is this more difficult than in matters touching on religious belief. How is a hierarchy to be constructed? It is tempting to identify something like opposition to allowing same-sex parents as a deep core belief, even though it does not fit the general description in the framework of what a deep core belief should be. In this paper, we identify such beliefs as the secondary applications of deep core and policy core beliefs. Then, we seek to build a way of thinking about what the deep core beliefs might be, and how the deeper beliefs about loyalty might influence changes in the secondary policy beliefs sitting beneath them.

Scholars working with the ACF emphasize that it should be applied to thinking about change over time; it is not intended to be just a more complicated version of a “stages heuristic” (Weible et al. 2009). Conceptualizing religious mandates as organized hierarchies of beliefs suggests that problems of social policy may not be as intractable over time as they may periodically seem at the present. In the group discussion at the Georgia Pentecostal Church of God, one congregant, to great general agreement, brought up the larger point precisely about change over time:

You have Scripture and you also have interpretation by individuals and the truth somewhere in the middle. I realize what I have been taught by my family and in church is not what I believe today. I have interracial marriage in my family. I was taught that it was wrong according to Scripture, but now I have changed. And the church has changed.

And there, deep in the conservative South, her view was extended by another:

Issues like gay marriage or abortion could take the same path. Yes, there are Scriptures in the Bible that are specific and some that are more broad. So while in theory I believe change can take place, it is hard for me. But I also realize, our kids later may say that we taught them wrong.

Flexibility at lower tiers of belief may produce rapid political changes unanticipated by long-term stability in deep core beliefs. Given the absence of a direct relationship between the concepts of loyalty to authority and the social policy outcomes found for the Protestant churches in our sample, such difference in application of deep core beliefs is likely to occur in a more democratic fashion, with leaders at most shaping the process and potentially lagging behind it. We hope our results will stimulate further application of the Advocacy Coalition Framework to specific social policy decisions even as it engages, in recognition of the American experience of democracy and autonomy, with expanded notions of influencers and elites.

We conducted this research in an exploratory spirit. Seriously engaged religious Protestants have been both characterized as independent-minded (following the traditional Protestant ethic of an individual relationship with God) and yet, particularly for more conservative denominations, acting in dedicated concert on particular policy issues. As Dillon observed, and consistent with our data as well, there are meaningful policy divisions even within the most conservative groups: it “is a widely held presumption that opposition to abortion and opposition to gay marriage are one of a piece,” even though this turns out to be much more complicated (2014, 5). Yet, despite these complexities, the “values voters” often find themselves in one policy coalition. Viewing social policy conflict through the lens of the ACF can help explain what may otherwise appear to be a contradiction, that groups can be at once united in policy coalitions and yet have genuine disagreements over policies as well. To the extent that they share deep core beliefs, it should be possible to build an effective coalition, even if there are some disagreements about secondary beliefs, if the opposition policy coalition’s beliefs are too different.

The larger point is, though, that social science must not neglect the serious study of religious Americans. Many elite participants in policy communities simply do not know very much about religious voters in America. The recent 2016 presidential election campaign, with Evangelical Christians providing some of the critical initial support for Republican Donald Trump, serves as one surprising example. The election has exposed, much as we suggest here, the tensions of deep core values and pragmatic political choices. Many Evangelical and Catholic leaders acknowledged the challenge of Donald Trump to their core value of purity, as noted in the words of R. Albert Mohler Jr. (Mohler and Albert 2016), president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville:

Evangelicals committed to the gospel of Jesus Christ know that each one of us is a sinner desperately in need of salvation and the forgiveness of sins. We believe in the power of Jesus Christ to save and in salvation that comes by grace alone to those who believe in Christ and repent of their sins… Trump’s horrifying statements, heard in his own proud voice, revealed an objectification of women and a sexual predation that must make continued support for Trump impossible for any Evangelical leader.

And the US Conference of Catholic Bishops president Joseph Kurtz, following the release of the controversial Trump tapes, stated: “The Gospel is offered for all people, for all times. It invites us to love our neighbor and live at peace with one another… Too much of our current political discourse has demeaned women, and marginalized people of faith. This must change” (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops 2016b). As one journalist marveled: “Trump is immodest, arrogant, foul-mouthed, money-obsessed, thrice-married, and until recently, pro-choice. By conventional standards, Evangelical Christians should despise him” (Merritt 2015). But as we highlight here, it is important to consider the flexibility on lower-tiered beliefs within policy coalitions and to take seriously the ways in which religious Americans organize their hierarchies of belief and seek to advance larger goals.

In a very different way, this was also evident following the massacre of mostly gay Latinos at an Orlando nightclub in 2016. No less than the president of the Southern Baptist convention declared: “since all human beings are made in the image of God, this attack against gay Americans in Orlando is an attack on each of us” (Allen 2016). Similarly, Archbishop Joseph Kurtz stated: “The merciful love of Christ calls us to solidarity with the suffering and to ever greater resolve to protecting the life and dignity of every person” (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops 2016a). To policy leaders outside of these communities, the condemnation of violence was likely not surprising, although the content of the messages may have been, and reflects the nuanced kind of inclusiveness we observed in our interviews.

Evangelical author Jonathan Merritt best describes the complex interplay between core beliefs and political and policy choices: “The next generation of Evangelicals craves a less partisan, less divisive and more racially inclusive expression of political engagement that addresses concern on a range of issues, not just abortion and gay marriage” (quoted in Goodstein 2016). In an email reflecting back on the focus group and interviews we held in his congregation, one minister explained that his congregation will sit out the election:

“If a man like Trump is elected president with the support of Evangelicals no less, then it send a message that morality has become at best secondary and perhaps plain unnecessary. However, Hillary, who apparently *practices* more of a moral lifestyle nevertheless *promotes* polices…which are seen as undermining the moral fabric of the nation even more than one man’s actions. In other words, in this vein at least, Mrs. Clinton is even more of a purity violation than Mr. Trump.”[18](http://eproofing.springer.com/journals/mainpage.php?token=OUlZ4SsDk_J1zbVJSFMe6nEZZBL6vz_S0sSI1J1B-ocP49kiJgYCcQ#Fn18)

Yet it is estimated that 81% in fact did vote for Trump for president in 2016 (Smith and Martinez 2016). This election has helped highlight the point that the types of beliefs many observers of politics have come to associate with many religious Americans have the characteristics of secondary policy beliefs rather than deeper core beliefs; in the variation of secondary beliefs lay the hints about the need for more nuanced understanding of the policy and political choices of faith communities as well as the future possibilities for policy entrepreneurs to realign coalitions.

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Electronic supplementary material

Below is the link to the electronic supplementary material.

Supplementary material 1 (DOCX 48 kb)

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For an example of the standard approach in a top-quality and widely used national survey, see: Schaffner and Ansolabehere (2015), detailing the questions in the common content of the CCES. The common content includes: a question about the frequency of church attendance, a question about the frequency of individual prayer, a general question about religious affiliation (“Jewish” “Muslim” “Hindu” “Roman Catholic” etc.), and a series of follow-up questions to identify the exact denomination of Protestants (“Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod” vs. “Lutheran Church, Wisconsin Synod”—for example), and similar follow-up questions for other groups (“Sunni” vs. “Shia” Muslim—for example). This is part of the list of standard control variables; researchers can add others (as control variables, or outcomes of interest), but numerous studies simply will make use of the broad denomination categories.

[2](http://eproofing.springer.com/journals/mainpage.php?token=OUlZ4SsDk_J1zbVJSFMe6nEZZBL6vz_S0sSI1J1B-ocP49kiJgYCcQ#FNLinkFn2)

Jenkins-Smith et al. (2014, 491) raise a similar point about the way two-party elections force “multiple dimensions of conflict onto a single dimension of competition and choice.” Our observation here is primarily statistical: studies using this reduced dimension outcome as the key dependent variable are necessarily limited in their ability to explore future coalitions; particularly in regard to the “values voter” (as in Dillon 2014), this can miss much of the variation we explore.

[3](http://eproofing.springer.com/journals/mainpage.php?token=OUlZ4SsDk_J1zbVJSFMe6nEZZBL6vz_S0sSI1J1B-ocP49kiJgYCcQ#FNLinkFn3)

An unusual alternative is the 2007 Faith Matters Study used in Putnam and Campbell (2010); for documentation, see: http://www.thearda.com/Archive/Files/Descriptions/FTHMATT.asp (last accessed 04/25/16).

[4](http://eproofing.springer.com/journals/mainpage.php?token=OUlZ4SsDk_J1zbVJSFMe6nEZZBL6vz_S0sSI1J1B-ocP49kiJgYCcQ#FNLinkFn4)

For example, the national Republican Party platform for 2000 included the following on issues relating to sexual purity: “We renew our call for replacing ‘family planning’ programs for teens with increased funding for abstinence education, which teaches abstinence until marriage as the responsible and expected standard of behavior. Abstinence from sexual activity is the only protection that is 100% effective against out-of-wedlock pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS, when transmitted sexually. We oppose school-based clinics that provide referrals, counseling, and related services for contraception and abortion. We urge the states to enforce laws against statutory rape, which accounts for an enormous portion of teen pregnancy. We support the establishment of Second Chance Maternity Homes, like the ones Governor Bush has proposed, to give young unwed mothers the opportunity to develop parenting skills, finish school, and enter the workforce. Because many youngsters fall into poverty as a result of divorce, we also encourage states to review their divorce laws and to support projects that strengthen marriage, promote successful parenting, bolster the stability of the home, and protect the economic rights of the innocent spouse and children. Finally, because so many social ills plaguing America are fueled by the absence of fathers, we support initiatives that strengthen marriage rates and promote committed fatherhood.” Archived at: http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=25849 (last accessed 04/25/16).

[5](http://eproofing.springer.com/journals/mainpage.php?token=OUlZ4SsDk_J1zbVJSFMe6nEZZBL6vz_S0sSI1J1B-ocP49kiJgYCcQ#FNLinkFn5)

This sort of mass public opinion was of interest to Lasswell also, given his work on propaganda (Lasswell et al. 2003).

[6](http://eproofing.springer.com/journals/mainpage.php?token=OUlZ4SsDk_J1zbVJSFMe6nEZZBL6vz_S0sSI1J1B-ocP49kiJgYCcQ#FNLinkFn6)

Support for political parties can also be treated, at least for individuals with some other over-riding identity, as a lower-tiered policy belief; Lugg and Robinson (2009) point out that many Evangelical Christians supported Democrat Jimmy Carter in 1976 only later to switch to Republican presidential candidates. Lugg and Robinson also note how changes in demographics can cause tactical shifts: “But beginning in the 1990s, some leaders of the Protestant Right began to engage in ‘racial reconciliation’ in hopes of finding common ground with African American Protestants with whom they had much in common theologically, if not politically” (2009, 260–261). Lugg and Robinson do not make an effort to formalize the concept of a hierarchy of beliefs in their paper, although this is certainly in line with what we develop.

[7](http://eproofing.springer.com/journals/mainpage.php?token=OUlZ4SsDk_J1zbVJSFMe6nEZZBL6vz_S0sSI1J1B-ocP49kiJgYCcQ#FNLinkFn7)

“Neoclassical theory simply skips this step under the assumption that people know what they are doing. This may be true in evaluating opportunity costs at the supermarket; but it is wildly incorrect when it comes to making more complicated choices in a world of complex problems and incomplete information…” (North 1998, 19).

[8](http://eproofing.springer.com/journals/mainpage.php?token=OUlZ4SsDk_J1zbVJSFMe6nEZZBL6vz_S0sSI1J1B-ocP49kiJgYCcQ#FNLinkFn8)

In much of formal political theory, individuals are given endowments (resources) and preferences (conceived as utility over available choices). Unlike in areas of economic policy in which preferences may be more readily assumed and stable (more money is usually better), dealing with the formation, ordering, and expression of preferences in social policy requires more investigation. Development of these preferences is not likely wholly random: human beings function in social settings and have evolved successful mechanisms to protect and sustain societies; the human mind is organized “…in advance of experience so that it is prepared to learn values, norms, and behaviors related to a diverse set of recurrent adaptive social problems” (Graham et al. 2012).

[9](http://eproofing.springer.com/journals/mainpage.php?token=OUlZ4SsDk_J1zbVJSFMe6nEZZBL6vz_S0sSI1J1B-ocP49kiJgYCcQ#FNLinkFn9)

We exclude the church names and precise locations to protect the anonymity of the respondents (including, where cited, the ministers).

[10](http://eproofing.springer.com/journals/mainpage.php?token=OUlZ4SsDk_J1zbVJSFMe6nEZZBL6vz_S0sSI1J1B-ocP49kiJgYCcQ#FNLinkFn10)

Our target population is the number of people who regularly attend the congregation. This makes calculating a response rate to be a complicated procedure, since the churches themselves may think about this number differently and may not have an exact number. See the Technical Appendix for more information. As a practical matter, the responses from the Catholic churches are more akin to traditional survey samples (ranging from 1 to 20% of the total parish—which is very difficult to estimate); for some of the Protestant churches the same holds, although for some we obtained near population-level data (in one case, 97% of the estimated regular attendance).

[11](http://eproofing.springer.com/journals/mainpage.php?token=OUlZ4SsDk_J1zbVJSFMe6nEZZBL6vz_S0sSI1J1B-ocP49kiJgYCcQ#FNLinkFn11)

The oldest person in our sample was born in 1918; the youngest person was born in 2000. The median age of the observations included in this model is 59. Mean ages vary a great deal by denomination: those in the diverse Catholic category were much younger (mean 52) than those in the wealthy Catholic sample (mean 71); on the Protestant side, the Mainline Protestants were the oldest (mean 61), followed by the Evangelicals (mean 52), and then the Black Protestant church (mean 46). If we expect individuals to build up their ideas over time, we might expect differences across ages even within denominations, as the national view of what is conventional and what is unusual changed over time. We include a squared term for age because the effect might be nonlinear (most dramatic on the youngest of the sample). The absence of a result in a multivariate setting does *not* rule out a relationship between age and answers on the purity scale; the effect merely could be captured better by some other variable—however, there really does not seem to be much of bivariate relationship between age and purity preferences either (see supplemental Figure 1).

[12](http://eproofing.springer.com/journals/mainpage.php?token=OUlZ4SsDk_J1zbVJSFMe6nEZZBL6vz_S0sSI1J1B-ocP49kiJgYCcQ#FNLinkFn12)

A graphical illustration of the changes in predicted probabilities for each response category is contained in supplemental Figure 2, displayed for the Wealthy Catholic congregation type only. The figure included here in the main section of the document conveys the important point that the movement only takes place with the Catholics.

[13](http://eproofing.springer.com/journals/mainpage.php?token=OUlZ4SsDk_J1zbVJSFMe6nEZZBL6vz_S0sSI1J1B-ocP49kiJgYCcQ#FNLinkFn13)

Those who do not report looking to Scripture to solve conflicts: Wealthy Catholic, 76%; Diverse Catholic, 59%; Mainline Protestant, 71%; Black Protestant, 59%; Evangelical Protestant, 23%. While that is roughly what one might expect, even among Evangelicals, a quarter do not look to scripture to solve conflicts—and the Mainline Protestants are nearly as scripture-averse as the Wealthy Catholic congregation.

[14](http://eproofing.springer.com/journals/mainpage.php?token=OUlZ4SsDk_J1zbVJSFMe6nEZZBL6vz_S0sSI1J1B-ocP49kiJgYCcQ#FNLinkFn14)

For additional information on the loyalty scale, see the Appendix—in particular the distribution of responses by type in Fig. 3a–e. The scale seeks to capture a variety of notions of loyalty; on the most direct question about loyalty to leader authority in case of conflict, very few respondents of any type responded affirmatively. Only 13% of the Wealthy Catholic congregation, 34% of the Diverse Catholic congregations, 3% of the Mainline Protestants, 18% of the black Protestants, and 12% of the Evangelical Christians indicated that in case of conflict they accept the authority of their leaders.

[15](http://eproofing.springer.com/journals/mainpage.php?token=OUlZ4SsDk_J1zbVJSFMe6nEZZBL6vz_S0sSI1J1B-ocP49kiJgYCcQ#FNLinkFn15)

Mainline Protestants: 16%; Wealthy Catholic Church: 18%; Black Protestant Church: 31%; Diverse Catholic Church Respondents: 36%; and Evangelical Protestants: 61%.

[16](http://eproofing.springer.com/journals/mainpage.php?token=OUlZ4SsDk_J1zbVJSFMe6nEZZBL6vz_S0sSI1J1B-ocP49kiJgYCcQ#FNLinkFn16)

The precise coefficients, levels, and significance for each of these vary somewhat from the results of the main regression reported in Table 2. There is enough variability in the question about providing condoms to high school students that the interaction effects for the two Catholic groups, although in the same direction (resulting in the predictions in the graph) as the others, do not reach conventional levels of significance. The interaction effects are significant at the 0.05 level in the homosexuality question. The point here is that the purity scale builds up *all* of these effects by adding the policy positions together and then the aggregate trend is a bit clearer.

[17](http://eproofing.springer.com/journals/mainpage.php?token=OUlZ4SsDk_J1zbVJSFMe6nEZZBL6vz_S0sSI1J1B-ocP49kiJgYCcQ#FNLinkFn17)

To explain differences in levels: we have near uniform emphasis among the black Pentecostal Church and the Evangelical churches that homosexuality “seems unnatural” and is “against what God wants of human beings” over an alternative statement about equal rights. Indeed, for both groups, 95% + of the respondents focused on one answer. For the question about condoms in high school, only 60% of Evangelical Protestants agreed and only 22% of the black Pentecostal church agreed. But in both cases, the lines are in effect flat.

[18](http://eproofing.springer.com/journals/mainpage.php?token=OUlZ4SsDk_J1zbVJSFMe6nEZZBL6vz_S0sSI1J1B-ocP49kiJgYCcQ#FNLinkFn18)

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| [**11. Kindly check and confirm the inserted publisher location for the reference “Schaffner and Ansolabehere (2015)”.**](http://eproofing.springer.com/journals/mainpage.php?token=OUlZ4SsDk_J1zbVJSFMe6nEZZBL6vz_S0sSI1J1B-ocP49kiJgYCcQ#AQ11)

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| [**12. Kindly check and confirm the inserted page number for the reference “Waterman (1981)”.**](http://eproofing.springer.com/journals/mainpage.php?token=OUlZ4SsDk_J1zbVJSFMe6nEZZBL6vz_S0sSI1J1B-ocP49kiJgYCcQ#AQ12)

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