Ideological Polarization or Reconciliation?

An Experimental Analysis of Civil Religious Framing Effects

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Abstract

Civil Religious rhetoric has frequently been utilized throughout American history to legitimize a political actor's policy proposals by drawing upon cultural beliefs regarding the nation's identity, meaning, and purpose in the world. Although a number of scholars have documented its usage, no serious academic effort has been made to determine whether it has a significant effect upon public opinion and if so, whether it will exacerbate or mitigate ideological predispositions. Because civil religious appeals are frequently employed to legitimize ideological positions, it cannot be assumed that those exposed will react uniformly. Therefore, the survey experiment presented here seeks to answer these questions with an Active Receiver methodology which relies upon participants' evaluations of the frame as a key independent variable while controlling for ideological predispositions and typical political covariates. The results indicate that exposure to civil religious language had a significant effect upon subsequent evaluations of a hypothetically proposed policy and that such rhetoric serves to exacerbate, rather than reconcile, ideological polarization.

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Introduction

Although political polarization has more often been the norm rather than the exception throughout American history, its current manifestation has rendered the task of governing increasingly difficult. The growing ideological divide in the halls of Congress and around coffee tables throughout the nation has made reaching consensus on most policy issues a herculean task. During such times of bitter debate, political actors have historically relied upon rhetoric which ostensibly serves to unite the polity around a common identity and purpose such that political action transcends these ideological differences.

The purpose of this research project is to examine whether the employment of civil religious rhetoric has a significant effect upon public opinion, and if so, whether mitigates or exacerbates ideological polarization. Formally defined, civil religion is a set of broadly shared beliefs, myths, and symbols, derived from the United States' founding and history, which reflect ideas about the nation's identity, meaning, and purpose in the world; and that incorporate notions of American Exceptionalism and a Covenantal relationship with a non-denominationally specific God. While these civil religious entities are themselves non-ideological, they can be manipulated and deployed by political actors to legitimize or mask their own ideological agenda.

Civil Religious rhetoric has become increasingly prevalent in contemporary political discourse as liberals and conservatives seek to legitimize their perspectives by drawing upon these moralistic accounts of the national identity and conduct sanctified by our founding values. In his 2012 nomination address, President Barack Obama prefaced his call for more government intervention to address issues of poverty and inequality with the following:

> As Americans, we believe we are endowed by our Creator with certain, inalienable rights, rights that no man or government can take away. We insist on personal responsibility, and we celebrate individual initiative. We're not entitled to success; we have to earn it. We honor the strivers, the dreamers, the risk takers, the entrepreneurs who have always been the driving force behind our free enterprise system, the greatest engine of growth and prosperity that the world's ever known. But we also believe in something called citizenship. Citizenship: a word at the very heart of our founding, a word at the very essence of our democracy, the idea that this country only works when we accept certain obligations to one another and to future generations (Obama, 2012).

In this excerpt, President Obama has invoked civil religious themes to assert the existence of citizen obligations; which are subsequently relied upon to legitimize his ideological platform. Similarly, his opponent, Governor Mitt Romney, drew upon similar civil religious themes to legitimize his plan to encourage economic growth by reducing the role of government:

> America is rightly heralded as the greatest experiment in self-governance in world history. We are all here today because of a startling conviction that free individuals could join together to decide their fate and that more freedom made us all stronger. Our example – and commitment – to freedom has changed the world. But along with the genius of our Declaration of Independence, our Constitution, and our Bill of Rights, is the equal genius of our economic system. Our Founding Fathers endeavored to create a moral and just society like no other in history, and out of that grew a moral and just economic system the likes of which the world had never seen. Our freedom, what it means to be an American, has been defined and sustained by the liberating power of the free enterprise system (Romney, 2012).

Both men aim to use this rhetoric to unite the nation such that their platforms are not viewed as simple reflections of ideology, but rather as consistent with what it means to be an American. However, most pundits have argued that the 2012 presidential election only served to further polarize our political system and foster resentment between liberals and conservatives. While there are many reasons for why this may be the case, it is important to determine whether the employment of civil religious rhetoric has contributed to this phenomenon.

Although civil religious scholarship dates back to Rousseau and experienced a revival in the latter half of the 20th century, no serious academic effort has been made to determine whether it

actually has a significant effect upon public opinion (or is merely superfluous) and if so, whether it acts as a unifying or polarizing force. The survey experiment conducted here evaluates the effects of two civil religious frames on attitudes regarding two hypothetical policy proposals; one reflecting liberal policy goals and the other conservative. Because of the implicit ideological overtones associated with these frames, and the tendency for political predispositions to influence the participant's agreement/disagreement with it, I rely on frame evaluation as a key independent variable. The results indicate that exposure to civil religious language had a significant effect upon subsequent evaluations of the hypothetically proposed policy (even after controlling for political predispositions) and that such rhetoric serves to exacerbate, rather than reconcile, ideological polarization.

I begin with a review of civil religion before considering the literature on political/value framing and the theoretical expectations derived from applying the insights of the latter with the former. I then describe the research design and present the results before offering some concluding remarks.

Civil Religion

Robert Bellah initiated a flurry of academic interest in "Civil Religion" when he asserted the existence of a "public religious dimension expressed in a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals" that "played a crucial role in the development of American institutions" (Bellah, 1967). He conceptualized civil religion as an organic source of unity and integration for a diverse and secularized society; one that provided cultural legitimacy for its political institutions with a transcendental understanding of American history. Accordingly, artifacts (e.g. American Flag, Declaration of Independence), events (e.g. Nation's Founding, Memorial Day), and heroes (George Washington, Abraham Lincoln) from our past were sanctified and mythologized to

provide a means by which Americans understood their nation's identity, meaning, and purpose in the world. Perhaps more significantly, the wedding of these entities to broadly shared notions of a Divine Covenant and American Exceptionalism allowed them to serve as an evaluative standard by which the legitimacy of the political system and its institutions could be judged. (Bellah, 1992)

In the years that followed Bellah's initial publication, scholars quantitatively verified the existence of civil religious beliefs among the public (Christenson & Wimberley, 1978), its effects upon electoral and policy preferences (Wimberley, 1980; Wimberley & Christenson, 1982; Chapp 2012), and that such beliefs were clearly distinguishable from "church religion" (Coleman, 1970; Flere & Lavric, 2007; West, 1980; Wimberley et al, 1976). There have also been a number of insightful qualitative analyses to illustrate the manner in which civil religion has been utilized to provide legitimacy for immigration policy (Beasley, 2004), the cold war arms race (Ungar, 1991) and military interventions throughout American history (Haberski, 2012).

Impressive as this body of research may be, it is all premised upon Durkheimian assumptions regarding the homogenous and monolithic nature of civil religion; consequently failing to adequately address the extent to which these beliefs and values can be manipulated by elites in the course of political conflict. (Cristi, 1997; Demerath & Williams, 1985; Williams & Alexander, 1994; Wuthnow, 1988)

> The image of civil religion in America as a *canopy* of shared values, operating exclusively in terms of consensus and social cohesion turns attention away from the role that civil religion plays in defining (or obscuring) national self-understanding; stabilizing (or upsetting) social and national expectations, its sense of destiny and mission; maintaining (or undermining) social values and beliefs; strengthening (or weakening) social consensus; relieving (or exacerbating) social tensions (Cristi, 1997).

This perspective is not only more consistent with the literature on "multiple traditions" (Smith 1993), and conflict over the American Creed (Huntington, 1981), but also encourages researchers to analyze how civil religious rhetoric plays a role in a variety of political phenomenon. As such, civil religion will be defined here as a set of broadly shared beliefs, myths, and symbols, derived from the United States' founding and history, which reflect ideas about the nation's identity, meaning, and purpose in the world; and that incorporate notions of American Exceptionalism and a Covenantal relationship with a non-denominationally specific God. While these civil religious entities are themselves non-ideological, they can be manipulated and deployed by political actors to legitimize or mask their own ideological agenda.

What is novel about my definition of civil religion is that it is related but analytically distinct from ideology; formally defined, as a set of coherently related shared beliefs and issue positions that are held by a social class or group, which reflect a set of tangible or intangible group or self interests, and which influence and legitimize political behaviors and relationships of power[1]. Although these conceptualizations of ideology and civil religion share some elements, they differ in that while the former reflect a set of coherent issue positions, the latter has no inherent connection to any particular policy[2]. Although civil religious entities are widely shared and culturally significant, their association with "good/right" or "bad/wrong" political conduct is itself a distinct political act. Ideology influences and legitimizes political behaviors and relationships of power by presenting them as "being in the 'common good' or as generally accepted." (Williams & Demerath, 1991) Because ideologies reflect social class or group

[1] Gerring (1997) makes a strong argument against attempts to construct or employ "all-purpose definitions [of ideology] that can be utilized for all times, places, and purposes." Rather, we must recognize that there are a variety of arguably valid attributes commonly associated with ideology and scholars should employ a definition that is "context-specific" to their particular research question. In sum, different definitions will be useful for different purposes and the responsible research will carefully consider why certain attributes are employed or discarded.
[2] Gerring (1997) reinforces this perspective by arguing that the primary distinction between ideologies and belief, philosophical, and cultural systems is that they specify a concrete political program and/or issue positions.

interests, they are naturally divisive; and civil religion is one means by which these particular interests may be presented as being in the common good.

My definition of civil religion also implies a similar analytical and conceptual distinction from religion. Cristi (1997) writes that scholars of civil religion have been "too much concerned with the religious dimension of civil religion, and not concerned enough with its political implications." Although American civil religion draws heavily upon biblical imagery and the protestant tradition, such explicit references need not be acknowledged or held for the public to accept the tenets of this faith. Explicit references to "God" are not necessary to convince the population that there is something exceptional about America or that there is a right and wrong way to understand what it means to be an American. This view is shared by Gorski argues that "even for unbelievers, the language of our religious traditions contain 'moral resources,' which are still far from exhausted[3]." (Gorski, 2011b) Similarly, Murphy (2011) notes that American civil religion is an "overlapping consensus" where agreement about basic principles is possible even among those who do not share the same "comprehensive worldview."

> an avowedly secular civic republican could agree with a social justice Christian about a great many things about the world historical significance of the American project, about the centrality of religious freedom and representative government to that project, about the admirable virtues of John Winthrop[4], Abraham Lincoln and Martin King, and so on, and so on, *without* thereby agreeing about the existence of God or a human *telos.* (Gorski, 2011b)

Insisting on an explicit reference to "God" not only excludes rhetoric that is rightly understood to be civil religion, but also has the potential to conflate civil religion with organized religion; thereby assuming that atheist, agnostic, or more secular members of the polity either do not share these beliefs or fail to be affected by them.

[3] Original quote is taken from Habermas, Pope Benedict, and Schuller, 2006.
[4] Reference to Winthrop's "Model of Christian Charity" sermon (1630) delivered en route to the Americas where he articulated a covenantal relationship with God and the phrase "City on the Hill."

Although there are a multitude of case studies purporting to illustrate that Civil Religious discourse has been utilized by Presidents (Adams, 1987; Gorski, 2011; Pierard & Linder, 1988; Roof, 2009) and other social movements (Williams & Alexander, 1994), these accounts don't tell us whether it is *actually* a useful resource to be manipulated by political actors. As Cristi notes, "scant attention has been given to the ideological divide which is likely to develop when values are interpreted by different groups in terms of their own political interests and agendas" (Cristi, 1997). Does this rhetoric have the capacity to influence public opinion? If so, will it serve to unify the populace or further polarize ideological warriors? This experiment aims to take the first step in addressing these questions.

Civil Religious Framing

As an abstract principle, we know that opinions can be dramatically influenced by the manner in which information is presented. Perhaps the most cited illustration of this proposition is Tversky & Khaneman's (1981) disease outbreak experiment[5] where differences in question wording led participants to support different responses with the exact same outcome. One prominent school of thought in the political communications literature posits that, with a requisite amount of political knowledge[6], framing recipients will express opinions that reflect considerations which happen to be "on the top of their head" (Zaller, 1992). Accordingly, the effectiveness of a frame is theorized to be a function of the extent to which Availability and Accessibility mental processes can be engaged. The former reflects the extent to which an individual understands the considerations raised in the frame while the latter refers to the

[5] Participants in the study were asked to state their preference over alternative government responses to a hypothetical disease outbreak. Presented with the option of "saving" 200 people out of 600 or "not saving" 400 people out of 600, 72% of respondents choose the former despite both options producing the same results (Tversky & Khaneman, 1981).

[6] Higher levels of political knowledge have been found to assist information comprehension (Availability) and retrieval (Accessibility) because individuals are more likely to understand the frames and their implications along with having more experience utilizing these concepts (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Zaller, 1992).

capacity of the receiver to retrieve that information when called upon to provide an opinion. Following this logic, it is reasonable to assume that civil religious frames (which reflect a set of myths and values broadly shared by the public and constitutive of the national identity), would be quite effective given the ease with which they could satisfy these requirements for comprehension and information retrieval.

However, this "Passive Receiver" (Brewer, 2001) model of framing has come under criticism for ignoring the potential for recipients to engage applicability processes whereby they evaluate whether the considerations raised are appropriate (Brewer, 2001, 2002; Brewer & Gross, 2005; Druckman, 2004; Chong & Druckman, 2007, 2010). Research on value frames[7] has shown that individuals are not only capable of rejecting the frames provided (Brewer, 2001; Barreto, Redlawsk & Tolbert, 2009), but that they can use the values provided to oppose the stated goal of the frame in favor of an alternative position (Brewer, 2002). These applicability processes are theorized to occur when the individual is sufficiently motivated to expend the energy required to engage in these more taxing mental operations. While Chong and Druckman (2007, 2010) convincingly demonstrate that such processes occur when participants are exposed to competing frames[8], Brewer (2002) found that participants in a non-competitive framing context utilized the values provided in conflicting ways; thus suggesting that applicability is at work.

When applicability processes are engaged ("Active Receiver" experimental models) we can expect a variety of potential confounds to emerge which may influence the effectiveness of a frame. Source credibility[9] (Druckman, 2001), political predispositions (Brewer, 2001; Cohen,

[7] Value frames are defined as frames which present one position on an issue as right by linking it to a core value (Brewer, 2001).
[8] Chong and Druckman's experiments (2007, 2010) show that exposure to strong competing frames tends to moderate public opinion.
[9] Source credibility reflects the extent to which participants believe that (1) the messenger has knowledge about the issue and (2) the messenger can be trusted to reveal what they know (Druckman, 2001).

2003), and relationship to consensus values (Feldman, 1988; Shen & Edwards, 2005; Shemer et al, 2012) are all posited to be critical in the development of "strong frames" (Chong & Druckman, 2007). Although there is great variability in the extent to which the public can correctly identify the ideological undertones of a political goal, value, or policy (Converse, 1964), we can expect that acceptance or rejection of the frame will largely depend upon the receiver's political predispositions when source credibility and consensus values remain constant. Petersen et al (2010) demonstrate that political parties develop a value reputation over time which may make it easier for the public to recognize them even when the partisanship of the messenger is not clear. Similarly, Graham et al (2009) found that ideological groups vary in their responses to different values.

The argument thus far presented suggests that when applicability processes are engaged, exposure to frames will tend to reinforce political predispositions. However, civil religious frames differ in that those exposed not only consider their ideological predispositions but whether the frame serves to legitimize them; ultimately exacerbating political differences in public opinion beyond the effects of purely ideological frames. These frames aim to engage a participant's sense of national identity and wed them to a particular policy preference. Lipset argues that because America was founded upon "core values" our identity as Americans requires an ideological commitment; "It is not a matter of birth. Those who reject American values are un-American" (Lipset, 1996). When delivered by a known partisan or reflecting a recognizable ideological orientation, those who share that party affiliation/ideology may be expected to rally behind the call for action with more vigor and conviction than before given that the policy battle has now evolved into a conflict over the national identity. Conversely, partisan/ideological opponents can be expected to more forcefully reject the proposed action because acceptance

would indicate that their previous policy preferences were not conducive to the American Identity. Resolving that existential crises would require abandoning long standing ideological predispositions; an uncommon occurrence in American politics (Campbell et al, 1960). The following hypotheses reflect this review of the literature:

> **Hypothesis 1:** Those who are exposed to and agree with the civil religious frame will exhibit a higher frequency of generally positive evaluations of the proposed policy (i.e. "very positive" and "somewhat positive") compared to the control group.
>
> **Hypothesis 2:** Those who are exposed to and disagree with the civil religious frame will exhibit a higher frequency of generally negative evaluations of the proposed policy (i.e. "very negative" and "somewhat negative") compared to the control group.

Data and Methods

The experiment was embedded within an Eagleton Institute Telephone poll of 1191 New Jersey registered voters conducted between May 31 and June 4, 2012[10]. The Civil Religion treatment and policy evaluation questions were presented near the end of the survey just before demographic and ideological identification questions[11]. Table 1 illustrates that the unweighted sample is slightly white, female, in their 30s, and with some college education. It was somewhat religious (indicating they attended religious services at least once a month) of moderate income ($50-75k/year) and ideologically moderate[12].

[Insert Table 1 about Here]

The study employed a 3 x 2 between-subjects design (Figure 1). Participants were randomly assigned to one of two "policy groups" each focused on a different hypothetically proposed bill

[10] The survey had a Land Line Response Rate of 16.1% and Cell Response Rate of 12.6%.
[11] For the purposes of this experimental analysis, I have chosen to exclude Party Identification as an independent variable. Although Party Identification and Ideology are similar constructs who are often highly correlated, some questions are better addressed through one over the other. In this case, I felt that the text in this experiment were more consistent with ideology since they provide no explicit partisan cues and aim to influence participants by invoking values that can have cross-party appeals.
[12] The sample was somewhat whiter and older than the NJ average.

before Congress and then randomly assigned again into one of three "treatment groups". The text of these policy evaluation questions was intentionally left somewhat vague to avoid potential confounds associated with particular government programs[13]. The "Entitlement" policy group was asked for their impression on legislation that we would typically associate with Conservatives:

> Now I'd like to ask for your impression on a bill before the United States Congress. Congressmen Sam Hayes says tax policies unfairly punish those who work hard in order to provide benefits to those who do not. He proposes to cut taxes on hard working Americans and increase requirements for receiving government benefits. Even though you do not know much about this proposal, is your initial impression very positive, somewhat positive, somewhat negative, or very negative?

The "Inequality" policy group was asked to evaluate legislation that we would typically associate with Liberals:

> Now I'd like to ask your impression of a bill before the United States Congress. Congressmen Sam Hayes says the wealthy have not been paying their fair share of taxes, limiting the ability of government to pursue policies for other Americans. He proposes to increase taxes on the wealthy to pay for programs that benefit hard working Americans who are struggling. Even though you do not know much about this proposal, is your initial impression very positive, somewhat positive, somewhat negative, or very negative?

[Insert Figure 1 about Here]

Participants within these two policy groups were then randomly assigned[14] again into one of three "treatment" groups (Control, Passive, and Active[15]). The passive and active treatment groups from each frame group were read a short ideological essay that incorporates civil religious language consistent with the conceptualization articulated in the literature review.

[13] For example a question asking whether "welfare" should be limited may conjure up racial stereotypes which would cloud the analysis.
[14] Randomization tests were successful; indicating that the variable means did not significantly differ across categories of random assignment. Details are available upon request from the author.
[15] The "Passive" group label reflects Brewer's (2001) reference to models that only consider accessibility and availability. The "Active" group label reflects the engagement of applicability processes that stand in contrast to the passive receiver model.

These essays begin by arguing that American Exceptionalism is the result of adherence to the sacred principles our nation was founded upon. They note that we are currently experiencing a national crisis because of our failure to live up to these ideals and that the only way to regain our prominence is to recommit ourselves to them[16].

The essays differ in that the one read to the "Entitlement" frame group explicitly suggests that American policy has been geared towards punishing those who have worked hard while rewarding those who have not and that the solution to our problems lies in a recommitment to values of individual self-reliance and personal liberty.

> Next, I'd like to ask your impression of part of a recent speech. Here it is: Our founding fathers created a nation built on the idea that all are created equal with rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. These were not just empty words, but sacred principles that made us the envy of the world. But we've gotten off track. The economic crisis is just one example of a trend towards decline. Increasingly, we punish those who have worked hard while rewarding those who take advantage of the system. Our government has forgotten that individual self-reliance and personal responsibility are fundamental American values that must be promoted.

In contrast, the "Inequality" frame explicitly argues that policies have been geared towards benefiting the rich and powerful at the expense of the majority and that the solution lies in a recommitment to democratic values which prioritize the public good over the interests of the privileged.

> Next, I'd like to ask your impression of part of a recent speech. Here it is: Our founding fathers created a nation built on the idea that all are created equal with rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. These were not just empty words, but sacred principles that made us the envy of the world. But we've gotten

[16] Most studies of Civil Religious beliefs have utilized rather overt references to religion in their surveys to highlight the religious aspect of the concept. However, this has often been done at the expense of invoking "tradition" or "national mythology", which are equally important conceptual components of Civil Religion. I have tried to bridge the gap in my frame by making explicit reference to the "Founding Fathers" and utilizing the term "sacred" as a religious cue to describe the text from the Declaration of Independence. Furthermore, this structure bears similarities to Jeremiads (Murphy, 2009) typically found in "Prophetic" civil religion (Pierard & Linder, 1988).

> off track. The economic crisis is just one example of a trend towards decline. Increasingly, we benefit the rich and powerful at the expense of the rest of us. Our government has forgotten that equality and fairness are fundamental American values that need to be promoted.

These two themes (entitlement and inequality) were reflected in the legislative proposals presented to the entitlement and inequality frame-groups (respectively). For the entitlement group both the policy and frame emphasized the theme that there is something unfair about punishing those who work hard and become successful with higher taxes. The primary difference between the policy and frame is that the latter includes civil religious references which serve to legitimize this ideological perspective. The civil religious language operates in a similar manner in the inequality group texts which emphasize the theme that the wealthy are not paying their fair share of taxes. Therefore, if it is found that differences of opinion exist between the treatment groups they can be attributed to the inclusion of civil religious rhetoric.

Finally, subjects assigned to the Active Treatment Groups were asked how much they agreed with the essay[17] while those in the Passive Treatment Group were not asked this question. Separating the treatment groups in this way provided a means of evaluating the merits of the distinction between Active and Passive Receiver experimental models, along with providing a key independent variable (Frame Agreement) in the Active Treatment group[18]. Barreto, Redlawsk, and Tolbert (2009) have argued that researchers employing experiments which reflect that passive receiver model often inaccurately assume that everyone exposed to a frame will be

[17] The exact question wording was "How much do you agree with this speech? Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, or Strongly Disagree." Reponses were then recoded along a -1 to +1 range (-1 = Strongly Disagree, -.5 = Disagree, 0 = Ambivalence, +.5 – Agree, and +1 = Strongly Agree) for some of the following analysis, and as binaries (Frame Agreement, Frame Rejection, or Ambivalence) for other parts of the analysis.

[18] Although this particular experiment does not expose participants to competing frames, it can be reasonably assumed that they would have engaged in similar mental processes (accessibility) because of this question. I do not argue that the presence of this question eliminates the need for competitive framing experiments; only that it is a reasonable proxy when budgetary restrictions preclude exposing participants to competitive frames (as was the case in this study).

equally affected by it. This assumption is critical in establishing causality in an experiment (Morton & Williams, 2009) but is difficult to justify if the treatment itself reflects a partisan/ideological issue where participants are likely to either accept or reject the frame based on political predispositions. In other words, individuals who agree with the content of the frame may exhibit a different reaction than those who disagree, even though both were exposed to the treatment. This variance in the treatment effect within the group may produce null results which mask the very significant effects on public opinion that occur between those who accept and reject the frame (albeit in opposing directions).

Results

Overall, evaluations of both policies were more positive than negative and generated at least 60% support regardless of the policy or treatment group[19]. However, the inequality policy generated more extreme responses (more "very positive" and "very negative" responses than "somewhat positive" and "somewhat negative") than entitlement, suggesting that the former is inherently more polarizing than the latter. Similarly, the evaluations of the frame in the active treatment groups generated 69.2% agreement ("Agree" or "Strongly Agree") with the inequality frame and 79.3% agreement with the entitlement frame; suggesting the relative popularity of the conservative interpretation. Given the small size of "Don't Know" responses (between 3% and 7% for all questions in all groups) and their potential to confound subsequent statistical analysis, they have been removed from the remaining models presented in this paper.

ANOVA contrasts of the estimated marginal means between the experimental groups within each frame (Control vs. Active; Control vs. Passive; and Active vs. Passive) were conducted to

[19] Complete experimental groups' response distribution figures for the policy and frame evaluations questions are available upon request from the author.

determine whether exposure to the frame had a significant effect upon policy evaluation[20]. No significant differences were found in these comparisons; which suggests that exposure to the civil religious frame did not have an effect upon policy evaluation[21]. However, because both the civil religious frames and policy questions carry implicit ideological connotations, and since ideological orientation is randomly distributed within each group, it is possible that positive policy evaluations generated by frame agreement in the treatment groups was offset by negative policy evaluations derived from frame rejection; resulting in no discernible change overall. In other words, is it possible that frame evaluation serves as a mediating variable that explains the relationship between ideological predispositions and policy evaluation?

As a first step towards answering that question, I ran a simple regression on Active group participants to investigate the influence of frame evaluation, ideology, and other typical covariates on policy evaluations (Table 2). The results clearly illustrate the strong positive effect frame evaluation[22] has upon policy evaluations for both frame groups. Although Ideology[23] was only marginally significant in the Entitlement frame group (.073), it was shown to have a significant effect upon policy evaluation for those exposed to the Inequality frame. Furthermore, the effect of ideology in both groups behaved as anticipated with conservatives opposing the liberal policy proposed in the inequality frame and supporting the conservative policy in the entitlement frame (and vice versa). Together, these results provide initial support for the assertion that evaluations of the frame impact evaluations of the policy. Also worth noting is the

[20] Complete results of this analysis are available upon request from the author.
[21] It is worth remarking on the methodological importance of the lack of a significant difference between the means for the Active and Passive groups. This finding indicates that simply being asked to voice an opinion about the frame had no independent effect upon the policy evaluation question that followed. Although this finding needs to be replicated in different experimental contexts, it is preliminary evidence that survey researchers need not employ "passive groups" in "active processing" models to control for the act of expressing an opinion on the frame; that relying on a typical "control" group which isn't exposed to the frame will be sufficient.
[22] Frame Agreement was coded as an ordinal scale variable: -1 = Strong Disagreement, -.5 = Disagreement, 0 = Don't Know, .5 = Agreement, 1 = Strong Agreement.

lack of significance for the other typical covariates with the exception of race in the inequality frame; which suggests that racial identity still play a role in how we think about issues of inequality.

[Insert Table 2 about Here]

To investigate whether Frame Evaluation operates as a mediating variable for Ideology and Policy Evaluation (and whether it does so as partial or full mediation), I ran a Sobel[24] test that determines if the total effect of the independent variable and dependent variable is significantly reduced with the inclusion of the mediating variable (Table 3). The results demonstrate that (1) Frame Evaluation had a significant effect on Policy Evaluation and Ideology for both frames, and (2) Frame Evaluation had a significant effect on Policy Evaluation even after controlling for Ideology. Because this indirect effect was found to be significant for both frames, I assert that Frame Evaluation is in fact a mediating variable. However, because Ideology had a significant effect upon Policy Evaluation even after controlling for Frame Evaluation, we must conclude that this mediation is "partial[25]" rather than "full."

[Insert Table 3 about Here]

Identifying Frame Evaluation as a partial mediator is consistent with a more detailed analysis of the response rates in the Active group. In the inequality group, 11% agreed with the frame but did not support the policy while 8% rejected the frame but supported the policy. Similar rates were found in the entitlement group with 15% in agreement with the frame but not the policy and 6% rejecting the frame but supporting the policy. Among those who agreed with the frame but not the policy, we might argue that that this indicates the difficulty of attaching a civil religious

[23] Ideology was coded as an ordinal scale variable: -1 = Liberal, 0 = Moderate, 1 = Conservative.
[24] The SPSS macro for this test was provided by A.F. Hayes (http://www.afhayes.com/spss-sas-and-mplus-macros-and-code.html) and is discussed in detail by Preacher & Hayes (2004).

belief to a particular policy option; that despite the appeal of the rhetoric, ideology simply precludes its acceptance. In the case of those who reject the frame but support the policy, we get a sense that although there is support for the policy, the manner in which it is justified was seen as problematic (presumably for the ideological implications of the Civil Religious frame provided). Both interpretations are consistent with a partial mediation model where policy evaluation was determined by both the direct effect of ideology and the indirect effect of ideology mediated through frame evaluation.

If Frame Evaluation is a partial mediator in this model, it behooves us to identify variables that influence this opinion. A simple regression on Frame Evaluation with typical policy covariates found that ideological predispositions are the dominant factor[26]. Ideology had a positive relationship to frame evaluation in both policy groups but was only marginally significant in the inequality group (.056). No other variables had a significant (or marginally significant) effect.

The results presented thus far clearly illustrate the ideological nature of the inequality and entitlement themes invoked by both the treatments and the policy to be evaluated. Therefore, it is equally clear that determining the effects of the treatments requires more than the standard comparison of marginal means typical to experimental research. Instead, these means must be compared after controlling for ideological predispositions, frame agreement, and the usual political covariates. Table 4a presents the parameter estimates of such an analysis with the treatment groups broken down into a series of binary independent variables representing Frame Acceptance, Frame Rejection, Ambivalence to the Frame and participation in the Passive Treatment Group or Control. Although none of the particular treatment groups was found to be

[25] Zhao et al (2010) classify this particular type of "partial" mediation as "complementary" mediation since both ideology and frame agreement have a positive relationship to policy evaluation.

significant, the entity as a whole was a highly significant predictor of policy evaluation for both of the frame groups; suggesting that policy evaluation was affected by exposure to the frame. Ideology was also found to be highly significant for both policies with females and non-whites also displaying a significant positive relationship to the inequality policy evaluation.

[Insert Table 4a about Here]

Further confirmatory evidence of the hypothesized influence of the frame is demonstrated by Table 4b which reports the comparisons of the marginal means between each group. Even after controlling for ideology and political covariates, those who accepted the frames (in either frame group) were significantly more likely than those in the Control and Passive groups to positively evaluate the policy proposed; while those who rejected the frame were significantly more likely than those in the Control and Passive groups to negatively evaluate the policy proposal. No significant differences from the control group were found for those in the Passive group and those who expressed Ambivalence regarding the Civil Religious frame. This demonstrates that agreement/disagreement with the frame produces significant differences in policy evaluation compared to those who were simply exposed to the frame and those who were not.

[Insert Table 4b about Here]

This analysis has thus far illustrated that Civil Religious frames do have a significant, positive effect upon policy evaluation once we account for ideological predispositions and frame evaluation. Conservatives are more likely to agree with the conservative frame and subsequently positively evaluate the conservative policy option (vice versa for liberals). Although this implies polarization a formal test is warranted to verify that it is occurring and determine the manner by which it is happening (Figure 2). If polarization is occurring, we should expect to find that liberals/conservatives are expressing greater support for the inequality/entitlement policy with

[26] Complete results of this analysis are available upon request from the author.

acceptance of the frame as compared to liberals/conservatives in the control or passive group. (Polarization Type 1) We should also expect to find that the gap in policy opinion between liberals and conservatives has grown significantly among those who accept and reject the frame compared to those in the control or passive group. In other words, the mean difference between liberals who accept the inequality frame and conservatives who reject it should be significantly larger than the difference between liberals and conservatives in the control or passive group. (Polarization Type 2)

[Insert Figure 2 about Here]

To address these questions, I ran separate models for each treatment group comparison to properly isolate the mean differences[27]. Beginning with Polarization type 1, Table 5a demonstrates a significant difference between conservatives who agreed with the entitlement frame compared to those in the control or passive group. Substantively, this mean difference of just over .4 suggests that acceptance of the frame leads conservatives to nearly jump a full category in support (from "somewhat positive" = .5 to "very positive" = 1). Although liberals in the inequality frame exhibited similar behavior, the differences were not significant. This is likely largely attributable to the high level of support for the policy in the control group. Whereas conservatives in the control group had a mean of .322 (in the Control vs. Accept/Reject model), liberals had a mean of .691. In other words, there was comparatively less room to increase support for liberals than conservatives.

[Insert Table 5a about Here]

With respect to the second type of polarization, Table 5b illustrates that once again the entitlement frame was more likely to polarize than inequality and for similar reasons as in the

[27] These ANCOVAs included demographic covariates and ideology.

previous model. The entitlement policy opinion gap was significantly larger between conservatives that accepted the frame and liberals that rejected it than conservatives and liberals in the control or passive groups. Also important to note is that the gap between liberals and conservatives in the passive group was significantly larger than those in the control. This suggests that simple exposure to the frame absent frame evaluation was enough to induce polarization[28]. Although similar tendencies were on display for the inequality frame, the differences between the groups were not significant. This is likely attributable to the significant gap between liberals and conservatives in the control; although that gap grew with frame evaluation, there was comparatively less room for it to grow compared to the entitlement policy. In other words, the inequality frame appears to be inherently more polarizing than entitlement.

[Insert Table 5b about Here]

Discussion

This experiment aimed to evaluate if civil religious frames had a significant impact upon policy evaluation and if so, whether it facilitated further ideological polarization or reconciliation. The results confirm the impact of these frames and indicate that this form of rhetoric is more likely to exacerbate political polarization. Acceptance and rejection of the frames appears to be politically motivated with the former ultimately more likely to support related policy proposals and the latter less likely. Although further study and experimentation are warranted, these results clearly add to the credibility of more recent conceptualizations of civil religion as a political tool for ideological conflict (Cristi, 1997; Demerath & Williams, 1985; Williams & Alexander, 1994; Wuthnow, 1988). In particular, future studies could analyze a broader variety of ideological issues (i.e. Affirmative Action, Military Intervention), cue

[28] To put a finer point on it, this suggests that applicability processes were still operating even when the active receiver experimental model was not employed.

different civil religious themes, and perhaps employ experimental procedures whereby frames compete against each other to see which are most effective. This latter point is especially important considering recent literature in political communication which suggests that competing "strong" frames tend to cancel each other out and result in more moderate opinionation (Chong & Druckman, 2007).

Another promising area of exploration is to revive a largely dormant research tradition into predictors of civil religious belief. Zhoa et al (2010) argue that cases of partial mediation point to the existence of some omitted variable; in this experiment, an omitted variable that mediates the relationship between ideology and policy evaluation in addition to civil religious frame evaluation. Because the type of partial mediation exhibited here was "complementary" (both ideology and frame evaluation had a positive effect upon policy evaluation) rather than "competitive" (i.e. If ideology had a positive effect on policy evaluation and frame evaluation had a negative effect), we can further assume that most likely this omitted variable would also have a positive effect on policy evaluation. It therefore stands to reason that there might exist predictors or covariates of civil religious beliefs that also mediate the relationship between ideology and policy. In addition, it may be worthwhile to investigate whether the inclusion of a partisan/ideological cue in the civil religious frame further mediates these effects (Druckman, 2001).

The search for answers to these research questions acquires a profound significance at a time when both the prevalence of civil religious rhetoric has increased and the ideological polarization of American politics has rendered the task of governing more difficult. As my introductory comparison of President Obama and Governor Romney indicates, reliance upon civil religion is a bipartisan affair that is unlikely to disappear in the near future. It therefore behooves the

academic community to better understand the role of civil religion in this process. More specifically, whether civil religious rhetoric is purposefully deployed to unite or polarize, and, whether it can be employed to facilitate the former. Furthermore, at a time when issues of social inequality and taxation are at the forefront of these ideological battles, research focused on the effects of these particular types of civil religious frames can have a profound impact on how we talk about these issues; with obvious implications for the policy outcomes we might hope to achieve.

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Tables and Figures:

Table 1: Summary Statistics of Independent Variables

Variable	Mean	SD	Min.	Max.	N
Education	5.60	2.02	1	8	1175
Age	4.25	1.58	1	6	1146
Religiosity	2.91	1.47	1	5	1152
White	0.79	0.40	0	1	1149
Income	3.65	1.60	1	6	963
Female	0.52	0.49	0	1	1191
Ideology	0.03	0.67	-1	1	1159

Notes: Education was scaled from 1-8 (1 = 8th grade or less; 5 = Some college; 8 = Graduate work). Age was scaled from 1-8 (1 = 18-20; 4 = Thirties; 8 = 65 or over). Religiosity was scaled from 1-5 (1 = attend service once a week; 3 = once a month; 5 = never.) White and Female were binary coded. Income was scaled from 1-6 (1 = <25k; 3 = 50-75k; 6 = >150k). Ideology was scaled from -1 to 1 (-1 = Liberal; 1 = Conservative).

Figure 1: Experimental Groups

Control Group		Passive Group		Active Group	
Inequality	Entitlement	Inequality	Entitlement	Inequality	Entitlement
-	-	Frame Exposure	Frame Exposure	Frame Exposure	Frame Exposure
-	-	-	-	Frame Evaluation Question	Frame Evaluation Question
Legislative Question	Legislative Question	Legislative Question	Legislative Question	Legislative Question	Legislative Question
N = 188	N = 188	N = 239	N = 203	N = 187	N = 186

Table 2: Role of Frame Evaluation in Policy Evaluation

	Inequality		Entitlement	
Variable	**B**	**(SE)**	**B**	**(SE)**
Education	-.058	-.005	-.005	(.032)
Age	.037	-.020	-.020	(.039)
Religiosity	-.020	.020	.020	(.035)
White	-.293*	.178	.178	(.135)
Income	-.050	-.010	-.010	(.044)
Female	.067	-.095	-.095	(.108)
Ideology	-.431***	.163	.163	(.085)
Frame Evaluation	.367***	.083	.443***	(.096)

*Notes: Significance levels are presented as: *<.05, **<.010, ***<.001. Ideology had a significance of .073 in the Entitlement model.*

Table 3: Frame Evaluation as Mediating Variable Between Ideology and Policy Evaluation

Model	Inequality		Entitlement	
	Coeff.	(SE)	Coeff.	(SE)
Frame Eval. (IV) Policy Eval. (DV)	.535***	.277***	.277***	(.082)
Frame Eval. (IV) Ideology (DV)	.270***	.183*	.183*	(.079)
Frame Eval. (IV) Policy Eval (DV) Ideology (CV)	.416***	.408***	.408***	(.074)
Ideology (IV) Policy Eval (DV) Frame Eval. (CV)	.423***	.202**	.202**	(.078)
Indirect Effect	-.112**	.074*	.074*	(.039)

*Notes: Frame Evaluation is an ordinal variable (-1 = Strong Disagreement, -.5 = Disagreement, .5 = Agreement, 1 = Strong Agreement). Significance levels are presented as: *<.05, **<.010, ***<.001. Bootstrapped Sample of 5000, whose upper and lower confidence interval of 95% did not include 0, indicates that indirect effect was significantly different from 0.*

Table 4a: ANCOVA – Parameter Estimates of Independent Variables

	Inequality		Entitlement	
Variable	**B**	**(SE)**	**B**	**(SE)**
Education	-.023	-.002	-.002	(.018)
Age	-.006	-.025	-.025	(.022)
Religiosity	.001	.033	.033	(.022)
White	-.218**	.008	.008	(.081)
Income	.000	.031	.031	(.023)
Female	.144*	-.006	-.006	(.064)
Ideology	-.446***	.176***	.176***	(.049)
Group	-	-	-	-
Control	-.116	.440	.440	(.279)
Passive	-.064	.433	.433	(.278)
Accept	.108	.635	.635	(.281)
Reject	-.397	.012	.012	(.296)

*Notes: Significance levels are presented as: *<.05, **<.010, ***<.001. Ambivalent Response Group was excluded from this estimate as a reference group. "Group" had a significance score of .002 in the Entitlement treatment and .004 in the Inequality treatment.*

Table 4b: ANCOVA – Mean Difference Between Groups

	Entitlement Treatment Group			
	Passive	**Accept**	**Reject**	**Ambivalent**
Control	.008	-.194*	.429**	.440
	(.081)	(.090)	(.161)	(.354)
Passive		-.202*	.421**	.433
		(.088)	(.160)	(.353)
Accept			.623***	.635
			(.164)	(.355)
Reject				.012
				(.378)
	Inequality Treatment Group			
	Passive	**Accept**	**Reject**	**Ambivalent**
Control	-.052	-.255**	.280*	-.116
	(.077)	(.087)	(.131)	(.279)
Passive		-.172*	.332**	-.064
		(.084)	(.128)	(.278)
Accept			.505***	.108
			(.135)	(.281)
Reject				-.397
				(.296)

*Notes: Figures in columns represent estimated marginal mean difference between groups and their standard errors. Significance levels are presented as: *<.05, **<.010, ***<.001.*

Figure 2: Types of Polarization

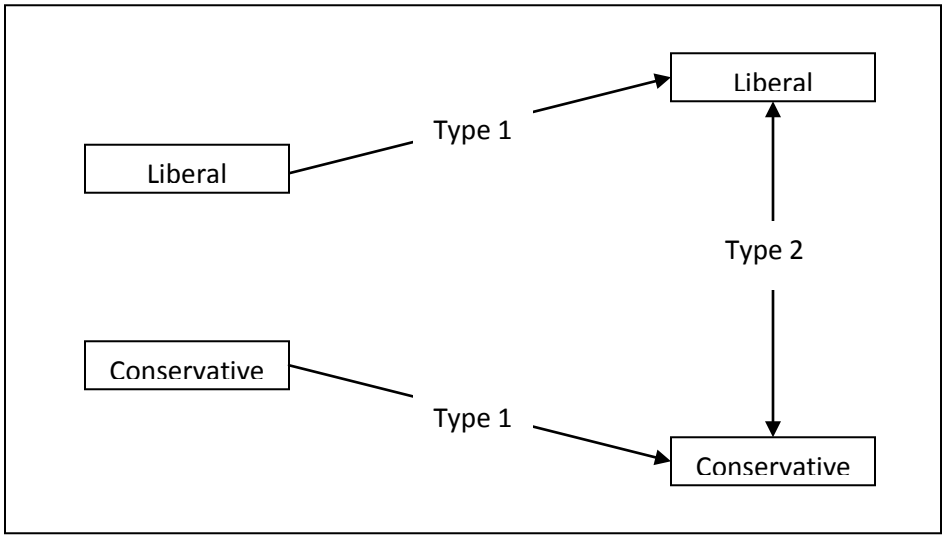

Table 5a: Polarization Type 1

	Control	Passive	Accept	Difference
Inequality				
Liberal vs. Liberal	.691 (.103)		.806 (.123)	.115 (.160)
		.617 (.104)	.832 (.127)	.215 (.164)
	.689 (.110)	.641 (.108)		.048 (.154)
Entitlement				
Conservative vs. Conservative	.322 (.106)		.736 (.130)	.414* (.163)
		.284 (.107)	.703 (.132)	.420* (.168)
	.326 (.112)	.289 (.112)		.038 (.157)

*Notes: Figures in columns (Control, Passive and Accept) represent estimated marginal means and their standard errors. Figures in the "Difference" column represent the estimated marginal mean difference (and standard error) for groups under comparison. To isolate these comparisons, only the two groups being compared were included in the models (which is why the means for each group differ slightly). Significance levels are presented as: *<.05, **<.010, ***<.001.*

Table 5b: Polarization Type 2

	Control	Passive	Accept/Reject	Difference
Inequality				
Liberal vs. Conservative	.922*** (.164)		.1.270*** (.237)	-.330 (.285)
		.888*** (.155)	1.424*** (.240)	-.536 (.282)
	.938*** (.174)	.903*** (.160)		.035 (.237)
Entitlement				
Liberal vs. Conservative	-.291 (.182)		-1.067*** (.282)	.776** (.326)
		-.430** (.162)	-1.025*** (.285)	.595* (.304)
	-.282 (.194)	-.423* (.166)		.141 (.254)

*Notes: Figures in columns (Control and Passive) represent the estimated marginal mean difference between liberals and conservatives within the group and their standard errors. Figures in the "Accept/Reject" column represent the estimated marginal mean difference (and standard error) between liberals/conservatives who reject/accept the entitlement frame and vice versa for the inequality frame. Figures in the "Difference" column represent the estimated marginal mean difference (and standard error) for groups under comparison. To isolate these comparisons, only the two groups being compared were included in the models (which is why the means for each group differ slightly). Significance levels are presented as: *<.05, **<.010, ***<.001.*