

Trust Me, I Believe in God: Candidate Religiousness as a Signal of Trustworthiness

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Forthcoming, *American Politics Research*

Religion plays a prominent role in American politics and candidates often attempt to display their religiousness in a variety of ways. For example, in spite of the association between conservatism and religion, research shows that candidates of *both* parties routinely use religious language and seek to demonstrate personal religiousness. Existing research portrays religious rhetoric primarily as an *ideological* cue, failing to explain why Democrats would make religious appeals. Drawing on psychological theories of prejudice towards atheists, we argue that candidates emphasize their religiousness in order to enhance perceptions of their trustworthiness and morality. Using survey data, we show that voters are quite unlikely to support an atheist candidate, an effect that is strongly driven by the perception of atheists' morality. Next, we show evidence that voters perceiving Hillary Clinton as religious also viewed her as more trustworthy, and were more likely to view her favorably. Finally, we show experimentally that religious candidates are perceived as more trustworthy, at least among a wide swath of the electorate. We conclude that displays of religiousness likely serve an ideological purpose, but also serve the broader goal of increasing perceived candidate trustworthiness.

But I think all of us would also agree that there's a very central part of your faith in how you approach public life. And I, frankly, would be really worried if somebody assured me that nothing in their faith would affect their judgments, because then I'd wonder, where's your judgment -- *how can you have judgment if you have no faith? And how can I trust you with power if you don't pray?*

- Newt Gingrich (Republican Presidential Debate, 10/18/2011)

Introduction

Religion has become inextricably and increasingly intertwined with American politics and modern political campaigns, even as the American public has become overall more secular. For instance, the use of religious and theistic references by U.S. Presidents and candidates has risen dramatically over time (Domke & Coe 2008; Albertson 2011; Sheets, Domke, & Greenwald 2011). Both verbal religious cues and non-verbal religious labels/perceptions have become increasingly important for politicians as the religious-secular divide has mirrored a partisan cleavage as well (Adkins et al. 2013). However, scholars have only recently begun to grapple with how candidate usage of religion affects the behavior of voters (McDermott 2009). Much of this research argues that politicians' religious identification serves as an information shortcut for voters who consider themselves part of the same religious or ideological group. Thus, religious rhetoric is seen as largely strategic, designed to “invoke symbolic political attitudes” (Mockabee 2007, 228). Religious information is often tailored to be an effective voting heuristic for religious and political conservatives—for whom the connection between religion and political beliefs is drawn easily—serving as a signal of policy congruence, competence,

integrity, among other positive attributes (Wilcox 1990; Adkins et al. 2013; Calfano & Djupe 2009; Campbell, Green & Layman 2011; Albertson 2011; McDermott 2009).

As a result, it tends to be members of the GOP who use a “religious code” to connect religious-conservative politicians to religious-conservative voters, while the meaning of these statements goes unnoticed by other voters (Calfano & Djupe 2009; Albertson 2015). Yet, this perspective fails to explain, among other things, why religious rhetoric has been just as prevalent among Democratic presidents as Republican presidents, and why politicians perceived as less religious—such as John McCain and Barack Obama—prominently employ such rhetoric in their electoral appeals (Wilcox & Robinson 2007; Domke & Coe 2008; Sheets, Domke, & Greenwald 2011). For instance, Bill Clinton explicitly quoted scripture twice during his acceptance speech at the 1992 Democratic National Convention, and also used a more subtle “coded communication”—paraphrasing part of a verse from the Biblical book of Isaiah—during his endorsement speech for John Kerry at the 2004 Convention (Albertson 2006, 2015). Sheets, Domke, & Greenwald (2011) similarly identify prominent religious allusions by both Obama and McCain in the 2008 presidential campaign. Whether or not communicated through specific verbal appeals, politicians use religion to convey information to voters—information that they believe will be politically beneficial.

While scholars show that politicians of all stripes use religion for political reasons—even liberal Democrats¹—it is unclear why or to what effect. For example, though Sheets et al. (2011) shows that perceptions of “American-ness” and “Christian-ness” are strongly correlated for both Barack Obama and John McCain (and generally increase positive attitudes toward both), such perceptions are much more central to candidate evaluations and voting decisions for Republicans than Democrats. Calfano & Djupe (2009, 331) argue that when coded religious cues are used by

Republican politicians, it “is an attempt to provide relevant information for white Evangelicals to know that a candidate is a member of their group, allowing a connection to the Republican Party given their history of electoral support for it.” If *merely* an in-group cue, it is unlikely that Democratic candidates would engage in such cue-giving, given the strong association between white Evangelicals and the Republican Party since the late 1970s (Layman 2001; Wald & Calhoun-Brown 2011; Adkins et al. 2013). Such cues would likely only be confusing for Democratic voters and unpersuasive for Republicans.

Further, there is significant evidence that the Democratic Party is becoming a home to voters who feel alienated by the Republican Party’s turn to the religious/cultural right, with the more traditionalistic traits and policies associated with it (Bolce & de Maio 1999, 1999a, 2007; Layman 2001; Fiorina, Abrams, & Pope 2010; Patrikios 2008). As a result, religious identification by Democratic politicians may also turn off individuals who would naturally favor Democratic candidates. Campbell, Green, & Layman (2010) show that identifying a candidate as Evangelical can effectively neutralize Democratic support for that candidate, i.e. Democrats are no more likely to support a Democratic Evangelical than a baseline candidate with no religious or partisan information. Additionally, Democratic voters are more likely than others to believe that there is “too much religious language” in modern American political discourse (Albertson 2011, 110). On the other hand, there is a relatively small but active Religious Left movement (e.g. Jim Wallis and Sojourners, Bread for the World, Catholics for Choice, among many others) for whom religion and progressive politics go hand in hand (Olson 2007; Wuthnow & Evans 2002). A not insubstantial number of religious citizens also identify as liberal, so there is certainly some cause for left-leaning politicians to use religion to help justify positions on economics, justice issues, environmental protection, and more (Olson 2007). However, this

would seem to conflict with the preferences of much of the Democratic base to minimize the use and abuse of religion in politics (Albertson 2011, 2015; Putnam & Campbell 2010; Layman 2001; Patrikios 2008).²

While previous literature explains one important aspect of religious rhetoric and symbolism—that it serves a partisan or ideological purpose—it does not explain its broad appeal and use in politics. It is often asserted that America is a peculiarly religious nation, and that civil religion, i.e. the combination of Christian beliefs and American identity, explains the prevalence of religious language in politics. This is certainly true, though it is unsatisfying as a solution to the puzzle of why politicians of all ideological orientations use religious cues. What is the mechanism that links religious cues to voter support? In order to explain why both liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans employ religious cues, the mechanism has to be more than a simple ideological dog-whistle. We argue that politicians acknowledging their belief in God (often via religious language or public identification as a member of a religious group) goes beyond demonstrating national identity, transcends specific religious tradition, and is not limited to in-group cues. Instead, politicians' religious identification reflects a powerful, widespread, but often subtle and unconscious bias in American society against those who do not believe in God. In other words, it is of vital importance for politicians to establish *religiousness*—i.e. that they possess a necessary baseline of religious belief. Drawing upon literature on the psychology of prejudice towards atheists, we argue that one important function of demonstrations of religiousness—including both symbolic and coded statements as well as more explicit acknowledgments of personal religious attachment—is to signal trustworthiness and moral character. Specifically, we argue that Americans view those without theistic belief as fundamentally untrustworthy and immoral, and therefore politicians use religious cues to

establish trust from the average American voter, and to establish their basic worthiness for political office. As Putnam and Campbell (2010, 460) state, “Most Americans, whatever their own degree of religiosity, seem to have a trust bias in favor of religious people.”

In this paper, we first use national survey data to show that a large segment of the public is unwilling to support someone who does not believe in God as a presidential candidate, and that this effect is strongly driven by the common belief that atheists cannot be moral. Second, using another national survey, we show that perceptions of a politician’s religiousness positively affect favorability and perceived trustworthiness of that politician across all ideologies, partisan identities, and religious groups. Finally, using an experimental design, we manipulate the religiousness of a hypothetical candidate. Our results show that, for all but a small subset of the population, perceived religiousness powerfully affects favorability, as mediated through perceptions of moral character/trustworthiness. We conclude with a discussion of the role of religious rhetoric and symbolism in modern campaigns, and the barrier this creates to atheists holding elected office.

Atheism, Religion, and Morality

While much work has focused on the associations between ideology and various religious groups, much less research (in American politics at least) has studied those without a religious group identity. Only recently have scholars begun to look at so-called religious “nones” as a socio-political force, and there is relatively little empirical work on the political opinions/behaviors of those who might be labelled as atheist, secular, or claiming no religion (Putnam & Campbell 2010; McTague & Layman 2009; Beard et al. 2013).³ As a result, we know relatively little about the incentives for politicians to appeal to secular voters, and whether there is a tradeoff for portraying themselves as religious (regardless of their particular identification).

Additionally, we know little about the role of perceptions of politicians' religious beliefs plays in voter evaluations (beyond so-called dog whistles), especially what mechanisms might be relevant.

First, we provide a theoretical foundation for the role of perceived religion in American politics and society by examining how a *lack* of religious faith serves as a huge barrier to societal acceptance. Studies have consistently shown that those who do not believe in God, i.e. atheists, have long been one of the most disliked social groups in America (Edgell, Gerteis, & Hartmann 2006; Schafer 2009).⁴ Atheists are rated the lowest when individuals are asked whether certain groups share their worldview (Edgell et al. 2006). Recent research in related disciplines provides some insight into prejudice towards atheists. Psychologists have taken a functional approach to explaining these attitudes, arguing that from an evolutionary perspective, religion has served to encourage pro-social behavior (Norenzayan & Shariff 2008). Supporting this view, research in economics shows that individuals playing a trust game are more likely to trust their money to highly religious participants (Tan & Vogel 2008). Following this line of work, research demonstrates that distrust is central to prejudice towards atheists (Gervais 2011; Gervais, Shariff, & Norenzayan 2011). Gervais et al. (2011, 1189) find that a “description of a criminally untrustworthy individual was seen as comparably representative of atheists and rapists, but not representative of Christians, Muslims, Jewish people, feminists or homosexuals.” In fact, Christians and Muslims were seen as equally trustworthy, and prejudice towards atheists was observed even among politically liberal samples and religiously unaffiliated individuals. While it is worthwhile to examine the role of atheism in American politics on its own, we argue that by assessing attitudes toward non-believers we will get a better understanding of the role of

religious attributes in appealing to American voters. In other words, we want to know how far politicians get simply by clearly identifying as a “believer.”

Although prejudice towards atheists is pervasive, prejudice is most prevalent among the highly religious (Gervais et al. 2011). Crucially, the effect of religiousness is mediated by the belief that people cannot be moral without God. Thus, for many, atheists are seen as lacking the necessary foundation for morality – religion. Indeed, research in moral psychology argues that “for many people in many cultures, morality *is* religion” (Rai & Fiske 2011, 67). Similarly, prominent work in sociology asserts that many Americans “associate religiosity with morality and trustworthiness” and that affirming a religious identity is a “basis for citizenship and a source of a common American identity” (Edgell et al. 2006, 216).

Moral character is vital to trust, defined as “a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of another” (Rousseau et al. 1998, 395). Recent work theorizes that the purpose of morality is to suppress selfishness and facilitate cooperation based on the expectation of moral, pro-social behavior on the part of others (Rai & Fiske 2011). The connection to trust is clear—morality is a form of social and psychological pressure that deters self-interested behavior and motivates pro-social behavior, allowing individuals to cooperate under shared expectations and goals. Thus, perceptions of moral character and trustworthiness go hand in hand (see also Earle & Siegrist 2006; Simpson, Harrell, & Willer 2013).

Not only does religion serve for many individuals as the foundation of morality, it also acts as a signal about one’s worthiness in a larger community. On this view, “[m]any religious rituals consist largely of affirming... social interactions... among the congregants” (Rai & Fiske 2011, 67). Thus, “religion has provided a cultural framework for the display and evaluation of

moral virtues. Yet in all societies, there are conspicuous individual differences in public religiosity (e.g., frequencies of churchgoing, tithe giving, public prayer) and in private faith” (Miller 2008). These expressions of public religiousness, while varied and often idiosyncratic, provide information voters may use to gauge the morality, and thus the trustworthiness, of individuals that are otherwise not well known. And finally, shared religiousness serves both as a signifier of “American-ness” and one thing citizens have in common with government. This sentiment may be best summarized by President Dwight Eisenhower, who mused that “our form of government has no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith, and I don't care what it is.” Thus, many Americans perceive religion as being a necessary precondition for the moral character that creates a valuable and trustworthy citizen.

Our theory follows directly from this research. We argue that in the United States, religious identity provides more than a cue about a politician’s theological or ideological orientation to congruent groups. Instead, as Newt Gingrich put it so succinctly in the epigraph, religiousness serves as a necessary (though not sufficient) condition for being seen as a trustworthy public servant. Rather than just an in-group cue for believers, religion provides an easily-understood heuristic that politicians can use to convey trustworthiness and public morality (e.g. civic religion) to voters—even those who are not highly religious themselves.

Candidate religiousness should provide the strongest cue among individuals who are religious themselves. The psychological literature demonstrates that prejudice towards atheists is strongest among the highly religious because they hold a stronger association between religion and morality (Gervais et al. 2011). Additionally, people who are more religious are trusted more, and this effect is largest among those who are highly religious, but null among the least religious (Tan and Vogel 2008). Similar to accessibility models in political science, candidate religious

ascription may more easily and powerfully activate (i.e. bring to the “top of the head”) feelings of trust in the minds of religious voters (Zaller 1992).

We are not arguing, however, that a politician’s religion *does not* provide an in-group cue; as Galen et al. (2011) state, while the religious are viewed as more moral, perceptions of morality are also affected by in-group identification (i.e. they are not mutually exclusive). Thus, while candidate religiousness may convey morality and trustworthiness to religious individuals, it may also have negative effects among those who do not identify as religious. To sum, religion has a two-pronged effect: the in-group political cue identified by scholars of religious appeals, and the more general cue of trustworthiness and moral character. While such demonstrations may be more meaningful for certain religious groups or people with more religiously-based ideologies (and thus individual *religiosity* matters), religious appeals represent a universal attempt for politicians to gain the trust and confidence of American voters. While such appeals may alienate some non-religious voters, politicians make a rational calculation that religion serves as a net positive, much as other symbolic patriotic acts do as well. Thus, while partisanship and political ideology will modify the effect, ascribed religiousness will increase net positive evaluations of a politician’s character, which then increases the overall support enjoyed by that politician.

Hypotheses

Following from our theory and prior research (e.g., McDermott 2009), we hypothesize that politicians who are seen as religious will be perceived as more trustworthy and moral than politicians for whom information about their religiousness is lacking (H1a).⁵ Conversely, politicians who are perceived as *not* believing in God will be perceived as less trustworthy and

moral than politicians providing no religious information (H1b). These effects will be demonstrable in the general public, but will be stronger for more religious individuals, for whom candidate religious commitment is of greater personal and political importance (H1c). Following previous work we also expect that this effect will be moderated by one's political views, with individuals on the right of the political spectrum (in terms of ideology or partisanship) being more likely to link candidate religiousness to trustworthiness and favorability (H1d).

Given the importance of trust in politics, and our theorized link between religion and trust, signaling trustworthiness through belief in God may be seen as a highly effective strategy. According to a 2007 Harvard/USNWR poll, honesty/integrity was rated as the most important out of fourteen traits for a candidate to hold. Thus, we hypothesize that candidates who are viewed as holding strong religious beliefs will be perceived more favorably (H2a), and those perceived to be lacking a belief in God will be perceived less favorably (H2b).⁶ Finally, we expect the relationship between perceived candidate religiousness and favorability to be mediated by perceptions of candidate trustworthiness (H2c).

Study 1: Public Opinion of Atheists

As a first test of our hypotheses, we examine the relationship between beliefs about atheists' morality and willingness to vote for an atheist. While this analysis focuses on atheists, and thus the explicit *rejection* of religious belief, our theory is motivated by psychological work on prejudice towards atheists, making this a clear first test of our expectations. Below we turn to the question of what politicians might gain from embracing religion. For this study, we rely on data from a March 2007 Newsweek poll, with a nationwide sample of 1,004 adults. The survey asks respondents: "Would you vote for a political candidate who says he or she is an atheist, or

not?” Only 30% of the sample answered affirmatively—which helps to explain the fact that atheist-identified politicians are nearly non-existent in American national government.

According to Hypothesis 2b, individuals should be less likely to support a candidate described as an atheist. Given the low level of support for an atheist candidate, we consider this strong evidence that perceived atheism reduces candidate favorability (H2b).⁷ The survey also asked whether “someone can be a moral person and be an atheist, or not?” Providing evidence that atheists are viewed as less moral (H1b), nearly 27% of respondents did not believe atheists could be moral.

According to our hypotheses, those who are highly religious and those with conservative political views should make the strongest connection between religion and perceived morality. Unfortunately, the Newsweek poll does not include data on the intensity of respondents’ religiosity.⁸ Instead, respondents are merely asked for their religious tradition and whether or not they are Evangelical. Thus, we can only test whether *religiousness* affects perceptions of atheists, and whether individuals from different religious traditions differ on this belief. To test these hypotheses, we predict beliefs about whether an atheist can be moral using a probit model as a function of religious, political, and demographic variables.⁹ According to H1c, religious individuals should be more likely to believe that atheists cannot be moral, compared with those who do not identify as a part of a religion.¹⁰ Supporting H1c, compared to those who do not identify with a religious tradition, Evangelicals—who tend to be religiously orthodox, highly religiously committed, and traditionalistic on moral/cultural issues (Layman 2001)—are significantly less likely to believe atheists are capable of being moral. It is interesting to note that none of the other religious traditions (non-Evangelical/Mainline Protestants, Catholics, Jews, or Mormons) are more likely to reject the possibility that atheists can be moral, compared to

religious “nones.” According to H1d, those with more politically conservative views should make a stronger connection between candidate religiousness and morality. Since we do not have a measure of ideology in the data set, we use a three-point ordinal measure of partisanship (Democrat, Independent, Republican) to assess increased conservatism on perceived morality. Supporting the hypothesis, moving towards the Republican end of the party identification scale is associated with a decreased likelihood of believing that atheists can be moral, even controlling for religious identity.¹¹

[Table 1 about here]

Next, we test our hypotheses about willingness to vote for an atheist candidate. We expect that unwillingness to vote for an atheist should be driven by the belief that atheists are not trustworthy and lack moral character (H2c). To evaluate this hypothesis, we predict willingness to vote for an atheist as a function of whether the respondent thinks an atheist can be moral, along with demographics and religious affiliation, and whether the respondent knows an atheist. Looking at the first row and the second column, believing that atheists can be moral greatly increases willingness to vote for an atheist ($p < .01$). Holding all other variables at their central tendencies, belief that atheists can be moral increases willingness to vote for an atheist by a remarkable 68 percentage points.

Religious beliefs and identification strongly affect the likelihood of voting for an atheist. First, a belief in God dramatically decreases a person’s willingness to vote for an atheist. Second, compared to self-identified religious “nones,” almost all religious identifiers are significantly less likely to vote for an atheist—only Jews are not turned off by an atheist politician. Holding all other variables constant, Mainline Protestants are predicted to be 18 percentage points less likely than a “none” to vote for an atheist. Catholics are also 18 points less likely, Evangelicals 31

points less likely, and Mormons are 28 points less likely to vote for an atheist. These results are notable; as shown in Column 1, only Evangelicals said that they found atheists less likely to be moral. Yet despite believing that it is *possible* for an atheist to be moral, the other religious identifiers are still less willing to vote for one. It may be that many people believe that atheists *can* be moral, but still tend to be less moral than others. Regardless, when push comes to shove, nearly all religious groups express wariness of supporting an atheist for public office.

Overall, we find support for our hypotheses regarding atheists. A quarter of the sample reported believing that atheists cannot be moral which, even as a blunt assessment of perceived trust in atheists, supports our hypothesized connection between perceptions of religiousness and morality (H1b). A solid majority of respondents openly admitted to being unwilling to vote for an atheist, suggesting that a lack of religiousness is a substantial impediment to office (H2b). These negative views are stronger among those who identify as religious and belonging to certain religious groups (H1c), and among Republicans (H1d). Finally, beliefs about whether atheists can be moral had a large effect on willingness to vote for an atheist (H2c). It is worth noting that this first study is entirely observational, and based on self-reports. However, the large number of respondents that were openly prejudiced towards atheists speaks to the social acceptability of this type of prejudice, and how it would be beneficial for a politician to create the perception that he or she believes in some higher power. This study is limited by only examining responses to an atheist in the abstract, rather than positive religious identification of an actual politician, a question we turn to next.

Study 2: Candidate Religiousness

As a further test of our theory, we look to see whether perceived religiousness affects support for and perceived trustworthiness of actual political figures. Study 1 showed that perceived morality was key for being willing to vote for an atheist, though many Americans do not see atheists as moral. Thus, we expect perceived morality and trust to be a vital contribution of politicians expressing religiousness. For this analysis, we employ data from a CBS News Poll taken in October of 2007, with a national sample of 1,282 adults. This survey asks respondents a variety of questions concerning a number of candidates running for their party's presidential nomination in 2008 regarding whether or not that candidate is thought of as "having strong religious values," whether he or she "has more honesty and integrity than most people in public life," the favorability of a number of candidates running for their party's presidential nomination in 2008, and the respondent's likelihood of voting for the candidate, ranging from "definitely would not vote" for the candidate to would "definitely vote for" the candidate (see Appendix for exact question wording). We focus the following analysis on Hillary Clinton, both for the sake of brevity and because she's the only candidate for whom the entire battery of questions is asked.¹² Next, we will seek to answer our central question: do perceptions of religiousness improve politicians' evaluations and increase favorability, even if they are not using such perception as an in-group cue to religious conservatives? In other words, does it pay off for a Democrat to cultivate a religious image?

We begin by using ordered probit models to test whether perceiving Clinton as having strong religious values increases the likelihood of believing that she has more honesty and integrity than most politicians (H1a), and overall evaluations of her as a candidate for office (H2a).¹³ In addition to a standard set of controls, we include interaction terms between

perceptions of Clinton's religiousness and respondent ideology (coded as a three point variable: liberal, moderate, and conservative) and between perceptions of Clinton's religiousness and respondent religiosity (measured as frequency of attendance at religious services). These interactions allow us to test whether religious respondents are more likely to infer moral character from candidate religiousness (H1c) and whether conservatives place more value on candidate religiousness (H1d). The results are shown in Table 2.

[Table 2 about here]

Looking at the first column, the main effects of believing that Clinton has strong religious values has a positive but insignificant effect on perceptions of her honesty and integrity. Given that this variable is interacted with respondent ideology and church attendance, this should be interpreted as the effect of Clinton's religious perception among those who are liberal and report never going to church.¹⁴ Thus, the prediction of H1a appears not to hold—at least for this subgroup: secular liberals are no more likely to view Clinton as honest if they see her as religious. Next, we turn to the interaction between respondent religiosity and perceptions of Clinton's religiousness. Contrary to H1c, the interaction term is not statistically significant, though the effect is in the expected direction. Moving to the interaction term between conservative ideology and perception of Clinton's religiousness, we see a positive and statistically significant ($p < .05$) relationship, supporting H1d.¹⁵ Among conservatives, perceived religiousness leads to large increases in perceptions of her being more honest than most (43 pp), while this effect is smaller and not statistically significant among liberals (8 pp). Among moderates, perceived religiousness increases perceived honesty by a more modest 26.5 percentage points. This shows that conservatives and moderates are more apt than liberals to associate a perception that Clinton has strong religious values with her trustworthiness (H1d).

Thus, our results show how expressing religious identity may be a key strategy to broadening her political coalition while simultaneously not alienating her likely less-religious Democratic base.¹⁶ The size of these effects is remarkable given the name-recognition of Clinton, not to mention well-documented antipathy toward her among conservatives and Republicans. We might expect these effects to be even larger for a candidate with less political baggage.¹⁷

We now turn to the second column of Table 2, demonstrating the effect of Clinton's perceived religiousness on her overall favorability. The results show that perceived religiousness has a positive, significant main effect (i.e. among secular liberals) on favorability ($p < .01$), increasing the probability of favorable views of Clinton by 20 percentage points, and decreasing the probability of unfavorable views by 15 percentage points (H2a). In other words, even though secular liberals do not associate Clinton's religiousness with her honesty (for obvious reasons), even they are still more likely to view her favorably and vote for her if they see her as religious! In addition, we observe a significant interaction between perceived religiousness and respondent ideology ($p < .05$), but not perceived religiousness and respondent religiosity.¹⁸ Once again, perceiving Clinton as religious has a large positive effect on Clinton's favorability among conservatives (50 pp), and a more modest, but still statistically significant positive effect among liberals (18 pp). Finally, Column 3 shows the same model predicting the likelihood of voting for Clinton, in order to test whether the results for favorability hold for electoral support. We find that this variable is highly correlated with favorability ($r = .81$), and the results are substantively the same.¹⁹

Overall, perceptions of Hillary Clinton's religiousness were powerful positive predictors of her perceived honesty, her favorability, and likelihood of electoral support, especially among conservatives. Again, perceived religiousness *does not* lead liberals to view her less favorably or

to be less likely vote for her, though such perception does not significantly increase her perceived honesty among secular liberals.²⁰ In other words, H1a is supported for all people except for this small group (under 7% of this survey's sample). These results imply that a campaign strategy to boost Clinton's image as a religious individual would serve as a strong political positive—especially in a general election effort to appeal to moderate and right-leaning voters.

The last hypothesis (H2c) predicts that the effect of perceived religiousness on increased candidate favorability is mediated by perceptions of the candidate's trustworthiness. In order to demonstrate this, we should find evidence that the positive effect of religious perception on Clinton favorability works largely through perceptions of her moral character. To test this hypothesis, we rely on the causal mediation framework (Imai et al. 2011). We first dichotomized perceptions of Clinton's honesty and favorability of Clinton, as the ACME package does not allow for ordered variables. Then we entered two equations with favorability as the dependent variable, honesty as the mediator, and religiousness as independent variable. Consistent with H2c, perceived honesty significantly mediates the effect of perceived religiousness on favorability ($p < .05$) and explains approximately 27% of the effect.²¹

We cannot fully test whether a similar mediational path works for Republican politicians, as the survey unfortunately does not ask about the perceived honesty/integrity of the Republican candidates for president. However, we can assess the effect of perceived religiousness on the favorability of Republican candidates Mitt Romney, Mike Huckabee, Fred Thompson, Rudolph Giuliani, and John McCain. Across these candidates, we find that perceptions of strong religious values are associated with more favorable evaluations, when not interacted with ideology (full results shown in the Appendix). Additionally, we again find evidence of an interaction between

perceived religiousness and respondent ideology, with conservatives and moderates rewarding religiousness to a greater extent.²² In sum, we find that when a candidate is perceived as religious, regardless of their partisanship, their favorability increases—especially for voters who are not liberal and secular.

Overall, Study 2 provides evidence that perceptions of religiousness strongly predict perceptions of honesty (H1a), and favorability of a candidate (H2a). However, we must note that the observational nature of the data makes these inferences uncertain, as it is possible that citizens are projecting their preferred religious beliefs onto favored candidates. Study 2 also provides evidence that the effects of perceived religiousness on favorability are mediated by perceived honesty (H2c). Again, we must note some uncertainty, as there are limitations to inference in mediational analyses (e.g., Bullock, Green & Ha 2010; Imai, Keele, Tingly & Yamamoto 2011). In the next section, we attempt to address some of these issues.

Study 3: An Experimental Test

So far, our evidence has relied entirely on observational data, raising questions of endogeneity. In order to establish a causal relationship between our variables, we implemented a survey experiment utilizing 311 subjects recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk). While the sample is not nationally representative, it is more diverse than typical convenience samples, and provides high quality data for low cost (Berinsky, Huber & Lenz 2012). Because our sample is not nationally representative, and religiosity is a likely moderator of the treatment effects, it is worth briefly discussing the characteristics of our sample. Our sample was highly non-religious. In fact, 48% of our subjects report *never* going to church and 38% report that God is *not important at all* in their lives. For comparison, results from a recent national survey shows

that only 17% of the national population report never attending church. Moreover, consistent with previous work (Berinsky, Huber & Lenz 2012), our sample skews young and liberal. More information on the demographics is displayed in Table A1 of the Appendix.

We employed a 2x3 factorial design, manipulating the partisanship (Democrat vs. Republican) and religiousness of the candidate (religious vs. atheist vs. no information). Subjects were asked to evaluate a hypothetical political candidate and were given one of the six versions of the text below.

Jeff Roberts is running for Congress as a [*Democrat/Republican*]. Jeff Roberts is married with two children, and friends describe him as a [*family man/family man and an atheist/family man with strong religious beliefs*]. Roberts is a small-business owner, and emphasizes his long-standing role in the community and local politics. His opponent characterizes him as a political insider who is out of touch with voters.

After reading the text, subjects were asked to evaluate how well six randomly ordered character traits (trustworthy, honest, moral, intelligent, efficient, hard-working) describe Roberts on five-point ordinal scales. Subjects were also asked to assess his ideology (7-point scale), their favorability of him (7-point scale), and how likely they would be to vote for him (5-point scale, ranging from “Not likely at all” to “Extremely likely”). Finally, subjects were asked a variety of background questions, including partisanship, ideology and religion. Full question wording is shown in the Appendix.

In order to evaluate the effect of Roberts’ ascribed religiousness on evaluations of him, we created three indices. The first index averaged three items to create a measure of his moral character (trustworthy, honest, moral; $\alpha = .84$).²³ The second index averaged three items to create

a measure of his competence (efficient, hard-working, intelligent; $\alpha = .76$). Finally, we rescaled and averaged subjects' ratings of Roberts' favorability and reported likelihood of voting for the candidate to create an index we refer to as "candidate support" ($\alpha = .84$).²⁴ All of our dependent variables are scaled to range from a minimum of zero to a maximum of one, with higher values representing more positive feelings and evaluations of Roberts.

Additionally, we also measured subject religiosity, which is an index of church attendance and the importance of God in subjects' lives ($\alpha = .77$). As noted above, our sample is highly non-religious, which is likely to affect average treatment effects. In order to address this, we focus below on the moderated treatment effects, allowing treatment effects to vary by subject ideology and religiosity (see Druckman & Kam 2011). However, mean levels of the two key dependent variables are shown by condition in Table 3. All variables are scaled to range from 0 to 1 in Table 3 as well as all of the analyses that follow. Although our measures are technically ordinal, for convenience we assume throughout that our dependent variables are measured at the interval level.²⁵

[Table 3 about here]

We begin with tests of Hypotheses 1a and 1b, which hold that atheists will be perceived as less moral than the control, and religious candidates will be perceived as having greater moral character than the control. A simple comparison of means found no differences between the atheist and control conditions (0.54 vs. 0.52, $p = .50$), or the religious and control conditions (0.52 vs. 0.52, $p = .99$). These results do not support our hypotheses, but given the low levels of religiosity in our sample, candidate religiousness may still provide an advantage among a large swath of the electorate. Thus, we now turn to moderated treatment effects.

Following our assumption that each dependent variable is intervallic, we predict each dependent variable as a function of the treatment conditions using OLS.²⁶ The atheist and religious treatments are each interacted with subject religiosity and subject ideology. Additionally, we include controls for the subject's partisanship (measured on a 7-pt scale ranging from strong Democrat to strong Republican and rescaled from zero to one), the (randomly assigned) partisanship of the candidate, and an interaction between the two. The first column of Table 4 shows the results of a model predicting moral character. As shown in the table, both of the main effects for each treatment condition are statistically significant, as are their interactions with subject religiosity. However, the interactions between the treatments and subject ideology do not reach statistical significance (atheist: $p = .48$, religious: $p = .16$). Column 2 of Table 4 shows the results of the model predicting candidate support. The results are substantively quite similar to the results of the moral character model, with each treatment effect statistically significant, and qualified by an interaction with subject religiosity.

[Table 4 about here]

In order to unpack the effects of each treatment, we calculated the marginal effect of each treatment as subject religiosity and ideology vary. We note that subject ideology did not significantly moderate the treatment effects; however, displaying the results separately by ideological group will help interpret the likely breadth of these effects, particularly given our use of a non-random sample. The upper left panel of Figure 1 shows the marginal effect of the atheist treatment on moral character. Each line represents the marginal effect of one of three ideological groups (very conservative, moderate, or very liberal). Stars next to the line indicate regions where the treatment effect is significantly different from zero. Consistent with our hypotheses, the atheist treatment has a negative effect on perceived moral character among the highly

religious, although this effect is indistinguishable from zero among very liberal subjects. However, among subjects who are both very liberal and low in religiosity, the atheist treatment actually has a *positive* effect.²⁷ The upper right panel of Figure 1 shows the marginal effect of the religious treatment. Among political moderates and conservatives, even at only moderate levels of religiosity, the religious treatment has a positive effect on moral character. However, for very liberal respondents low in religiosity, the religious treatment actually has a negative effect on perceptions of moral character, in keeping with Putnam & Campbell's (2010) findings on the effect of religion on interpersonal trust. Very liberal respondents of at least moderate religiosity are not negatively affected by the religious treatment. Overall, the atheist candidate is the most polarizing, with religious moderates and conservatives viewing him as less moral and trustworthy (as with even very liberal religious individuals, though not quite to statistical significance), and non-religious liberals viewing him as more moral and trustworthy. However, the religious candidate has the broadest appeal, making gains in perceived moral character among moderates and conservatives who are at least marginally religious. We argue that this pattern is sensible, and mostly supportive of our theoretical predictions.

Finally, our hypotheses predict that the effect of the treatments on candidate support will be mediated through perceptions of moral character. Although the treatments strongly affected perceptions of the candidate's moral character, auxiliary analyses show that they also affected perceptions of the candidate's competence and ideological views, similar to findings by McDermott (2009). As a result, it is not immediately clear through which path the treatment is affecting candidate support. To support our claim that it is moral character that is the primary mechanism through which religiousness affects candidate support, we begin with a simple analysis predicting candidate support as a function of subjects' post-treatment *perceptions* of the

candidate's moral character, competence, and ideological distance, along with controls for subject partisanship, candidate partisanship, and an interaction between the two (for a similar approach, see Huddy and Terkildsen 1993). The results are shown in Table 5. As one would expect, perceptions of the candidate's moral character and competence are both positively associated with candidate support (both $ps < .05$), while perceived ideological distance is negatively associated with candidate support ($p < .01$). However, consistent with our prediction, the magnitude of the coefficient on moral character ($b = .69$) is significantly greater than the magnitude of the coefficients on competence ($b = .13, p < .001$) and ideological distance ($b = -.21, p < .001$) according to a Wald test for the equality of coefficients. Thus, even if the treatments were equally affecting all three of these potential mediator variables, this analysis suggests the effects are driven primarily through perceptions of moral character.

[Table 5 about here]

To more formally test our mediation claim, we conducted a moderated mediation analysis using structural equation modeling (Preacher, Rucker, and Hayes 2007). Beginning with the atheist treatment, we excluded the religious candidate condition and estimated a moderated mediation model in which we first predicted moral character as a function of the atheist treatment, subject religiosity, and an interaction between the two, as well as controls for candidate partisanship, subject partisanship, and an interaction between them (full model results shown in Table A2 in the Appendix).²⁸ At the minimum level of religiosity, perceptions of moral character significantly mediate the treatment effect on support ($b = .09, p < .01$), accounting for approximately 80% of the total effect. At the maximum level of religiosity, perceptions of moral character also significantly mediate the treatment effect ($b = -.12, p < .05$), accounting for approximately 64% of the total effect.

Next, we repeat these analyses for the religious treatment, while excluding data from the atheist treatment. Among the least religious, moral character significantly mediates the treatment effect ($b = -.05, p < .10$), accounting for 44% of the total effect. Among the most religious, the effect is much stronger ($b = .15, p < .01$) and accounts for 88% of the total effect. Consistent with our theory, this suggests that the candidate's religiousness has stronger effects on perceptions of moral character among the religious than the non-religious. Overall, our results are consistent with perceptions of moral character strongly mediating the effects of candidate religiousness on vote likelihood, and this pattern was most pronounced among religious subjects. These results fit with our theory, as we would expect that the connection between religiousness and moral character is stronger among religious individuals than non-religious individuals.

A possible alternative explanation is that religiousness simply serves as a group cue – the non-religious view non-religious candidates more favorably than religious candidates and vice-versa for the religious. Although we do find some evidence for this claim, we do not think this provides a full explanation of the effects of candidate religiousness for a few reasons. First, we only observed negative effects of candidate religiousness on perceptions of moral character among a very small subset of the population – people who are very liberal *and* non-religious. In contrast, the estimated effect of candidate religiousness among political moderates at the lowest levels of religiosity was approximately zero. Second, although candidate religiousness had large effects on perceptions of moral character, it had weaker effects on perceptions of competence. This suggests that religiousness particularly affects perceptions of moral character, rather than simply creating positive perceptions across the board, and these findings are more consistent with our theory. Nonetheless, our results are not definitive on this question, and it deserves further research.

Discussion

In this paper, we employ three different studies in an effort to assess how perceptions of politicians' religiousness affect voter trust and support. Though none of the studies can fully substantiate our hypotheses on their own, collectively they suggest that not demonstrating religiousness is a significant roadblock for winning public office in the United States, and being perceived as religious increases the level of trust instilled in voters. Additionally, we found some surprising and intriguing results. While our observational analyses provided evidence that perceived religiousness always has a positive (or at worst a null) effect on perception of integrity/honest, favorability and vote choice, our experimental test demonstrated that there can be another side to the coin. Liberal subjects at the lowest levels of religiousness actually saw the atheist candidate as having *greater* moral character, and reported greater vote likelihood, relative to the control.²⁹ While we did not predict this finding, it makes sense that secular liberals would respond positively to a politician brave enough to “come out” as a non-believer. Moreover, the positive identification as an atheist may be more likely to produce in-group effects than the mere absence of religious beliefs. This finding further supports previous work showing that as religious and political conservatism become more tightly enmeshed, there is an opposing force where liberal voters become less comfortable with overt religion in politics. For an ambitious politician, however, some lost support among the secular, liberal voting bloc might be willingly sacrificed in order to better appeal to moderate voters who might respond positively toward religious rhetoric via increased trust. This is true even of Democratic politicians, for whom other ideological signals might be sufficient to keep liberal voters in the fold—as we suggest to be the case for Hillary Clinton in Study 2.

Conclusion

Religion plays an important role in nearly all modern American political campaigns, either by the politicians themselves, or in how voters use their personal faith to guide their choices. Religious cues can and do come in many varieties and have a multitude of effects on voter behavior. Some cues can provide information to particular religious groups, such as Evangelicals, while others are heard and understood by a wider audience. Religious cues are used by politicians to signal group membership, adherence to particular values and traditions, competence, and more. Our study sets out to couch the use of religious cues firmly within the perspective that voter trust is a vital attribute for a politician to obtain, and that religiousness is a necessary precondition to earn that trust from the great majority of American voters. Across three studies, our results demonstrate that when a candidate is perceived as adhering to a set of religious values, voters see them as moral and possessing high levels of integrity and honesty. Such perceptions ultimately translate into increased political support for these candidates. Our first study demonstrated that Americans are largely unwilling to vote for an atheist, and many do not believe that atheists can be moral. Both of these attitudes were particularly common among religious individuals. Our second study showed that perceptions that Hillary Clinton held strong religious beliefs increased perceptions of her honesty and favorability, particularly among non-liberals, which then led to increased likelihood of voting for her. Notably, however, perceptions that she is religious did not harm her among liberals or the non-religious. Finally, in our experimental study, we provided evidence that increased religiousness causes an increase in perceptions of moral character and favorability, among all subjects except for those who were both liberal and non-religious. Given the relatively low percentage of the electorate that is liberal and non-religious it is likely that the benefits of religiousness outweigh any costs for most

politicians. Moreover, we suspect that in richer information environments than our experiment (which uses a hypothetical candidate), other policy and ideological signals may outweigh any ideological signal sent by a candidate's religiousness (as we suggest is the case in our observational study).

Put together, these results demonstrate that signaling religiousness can be a powerful tactic for candidates to improve perceptions of their trustworthiness and morality and to increase their vote share, even for Democratic politicians. Further, our results help make sense of what is somewhat of a conundrum found in previous literature. While McDermott (2009) shows that Evangelical politicians are seen as more competent and trustworthy than other candidates, campaigning on an Evangelical identity can be a double-edged sword for politicians as Evangelicals are also commonly seen as conservative, intolerant, and somewhat out of the mainstream. Democrats in particular have distaste for Evangelical-identified politicians (Campbell, Green, & Layman 2011). Yet Democratic candidates continue to make religious appeals, which would appear to be puzzling given this recent research. Our results show that displaying generic religious values can increase perceptions of a candidate's trustworthiness and favorability, particularly among moderates and conservatives. For Republican politicians, displays of religiousness will likely reinforce pre-existing support from those who are predisposed to agree with their policies. For Democrats, on the other hand, displays of religiousness can serve to expand their appeal among moderates and conservatives without endangering support from liberal voters. While secular liberal voters may not be happy with Democratic politicians using religious rhetoric, it is highly unlikely that they would punish those politicians by defecting to the Republicans, especially in the current political-religious climate.

We believe our research opens up a variety of interesting questions to be explored by future studies. First, what are the most effective strategies for politicians to signal religiousness? Signaling religiousness should only be effective if the signal is believable. As a result, we suspect that signals that are costly or hard to fake, such as emotional responses, should be more effective. Additionally, is it more difficult for groups that are not typically associated with religion, such as liberal Democrats, to convincingly signal base levels of religiousness and higher levels of religiosity? Second, do strong policy signals serve to blunt the ideological signal sent by a candidate's religiosity, and how do voters weigh and interpret contradictory signals? Third, our research does not examine the optimal *level* of religiosity for political candidates. Discovering where that line is, and what creates it, should be an interesting area for research. Further, it would be valuable to explore variation in the effects of different types of religious signals. In other words, are certain types of religious signals effective at generating trust without sending an ideological signal, while other types of religious signals are more strongly ideological? Answering this question would provide important insight into the strategic use of religious appeals in campaigns.

Our results also imply that there remains a substantial barrier to non-religious politicians winning an elected office and gaining descriptive representation. In fact, Congress had only one open atheist, Pete Stark (D-CA), until he lost his 2012 House re-election campaign.³⁰ However, there may be reason for optimism for the “religious nones” in the long-term. Younger Americans are less likely to hold prejudicial attitudes and are more willing to vote for an atheist (Study 1). Moreover, the non-religious are one of the fastest growing religious categories in America. Research has demonstrated that, contrary to many other types of prejudice, atheists face less discrimination when they are *more* prevalent (Gervais 2011). Thus, the increasing numbers of

citizens who are openly atheist or non-religious may serve to erode the substantial barrier to descriptive representation.

Endnotes

¹ Part of the reason that Democrats use religious rhetoric is simply because they are religious themselves, thus this behavior is not puzzling at all, nor is it merely the result of political pandering (see, for example, Benson & Williams 1982). While it is undoubtedly true that Democratic politicians—along with most all politicians—are often highly religious themselves, this raises a different question: why are politicians so disproportionately religious, compared to the overall public and especially the Democratic base? According to a June 2014 Gallup poll, 30% of Americans are identified as “nonreligious,” and these voters favor the Democratic Party by a margin of 52% to 29%. Despite this, essentially no Democratic national politicians identify as nonreligious.

² Our 2007 Newsweek poll shows that over 48% of Democrats and Democratic-leaners say that “organized religion has too much influence on American politics.” Only 18% of Republicans say the same.

³ Complicating matters is the fact that religious “nones” or as secular often do not identify as atheists (Putnam & Campbell 2010). However, we suspect that this distinction is often missed by the public, for whom an ascribed lack of religious tradition and belief is seen as functionally equivalent to atheism.

⁴ The 2009 Religion and Public Life poll shows that atheists are seen in a substantially less favorable light than any other religious group, with over 60% of respondents saying they have an unfavorable view of atheists. The only other group remotely close is Muslims, with 43% saying they have an unfavorable view. Poll after poll also reveals that atheism seems to be an unsurpassable barrier to holding public office. Even as recently as 2011, 66% say they would be less likely to vote for a candidate who does not believe in God, twice the percentage of those

who say the same about homosexuals (Figures come from a Pew Research poll of a national sample of adults conducted May 25-30, 2011). Similarly, a 2007 Gallup poll shows that only 46% report being willing to vote for a generally well-qualified atheist nominated from their party, while 56% report the same about homosexuals. According to a Fox News poll, 58% would not be comfortable with an atheist serving on the Supreme Court, a number higher than other religious groups sometimes targeted for discrimination (Muslims: 53%, Mormons: 30%, Christians who takes the Bible literally: 35%).

⁵ In this paper, we do not aim to tease apart the precise relationship between perceptions of moral character and perceptions of trustworthiness. Given that literature in psychology argues that the two concepts should be closely related, we simplify our model and treat them as largely interchangeable for the purposes of this paper.

⁶ In addition to favorability, we hypothesize that this process will have a similar effect on reported vote choice in an electoral context.

⁷ By comparison, another survey shows that only 8% of Americans would *not* vote for a “generally well-qualified” Catholic nominee, 11% wouldn’t vote for a Jew, 37% wouldn’t vote for a Muslim, and 17% wouldn’t vote for an Evangelical Christian (McDermott 2009).

⁸ Ideally, we would be able to ask for the respondents belonging, beliefs, and behavior to create an aggregate measure of religious commitment (Layman 2001). However, it is somewhat rare to have a full complement of religious variables in smaller surveys, so we respondents’ identification with a specific religious tradition and church attendance (when available) as measures of religiosity.

⁹ The survey also does not ask respondent ideology, and thus we are forced to use party identification as a proxy for ideology. However, our prediction is the same: Republicans will be less likely to view atheists as moral and to vote for them.

¹⁰ We originally included whether the respondent identified as an atheist in the first model, but this was (unsurprisingly) a perfect predictor of belief that atheists *can* be moral. As a result, we cannot include this variable in the first model reported in Table 1.

¹¹ In regard to the remaining variables in the model, reporting that one actually knows an atheist greatly increases belief that atheists can be moral, supporting previous research on prejudice and intergroup contact (e.g., Allport 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp 2006; Lewis 2011). Additionally, education and being male increase the likelihood of seeing atheists as moral. On the negative side, older respondents and African Americans are more likely to think that atheists cannot be moral.

¹² The survey asks some, but not all, questions for many other candidates—both Democratic and Republican—allowing for partial validation of our results for Clinton. Specifically, questions regarding perceived religiousness, honesty, and favorability are asked for Democratic candidates John Edwards and Barack Obama, while respondents are asked only about perceived religiousness and favorability for the main Republican candidates. See the Appendix for these results.

¹³ The question regarding Clinton's honesty/integrity is only asked for a subset of respondents, hence the significantly smaller N for column 1 of Table 2 compared to the second column.

¹⁴ Nearly identical results are found when including these interactions individually into the model.

¹⁵ The main effect of ideology is negative and significant across all three models, showing that when Clinton is NOT perceived as having strong religious values, conservative ideology strongly predicts significantly lower levels of perceived honesty, favorability, and likelihood of voting for Clinton. None of this is surprising, and is predicted by our theory.

¹⁶ Similar results are found when substituting Democratic partisanship for liberal ideology in the interaction. The substantive interpretation, as a result, holds regardless of whether we look at ideology or partisanship as the key variable interacting with perceptions of religiousness.

¹⁷ In fact, the results linking perceived religiousness to perceived honesty/integrity and favorability are if anything even stronger for John Edwards (see Appendix), who likely possessed less political baggage at that point than Clinton.

¹⁸ A person who does not believe Clinton has strong religious values is predicted to be more likely (51%) to say they do not have a favorable opinion of her, holding all other variables in the model constant. This drops to 18% for a hypothetical person who does believe she has strong religious values, again keeping other variables constant. Her predicted probability of approval increases from 28% to 54%.

¹⁹ Focusing on favorability also allows us to directly compare our findings with Clinton's Democratic rivals (see Appendix). The results for John Edwards are nearly identical to Clinton's, and provide the same substantive interpretation. The ideology/religious perception interaction for Obama is not significant, though given the doubts and questions surrounding Obama's religion it is not surprising that more conservative voters would not associate his religiousness with greater honesty or favorability. Liberals, on the other hand, are more likely to see Obama favorably when he is viewed as having strong religious values. However, in other models (not shown), we find that the main effects of perceiving both Obama and Edwards as religious (i.e. in models not

including interactions) are strongly positive and significant, meaning that overall religious perceptions are highly predictive of perceived honesty/integrity and overall candidate favorability, which is exactly what our theory predicts. So while Obama demonstrating religiousness may not increase his standing among conservatives, it would still be a net political positive for him.

²⁰ This somewhat contradicts the findings of Campbell, Green, & Layman (2010), who show that when a candidate is identified as an Evangelical or generically religious there is a sharp drop in the level of Democratic voter support. However, in their experiment voters had much less information about the hypothetical candidate than our survey respondents did for Clinton. As a result of having more information about Clinton's ideological orientation and built-in affinity for her, liberals might be less likely to use her religiousness as a negative ideological cue.

²¹ Although the package does not allow for moderated mediation, we also ran the model while excluding liberals. As expected, the results became even stronger, with perceptions of honesty explaining approximately 40% of the effect of perceived religiousness.

²² For two candidates in our sample—Mike Huckabee and Mitt Romney—liberals actually become *less* likely to support them when they are perceived as religious. Huckabee, an outspoken Evangelical, will likely engender significant antipathy by liberal voters (Campbell, Green, & Layman 2011). Romney's Mormonism likely also drove away liberals due to the Mormon Church's long ties to conservative politics. Thus, the religious affiliation of these two candidates may be sending stronger ideological signals than other candidates' affiliations, counteracting any gains due to increased perceived moral character—at least among liberals.

²³ Supporting our contention that perceptions of trustworthiness and morality are closely related, the two variables are strongly correlated ($r = .61, p < .001$).

²⁴ Specifically, each constituent variable (favorability and vote likelihood) was rescaled to range from 0 to 1, then averaged.

²⁵ The high intercorrelations between the items making up our indices, as well as other diagnostic tests suggest that our assumption is warranted.

²⁶ We employ OLS rather than an ordered model because our dependent variables are created by combining several 5-7 point scales making OLS a reasonable approach. The results are substantively the same regardless of modelling strategy, but because of ease of interpretation we use OLS.

²⁷ While we did not predict this, it would make sense for a liberal non-religious respondent to feel kinship with a politician who declares him or herself to be non-religious, and to feel positively toward them. Additionally, this supports the findings of Putnam & Campbell (2010, 460, Figure 13.4) who show that the only group of Americans who demonstrate greater trust for nonreligious people than religious people are those at the extreme low end of personal religiosity, and even then the difference is quite small.

²⁸ For simplicity, and because we did not find consistent moderating effects of subject ideology, we exclude the interaction between the atheism treatment and subject ideology. Results are substantively unaffected by this choice.

²⁹ We believe that a likely explanation for this discrepancy has to do with the nature of our Mechanical Turk sample. As noted previously, our MTurk subjects were much less religious than the national population. However, the sample also diverges from a national sample on other important dimensions. Previous research shows that MTurk users are much younger, less likely to be African-American, and more educated than national samples (Berinsky, Huber, & Lenz 2012). Our subjects were also overwhelmingly liberal and Democratic. Notably, each of these

differences would predict greater tolerance towards atheists in our MTurk sample, based on the findings in Study 1. So, although our results uncovered some backlash in which candidate religiousness actually hurt the candidate, we expect that this effect is not prevalent nationally.

³⁰ According to some sources, a new representative elected in 2012—Kyrsten Sinema (D-AZ)—took on the mantle as the only atheist in Congress, though her campaign spokesman denied that she identifies herself as such (Winston 2012).

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Figure 1. Effects of atheist and religious treatments on moral character and vote choice

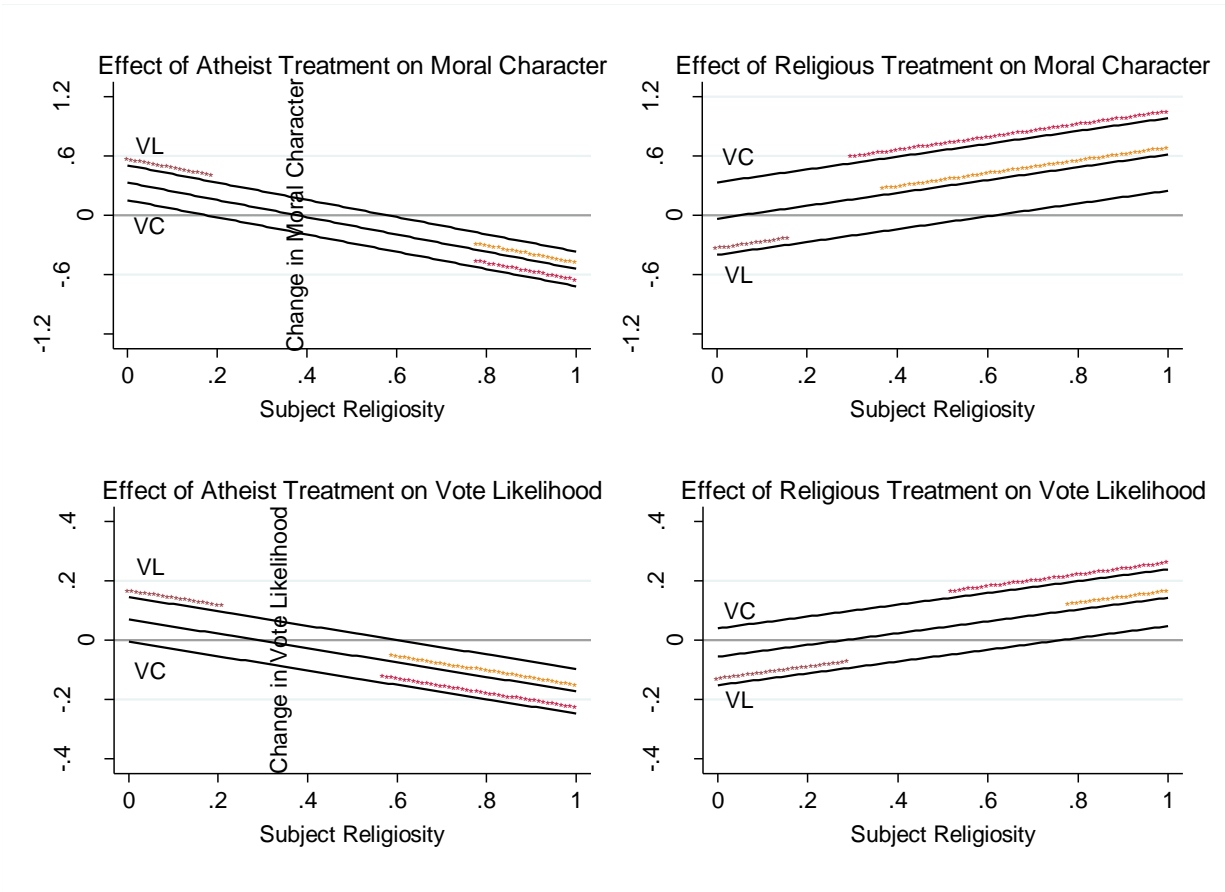


Table 1. Perceived Morality of and Political Support for Atheists

	Morality	Vote Likelihood
<i>Perception of Atheists</i>		
Atheists can be moral	--	2.41 *** (0.40)
Know an Atheist	0.44 *** (0.10)	0.47 *** (0.13)
<i>Respondent Characteristics</i>		
Partisanship (0 = Dem., 1 = Ind., 2 = Rep.)	-0.10 * (0.06)	-0.37 *** (0.08)
Believe in God	--	-0.84 ** (0.32)
Mainline Protestant	-0.23 (0.17)	-0.51 *** (0.21)
Evangelical	-0.46 *** (0.12)	-0.85 *** (0.16)
Catholic	0.26 (0.18)	-0.51 ** (0.22)
Jewish	-0.07 (0.38)	0.23 (0.41)
Mormon	0.18 (0.40)	-0.76 ** (0.35)
Age	-0.01 * (0.00)	-0.02 *** (0.00)
Education	0.08 ** (0.03)	0.02 (0.04)
African-American	-0.69 *** (0.17)	-0.54 ** (0.27)
Male	0.21 ** (0.10)	0.49 *** (0.12)
Constant	0.92 *** (0.27)	-0.24 (0.57)
Pseudo R-Squared	0.11	0.41
Observations	886	782

Standard errors in parentheses. * $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$. Column 1 displays results predicting whether an atheist can be moral. Column 2 displays the results for whether the respondent would be willing to vote for an atheist candidate. Partisanship is measured on a 3-pt scale and treated as ordinal.

Table 2. Perceptions of Hillary Clinton's Religiosity

	Honesty	Favorability	Vote Likelihood
<i>Perceptions of Hillary Clinton</i>			
Strong Religious Values	0.15 (0.38)	0.53 ** (0.27)	0.63 *** (0.23)
<i>Subject Characteristics</i>			
Ideology (0 = Lib., 1 = Mod., 2 = Cons.)	-0.24 ** (0.12)	-0.50 *** (0.08)	-0.40 *** (0.07)
Partisanship (0 = Dem., 1 = Ind., 2 = Rep.)	-0.35 *** (0.12)	-0.71 *** (0.06)	-0.87 *** (0.06)
Church Attendance	-0.07 (0.06)	-0.08 ** (0.03)	-0.09 *** (0.03)
Evangelical	-0.15 (0.18)	-0.29 ** (0.11)	-0.22 ** (0.10)
Income	-0.11 ** (0.05)	0.03 (0.03)	0.05 * (0.03)
Education	-0.07 (0.06)	-0.01 (0.04)	0.05 (0.04)
African-American	0.28 (0.22)	0.50 ** (0.20)	0.41 ** (0.17)
Male	0.06 (0.15)	-0.26 *** (0.09)	-0.12 (0.08)
<i>Interactions Between Perceptions of Clinton and Subject Characteristics</i>			
Clinton Religious × Ideology	0.51 ** (0.24)	0.43 ** (0.18)	0.32 ** (0.16)
Clinton Religious × Church Attendance	0.05 (0.11)	-0.01 (0.08)	-0.04 (0.07)
Cut 1	-2.41 (0.30)	-1.49 (0.19)	-1.52 (0.17)
Cut 2	-0.97 (0.27)	-0.92 (0.18)	-0.74 (0.17)
Cut 3	--	--	0.11 (0.16)
Pseudo R-Squared	0.10	0.27	0.25
Observations	354	954	951

Standard errors in parentheses. * $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$. Column 1 displays results for whether Clinton is has less, about the same, or more honesty and integrity than most people in public life. Column 2 displays results for whether the respondent has favorable or unfavorable views of Clinton, or has not decided. Column 3 displays results for an ordered model on the respondent's likelihood of voting for Clinton. Ideology and partisanship are both measured on 3-pt scales and treated as ordinal.

Table 3. Mean Ratings of Candidate by Experimental Condition

Experimental Condition		Dependent Variable			N
Religiousness	Partisanship	Moral Character	Candidate Support	Competence	
Unspecified	Democrat	0.53 (.13)	0.55 (.18)	0.57 (.16)	53
Unspecified	Republican	0.51 (.15)	0.47 (.22)	0.60 (.17)	47
Atheist	Democrat	0.50 (.21)	0.53 (.23)	0.62 (.20)	52
Atheist	Republican	0.57 (.19)	0.50 (.20)	0.64 (.16)	51
Religious	Democrat	0.56 (.18)	0.52 (.20)	0.58 (.15)	63
Religious	Republican	0.48 (.20)	0.42 (.25)	0.53 (.20)	61

Standard deviations in parentheses. All variables are scaled to range from 0 to 1.

Table 4. Effects of Candidate Religiosity on Perceptions of Character and Candidate Support

	Moral Character	Candidate Support	Competence
<i>Candidate Characteristics</i>			
Atheist	0.12 ** (0.05)	0.14 *** (0.05)	0.10 ** (0.05)
Religious	-0.09 ** (0.04)	-0.14 *** (0.05)	-0.06 (0.04)
Democrat	0.04 (0.03)	0.18 *** (0.04)	0.04 (0.03)
<i>Subject Characteristics</i>			
Religiosity	0.05 (0.07)	0.08 (0.07)	0.07 (0.07)
Ideology (7-pt scale; 0 = very liberal, 1 = very conservative)	0.01 (0.08)	0.06 (0.09)	-0.02 (0.08)
Partisanship (7-pt scale; 0 = strong Democrat, 1 = strong Republican)	0.02 (0.06)	0.10 (0.07)	0.09 (0.06)
<i>Interactions between Candidate and Subject Characteristics</i>			
Atheist × Subject Religiosity	-0.21 ** (0.09)	-0.23 ** (0.10)	-0.17 * (0.09)
Religious × Subject Religiosity	0.16 * (0.09)	0.20 ** (0.10)	0.06 (0.09)
Atheist × Subject Ideology	-0.07 (0.10)	-0.14 (0.11)	-0.02 (0.10)
Religious × Subject Ideology	0.15 (0.10)	0.17 (0.12)	0.06 (0.10)
Democratic Candidate × Subject Partisanship	-0.10 (0.07)	-0.32 *** (0.08)	-0.09 (0.07)
Constant	0.48 *** (0.04)	0.38 *** (0.04)	0.53 *** (0.03)
R-Squared	0.13	0.22	0.07
Observations	311	311	311

Standard errors in parentheses. * $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$. Partisanship and ideology are both measured on 7-point scales and rescaled to range 0-1. High values indicate more conservative ideology and stronger identification with the Republican Party, respectively. The first column displays results predicting perceptions of candidate morality (trustworthy, honest, moral). Column 2 displays results predicting an index of candidate favorability and likelihood of voting for the candidate. Column 3 displays the results predicting candidate competence (intelligent, efficient, hard-working).

Table 5. Effects of Subject Perceptions of Candidate on Candidate Support

	Candidate Support
<i>Perceptions of the Candidate</i>	
Moral Character	0.69 *** (0.05)
Competence	0.13 ** (0.05)
Ideological Difference	-0.21 *** (0.03)
<i>Candidate Characteristics</i>	
Democrat	0.08 *** (0.03)
<i>Subject Characteristics</i>	
Partisanship (7-pt scale; 0 = strong Democrat, 1 = strong Republican)	0.00 (0.01)
<i>Interactions between Candidate and Subject Characteristics</i>	
Democratic Candidate × Subject Partisanship	-0.12 ** (0.06)
Constant	0.10 ** (0.04)
R-Squared	0.65
Observations	311

Standard errors in parentheses. * $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$. The dependent variable is an index of candidate favorability and the likelihood of voting for the candidate.

Appendix

Table A1. Sample Characteristics

Partisanship		Income	
Republican	13.2%	Less than \$10,000	10.3%
Democrat	38.3%	\$10,000-20,000	13.2%
Independent	40.2%	\$20,000-30,000	13.8%
Other	8.4%	\$30,000-40,000	10.3%
		\$40,000-50,000	8.4%
		\$50,000-75,000	15.1%
		\$75,000-100,000	12.5%
		\$100,000-150,000	4.2%
		\$150,000 or more	2.9%
		Refused	9.3%
Ideology		Race	
Liberal	56.9%	White	80.71%
Moderate	27.3%	Black	2.89%
Conservative	15.7%	Asian	11.25%
		Other	5.14%
Education			
Grade school	0.3%		
High school	12.5%		
Some college	43.1%		
College degree	37.3%		
Post-graduate degree	6.8%		
Male	66.2%		

Table A2. Perceptions of Moral Character Mediate Treatment Effects

	Atheist Treatment		Religious Treatment	
	Moral Character	Support	Moral Character	Support
<i>Perceptions of the Candidate</i>				
Moral Character		0.83 *** (0.06)		0.83 *** (0.06)
<i>Candidate Characteristics</i>				
Atheist	0.10 *** (0.04)	0.02 (0.03)		
Religious			-0.06 * (0.03)	-0.06 ** (0.03)
Democrat	0.02 (0.04)	0.17 *** (0.03)	0.08 ** (0.04)	0.15 *** (0.03)
<i>Subject Characteristics</i>				
Religiosity	0.07 (0.06)	0.06 (0.05)	0.03 (0.06)	0.05 (0.05)
Partisanship (7-pt scale; 0 = strong Democrat, 1 = strong Republican)	0.00 (0.01)	0.02 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.03 *** (0.01)
<i>Interactions between Candidate and Subject Characteristics</i>				
Atheist × Subject Religiosity	-0.25 *** (0.08)	-0.09 (0.06)		
Religious × Subject Religiosity			0.23 *** (0.07)	0.08 (0.06)
Candidate PID × Subject PID	-0.17 ** (0.08)	-0.31 *** (0.06)	-0.08 (0.08)	-0.30 (0.07)
Constant	0.50 *** (0.04)	-0.04 (0.04)	0.44 *** (0.04)	-0.05 (0.04)
R-Squared				
Observations	191	191	216	216

Standard errors in parentheses. * $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$

Table A3. The Effect of Religious Perceptions on Candidate Favorability

	Obama		Edwards	
	Honesty	Favorability	Honesty	Favorability
<i>Perceptions of Candidate</i>				
Strong Religious Values	0.26 (0.30)	0.53 *** (0.20)	0.44 * (0.28)	0.27 (0.17)
<i>Subject Characteristics</i>				
Ideology (0 = Lib., 1 = Mod., 2 = Cons.)	-0.26 * (0.15)	-0.23 *** (0.08)	-0.24 (0.18)	-0.44 (0.09)
Partisanship (0 = Dem., 1 = Ind., 2 = Rep.)	-0.14 (0.14)	-0.35 *** (0.06)	-0.29 ** (0.13)	-0.43 (0.06)
Church Attendance	-0.05 (0.07)	-0.10 *** (0.04)	-0.08 (0.07)	0.03 (0.04)
Evangelical	0.44 ** (0.23)	-0.30 *** (0.11)	0.20 (0.21)	-0.09 (0.10)
Income	0.04 (0.06)	0.07 ** (0.03)	-0.06 (0.60)	-0.01 (0.03)
Education	0.03 (0.07)	0.10 ** (0.04)	-0.02 (0.07)	0.03 (0.04)
African-American	0.34 (0.26)	0.68 *** (0.18)	-0.27 (0.22)	0.13 (0.17)
Male	0.08 (0.16)	-0.20 ** (0.09)	0.19 (0.16)	-0.08 (0.08)
<i>Interactions Between Perceptions of Candidate and Subject Characteristics</i>				
Cand. Religious × Ideology	0.36 (0.26)	-0.17 (0.13)	0.61 ** (0.25)	0.33 (0.12)
Cand. Religious × Church Attendance	-0.05 (0.12)	0.14 ** (0.06)	-0.07 (0.11)	-0.01 (0.06)
Cut 1	-1.60 (0.35)	-0.82 (0.18)	-2.04 (0.35)	-1.09 (0.18)
Cut 2	-0.35 (0.33)	0.22 (0.18)	-0.80 (0.32)	-0.07 (0.18)
Pseudo R-Squared	0.05	0.14	0.08	0.12
Observations	302	821	323	860

Standard errors in parentheses. * $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$. Ideology and partisanship are both measured on 3-pt scales and treated as ordinal.

Table A4. The Effect of Religious Perceptions on Candidate Favorability

	Giuliani	Romney	McCain	Huckabee	Thompson
<i>Perceptions of Candidate</i>					
Strong Religious Values	0.58 *** (0.23)	-0.57 *** (0.18)	0.23 (0.17)	-0.47 ** (0.24)	0.12 ** (0.24)
<i>Subject Characteristics</i>					
Ideology (0 = Lib., 1 = Mod., 2 = Cons.)	0.03 (0.07)	0.07 (0.09)	0.03 (0.08)	-0.03 (0.10)	0.15 * (0.08)
Partisanship (0 = Dem., 1 = Ind., 2 = Rep.)	0.40 *** (0.05)	0.31 *** (0.06)	0.12 ** (0.05)	0.20 *** (0.07)	0.30 *** (0.06)
Church Attendance	-0.04 (0.03)	-0.03 (0.04)	-0.03 (0.04)	0.04 (0.05)	0.02 *** (0.04)
Evangelical	0.00 (0.10)	-0.24 ** (0.11)	-0.03 (0.10)	0.03 (0.14)	0.37 *** (0.12)
Income	0.05 * (0.03)	-0.02 (0.03)	0.00 (0.03)	-0.02 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.03)
Education	0.00 (0.04)	-0.05 (0.04)	0.03 (0.04)	0.09 * (0.05)	-0.04 (0.04)
African-American	0.21 (0.16)	0.07 (0.18)	0.01 (0.16)	0.07 (0.22)	-0.09 (0.18)
Male	-0.06 (0.08)	0.01 (0.09)	0.01 (0.08)	0.01 (0.11)	0.05 (0.09)
<i>Interactions Between Perceptions of Candidate and Subject Characteristics</i>					
Cand. Religious × Ideology	0.08 (0.15)	0.46 *** (0.13)	0.03 (0.12)	0.78 *** (0.18)	0.29 * (0.17)
Cand. Religious × Church Attendance	0.05 (0.08)	0.10 * (0.06)	0.18 (0.05)	0.05 (0.08)	0.13 (0.09)
Cut 1	0.14 (0.16)	-0.55 (0.19)	-0.05 (0.17)	-0.58 (0.23)	-0.26 (0.18)
Cut 2	1.07 (0.16)	1.04 (0.19)	0.96 (0.17)	1.72 (0.24)	1.51 (0.19)
Pseudo R-Squared	0.07	0.08	0.05	0.10	0.12
Observations	914	778	868	539	681

Standard errors in parentheses. * $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$. Ideology and partisanship are both measured on 3-pt scales and treated as ordinal.

Newsweek Poll #2007-NW05: Religious Beliefs
March 28-29, 2007
N=1,004

People who don't believe in God are called atheists... Do you personally know any atheists, or not?

1 Yes
2 No
9 DK/NA

Would you vote for a political candidate who says he or she is an atheist, or not?

1 Yes
2 No
9 DK/NA

Do you think someone can be a MORAL person and be an atheist, or not?

1 Yes
2 No
9 DK/NA

Study 2 Question Wording

CBS News Poll #2007-10A: 2008 Presidential Election/China

October 12-16, 2007

N=1,282

Do you think of Hillary Clinton as having strong religious values, or don't you think of Hillary Clinton that way?

- 1 Yes
- 2 No
- 9 DK/NA

Do you think Hillary Clinton has more honesty and integrity than most people in public life?
IF NO, ASK: Do you think Hillary Clinton has less honesty and integrity than most people in public life or about the same honesty and integrity as most people in public life?

- 1 Yes, has more
- 2 Less
- 3 Same
- 9 Don't know/No answer

Is your opinion of Hillary Clinton favorable, not favorable, undecided, or haven't you heard enough about Hillary Clinton yet to have an opinion?

- 1 Favorable
- 2 Not favorable
- 3 Undecided
- 4 Haven't heard enough
- 5 Refused

If Hillary Clinton is the Democratic Party's nominee for president in 2008, would you definitely vote for her in the general election, would you consider voting for her, would you definitely not vote for her, or is it too early to say?

- 1 Definitely vote for her
- 2 Consider voting for her
- 3 Definitely would not vote
- 4 Too early to say
- 9 Don't know/no answer

Study 3 Question Wording

We would like to get your opinion of a hypothetical candidate running for Congress. Please read the description carefully, as you will be asked to evaluate him.

Condition A (Democrat, Control)

Jeff Roberts is running for Congress as a Democrat. Jeff Roberts is married with two children, and friends describe him as a family man. Roberts is a small-business owner, and emphasizes his long-standing role in the community and local politics. His opponent, however, characterizes him as a political insider who is out of touch with voters.

Condition B (Democrat, Atheist)

Jeff Roberts is running for Congress as a Democrat. Jeff Roberts is married with two children, and friends describe him as a family man who is an atheist. Roberts is a small-business owner, and emphasizes his long-standing role in the community and local politics. His opponent, however, characterizes him as a political insider who is out of touch with voters.

Condition C (Democrat, Religious)

Jeff Roberts is running for Congress as a Democrat. Jeff Roberts is married with two children, and friends describe him as a family man who has strong religious beliefs. Roberts is a small-business owner, and emphasizes his long-standing role in the community and local politics. His opponent, however, characterizes him as a political insider who is out of touch with voters.

Condition D (Republican, Control)

Jeff Roberts is running for Congress as a Republican. Jeff Roberts is married with two children, and friends describe him as a family man. Roberts is a small-business owner, and emphasizes his long-standing role in the community and local politics. His opponent, however, characterizes him as a political insider who is out of touch with voters.

Condition E (Republican, Atheist)

Jeff Roberts is running for Congress as a Republican. Jeff Roberts is married with two children, and friends describe him as a family man who is an atheist. Roberts is a small-business owner, and emphasizes his long-standing role in the community and local politics. His opponent, however, characterizes him as a political insider who is out of touch with voters.

Condition F (Republican, Religious)

Jeff Roberts is running for Congress as a Republican. Jeff Roberts is married with two children, and friends describe him as a family man who has strong religious beliefs. Roberts is a small-business owner, and emphasizes his long-standing role in the community and local politics. His opponent, however, characterizes him as a political insider who is out of touch with voters.

[Programmer note: randomize the order of the six trait questions.]

1. In your opinion, how well does the word “trustworthy” describe *Jeff Roberts*?
 - <1> Not well at all
 - <2> Not too well
 - <3> Somewhat well
 - <4> Very well
 - <5> Extremely well

2. In your opinion, how well does the word “honest” describe *Jeff Roberts*?
 - <1> Not well at all
 - <2> Not too well
 - <3> Somewhat well
 - <4> Very well
 - <5> Extremely well

3. In your opinion, how well does the word “moral” describe *Jeff Roberts*?
 - <1> Not well at all
 - <2> Not too well
 - <3> Somewhat well
 - <4> Very well
 - <5> Extremely well

4. In your opinion, how well does the word “intelligent” describe *Jeff Roberts*?
 - <1> Not well at all
 - <2> Not too well
 - <3> Somewhat well
 - <4> Very well
 - <5> Extremely well

5. In your opinion, how well does the word “hard-working” describe *Jeff Roberts*?
 - <1> Not well at all
 - <2> Not too well
 - <3> Somewhat well
 - <4> Very well
 - <5> Extremely well

6. In your opinion, how well does the word “efficient” describe *Jeff Roberts*?
 - <1> Not well at all
 - <2> Not too well
 - <3> Somewhat well
 - <4> Very well
 - <5> Extremely well

7. How would you describe the political views of *Jeff Roberts*?
 - <1> Very liberal
 - <2> Liberal
 - <3> Slightly liberal
 - <4> Moderate

- <5> Slightly conservative
- <6> Conservative
- <7> Very conservative

8. How likely would you be to vote for *Jeff Roberts*?

- <1> Not likely at all
- <2> Not too likely
- <3> Somewhat likely
- <4> Very likely
- <5> Extremely likely

9. Would you say your views towards *Jeff Roberts* are...

- <1> Very favorable
- <2> Favorable
- <3> Slightly favorable
- <4> Neither favorable nor unfavorable
- <5> Slightly unfavorable
- <6> Unfavorable
- <7> Very unfavorable