Proudly We Hail? Partisan and Religious Capture of the American Flag

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Abstract

What does the American flag mean in a polarized country? Using data from the 2016 American National Election Study (ANES) on feelings towards the American flag, the most prominent symbol of our political religion, we first find a relatively positive affect towards the nation, with variation across partisan and religious groups. However, we demonstrate that certain groups—Christians, Republicans, and Trump supporters—connect their strong positive feelings toward the flag not (so much) through their attachment with American identity, but to a higher degree through their religious and partisan identities. While we find evidence for this relationship in 2016, analyses of the 2012, 2004, and 1988 ANES studies show little to no divergence on partisan or religious grounds. These findings suggest that the symbol of the American flag is being appropriated by sectarian interests. While the flag persists as a unifying civil religious symbol, our finding suggest that it is weakened by increasing attachment to particular group identities.

Keywords: American Flag; partisan polarization; American Civil Religion; religious polarization; Donald Trump; ANES

Introduction

What can Americans' feelings toward the flag tell us about national identity in a polarized country? The American flag is seen by many as the preeminent symbol of the United States, and its political and psychological impact has been studied across disciplines for decades (Kemmelmeier and Winter 2008; Butz 2009; Teachout 2009; Marvin and Ingle 1999). The flag has been historically identified as a unifying symbol, although recent literature has found evidence of the flag's cooption into partisan politics (Kalmoe and Gross 2016; Carter et al. 2011; Trofimchuk and Goh 2024). Using data from multiple waves of the American National Election Study (ANES), we ask whether and how Americans' affect toward their flag reflects a polarized public. We place specific emphasis on analyzing the links between national identity, subgroup identity, and feelings toward the flag.

Studies of the American flag often center on the flag as a unifying, civil religious, and/or patriotic totem (Durkheim 1912; Hobsbawm 1990; Schatz and Lavine 2007). It has not, however, always held such critical importance for the construction of American identity. The felling of the flag at Fort Sumter in 1861 sparked not only the Civil War, but also an evolution in the flag as a symbol. Before the war, the flag served primarily naval or military purposes as a marker for American territory, embassies, and ships (Guenter 1990). In the following weeks, months, and years, the flag could not be made fast enough, even as it began to be mass-produced rather than individually stitched for the first time. In the words of historian Adam Goodheart, "the abstraction of the Union cause was transfigured into a physical thing: strips of cloth that millions of people would fight for, and many thousands die for" (Goodheart 2012, 22). In the face of the existential threat of facture and dissolution, the flag became not just the formal image of the United States, but a civil religious symbol of American identity and unity engraved in the hearts of its citizens. As the United States faces a renewed period of intense political polarization, our understanding of the American flag—and its connection to our national identity—must also be refreshed.

While the flag has been the primary American symbol since the Civil War, the study of

it as a civil religious symbol is more recent. It has been over half a century since Robert Bellah (1967) first formally identified and articulated a theory of civil religion in the United States. Inspired by Rousseau's original conception, Bellah saw in Americans a common commitment to fundamental civic beliefs, symbols, values, and rituals that run parallel to, and independent of, their personal religion. He claimed that at its best, the American Civil Religion (ACR) "is a genuine apprehension of universal and transcendent religious reality as seen in or, one could almost say, as revealed through the experience of the American people" (Bellah 1967, 12). For him, the collective meaning developed through civil religion and its symbols ultimately derives not from the belief that society is good but from the belief that society has a responsibility to attempt to be good. One does not need to believe in the divine providence of American exceptionalism or an inherent American goodness in order to believe in the civil religion, but they must affirm the American project and its potential.

As Bellah developed this concept, he also launched a literature that deals extensively with the trials and existential threats that ACR faces (Bellah 1992; Fuist and Williams 2015; Gorski 2017). While Bellah was worried about America's place in the world, the trial of the 21st century concerns America's belief in itself. Amid crises of mass partisan polarization (Hetherington 2009; Abramowitz and Webster 2016) and democratic backsliding (Graham and Svolik 2020), what it means to be American has become a cornerstone of political debate. The nation's core national and civil religious symbol, the American flag, is inevitably a key part of this debate. Our research explores whether the flag still stands as a universal symbol of American identity within the mass public, or whether it is being reinterpreted narrowly through partisan and religious perspectives.

In this paper, we use data from the 2016 ANES to study feelings towards the American flag—the most prominent symbol of our nation and political religion (ANES 2017). We find evidence for the persistent existence of positive feelings toward the flag in public opinion, unrelated to primordialist views of the nation, and instead heavily tied to the strength of individual American identity and the belief in the American Creed. At the same time, we

identify strong connections between positive feelings toward the flag, Republican partisanship, Christianity, and support for Donald Trump. While this narrative is prominent in the accounts of Gorski (2017) and others (Whitehead et al. 2018; Seidel 2019; Gorski and Perry 2022), we empirically demonstrate the existence of this relationship. Most importantly, we uncover significantly weaker connections between American identity and positive affect toward the American flag among Republicans, Christians, and Trump supporters—the very groups with the strongest positive feelings toward the flag. These sectarian groups, we argue, are more likely to identify the flag as a symbol representing their group identity rather than their national identity. Critically, we also show that these findings only hold among white Americans. Among non-white Americans, this identity-based appropriation of the American flag does not appear to be occurring. In supplementary of analyses of the 2012, 2004, and 1988 ANES studies, we show that this divergence in linkage between national identity and the flag was not present until 2016 (ANES 2013, 2005, 1989). Ultimately, while our findings indicate that there is still a broadly unifying patriotic and civil religious sentiment in the country, we show that perceptions of its core symbol have become heavily dependent on partisan and religious affiliation. This evidence suggests the flag is in the process of being appropriated by partisan and sectarian interests.

The American Flag as Symbol

While Robert Bellah was the first to articulate ACR as we interpret it today, he was inspired by the thought of Emile Durkheim, who developed similar concepts in the early 20th century (Durkheim 1973; Wallace 1977). Through Durkheim's work, and a broader literature in sociology, political science, and psychology, we can credibly identify the American flag as a, if not the, pivotal component of our civil religion. Durkheim originated the sociological study of the national flag as a "totem," or "the sign by which each clan distinguishes itself from the others" (Durkheim 1912), and a number of scholars since have written about the

central role that the American flag plays in developing American identity (Weinstein 1957; Frisch 1989; Hobsbawm 1990). In a world where the nation is an "imagined community" (Anderson 1983), the importance of this connective symbol is paramount. The constant exposure to the flag fosters what Billig (2010) calls "banal nationalism," an emotional linkage reproduced mundanely and without conscious thought. Schatz and Lavine (2007) describe how this symbolic connection to the flag is tied to our national identity, yet is at the same time independent of political behavior. These linkages suggest that we can interpret how Americans feel toward the American flag as an important component of ACR.

While the flag and people's feelings toward it have seemed like a fruitful place to look for pertinent evidence for understanding both ACR and American identity, it is has been difficult to ask reliable survey questions on the topic due to the salience of contemporary political issues surrounding the flag. Bellah wrote his seminal article in the midst of the Vietnam War. As the war became a polarizing issue, the American flag became a salient polarizing symbol (Appy 2015). When asked about their feelings toward the flag, respondents were likely to give answers primed by their opinion on the war, confounding any direct connections to ACR. Because of this, Bellah himself routinely rejected empirical accounts of ACR as irrelevant to his conception (Hammond et al. 1994). These survey response difficulties endured with the rise of flag burning controversies in the 1980s. During this time, many Americans were primed to think about the debate over the legality of burning the flag when asked questions about the symbol. In 1994, Phillip Hammond explicitly rejected the empirical study of the symbol on these grounds, citing flag burning as the core confounding variable (Hammond et al. 1994, 4). The salience of this issue, however, has lessened over time.[1] Likewise, the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 generated a "rally around the flag" effect which raised affect toward the flag as well as general patriotic sentiment for a time, but this effect

[1]As late as 2006, one poll found that 3/4ths of respondents believed flag burning should be illegal (Fox News 2006). That year, the House of Representatives even passed a constitutional amendment proposal, H.J.Res. 10, to prohibit desecration of the flag. A decade later, less than half of respondents to poll said that flag burning should be illegal (Quinnipiac 2016), and a 2023 flag burning amendment proposal only managed to garner fifteen cosponsors in Congress. 105 *New York Times* articles mentioned flag burning in 2006, compared to 21 in 2016.

diminished in the proceeding decade (Hetherington and Nelson 2003). This evidence suggests that the flag in 2016 can be understood less as a symbol inexorably linked to a particular event or controversy, and more a broad symbol of patriotic and civil religious sentiment.

We do acknowledge that the connotation of the American flag is often dependent on its context. Americans think about the flag differently when viewed in campaign literature, on the back of a pickup truck, or flying outside the post office. The ANES specifically asks about how people feel when they seeing the flag flying, which we argue evokes the more formal, government-oriented usage of the symbol, rather than the flag as merchandise or hanging behind a political candidate. The question thus captures sentiment towards a particular evocation of the flag—specifically, the flag in its archetypal civil religious and patriotic setting.

Further validating the study of affect toward the American flag is the vast experimental literature on flag exposure. Work by Hassin et al. (2007) and Butz et al. (2007) suggests that subconscious, mundane exposure to the flag has a unifying effect, priming Americans to embrace values of egalitarianism and toleration. Other scholars, however, have demonstrated more deleterious effects of flag exposure, from a rise in dominance-oriented nationalism as opposed to patriotism (Kemmelmeier and Winter 2008) to a significant association with the Republican Party that can even influence voting behavior (Carter et al. 2011; Kalmoe and Gross 2016). In a meta-analysis of flag priming studies, Carter et al. (2020) show that some of the powerful effects that characterized early flag priming experiments have disappeared alongside the GOP capture of the symbol.

The Flag, National Identity, and Social Identity

As a core symbol of the nation, the American flag can also be understood through individuals' conceptions of national identity. Myrdal (1996) famously argued that American identity is based on a collection of ideas he termed the American Creed. In his understanding,

these ideas included individualism, the promise of hard work, rule of law, freedom, and equality. Conventional wisdom has long held that the American nation is defined by this sort of creed, rather than a primordial understanding of culture, ethnicity, and ancestry. The exact terms and ideals of this creed are far from universally agreed upon, and have been argued across a range of perspectives (Schildkraut 2014). As a democratic nation, the argument over the content the Creed is an inherent part of the Creed itself. It is the general belief in this creed, broadly construed, as experienced in the American people that makes up the content of the ACR described by Bellah. Studies of American identity in the mass public often test this concept by distinguishing between civic factors related to the American Creed and ascriptive factors such as the belief in God, ancestral heritage, being born in the United States, and speaking English. The civic factors surrounding the American Creed are almost always identified as important for American identity, but among some groups—especially wealthier, older Republicans with lower levels of education—the ascriptive factors are viewed as more important (Citrin et al. 1990; Wright et al. 2012).

To that extent, perceptions of the American flag may be shaped not only by one's national identity, but also by other salient social identities, and the ways in which those identities mix. Prior literature suggests that being Christian is considered by many Americans to be in some form constitutive to American identity, despite formal freedom of religion and cultural norms of religious toleration. Jacobs and Theiss-Morse (2013) show that the majority of Americans, regardless of personal religion, both explicitly and implicitly associate being Christian with being American. They also demonstrate that Christians are more likely to be patriotic than non-Christians and set more exclusive boundaries on the national group than their non-Christian counterparts. Shelton (2010) finds that evangelical Protestants and Catholics both view patriotism and ethnoculturalism as critical features of American identity. Scholars also note the rise of Christian Nationalism, an ideology which views the United States as uniquely ordained by God to further the Christian cause. This is separate and from somewhat antithetical to ACR, which is explicitly divorced from traditional religion.

Christian Nationalist sentiment has been tied to the electoral successes of Donald Trump and the reshaping of the GOP (see, e.g. Whitehead et al. 2018; Baker et al. 2020; Sides et al. 2018).

Beyond just religious identity, many scholars understand being American through the lens of social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 2004; Spears 2011) and our work is no exception. In this lens, part of every individual's sense of self derives from their membership in groups and the value or meaning they attach to their memberships. Thus, the degree of attachment to a group shapes the attitudes and behaviors of individuals. This understanding of identities provides a road map for scholars to study American identity in nuanced ways as both a moderator and an outcome. Typically, scholars study the strength of American identity by looking at the extent to which Americans say being American is important to them (Huddy and Khatib 2007; Jacobs and Theiss-Morse 2013; Pérez et al. 2019), and we follow their lead.

While the literature on social identity theory finds that those with a stronger national group identity tend to be more patriotic (Huddy and Khatib 2007; Theiss-Morse 2009), patriotism is often studied as analytically distinct from American identity. One can feel very identified as American, but still not love the country in a patriotic way. Parker (2010) distinguishes between symbolic and blind patriotism, measuring symbolic patriotism as a combination of affect toward the flag and reported love for the United States. Symbolic patriotism is an abstract, affective, attachment to the nation and its core values and is juxtaposed to blind patriotism, which is a more concrete measure indexing uncritical support for national policy and practice. ACR, as a belief in the possibilities of the nation, is analytically much closer to symbolic rather than blind patriotism. However, unlike symbolic patriotism, ACR does not require a current love of the country, but rather an aspirational belief in its values, and is experienced more transcendentally. Taken together, the literatures on civil religion, religious identity, and American identity suggest that the social identities that people hold should shape their attachment to and feelings toward the American flag.

Hypotheses

How do the various identities that Americans hold correlate with their feelings toward the stars and stripes? First, we expect that the importance of American identity should correlate strongly with affect toward the flag. As found in prior research from Schildkraut (2014) and Huddy and Khatib (2007), we hypothesize that those individuals who report a stronger sense of American national identity will also be more favorable toward the national symbol.

> **H1**: Respondents who report greater importance of American identity will report greater affect toward the American flag.

We also expect that certain groups of Americans feel more positively toward the flag than others. Both scholarly literature and public commentary suggest that in recent decades, the American public has come to see patriotism and the flag as concepts owned by the Republican Party (Petrocik 1996; Hayes 2005; Butz et al. 2007; Hassin et al. 2007; Kalmoe and Gross 2016). Through Christianity's ties to several foundational components of the ACR, as well as its role as a political norm in the United States, we also expect Christians to be more favorable to the flag than those holding other, or no, religious views (Sheets et al. 2011; Jacobs and Theiss-Morse 2013). Finally, Trump himself has deployed the flag in an increasing sectarian way—it is even featured on the side of the red Make America Great Again hat, the titular symbol of Trump support (Hickel and Murphy 2022). Americans who belong to these three groups have reason to associate American symbols, and especially the flag, with their particular partisan and religious identities. This symbolic capture may also lead non-Republicans, non-Christians, and non-Trump supporters to experience negative polarization against the flag, and we would thus expect them to feel less positively about the symbol then their counterparts (Abramowitz and Webster 2018).

> **H2a**: Republican respondents will report greater affect toward the American flag than non-Republican respondents.
>
> **H2b**: Christian respondents will report greater affect toward the American flag than non-Christian respondents.

> **H2c**: Respondents with greater affect toward Donald Trump will report greater affect toward the American flag.

We do not expect the linkage between American identity and feelings toward the flag to be homogeneous across respondents. The literature highlighted above suggests that the American flag has been appropriated from a national symbol to a symbol seen by many as representative of various partisan and religious subgroups. We expect that those within the aforementioned groups will be more likely to perceive the flag as a symbol tied to their subgroup identities. As a consequence, Christians, Republicans, and Trump supporters should display weaker linkages between how they feel about the flag and the strength of their American identity than those in the opposing categories. As such, we suggest our final set of hypotheses:

> **H3a**: Republican respondents will have a weaker relationship between American identity and affect toward the American flag than non-Republican respondents.

> **H3b**: Christian respondents will have a weaker relationship between American identity and affect toward the American flag than non-Christian respondents.

> **H3b**: Respondents with greater affect toward Donald Trump will have a weaker relationship between American identity and affect toward the American flag than other respondents.

Data

We utilize data from the ANES 2016 Time Series Study to interrogate the connection between Americans' feelings towards the flag and their political beliefs. The data for this survey was collected between September 2016 and January 2017, and while it would be ideal to be able to examine responses from the 2020 or 2024 Time Series Studies, we are unable to do so, as our outcome of interest—the affect that Americans feel towards the American flag—was not asked in the most recent surveys. Not only does the 2016 study ask respondents how they feel about the American flag, but it does so in a way that provides us with significantly more information than prior surveys. This question had previously been

asked on the 1988, 1992, 2002, 2004, and 2012 surveys, with inconsistencies in the response options. Generally, respondents could answer on a 4- or 5-point scale from "Extremely Good" to "Not Very Good." In the 2016 ANES, the response options were expanded to a 7-point scale, from "Extremely Good" to "Extremely Bad." The 2016 version offers greater insight into those Americans who actively experience negative feelings when they encounter the flag, as well as those who feel very little.

Taking these differences into account, we also examine changes in affect toward the flag over time, performing supplementary analyses on the 1988, 2004, and 2012 ANES Time Series Studies. We focus on these datasets due to the inclusion of a critical explanatory variable that was also asked in 2016: respondents' sense of American identity. In 2004, 2012, and 2016, the question is phrased as the importance of being American to one's identity, while in 1988 it is phrased as pride in being American. Following Huddy and Khatib (2007), Jacobs and Theiss-Morse (2013), and Pérez et al. (2019), we use this question as a measure of national identity.

We next measure partisanship on a seven-point scale, where 1 indicates strong Democrat, 4 indicates Independent, and 7 indicates strong Republican. [2] Religion is coded as a four category factor variable, with respondents classified as evangelical Christian, non-evangelical Christian, Other Religion, or No Religion.[3] Our final explanatory variable in 2016 is respondent affect toward Donald Trump, measured across a 100-point feeling thermometer. In the 2012 ANES, we test affect toward Mitt Romney and the Tea Party, while in 2004 and 1988 we examine feelings towards George W. Bush and George H.W. Bush, respectively.

We control for a number of other beliefs and demographic characteristics in our models. First, we control for other reported feelings about American identity. The 2016 ANES asks whether the following characteristics are important for being "truly American":

1. To have been born in the United States.

[2]This variable is coded along a 5 point scale in 1988 and 2004

[3]We delineate separate categories for evangelicals and non-evangelicals because there is significant evidence that evangelicals are organized and behave in politically unique ways from their other Christian counterparts (Smith and Walker 2013; Gold and Russell 2007).

2. To have American ancestry.

3. To be able to speak English.

4. To follow America's customs and traditions.

We identify the first three questions in this group as similar in theme—tied to the primordialist view that there is something ascriptive, intrinsic, and/or ethnic about holding American identity—and average them together to form a primordialism index (Chronbach's $\alpha = 0.75$). The fourth item, American customs, reflects a view of national identity more abstract from ethnic or linguistic identity, associated with the American Creed and more civic understandings of American identity. We thus isolate this as a separate indicator.[4]

Beyond questions of national identity, we also control for symbolic racism. While our focus in this paper is on partisan and religious identities, social identity theory and the history of race in America suggests that respondents with higher racial animus should perceive the flag as (1) an in-group symbol of white American identity, and (2) a more favored symbol (Gorski and Perry 2022). We develop a symbolic racism index (Chronbach's $\alpha = 0.85$) to measure this concept. To further reflect the nuances in religious identification, we add a religiosity index to our model (Chronbach's $\alpha = 0.77$). [5]

Finally, we control for other demographic variables that may shape the affect Americans feel toward the flag—race, gender, educational attainment, and age. We binarize race, coding respondents as a 1 if they are white, and 0 if otherwise, and code educational attainment from 1 to 5, ranging from less than high school to graduate degree. Using OLS regression, we interrogate how these bundles of beliefs and identities correlate with Americans' feelings toward their national symbol. While our dependent variable is ordinal, rather than continuous, we choose a linear model for ease of interpretation and discussion.[6]

In Appendix Table A.1, we show a breakdown in descriptive characteristics between those respondents who report feeling bad about the flag (N = 69), neither good nor bad

[4]Unfortunately, these questions were not asked on any of the earlier ANES surveys.

[5]See Appendix D for the full list of questions included in these indices.

[6]We check the robustness of our results through the subsequent estimation of an ordinal logistic regression in Appendix Table C.1, and find similar results.

(N = 601), and good (N = 2664), compared to the demographics of the full sample of respondents. While the vast majority of respondents feel positively about the symbol, those who report feeling negatively about the flag are overwhelmingly Democrats and women, and are much more racially diverse than the full sample. Conversely, those who report feeling good about the flag are a largely white and largely Christian group. Frequencies of response options by party and religion are displayed in Figures 1 and 2, respectively, where a value of 1 is coded to equal "Extremely Bad," and a value of 7 equals "Extremely Good." While very few respondents report that the flag makes them feel bad, these two distributions—and the visible differences between the partisan and religious groups—are both striking and similar. These initial descriptive results provide some validation for **H2a** and **H2b**.

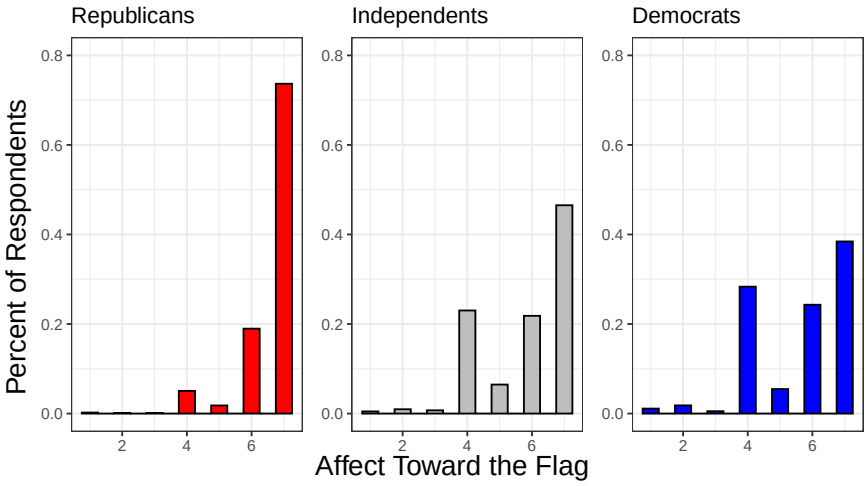

Figure 1: **Distribution of Affect Toward the Flag by Party.**

Note: Response options range from 1 ("Extremely Bad") to 7 ("Extremely Good").

Results

In Figure 3, we display the results of our fully specified model, regressing our independent variables and controls against affect toward the American flag (see Appendix Table B.1). To more easily interpret our results, we standardize our independent variables to range from 0 to 1.

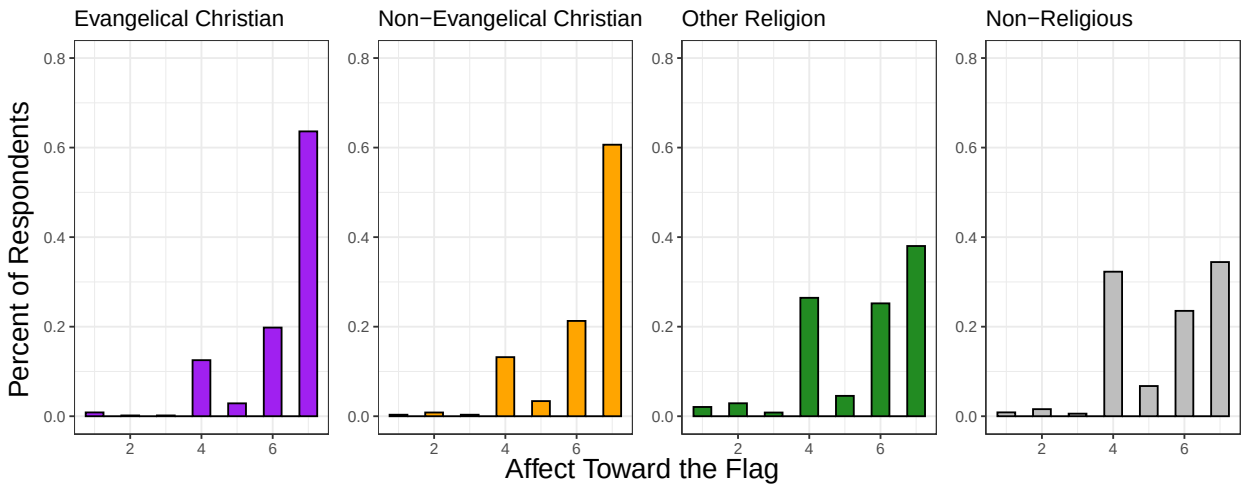

Figure 2: **Distribution of Affect Toward the Flag by Religion.**

Note: Response options range from 1 ("Extremely Bad") to 7 ("Extremely Good").

In support of **H1**, strength of American identity is strongly associated with greater positive feelings toward the American flag. The coefficient on our control for belief in the importance of American customs is also positive and significant, while the coefficient for primordialist views is insignificant. These results suggest that strength of individual American identity, as well as belief in the importance of American customs, are more closely tied to the symbolic side of civil religion than the more primordialist components of American identity.

Being a non-evangelical Christian and a stronger Republican, as well as having more positive feelings toward Donald Trump, are all positively and significantly associated with more positive feelings toward the American flag. These findings offer support for **H2a**, **H2b**, and **H2c**. While there is no significant effect of being an evangelical Christian in the fully specified model, we do find effects in Models 1 and 2 in Appendix Table B.1. There is, unsurprisingly, a strong correlation between feelings toward Trump and being evangelical that may be masking part of the expected effect. Among our other control variables, higher levels of symbolic racism and religiosity, being older, and being white are also all associated with more positive flag affect.

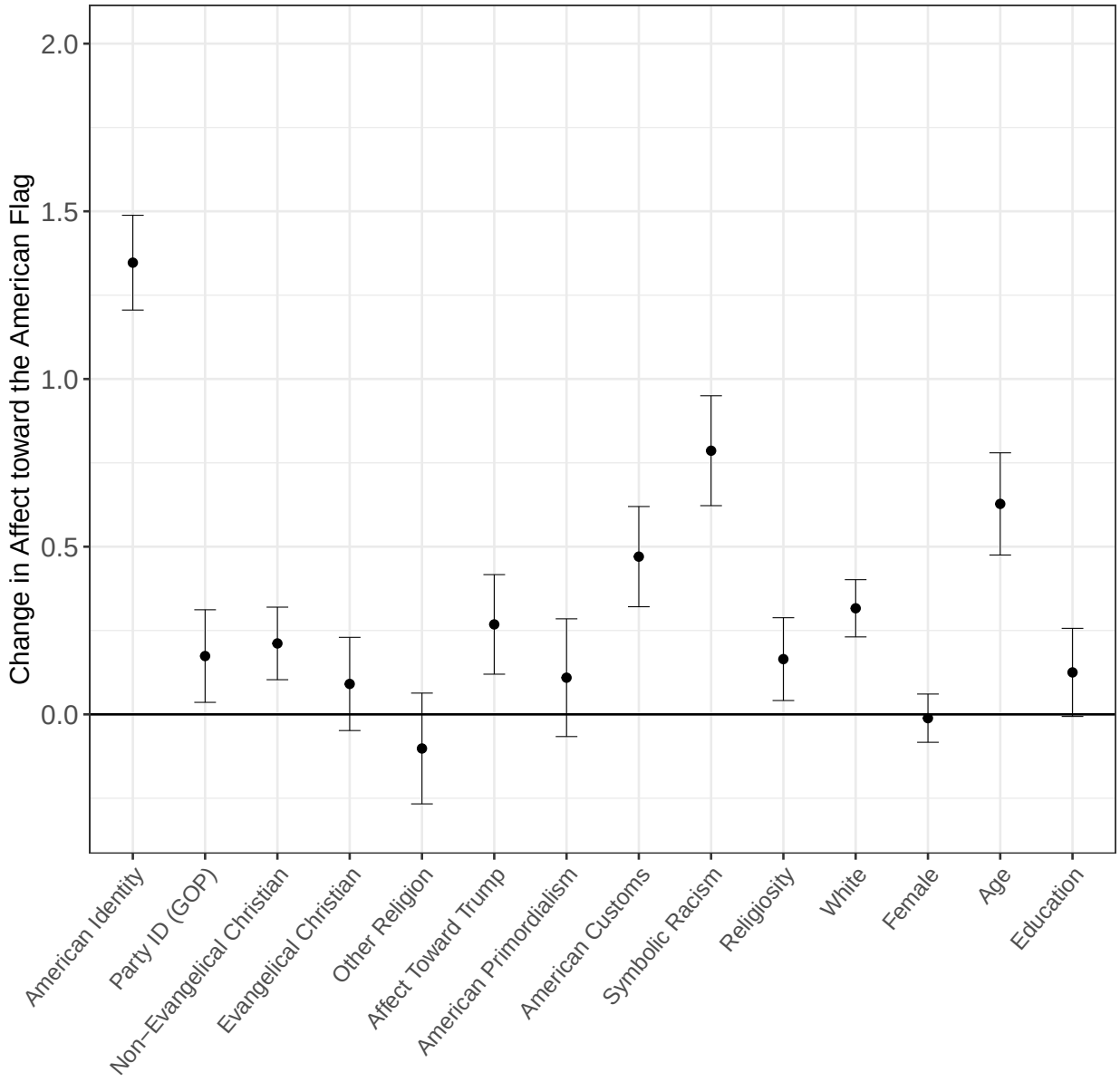

Figure 3: **Coefficient Estimates on Affect Toward the Flag.**

Note: Point estimates are standardized coefficients on a 0 to 1 scale, representing movement from the minimum value to the maximum value of each independent variable. These results reflect coefficients from Model 3 in Appendix Table B.1. Error bars reflect 95% confidence intervals. Affect toward the American flag is coded on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 ("Extremely Bad") to 7 ("Extremely Good").

How Identity Shapes Feelings Toward the Flag

Our theoretical argument suggests that as the American flag is appropriated by sectarian groups, Americans outside of those groups will be less likely to associate positively with the symbol. This concept is largely reflected in Figure 3. Yet, at the same time, the importance of American identity vastly outweighs the impacts of partisanship, religion, or racism on feelings toward the flag. If these feelings stem so centrally from national orientation, how much should we focus on these other factors? To test this, we interact American identity with partisanship, religious identity, and affect toward Donald Trump. We run these interactions separately because of the high correlations between identifying as Republican, being Christian, and having strong positive feelings for Trump. Per **H3a**, **H3b**, and **H3c**, we expect members of these groups to exhibit a weaker relationship between the strength of their American identity and their feelings toward the flag. In Figure 4, we plot the predicted values across each of our interaction terms (full results are in Appendix Table B.2).

The results of these interactions provide strong support for our hypotheses. Christians (regardless of evangelical status), Republicans, and those with positive feelings toward Donald Trump have a weaker relationship between their sense of American identity and their affect toward the flag than non-Republicans, non-Christians, and those with negative feelings toward Trump, holding all else constant. What these results imply, we argue, is that members of these groups are linked to their disproportionately positive feelings toward the flag not (so much) through their association with Americanness, but to a significantly greater extent through their religious, partisan, and/or political affiliations.

The relationship is starkest for those with the most favorable feelings toward Donald Trump. When we set American identity to its maximum value, the predicted outcome is around 6.25, regardless of feelings toward Trump. Lowering American identity to its minimum decreases the predicted flag rating to around 4.5 for those who give Trump a minimum score, but barely shifts affect to 5.8 for Republican respondents who rate Trump a perfect 100. Trump's strongest supporters, regardless of their relationship to American

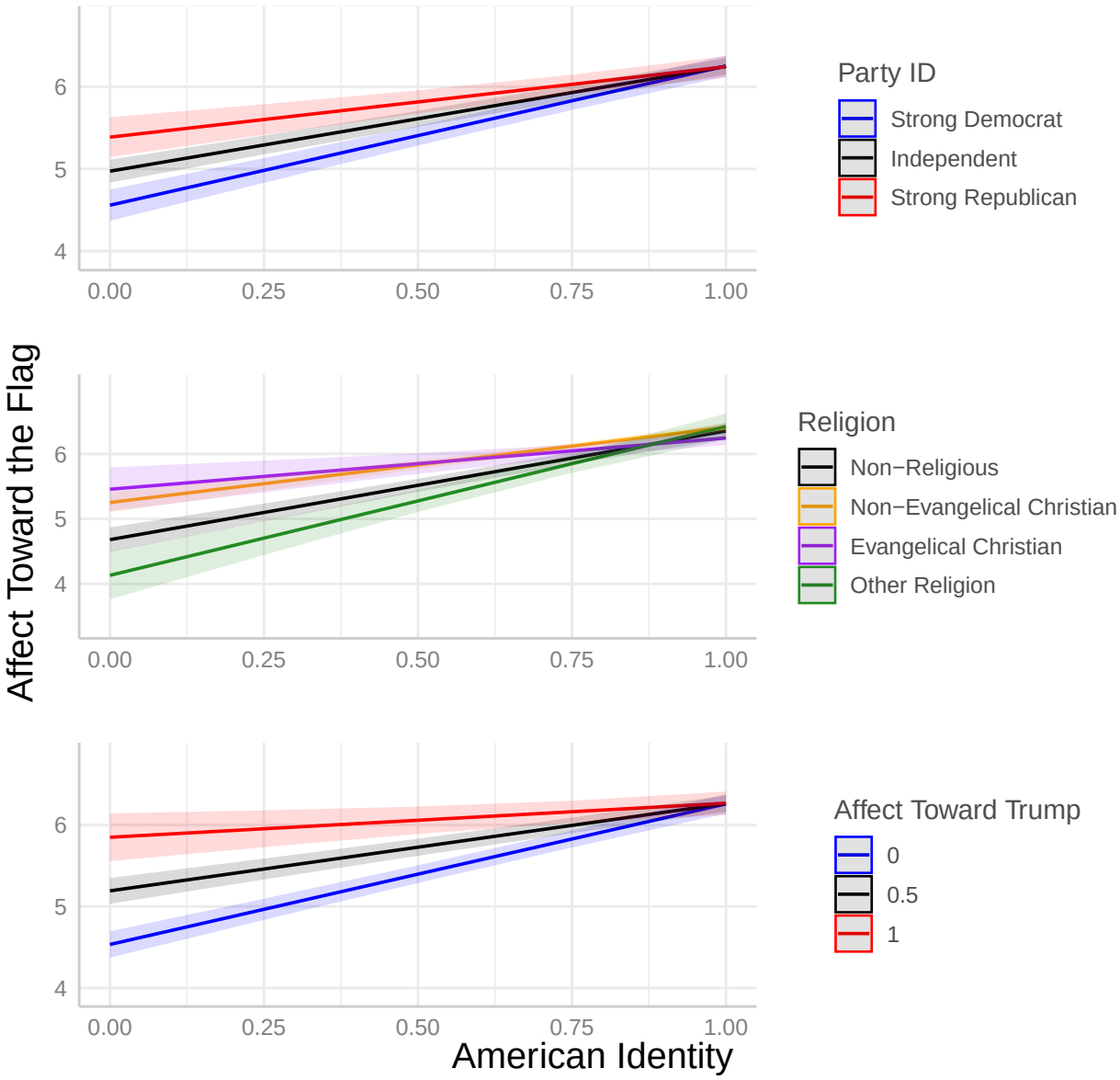

Figure 4: **Predicted Values from Interactions Between American Identity and Group Identities, 2016.**

Note: Each plot in this figure reflects the change in predicted values of the outcome variable, affect toward the American flag, across the range of American identity for the average respondent in 2016. These values were generated using Models 1, 2 and 3 in Appendix Table B.2.

identity, hold strong positive perceptions of the flag. Overall, these interactions suggest that there are unique and favorable ties between the flag, the GOP, Christianity, and Donald Trump, beyond overarching American patriotism and civil religion.[7]

Flag Affect Across Elections

Are the results discussed thus far dependent on the context surrounding the 2016 presidential election and the political rise of Donald Trump? To answer this question, we undertake a secondary analysis using data from the 2012, 2004, and 1988 ANES studies. We match questions as closely as we can between the two surveys, but leave out some control variables due to missing questions in the earlier study. After cleaning the data, the sample sizes are $N = 5{,}079$ respondents in 2012, 933 in 2004, and 1,522 in 1988.[8]

As noted earlier in the paper, the flag question was measured across a 5-point scale in 2012, and a 4-point scale in 2004 and 1988. Instead of including an indicator for affect toward Donald Trump, we include alternate feeling thermometers tied to the Republican Party and its leadership. In 2012, we control for affect toward Presidential nominee Mitt Romney, as well as for the Tea Party, the conservative movement that many have identified as a predecessor to Trumpism. In 2004, we control for affect toward President George W. Bush, and in 1988, for then-Vice President and Republican candidate George H.W. Bush. The results from these OLS models are in Appendix Tables B.4, B.5, and B.6.

In each of these prior surveys, we find continuing evidence that Republicans, Christians, and stronger supporters of Republican presidential candidates have more favorable feelings toward the flag. Likewise, American identity, or pride in being American, remains the strongest predictor of flag affect across each wave of the ANES.

In Figures 5, 6, and 7, we plot interactions between American identity and flag affect, akin to those found in Figure 4. Unlike our findings in 2016, partisan and religious identity,

[7] In Appendix Table C.2, we show that these results hold when our analyses are run only on the subset of respondents who reported neutral or positive feelings toward the flag (4–7 on the scale).

[8] In 2004, the flag question, along with other patriotism items, was only asked to a subset of respondents.

as well as affect toward the Republican presidential candidate, do not moderate the link between American identity and the flag in these prior periods. We identify a minimal effect of being an evangelical Christian in 2012, but it does not resemble the magnitude of the effect in 2016. The strongest results from these interactions are those for Tea Party support, mirroring that of Trump support in 2016 (though still to a lesser degree). In 2004 and 1988, we find no significant interactions between these subgroup identities and American identity or pride. Our results suggest that in these earlier election cycles, the relationship between American identity and the national symbol was not uniquely shaped by ones' party, religious affiliation, or support for the head of the GOP. It is only in 2016 that we identify a significant divergence.

After showing little change for over two decades, the associations between the flag, the Republican Party, and Christianity appear to have grown significantly tighter between 2012 and 2016. That affect toward Romney remained unrelated to the linkage between the flag and American identity, while support for the Tea Party had a similar effect to that of Donald Trump in 2016, is perhaps the most important finding from these models. Our results suggest that it is not merely the Republican Party that has co-opted the American flag as a symbol, but rather a particular branch of the right: one that has come to dominate conservative politics in recent years, and led many of its most ardent supporters to view the American flag less as a symbol of national identity, and more as a symbol of sectarian, political identity.

The Role of Whiteness

While we find strong differences in the strength of the relationship between American identity and the flag between Christians and non-Christians, Democrats and Republicans, and Trump-lovers and Trump-haters, do these differences hold across race? Or are these trends unique to white Americans?

White identity has played a consistent and core role in the rise of Trumpism. Sides et al. (2017) find that Trump uniquely activated white identity in the mass public through his

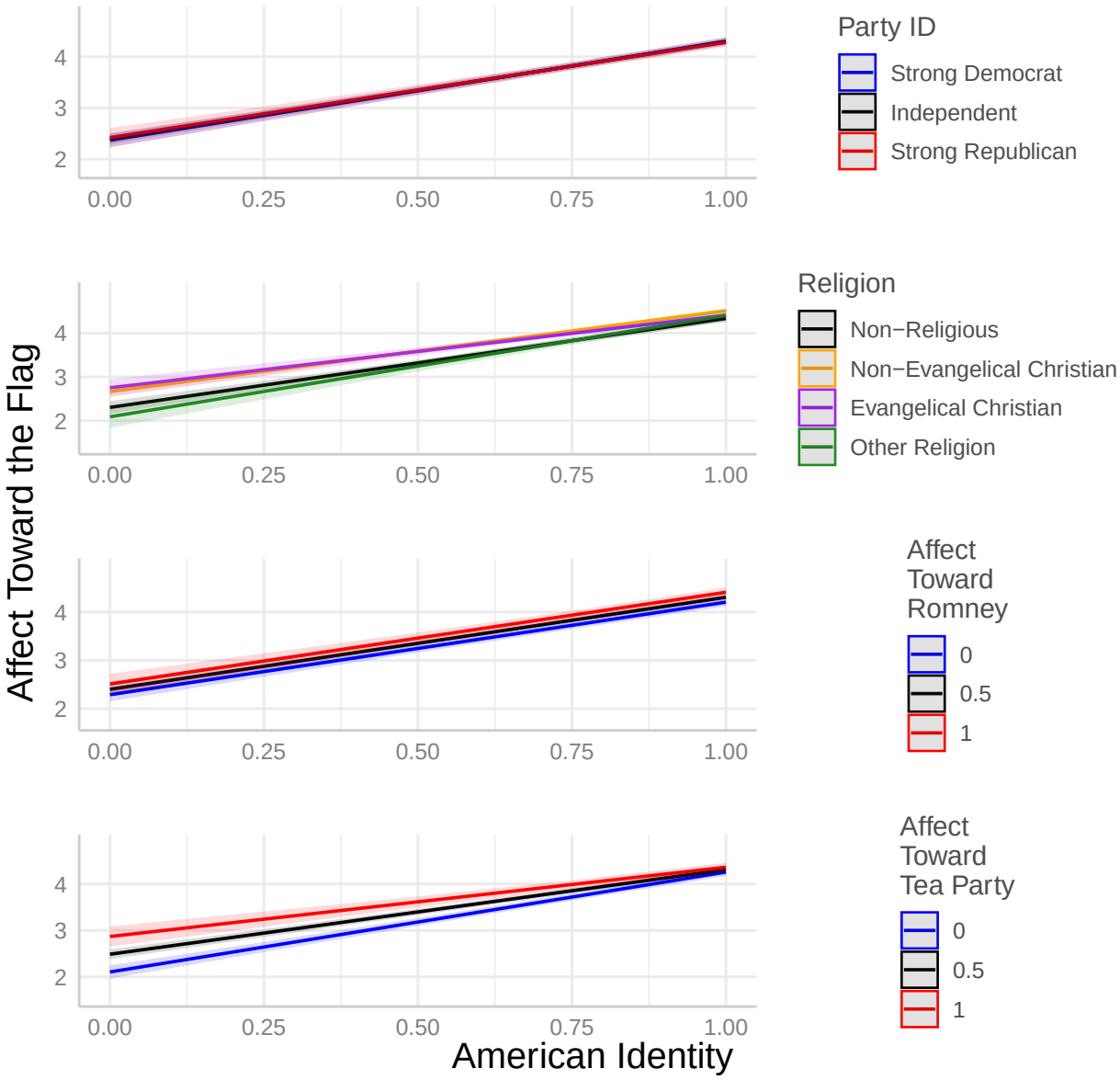

Figure 5: **Predicted Values from Interactions Between American Identity and Group Identities, 2012.**

Note: Each plot in this figure reflects the change in predicted values of the outcome variable, affect toward the American flag, across the range of American identity for the average respondent in 2012. These values were generated using Models 1, 2 3, and 4 in Appendix Table B.7.

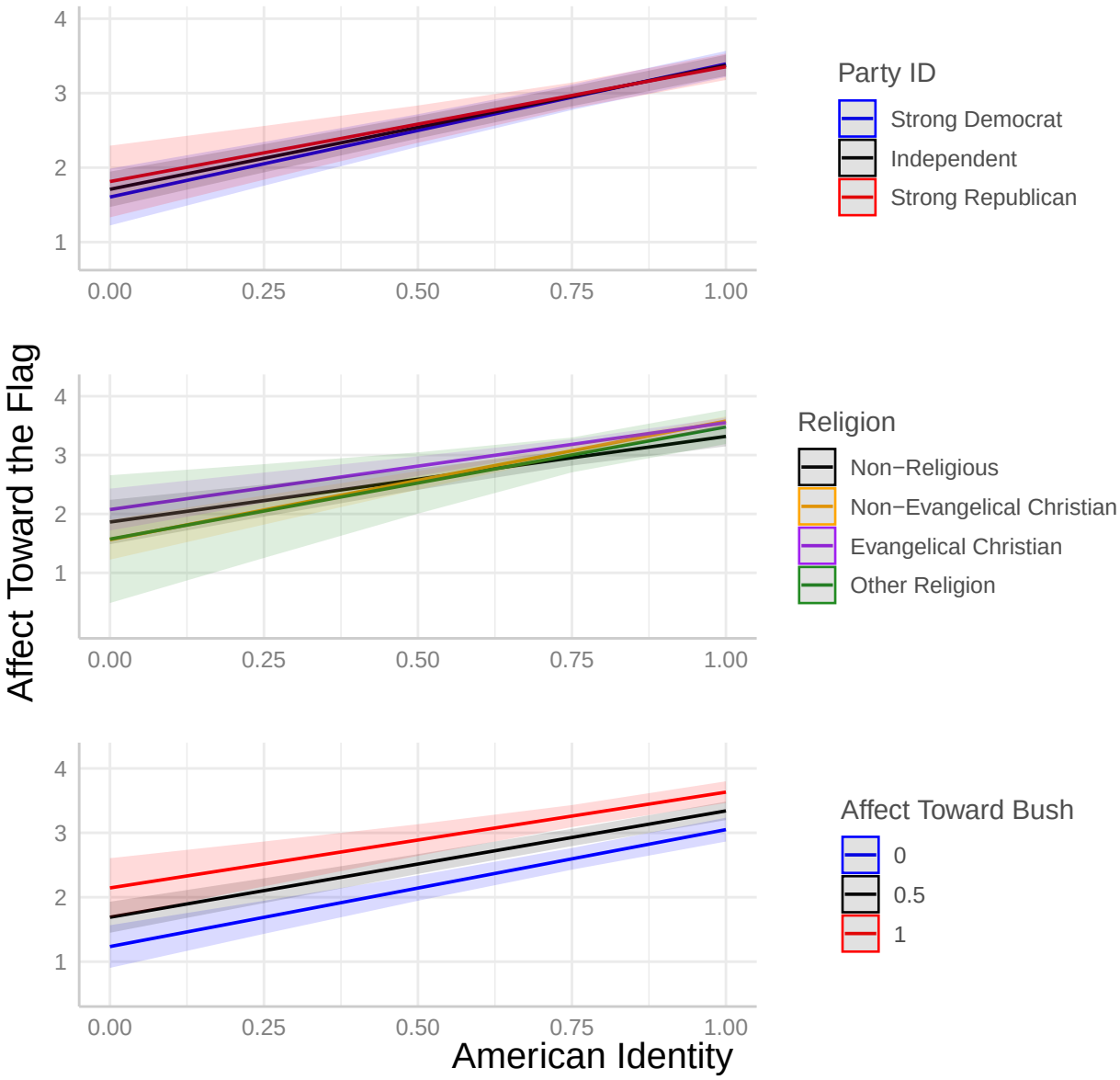

Figure 6: **Predicted Values from Interactions Between American Identity and Group Identities, 2004.**

Note: Each plot in this figure reflects the change in predicted values of the outcome variable, affect toward the American flag, across the range of American identity for the average respondent in 2004. These values were generated using Models 1, 2 and 3 in Appendix Table B.8.

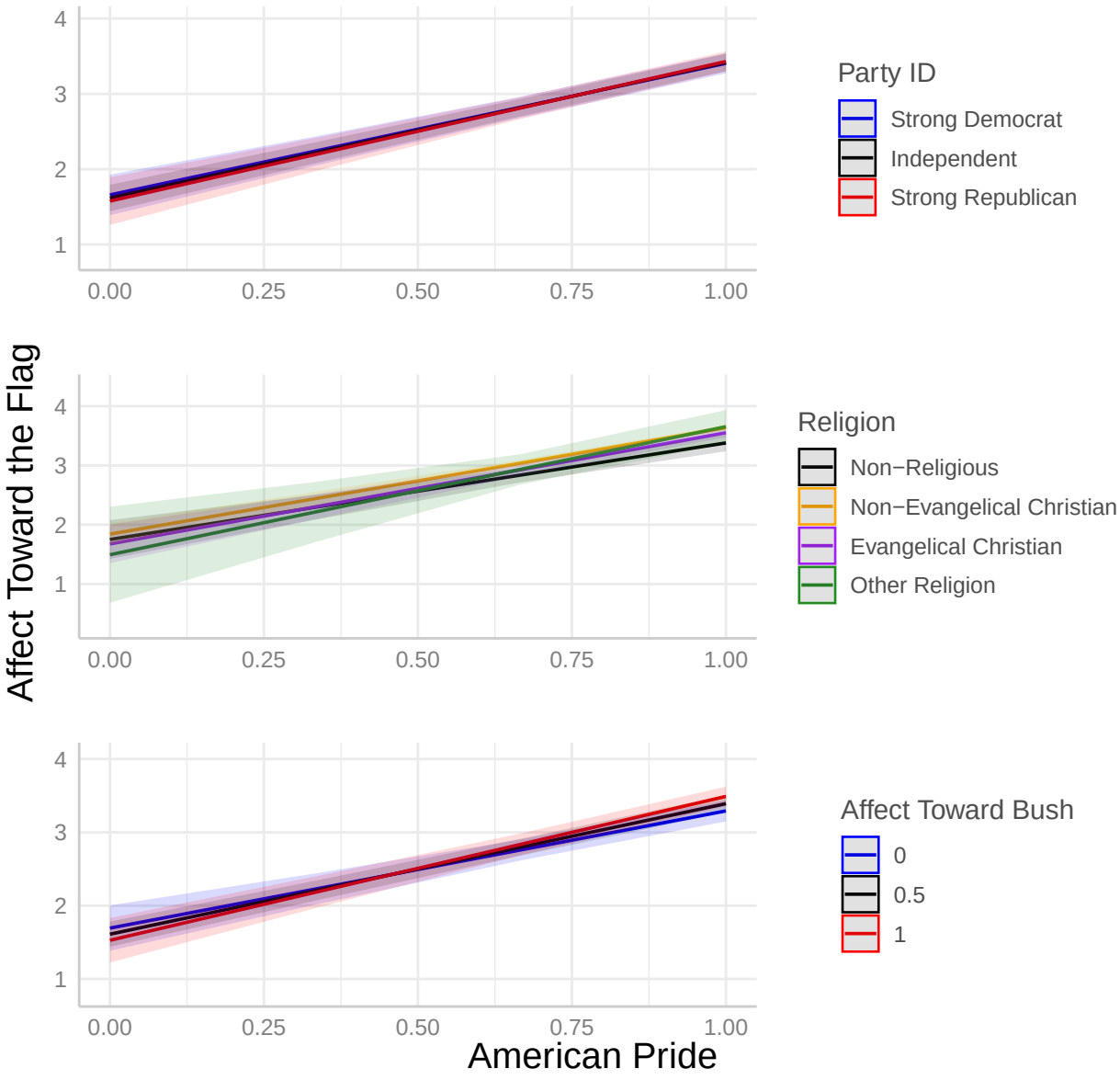

Figure 7: **Predicted Values from Interactions Between American Identity and Group Identities, 1988.**

Note: Each plot in this figure reflects the change in predicted values of the outcome variable, affect toward the American flag, across the range of American identity for the average respondent in 1988 These values were generated using Models 1, 2 and 3 in Appendix Table B.9.

appeals to threats on whites from non-whites. While they argue that white identity was made uniquely salient by Trump, whiteness and American identity have a long history of association dating back to the founding era (Pinder 2010). In addition, there is significant evidence that white evangelicals behave significantly differently than black evangelicals despite their shared religious identities (Lockerbie 2013). For these reasons, it is important to consider white identity as a potentially confounding factor in how religious and conservative Americans' views of their national identity are linked to their symbolic patriotic affect.

While we control for race across our analyses, our results thus far have not fully grappled with this dimension. If the relationship between American identity and the flag are weakening for Republicans, Christians, and Trump supporters, it is possible—if not highly likely—that this effect is strongest for white members of these three groups.

To test this, we run a series of three-way interactions, including whiteness alongside the prior interactions in Figure 4. These results, shown in Figure 8, suggest that whiteness is a critical component missing from our prior results. Among white Americans, the dynamics in Figure 8 are similar to, and slightly stronger in magnitude, than those in Figure 4. However, among non-white respondents, the interactive effects are *no longer significant*. A non-white evangelical Christian has a virtually indistinguishable relationship between American identity and the flag than a non-white, non-religious person, and so on. It is only among white Americans that religion, partisanship, and Trump affect seem to reshape the connection between national identity and the national symbol. These results suggest that **H3a, H3b,** and **H3c** are only partially supported.

In Appendix Tables B.10, B.11, and B.12, we also test these triple-interactions on data from the 2012, 2004, and 1988 ANES studies. Predicted values from these interactions are plotted in Appendix Figures B.1, B.2, and B.3, respectively. As before, there is no significant moderating effect of race in these earlier surveys. It is only in 2016 that whiteness appears to play a key role in shaping Americans' relationships between their salient political identities, their American identity, and their feelings toward the nation's symbol.

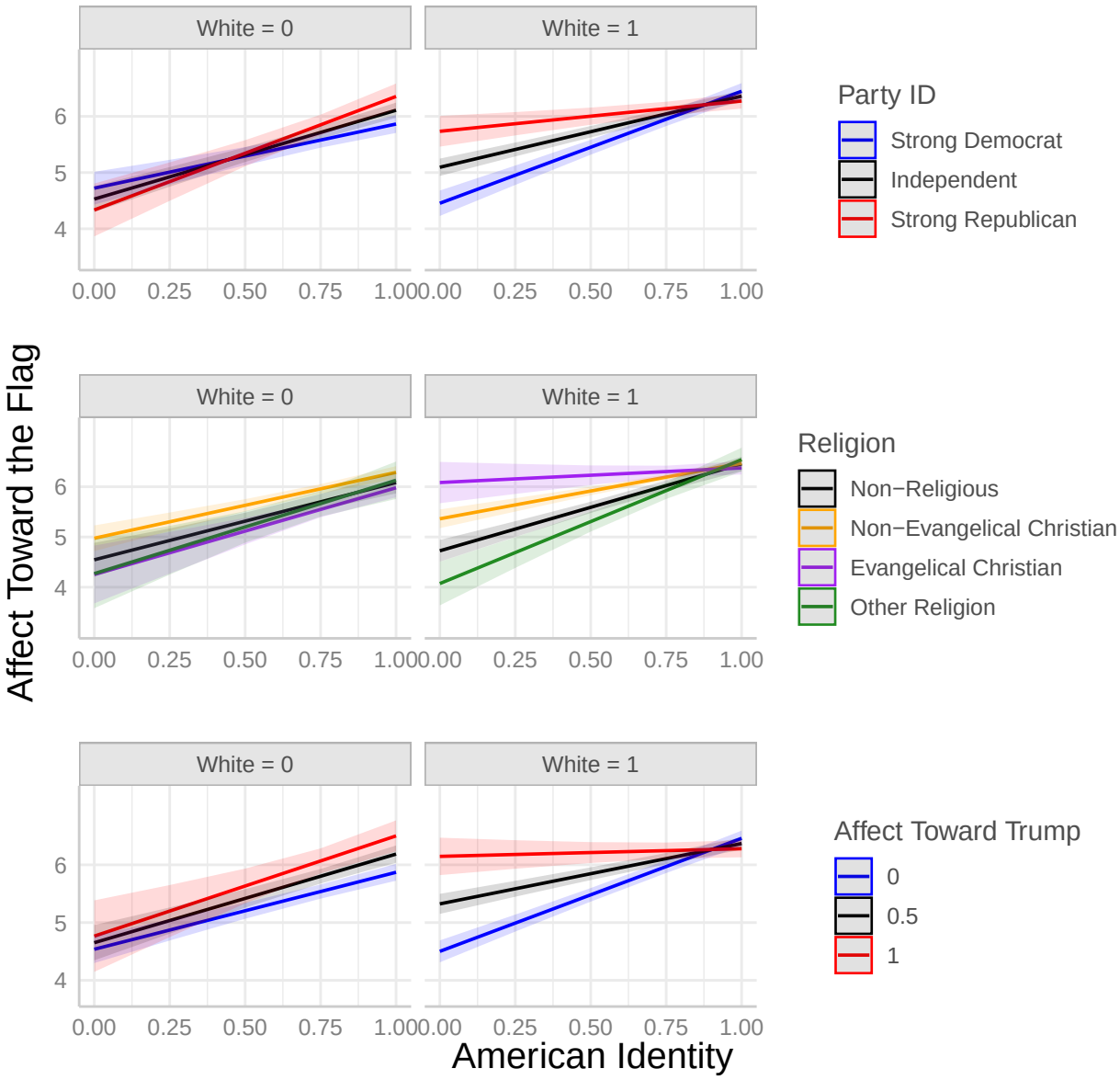

Figure 8: **Predicted Values from Interactions Between American Identity and Group Identities, including Race, 2016**

Note: Each plot in this figure reflects the change in predicted values of the outcome variable, affect toward the American flag, across the range of American identity for the average respondent in 2016. These values were generated using Models 1, 2, and 3 in Appendix Table B.3.

Discussion and Conclusion

Taken together, our findings first suggest that the flag is still a present and positive symbol tied to Americans' national identity. Despite mass polarization and some variations in opinion by demographic subgroups, a large majority of Americans hold a positive emotional affect toward the national flag. The most important predictor of how one feels toward the flag is not party, religion, race, or any other belief system, but rather the strength that one identifies as an American. Beyond this, those who view the customs and traditions of the nation as integral to what it means to be an American also have significantly more positive feelings toward the flag, while holding a primordialist account of the nation (i.e. connecting being American to ancestry, natality, or language) does not correlate with flag affect. Broadly, this finding suggests that Bellah's (1967) account of civil religion is still alive today. There is, of course, the caveat that the ANES focuses on voters. As the practice of voting is deeply tied to ACR, these results may be biased upwards compared to non-voting, less-participatory Americans.

Despite this, our evidence finds certain identity subgroups of Americans who tie their group orientation to the national flag. We argue that these voters—Republican, Christian, and more favorable toward Donald Trump—feel more warmly toward the flag because they feel it represents them and those like them rather than every American. Conversely, what these findings imply is that Americans outside of these groups feel a significantly greater distance from their national symbol. We do not find strong evidence for these trends in prior electoral cycles, suggesting that the rise of Trumpism in the Republican Party is central to these shifts in how voters perceive the flag. We also find that race plays a critical role in this relationship. Our results only hold for white Americans, who seem to have a unique relationship between their American identity and their national symbol. As ownership over symbolic patriotism is claimed by many on the right, we show that the ties between national identity and flag affect are far weaker for voters within these groups than others. These findings indicating a shift in the state of ACR. If this trend continues, it is possible that

ACR could cease to be the universalizing quality that binds the nation together.

Future work should more closely consider the flag and its relationship with ACR. While we believe the theoretical foundation for connecting them is sound, it is possible that the trends we identify are less tied to civil religious sentiment, and instead linked to more general feelings of patriotism, nationalism, or a belief in the American Creed. This would not change the substantive reality of these findings—the appropriation of the national symbol by subnational groups—but may lead to a reconsideration of its implications.

The literature suggests a connection between these results and the rise of Christian Nationalism within the Republican Party. Due to the limitations within ANES data, we could not directly test for ties between civil religion and Christian Nationalistic sentiment. While our results do present strong evidence regarding evangelical Christians and those on the political right, we cannot make any direct claims about the role Christian Nationalism plays in our findings. And while we acknowledge that it is likely an explanatory factor in our analysis, what we show goes beyond Christian Nationalism. Both Christians and Republicans are associating the flag with their own identities, but not necessarily for Christian Nationalistic reasons. As noted above, being Christian was already seen as constitutive of American identity before the modern rise of Christian Nationalism (Jacobs and Theiss-Morse 2013), and the Republican Party has long claimed ownership over patriotism (Hayes 2005). In addition, Trump's civil religious rhetoric is sectarian, but in myriad ways (Hickel and Murphy 2022). The core dilemma of our civil religion is that it appears to be co-optable by forces that run counter to the American Creed. Robert Bellah concluded his original piece with a note that rings just as true today as it did over half-a-century ago, stating that ACR "has often been used and is being used today as a cloak for petty interests and ugly passions" (Bellah 1967). Of course, there is the possibility that among some Americans, more negative affect to the flag may be driven by anger at the state and its history. Yet, to extract civil religion from the ownership of any particular group requires not that we abandon it or ignore past sins committed in its name, but that we reframe it. Bellah continues: "It is in need—as is any

living faith—of continual reformation, of being measured by universal standards. But it is not evident that it is incapable of growth and new insight" (Bellah 1967).

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