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. Critically, we also show that these findings only hold among white Americans. 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 sectarian interests are appropriating the symbol of the American flag. While the flag persists as a unifying civil religious symbol, we argue that its increasing attachment to particular group identities is weakening its ability to function in that role.

KEYWORDS
American Flag; partisan polarization; American Civil Religion; religious polarization; Donald Trump; ANES

1. Introduction

What can Americans' feelings toward the flag tell us about national identity in a polarized country? Many people see the American flag as the preeminent symbol of the United States, and scholars have studied its political and psychological impacts across disciplines for decades (Kemmelmeier and Winter 2008; Butz 2009; Teachout 2009; Marvin and Ingle 1999). Americans have historically viewed the flag as a unifying symbol, although recent literature has found evidence of the flag's cooption into partisan politics (Kalmoe and Gross 2016; Carter, Ferguson, and Hassin 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 fracture 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 partisan or religious groups are reinterpreting it more narrowly.

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, Perry, and Baker 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. For some respondents, our results are strongly moderated by religiosity and negative partisan polarization. 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 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 increasingly dependent on partisan and religious affiliation. This evidence suggests that partisan and sectarian interests are in the process of appropriating the flag. We theorize that as this occurs, members outside of these groups may also come to associate the flag as a partisan rather than civil religious or national symbol.

Taken together, our findings contribute to a growing literature documenting the increasing entanglement of national symbols with partisan identities in the United States. We identify evidence of the sectarian appropriation of the flag in the mass public emerging in the 2016 election. Since that election, affective polarization has only intensified, and there is evidence that groups outside of Republicans, Christian, and Trump supporters have become less proud of and less able to be primed by their American identity (Levendusky 2023). These results fit alongside recent experimental findings that liberals associate the American flag with conservatism, aggression, and prejudice when they see the symbol displayed on social media profiles (El-Alayli, Miguel, and Dodson 2026). As the nation's preeminent civil religious symbol becomes increasingly associated with a particular set of partisan coalitions, its ability to activate a shared national identity and mitigate inter-group divisions may be diminished. This interpretation contributes to a broader literature demonstrating that common national identities and symbols can reduce political conflict by emphasizing superordinate identities, while also illustrating how those unifying effects depend on the perceived status of the symbols themselves. At the same time, symbolic meanings are not fixed. Recent efforts by Democratic and pro-democracy movements to more prominently embrace the American flag, exemplified in the "No Kings" demonstrations, suggest that its partisan associations remain contested (Kamerick 2025; Schulman 2025). Whether these efforts or potential shifts in partisan rhetoric from both sides can once again broaden the flag's symbolic appeal or further politicize it remains an open question. Understanding how national symbols have evolved over the Trump era, and whether they can once again function as genuinely shared civic symbols in the post-Trump era, are important avenues for future research. In this account, polarization reshapes the social meaning of the flag, and the changing meaning of the flag, in turn, has the potential to reinforce political polarization by eroding one of the nation's most important symbols of shared identity.

2. 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 symbol of 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 (1995) 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 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, Plant, and Doerr (2007) suggests that subconscious, mundane exposure to the flag has a unifying effect, priming Americans to embrace values of egalitarianism and toleration. Other

[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.

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, Ferguson, and Hassin 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.

3. 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 this sort of creed, rather than a primordial understanding of culture, ethnicity, and ancestry, defines the American nation. 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 of 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, Reingold, and Green 1990; Wright, Citrin, and Wand 2012).

Many scholars also understand being American through 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, Deichert, and Engelhardt 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), scholars often study patriotism 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.

4. Theory and Hypotheses

How do the various identities that Americans hold correlate with their feelings toward the stars and stripes? The literatures on civil religion and social identity theory, paired with the findings of prior research on flag exposure and the flag as a national symbol, suggests that for many Americans, the strength of their national identity should be closely tied to how they feel about the flag. However, national identity is not the only salient social identity that impacts attitudes and behaviors of individuals, and we would thus expect other consequential identities to be associated with the flag. Below, we explore why three core (and overlapping) groups of American voters—Republicans, Christians, and Trump supporters—might exhibit closer attachment to the flag than others, and how those associations may reshape the relationship between the flag and national identity among the voting public.

First and foremost, 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. This is consistent with the theoretical accounts of ACR and a creedal account of the nation.

> **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. We hypothesize that this feeling is tied to particular social identities and related to the strength of those identities, in keeping with the expectations of social identity theory.

Partisanship

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, Plant, and Doerr 2007). Carter, Ferguson, and Hassin (2011) find that most Americans associate the flag more with the Republican Party than the Democratic Party, and when exposed to the flag in an experimental setting, shift their political beliefs toward Republican positions. In addition, Kalmoe and Gross (2016) find that when politicians use the flag in campaign literature, it provides modest benefits for Republicans regardless of candidate. And there is recent ethnographic evidence (Wagner 2025) that Republicans imbue the flag with partisan and ideological meaning and actively employ it as an in-group symbol. Because of this, we should expect Republicans to feel especially positively toward the symbol. Conversely, especially considering the rise of negative social polarization around the 2016 election (Mason 2018), we would expect non-Republican respondents with a negative view of the party to feel less positive affect toward the flag, identifying it with the Republican Party (Trofimchuk and Goh 2024) rather than the whole of America.

H2a: Republican respondents will report greater affect toward the American flag than non-Republican respondents. This relationship will be conditional on the strength of partisan identity and negative polarization.

Religious Affiliation

Prior literature suggests that many Americans consider being Christian 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. Foertsch and Dougherty (2025) show that nearly half of all Christian religiously affiliated adults worship with the flag on display in their place of worship. Shelton (2010) finds that Evangelical Protestants and Catholics both view patriotism and ethnoculturalism as critical features of American identity. Christians as a whole are an exceptionally broad category and we would expect certain religious groups to have greater flag affect than others. Prior research (Shelton 2010; Foertsch and Dougherty 2025; Sheets, Domke, and Greenwald 2011) suggests that Evangelical Protestants, Catholics, and biblical literalists all worship with the flag more often and are particularly likely to associate it with their identity. Additionally, we expect this relationship to be heavily shaped by religiosity, beyond mere affiliation with a particular church or Christian group. Despite differences between Christian traditions, we still expect that Christians as a whole, regardless of sect, have reason to be more favorable to the flag than those holding other, or no, religious views.

H2b: Christian respondents will report greater affect toward the American flag than non-Christian respondents. This relationship will be conditional on religiosity and the Christian tradition of the respondent.

Trump Support

Finally, there is a unique connection between the flag and the Make American Great Again (MAGA) political movement, as Donald Trump has deployed the flag in an increasing sectarian way. Though he is the leader of the Republican Party, and we would therefore expect a similar effect to our hypothesis regarding partisan flag capture in **H2a**, there are specific and somewhat separate reasons that the most ardent Trump supporters might have an even stronger positive association with the flag. In his 2016 campaign, Donald Trump made the flag a central focus of his visual branding. The red MAGA hat, the titular symbol of Trump support, even features the American flag on its side. During his first campaign in 2016, Trump frequently employed civil religious rhetoric meant to rally the partisan base more than build alliances with the opposition or the whole public (Hickel and Murphy 2022; Levendusky 2023, 64–65). His rhetoric consistently cast blame and focused on division rather than national union, marking a unique change in civil religious rhetoric.

Through the development of the MAGA Movement, support for Trump has become the basis for a social group identity among many Americans, one wrapped in the American flag and the concept of the "true American" or "true patriot" (Thompson 2021; Wronski 2024). While the January 6th Insurrection was still years away, it is no

coincidence that the flag-clad rioters who stormed the U.S. Capitol in 2021 *literally* weaponized the Star-Spangled Banner, using the national symbol to beat and attack the Capitol police as they attempted to overturn the results of a presidential election (Reanne 2024). Additionally, through his consistent use of the American flag and focus on defining who belongs and who does not, many outside of the MAGA movement have also come to see the flag as intrinsically tied to Trump. As Estrada et al. (2024) describe, the flag has "negatively impacted many young adults' sense of belonging as Americans when it was co-opted by MAGA and came to be associated with a nationalistic and nativist agenda" (14).

We hypothesize that these patterns are unique to Donald Trump's political following compared to previous Republican presidential candidates, and expect that support for Trump should associate closely with feelings about national symbols like the flag. We argue that both those who love Trump as well those who hate him are likely driving this expected effect, as the flag comes to be seen as a stand-in symbol for MAGA, rather than the United States.

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

The Prominence of National or Subgroup Identity

In line with **H1**, we continue to expect strength of American identity to be the primary correlate to positive flag affect, with negative associations rising as a response to the appropriation of the symbol by out-partisans. However, greater average support for the flag by specific groups is not itself evidence of symbolic appropriation. Our theory instead predicts that subgroup identity will partially substitute for national identity as a basis for attachment to the flag. We thus expect the linkage between American identity and feelings toward the flag to be heterogeneous across respondents. The literature highlighted above suggests that the American flag has increasingly acquired partisan and religious meanings alongside its longstanding role as a national symbol. 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, Republicans, Christians, 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.
>
> **H3c**: Respondents with greater affect toward Donald Trump will have a weaker relationship between American identity and affect toward the American flag than other respondents.

Taken together, these hypotheses reflect a broader process of symbolic appropriation. We argue that the flag has increasingly come to be associated not only with the nation, but also as a marker of particular partisan and religious identities. As Republican, Christian, and Trump-supporting elites and affiliates incorporate the flag into their political rhetoric, imagery, and identities, members of these groups have greater reason to associate the symbol with their own subgroup. This could be because Republicans, Christians, and Trump supporters are coming to associate the flag as a symbol of their own group identities, but it could also indicate a merging of American

identity with subgroup identity, such that, for instance, some Republicans view themselves as equal to and constitutive of the American people. Given the data available in the 2016 ANES, we are not able to explore the exact nature of this phenomenon in this analysis, but we believe both explanations are likely at play. At the same time, Americans outside of these groups are likely driving part of this relationship, as they develop animosity—or at least ambivalence—to the American flag as a symbol coopted by subgroup identities to which they do not belong and do not like.

Regardless of the exact nature of the links between these groups, we argue that positive affect toward the flag has become rooted in *both* national identity and subgroup identity, weakening the extent to which attachment to the nation alone predicts attachment to the flag. This process potentially diminishes the flag's ability to function as a shared civil religious symbol capable of activating a common American identity. Rather than reflecting declining patriotism, weaker attachment to the flag among political out-groups may thereby represent a rational response to changing symbolic meanings.

5. Data

We utilize data from the ANES 2016 Time Series Study, collected between September 2016 and January 2017, to interrogate the connection between Americans' feelings towards the flag and their political beliefs. 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 the most recent surveys did not ask about our outcome of interest—the affect that Americans feel towards the American flag. 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," including a clear mid-point for those who feel "Neither Good nor 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: respondents' sense of American identity. In 2004, 2012, and 2016, the question is the importance of being American to one's identity, while in 1988 it is pride in being American. Following Huddy and Khatib (2007), Jacobs and Theiss-Morse (2013), and Pérez, Deichert, and Engelhardt (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 six category factor variable, with respondents classified as Evangelical Protestant, Mainline Protestant, Roman Catholic, Other Christian, Other Religion, or No Religion.[3] Our final explanatory variable in 2016 is respondent affect toward

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

[3]We delineate separate categories for Evangelical and Mainline Protestants because there is significant evidence that evangelicals are organized and behave in politically unique ways from their other Christian counterparts

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. 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 (Cronbach'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] In Appendix D, we provide additional evidence as to why these measures should not be combined into a single scale. We expect that both American primordialism and American customs may positively correlate with feelings toward the American flag.

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 utilize the standard symbolic racism index (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.85$) to measure this concept. To further reflect the nuances in religious identification, we include a religiosity index in our models (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.77$), which we likewise expect to positively correlate with flag affect.[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 (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. Within partisan, racial, and religious categories, the groups with the most

(Smith and Walker 2013; Gold and Russell 2007).

[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.

respondents answering in the bad or neutral categories include Democrats, Black and Asian Americans, and secular Americans. 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**.

[fig 1 here]

[fig 2 here]

In Appendix Table A.2, we also break down the percentages within each demographic group for the American identity variable. Within nearly all categories included in the table, a plurality of respondents reported that being American is "Extremely" important to their identity. Similar to above, the groups in which more people reported a weaker sense of national identity include Democrats and Independents, Secular and non-Christian respondents, and Asian Americans. Republicans, Evangelical Respondents, and Black Americans responded most favorable to this question.

Finally, in Appendix Figures A.1, A.2, A.3, and A.4, we plot the densities of flag affect and American identity by party and religion over each ANES study in our data (1988, 2004, 2012, and 2016). These figures show that while some patterns have remained relatively constant over the years, others shifted significantly in 2016. Republicans have consistently displayed higher affect towards the flag and greater importance of national identity than Democrats and Independents, but are significantly more concentrated at the ceiling of the flag variable in 2016 (and simultaneously less concentrated at the highest levels of American identity). We observe similar trends among religious groups—secular and non-Christian Americans have had lower flag affect and lower American identity than Christians across the last three decades, but the concentration of Christians with higher flag affect has increased (and become slightly more homogeneous across the various Christian faiths in the data).

6. Results

In Figure 3, we display the results from 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.

[fig 3 here]

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 Catholic or Mainline Protestant 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 Protestant 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 an 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.

How Identity Shapes Feelings Toward the Flag

Our theoretical argument suggests that as sectarian groups appropriate the American flag, Americans outside of those groups will be less likely to associate positively with the symbol. Figure 3 largely reflects this concept. 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).

[fig 4 here]

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 the respondents who rate Trump a perfect 100. Trump's strongest supporters, regardless of their relationship to American 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]

[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).

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 2012 ANES measured the flag question across a 5-point scale, and the 2004 and 1988 surveys used a 4-point scale. 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, 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 minimal effects of being an Evangelical Protestant or Catholic in 2012, but they do not resemble the magnitude of the effects 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, party, religious affiliation, or support for the head of the GOP did not unique shape the relationship between American identity and the national symbol. It is only in 2016 that we identify a significant divergence. In Appendix Table C.3, we test a version of the 2016 scale that is collapsed into 5 categories to more similarly match the previous ANES questions. The results, which can be seen in Appendix Figure C.1, are nearly identical to those in 4, which supports the notion that our divergent findings in 2016 are not merely the result of the changed question wording.

[fig 5 here]

[fig 6 here]

[fig 7 here]

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

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

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.

Negative Partisan Polarization

Our results show that strong Republicans have a greater affinity for the flag than strong Democrats, and that party ID conditions the relationship between national identity and feelings toward the national symbol. To what degree does Republican fondness for the flag drive these results, or Democrats pulling away from the flag due to their dislike of Republicans and its association with the GOP? As expressed in **H2a**, we expect both Republican capture of the symbol *and* negative polarization among Democrats to shape this relationship. To study this concept, we estimate a models on a sample restricted to only Democrats and Republicans, and introduce a measure of negative polarization from the ANES. This measure, calculated using the Democrat and Republican Party feeling thermometers, estimates the degree to which partisans dislike members of the out-party, with higher values equaling greater dislike.

[fig 8 here]

After interacting partisan strength with negative polarization, as seen in the top panel of Figure 8, we find support for the claim that Democratic dislike of the GOP may contribute to our findings (see Appendix Table C.4). Democratic partisans with minimal dislike for Republicans rate the flag relatively high. As negative polarization increases, affect toward the flag decreases. The same cannot be said of Republican respondents, for whom negative polarization and flag affect appear to be unrelated. We next model a triple interaction, looking at how negative polarization affects the relationship between feelings toward the flag and American identity. These results, in the bottom panel of Figure 8, reveal diverging trends across parties. For Republicans, those with the least antipathy towards Democrats also have the strongest connection between their American identity and the flag. The relationship is inverted for Democrats, with highly polarized Democrats exhibiting the stronger relationship. Together, these two findings—Democrats with greater negative polarization like the American flag less, and connect the flag more closely to their national identity—provide support for the notion that negative polarization is responsible for some of the effects in the top panel of Figure 4. Republicans overwhelmingly rate the flag high, despite the strength of their American identity, and highly partisan and less nationally attached Democrats simultaneously rate the flag much lower.

While we do believe that some non-Christians may feel more isolated from the American flag in relation to its linkage to Christianity, the concept of religious negative polarization is not as easily captured. The ANES does ask a feeling thermometer about Christians in general, but there is no comparable feeling thermometer for secular Americans, who encompass the majority of the non-Christians in our sample. To better understand differences across and within religious faiths, we turn to religiosity and the strength of belief.

Religious Heterogeneity

As our main results suggest, there are substantial differences in the relationship between American identity and affect toward the flag among respondents from different religious groups. Our results in Figure 4 show that most respondents affiliated with Christian traditions exhibit weaker relationships between the flag and their national identity than non-religious people and people belonging to other faiths, in support of **H2b**. Religious affiliation, however, does not necessarily correspond to strength of religious belief. Per our other expectations in **H2b**, and to better understand the differences across Christian traditions, we examine how religiosity moderates these effects. Religiosity serves not only to measure religious attendance and strength of belief, but is also strongly associated with conservative political beliefs (Malka et al. 2012).

[fig 9 here]

Figure 9 displays the predicted values of flag affect from a model that includes a triple interaction between religion, religiosity, and American identity (see Appendix Table C.5 for full results). This model omits non-religious Americans from the analysis, as these respondents do not have any meaningful religiosity scores to condition on. These findings suggest that among Protestants, as well as members of non-Christian faiths, religiosity does not moderate the relationship between strength of American identity and feelings toward the flag. However, among Catholics and other non-Protestant Christian respondents, we observe significant differences. Extremely religious Catholic respondents display essentially no connection between their Americanness and their love of the flag, almost uniformly responding near the top of the scale. Catholics with low religiosity, on the other hand, exhibit the expected positive relationship between the two variables. While Republicans tend to rank higher in religiosity, this result is not merely a stand-in for partisanship—among highly religious Catholics, only 52% are Republicans, yet nearly all rate the flag as a 6 or 7.

The lack of moderation of religiosity among Protestants, both Mainline and Evangelical, is particularly interesting. For these individuals, our results suggest that the weaker relationship between American identity and the flag is unrelated to their strength of religious belief. In other words, this weaker relationship may be a consequence of affiliation with Protestantism as a social identity, whereas for Catholics, it appears to be a phenomenon linked to respondent's religious beliefs.

Ideally, we would also model these differences across a more refined measure of religious identity, including separate analyses for distinct Christian faiths including Black Protestants and Latter-day Saints. The number of respondents from these and other groups, however, are too few to confidently model these triple-interactions at this level.

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, Tesler, and Vavreck (2017) find that Trump uniquely activated white identity in the mass public through his appeals to threats on whites from non-whites. While they

argue that Trump made white identity uniquely salient, 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 triple interactions, including whiteness alongside the prior interactions in Figure 4. These results, shown in Figure 10, suggest that whiteness is a critical component missing from our prior results. Among white Americans, the dynamics in Figure 10 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 Protestant has a virtually indistinguishable relationship between American identity and the flag than a non-white, non-religious person, and so on. The only distinct religious effect we identify among non-White Americans is among Catholic respondents, who are largely of Hispanic origin. Otherwise, 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.

[fig 10 here]

Accounting for Possible Ceiling Effects

Because the majority of Republicans, Christians, and Trump supporters are clustered near the top of the 7-point flag scale, there is less room for the predicted probabilities to vary across our interactive models. It is thus possible that ceiling effects are biasing some of our results. In some instances, social pressures or constrained scales may artificially force survey respondents to select an answer at one end of a Likert scale (S.Lewis-Beck, Bryman, and Liao 2004; Masino and Lam 2014; Chyung, Hutchinson, and Shamsy 2020). This can create a false sense of the underlying distribution of opinions on a given issue, but becomes less of a concern as a scale expands in response options (Chyung, Hutchinson, and Shamsy 2020). While the responses to the flag question on the 2016 ANES are concentrated near the ceiling, the clustering is likely not the result of respondents facing too few response options. The responses to this questions are actually the aggregate of two separate questions, asking (1) whether the respondent feels "Good", "Bad", or "Neither Good nor Bad" about the flag, and (2) the degree to which they feel good or bad. While there may be initial ceiling effects,

such that people feel pressure that they should answer "Good" to the first question, the second part of the question allows for greater variation in response options (such that they can answer "A Little Good," "Moderately Good," or "Extremely Good"). The fact that Republicans, Christians, and Trump supporters tend to respond at the top of the scale to a much greater degree than others—a finding which holds despite the importance of their American identity—suggest that these response patterns are a substantive phenomenon, rather than the result of forced choice and the artificial limitation of the scale.

Nevertheless, the clustering of these groups at the top of the scale may still bias our empirical specifications—particularly, our interactive models. To assess whether this is the case, we test alternate versions of our main models using Beta Regression (see, e.g., White II 2018; Wiedermann et al. 2024).[9] A form of GAMLSS (generalized additive models for location, scale, and shape), Beta Regression allows for more flexible distributions than OLS, and can account for floor and ceiling effects. This model also requires the dependent variable to be rescaled from 0 to 1. Because there are many values concentrated around 1, and almost none around 0, we use the One-Inflated Beta Regression for this robustness check. The results from these models can be found in Appendix Tables C.6 and C.7 and Appendix Figures C.2 and C.3.

In Model 1 in Appendix Table C.6, we can see continued support for **H1a**, **H2a**, **H2b**, and **H2c**. Compared to other respondents, Republicans, Christians, and people who are more favorable toward Trump rate the flag higher. Turning to the interactions between American identity and flag affect, the results for Trump supporters are very similar to those in Figure 4, though they are weaker in confidence. However, the clear differences between strong Democrats and strong Republicans are no longer statistically separable in this model. Additionally, while the difference between Christian respondents and those from other religions is still evident, the Beta Regression results suggests that ceiling effects may be driving some of the inter-Christian differentiation observed in our main models, as well as the distinction between Christians and non-religious people.

The Beta Regression results suggests that the religious and partisan heterogeneity in the relationship between American identity and the American flag may be overstated. Under an alternate specification using a three category measure of partisanship (Democrat, Republican, or Independent), however, we do observe results similar to those in our main models, with significant heterogeneity in the interaction between Democrats and Republicans (see Appendix Table C.6). The religious differences observed under these models—and lack of clear difference between Christian respondents and non-religious respondents—push back against **H3b**, and offer evidence for a slightly different phenomenon. Rather than Christians displaying weaker relationships between their American identity and their flag affect than other groups, these results propose that it may be members of other non-Christian religious faiths, such as Jews, Buddhists, Muslims, or Hindus, who actually have a *stronger* connection between these variables than other Americans, Christian or secular. Given the amalgamation of faiths included in this category, it is difficult to draw a clear substantive conclusion. Through larger samples and more focused analyses of minority religions in the United States, future work can better tease out these dynamics.

These robustness checks do not invalidate our results, but they do suggest that some of our findings—specifically, those tied to Christianity—may be exaggerated in

[9]Some studies use Tobit models to address ceiling effects bias (i.e., Wang et al. 2008), but these models also rely on the assumption of normality, which the underlying distribution of our data likely violates.

our main models. However, it is important to emphasize that the effects we find for Trump supporters remain almost unchanged under this alternate set of analyses. No matter the specification, (white) Americans who are most favorable to Trump display very high affect towards the American flag, and the weakest relationship between this affect and the importance of being American to their identity.

7. 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 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 their particular identities rather than their national identity. Conversely, what these findings imply is that Americans outside of these groups may come to associate the flag with the groups that are appropriating the symbol. For these individuals, the flag is still primarily correlated with the strength of American identity, but is starting to become associated with out-partisan, unrepresentative, groups. 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 identify the impact of negative polarization, such that more polarized Democrats are more wary of the national symbol, as well as the role of religiosity, to the extent that highly religious Catholics exhibit an exceptionally weak relationship between their national identity and 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 many on the right claim ownership over symbolic patriotism, we show that the ties between national identity and flag affect are far weaker for voters within these groups than others. These findings indicate 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.

We recognize that these political and religious identities and attitudes are tightly bound together, and that it is difficult to isolate how any given social identity relates to flag affect on its own. This paper makes no specific causal claims about the role of one identity over another, and instead identifies trends that likely overlap across the various categories within Americans' partisan mega-identities (Mason 2018). Alternative research designs, such as the use of a conjoint survey experiment, could better measure the distinct identities that Americans perceive to be associated with the flag.

Future work should also 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—subnational groups appropriating the national symbol—but may lead to a reconsideration of its implications. Additional research is also needed to better understand how these trends have developed since 2016, to what extent and in what contexts the the flag continues to be an effective prime for American identity, and to what extent the groups we highlight in this paper have appropriated the symbol.

Prior 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 cannot directly test for ties between civil religion and Christian Nationalistic sentiment in this analysis. While our results do present strong evidence regarding Evangelical Protestants 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 appear to associate 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, anger at the state and its history may drive more negative affect to the flag. Yet, to extract civil religion from the ownership of any particular group requires not that it be abandoned or the past sins committed in its name be ignored, but reframed. 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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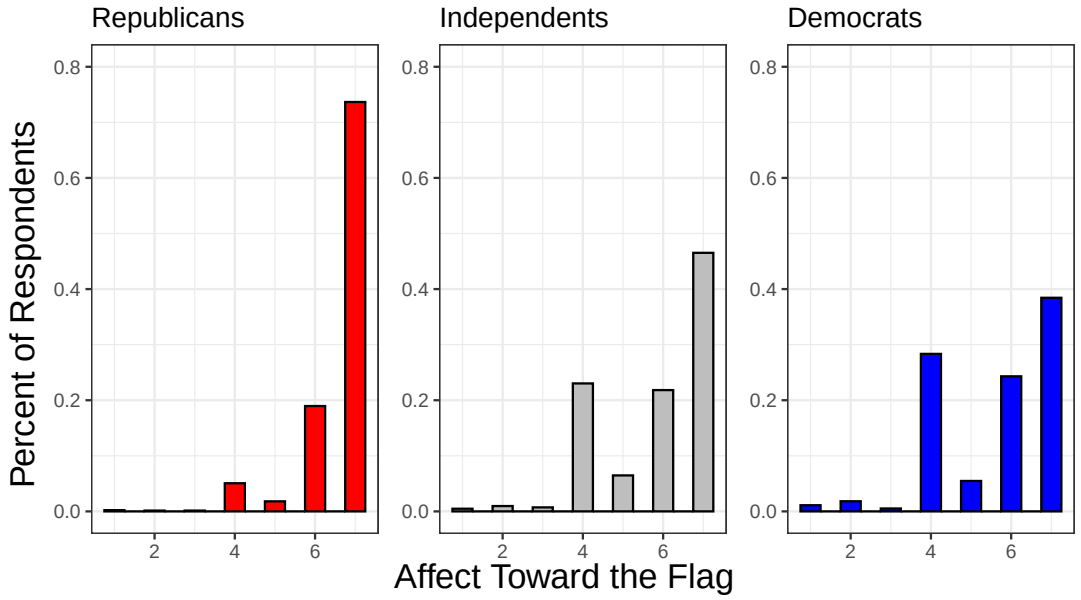


Figure 1. Distribution of Affect Toward the Flag by Party. Response options range from 1 ("Extremely Bad") to 7 ("Extremely Good").

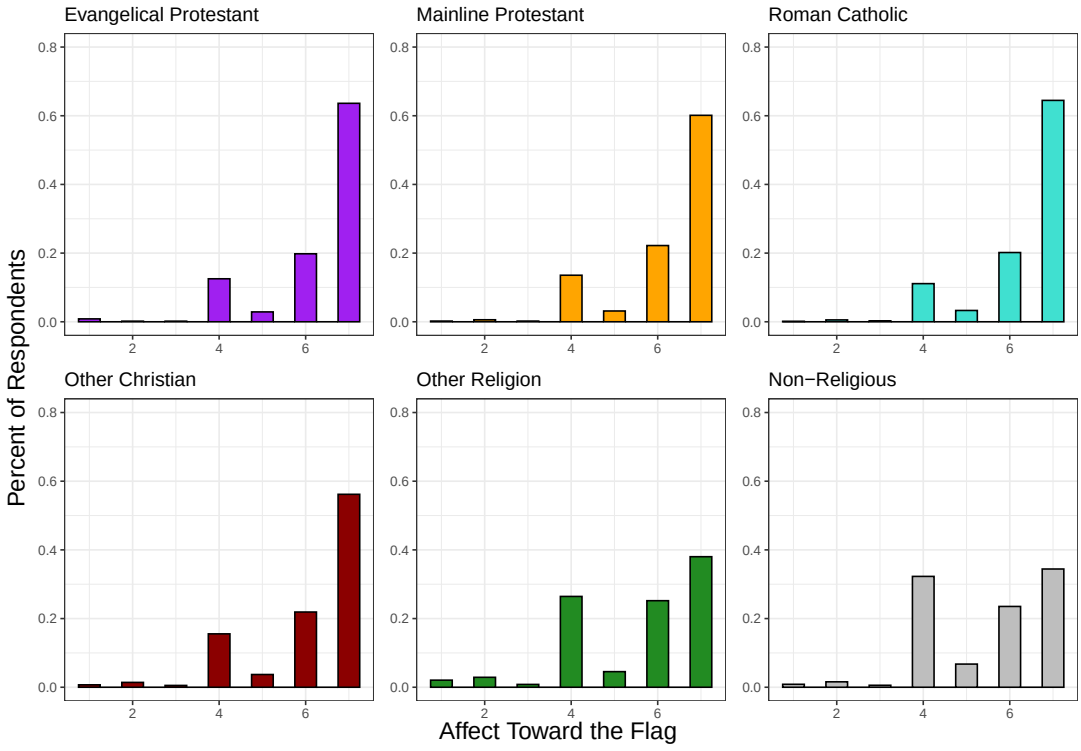


Figure 2. Distribution of Affect Toward the Flag by Religion. Response options range from 1 ("Extremely Bad") to 7 ("Extremely Good").

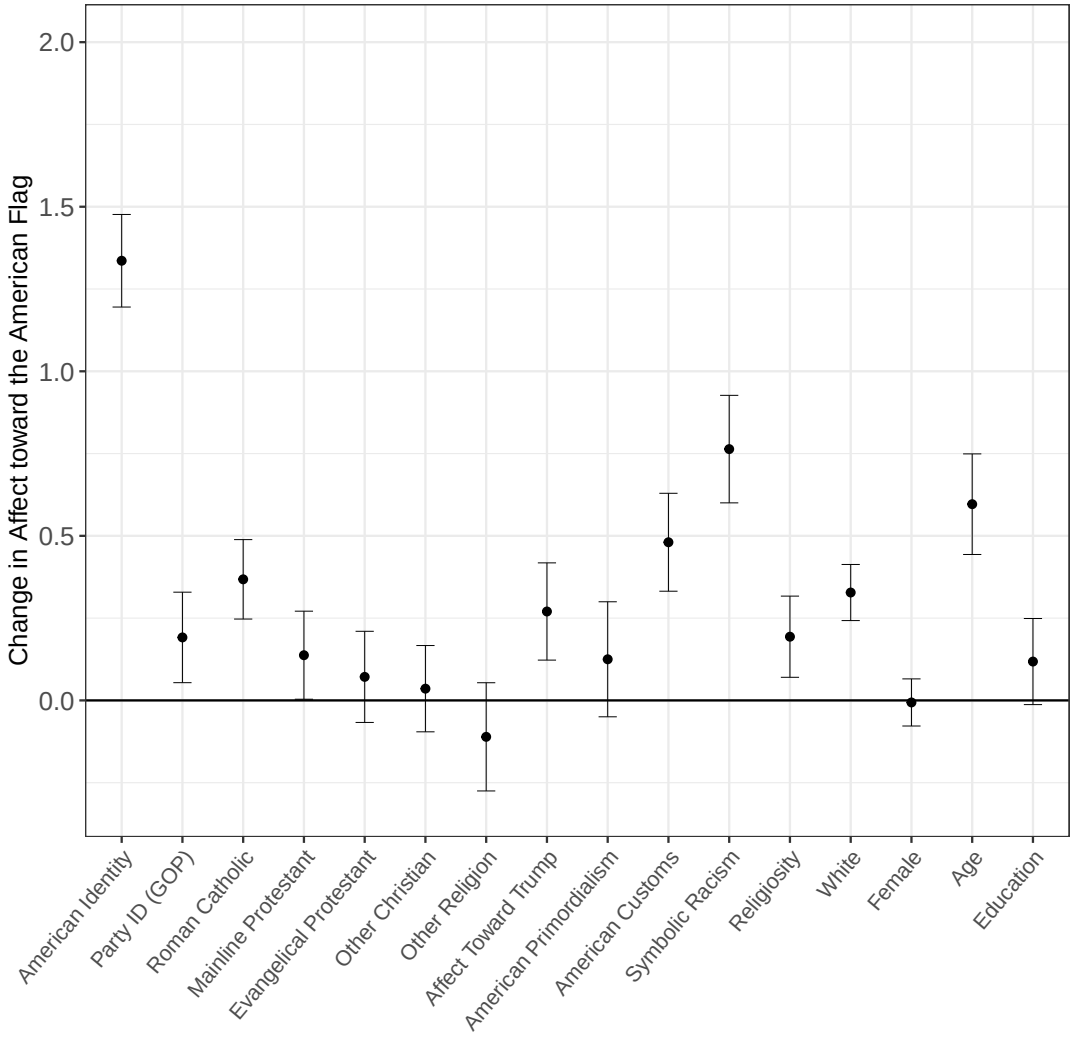


Figure 3. Coefficient Estimates on Affect Toward the Flag. Point estimates are standardized coefficients on a 0 to 1 scale, representing movement from the minimum value to the maximum value of each independent variable. These results reflect coefficients from Model 3 in Appendix Table B.1. Error bars 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").

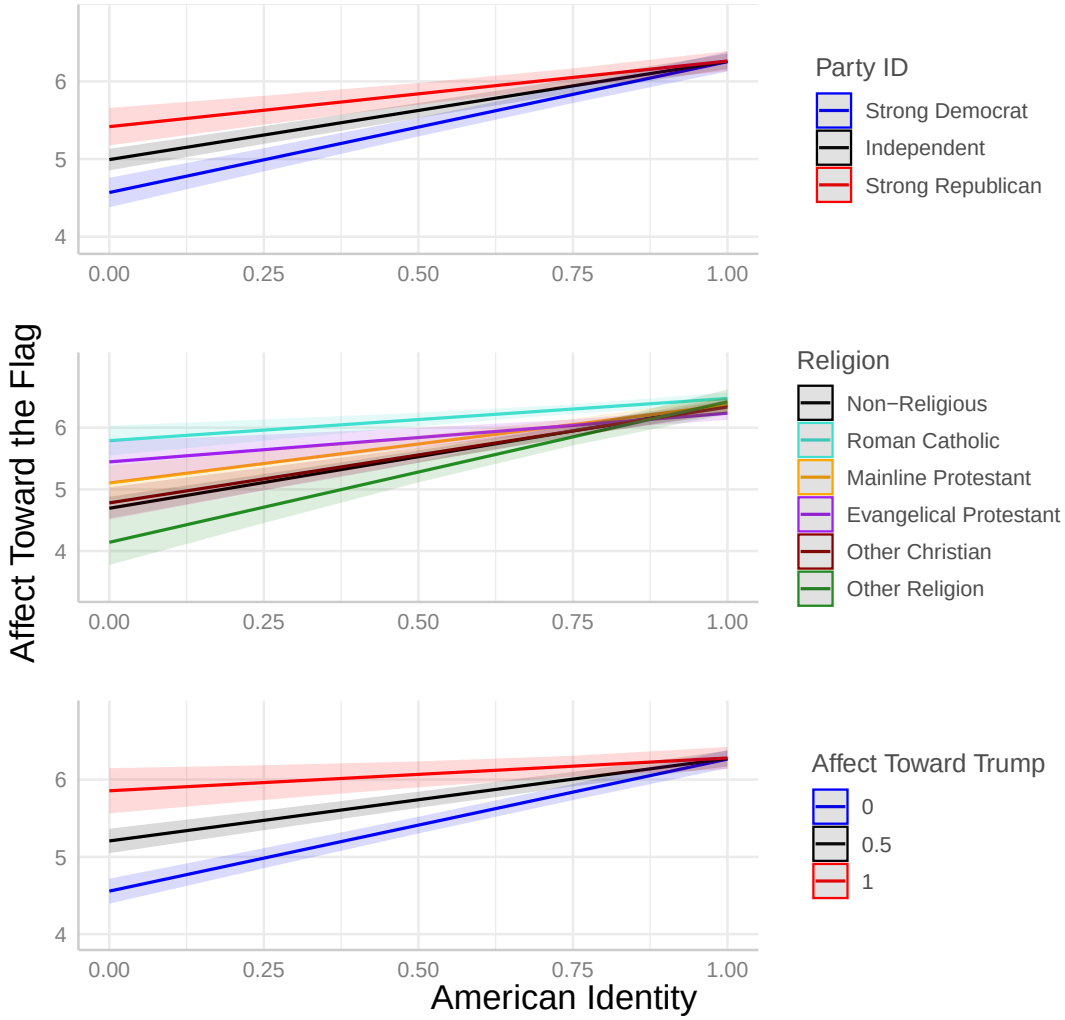


Figure 4. Predicted Values from Interactions Between American Identity and Group Identities, 2016. Each plot in this figure reflects the change in predicted values of the outcome variable, affect toward the American flag, across the range of American identity for the average respondent in 2016. These values were generated using Models 1, 2 and 3 in Appendix Table B.2.

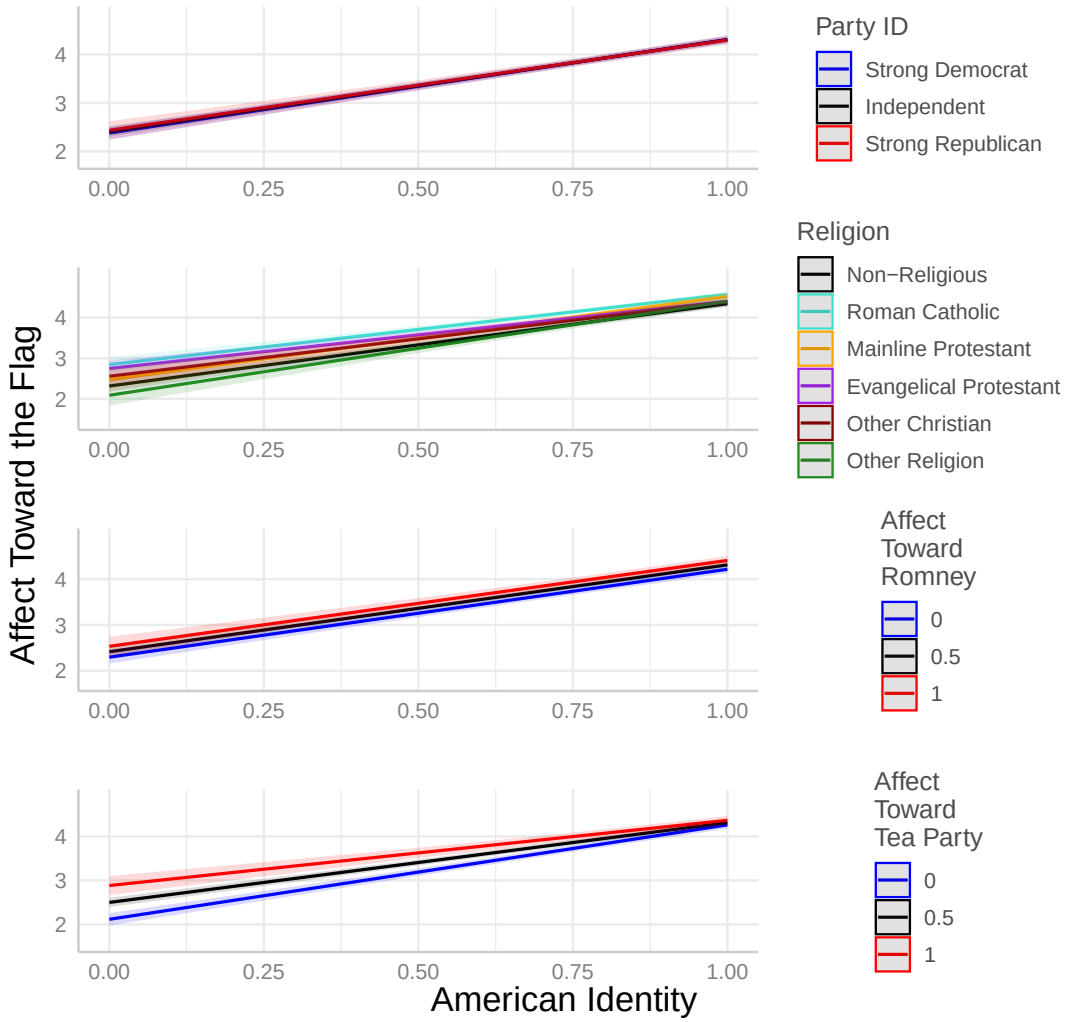


Figure 5. Predicted Values from Interactions Between American Identity and Group Identities, 2012. Each plot in this figure reflects the change in predicted values of the outcome variable, affect toward the American flag, across the range of American identity for the average respondent in 2012. These values were generated using Models 1, 2 3, and 4 in Appendix Table B.7.

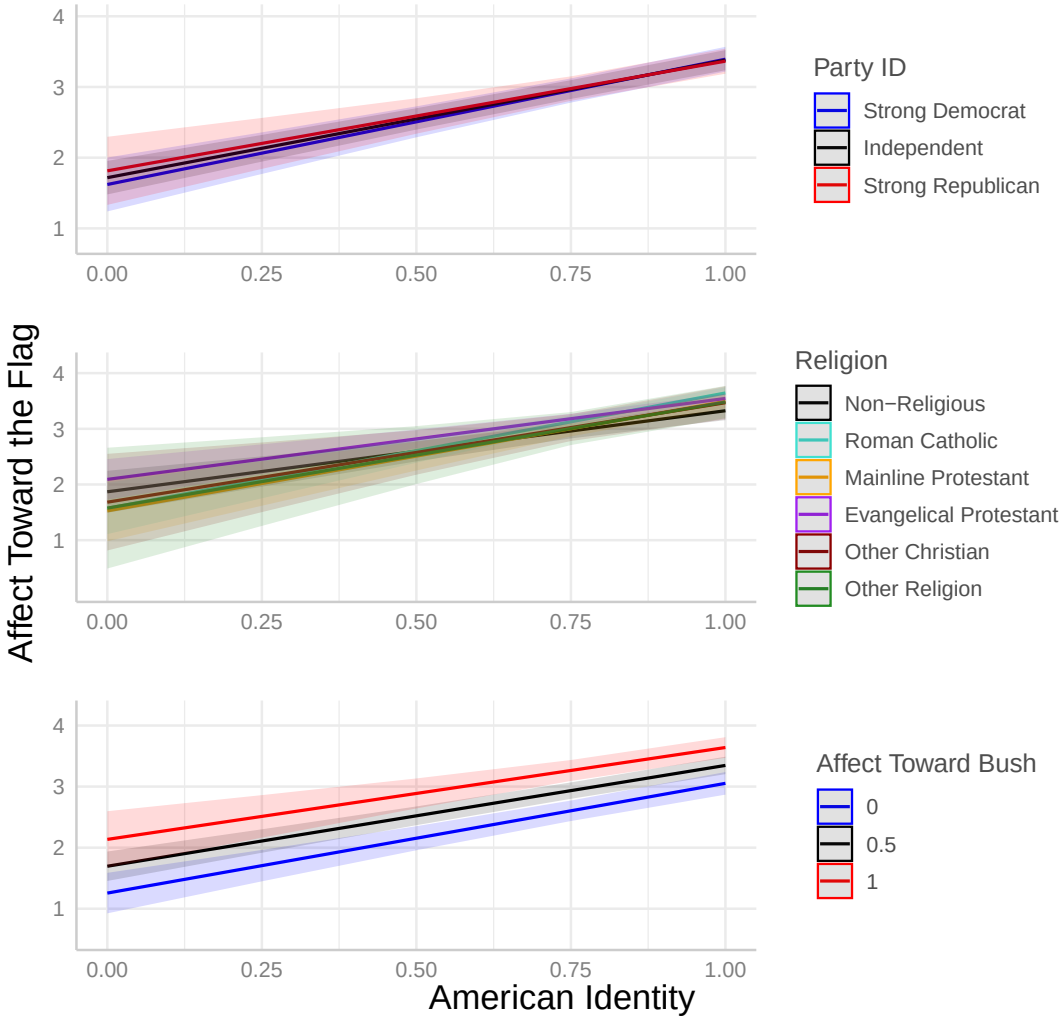


Figure 6. Predicted Values from Interactions Between American Identity and Group Identities, 2004. Each plot in this figure reflects the change in predicted values of the outcome variable, affect toward the American flag, across the range of American identity for the average respondent in 2004. These values were generated using Models 1, 2 and 3 in Appendix Table B.8.

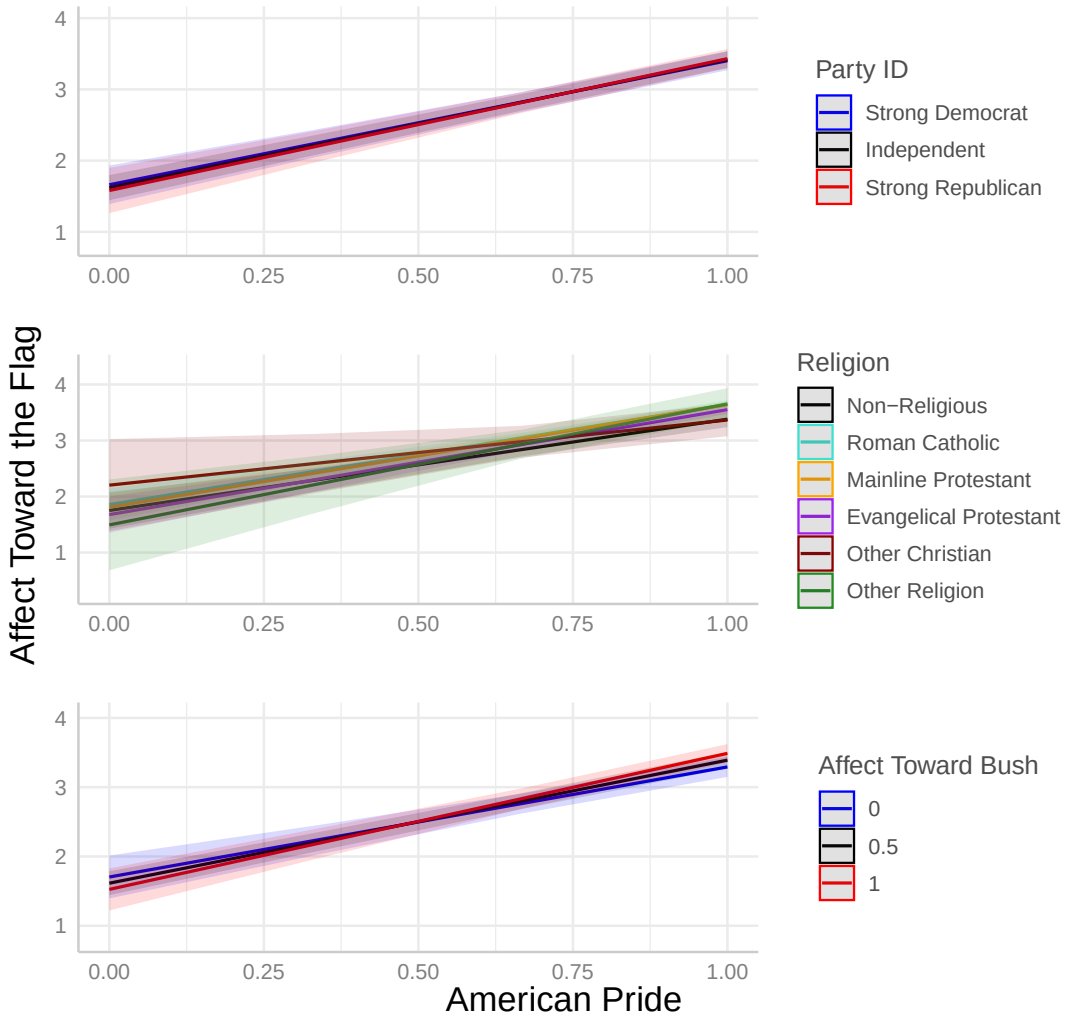


Figure 7. Predicted Values from Interactions Between American Identity and Group Identities, 1988. Each plot in this figure reflects the change in predicted values of the outcome variable, affect toward the American flag, across the range of American identity for the average respondent in 1988 These values were generated using Models 1, 2 and 3 in Appendix Table B.9.

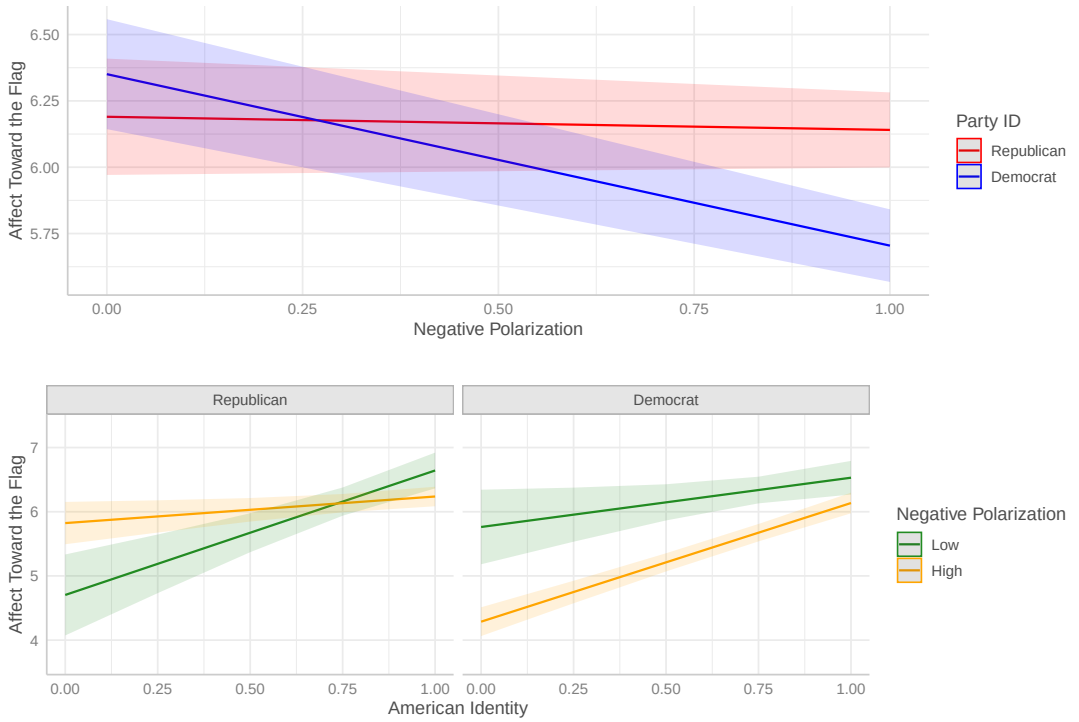


Figure 8. Predicted Values from Interactions Between American Identity, Party, and Negative Polarization, 2016. The top plot in this figure reflects the change in predicted values of the outcome variable, affect toward the American flag, across the range of negative polarization for the average respondent in 2016, split by party. The bottom plots reflect 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, conditional on party and negative polarization. These models omit Independents. These values were generated using Models 1 and 2 in Appendix Table C.4.

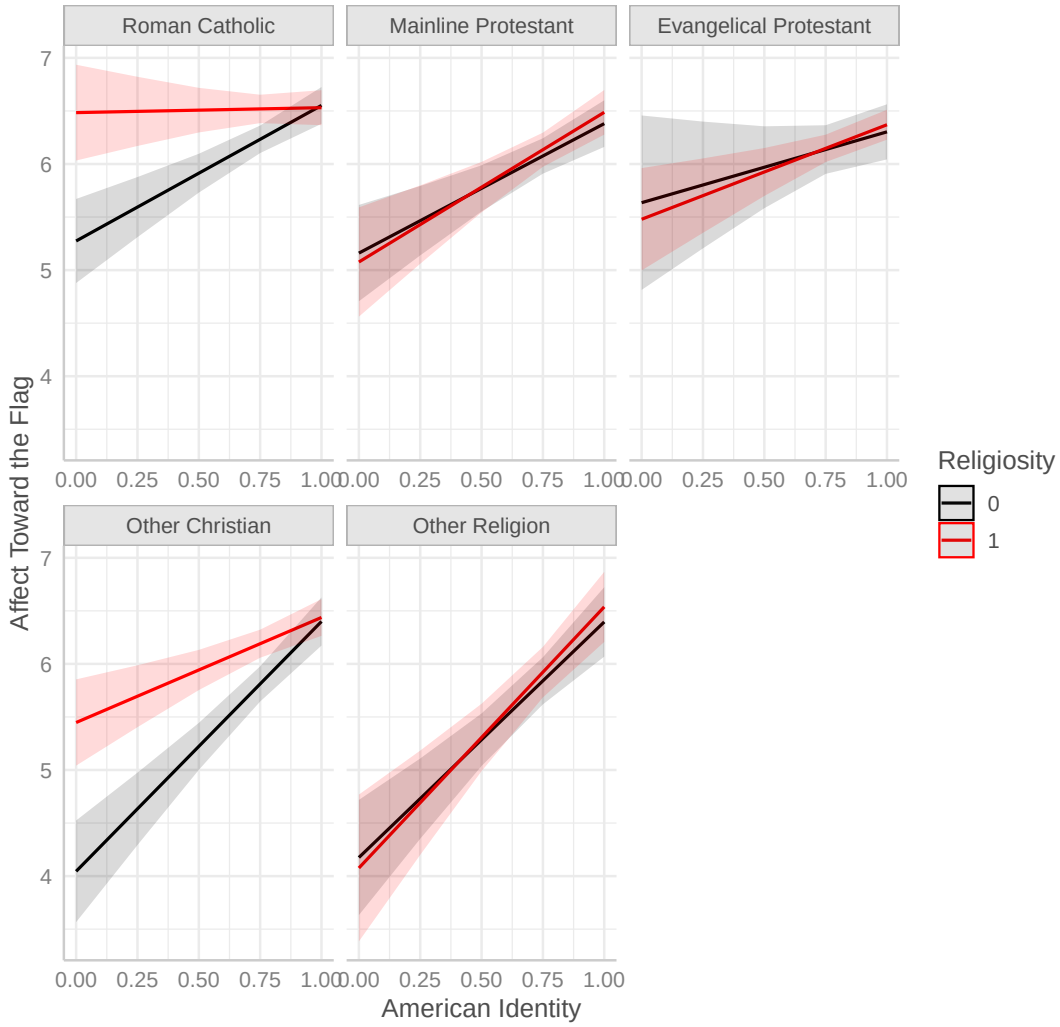


Figure 9. Predicted Values from Interactions Between American Identity, Religion, and Religiosity, 2016. Each plot in this figure reflects the change in predicted values of the outcome variable, affect toward the American flag, across the range of American identity for the average respondent in 2016, split by those at minimum and maximum levels of religiosity. These models omit non-religious respondents. These values were generated using Model 2 in Appendix Table C.5

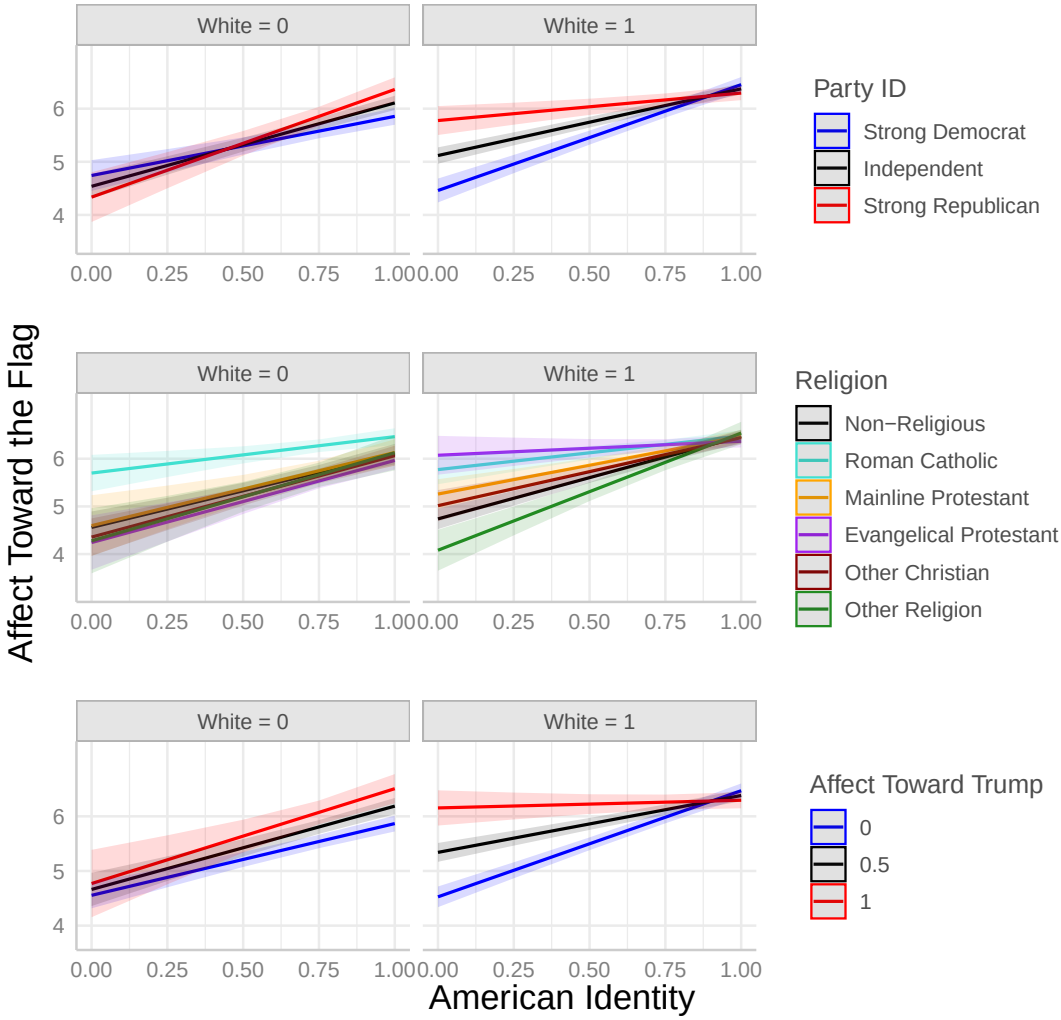


Figure 10. Predicted Values from Interactions Between American Identity and Group Identities, including Race, 2016. Each plot in this figure reflects the change in predicted values of the outcome variable, affect toward the American flag, across the range of American identity for the average respondent in 2016. These values were generated using Models 1, 2, and 3 in Appendix Table B.3.