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# How Much Do Groups Still Matter to Politics? An Examination of Group Influences on Public Opinion

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How Much Do Groups Still Matter to Politics? An Examination of Group Influences on  
Public Opinion

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## **Abstract**

Public opinion plays an important role in democracy. A system of government designed specifically to be by the people, for the people and of the people must by necessity listen to the opinions of the people. Accordingly, an important research agenda is determining conditions under which public opinion is listened to and translated into government responsiveness. Most of the public opinion literature answering this question focuses specifically on individual opinion. I argue that this is problematic because politics is ultimately carried out in terms of the collective. Further, I argue that collective opinion is often voiced through groups in society such that groups are an important and often overlooked mediator of public opinion. I present a model of group influences on public opinion, arguing in three parts that groups first shape individual opinion through social identity effects or the desire of individuals to feel connected to others, government is theoretically likely to listen to groups rather than individual or overall opinion because politics is ultimately carried out in terms of the aggregate, but government is only likely to listen to group opinion if the group holds intense preferences and can therefore signal their opinion to individual group members and to government. I test this theory in three separate cases where public opinion is evidenced, political parties, state Supreme Court decision making and ballot initiatives. I find support for my theory in two of the three cases, political parties and state Supreme Court decision making. Overall, I demonstrate the continued importance and role of groups in American politics and to public opinion in particular and show the necessity of testing the breadth and depth of theory.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

V.O. Key famously defined public opinion as “those opinions held by private persons which government finds it prudent to heed” (1961, 1). Democracy commonly understood as government by the people and for the people, arguably should rest on the opinions of the people. As such, democracy is considered the best form of government since it does give voice to the otherwise voiceless. However, at the same time, democracy is also often considered the most tenuous form of government, and at the extreme, the system of government least likely to succeed. Because it is a system designed specifically to listen to and follow the voice of the people, the ancient Greeks down through the Founding Fathers feared the potential result of misdirected and misguided decision making by a populous unqualified and in many ways unable (in their minds) to make good judgments. They feared the end result would be chaos through mob rule.

To prevent the potential for mob rule, the Founding Fathers compromised by creating not a pure democracy but a democratic republic (Wood 1969, 1991). Rather than literal rule by the people, the Founders crafted a system whereby the people elected leaders to represent them and their opinion in government. Therefore, the people were given at best an indirect voice in government. Accordingly, a key question that faced the Founding Fathers became how much these elected leaders, collectively making up the government, should listen and adhere to public opinion. Are leaders to act as delegates,



consciously taking into consideration the opinions of their constituents, or trustees, free to act as they see fit with little to no regard for the actual opinions of the people?

### **1.1 Public Opinion: Two Views**

At the root of this debate lay two opposing views on public opinion. Among the Founders Hamilton best embodies the skeptic view, arguing that the people are capricious with little knowledge, political in particular, and as a result their opinion should not form the basis of judgment for government. As he puts it, “the people are turbulent and changing; they seldom judge or determine right,” though they have been said to have the voice of God “it is not true in fact” (Frisch 1985,108). This view finds substantial support in the literature beginning with Lippmann (1922) and Schumpeter (1942) who wrote despairingly of there being any wisdom, relating to governing matters in particular, in the people and consequently their influence on policy should be limited. Beginning with the first public opinion polls, empirical findings supported this claim that the public is ignorant and uninformed about politics providing a basis of support for this skeptical view of public opinion (Campbell et al. 1960; Converse 1964; Butler and Stokes 1969; Luskin 1987, 1990; see more recently Kuklunski et al. 2000 and misinformation). As Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) note, one scholar goes so far as to say that “America’s embarrassing little secret...is that vast numbers of Americans are ignorant” and argues that this lack of basic knowledge about politics undermines the central tenet of democratic government, rule by the people (Blumberg 1990, 1).

However, on the other side of the debate are the optimists who, though acknowledging that citizens are often uninformed, argue that democracy ultimately rests on the will of the people and so listening to and following their opinions is vitally

important especially in maintaining democratic legitimacy. Jefferson best embodies this view among the Founders. For example, in speaking with a friend he argues that he is willing to “freely leave to self government” the masses of the United States (keeping in mind that meant white males) (Padover 1939, 56). Jefferson viewed citizens as more than capable of self-government and believed democracy rested on their input and opinions. Further, optimists argue that the lack of information and knowledge among the public is largely a result of external forces, resulting from defective social and political institutions rather than internal deficiencies (e.g. Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996) and as such these deficiencies can be overcome. They argue that there are systematic biases in America, such as inequality in socioeconomic status, that are a major cause of the ignorance of the populous. Or, in another view, V.O. Key (1961, 557) forcefully puts it “politicians often make of the public a scapegoat for their own shortcomings.” He argued that citizens are not as ignorant as often perceived yet politicians can use the fact of the public’s deficiencies to their own advantage. At the same time, some optimists also argue that a fully informed electorate is not needed since citizens are able to rely on ‘shortcuts’ to act as if they are fully informed (Lupia 1994; Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Lau and Redlawsk 2001). Overall, optimists argue that public opinion must be listened to for democracy to maintain its legitimacy, as best stated by V.O Key, (1961,10) “unless mass views have some place in the shaping of policy, all the talk about democracy is nonsense.”

## **1.2 Research Question**

Accordingly, though debated, it is clear that the importance of public opinion to democracy remains a vital topic of interest in political science. While of concern to

scholars from the early days of political science (for example Lippman 1922) the study of public opinion exploded with the advent of scientific polling and the consequent ability of scholars to actually measure the opinions of the public. For example, Gallup famously argued that public opinion polling would allow political leaders to find out public opinion and respond to it (Gallup 1938; Gallup and Rae 1940). This view only grew as the ability (both methodologically and financially) to conduct studies of the public increased (for example Campbell et al. 1960 and the subsequent Michigan national election studies).

Consequently, public opinion literature analyzes a wide variety of research questions including whether policy makers actually respond to public opinion (see Shapiro 2011 for a review), do citizens hold political belief systems and have coherent structure in their opinions (Converse 1964; Nie and Anderson 1974; Achen 1975; Luskin 1987), how informed is the citizenry and how informed does it need to be for democracy to survive (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1997; Jerit et al. 2006; Kuklinski, et al. 2000; Hutchings 2003 see the heuristics literature as well Lupia 1994; Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Lau and Redlawsk 2001; Darmofal 2005), how do citizens reach their opinions (Lodge et al. 1989; Zaller 1992), what is the role of the media in opinion formation (Bartels 1993; Mutz 1998; Prior 2007) and many more. In adding to this body of literature I seek to answer the question, what are some of the specific conditions under which public opinion is listened to and translated into government responsiveness. I offer a model of how this process works and test it in three distinct cases.

### **1.3 Atomistic Actor versus Interpersonal Relations**

My research question is premised on a divide I see in the literature between studies that focus (intentional or not) on individuals as more or less atomistic actors in

their opinion and studies that focus on how group interactions affect individual opinion. This divide is evidenced from the beginning of the public opinion literature in the two schools of thought that drove most of the research on public opinion since the 1950s, the Columbia school (Lazarsfeld 1944; Berelson et al. 1954; Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955) and the Michigan school (Campbell et al. 1960).

The Columbia school came first and offered a sociological view of public opinion. These scholars argued that you can think of politics as you think of consumer products where citizen opinion is formed through ‘marketing’ by the media and other opinion leaders in society. Citizens form opinions based largely on interpersonal interactions with others and look to groups within society (through the opinion leaders of these groups) as a basis for forming judgments and making decisions. In contrast, the Michigan school more heavily emphasized the psychological aspect of opinion. These scholars focused primarily on the individual as in many ways an atomistic actor influenced in their opinion by psychological things such as socioeconomic status (the base of the funnel in their funnel of causality for voting behavior). Sociological factors played a role as well (it is often referred to as the socio-psychological model) but the emphasis was on the individual as in many ways a lone actor forming opinions and judgments.

As with the voting behavior literature, I argue that the majority of the literature on public opinion following these early studies focused on the Michigan school analysis of public opinion as centered on the psychological and considers the individual as more or less an atomistic actor. Because the advent of polling and scientific surveys allowed scholars to some extent ‘see inside’ people’s minds for the first time, it opened a new

avenue of research centered on the individual. Scholars no longer had to rely on aggregate or case study data to form and test theories and hypotheses but could now bring their theories under the scrutiny of actual individual level data. Additionally, the work of Downs (1957) and the resultant rational choice literature also spurred on the focus on the individual and how they form and reach decisions (for example the decision to vote). This is not to say that sociological factors are entirely missing from this literature (see the early media literature for example: Bartels 1993; Iyengar and Kinder 1987). I simply argue that the majority of the literature approached the study of public opinion from a notion of the individual as an atomistic actor centered more heavily on psychological concerns.

However, this began to change in the literature as Huckfeldt (1979; 1983; 1984) and others (Kenny 1992; Huckfeldt et al. 1995; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; Huckfeldt et al. 1998; McClurg 2003; Huckfeldt, Johnson and Sprague 2004; Walsh 2004; Mutz and Mondak 2006) began reviving the Columbia school focus on the sociological aspects of public opinion. These scholars argued for the role interpersonal relations can have on public opinion and other areas of political behavior. Citizens are not lone actors but are heavily influenced by those around them in their thoughts and opinions.

#### **1.4 Groups Influences**

I seek to continue in the tradition of the Columbia school and this growing body of literature by focusing on the role of interpersonal relations, as mediated through groups, on public opinion, looking at the specific question of conditions under which public opinion is listened to by government and translated into government responsiveness. I argue that, while examining the individual is important, it is only

through collective or aggregate opinion that politics is truly carried out, in terms of influencing elected leaders decisions and consequent policy making.

Accordingly, I offer a theory of group influences on public opinion drawing off of the work of the importance of interpersonal relations as argued by Huckfeldt (1979; 1983; 1984) and others (Kenny 1992; Huckfeldt et al. 1995; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; Mcclurg 2003; Huckfeldt, Johnson and Sprague 2004; Walsh 2004; Mutz and Mondak 2006). While politics is ultimately carried out in terms of the aggregate, this ‘collective’ opinion I argue is mediated through groups within society. Citizens spend a great deal of their time associating either loosely or closely with groups (race, gender, religion, social clubs to name a few). I argue that these interpersonal relations form in many ways the basis for their opinions and judgments. Accordingly, one way to study the influence of public opinion on government is to focus on groups and the influence that they wield within society. However, I argue that group influence on public opinion is conditional. This process will only work when a specific condition is present: that is when a group feels intensely about an issue and consequently ‘owns’ the issue whereby group members are able to clearly perceive the stance of the group and it consequently informs their own opinion and government feels the intensity of the group preference such that they are likely to listen to it as well. Overall, I argue that government listens to group opinion within society when reaching their decisions.

To test this theory of group opinion as influencing governmental decision making, I choose to focus on religious groups in particular. As I will explain in more detail, religious groups I argue offer a good test case for the influence of group opinion on governmental decision making. I then analyze this theory in three distinct areas to show

the breath of the model: political parties, state Supreme Court decision making and ballot initiatives.

Accordingly, in chapter one I explain my theory of group influences on public opinion in detail. It is composed of three parts: social identity theory, or how citizens think in terms of groups, group influences on politics and intensity of preferences held by the group. I next offer an argument for why religious groups in particular present a good test case for my theory. Finally, I explain how my theory relates and will be tested in three distinct analyses, strength of partisan attachment, state Supreme Court decision making and direct democracy focusing on the use of ballot propositions as affecting candidate choice in an election.

Chapters three through five will present my individual analyses. Chapter three focuses on public opinion as viewed through partisanship and strength of partisanship in particular, asking the question, does strength of religious commitment lead to strength of partisan commitment. Chapter four examines public opinion through the lens of one branch of government, the judicial branch, looking at whether religious groups influence state Supreme Court justices in their decision making. Chapter five analyses public opinion as exhibited through direct democracy looking at whether the use of ballot propositions can prime groups in a state, focusing on religious groups, in both voter turnout and vote choice.

Finally, chapter six concludes my dissertation. I review my overall theory of group influences on public opinion and then analyze and evaluate how well it performed in each of the three individual analyses. I offer concluding thoughts on this project and

whether I was able to uncover specific conditions under which public opinion is listened to and translated into government responsiveness.



## **Chapter 2**

### **Theory**

Historically, in American politics, groups within society have been a focal point of scholarly investigation and are arguably central to the maintenance of American democracy. In his classic examination of the success of early American democracy Tocqueville theorized that one of the key reasons the ‘experiment’ of democracy in America succeeded was a result of the civic life of the American populous (Tocqueville [1835-40] 1969). He noticed that Americans were “joiners,” belonging to all types of civic and political associations. As he studied these groups within society he also began to observe that otherwise nonpolitical associations (for example lions clubs) often became mobilized and involved in politics at least at the local level. This greatly surprised Tocqueville as this was not common practice in the European context to which he was accustomed.

Many scholars since Tocqueville also argue for the importance of groups to American democracy. Perhaps the most extended treatment is done by Putnam (1995; 2000, 19) who argues that social capital, defined as “connections among individuals - social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them,” is essential for the health of democracy. Social capital enables citizens to come together to work on community concerns as well as engage in the political system. According to Putnam greater amounts of social capital produce an increase in democratic practices.

The decline he sees in group interactions, in the number of ‘joiners’ in American society is consequently extremely troubling to scholars such as Putnam.

From this observation of the number and importance of groups to American society, early scholars of political science found that even nominal membership in a group carried with it significant political meaning (e.g. Campbell et al. 1960). Simply being a Catholic or a union member or a white southerner (to name only a few) gave scholars clear direction as to their party identification and their political leanings. Campbell et al. (1960) sought to formalize this phenomenon through group reference theory, arguing that citizens look to groups to form their opinions and consequently their political decision making such as voting behavior.

However, with the advent of survey data and the capability (e.g. computers and statistical software) and methodology to carry out and conduct increasingly complex statistical analysis on this newly collected individual level data, the study and importance of groups to American politics declined. At least three things occurred. As I argued earlier, the focus of scholars of public opinion and other subfields became increasingly focused on the individual through the analysis of individual level data. However, at the same time, scholars now had the increasing capability to investigate and analyze beyond the group effect to seek out the causal mechanisms at work in causing these group level effects. Is simply being a white southerner the cause or the mechanism behind Democratic identification or is something else going on? Questions such as these became suddenly accessible to answer from an empirical standpoint. Additionally, American society went through a major transformation beginning in the 1960s such that old group alliances fell away (e.g. white southern, union member to some extent) and new ones

emerged (e.g. evangelical Protestant, Green voters) (see e.g. Levine, Carmines and Huckfeldt 1997).

I argue for the continued importance of examining and understanding group dynamics and their effect on public opinion in particular. As Huckfeldt (2007, 116) argues (for reasons I will elaborate) there is currently an “opportunity to reintroduce the study of groups in political analysis.” Accordingly, I offer a theory of group influence on public opinion composed of three parts, social identity, group influence, and intensity of preference or issue ownership, and use this framework to answer the question of specific conditions under which public opinion is listened to and translated into government responsiveness.

## **2.1 Social Identity or How Citizens ‘Think’ in Terms of Groups**

The foundation for my theory of group influences on public opinion rests on the idea beginning with the Columbia school (Lazarsfeld 1944; Berelson et al. 1954; Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955) that citizens are heavily influenced by interpersonal relationships and these relationships are most often formed in the context of groups. As I argued, in contrast to the view of individuals as atomistic actors (whether intentional or not most examinations of public opinion treat individuals that way) other scholars (Huckfeldt 1979; 1983; 1984; Kenny 1992; Huckfeldt et al. 1995; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; Mcclurg 2003; Huckfeldt, Johnson and Sprague 2004; Walsh 2004; Mutz and Mondak 2006) argue that politics is most often carried out in terms of interpersonal relationships.

In this view, citizens learn and form opinions not from pure psychological factors or merely associating with a group (nominal membership), but from conversations and interactions with other citizens (see especially Walsh 2004). As Huckfeldt (2007, 116)

succinctly puts it, “it is through these networks that communication and persuasion occur.” In the traditional view of this literature this does not have to (and some would argue does not) occur within the context of a group. This renewed focus on interpersonal relationships developed into a robust literature centered on the role of these social networks in political behavior (Huckfeldt 1979; 1983; 1984; Kenny 1992; Huckfeldt et al. 1995; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; McClurg 2003; Huckfeldt, Johnson and Sprague 2004; Walsh 2004; Mutz and Mondak 2006; see Huckfeldt 2007 for a review of this literature) and has extended to other subfields of political science as well.

As Huckfeldt (2007) in a review of the literature notes, however, social network analysis has to a large extent ignored the potential for continued overarching group dynamics in public opinion. He goes so far as to argue that studying public opinion within the context of these social networks “creates an opportunity to reintroduce the study of groups in political analysis (116).” I agree with Huckfeldt (2007) that the ‘reintroduction’ of the study of groups to public opinion is necessary and can best be done through social identity theory.

Social identity theory is premised on the idea that there is a human need to feel connected to something, to achieve some level of positive distinctiveness from others (Greene 1999). This theory argues that this occurs through identification with groups. Citizens identify with groups within society and this fulfills a basic need they have to feel connected to others (once again the importance of viewing citizens as social beings rather than individual actors). A corollary of this is that citizens then instinctively categorize the world into dichotomous groupings, being either a part of the in-group or the out-group. This creates an ‘us versus them’ mentality that leads to two outcomes, favorable

perceptions of the in-group and increasingly biased perceptions of the out-group and increased loyalty towards the in-group (Greene 1999; Brewer 1979; Druckman 1994). In the context of public opinion, the result is that members of the in-group increasingly become influenced by and adopt the opinions and ideas of the group and groups take on a significant role in the life of the individual.

Social identity theory fits in well with the social network literature in public opinion because I argue interpersonal relationships are at root group based. The most basic social network is the family and an individual's network expands outward from there to friends, work based groups, broader groups within society such as religious institutions, political affiliations and more. Citizens form their opinions in the context of these various networks and in turn, from social identity theory, they develop group based patterns of opinion and behavior as well.

Consequently, for the foundation of my theory of group influences on public opinion I argue that there are clear dynamics whereby groups within society influence individual opinion formation. As with the historical literature, citizens still 'think' in terms of groups and are influenced by groups in what opinions they hold.

## **2.2 Group Influences on Politics**

While I argue that groups still play an important role in shaping individual opinion within society, key to my theory of group influences on public opinion and answering my question of what are the conditions under which public opinion is listened to by government and translated into government responsiveness, is whether there are theoretical reasons to suppose that government is responsive to groups within society in particular.

Historically, at least since Truman (1951), a paradigm in political science by which to conceptualize American politics is through group identity and the related concept of pluralism. Truman (1951) argued that all politics is carried out in terms of groups and that these groups have multiple access points in their ability to influence government, the concept of pluralism. However, this was not a new concept. Madison in *Federalist 10* warned against the mischief of faction, arguing that it would fragment the newly united country. Yet, by the time Alexis de Tocqueville studied American democracy, as seen earlier, he observed that “in no country in the world has the principle of association been more successfully used or applied to a greater multitude of objects than in America” (Tocqueville [1835-40] 1969, 191). While many groups are not inherently political, as they are not organized for political purposes, they often take on political roles and become involved with political issues (Tocqueville [1835-40] 1969; Truman 1951).

The continued importance of groups to American politics is evidenced in the literature at both the mass and elite level. At the mass level, political participation, especially voting behavior, has often been explained in terms of group dynamics and group behavior. As noted, in the seminal study *The American Voter*, Campbell et al. (1960) argue that groups shape the politics of their members as a result of the psychological attachment that members feel for the group (group reference theory). More recent scholarship bears out this proposition. In particular, scholarship on union membership indicates that the stronger the attachment of members to a union the more likely they are to support union backed candidates (Rapoport, Stone and Abramowitz 1991; Clark and Masters 2001). At the elite level, Congressional literature examining the

representational linkage between citizens and government find that Congressmen provide substantive representation in relation to the size or proportion of groups within their geographic or reelection constituencies (Griffin and Newman 2005; Hill, Leighley, and Hinton-Andersson 1995). Accordingly, at least since Pitkin (1967), the concept of representation has been tied to groups. For example, descriptive representation is premised on the idea that various groups in society should have members of their group representing them in Congress.

It is clear in the literature that groups play an important dynamic in politics, yet in the public opinion literature there has been, as noted, less of a focus on the role of groups. Accordingly, while I argue that groups play an important role in shaping individual opinion, I also argue that groups play an important role in influencing government because it is ultimately only through the collective opinion that politics is actually carried out. This contention is clearly seen in the work of Downs (1957) and the classic paradox of the vote. Downs (1957) cleverly shows that an individual vote has little to no effect on changing the outcome of an election. The question he left scholars with became why then does someone actually go to the polls to vote? Applying this logic to public opinion, the question becomes why would (and would it even be possible for) government listen to one voice among the many? In a majority rule system, politicians must strategically cater to the constituency that will win them election (Mayhew 1974; Fenno 1978) and in doing so they must reach the most number of people they can. I argue that one of the primary ways politicians can target citizens is through targeting the groups to which citizens belong. This provides a much more manageable dynamic and ensures politicians are reaching the maximum number of people they can. Accordingly, it then becomes group

opinion and not individual opinion that influences politicians and so government decisions and policymaking.

I argue that politicians' catering to groups within society and consequently listening to group opinion is most likely to occur for dominant groups within society. For a group to be 'dominate' I argue that it must be both large and cohesive in opinion. A group must be large enough for politicians to find it worth their time and effort to target and listen to their opinion. From Tocqueville's early analysis of American democracy to today there are myriad groups within American society, for which it would be impossible for politicians to listen to them all. But a large group provides politicians with an easy way to target their message and gain supporters. It is not just the size that is important however, it is also the cohesiveness of the group. A group must be able to in a sense 'hold in line' the opinions of its members for politicians to be willing and able to listen to their opinion. When a group has cohesive opinion it provides a signal to politicians of the direction of opinion they need to take in order to win the support of the group.

Overall, I argue along with other subfields that group dynamics are an important part of American democracy. With regards to public opinion in particular, I argue that it is impossible for politicians (and consequently government) to listen to individual opinion. However, it is possible and theoretically highly likely that they listen to group opinion and consequently groups within society are able to make their opinions known and so influence government decision making.

### **2.3 Intensity of Preference and Issue Ownership**

However, I further argue that this process of group influence is most likely to occur when a specific condition is present, when a group shows intensity of preference in



their opinion and ‘owns’ particular issues such that they signal clear direction in opinion both to group members and to politicians. Theoretically, democratic theorist Robert Dahl (1956) argues that politics is carried out with regards to “the relative intensity of preferences.” In other words, American democracy institutes safeguards to ensure that the majority does not always win over the minority, especially if the minority holds an intense opinion. According to Dahl (1956), it is not simple majority minority rule which dominates politics, but the intensity with which the majority minority hold their opinions. An intense minority or majority is able to gain access to government to get their voices heard. This fits in with the concept of pluralism as argued by Truman (1951) that even small groups within society have the ability to at a minimum access government through multiple channels such as through the ballot box, through lobbying the presidency or through Supreme Court decisions.

Accordingly, when a group holds intense opinion on particular issues, I argue that they consequently provide a signal to both their own group members and to politicians of the direction of their opinion. In the voting behavior literature, scholars have found that there are partisan stereotypes whereby voters are able to associate positions on issues to either the Republican or Democratic Party. This concept is elaborated in the idea of issue ownership where it is argued that parties hold such a monopoly on a particular issue that they consequently ‘own’ the issue and it provides a clear signal to voters of the position of individual candidates within the party (Rahn 1993; Petrocik 1996; Egan 2013).

The concept of issue ownership can extend beyond political parties to groups within society. Groups by design often tend to be issue focused (e.g. environmental groups, animal rights groups). Even large groups within society often show clear

direction in terms of their opinion on issues (e.g. religious groups and moral issues). When these group opinions on issues are combined with intensity of preference on the issue, it creates the situation whereby a group can come to ‘own’ a particular issue. The result as I argued is that it provides a clear signal to individual members of the group of the ‘correct’ opinion they should hold on the issue (and social identity theory works to ensure that group members follow that opinion as argued earlier) and a clear signal to government of the opinion of the group. For both reasons this is likely to translate into government listening to and being responsive to public opinion as mediated through groups. Without this condition of intensity of opinion present, however, it is not as likely that government will listen to group opinion.

In summary, my theoretical argument has three parts. First, I argue that the importance of interpersonal relationships and social identity theory work to ensure that citizens are still group orientated and are consequently influenced in their individual opinion by groups. The desire to feel connected to others is alleviated through group interactions and in turn individuals develop group based patterns of opinion. Second, I argue that in a large democratic society such as the United States it is virtually impossible for government to listen and be responsive to individual opinion. However, government is likely to listen to collective opinion which is often mediated through dominate groups within society (groups that are both large and have cohesive opinion). Accordingly, government is likely to listen to and be responsive to group opinion rather than individual public opinion. Third, I argue that this group influence is conditional on the group showing intensity of preference and opinion and ‘owning’ particular issues. This is necessary because it shows individual members of the group what opinion they should

adopt and it signals direction of opinion to government such that politicians have a clear indication of what position they must take to win support and consequently listen to the opinion of the group.

#### **2.4 Focus Group: Religion**

To test this theory of group influences on public opinion I choose to focus on religious groups. Religious groups fit all three criteria of the model and should provide a good test for this theory. For my theory and analysis I focus on the largest religious groups in American society, evangelical Protestantism, mainline Protestantism, Catholicism and black Protestantism.

##### *Social Identity*

Religious groups offer perhaps the best test of social identity theory and its relationship to group opinion for two reasons. First, social identity theory typically focuses on characteristics of an individual (and so the consequent group it places them in) that are genetic, such as gender, ethnicity and race. Religion, on the other hand, is a group to which familial identification plays a role (I'm a Catholic because my mom was a Catholic) but is also very much the product of individual choice (see especially Fink and Stark 2005 and the idea of the marketplace of religion in the United States). Because it is a group that an individual chooses to be a part of, it is likely that the attachment they feel for the group will run deeper as it took them more effort to go about the task of 'joining' one particular religious group over another (or no religion at all). As a result, even nominal membership in a religious group is likely to have strong social identify effects and thereby produce individual opinion that is shaped by the group. Scholars back up this claim for religion in particular arguing that simply belonging to a religion can

provide a forum in which politics is discussed and where religious leaders especially can (and often do) shape the opinion of individual members of the congregation (Kohut 2000; Smidt et al. 2009; Putnam and Campbell 2010). Of course a corollary of this is that the greater an individual is attached to their religion (religious commitment such as attending church once or more than once a week) the stronger the social identify effect will become.

Second, religion offers perhaps the best test of social identity theory because it arguably best provides the sense of ‘connectedness’ that is at the heart of the theory (Greene 1999). Citizens look to groups to find purpose and meaning and build relationships with one another and the aim of religion is to provide exactly that. While other groups in American society also provide a sense of meaning and purpose, that is often not their express goal as is the case with religion. While even nominal membership provides this sense of connectedness and purpose, again this is greatly magnified for those who are more committed to their religion. For example, gathering together once or more than once a week provides an ideal basis for the development of interpersonal relationships. For these two reasons, religious groups provide a context in which individual opinion is being shaped and molded by the group.

### *Group Influences*

Religious groups provide an excellent test of the second part of my theory that government listens not to individual opinion but to group opinion. The two criteria I offer for this to take place are for a group to be both large and cohesive in opinion.

Despite predictions of secularization (see Gorski and Altinordu 2008 for a review), religion has persisted in America with the result that America remains one of the

most religious nations in the world. Surveys reveal that nine out of ten Americans claim to identify with a religious group or tradition (Dougherty, Johnson and Polson 2007). While there are many small religious groups within the United States, the four largest groups, evangelical Protestants, mainline Protestants, Catholics and Black Protestants combined make up more than three quarters of the population. Evangelical Protestants and Catholics each contain roughly a quarter of the population, mainline Protestants a little less than 20 percent of the population and black Protestants about seven percent of the population (Pew Religious Landscape Survey 2007; Wald and Calhoun-Brown 2011). These percentages make religious groups among the largest groups in American society. Rates of religious participation reveal that Americans are very likely to not just claim identification with a religion but actively engage in their faith. For example, eighty percent of Americans report going to church a few times a year or more, with forty percent of Americans reporting weekly (or more) church attendance (Wald and Calhoun-Brown 2011, 11).

Additionally, religious groups, the four largest ones in particular, have come to play an increasingly important role in American politics. This is summed up by Corwin et al. (2009, 1) in the *Oxford Handbook of Religion and American Politics* where they state that over the past three decades in particular “there has been a growing recognition that religion plays a vital role in American politics” with the consequences that it is now a major subfield of examination in American politics. The rise of the Religious Right in particular led scholars to investigate the phenomenon of religion’s impact on politics (Wilcox and Larson 2006; Wilcox and Robinson 2011) and they have found profound effects for the influence of religion on politics, especially as related to attachment with

the Republican Party (Domke and Cole 2008). Consequently, it is a group that government is likely to pay attention to and listen to the opinion of when making decisions.

Aside from the size of these four religious groups, they have also come to play an important role in politics because they exhibit cohesiveness as a group (though some more so than others). The cohesiveness of the group is well documented, for example, in the voting behavior literature, where scholars find that religious groups identify with particular political parties (see for example Harris 1999; Layman 2001; Classen and Povtak 2010) and it extends to stances on political issues. For example, black Protestants have consistently been shown to be extremely conservative on social and moral issues, as have evangelicals (Steendland et al. 2000; Campbell and Monson 2008). Therefore, this indicates that religious groups are able to send signals on their preferred policy to government.

#### *Intensity of Preference and Issue Ownership*

Finally, religion fits my theory particularly well because not only are religious groups cohesive groups in terms of opinion (as just argued) but they are also groups that hold intense opinions and have come in some ways to ‘own’ some issues in particular.

As I argued, it is most likely the case that government is responsive to group opinion when the group holds an intense preference about an issue. It benefits government to pay attention to intensity of group opinion in particular because it provides strong signals for government to follow and they can be greatly rewarded for doing so (in terms of votes, financial support etc.). Conversely, it would be costly for government to

ignore intensity of preference and at the extreme it would result in loss of faith in and legitimacy of democracy (Dahl 1956).

Religious groups tend to hold very intense opinions. By design, religious groups most often (especially the four big religious groups under analysis) think of the world in terms of black and white, truth and untruth. Accordingly, they tend to hold strongly to their beliefs (though there are exceptions such as ecumenicalism among Mainline Protestants and Catholics to some extent see Fowler et al. 2010; Wald and Calhoun-Brown 2010). In the context of American politics, these beliefs have most often translated into intense opinion over social and moral issues (though the religious agenda has expanded see Wilcox and Robinson 2011; Smith and Olson 2013). The intensity with which religious groups hold to their opinion on social and moral issues has led scholars to argue that there is a ‘culture war’ between religious groups and secular society (Hunter 1991; Cook et al. 1992; DiMaggio et al. 1996; Evans 2003; Fiorina 2010; Gay et al. 1996; Green et al. 1996; Layman 1999, 2001; Lege and Kellstedt 1993; Putnam and Campbell 2010). As a consequence of the intensity with which religious groups hold to their opinion, they have come in some ways to ‘own’ social issues in particular such that individual members of the group know where the group stands and it provides a clear signal to government of direction of opinion, which has most often led to ties with the Republican Party (Green et al. 1996; Kohut et al. 2000; Layman 2001; Layman and Green 2006; Regnerus, Sikkink and Smith 1999; Calfano and Djupe 2009; Layman 2010). Overall, religion provides an excellent group to focus on as a test for my theory of group influences on public opinion.

## 2.5 Theory Testing: Three Cases

In testing my theory of group influences on public opinion and answering the question of the conditions under which public opinion is listened to and translated into government responsiveness, I conduct three separate analyses examining strength of partisanship, state Supreme Court decision making and ballot initiatives. Each analysis focuses on a different avenue by which public opinion affects government. Conducting three separate analyses allows me to test the breadth and depth of my theory. Each analysis examines a sub-research question but I argue that the overarching theory applies and is tested in each case. Again religion (and for two of the three studies the four largest religious groups in America) is the group I focus on as a test for my theory of the influence of group opinion on governmental decision making

### *Political Parties: Strength of Partisanship*

In this analysis I examine my theory of the influence of group opinion on governmental decision making through the lens of political parties and strength of partisanship. In American democracy, partisanship is arguably the prime way in which public opinion is made known to government (and consequently listened to). While the Founding Fathers and James Madison in particular were worried over what the mischief of faction could do to a new democracy and consequently sought to prevent the formation of political parties (see *Federalist 10*), from the very early days of American democracy a two party system of political parties emerged (Aldrich 1995). Contrary to the decline of party thesis (Burnham 1989; Wattenberg 1996), the literature shows that political parties still play a large and vital role in American democracy (Bartels 1992, 2000; Aldrich 1995; Hetherington 2001). As scholars argue, political parties provide an efficient means



by which mass opinion is aggregated and majority rule is able to be carried out (Key 1942; Committee 1950; Aldrich 1995). As part of the classic normative view of political parties, the responsible party thesis (Committee 1950), parties make a commitment to the public to listen to their opinion and carry out their agenda once in office. Overall, political parties help provide structure to public opinion in American democracy.

However, I argue that it is not partisanship in a nominal sense that affects public opinion but strength of partisanship. If it is true that one way in which public opinion is translated to government is through political parties, then the important question becomes how the parties themselves form their agenda and opinions. In other words, is the opinion and agenda of the parties simply the aggregation of those who affiliate with the party or is it formed by something else? Aldrich (1995) answers this by arguing that parties have always been no more than a tool for politicians, that elite individuals have great power in shaping the opinion and agenda of the parties. Schattschneider (1960, 56) on the other hand argues in part that parties are divided into two entities, “an organized mass of insiders who have effective control of the party” and mass “passive members” who have little say.

I argue along the lines of Schattschneider (1960) that the opinion of the party is most often shaped by those who are strongly attached to the party, strong party identifiers in the party identification scale. The original authors of *The American Voter* (1960) argued for this role of strength of partisanship, identifying it as an important avenue for future research. Scholars find that strength of partisanship leads to greater involvement in government, such as through higher rates of voter turnout (Milbrath and Goel 1977; DeNardo 1980; Abramson and Aldrich 1982; Teixeira 1992), greater participation in

primary elections (Ranney 1972; Abramowitz, McGlennon, Rapoport 1981), and increased loyalty to the political system (Campbell et al. 1960; Converse 1969). Often overlooked in the literature, I argue that strong partisans greatly affect the opinion and agenda of the overall party, thus affecting how public opinion is translated to and listened to by government.

The question then becomes, what causes someone to identify as a strong partisan and consequently have these effects on public opinion? This is the sub-question I ask in my analysis and I argue that my theory of group influences on public opinion provides an answer to this question, focusing specifically on religious groups. More particularly, I ask the question, is there a link between strength of religious attachment and strength of partisan attachment.

First, I argue social identity theory extends to both religious identity and partisanship. These are two groups within society that citizens develop identities with and consequently develop the us versus them mentality and group loyalty whereby individual opinion is shaped by the overall opinion of the group. These social identity effects are likely to be even greater when examining strong partisans and those who are strongly attached to religion in particular. They are self-described as more attached to their party and religion than other members of the group.

Second, as just argued, public opinion is arguably most often translated to government through political parties. The opinion of the party that holds the majority in government is likely to have their opinions (to some degree) focused on and responded to in terms of government policy. However, per my overall argument, it is theoretically likely that political parties are controlled not by aggregate member opinion but by

specific groups within the party. If identifying with a group leads to strength of partisanship, as just seen, that will in turn lead to changes in the overall composition and opinion of the party such that the opinion of the party will then take on the opinion of the group. I argue this is likely to happen through religious groups. However, it is conditional on the third element of my theory, that the religious group holds intense preferences and to some extent ‘owns’ particular issues. In the context of political parties, it is clear in the literature that this is indeed the case, as religious groups have more and more identified with the Republican Party with their focus on conservative stances on social and moral issues (Green et al. 1996; Kohut et al. 2000; Layman 2001; Layman and Green 2006). Consequently, from my argument, the group opinion influence should only hold for the Republican Party and not for the Democratic Party.

A note for my theory as tested in this analysis (as opposed to the other two) is that I focus on strength of religious attachment rather than individual religious groups. As such I am not providing a complete test of my theory. However, religious attachment only occurs in the context of attachment with a religious group, so it is still group orientated behavior. What is missing is the distinction between different religious groups and their effect on strength of partisanship, here I am simply lumping them all together. Extensions of the analysis will need to look at individual religious group effects.

#### *State Supreme Court Decision Making*

In my second analysis, I test my theory of group opinion influences on one of the three branches of government, the Supreme Court as measured at the state level. The Supreme Court presents a good test because it is the branch of government that is most often thought of as insulated from public opinion. It was designed by the Founders to be

to some extent independent from public opinion through the fact that it is the only nonelected branch of government (e.g. see *Federalist* 78). However, at the federal Supreme Court level, scholars are beginning to show that justices do listen to and respond to public opinion in their decision making (Caldeira 1991; Mishler and Sheehan 1993; Flemming and Wood 1997; McGuire and Stimson 2004; Giles et al. 2008). At the state level, the potential for justices listening to public opinion is more apparent since some states do hold judicial elections. And, indeed, scholars find that elected justices do respond to public opinion (Brace and Boyea 2008; Devins and Mansker 2010).

This literature examines the effects of public opinion on judicial decision making through the lens of overall opinion, measured in various ways such as by the ‘public mood’ (Mishler and Sheehan 1993; Flemming and Wood 1997) overall ideology or by overall public opinion on a specific issue (Brace and Boyea 2008). As such this literature misses the importance of groups in shaping opinion. Accordingly, I ask the question, is it possible that justices respond not to overall opinion but to specific group opinion? In particular, do state Supreme Court justices listen to religious opinion?

Accordingly, I address this question through the lens of my theory of group influences on public opinion focusing on the presence of religious groups, and so religious opinion, in the states. First, the foundation is once again social identity theory. Religious groups in particular provide the sense of connectedness that individuals seek and consequently individual members of the group develop the us versus them mentality whereby they become influenced by the group in their opinions and judgments.

Second, I argue that overall opinion in the states is mediated by groups within society. Again, it is impossible in a democracy for government to listen to individual

opinion. Opinion must be aggregated in some form or fashion for government to be able to listen to it and respond to it in terms of policymaking. This is theoretically likely to occur through groups within society. For state Supreme Court justices, there may be dominant groups within the state that they feel they must listen and respond to in their decision-making (for reasons I elaborate in the analysis, e.g. judicial election, legitimacy). Religious groups in particular, as I argued, are dominant groups within society in terms of both their size and cohesiveness in opinion, and consequently present a good test to see whether justices respond to their opinion.

Finally, I argue that this is only likely to occur when the group holds an intensity of preference on the issue. For my analysis I use the issue of the death penalty as my test case. I examine whether justices change their decision making on death penalty cases (measured as a death penalty reversal) based on the presence of religious groups in the states. The issue of the death penalty is an issue that religious groups feel strongly about (Young 1992; Britt 1998; Pew Research Forum Survey 2007) and so signal clear direction of opinion to their group members and to the state Supreme Court justices. For this analysis I analyze the four largest religious groups in the states, evangelical Protestants, mainline Protestants, Catholics and black Protestants.

#### *Direct Democracy: Ballot Initiatives*

For my third and final analysis I test my theory of group opinion influence on government through the lens of direct democracy. Direct democracy occurs when citizens are directly involved in making and forming policy. In American democracy this most often takes place in individual states through the use of ballot initiatives, referendums and recall elections. As Smith et al. (2008, 102) note, analysis of the effects

of direct democracy was ignored by political science and legal scholars for much of the twentieth century but has received increased attention in the past few decades such that it is now “in vogue” and a burgeoning literature (e.g. Bell 1978; Smith and Tolbert 2001; Bowler and Donovan 2002; Nicholson 2005; Smith, DeSantis, and Kassel 2006; Smith and Tolbert 2007). These scholars examine the effects of direct democracy on a variety of different things including political efficacy among citizens (Bowler and Donovan 2002) levels of political knowledge (Smith 2001) and voter participation (Smith 2001; Tolbert, Grummel, and Smith 2001) among others.

Focusing on public opinion in particular, from a theoretical standpoint, direct democracy should result in public opinion being clearly translated into government policymaking (since ‘the public’ is the one making the policy). Indeed, scholars find that states with initiatives and referenda are more responsive to public opinion than those without (Arceneaux 2002; Burden 2005). However, at the same time, scholars call into question the ability of direct democracy to actually reflect the underlying structure of mass preferences (Riker 1982; Broder 2000). These scholars warn that a rosy picture of direct democracy where direct democracy is equated with perfect public opinion responsiveness may not happen in actual practice.

I argue that my theory of group influences on public opinion can account for this discrepancy that scholars find. If my theory is correct in the assumption that public opinion is mediated through dominant groups within society, such that public opinion is best thought of in terms of group opinion, then the effect of direct democracy should be that public opinion as a whole is not followed but public opinion of groups within the state.

Accordingly, I test my theory and this claim analyzing one specific aspect of direct democracy, candidate choice, asking the question, do ballot propositions affect candidate choice. More specifically (to my theory), I examine whether religious ballot propositions affect candidate choice in elections by priming religious individuals (religious groups) in who to vote for. Here I am looking at the ‘spillover’ effects direct democracy can have on shaping opinion through candidate choice.

Once again the foundation for my theory is the presence of social identity effects. For ballot propositions in particular, public opinion is reflected through citizens showing up at the polls and voting on the policy at hand. For the spillover effects to occur and so public opinion to be reflected in the choice of candidates, it is also dependent on citizens’ first showing up at the polls to vote. Social identity, in the context of religious groups, therefore works in two ways in this analysis. First, the voting behavior literature clearly shows a positive relationship between religious affiliation and voting and this relationship grows stronger when religious commitment is taken into account (Macaluso and Wanat 1979; Houglund and Christenson 1983; Hill and Cassel 1984; Huges and Peek 1986; Peterson 1990; Rosenstone and Hanson 1993; Verba et al. 1995; Smidt et al. 2007). While scholars provide different explanations for this finding, I argue that social identity applies. The social identity effects of a group are not isolated to opinion formation but can extend to behavior. Whereas I have focused primarily on opinion effects, that being a part of the group creates the us versus them mentality and as a result causes individual members to be shaped by and take on the opinion of the group, the group can also shape patterns of behavior. If the group highly values participation in elections, individual members will conform to this behavior and vote in elections. Indeed with regards to

religious groups in particular scholars are recognizing this possibility and the consequent ‘habit’ of political participation that is formed (see Smith and Walker 2013). Second, as just seen, social identity applies because individual members of the religious groups are shaped in their opinion by the group and therefore in the direction of candidate choice.

As noted, some scholars are skeptical of the link between direct democracy and public opinion, arguing that direct democracy does not truly reflect the mass distribution of public opinion (Riker 1982; Broder 2000). The second part of my theory can help account for this. By conceptualizing public opinion in terms not of overall opinion but group opinion, it may be the case that opinion is accurately reflected through dominant groups. I argue in my specific analysis that ballot propositions target (intentionally or not) specific groups within a state to turn out to vote and as a corollary to vote for a specific candidate. Consequently, the overall result of the ballot proposition will reflect group opinion and the overall vote for candidates will reflect group opinion as well. However, this is again only likely to occur when the specific condition of group intensity of preference is met. The ballot initiative I examine is gay marriage amendments in the 2004 election. This is an issue on which religious groups hold very intense preferences and can be considered to ‘own’ it along with other key moral issues such as abortion (Abramowitz 1995; Domke and Coe 2008; Wilcox and Robinson 2011). For evangelical Protestants the media claimed that this particular issue was used to specifically target increased evangelical turnout for President Bush (e.g. Dao 2004). Accordingly, this issue meets the condition of group intensity of preference and so it is highly likely that group opinion is reflected rather than overall opinion.



## **2.6 Summary**

In summary, I offer three distinct analyses of my theory of group influences on public opinion: political parties, arguably the primary way in which public opinion is translated to government, state Supreme Courts, focusing on the branch of government least likely to be responsive to public opinion, and direct democracy through the use of ballot initiatives, arguing for the effect of public opinion on candidate choice through spillover effects of ballot initiatives. Analyzing these three distinct areas will help me test the breadth and depth of my theory.

Accordingly, in chapters three through five, I present these analyses. Each contains a sub-research question and theory as I showed and as such will be presented as standalone analyses. However, I argue they all fit within the framework of my overall theory and help to answer my overall research question of finding the specific conditions under which public opinion is listened to and translated into government responsiveness. In chapter six I will examine specifically how well my theory performed for each analysis and offer concluding thoughts.

## Chapter 3

### Partisan Strength and Religious Commitment

“Most Americans have this sense of attachment with one party or the other. And for the individual who does, the strength and direction of party identification are facts of central importance in accounting for attitude and behavior.”

- Campbell et al. *The American Voter* (1960)

Party identification, as noted by Green and Palmquist (1990), is the single concept most extensively discussed and analyzed in the field of American political behavior. First identified and elaborated by Campbell et al. (1960) it remains an important and enduring concept. It is found to play a central role in such things as individual vote choice, evaluations of government and judgments about political leaders and political groups.

Recent literature stresses that contrary to the “decline of parties thesis” (see Burnham 1989; Wattenberg 1996) the impact of party identification is substantial (and possibly increasingly so) on the political behavior of citizens (Bartels 1992, 2000; Hetherington 2001). This is stated perhaps the most forcefully by Bartels (2000,35) as he finds that partisan loyalties had as much impact on the voting behavior of citizens at the presidential level in the 1980s as in the 1950s and perhaps more impact on voting behavior in the 1990s. Therefore he concludes that “the ‘decline of parties’ in American politics is badly outdated.” This literature suggests that party identification should and will continue to receive attention by scholars of political behavior.

The great majority of the literature on party identification revolves around a few central debates. The first is the role of partisanship in shaping and influencing political behavior, including, among other things, the voting behavior of citizens. As just evidenced, this literature waxes and wanes over time as the importance of partisanship to citizens' behavior is debated (Bartels 2000). A second debate looks at trends in partisanship at the macro level, arguing for its stability (Green and Palmquist 1990; Green, Palmquist and Schickler 2002) or instability (Mackuen, Erickson and Stimson 1989; Erickson, MacKuen and Stimson 2002) over time. Yet a third debate in this literature focuses on the definition of party identification, whether it is an exogenous variable as conceptualized by Campbell et al. (1960) as a highly stable orientation developed at a young age, or whether it is an endogenous variable subject to short-term influences such as evaluations of presidential performance (Fiorina 1981; Page and Jones 1979; Brody and Rosenberg 1988) and candidate ratings (Markus and Converse 1979; Page and Jones 1979) among other things.

A central theme running through these studies of party identification is analyzing the direction of partisanship (including a focus on independents and independent leaners) without necessarily considering the magnitude or strength of partisanship. The majority of the literature (except see Ranney 1972; Milbrath and Goel 1977; Holbrook and McGlurg 2005) is concerned with understanding how citizens acquire their partisanship (regardless of which party they identify with) and how that affects their political behavior. However, as the opening quote suggests, both the direction and the strength of party identification are of central importance to fully understanding the role that party identification plays in citizens' lives.

Accordingly, I argue that understanding the strength and not just the direction of partisanship is a vital research agenda. There are many normative reasons why strong party identification is appealing, yet the literature provides little theoretical or empirical studies with this as their focus. I seek to more fully answer the question of what influences the strength to which citizens are attached to their political party.

In particular, I argue that there is a psychological aspect of partisan strength that has gone overlooked within the political science literature. I argue that attachments individuals feel towards two identities are related: attachment to their political identity and attachment to their religious identity, that is, individuals identifying as a member of a group is an important part of their conception of self. The assumption behind this is that those individuals who value their identity within a group within one realm of life may also find it desirable to do so in the political realm. As such, I frame my argument within the social identity theory literature that has been developed within other social science fields and seek to expand its importance to the area of political science.

Social identity theory suggests that individuals become highly attached to a number of different groups and identities. Accordingly there are a number of different identities that may affect one's political identity other than religion. However, I argue that religious identity, since it is more fluid (more of a choice involved, which religion, how deeply committed etc.) rather than a fixed entity (gender, race, ethnicity, etc.) is arguably the best identity that may affect one's choice of a political identity. Therefore, in this chapter the key question I address is whether the degree of loyalty (partisan strength) citizens feel towards political parties can be explained by their loyalties to other

identities, in particular their loyalty to their religious organization. In other words, does greater religious commitment lead to greater partisan strength?

In answering this question I control for a number of factors that may affect partisan strength including personal factors such as age, level of educational attainment, political factors such as ideological strength, issue saliency, political knowledge, interest in politics, and levels of social capital which have been shown to affect one's partisan strength. I also break the analysis apart by political party since it may be the case given the literature (Green et al. 1996; Kohut et al. 2000; Layman 2001; Layman and Green 2006) that religious identity may affect Republican identifiers more than Democratic identifiers.

Overall, I find support for my theory that there is a psychological link between partisan strength and religious commitment and it is stronger for Republicans than Democrats. Accordingly, this analysis provides another explanation for differentiating levels of partisan strength and does so using a theory that is relatively absent within the political science literature, though it figures quite prominently in other areas of social science research. However, I still find a lot of variation in partisan strength unaccounted for leaving this as an important research agenda for the future.

### **3.1 Strength of Partisanship: Normative Concerns**

While the normative implications of party identification are probed in the literature, that, among other things, it provides a cue for voters (Lupia 1994) and as a result allows otherwise uninformed citizens to act as if they have some amount of political knowledge (desirable from a democratic theory standpoint), the normative concerns regarding strength of partisanship are no less attractive. In fact there are a

number of political implications as well as broader implications for democracy regarding strength of partisanship.

The literature, both theoretical and empirical, is clear that strength of partisanship is a strong predictor of political participation and voter turnout in particular. Campbell et al. (1960) initially made the claim that strong party identifiers are more likely to be engaged in politics. They argue that strong feelings of party identification help contribute to a psychological involvement in politics (see also Milbrath and Goel 1977). Later scholars trace the decline in voter turnout in the mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> century to declining strength of party identification among citizens (DeNardo 1980; Abramson and Aldrich 1982; Teixeira 1992). These studies demonstrate that, as with the pluralist chorus (Schattschneider 1960), the American electorate sings with a specific accent—in this case, a strong partisan accent. The fact that strength of partisanship leads to increased political participation begs the question of discovering what causes individuals to hold strongly to a particular party. If there are ways to increase the likelihood that individuals strongly identify with a party then the normatively desirable result will be increased citizen involvement in government.

Similarly, strength of partisanship significantly influences the likelihood of voting in a primary election (Ranney 1972; Abramowitz, McGlennon and Rapoport 1981). As a result, strong partisans have an inordinate influence on the selection of candidates to run for political office. Though not as extreme in ideology as political activists (see Aldrich 1983 for a discussion of activists) the fact that they vote disproportionately compared to other groups (weak partisans and independents) likely results in the selection of more extreme candidates. This could be part of the reason behind the failure of spatial models

which predict the emergence of more moderate or centrist candidates (Downs 1957). The 2010 midterm elections and 2012 Republican presidential nomination contest present a recent case study of this phenomenon, in the selection of more extremist candidates in primary elections across the United States.

Strength of partisanship also has broader normative implications. Scholars argue that strong parties make for stronger democracies. Campbell et al. (1960) and Converse (1969) argue that partisan loyalty begets loyalty to the political system. When individuals become attached to a particular party it indicates that they are willing to work within the political system that is established, thereby enhancing the overall stability of the government. It is not partisanship itself that leads to these normatively desirable outcomes, but partisan loyalty, in the words of Campbell et al. (1960) and Converse (1969).

Strength of partisanship has important political (political participation) and governmental (democratic stability) implications. For all of these reasons, it is evident that it is vitally important to identify the mechanisms at work causing individuals to identify as strong partisans, the question that I address in this analysis.

### **3.2 Previous Research**

The traditional measure of party identification is a seven point scale which includes categories for strong partisans, weak partisans, independent leaners and pure independents (Campbell et al. 1960). There is debate over whether this scale is an accurate measure of party identification (see for example Weisberg 1980 and Franklin and Jackson 1983 on the dimensionality and dynamics of the traditional party identification measure). Yet it is clear that each category behaves in a distinct fashion on

a number of political variables including voter turnout and vote choice. This indicates that it is tapping some level of individual decision making with regard to how citizens conceive of their party identification.

While much literature exists examining the independent voter (e.g. Burnham 1970; Abramson 1976; Norpoth and Rusk 1982; Clark and Suzuki 1994), less research is conducted focusing on the strong partisans of the party identification scale. Converse (1969; 1976) offers the first concentrated theoretical effort at answering the question of what causes voters to identify as strong partisans. He argues that strength of partisanship is a predictor of political stability (as seen earlier). The biggest influences on partisan strength, he argues, are social learning and the intergenerational transmission of party ties. Social learning comes with age. As individuals' age, they are more likely to identify strongly with a political party because they identify to a greater degree with the political system and have participated in the political system. The second influence on partisan strength is the transmission of partisanship from parent to child. Similar to the conceptualization of the formation of party identification elaborated by Campbell et al. (1960), the funnel of causality, citizens' strength of partisanship is heavily influenced by that of their parents.

However, his theory, especially his assertion that as individuals age they become more loyal to their political party, is heavily criticized. In particular, scholars argue that is not individual life-cycle changes that effect partisan strength, but generational changes (Abramson 1976; 1979). These scholars argue that the decline of parties evidenced in the 1960s and 1970s (except see Keith et al. 1992) resulted in younger generations having weaker political ties than their parents (Burnham 1970; Niemi et al. 1985). Scholars also



quibble with the argument that strength of partisanship is influenced by the transmission of intergenerational party ties. They argue that intergenerational effects result in the transmission of the direction of partisanship but not the strength or intensity of it (Claggett 1981).

Scholars after Converse (1969; 1976) identify other potential causes of partisan strength, including political participation, in the form of voting because it solidifies party attachment (Cassell 1993), length of party attachment (Tilly 2003), and high socioeconomic status (Campbell et al. 1960). However, it is clear that there has been little theoretical development on the causes of the strength of partisanship since Converse (1969). In part, this could be the case because of the perceived elegance of Converse's model (see Shively 1972; 1990; Niemi 1986).

### **3.3 Religious Attachment and Hypotheses**

However, there may be other potential mechanisms at work causing citizens to self-identify as strong partisans. In particular, I argue that there is a relationship between strength of party identification and strength of religious attachment (or religiosity). The more committed an individual is to their religion the more likely that person is to identify as a strong partisan. In other words, commitment to religion should affect levels of commitment in other areas of citizens' lives. Past research has tended to look at these potential effects through the lens of social capital theory and I test for this possibility. However, I argue that a second mechanism as yet unidentified is at work, social identity theory.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> There is the potential that religious commitment and strength of partisanship are endogenous. However, theoretically, I argue, based on the conceptualization of party identification of Campbell et al. (1960), that religious commitment comes first. As a

Scholars demonstrate that citizens hold a certain amount of social capital, which is defined as “connections among individuals - social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (Putnam 2000: 19). Stores of social capital are related to participatory attitudes. The greater the amount of social capital the more likely citizens are to engage in politics (and other forms of group activity such as organizational meetings). Scholars make clear that one component of social capital is religious affiliation and religious commitment (Verba et al. 1995; Putnam 2000). Citizens learn skills in religious settings that prepare them and enable them to participate in politics. These scholars lament the decline of social capital in America, as they fear it will result in less citizen participation in government as well as in other areas of life including school boards and PTA meetings (see especially Putnam 2000).<sup>2</sup>

I argue that the connection between social capital and participatory attitudes can be extended to include group attachments and partisan attachments in particular. Citizens who hold high stores of social capital are more likely to not only participate in politics to

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result, the relationship is exogenous. An individual’s party identification develops though the process of political socialization, part of which includes characteristics of the individual and their parents including religious commitment. Therefore, religious commitment is likely to be a primary influence on other areas of the individual’s life.

<sup>2</sup> Wielhouwer (2009) argues that there are three distinct approaches identified in the literature within the broader social capital argument of the link between religion and political participation: (1) the type of individuals who are likely to engage in one form of social involvement, such as church attendance, are likely to engage in other forms of social involvement, such as voter turnout (Rosenstone and Hanson 1993; Jones-Correa and Leal 2001); (2) religious settings operate as “centers for electoral mobilization” where members are exposed to messages about social and political issues and are often targets for mobilization efforts (Cassell 1999; Harris 1999; Guth et al. 2002); (3) religious settings are venues for political communication (Wald, Owen, and Hill 1988, 1990; Huckfeldt, Plutzer, and Sprague 1993) as well as “crucibles of democratic skills” where members gain skills that can be easily applied to the political or civic arena (Verba et al. 1995; Smidt 1999; 2003).

a greater extent but also to hold stronger partisan views. This is the case because, I argue, seeing a greater need for participation in the political system (the result of social capital) corresponds with holding a particular view of what actions government should take. As citizens become engaged in politics to a greater extent they see the necessity of actively promoting a particular worldview, which, in the American system, means (most often) promoting one of the two political parties, thereby becoming more likely to identify as strong partisans. Following this logic, religiosity (a main source of social capital as noted) leads to strength of party identification.

A second theoretical reason that religiosity may presumably lead to strength of partisanship is related to social identity theory. Campbell et al. (1960) first argued that party identification can be understood by group reference theory, the idea that as people identify with racial, ethnic or religious groups, so too do they identify with political parties. It posits that party identification can and should be treated as another fundamental category or group to which citizens are psychologically attached (see also Greene 2004; Green, Palmquist and Schickler 2002 for extensions).

Social identity theory expounds this idea, stating that identification with a group is motivated by a human need to feel connected to something, to achieve some level of positive distinctiveness (Greene 1999). Social identity theory posits that humans instinctively categorize the world into dichotomous groupings, being either a part of the in-group or the out-group. This creates an 'us versus them' mentality that leads to favorable perceptions of the in-group and increasingly biased perceptions of the out-group, leading in even the most minimal conditions to the emergence of in-group favoritism (Greene 1999; Brewer 1979). When this favoritism is coupled with the

increased biased view of the out-group, social identity theory seems to be a key factor in intergroup conflict (Tajfel 1981; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher & Wetherell 1987). Accordingly, intergroup conflict can spur a group on towards collective action (Huddy 2001), which in the case of politics most often happens by first identifying with a political party. Social identity theory also posits that a consequence of intergroup conflict is increased loyalty to ones' own in-group, for the purposes of this study, strength of religion and strength of partisanship (Druckman 1994).

European studies have found considerable evidence that social identity theory does have a sizable impact on partisanship (Kelly 1988; 1989; 1990a; 1990b). While most of the literature on social identity theory focuses on nature-based groupings (race, ethnicity, gender etc.) I argue that this theory applies to religious identity as well. Accordingly, I argue that social identity is not limited to one aspect of an individual's life (gender for example) and consequently, individuals who feel a need to be connected in one area of their life (religion) might also reasonably feel a similar need in other areas of their life (politics). I argue that social identity can and does have a spillover effect such that levels of commitment to one identity lead to higher levels of commitment to another identity. Therefore the level of commitment citizens hold to their religious group affects the level of commitment they hold to their political party (and so strength of partisan attachment).

*Hypothesis 1:* Strength of religious commitment (religiosity) is positively related to strength of partisanship.

There is good reason to suspect, however, that this hypothesized effect of religious commitment on partisanship strength might well be mitigated by partisans'

perceptions that their religious commitment has some meaning in relation to their political party's platform, ideas and leaders. Therefore, it is likely that as partisans' judge their political party in terms of their party's religious attachment, it may lead to different outcomes in how religious commitment affects Republicans and Democrats. More specifically, if religiously committed Democrats fail to think of the Democratic Party as itself being religiously committed, then the us versus them mentality central to social identity theory cannot take root and consequently there may not be this strong link between religious commitment and partisan commitment. On the flip side if Republicans view the Republican Party as being particularly well attached to religion, it would encourage an us versus them mentality to take hold. In other words, the perception that people have regarding the political party's level of commitment to the same group (in this case religion being the group) is central to the application of social identity theory.

Previously research shows that the Republican Party is becoming increasingly religious whereas the Democratic Party is becoming increasingly secular (Green et al. 1996; Kohut et al. 2000; Layman 2001; Layman and Green 2006) and that there is an increasing "religion gap" with regard to religious practice, or religiosity, between the two parties (Kohut et al. 2000; Layman 2001; Green and Silk 2003; Fiorina 2005; Olsen and Green 2006; Layman et al. 2006). As Domke and Cole (2008) argue, since Ronald Reagan's 1980 nomination acceptance speech that brought religion to the forefront of political campaigns, religion is now somewhat of a political test for Republican politicians. Overall, this literature argues that religion appears to matter to a greater extent to Republican Party identifiers than to Democratic Party identifiers. This

conclusion is bolstered by findings in the literature that the Religious Right has been very influential in mobilization campaigns in support of Republican Party candidates (Regnerus, Sikkink and Smith 1999; Calfano and Djupe 2009) and that religious activists are heavily concentrated in and represented by the Republican Party (Layman 2010). Accordingly, I hypothesize that the linkage between religious commitment and partisan strength is conditional upon the particular political party.

*Hypothesis 2:* The effects of religious attachment on partisan strength may manifest at different levels for Republicans and Democrats. Specifically, the effects of religious attachment will be greater for Republican partisans than Democratic partisans.

### **3.4 The 2008 Election**

In order to test the theory that religious attachment affects partisan strength, I choose to focus on the recent 2008 presidential election. Bartels (2000) and other scholars are finding the effect of partisanship on elections has increased over the past several years, making the most recent presidential election ripe for analysis. Using a recent presidential election cycle also avoids some of the biases that are present during non-presidential election cycles (systematic differences regarding interest, knowledge, participation, etc.). Additionally, because both parties' presidential candidates were viewed skeptically when it came to religion in 2008 there is less of a chance that respondents will be identifying with the candidates' religious attachments rather than the parties' as a whole. Another reason for choosing the 2008 election is that the existing research looking at the question of what causes strength of partisanship in the United States analyzes data through the 1992 election (Cassel 1993). Therefore focusing on later

elections provides an updated analysis and can see if there are differences or changes in the influences on partisanship strength in recent elections.

The choice of analyzing data surrounding presidential elections is also a strategic choice, as I argue that theoretically speaking the importance of partisanship and partisanship strength in particular is found in its relation to elections. What is of interest to scholars is discovering how partisanship affects politics. One primary aspect of this is elections, as partisanship affects levels of turnout as well as voter choice and so is extremely consequential in determining election outcomes. Furthermore, many of the normative implications of partisanship are only apparent with regards to elections as they deal primarily with voter turnout. Literature also suggests that the concept of party identification as a stable and long lasting construct (Campbell 1960) continues to be the case in politics today (see Green and Palmquist 1990; Green et al. 2002), with the implication that there should be little difference in reported partisanship for election and non election years.<sup>3</sup>

### **3.5 Data**

Accordingly, I use the Henry Institute's 2008 pre-election (April & May 2008) and post-election (November 2008) data sets from their Religion & Civic Engagement

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<sup>3</sup> As Cassel (1993) notes, the revisionist theories of party identification which argue that party identification (focusing primarily on direction but the arguments can be extended to include intensity) is affected by short term influences poses a challenge to identifying the causes of partisanship strength (see Franklin and Jackson 1983; Mackuen, Erickson and Stimson 1989; Erickson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002). However, she notes that these studies show that short term influences have only a marginal substantive impact on party identification and other scholars, notably Green and Palmquist (1990), argue that even these findings are incorrect when measurement error is taken into account. Therefore, enough doubt is cast in the literature to argue that party identification is not subject to short term influences and consequently I have chosen not to account for these influences in my analysis.

Project. This data set, despite having a much smaller n than studies such as the National Annenberg Election Surveys (NAES), were judged to be superior for the purposes of answering this research question since the data sets included questions that better get at a sense of religious attachment.<sup>4</sup>

### *Dependent Variable*

As discussed, the research question that I am interested in is determining what mechanisms are at work influencing the strength of party identification of citizens—in particular, whether religious commitment affects strength of partisanship. Therefore, my dependent variable is partisan strength. Party identification is traditionally measured as a seven-point scale (Campbell et al. 1960) including categories for strong and weak Republicans and Democrats, independents who lean toward either the Republican or Democratic Party, and pure independents. Though there is debate in the literature concerning whether this measure of party identification is an accurate portrayal of citizen partisanship (see Weisberg 1980 and the dimensionality of the measure), the general consensus is that it is an accurate measure and as a consequence it is the one traditionally used by scholars (see Cassel 1993).

For the present analysis, however, I collapse the seven-point scale of party identification into a dummy variable encompassing pure independents, independent leaners, weak partisans (Republican or Democrat), and strong partisans (Republican or Democrat).<sup>5</sup>

Thus, for the present project I test three dependent variables, 1) strong partisans versus

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<sup>4</sup> I do test my theory using the 2000, 2004, 2008 NAES data. The proxy for religious attachment included in those surveys is religious attendance. Using this variable, I do find support for both of my hypotheses.

<sup>5</sup> I exclude respondents who identify with third party candidates (only 2-3 percent of the data). I also exclude responses of don't know or know response (also roughly 2-3 percent of the data).



everyone else (weak partisans and independents), 2) strong Republicans versus weak Republicans, independents leaning Republican and pure independents and 3) strong Democrats versus weak Democrats, independents leaning Democratic and pure independents.<sup>6</sup>

### *Religious Attachment*

The key independent variable of interest is religious attachment or religiosity. To measure this concept, I built a composite score using four different questions from the Henry Institute data. First, respondents were asked whether they believe it best to keep one's religious beliefs private; answers were provided on a five-point scale and those who strongly agreed with the statement were coded as being less religiously attached (=1) than those who strongly disagreed (=5). Second, respondents were asked whether there are absolute standards of right and wrong; again, answers were provided on a five-point scale, only this time those who strongly agreed were coded as being more religiously attached (=5) than those who strongly disagreed (=1). Third, respondents were asked whether they agreed with the statement that all the great religions are equally good and true; on the five-point scale those who strongly agreed were coded as being the least religiously attached (=1) and those that strongly disagreed were coded as being the most religiously attached (=5). Finally, respondents were asked how often they attend religious services; again, this question was coded along a five-point scale wherein those who never attend were coded as the least attached to religion (=1) and those who attend more than once a week were coded as the most

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<sup>6</sup> All variable coding is available upon request.

religiously attached (=5).<sup>7</sup> I combine these four questions to create a composite score of religious attachment.

### *Ideology*

Although social identity theory is a growing body of literature in the social sciences, there are some who remain skeptical about its explanatory value. Contrary to proponents of social identity theory, Abramowitz and Saunders (2006) suggest that it is merely political ideology that leads voters to develop attachments to political parties, not their social identities as defined by their group memberships. In such an account, issues clearly matter more than social identification. I have aimed to counteract this claim by including a control variable for political ideology that is built using three separate questions within the Henry Institute data. The use of three separate questions is necessary since the data set does not actually include a measure of ideology. Therefore questions measuring respondents' preferences regarding the environment, poverty and immigration are used to build a composite score measuring respondents' ideological persuasion. Noticeably absent from this composite score are issues that are religious in nature since I distinctly try not to confound variables and the inclusion of largely religious issues like abortion and gay marriage might do just that.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> In between the “never” and the “more than once a week” options were those who attend a few times a year (coded=2), those who attend once or twice a month (=3) and those who attend each week (=4).

<sup>8</sup> I did include a composite of religious issues in an earlier model (abortion, gay marriage and public displays of the Ten Commandments) but the results were robust so I kept it out of the final model to keep it more parsimonious (Achen 2002). Also, although the non-religious issues that I chose may be related to the teachings of a religious doctrine, I do not believe these to be inherently religious issues, nor do I believe the general public forms their preferences on these issues out of devotion to a particular religious doctrine.

### *Age and Previous Political Participation*

Beginning with Converse (1969; 1976), previous research identifies two key variables that affect partisan strength, age and previous political participation. As citizens age, they develop loyalty to the nation and so loyalty to their political party making them more likely to identify as strong partisans. Similarly, as citizens engage in the political process, especially through voting in elections, they become “bound” to the political system and so to a political party again making them more likely to identify as strong partisans. As Cassel (1993) notes, Converse (1969; 1976) argues that the “binding in” effect of voting in elections comes from voting for a particular party not from the experience of voting per se. Accordingly, I control for these two possibilities by including a variable for the respondent’s age and for voter turnout in the previous election, in this case 2004. For the Republican and Democratic only models I include vote choice in 2004 rather than voter turnout.

### *Additional Independent Variables*

To ensure that the results are not spurious, I include the following independent variables in the model: marital status, education, income level, political knowledge, political interest, and social capital variables—volunteering, length of residence in their community, and discussion of politics.<sup>9</sup> Increases in age, as conceptualized by Converse (1969) result in greater acceptance of the political system and hence greater attachment to the political parties. Therefore, those higher in age should exhibit greater attachments to the political parties and so greater amounts of partisan strength (since this is a cross sectional study).

Finally, Campbell et al. (1960) and later scholars (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980) find that

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<sup>9</sup> For all of the independent variables, including religious attachment, I exclude responses of don’t know or no response. I treat these responses as missing data.

income and education are strongly related to voter turnout. This is at least in part because these citizens have greater amounts of social capital and have a greater stake in the political system. This line of reasoning can be extended to strength of partisanship, as in this case those high in income and education should be more likely to identify strongly with a particular party.<sup>10</sup>

### *Statistical Method*

Because I collapse the normal 7-point party identification scale into a dummy variable, where respondents are coded as either being strong partisans or not (weak partisans and independents), the analysis is presented using logistic regression. I estimate three models corresponding to the three dependent variables: partisan strength with both parties included, one examining just Republicans and one examining just Democrats. Since MLE coefficients are not directly interpretable, I estimate predicted probabilities in order to understand the substantive effects of the independent variables, in particular religious attachment, on partisan strength.

### **3.6 Results**

As reported in Table 3.1, the results provide support for both of the hypotheses. First, when examining all respondents regardless of party affiliation, I find that religious attachment is positively related to strength of partisan attachment. As respondents become more attached to their religion they increase their likelihood of identifying as a strong partisan. I argue that this provides support for the social identity theory argument,

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<sup>10</sup> One important variable that is missing from the model is the partisanship of the respondent's father. Unfortunately, this question was not asked in either the NAES, the NES or the Henry Institute surveys. It was only asked in the NES surveys through 1980. Cassell (1993) finds, in examining strength of partisanship, that her model fit drops dramatically after 1980 from previous presidential elections when she can no longer include father's partisanship (because the NES ceased asking that question).

that as citizens become more attached to their religion they develop an us vs. them mentality that has a spillover effect positively affecting their level of partisan attachment.

As reported in Table 3.2, the actual substantive effect of religious attachment on partisan strength is quite large. Moving from the minimum level of religious attachment (no attachment) to the maximum level of religious attachment (high attachment) holding everything else at the mean leads to a 17 percent change in a respondent's level of partisan strength.

This result for religious attachment is robust given the control variables. As expected, previous voter experience is positively related to partisan strength and it produces the largest substantive effect, a 22 percent change moving from not voting in 2004 to voting in 2004. Interestingly, I find that variables of political interest are positively related to strength of partisanship while social capital variables are insignificant. Both talking about politics and expressing an interest in politics increases the likelihood that a respondent will identify as a strong partisan. Strikingly given the literature, in the overall model, I find that both age and ideology are insignificant predictors of partisan strength.

However, the results of the overall model come into greater focus when I examine Republican and Democratic respondents separately (columns 2 and 3 in Table 3.1 and Table 3.2). The second hypothesis is confirmed that the effect of strength of religious attachment on strength of partisanship is conditional upon the perceptions respondents' hold of the two political parties. As strength of religious attachment increases, the likelihood of identifying as a strong Republican increases but it does not affect the strength of partisanship for Democratic respondents. The substantive effect is quite large.

Moving from no religious attachment to the highest level of religious attachment leads to a 41 percent change in the likelihood of identifying as a strong Republican. This is the largest substantive effect produced by any of the models. This result provides support for the literature which argues that the Republican Party is the party that is ‘friendlier’ to religion. It appears that the perception of the Republican Party being more attuned to religious interests is clear in the minds of respondents. This result may indicate that the Republican Party may be able to play a role in using social identity to their favor by continuing to frame their party as the party that is friendly to religion and so continue to secure the religious base.

Again these results for religious attachment are robust given the control variables. Interestingly, ideology is a significant predictor of partisan strength when the two parties are analyzed separately. Ideology influences both Republicans and Democrats, with an increase in ideology increasing the likelihood of identifying as a strong partisan. Another interesting finding is that political interest variables matter for Democrats but not for Republicans. Talking about politics and following politics has no affect on strength of Republican Party identification but increases the likelihood of identifying as a strong Democrat. As in the overall model, social capital variables are not related to partisan strength.

Overall, these findings suggest that religious attachment, via group attachment theory and social identity theory, can have an effect on partisan strength but not always since perception (of the party) appears to be a mitigating circumstance. Thus, future extensions of this analysis would need to find a way to measure this perception. For the current analysis, the proxies available within the Henry Institute data are not entirely

satisfactory and so they are not included. Also, this explanation might help explain why Democratic respondents relied on more cerebral aspects of politics—political knowledge and follow politics variables held significant for Democrats but not Republicans—since their psyches would not be tapped by the emotional effects of group attachment theory and social identity theory if they do not link their own religious attachments to those of their party in general.

### **3.7 Conclusion**

The authors of *The American Voter* make clear that both direction and strength of party attachment are important predictors of the political attitudes and behavior of citizens. Strength of partisanship in particular is associated with normatively desirable outcomes, including increased voter participation and increased attachment to the political system (leading to political stability). However, despite the critical implications of partisan strength, a great deal less research is conducted identifying the causes of the strength of citizens' attachment to political parties than is spent understanding the development and direction of party identification.

Scholars investigating this question find two principle causes of partisan strength, the intergenerational transmission of partisan ties and the length of attachment to the political system, including how long citizens have lived under the system (their age) as well as their levels of political participation and engagement with the political system. In the current analysis, I identify another principle influence on partisanship strength, religious attachment. I find that religious attachment positively affects the probability that Republicans will identify as a strong partisan, but not Democrats. I argue that this provides support for the idea that the Republican Party is perceived as being 'friendlier'

towards religion. They have been successful at using social identity to their advantage to portray themselves as the party for religion. However, further research is necessary to fully understand why religious strength affects Republican Party identification and not Democratic Party identification. I suspect that variables measuring respondents' perceptions of the parties' religious attachments would be instrumental in better understanding this divide. Perceptions are an important part in the way group attachment theory and social identity theory take root (or fail to take root) and due to the social capital variables' lack of significance, furthering the research that specifically pertains to these explanations is likely to yield the most interesting and significant results in the future.

Further, over time analysis is important to see if there are changes in the influences of partisan strength, especially with regards to religious attachment, as events in the past several decades, notably the rise of the Religious Right, may have made religion more salient to the political lives of citizens. Relatedly, there may be different effects of religious attachment to strength of partisanship across the religious groups in America. In particular, the Religious Right targets conservative and evangelical Christians, indicating that religion may be the most salient to the lives (political and non-political) of these citizens and so they may identify more strongly with a political party (primarily the Republican Party see Layman 2001).

The desirability of an electorate that is strongly tied to political parties is clear, resulting in increased citizen involvement in government and increased political stability. Therefore, identifying the causes of partisan strength is and will continue to be an



important research agenda for scholars of political behavior and of party identification in particular.

**Table 3.1. Logistic Regression of the Effects of Religious Attachment on Partisan Strength**

Variable	All Respondents Model Coefficient (SE)	Republican Model Coefficient (SE)	Democrat Model Coefficient (SE)
Religious Attachment	0.046 (0.012)***	0.135 (0.018)***	-0.008 (0.017)
Age	0.006 (0.003)	0.011 (0.005)*	0.007 (0.004)
Vote 2004*	0.958 (0.154)***	1.079 (0.260)***	1.018 (0.193)***
Ideology	0.001 (0.015)	-0.140 (0.022)***	0.127 (0.021)***
Political Knowledge	-0.024 (0.047)	0.070 (0.069)	-0.188 (0.064)**
Talk Politics	0.125 (0.043)**	0.112 (0.069)	0.116 (0.057)*
Follow Politics	0.309 (0.070)***	0.105 (0.103)	0.315 (0.093)***
Volunteer	0.275 (0.094)	0.104 (0.136)	-0.055 (0.126)
Length of Residence	0.003 (0.003)	0.003 (0.003)	0.003 (0.003)
Marital Status	-0.179 (0.091)*	-0.031 (0.131)	-0.277 (0.127)*
Education	-0.017 (0.034)	0.016 (0.048)	-0.046 (0.046)
Income	0.027 (0.027)	0.056 (0.038)	-0.010 (0.038)
Constant	-3.458 (0.353)***	-4.217 (0.545)***	-3.587 (0.453)***
Log Likelihood	-1554.269	-768.409	-868.596
LR $\chi^2$	180.78***	231.11***	134.39***
Pseudo $R^2$	0.055	0.131	0.072
Number of Observations	2393	1332	1386
Reduction in Error	11.81%	20.00%	9.79%

Note: Dependent variable for All Respondents Model is Party Identification 1= strong partisan 0= weak, leaner, independent; For Republican only Respondents 1=strong Republican 0=weak Republican, independent leaner, independent; For Democratic only Model 1=strong Democrat 0=weak Democrat, independent leaner, independent; SE= Standard Error

\*Vote2004 is voter turnout for All Respondents model and vote choice for Republican and Democrat Models

\* p-value < .05 \*\* p-value<.01 \*\*\* p-value<.001

**Table 3.2. Predicted Probabilities for the Logistic Regression of the Effects of Religious Attachment on Partisan Strength**

Variable	All Respondents Model %Δ	Republican Model %Δ	Democrat Model %Δ
Religious Attachment	.176	.417	---
Age	---	.189	---
Vote 2004	.217	.208	.218
Ideology	---	-.356	.338
Political Knowledge	---	---	-.138
Talk Politics	.120	---	.111
Follow Politics	.214	---	.205
Volunteer	---	---	---
Length of Residence	---	---	---
Marital Status	-.044	--	-.066
Education	---	---	---
Income	---	---	---

Note: Predicted Probabilities are calculated by setting the variables at their mean and moving the variable of interest from its minimum value to its maximum value

## Chapter 4

### **Judicial Decision Making in state Supreme Courts: Do Justices Respond to Religious Opinion?**

The concept of judicial independence is firmly entrenched in American Democracy. The judiciary at the federal level is a nonelected body, being the branch of government most removed from the influence of the public. The judicial branch was designed to be an impartial arbiter of the law, yet as recent work indicates, justices, especially at the level of the US Supreme Court, often vote their ideological preferences (Segal and Spath 1993, 2002). At the same time, other work is examining a key question regarding the nature of judicial decision making, whether justices respond to public opinion when making their decisions. Though this seems counterintuitive given the nature and design of the judicial branch, scholars are beginning to show at the federal level that justices do respond to and reflect changes in public opinion (Caldeira 1991; Mishler and Sheehan 1993; Flemming and Wood 1997; McGuire and Stimson 2004; Giles et al. 2008).

At the state level, the potential influence of public opinion on judicial decision making is more apparent. The practice of electing judges to state Supreme Courts indicates that the same direct representational link between Congress and the public exists for justices as well. As a result, elected judges may take public opinion into account when making decisions, as scholars have indeed found to be the case in the area of the death penalty (Brace and Boyea 2008).

However, a related question that has not been examined by the literature is whether justices are influenced by specific groups within the public and by religious groups in particular. Congressional literature examining the representational linkage finds that Congressmen provide substantive representation in relation to the size or proportion of groups within their geographic or reelection constituencies (Griffin and Newman 2005; Hill, Leighley, and Hinton-Andersson 1995). In particular, Smith et al. (2010) finds that Congressmen provide substantive representation for religious constituents within their state depending upon the proportion of the religious groups within the state. While work on state Supreme Court judicial decision making finds that the religion of justices affects their decisions (Songer and Tabrizi 2000; see also Tate 1981 for the US Supreme Court) it has not examined whether religious groups within states affects judicial decisions, in states where justices are either elected or nonelected. Therefore, this analysis seeks to answer the question, does the presence of religious groups in states influence the decision making of justices on state Supreme Courts?

#### **4.1 Public Opinion and Judicial Decision Making**

The majority of literature that examines the linkage between public opinion and judicial decision making focuses on the US Supreme Court. However, recent developments in measuring public opinion in the states (see Erickson, Wright, McIver 1993; Berry et al. 2000) resulted in scholarly work examining this linkage at the state Supreme Court level as well. Collectively, this literature identifies three potential casual pathways for a direct link between public opinion and judicial decision making in state Supreme Courts: strategic behavior to ensure implementation of decisions and to protect

judicial legitimacy, attitudinal change reflecting changing public mood and the direct election of justices.

The first mechanism at work causing justices to respond to public opinion is the strategic behavior of justices to both ensure proper implementation of its decisions and to protect the perceived legitimacy of the court (McGuire and Stimson 2004; Giles et al. 2008). Hamilton wrote in *Federalist 78* that the judicial branch was the “least dangerous” branch of government, because it has “neither force nor will, but merely judgment” and it has “no influence over either the sword or the purse.” As a result of its inability to enforce its decisions, the court looks to public opinion to ensure proper implementation. They do this indirectly, through the implementation of its decisions by the other branches of government and directly, through maintaining legitimacy in the eyes of the public.

At least since Murphy (1964: 171), scholars have theorized that the court must act strategically, anticipating that its decisions will not “stir a political reaction” thereby potentially threatening the implementation of its policy decision. Building on the concept of strategic anticipation, McGurie and Stimson (2004, 1022) note that “the Court requires the cooperation of legislative and executive officials, many of whom are themselves careful auditors of mass opinion.” Therefore, the court takes into consideration whether a given policy will be adequately implemented by the other branches of government, framing the policy in such a way to ensure the cooperation of the other branches.

However, as McGurie and Stimson (2004) note, the primary consideration of the other branches is whether their constituency would agree with the Supreme Court decision and so whether their chances of reelection would be harmed. As a result, public

opinion is indirectly linked to judicial decision making, through the linkage of the public to the officials who the court depends upon to enforce its decisions. At the same time, there is also a direct link between public opinion and judicial decision making in the desire and necessity of the court to be perceived as legitimate in the eyes of the public in order for its decisions to be faithfully implemented and adhered to. Legitimacy theory argues that in order for the judiciary to remain effective, it must be viewed as legitimate in the eyes of the public, with judges acting as impartial arbiters of the law (Friedman 1998; Gibson 2008). If the court is no longer perceived as legitimate, citizens will be unwilling to listen to and follow the decisions that it renders. The necessity and desire of justices for institutional legitimacy is especially evident in a cross national perspective (see Haynie 2003; Widner 2001). Therefore, justices act strategically to protect their legitimacy, especially knowing that their policies have the greatest effect when popular support is on their side (Rosenberg 1991).

The second casual pathway linking public opinion with judicial decision making is an attitudinal change explanation (Giles et al. 2008) whereby justices reflect overall changes in public mood. In part, this is tied in with the above description of judicial legitimacy. A component of legitimacy theory is the idea that judges cannot stray too far from the opinion and norms of the public, either as reflected in the composition of the court (see feminist legal theory Wilson 1990 for example) or in the opinions and judgments that are rendered (Friedman 1998). If the court does stray too far from societal norms, their legitimacy, the notion that they are impartial and so can adequately ensure that justice is served, can potentially be harmed. Therefore, justices are likely to follow overall changes in public opinion and public mood.

However, a more recent explication of this mechanism comes from Giles et al. (2008) in the notion that the preferences of justices, like other actors, may be shaped and molded by societal forces occurring in their environment (also see Mishler and Sheehan 1996; Flemming and Wood 1997). The idea that judicial attitudes are not permanent but can shift with changes in society is supported in the literature, with the finding that some Supreme Court justices have exhibited a substantial shift in attitude during their tenure on the court (Baum 1988; Ulmer 1973). More recently, scholars are arguing that shifts in judicial attitudes are far more common than is supposed under the attitudinal model (Epstein et al. 1998; Epstein et al. 2007). These shifts in judicial attitudes provide an indication that forces outside of the justices may be causing them to change opinion. As Giles et al. (2008: 295) write, “the attitudinal change explanation suggests that the observed direct linkage between public opinion and the behavior of justices arises from the force of mutually experienced events and ideas in shaping and reshaping the preferences of both the public and the justices.” Justices are humans like everyone else and are subject to the same societal forces and changes as the public.

The third mechanism by which public opinion is reflected in judicial decision making is specific to state Supreme Courts, the method of replacing justices by election. Justices who face election (and reelection) may “have their eyes on the ballot box” responding to changes in public opinion to ensure that they remain in office (Brace and Boyea 2008: 361; Huber and Gordon 2004). This view is widely held among observers of state courts, but has received relatively little scholarly attention, largely a result of the lack of adequate measures of public opinion in the states (Brace and Boyea 2008).



More recently, judicial elections are increasingly of concern to scholars and observers of state Supreme Courts alike as the visibility of judicial elections has increased over the last two decades. As well, the US Supreme Court ruled in 2005 (*Republican Party of Minnesota v White*) that judges have free-speech rights allowing them to declare their policy positions during campaigns, something they were prohibited from engaging in before in many states (the commit clause). This set off concern that judicial legitimacy would be harmed by the ability of justices to declare how they would decide in cases as well as the ability to engage in negative advertising. Gibson (2008), in a survey in Kentucky using hypothetical situations where justices do engage in such practices as negative advertising, finds initial evidence that the legitimacy of the court is harmed by justices engaging in these campaign tactics.

As a result of these recent developments as well as the development of accurate and reliable measures of public opinion in the states, more recent research has begun to examine the link between judicial elections and judicial decision making. Empirically, scholars are finding evidence that elected justices are swayed by public opinion, specifically in the issues of sentencing and the death penalty (Huber and Gordon 2004; Brace and Boyea 2008). Further, the literature is providing theoretical clarifications on the linkage, searching for conditions under which elected justices pay attention to and reflect public opinion. In particular, Brace and Boyea (2008) argue that the linkage can be informed by the literature on elite responsiveness to public opinion. These theories argue that when the issues are complex, or when they are reflective of party cleavages (opinion among the public is divided) public opinion may be influenced by elites, policy or other events. In these situations, elites are unlikely to follow public opinion, as it gives

them no clear direction or advantage among the population. However, when issues are simple, there is convergent opinion cutting across party lines, elites are more likely to be responsive to public opinion (Hurley and Hill 2003).

#### **4.2 Group Influence Model of Judicial Decision Making**

Through these three mechanisms, it is clear in the literature that justices listen to and reflect public opinion, though it is often unclear as to which mechanism is at work (see especially Giles et al. 2008 for a discussion). However, what has been unexplored in the literature is whether justices may listen to specific group opinion rather than public opinion as a whole. I seek to elaborate on this linkage, looking at it both in general terms as well as focusing on the particular case of religious opinion.

At least since Truman (1951), a paradigm in political science by which to conceptualize American politics is through group identity and the related concept of pluralism. Truman (1951) argued that all politics is carried out in terms of groups and that these groups have multiple access points in their ability to influence government, the concept of pluralism. However, this was not a new concept. Madison in *Federalist 10* warned against the mischief of faction, arguing that it would fragment the newly united country. Yet, by the time Alexis de Tocqueville studied American democracy, he observed that “in no country in the world has the principle of association been more successfully used or applied to a greater multitude of objects than in America” (191). While many groups are not inherently political, as they are not organized for political purposes, they often take on political roles and become involved with political issues (Truman 1951).

The continued importance of groups to American politics is evidenced in the literature at both the mass and elite level. At the mass level, political participation, especially voting behavior, has often been explained in terms of group dynamics and group behavior. Going back to the seminal study *The American Voter*, Campbell et al. (1960) argue that groups shape the politics of their members as a result of the psychological attachment that members feel for the group. More recent scholarship bears out this proposition. In particular, scholarship on union membership indicates that the stronger the attachment of members to a union the more likely they are to support union backed candidates (Rapoport, Stone and Abramowitz 1991; Clark and Masters 2001). More recently, Lewis-Beck et al. (2008) employ a model of group influence to explain mass voting behavior in the 2000 and 2004 election in their revisitation of the Campbell et al. (1960) work.

The importance of groups to American politics is also evidenced at the elite level. As noted earlier, Congressional literature examining the representational linkage between citizens and government find that Congressmen provide substantive representation in relation to the size or proportion of groups within their geographic or reelection constituencies (Griffin and Newman 2005; Hill, Leighley, and Hinton-Andersson 1995). Accordingly, at least since Pitkin (1967), the concept of representation has been tied to groups. For example, descriptive representation is premised on the idea that various groups in society should have members of their group representing them in Congress.

While it is evident that groups influence politics and public opinion at the mass level and the elite level, specifically concerning the behavior of Congressmen, I argue that a model of group influence can also be applied to the decision making behavior of

state Supreme Court justices. I further argue that this occurs in three ways, through the election mechanism, through the presence of dominant groups in a state and through the intensity of political beliefs held by groups in a state.

The first mechanism by which groups may influence the decision making of state Supreme Court justices is through the mechanism of judicial elections. As seen earlier, justices who are elected to office respond to public opinion on specific issues, especially the death penalty (Brace and Boyea 2008). Borrowing from Congressional literature, justices who are elected to office will cater to the group or groups that are needed for reelection (see especially Fenno 1978). As Brace and Boyea (2008) state, “elites fear losing office” including justices to the Supreme Court. More recent Congressional literature notes the linkage between substantive representation and the composition of a Congressman’s district or state. Congressmen actively seek to provide representation to groups within their constituency to ensure reelection (Griffin and Newman 2005; Hill, Leighley, and Hinton-Andersson 1995). I hypothesize that similar behavior occurs among justices who are elected to office.

The second mechanism by which groups may influence judicial decision making is through the presence of dominant groups in a state who in turn influence the societal norms of the state. As noted earlier, one pathway by which justices respond to public opinion is through “attitudinal change” (Giles et al. 2008) or changes in societal norms and opinions. Mishler and Sheehan (1996; 175) argue that the attitudes of justices may change as a response to either “fundamental, long-term shifts in the public mood or to the societal forces that underlie them.” I argue that a potential clarification is needed on this theory. It may be that justices are indeed influenced by societal changes but that overall

societal changes are mediated by dominant groups within society. In other words, a dominant group within society may be the actual influence behind a shift in public mood.

Accordingly, the third mechanism by which judicial decision making may be influenced by group opinion is the idea that justices may listen to groups in a state that hold intense opinions. Democratic theorist Robert Dahl (1956) argues that politics is carried out with regards to “the relative intensity of preferences.” In other words, American democracy institutes safeguards to ensure that the majority does not always win over the minority, especially if the minority holds an intense opinion. According to Dahl (1956), it is not simple majority minority rule which dominates politics, but the intensity with which the majority minority hold their opinions. An intense minority or majority is able to gain access to government to get their voices heard.

I argue that this theory of democracy is applicable to judicial decision making. Justices may listen to groups in society that exhibit intensity in their opinions. A motivating factor to do so is that the potential consequence of failing to consider intensity of preference is loss of legitimacy in the eyes of the group. A prime example of judicial decision making taking into consideration intensity of preference is the issue of desegregation and the Supreme Court case *Brown v Board of Education* (1954).

### **4.3 Judicial Response to Religious Opinion?**

It is evident that, in general terms, judicial decision making on state Supreme Courts may be influenced not simply by overall public opinion but by specific group opinion through the three mechanisms outlined above. However, I further argue that justices are likely to be responsive to religious opinion in particular when making their decisions, as religious groups fit each of the three criteria just described. Religious

groups, therefore, present a vital test of a group influence model on judicial decision making for three main reasons.

First, religious groups, notably the four Christian religions, evangelical Protestants, mainline Protestants, black Protestants and Catholics, are predominant groups in American society.<sup>11</sup> Added together, over three quarters of Americans identify with one of these four Christian religions. Aside from the size of these four religious groups, they also exhibit cohesiveness as a group (though some more so than others). The cohesiveness of the groups is well documented, for example, in the voting behavior literature, where scholars find that religious groups identify with particular political parties (see for example Harris 1995; Layman 2001; Classen and Povtak 2010) and it extends to stances on political issues. For example, black Protestants have consistently been shown to be extremely conservative on social and moral issues, as have evangelicals (Steendland et al. 2000; Campbell and Monson 2008). Therefore, this indicates that religious groups are able to send signals on their preferred policy to government. The literature reveals that Congressmen provide substantive representation for religious groups residing in their states, in part to ensure reelection (Smith et al. 2010).

Accordingly, religious groups, as a result of their size and cohesiveness, are a potential

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<sup>11</sup> Evangelical Protestants are distinguished by their strict interpretation of scripture, their emphasis on the need for each individual to accept Jesus Christ as personal savior, and their active efforts to spread their faith through evangelism to others. Mainline Protestants are more theologically—and increasingly, politically—liberal than their evangelical counterparts. Black Protestants, as noted, identify politically with the Democratic Party yet are extremely conservative on social and moral issues, opposing, for example, abortion and gay marriage. Catholics, though historically identifying with the Democratic Party, are increasingly moving towards the Republican Party, in part because of their conservative views on social and moral issues.

constituency that justices facing reelection may provide representation for in the direction of their decisions.

Secondly, also as a result of the size and cohesiveness of religious groups, it may be that they influence societal norms in individual states. Therefore, if justices follow societal norms in their decision making (Caldeira 1991; Mishler and Sheehan 1993; Flemming and Wood 1997; McGuire and Stimson 2004; Giles et al. 2008) then they may be following the norms of religious groups in their state and so make decisions following religious opinion.

Thirdly, for particular issues, notably social and moral issues, the literature indicates that religious groups hold very intense opinions. The Religious Right was formed in large part to give voice to the conservative stance of religious groups, notably evangelical Protestants, on social and moral issues (see Wilcox and Larson 2006; Wilcox and Robinson 2011). Therefore, religious groups are a group that justices may listen too due to the intensity of their preferences on particular issues.<sup>12</sup>

#### **4.4 Hypotheses**

I propose to examine an issue on which religious opinion should be likely to influence judicial decision making on state Supreme Courts, the death penalty. I chose to look at death penalty decisions for two primary reasons. First, this is an issue on which religious groups have coherent and cohesive opinion and hold their opinion very strongly.

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<sup>12</sup> Another component of the strength of religious preferences is seen in the great variation across states in the intensity with which individuals adhere to their religion. In states where religious intensity is higher, where more individuals attend church for example, justices may feel more pressure to make decisions in line with religious opinion. While this is a distinct possibility, I hold off testing it due to lack of available data on the religious intensity of individuals within the states.

Second, previous research has found that public opinion affects judicial decision making on death penalty cases (see Brace and Boyea 2008). Therefore, this allows me to test my theory of group influence, that specific groups, in this case religious groups, are potentially part of the mechanism at work behind the influence of public opinion on judicial decision making. This allows for greater clarity and nuance than previous literature in understanding the role of public opinion in judicial decision making.

I focus primarily on the effects of the four Christian religions on judicial decision making on death penalty cases. The issue of the death penalty presents an instance of divided opinion among the religious groups. Evangelical Protestants are the most in favor of the death penalty as an acceptable form of punishment (Britt 1998). Both evangelical clergy as well as members overwhelmingly support the use of the death penalty. However, mainline Protestants and Catholics are less supportive of the death penalty than evangelicals. A number of mainline denominations, including the Episcopal Church and the Methodist Church, have made explicit statements against the death penalty as a form of punishment. As well, the Catholic Church does not support the use of the death penalty. Accordingly, a 2007 survey of mainline Protestant clergy found that that 66% of mainline clergy oppose the death penalty. However, for both mainline Protestants and Catholics, the rank and file members overwhelmingly support the death penalty, though showing less support than evangelicals (see the Pew Research Forum Survey 2007). Black Protestants are the least supportive of the death penalty as a form of punishment, partly because black men are disproportionately given the death penalty sentence (Young 1992). Because black Protestants are the most liberal on the issue of the



death penalty among the religious groups, they comprise the excluded category for the analysis.

*Hypothesis 1:* I expect a negative relationship to exist between evangelical Protestants, mainline Protestants and Catholics and the decision to reverse a death penalty sentence by state Supreme Court judges.

As noted, one potential pathway for groups, and religious groups in particular, to influence judicial decision making is through judicial elections. Justices that are elected to office may take greater heed of religious opinion as they “have their eyes on the ballot box.”

*Hypothesis 2:* I expect a negative relationship to exist between evangelical Protestants, mainline Protestants and Catholics and the decision to reverse a death penalty sentence for state Supreme Court judges who are elected to office.

#### **4.5 Research Design**

##### *Data, Case Selection and Dependent Variable*

The primary data I use for this analysis is the State Supreme Court Data Archive (SSCDA) compiled by Brace and Hall for the years 1995, 1996, 1997 and 1998.<sup>13</sup> The case I will use to analyze whether state Supreme Court justices listen to religious opinion in the states is the death penalty. Scholarly work already indicates that elected justices deciding on death penalty decisions are responsive to state public opinion in general (Brace and Boyea 2008). However, religious groups, as noted above, offer a clear direction of opinion on this issue to which state Supreme Court justices can listen.

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<sup>13</sup> The SSCDA project was supported by the National Science Foundation grants SBR 9617190 SBR 9616891, SES-051849, SES-0516409 and SES-0516600. For additional information on the SSCDA data, visit the website <http://www.ruf.rice.edu/~pbrace/statecourt/>.

Therefore, the effect of public opinion on judicial decision making on death penalty cases may be mediated by the presence of religious groups in the state. The death penalty also presents a good case to test the hypothesis that the presence of religious groups affects judicial decision making because the four Christian religions diverge in their opinion on this issue. Therefore, this case should present a relatively easy test of the theory that state Supreme Court justices respond to religious opinion.

For judicial decisions on death penalty cases, a liberal decision will be coded as one if the death penalty is overturned and a conservative decision will be coded as zero if the death penalty is upheld. More specifically, this measure is constructed in the following way. A liberal decision occurs when the appellant in the death penalty case is an individual and the justices vote to overturn the decision (thereby overturning the death penalty sentence) and a conservative decision occurs when the appellant is an individual and the justices uphold the decision (thereby upholding the death penalty sentence).

#### *State Religion Data and Method of Judicial Appointment*

In order to test for the effect of state religious populations on judicial decision making, I employ a measure of religious affiliation compiled by Green (2007) for the year 2004. His religious data is generated from numerous statewide surveys and is generally regarded as one of the most precise measures of religious affiliation in the fifty states that exists (Smith et al. 2010). Although it is measured seven years after the last year in the SSCDA data, religious affiliation, like party identification, is a stable and long lasting construct, with few individuals shifting from one religious tradition to another.

I collapse the traditional seven category measure of religion (see Steensland et al. 2000) into five categories, evangelical Protestant, mainline Protestant, black Protestant,

Catholic, and other faith. I do this for two reasons. First, my theory of group, and in this case religious, influence on judicial decision making necessitates that there is a relatively large population for justices to listen to. If a group comprises only a small percentage of the population, say less than two percent as, for example, is typical for the Jewish or Muslim population, justices have little incentive to listen to them and so be responsive in their decision making to their opinion on particular issues. As the groups get larger, however, they gain in influence according to my theory. As a result, I keep the religious categories separate that do have relatively large populations across the United States (evangelical Protestant, mainline Protestant, Catholic and black Protestant as discussed earlier). The second reason that I chose to collapse religious categories is to have a more parsimonious model (Achen 2005). Therefore, I chose to collapse the categories of Jewish, Muslim, other Christian (which includes Mormons) and no religion into a single category of other faith. While this creates a less meaningful category, the advantages associated with collapsing the category outweigh this particular disadvantage.

The second main independent variable of interest is a measure of judicial method of appointment. Following Brace and Boyea (2008) I focus on methods of judicial retention rather than judicial selection. Justices who have been in office and face a retention election may, as argued earlier, “have their eyes on the ballot box” more so than justices who are facing election for the first time. They have developed a tract record on which voters and groups may base their decisions, either favorably or unfavorably. Therefore, using the judge level dataset added to the Brace and Hall data, I look at two types of retention mechanisms, whether justices were appointed (by either governor or state legislature), or whether justices were elected (either partisan, nonpartisan or

retention election). This is coded as 1 for either election or retention and 0 for justices that were appointed to office.

### *Control Variables*

To ensure that the results are not spurious, I include a number of control variables that may affect judicial decision making. These variables are measures of citizen ideology, ideology of the court, individual judge characteristics and case and state specific factors.

The ideology of the citizens of the states as well as the ideology of the justices of the states must be controlled for, as judicial decision making could simply be reflecting the overall ideology of the state or of the ideology of the judges (in the framework of the attitudinal model). Citizen and justice ideology are obviously connected to judicial decision making, justice ideology through the attitudinal model and citizen ideology as argued in this paper. To capture state Supreme Court judge ideology, I use the PAJID scores developed by Brace, Langer and Hall (2000). These scores integrate the partisan affiliation of the judges with the citizen ideology at the time of their selection (using the Berry et al. (2000) scores for citizen ideology) and prove to be valid and reliable measures. As a measure of citizen ideology I use the Berry et al. (2000) scores. These measures are coded from 0-100 for judge ideology and 0-100 for citizen ideology with 0 being extremely conservative and 100 being extremely liberal.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> These two measures, though there is some overlap in how the measures are constructed, are correlated at less than .6. Though this is slightly high, it is not correlated enough to present problems with multicollinearity. I can substitute the Berry et al. (2000) citizen ideology scores with the Erickson, Wright McIver (1993) scores. However, this is not as adequate a solution, as not all states are included in the EWI scores. When running an analysis with the EWI scores similar results are obtained. There is the further consideration that using the judge ideology scores and the citizen ideology scores in the

The second set of variables I control for are judge specific characteristics that affect their decision making. Recent work reveals that judge gender and age can affect the decisions that they reach across a wide variety of issues (see for example Songer and Crews-Meyer 2000 for a discussion of the effect of gender on state Supreme Court decisions). Gender is coded as a dummy variable with one being a male and zero being a female and age is left as a ratio level variable.

The final set of variables I control for are case and state specific variables. Following Brace and Boyea (2008) I include a control for whether there is a public defender in the death penalty case. The quality of council is a major issue in many death penalty cases, with the public defender being less resourced to defend their client. Therefore, it is likely that in cases with a public defender judges may find greater room for reversible error in the case.<sup>15</sup> This variable is coded as one if a public defender is present and zero otherwise. I also control for state specific characteristics through my modeling strategy detailed below.<sup>16</sup>

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same model is problematic since the judge ideology measure incorporates the Berry et al. (2000) citizen ideology scores as part of its construction. However, the two variables are correlated at .38, therefore not necessarily presenting a problem of multicollinearity.

<sup>15</sup> I also include a variable for whether the state enacted a commit clause or not, a proxy for campaign restrictions. The hypothesis here is that where restrictions on the speech of justices exist, they should be more insulated from the effects of public opinion (see Brace and Boyea 2008). In all of my models it does not reach statistical significance and does not change the overall model. For the sake of parsimony I exclude it from the models that are presented in this analysis.

<sup>16</sup> An important control variable that the literature is missing is closeness or proximity to the election. To my knowledge, none of the literature on judicial elections control for how close a justice is to reelection. There is strong Congressional literature to suggest that Congressmen change their behavior when an election nears in hopes of shoring up constituent support. I also do not control for this for lack of data. However, I will collect this to include it in future analysis on this topic and research question.

## *Methodology*

Because the outcome variable is dichotomous (judge vote) and the data includes both pooled cross-sectional and time-series elements, I use binomial generalized estimating equation (GEE) analysis with logit as the link function to estimate my models (see also Brace and Boyea 2008). More specifically, due to the cross-sectional nature of the data, there is possible interdependence between justices when they make their decisions that is unaccounted for in the model as specified. Accordingly, in order to account for this possible interdependence I use GEE clustered on the court case. GEE allows for more precise estimation of data involving this type of conditional interdependence (Zorn 2006; Brace and Boyea 2008). Additionally, in order to control for any possible temporal effects (the data covers four years) I control for the decision year in the GEE analysis.

In analyzing the effects of religion on state Supreme Court decision making, I conduct three models. First, I look at the effects of the percentage of religious traditions in the states controlling for the variables described above, excluding the measure of judicial retention, with black Protestant as the excluded category. Second, I include the measure of judicial retention to the first model. Third, I include interaction effects between judicial retention and state ideology and the religious groups that are statistically significant in the first two models (evangelical and mainline Protestant) in order to test the hypothesis that the influence of religious groups on judicial decisions making on death penalty cases is found in the mechanism of judicial election.

## 4.6 Results

Table 4.1 presents descriptive statistics of the number of death penalty cases that fall within each of the three judicial retention mechanisms for the years 1995-1998 as well as showing the percentage of the religious groups and their range residing in the 50 states. The overwhelming majority of death penalty cases were decided in states that have either judicial elections or retention elections as their method of retention for Supreme Court justices. As evidenced, only a small minority, five percent, of death penalty cases were decided in states where justices are appointed to office. The other striking observation is that the rest of death penalty cases are split fairly evenly between justices that are retained through elections and through retention elections.<sup>17</sup>

Looking at the percentage of religious groups in the states, evangelical Protestants comprise the largest group (26 percent) followed by Catholics (22 percent) and then mainline Protestants (21.5 percent). In all three cases, these religious traditions make up individually over one fifth of the population in the states, confirming the assertion that they represent large segments of the population in the 50 states and as a result may be groups that state Supreme Court justices are likely to pay attention to when deciding

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<sup>17</sup> Previous research uses a dichotomy of appointed and non-appointed when examining the effect of judicial elections on judicial decision making. However, it may be that there is a difference in decision making between justices who are retained through elections against a challenger (though a challenger may not always be present) and being retained through retention elections where they do not face a challenger. The literature finds that there are substantial differences between judicial elections and retention elections, especially that retention elections are not as insulated from the public and outside forces as often assumed (Hall 2001) though it has not been looked at with regard to public opinion and religion. In future research I plan to develop a theoretical expectation for why there would be a difference between elected and retained justices and the influence of public opinion and religious opinion in particular on their decision making and test it empirically.

cases. However, while it is clear that religious traditions represent large groups within the population of the states, it remains to be seen whether their presence actually affects judicial decision making, specifically in cases involving the death penalty.

Table 4.2 presents the results of the GEE logistic regression analysis of the effect of religion on judicial decision making in death penalty cases. The first column looks at the effect of religion on death penalty decisions without controlling for the mechanism of judicial retention. Here the results show a negative relationship as hypothesized between the religious traditions and the decision to reverse a death penalty sentence. In other words, the presence of evangelical and mainline Protestants in the states, compared to black Protestants, does significantly affect the decision of justices to vote in a conservative fashion on death penalty decisions (a vote to uphold the death penalty sentence). Looking at the control variables reveals that more liberal justices are more likely to vote to reverse death penalty decisions (confirming the literature), the presence of a public defender also influences justices to vote to reverse death penalty decisions, indicating that justices may indeed find more room for reversible error when a public defender is present, and male justices are more likely to vote to reverse death penalty decisions than females. An interesting non-finding here is that citizen ideology fails to reach statistical significance.

Including a control for judicial retention (column 2) is not statistically significant and it does not change the sign or significance of the variables in the model. However, the true test of whether the mechanism of judicial elections influences votes to reverse death penalty decisions is found in the interaction of judicial retention with citizen ideology and the religious traditions.



Accordingly, column 3 presents the results of the effects of religious tradition and judicial retention, with interactions between judicial retention and citizen ideology and religious tradition, on the vote of justices to reverse or uphold the death penalty. First, examining the control variables reveals that liberal justices, male justices and public defenders significantly influence the likelihood of a vote to reverse the death penalty (consistent with before). Second, a surprising finding is that the interaction between citizen ideology and judicial retention is significant and negative. This indicates that in states where justices are elected to office the ideology of the state (from conservative to liberal) results in a greater likelihood to uphold the death penalty (a conservative decision). Third, the interaction between judicial retention and the percentage of evangelical Protestants in the states is also significant and negative, indicating that in states where justices are elected, as the percentage of evangelicals increases, justices are more likely to vote to uphold the death penalty, the conservative decision.

While the statistical analysis thus far reveals some support for my hypotheses that the percentage of religious groups residing in states affect judicial decision making on death penalty cases and that this relationship exists in particular in states where justices are elected to office, it is important to understand the magnitude of the effects.

Accordingly, table 4.3 presents the marginal effects of the significant variables from table 2 on judicial decision making in death penalty cases.

Focusing on the 3<sup>rd</sup> column, the results reveal that the marginal effects of all of the significant variables are small. This indicates that the variables do not produce large substantive effects on judicial decision making. Looking at the control variables, the presence of a public defender in the case increases the probability of a judge reversal by 2

percent and male, as compared to female, justices increase the probability of a reversal by 3.7 percent, holding everything else constant, from the baseline probability of 23 percent probability of a judge vote of reversal on the death penalty. A one unit increase in judge ideology, from conservative to liberal, results in a .002 increase in the probability of a judge reversal, or in other words, a ten percent increase in judge ideology (the scale of 0-100) results in a 2 percent increase in the probability of a judge reversal.

Examining the marginal effects of the judicial retention, citizen ideology and the religion variables reveals that the interaction of judicial retention with citizen ideology has the largest substantive impact on votes to reverse the death penalty. For states where justices are elected to office, a one unit increase in the citizen ideology of the state (from conservative to liberal) decreases the probability of a death penalty reversal by .018 percent. Put another way, a ten percent increase in citizen ideology (the scale of 0-100) results in a decrease in the probability of a death penalty reversal by 18 percent. The interaction of the percentage of evangelical Protestants residing in the state with judicial retention produces a much smaller substantive effect. Here, in states where justices are elected to office, a one unit increase in the percentage of evangelicals in the state decreases the probability of a judge reversal by .003 percent. Accordingly, a ten percent increase in the percentage of the evangelical population results in a decrease in the probability of a judge vote to reverse the death penalty by 3 percent.

Overall, the results confirm existing literature as well as provide support for my hypotheses regarding the effect of religion on judicial decision making in death penalty cases. The results confirm the literature that case characteristics matter, in particular the presence of a public defender results in more death penalty reversals (Brace and Boyea

2008) as well as the literature that specific judge characteristics matter, that justices are influenced by their own ideology when voting (Segal and Spaeth 2002) and their gender (Songer and Crews-Meyer 2000). The results also confirm the literature which argues that elected justices respond to public opinion when deciding cases, but they show the opposite effect, that as states become more liberal justices are more likely to vote to uphold the death penalty rather than reverse it. This finding could be due to the rough measure of citizen ideology that is used compared to previous scholars who are able to capture actual citizen support for the death penalty (Brace and Boyea 2008). Finally, my hypotheses are supported that justices and elected justices in particular do respond to religious opinion, primarily to evangelical Protestants. As the percentage of evangelical Protestants increases in states where justices are elected to office, the justices are more likely to vote in a conservative direction on the death penalty.

#### **4.7 Discussion, Conclusion and Limitations**

Overall, these results reveal that justices do listen to religious opinion when deciding death penalty cases, thus providing some support for my hypotheses. Without controlling for judicial elections, the results show that justices are more likely to vote in a conservative direction on the death penalty as the percentage of evangelical and mainline Protestants increases (compared to black Protestants). When controlling for the mechanism of judicial elections, the results reveal that only the presence of evangelical Protestants serves to influence the decision of justices who are elected to office to vote in a conservative direction on the death penalty. Given these results it is reasonable to argue that state Supreme Court justices may indeed respond to specific group opinion in the states as well as to overall public opinion, especially justices that are elected to office.

Religious groups in particular present justices with coherent and cohesive opinions on issues, providing them with an easy segment of the public to satisfy with the direction of their rulings.

While the issue of the death penalty presents one example of justices responding to religious opinion, the assumption is that justices are likely to respond to religious opinion on other issues on which religious opinion is united, social and moral issues in particular such as abortion and gay rights. These privacy issues should present an even easier test of the theory that religious groups are likely to influence state judicial decision making.<sup>18</sup>

However, there may be broader implications of these findings. The rise of the Religious Right has made religion increasingly important to politics (see Wilcox and Larson 2006; Wilcox and Robinson 2011). As a result, it may be that judges feel the increased political presence and power of the religious groups in their states and respond to their opinion not just in the domain of social and moral issues but in other areas of the law as well. One extension of this project would be to look at judicial decision making over time, to see whether justices increasingly responded to religious opinion with the rise of the Religious Right and the perceived importance of religious groups to politics.

Overall, the results of this paper that justices respond to religious opinion and findings of previous research that justices respond to public opinion have two opposing normative implications. On the one hand, these findings indicate the justices do listen to the will of the people, an inherently democratic value. They indicate that the judicial branch is not as removed and insulated from the people as it often appears to be. On the

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<sup>18</sup> In future research, I plan on testing my theory on a number of privacy issues.

other hand, these findings may reflect the fact that judges are not impartial when it comes to the law and that they are influenced not just by internal forces, their own political ideology, but also by external forces. By extension, it may be that it is simply impossible for judges to fulfill their role as impartial arbiters of the law. Accordingly, it is essential to identify other potential external forces that may influence judicial decision making as well as probe the normative implications of the increasing number of empirical findings which argue that judicial decision making is not a cut and dry process but is influenced by many different factors.

**Table 4.1. Descriptive Statistics, Method of Judicial Appointment and Death Penalty Cases and Mean Percentage of Religious Groups in the States**

Judicial Retention Mechanism	Number of Death Penalty Cases	Percent of Death Penalty Cases
Appointed (Governor/state Legislature)	411	5.44
Judicial Retention Election	4292	51.53
Judicial Election (Partisan/Non-Partisan)	3584	43.03
Total	8329	100.00
Religious Groups	Mean Percentage in States	Range of Percentage in States
Evangelical Protestant	26.49	6.70 – 47.00
Mainline Protestant	21.46	6.20 – 33.8.0
Catholic	22.05	4.70 – 51.00
Black Protestant	8.71	0.10 – 30.60
Other Faith	21.29	9.80 – 74.90
Total	100.00	

**Table 4.2. GEE Logistic Regression of the Effects of Religion on State Supreme Courts Death Penalty Decisions**

Variable	Religion Only Coefficient (SE)	Religion and Judicial Retention Coefficient (SE)	Religion and Judicial Retention Interactions Coefficient (SE)
Citizen Ideology	-0.004 (0.004)	-0.003 (0.004)	0.100 (0.020)*
Evangelical Protestant	-0.018 (0.007)*	-0.020 (0.007)*	0.028 (0.019)
Mainline Protestant	-0.059 (0.010)*	-0.061 (0.011)*	-0.120 (0.033)*
Catholic	0.003 (0.007)	0.001 (0.007)	0.010 (0.007)
Other Faith	-0.154 (0.025)*	-0.149 (0.025)*	-0.137 (0.024)*
Judge Ideology	0.010 (0.001)*	0.010 (0.001)*	0.009 (0.001)*
Gender	0.234 (0.080)*	0.230 (0.080)*	0.211 (0.081)*
Judge Age	0.004 (0.004)	0.004 (0.003)	0.012 (0.315)
Public Defender	0.181 (0.057)*	0.188 (0.058)*	0.126 (0.060)*
Judicial Retention		0.213 (0.133)	5.479 (0.960)*
Judicial Retention*Citizen Ideology			-0.102 (0.019)*
Judicial Retention*Evangelical			-0.020 (0.007)*
Judicial Retention*Mainline			0.017 (0.010)
Constant	0.275 (0.474)	0.167 (0.478)	-4.423 (0.980)
Number of Observations	7988	7988	7988
Number of Groups	209	209	209
Wald $\chi^2$	225.20*	227.31*	261.14*

Note: Dependent variable is individual judge decision on death penalty cases, 1= liberal decision 0= conservative decision. The excluded religious category is Black Protestant. Judicial Retention is coded as 1=elective method of retention 0=appointed. SE= Standard Error

\*p<.01

**Table 4.3. Marginal Effects for the GEE Logistic Regression of the Effects of Religion on State Supreme Courts Death Penalty Decisions**

Variable	Religion Only Marginal Effects	Religion and Judicial Retention Marginal Effects	Religion and Judicial Retention Interactions Marginal Effects
Citizen Ideology	--	--	0.018
Evangelical Protestant	-0.003	-0.004	--
Mainline Protestant	-0.0005	-0.011	-0.022
Catholic	--	--	--
Other Faith	-0.028	-0.027	-0.025
Judge Ideology	0.002	0.002	0.002
Gender	0.040	0.040	0.037
Judge Age	--	--	--
Public Defender	0.033	0.034	0.023
Judicial Retention		--	0.288
Judicial Retention*Citizen Ideology			-0.018
Judicial Retention*Evangelical			-0.004
Judicial Retention*Mainline			--
Baseline Probability	0.236	0.236	0.236

Note: Marginal effects for the significant variables from the GEE logistic regression reported in table 4.2.



## **Chapter 5**

### **Partisan Effects of Ballot Propositions**

Early voting behavior literature found that voters have long time “standing decisions” that influence their vote choice long before an election cycle begins (Key 1949; Berelson, Lazerfeld and McPhee 1954; Campbell et al. 1960). The literature argued that campaigns had only minimal effects on vote choice. For example, Finkel (1993) found that for presidential elections in the 1980s, “the effect of the general election campaign in shifting the aggregate vote distribution was small, and the maximum overall net impact of the campaign was about 3%” (14). Scholars argued that campaign effects are too minimal to change electoral outcomes and as a result are not significant. However, recent scholarly work has begun to demonstrate that campaigns do matter, having a greater impact on vote choice than early literature found (Holbrook 1996; Shaw 1999).

A new area of research looking at campaign effects examines the effect of ballot propositions on vote choice. The dramatic increase of ballot measures has caused scholars to begin examining their impact on political behavior. For example, in the 2000 election alone, there were 204 statewide measures on the ballot, including 71 that were popular initiatives and referenda (Initiatives and Referendum Institute 2000). Scholars have found a number of significant effects of the use of direct democracy, including promotion of political efficacy among citizens (Bowler and Donovan 2002) increased levels of political knowledge (Smith 2001) and increased voter participation (Smith

2001; Tolbert, Grummel, and Smith 2001). Cumulatively, the literature suggests that direct democracy has meaningful impacts on political behavior and the political life of citizens.

Recently, scholars have sought to examine whether there is a link between voting on a ballot proposition and voting for a candidate. This question came of interest after scholars began finding that voting on ballot measures is highly informed by an individual's partisan identification (Smith and Tolbert 2001; Smith and Tolbert 2007). Literature investigating this link between initiatives and candidates is only just beginning to emerge, with findings suggesting a positive relationship does exist between voting on a ballot proposition and voting for a particular candidate (Nicholson 2005; Smith, DeSantis, and Kassel 2006; Donovan, Tolbert and Smith 2008). For example, Nicholson (2005) finds that the issue of Nuclear Freeze in the 1982 elections appearing on ballots across the states had an effect on national candidates. I seek to expand on this literature, looking at gay marriage ballot propositions in 2004 and their possible spillover effects to vote choice for presidential and lower level elective offices.

### **5.1 Agenda Setting Theory of Ballot Propositions**

Nicholson (2005) offers the most well developed theory on how and why ballot propositions have spillover effects on candidate evaluations. He argues that ballot propositions have agenda setting effects, whereby they shape the political agenda, making certain issues more salient in an election than otherwise would be the case. In doing so, the ballot propositions then serve to "prime voters to evaluate candidates" based on that issue (15). In this theory, ballot propositions serve as another means by which

issues are brought before the public, apart from the effects of the campaigns themselves or the media.

In order for the link between ballot propositions and candidate evaluations to work, however, voters must ascribe positions on the issues to the candidates themselves. As Nicholson (2005) notes, there are partisan stereotypes, whereby voters associate positions on issues to either the Republican or the Democratic Party. Rahn (1993) finds these stereotypes to be so powerful that even if a candidate holds a position different from that of the party, citizens still associate the candidate with the position of the party because of the use of stereotypes. Accordingly, scholars have found that there are certain issues that parties “own”, an example being the Republicans and moral issues such as abortion. Petrocik (1996) deems this “issue ownership”, finding that if the important issues in a given election are owned by a particular party, that party will be advantaged, even if the candidates themselves do not discuss the issues or take opposing sides on the issues.

From this theory, ballot propositions can have a powerful effect on candidate evaluations, independent of what candidates themselves do or say. As a result, Nicholson (2005) finds evidence that candidates and parties actively seek to use ballot propositions to their advantage. They do so by using ballot propositions as a wedge issue, which is an issue that can “divide supporters of the opposing candidate, either persuading them to switch or to just sit out the election” (Baer 1995, 58). Nicholson found that the Republican Party successfully used anti-affirmative action initiatives in California as a wedge issue (Nicholson 2005 Chapter 6; see also Bowler, Nicholson and Segura 2006).

A key point of this theory linking ballot propositions to candidate evaluations is that it not only affects high profile elections, such as the Presidency, but it can affect all elections in a given electoral cycle. Ballot propositions affect views of the party, as demonstrated, thereby priming evaluations of all the individual candidates associated with that party. Therefore, they have the potential to be far reaching, affecting multiple campaigns and candidates. For example, Nicholson found in looking at nuclear freeze ballot initiatives, that voters in states with nuclear freeze initiatives were “likely to consider the freeze issue when making voting decisions for a given office or across offices, which voters in states without them were not likely to do so” (2005: 87). However, this aspect of the spillover effect of ballot propositions to candidate evaluations across multiple elective offices has received limited scholarly attention (though see Nicholson 2005; Ensley and Bucy 2010).

Donovan, Tolbert and Smith (2008) offer an important clarification to the agenda setting theory of ballot initiatives. They argue that the effect of ballot propositions is primarily a priming effect, whereby citizens are persuaded to think of a particular issue as highly salient and important in their evaluation of candidates. Theories of cognitive behavior treat citizen recall of memory as a largely passive process. They argue that when answering questions or making decisions about vote choice for example, citizens use “considerations that are immediately salient” to them (Zaller 1992, 49; Bartels 2003). In other words, citizens often make decisions based on what is at the top of their head, what has recently been stored in their memory and on their mind. Accordingly, ballot propositions serve to bring particular issues to the attention of citizens. Therefore, when evaluating candidates citizens are primed by ballot propositions to consider particular

issues important to their vote choice, and so vote for the candidate who is more in line with their opinion on that issue.

A final consideration towards a theory of the agenda setting nature of ballot propositions is the possibility that these propositions can prime subsets of individuals to vote for specific candidates. Ballot propositions have the possibility of priming individuals who feel intensely about the issue, rather than priming the entire electorate in the state. This can especially be the case when candidates and campaigns target specific groups with the propositions. Campbell and Monson (2008) test for this possibility with the gay marriage ballot propositions in 2004. They argue that no previous research had actually tested for the Republican campaign strategists plan in 2004, which was to “shore up Bush’s support among evangelical Protestants” (402). Part of this strategy was to use the ballot propositions to their advantage among that particular group of voters.

Clearly, in theory, ballot propositions can have substantial and far reaching effects on election outcomes. They can serve as a mechanism by which individuals evaluate and vote for specific candidates. In the next section I examine the extant literature on the gay marriage propositions in the 2004 election which I use as a test for the theory of the agenda setting nature of ballot propositions.

## **5.2 Gay Marriage and the 2004 Election**

In the last few decades, the issue of gay rights has been a common feature in state and local politics, and has also increasingly become a prominent feature in national politics (Haider-Markel and Meier 1996; Haider-Markel , Querze and Lindaman 2007). One aspect of gay rights in particular that has received a great deal of attention in the last few years is gay marriage. In 1996 the United States Congress passed the Defense of

Marriage Act, which defined marriage for the purposes of federal law, as a union between one man and one woman. However, beginning in 2003, a number of states took action to redefine marriage for purposes of individual state law. Massachusetts became the first state to allow gay marriage when the state Supreme Court ruled that a proposed civil union bill was unconstitutional as it denied equal access to marriage for same sex couples. Additionally, in 2003 San Francisco, California and Portland, Oregon began allowing same sex marriage, though their efforts were blocked by their respective courts. This led President Bush in his State of the Union address on January 20, 2004 to mention the prospect of a federal constitutional amendment banning gay marriage. As a consequence of these events, numerous states added constitutional amendments to their November ballots, such that in the 2004 election thirteen states had gay marriage amendments, eleven of which were on the November ballot.<sup>19</sup>

Donovan, Smith and Tolbert (2008) note that the 2004 gay marriage amendments received significant media coverage. Tracking the media coverage on gay marriage through Google Trends, they find that, “nationally, media attention to gay marriage peaked in late February”, declined through the summer, and “peaked again in late October” (Donovan, Smith and Tolbert 2008, 1220). Additionally, there was a clear distinction between the political parties and between the candidates on this issue. The Republican Party favored a constitutional ban on gay marriage, with Bush having suggested a constitutional amendment to define marriage between a man and a woman (2004 Republican Platform). The Democratic Party in contrast, was against a

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<sup>19</sup> The amendment states were Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Michigan, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma and Oregon. Louisiana and Missouri were the two states that did not place the ballot measure on the November ballot, but instead included it on the ballot in the primary election.

constitutional amendment and in favor of letting the states decide the issue (2004 Democratic Platform). Senator John Kerry also favored letting the states decide but did argue for the legality of civil unions.

This was an issue that received a great deal of attention and an issue that the parties were divergent on, and so had the potential to set the electoral agenda and prime voters when going to the polls. This possibility was noticed by political pundits both before and after the election. Commentators from the *New York Times* to the *Wall Street Journal* speculated that Bush won reelection based on the presence of these issues on the ballot, especially in the swing state of Ohio (see, for example, Dao 2004).

As a result of the prominence and speculation of the importance of this issue to the 2004 election outcome, the issue of gay marriage provides a prime test for the agenda setting theory of ballot propositions. Scholars have investigated the effect of the gay marriage amendments on the 2004 election at both the individual and the aggregate level, with mixed results. At the individual level, some scholars conclude that “moral value” issues, including gay marriage, were not a central factor in the reelection of President Bush (Hillygus and Shields 2005; Lewis 2005). Instead, they found that the war on terror and the war in Iraq were more salient issues bringing individuals to the polls (Hillygus and Shields 2005). However, other scholars have reached opposite conclusions. They find that the presence of gay marriage amendments primed voters to support Bush (Donovan, Tolbert and Smith 2008) and it also affected some voters more than others to support Bush, most notably evangelical Protestants (Campbell and Monson 2008). Studies looking at this issue at the aggregate level are also mixed. Using aggregate state wide and national data, Abramowitz (2004) and Burden (2004) found that states with the

gay marriage amendments did not have increased levels of support for Bush or increased turnout compared to states without the amendments. Conversely, using county data for Ohio and Michigan, Smith, DeSantis and Kassel (2006) found that those who supported the gay marriage amendments were more likely to vote for Bush, confirming individual level findings.

I improve on this literature in a number of ways. A problem of the above mentioned aggregate level studies is their failure to look at the effect of the amendments on religious populations. As Campbell and Monson (2008) put it, they have not tested what the Republican campaign strategists said they were planning on doing, which was “shoring up support among evangelical Protestants” (402). Therefore, I will reexamine aggregate level data including measures of religion in the states. I will focus my analysis on the three Christian religions, evangelical Protestantism, mainline Protestantism and Catholicism, as they are the subgroup of voters most likely to be mobilized by the presence of gay marriage amendments (Campbell and Monson 2008).

Aside from the work of Ensley and Bucy (2010) scholars have not examined whether there were spillover effects of the gay marriage amendments to lower level elective offices. The research thus far on the gay marriage amendments has focused on presidential vote choice. However, as Nicholson (2005) found, the agenda setting power of ballot propositions goes beyond a single elective office or campaign. Accordingly, Ensley and Bucy (2010) are the first to examine whether the presence of gay marriage amendments affect elective offices other than the Presidency. They focus on gubernatorial elections, finding that Republican governors benefited from the presence of the amendment when their position on the issue diverged from that of their challenger. I



contribute to this literature by examining the spillover effects of the gay marriage amendments on state legislative elections, examining whether Republican legislators benefited from the presence of these amendments.

### **5.3 Hypotheses**

A consistent finding in the literature is that the presence of ballot initiatives can lead to higher levels of turnout (M. Smith 2001; Tolbert, Grummel, and Smith 2001). Individuals who would otherwise fail to vote are mobilized by the presence of these issues on the ballot. Scholars have found that states that allow for the use of ballot initiatives, especially the western states, report consistently higher turnout than states that do not allow their use (see Tolbert, Grummel, and Smith 2001).

*Hypothesis 1:* States with gay marriage amendments will report higher levels of turnout than states without the amendments.

As noted above, scholars have just begun investigating the partisan effects of ballot propositions. Ballot propositions can serve as a means of setting the electoral agenda, by priming voters to focus on specific issues in the campaign. When positions on these issues are tied to parties and candidates, voters can use that information in determining their vote choice. In the present analysis, the Republican Party and President Bush in particular were clearly tied to support for the gay marriage amendments.

*Hypothesis 2:* States with gay marriage amendments will have increased levels of turnout for the Republican presidential candidate, President Bush, as compared to states without the amendments.

One of the conditions under which ballot propositions can have partisan effects is by mobilizing subsets of voters. Ballot propositions have the potential of mobilizing

individuals who feel intensely about the issue rather than mobilizing the entire statewide electorate. Scholars have found that there are issue publics within the American electorate. For a variety of reasons citizens may feel strongly about specific issues (Krosnick 1990). Ballot propositions are, by definition, issue focused. As a result, the issue public that feels intensely about the proposition, either for or against, may be the voters who are mobilized to vote, both for the proposition and for the candidate who supports their position on the issue. In the present study, evangelical Protestants, and identifiers of the three Christian religions more generally, felt strongly about the issue of gay marriage.<sup>20</sup>

*Hypothesis 3:* There should be a spillover effect of gay marriage amendment states interacted with the three Christian religions to support the presidential Republican candidate, President Bush: specifically, the percentage of the three Christian religions in gay marriage amendment states, evangelical Protestantism in particular, should report increased levels of support for the Republican candidate, as compared to states without the amendments.

The partisan effects of ballot propositions should not stop at the highest elective office on the ballot. Voters associate issue positions on the propositions with a political party, not just with a specific candidate (Rahn 1993). As a result, spillover effects of

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<sup>20</sup> There is also the possibility that subsets of voters who feel strongly against ballot propositions will be mobilized to turn out to vote. In the present analysis, gay rights activists and possibly liberals could be mobilized by the gay marriage amendments to vote for the Democratic candidate, John Kerry. Another possibility is that subsets of voters are demobilized by the presence of ballot propositions. In the case of the gay marriage amendments, Campbell and Monson (2008) find that secular Americans (those who do not identify with a religion) were demobilized both in terms of voter turnout and in vote choice for the Democratic candidate, John Kerry. However, though these are interesting propositions, I do not test for these possibilities in this analysis, holding them for future research.

ballot propositions to lower level offices should be seen, as voters are primed by the proposition to support a particular political party. This was clearly the case with gay marriage amendments, as the Republican Party took a clear position on the issue, so that all Republican candidates should benefit from the presence of the proposition. Two potential mechanisms could work to benefit lower level Republican candidates. First, the ballot propositions may mobilize voters who would otherwise have failed to vote, but who would vote for the Republican Party anyway. Second, the ballot propositions may cause voters to switch parties, giving them a greater likelihood of voting for Republican candidates.

*Hypothesis 4:* The effect of the gay marriage amendment should carry over to lower level elective offices; specifically, there should be seat gain for the Republican Party in state legislatures in states with gay marriage amendment initiatives.

As with Hypothesis 3, ballot propositions have the potential of mobilizing subsets of voters. Specifically, the gay marriage amendments may mobilize identifiers of the three Christian religions, evangelical Protestants in particular, to vote for the Republican presidential candidate. They may be mobilized to vote for other Republican candidates on the ballot, indicating the potential of spillover effects of the propositions to lower level offices.

*Hypothesis 5:* There should be a spillover effect of gay marriage amendment states interacted with the three Christian religions to lower level elective offices: specifically, the percentage of the three Christian religions in gay marriage amendment states, evangelical Protestantism in particular, should report increased

levels of support for the Republican Party in state legislatures, as compared to states without the amendments.

#### **5.4 Data and Methods**

As already noted, this study is an aggregate level analysis of the effect of gay marriage amendments on the 2004 election. As such, the unit of analysis is the individual state, and therefore I will be examining whether there were statewide effects of the gay marriage amendments. This is potentially a stricter test for the theory than individual level analysis, as the magnitude of the effect of gay marriage amendments must be stronger to have a statewide effect rather than having an effect on individuals. It is also theoretically important to look at state effects of ballot propositions. In the Electoral College, only states have an effect on the outcomes of elections. Therefore, if individual level effects of ballot propositions do not carry over to have statewide implications, it indicates that ballot propositions have only marginal effects in the political system.

##### *Dependent Variables*

I test the effects of gay marriage amendments on three dependent variables. The first is a measure of overall state turnout in the 2004 election. This was calculated using total number of votes cast by state, dividing the number of votes cast in each state by the total population of each state. The second dependent variable is a measure of turnout for President Bush. This was also calculated using total number of state votes, dividing the number of votes cast for President Bush in each state by the total population of each state.<sup>21</sup> The third and final dependent variable is a measure of the change in the number

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<sup>21</sup> State population data comes from the US census population estimate for 2004. Turnout data for 2004 comes from David Leip's website <http://www.uselectionatlas.org>.

of Republican seats held in the lower house of the state legislatures from the previous election. I focus my analysis on the lower house in state legislatures because every member is up for reelection, rather than only examining part of the legislative body which is up for reelection in 2004. This was calculated by measuring the difference between the number of seats held by Republicans in the 2004 election from the previous election in each state, such that positive numbers indicate seat gain for Republicans and negative numbers indicate seat gain by Democrats.<sup>22</sup> Nebraska was excluded from the analysis due to its unicameral nonpartisan legislature and Virginia was also excluded from the analysis because it holds off year state legislative elections.

### *Independent Variables*

There are two main independent variables of interest in the analysis, whether the state had a gay marriage amendment in the 2004 election and the size of the religious population in each state. There were eleven states that had gay marriage amendments on their ballot in the 2004 November election: Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, Michigan, Mississippi, Montana, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon and Utah. The variable is a dichotomous variable, coded as one if a gay marriage amendment was present in the state and zero otherwise.

The second main independent variable of interest is a measure of the religious affiliations of citizens in the fifty states. Recent scholarship in religion and politics has established the necessity of using a more nuanced measure of religious affiliation than

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His turnout data is collected directly from each state's election board or Secretary of State and so is an accurate measure of turnout figures in each state.

<sup>22</sup> The data for Republican seat change comes from the State Dataset compiled by Stefanie A. Lindquist. It is located on the State Politics and Policy Quarterly website, which can be accessed at [http://academic.udayton.edu/SPPQ-TPR/tpr\\_data\\_sets.html](http://academic.udayton.edu/SPPQ-TPR/tpr_data_sets.html).

was previously used in the literature (Fastnow, Grant and Rudolph 1999; Layman 2001; Steensland et al. 2000). Specifically, Steensland and his colleagues (2000) created a religious measure with seven categories: evangelical Protestantism, mainline Protestantism, Catholicism, Judaism, Mormonism, African American Protestantism and other faith. In the current analysis, I employ data recently compiled by Green (2007) measuring the statewide population of each of the religious traditions. He compiled this data from numerous statewide surveys, and it is currently the most precise estimate of religious affiliations in the fifty states. It is measured as a percentage of the state population identifying with each religious affiliation. For the current analysis I focus on the three Christian religious categories, evangelical Protestantism, mainline Protestantism and Catholicism.<sup>23</sup>

To test the hypothesis that gay marriage mobilized religious individuals and evangelical Protestants in particular to vote, an interaction term will be used between the percentage of each religious affiliation in the states and gay marriage amendment states. This will examine the subgroup that both live in a gay marriage amendment state and are affiliated with evangelical Protestantism, mainline Protestantism and Catholicism respectively. The main interaction of interest is with evangelical Protestants, but all three religious groups are examined.

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<sup>23</sup> African American Protestants are an interesting case. They are socially conservative yet identify with the Democratic Party for historical reasons (Civil Rights for example) (see Steensland et al. 2000 for a full discussion of African American Protestants). Since my focus is on the Republican candidates, I chose to exclude them from the current analysis. However, in future work I will look at the effect of the gay marriage amendments on turnout for the Democratic candidate, John Kerry, to see if African American Protestants were mobilized by the propositions to vote for him.

In order to control for competing explanations for overall levels of turnout and turnout for President Bush in 2004, I follow previous aggregate level studies examining the effect of gay marriage amendments and include a control for the previous election turnout and vote share for President Bush (Abramowitz 2004; Burden 2004). Including a control for turnout and turnout for President Bush in 2000 allows for state demographic controls on turnout. The two variables are calculated in the same manner as described for turnout and turnout for Bush in 2004. In examining Republican state lower house legislative seat gain, I include a control for legislative composition in the previous election, measured as the number of Republicans in the lower house.<sup>24</sup> I also control for citizen ideology and party competition, which would affect Republican seat gain in the state legislature. More competitive states have a greater number of seats, which could potentially change party control compared to less competitive states. This could be a potential cause of Republican seat change, as states pick up seats partly because the state is more competitive, with more of a chance of winning seats. Party competition is measured using the Ranney index of party competition. Ideology is also a potential confounding variable with Republican seat change in that more conservative ideologies may be the causal factor behind gains in Republican seats. This is measured using the Berry et al. (1998) measure of citizen ideology, which is a score of ideology ranging from 0 to a 100 with higher scores indicating increased liberalism.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Turnout data for 2000 again comes from David Leip's website <http://www.uselectionatlas.org>. Legislative composition in the lower house again comes from State Dataset compiled by Stefanie A. Lindquist. It is located on the State Politics and Policy Quarterly website, which can be accessed at [http://academic.udayton.edu/SPPQ-TPR/tpr\\_data\\_sets.html](http://academic.udayton.edu/SPPQ-TPR/tpr_data_sets.html).

<sup>25</sup> Both the Ranney index and the citizen ideology measure come from the State Dataset compiled by Stefanie A. Lindquist. It is located on the State Politics and Policy

The analysis is estimated using Ordinary Least Square regression. OLS is used because the three dependent variables are continuous variables, indicating that OLS is the most appropriate method. I also check for potential violations of OLS, specifically examining the data for potential problems with non-constant error (heteroskedasticity) and normality.

## 5.5 Results

I begin by examining the overall effect of gay marriage amendments on turnout and turnout for President Bush controlling for the previous election year results. Table 5.1 presents the results. In both cases, the gay marriage amendment variable is not statistically significant, indicating that the presence of these ballot measures did not increase overall levels of turnout or increase levels of support for President Bush in the states which had amendments versus the states that did not.<sup>26</sup>

However, as noted, the literature at the individual level has found that the presence of the gay marriage amendments mobilized a subgroup of voters, evangelical Protestants, to turn out to vote and to cast their ballot for President Bush (Campbell and Monson 2008). I begin testing this hypothesis looking at overall levels of turnout in the 2004 election.

Table 5.2 presents two models of turnout in the 2004 election, focusing specifically on the effect of religion. The first model is a base model examining the effects of the three Christian religions on overall levels of turnout in the 2004 election.

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Quarterly website, which can be accessed at [http://academic.udayton.edu/SPPQ-TPR/tpr\\_data\\_sets.html](http://academic.udayton.edu/SPPQ-TPR/tpr_data_sets.html).

<sup>26</sup> There are only fifty observations, leading to a potential problem with normality. However, a qnorm test for normality revealed that the data are normally distributed. A test for heteroskediscity reveals that the errors are uncorrelated in all of the models.



The results reveal that states with higher percentages of mainline Protestants exhibit significantly higher rates of turnout in the 2004 election controlling for turnout in 2000, while states with higher percentages of evangelical Protestants and Catholics do not. Model 2 looks at the interaction of the percentage of evangelicals, mainline Protestants and Catholics residing in the states with gay marriage amendment states. It examines whether states with higher percentages of the three religions and with gay marriage amendments on the ballot have higher levels of turnout in the 2004 election. However, the results largely disprove my hypotheses. States with higher percentages of evangelical Protestants with a gay marriage amendment on the ballot do not have higher levels of turnout. The only significant finding is that states with higher percentages of mainline Protestants still exhibit higher levels of turnout in the 2004 election.

Table 5.3 presents the same two models looking at the effect of religion on turnout for President Bush in the 2004 election. The base model, model 1, examining the effects of the three Christian religions on turnout for President Bush in the states, reveals that controlling for levels of support for Bush in 2000 none of the three Christian religions is statistically significant. Model 2, examining whether higher percentages of all three Christian religions interacted with gay marriage amendment states results in increased turnout of President Bush, shows that here as well there is no statistically significant effect of gay marriage amendment states and religion.

Table 5.4 presents the final set of results looking at whether the effect of gay marriage amendments carries over to other Republican candidates, in this case specifically looking at the lower house of the state legislatures. The first column shows results just including whether gay marriage amendment states is a positive contributor to

Republican legislative lower house seat gain. The Ranney index of party competition is positive with a large effect as anticipated. Citizen ideology, while not significant at the traditional .05 level (.064), is also in the expected direction having a negative coefficient indicating that a one unit increase in citizen ideology, going from conservative to liberal, results in roughly a one seat lose for the Republican Party. Republican control in the previous election is also significant. However, here again the presence of gay marriage amendment states has no effect on Republican legislative lower house seat gain.

I next look at the interactive effect of religion and gay marriage amendments on Republican seat gain, examining the same three models as before. Model 1 examines whether the three Christian religions have a significant effect on Republican seat gain. The results reveal that they do not. However, model 2, including all three Christian religions interacted with gay marriage amendment states, reveals some interesting results. The percentage of mainline Protestants residing in the states interacted with gay marriage amendment states is significant, indicating that as the percentage of mainline Protestants residing in amendment states increases by one unit, Republicans gain slightly over one seat. While not significant at the .05 level, the percentage of Catholics residing in the states interacted with gay marriage amendment states (.066) exhibit the reverse effect of mainline Protestants, causing a decline of roughly one Republican seat. This effect of Catholics is possibly the result of Catholics being mobilized to vote in legislative races by the gay marriage amendment yet voting for the Democratic candidate, as they have historically identified with the Democratic Party.

## 5.6 Discussion and Conclusion

Overall, the findings largely fail to confirm my hypotheses, as I find that the gay marriage amendments did not increase levels of turnout in the election, they did not increase support for President Bush, they did not affect Republican seat gain in the lower house of state legislatures and the amendments did not interact with the percentage of evangelical Protestants residing in the states to effect any of the three dependent variables.

However, the findings do produce two notable and highly interesting results. First, the percentage of mainline Protestants residing in the states is significantly related to higher turnout. This confirms the religion and politics literature that finds that mainline Protestants have traditionally been the most civically engaged of the three Christian religions (Wuthnow 1999). Second, I did find that higher percentages of mainline Protestants residing in gay marriage amendment states does increase Republican seat gain in the lower house of the state legislatures, while the opposite effect was found for Catholics, and no effect was found for evangelical Protestants. As I speculated earlier, the negative relationship for the percentage of Catholics residing in the states may be a product of the fact that they have historically identified with the Democratic Party. Therefore, they are mobilized by the gay marriage amendments yet vote for the Democratic candidate.

The difference between mainline and evangelical Protestants presents a different story. The fact that the percentage of evangelical Protestants residing in the states did not affect any of the dependent variables indicates that they were already mobilized to turnout and, in turning out, to vote for the Republican candidates on the ballot. This

comports with recent religion and politics literature. Evangelicals have become an established voting bloc, with well over three quarters of evangelicals identifying with the Republican Party (Green 2007). They were mobilized to vote with the rise of the Religious Right in the 1980s and have become habitual voters, identifying with and voting for the Republican Party (Wilcox and Larson 2006; Gerber, Green and Shachar 2003; Smith and Walker 2013). Mainline Protestants, on the other hand, are more liberal than evangelicals, and as a result do not identify as strongly as a group with the Republican Party.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, they are more amenable to being swayed to vote for Republican candidates as a result of the gay marriage amendments. However, I argue that the fact that many of my hypotheses were rejected, that I found largely no effect for gay marriage amendments on the 2004 election at the state level, is puzzling for two reasons.

First, these results reveal a disconnect between the way the media and political analysts after the election viewed the importance of the gay marriage amendments to the outcome and empirical evidence on their actual effect. As noted, commentators from the *New York Times* to the *Wall Street Journal* declared that the gay marriage amendments had been a key force in the victory of President Bush in 2004, garnering him votes in swing states, most notably Ohio, which allowed him to win. For example, the *New York Times*, stated that the amendment in Ohio “helped turn out thousands of conservative voters on Election Day” and that this support by conservative voters was “widely viewed as having been crucial to President Bush’s narrow victory in that swing state” (Dao 2004, A-28). In contrast to these claims by the media, the results here clearly show that the gay

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<sup>27</sup> See Steensland et al. (2000) for a thorough description of the differences between mainline and evangelical Protestants.

marriage amendments did not change electoral outcomes and so were not the cause of President Bush's victory. This leaves an interesting question as to why the media was so persuaded that the gay marriage issue made the difference in the election. This disconnect also points to the importance of empirical investigation into political phenomenon, as it serves to clarify assumptions about political events.

The second reason that these results present a puzzle is the discrepancy between the individual and the aggregate level findings on the effect of the gay marriage amendments. At the individual level, scholars found that the gay marriage amendments did increase support for President Bush among white evangelical Protestants living in amendment states (Campbell and Monson 2008). However, the findings here suggest that this increased support did not carry over to have an aggregate level effect. While gay marriage amendments might have mobilized evangelical Protestants in support of President Bush, the effect was not strong enough to have electoral implications. This discrepancy clearly highlights the danger of the ecological fallacy and the need to conduct multiple levels of analysis on the same phenomenon. A finding at one level of analysis does not necessitate the existence of that finding at another level of analysis.

Finally, these findings point to the need to refine the agenda setting theory of ballot initiatives. These results, along with the scholarly work on this topic, indicate that there may be certain conditions under which ballot propositions are effective. The present findings seem to suggest that the effect of ballot propositions is not large enough to change electoral outcomes, but does have a substantial impact on individual voting decisions. Further refinement is needed to sort out the conditions under which this theory and the effects of ballot propositions hold.

**Table 5.1. Ordinary Least Squares Regression Analysis, of Gay Marriage Amendment States on Turnout in 2004 and Bush Vote Share in 2004**

Variable	2004 Turnout Coefficient (SE)	2004 Bush Vote Share Coefficient (SE)
Turnout in 2000	1.024 (0.042)***	
Bush Vote Share 2004		1.014 (0.035)***
Gay Marriage States	0.008 (0.005)	0.004 (0.003)
Constant	0.036 (0.017)*	0.033 (0.007)***
Observations	50	50
R <sup>2</sup>	0.92	0.95

Note: Dependent Variable is the percent turnout in 2004 and the percent vote share for President Bush in 2004 measured from 0 to 1. SE= Standard Error

\*p<.05 \*\*p<.01 \*\*\*p<.001

**Table 5.2. Ordinary Least Squares Regression Analysis, Effect of Gay Marriage Amendment States and Religion on Turnout in 2004**

Variable	Model 1 Coefficient (SE)	Model 2 Coefficient (SE)
Turnout in 2000	0.942 (0.054)***	0.948 (0.055)***
Gay Marriage States		0.066 (0.055)
Evangelical Protestant	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)
Mainline Protestant	0.01 (0.000)**	0.001 (0.001)*
Catholic	-0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)
Evangelical*Gay Marriage		-0.001 (0.001)
Mainline*Gay Marriage		0.000 (0.002)
Catholic*Gay Marriage		-0.002 (0.001)
Constant	0.040 (0.020)	0.032 (0.021)
Observations	50	50
R <sup>2</sup>	0.94	0.94

Note: Dependent Variable is the percent turnout in 2004 measured from 0 to 1.

SE= Standard Error

\*p<.05 \*\*p<.01 \*\*\*p<.001

**Table 5.3. Ordinary Least Squares Regression Analysis, of Gay Marriage Amendment States on Bush Vote Share in 2004 and Religion**

Variable	Model 1 Coefficient (SE)	Model 2 Coefficient (SE)
Turnout in 2000	0.958 (0.042)***	0.965 (0.045)***
Gay Marriage States		-0.018 (0.037)
Evangelical Protestant	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)
Mainline Protestant	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)
Catholic	-0.000 (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)
Evangelical*Gay Marriage		0.000 (0.001)
Mainline*Gay Marriage		0.001 (0.001)
Catholic*Gay Marriage		-0.000 (0.000)
Constant	0.037 (0.011)**	0.037 (0.012)**
Observations	50	50
R <sup>2</sup>	0.96	0.96

Note: Dependent Variable is the percent vote share for President Bush in 2004 measured from 0 to 1. SE= Standard Error

\*p<.05 \*\*p<.01 \*\*\*p<.001



**Table 5.4. Ordinary Least Squares Regression Analysis, of Gay Marriage Amendment States and Religion on Republican Seat Change in State Legislatures Lower House**

Variable	Gay Marriage States Coefficient (SE)	Model 1 Coefficient (SE)	Model 2 Coefficient (SE)
Republican Seats Previous Election	0.097 (0.024)***	0.101 (0.025)***	0.101 (0.024)***
Citizen Ideology	-0.120 (0.058)	-0.159 (0.091)	-0.148 (0.090)
Party Competition	14.966 (6.218)*	20.145 (8.241)	18.650 (8.564)*
Gay Marriage States	-1.670 (3.970)		0.633 (20.173)
Evangelical Protestant		-0.164 (0.150)	-0.390 (0.155)
Mainline Protestant		0.133 (0.178)	-0.028 (0.192)
Catholic		-0.043 (0.125)	-0.013 (0.126)
Evangelical*Gay Marriage			-0.256 (0.396)
Mainline*Gay Marriage			1.333 (0.573)*
Catholic*Gay Marriage			-0.965 (0.510)
Constant	-4.193 (3.970)	-2.158 (6.255)	-2.319 (6.066)
Observations	48	48	48
R <sup>2</sup>	0.33	0.34	0.46

Note: Dependent Variable is the change in Republican seats in the Lower House of the States Legislatures in 2004 from the previous election, measured as positive for Republican gain. SE= Standard Error

\*p<.05 \*\*p<.01 \*\*\*p<.001

## **Chapter 6**

### **Conclusion**

“Unless mass views have some place in the shaping of policy, all the talk about democracy is nonsense.”

- V.O. Key (1961)

Democracy should arguably rest on the opinions of the people. A government of the people, by the people and for the people would be a contradiction in terms if it did not listen to the voice of the people and take into account their opinions and desires in governing. This is perhaps especially the case in a representative democracy where citizens do not directly vote on policy but their views are translated through elected officials. The study of public opinion then, determining whether and under what conditions government listens to the voice of the people, presents an important area of research.

I argue that most of the literature examining the role of public opinion in American democracy tends to focus on the opinion of individual citizens and typically views these citizens as atomistic actors. Questions such as whether citizens have clear and structured preferences (Converse 1969), how informed is the citizenry and how informed should it be (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996), and are there ways in which citizens can ‘get by’ with less information (Lupia 1994) have long dominated the attention of scholars.

I add to the literature by bringing back a renewed focus on groups within American society and examine how they shape, form and affect public opinion. In doing so I build on the more recent work of scholars that have moved from examining public opinion from the starting point of citizens as atomistic actors to focusing on the role of interpersonal relationships in shaping and forming opinion (Huckfeldt 1979; 1983; 1984; Huckfeldt et al. 1995; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; Huckfeldt et al. 1998; Huckfeldt, Johnson and Sprague 2004; Walsh 2004; Mutz and Mondak 2006). In particular, I focus on the role of interpersonal relationships in public opinion as they are played out through groups within society. Through this I address the question, what are some of the specific conditions under which public opinion is listened to and translated into government responsiveness.

To answer this question I present a theory of group influences on public opinion. My theory has three parts. First, I argue that the importance of interpersonal relationships and social identity theory in particular work to ensure that citizens are group orientated and are influenced in their individual opinion through groups. Citizens have a strong desire to feel connected to others (social identity theory) which is alleviated through group interactions and these interactions in turn shape and mold individual opinion. Second, in a large democratic society it is virtually impossible for government to listen and be responsive to individual opinion. Instead, government listens to collective opinion which, I argue, is often mediated through dominant groups within society (groups that are large and cohesive in opinion). Finally, group influence on public opinion is conditional on the group showing intensity of preference and opinion and ‘owning’ particular issues. This allows individual group members to know and adopt the opinion of the group and

signals to government the group opinion such that government has a clear indication of opinion to follow.

### **6.1 Theory Testing: How Well did it Perform?**

I test this theory in three specific cases, political parties, state Supreme Court decision making and ballot initiatives. Each analysis examines a sub-research question as the focus of attention. However, as I explained in the introduction, my overall theory of group influences on public opinion applies in each case. While I went over why and how the theory applies in the introduction, here I will examine how well my theory actually performed.

### **6.2 Political Parties**

The sub-research question under consideration for my first analysis is whether strength of religious attachment leads to strength of partisan attachment. I argue that in the American two party system of government, one of the primary, if not the primary way, in which public opinion is listened to and translated into government decision making is through partisanship. Accordingly, the platform and opinions of the political parties take on a significant role in translating public opinion to government. Scholars argue that the overall opinion of the political parties tends to be formed through the elites in government (Aldrich 1995) and through those who are strongly attached to the party (Schattschneider 1960). Identifying the causes behind someone claiming to be a strong partisan, therefore, has significant public opinion consequences.

I argue in the analysis that there are spillover effects of social identity theory, such that individuals who are strongly attached to their religious identity are likely to be strongly attached to their political party. This is premised on the idea that the need to feel

connected to others in one area of life leads to a need to feel connected in other areas of life as well. However, it is likely that this relationship is conditional upon partisans' perceptions that their religious commitment has some meaning in relation to their political party's platform, ideas and leaders. Overall, I find in the analysis that religious attachment is positively related to strength of partisan attachment. As respondents become more attached to their religion they increase their likelihood of identifying as a strong partisan. However, I do find that this is conditional on the political party. When analyzing Republicans and Democrats separately, the effect only holds for Republican identifiers.

Accordingly, I argue that these results provide support for my overall theory of group influences on public opinion. First, the social identity effects are clear. Increased attachment to religion leads to increased attachment to a political party. Religion, as per social identity theory, is therefore informing the opinion and behavior of its individual members. This confirms the potential for group based patterns of opinion. However, a note here is that I am examining religious attachment as opposed to specific religious groups. I would expect to find this effect looking at individual religious groups, though there will likely be variation in the actual substantive effect.

Second, I argue that as a result of this confirmed link between strength of religious attachment and strength of partisanship, the implication is that religion is impacting the political parties and so the opinions that they hold. Again, it is arguably the strong partisans who most affect the agenda and opinions (e.g. stances on specific issues) of the overall political party, so the fact that more religiously attached individuals are more likely to be strong partisans indicates that they have more influence over the

agenda and opinions of the party. I argue that this confirms my theory of group based influence on public opinion, because religious groups are influencing the overall opinion of the political party (though note here again further tests are needed looking at specific religious groups to fully confirm this point).

At the same time, I find that this group based influence on public opinion through political parties is conditional on the group holding intensity of preferences, the third point of my theory. This is clearly born out because I only see affects of strength of religious attachment on strength of partisan attachment for Republicans and not for Democrats. As I argue, religious groups have formed very intense preferences about social issues in particular and the Republican Party is thought of as the party that is ‘friendlier’ toward religion. Accordingly, the intensity to which religious groups hold their opinion signals clear direction to their own members to attach to the Republican Party and it signals to the Republican Party the continued direction of opinion they should follow.

Overall, I find some support for my theory of group influences on public opinion in this analysis. However, it is not a complete test as clarifications are needed. As presented, I provide only an indirect test of group influences. For a direct test, I need to look specifically at religious groups rather than religion as a whole. Similarly, I argue from a theoretical standpoint (and from the literature) that it is the religious group influencing the opinions of the overall political party (the Republican Party in particular). However, this needs to be more directly tested through over time analysis to see whether the opinions of the party truly change as religious groups show intensity in their preferences and opinion on specific issues.

### **6.3 State Supreme Court Decision Making**

For this analysis, the sub-research question under consideration is whether state Supreme Court justices respond not just to overall public opinion but to specific group opinion, religious groups in particular, in their decision making. Here I focus on a specific branch of government, the courts, to see how well they listen to public opinion and so answer my overall research question of conditions under which public opinion is listened to and translated into government policy. This is the branch of government theoretically least likely to be influenced by public opinion as evidenced in the fact that scholars did not spend much time until recently studying public opinion influences on the judicial branch. However, more and more research is showing that the national Supreme Court and state Supreme Court justices are indeed responsive to public opinion (Caldeira 1991; Mishler and Sheehan 1993; Flemming and Wood 1997; McGuire and Stimson 2004; Giles et al. 2008).

I argue that it is theoretically likely that justices respond not just to overall public opinion but to specific group opinion, religious opinion in particular, for three reasons. First, in many states, state Supreme Court justices are elected to office. They, along with other elites, ‘fear losing office’ (Mayhew 1974; Brace and Boyea 2008) and so will likely cater towards the groups within the state that will ensure their election or reelection. Religious groups are some of the largest groups in American society and hold cohesive opinion on some issues in particular so they may present a valuable election group for justices. Second, justices may listen to public opinion because they themselves are changing as a result of the changing norms and opinions of the state (Giles et al. 2008). For example, as a state becomes more conservative, justices may be themselves

influenced and vote in a more conservative fashion. I argue that changes in societal norms are theoretically likely to be caused by dominant groups in a state. Religious groups are again both large and cohesive in opinion and so may influence the overall ideology of a state and so the ideology of justices. Third, justices may respond to group opinion if a group holds very intense preferences (Dahl 1956). Justices may feel the need to respond to intense opinion to ensure legitimacy in the eyes of the group (see the importance of legitimacy for the courts, McGurie and Stimson 2004) as well as be protectors of minority rights. The fact that religious groups tend to hold very intense preferences makes them a group justices are likely to respond to. Accordingly, I expect to find, examining death penalty cases, that state Supreme Court justices both elected and nonelected are responsive to religious opinion looking at the four largest religious groups.

Overall, I find that justices do respond to religious opinion on the death penalty. Without examining the election mechanism, justices are more likely to uphold the death penalty, the conservative opinion, as the percentage of evangelical Protestants and mainline Protestants in a state increases (as compared to black Protestants). In states where justices are elected, I find that as the percentage of evangelical Protestants increases, justices are more likely to uphold the death penalty. However, the substantive effect of these results is small, indicating that while a change in opinion is produced, it is not very strong.

These results provide support for my overall theory of group influences on public opinion. While not directly addressed in the analysis, the foundation for my results rests on social identity theory. Citizens join groups to satisfy a need to feel connected to others and are consequently shaped in their opinion and behavior by the group. My



finding that state Supreme Court justices are responsive to religious groups on the issue of the death penalty is premised on the fact that religious groups hold clear and cohesive direction of opinion such that justices can respond to it, a direct implication of social identity theory. Further, my theory is confirmed that there are clear group influences on public opinion. It is important to not only examine the opinion of individuals or public opinion as a whole, but to examine group opinion. As I find in this analysis, it is the case that government listens to and responds to group opinion (i.e. State Supreme Court justices do not just listen to overall opinion but to religious opinion). Finally, for my theory of group influences on public opinion to hold, the condition of the group holding an intensity of opinion must be met. I find support for this in my analysis. My results primarily point to evangelical Protestants as influencing state Supreme Court justices in their decision making on the issue of the death penalty. The literature shows that evangelical Protestants are the most conservative on the issue of the death penalty (Britt 1998) (and therefore hold the most intense opinion) so it upholds my theory that I primarily find results for them. The other religious groups (mainline Protestants and Catholics) are more divided in their opinion on the death penalty (less intense) and so it is less likely that justices would respond to them, as I find to be the case.

Overall, I once again find support for my theory of group influences on public opinion. An increase in the presence of evangelical Protestants in states in particular results in state Supreme Court justices making the conservative decision to uphold the death penalty. Justices are indeed swayed by group opinion. However, it is important to broaden this analysis to other policy areas, social and moral issues and beyond, to more fully test how well the group influence theory of public opinion works.

#### **6.4 Direct Democracy: Ballot Propositions**

For my final analysis, the sub-research question under consideration is whether ballot propositions affect candidate choice. In other words, I examine whether there are spillover effects of ballot propositions such that voters are primed by the initiative in their choice to cast a vote for one candidate over another when they go to the polls. In a democracy, mechanisms such as ballot propositions are the most ‘direct’ that public opinion can be translated to government because it involves individuals actually voting on policy. As noted, scholars find that states with initiatives and referendums are more responsive to public opinion than those without (Arceneaux 2002; Burden 2005). For my analysis, I focus specifically on how public opinion is voiced through candidate choice, which can in turn be affected by the use of direct democracy. Elected officials must take into consideration the opinion of those who vote for fear of not getting elected or losing office later (Mayhew 1974).

I argue that ballot propositions have agenda setting effects whereby they shape the political agenda making certain issues more salient in an election than otherwise would have been the case. In doing so, ballot propositions serve to prime voters to appraise candidates based on their position on the issue and consequently vote for the candidate that holds their own opinion. This only works, however, if parties “own” particular issues (Petrocik 1996) such that voters can then ascribe the position on the issue to individual candidates regardless of whether that candidate actually adheres to the position. Additionally, candidates can use ballot propositions to their advantage by identifying them as a wedge issue (Baer 1995) that divides the supporters of the opposing candidate. In particular to my theory of group influences on public opinion, ballot

propositions have the potential to target and so prime subsets of voters and groups more specifically in who to vote for in the election. I examine the gay marriage amendments in the 2004 election, an issue that received a great deal of attention and had the potential to prime religious groups in voting for the Republican candidates in the election (President Bush on down the ballot). I examine aggregate level effects (the state being the unit of analysis) rather than individual opinion. For my theory of group influences on opinion, individual level opinion and opinion change is important (social identity) but I argue that it is only through the aggregate that politics is ultimately carried out so examining aggregate level effects is vitally important.

Overall, in my analysis I find no result for ballot propositions increasing overall levels of turnout, turnout for President Bush or turnout for other lower level Republican officials in the fifty states. Examining religious groups in particular, I only find a result for mainline Protestants, that they report a higher rate of voter participation in states that have gay marriage amendments and they increase Republican seat gain slightly. I find, in essence, almost no support for my theory of spillover effects of ballot propositions. It is particularly striking that I find no result for evangelical Protestants, the group most likely to have been primed by the gay marriage amendments to increase turnout for President Bush and other Republican officials. These results are at odds with individual level findings (Campbell and Monson 2008) and as such show the importance of examining both individual and aggregate level effects and the danger of the ecological fallacy.

This analysis largely fails to confirm my overall theory of group influence on opinion as displayed in the case of ballot propositions. First, I argue for social identity effects to be seen both in terms of groups being primed by the initiative to show up at the

polls (if the group as a whole values increased participation then individual members will conform to that behavior) and to effect who they choose to vote for (members will conform to the opinion of the group to vote for a specific candidate in this case religious groups and the Republican candidates). However, I find support for neither contention. Second, I argue that by conceptualizing public opinion in terms not of overall opinion but group opinion, it may be the case that opinion is accurately reflected through dominant groups. Ballot propositions may target specific groups such that these groups are more likely to express their opinion (i.e. vote and vote for a specific candidate) and so group opinion is the influence behind public opinion. However, again I find no effect for the gay marriage amendments priming religious groups in voter turnout or vote choice. Finally, I argue that my theory holds only when the condition of intensity of preference is met. The group must feel strongly in their opinion for it to influence individual members of the group and for it to signal to government the group's preferred stance. Gay marriage amendments were an issue that religious groups and evangelicals in particular felt very passionately about. So the third condition was met yet I still did not find support for my theory.

Overall, this analysis produces a number of interesting conclusions. First, it shows the discrepancy, as noted, between individual and aggregate level effects of ballot propositions. Individual level findings did show gay marriage ballot propositions affecting evangelicals in particular in their vote choice (Campbell and Monson 2008) yet I do not find that this holds at the aggregate level when examining overall state results. For my theory of group influences on opinion, I argue that it is at the aggregate level that we truly see opinion mattering to government. This is a case in point. Though individual

evangelical opinion might have been changed by these propositions, at the aggregate level this was not the case and so it had no effect on overall opinion and so overall election outcomes. Second, this analysis shows a limitation on my theory. While I found support for my theory in the case of political parties and state Supreme Court decision making, I do not find support in the case of ballot propositions. It would be a good idea to confirm this non-finding with ballot initiatives focusing on other issue areas and with other groups. Finally, this points to the importance of testing the breadth and depth of theory to see conditions under which it holds and does not hold.

## **6.5 Concluding Thoughts**

America both historically and currently is a nation of ‘joiners.’ Americans show themselves willing to form and join a wide variety of groups within society and these groups often take on political meaning either intentionally or not (Tocqueville [1835-40] 1969; Truman 1951). Accordingly, groups and group dynamics play a large role in American politics, one I argue that is often overlooked. While scholars investigate the role of groups in areas such as voter turnout (Campbell et al. 1960; Lewis-Beck et al. 2008) and the development of social capital (Putnam 2000), the public opinion literature has long been lacking in a focus on the role groups can and do play in the study of public opinion (Huckfeldt 2007).

I seek to address this gap in the literature focusing on the question of finding specific conditions under which public opinion is listened to and translated into government responsiveness. As an answer to this question, I argue that it is through groups that government can and does listen to public opinion and so be responsive to opinion in terms of policy and decision making. Put another way, I argue that groups are

an important and often overlooked mediator of public opinion. More specifically, I offer a theory of group influences on public opinion, arguing that groups first shape individual opinion through social identity effects, government is theoretically likely to listen to groups rather than individual or overall opinion because politics is ultimately carried out in terms of the aggregate, but government is only likely to listen to group opinion if the group holds intense preferences and can therefore signal opinion to individual group members and to government.

In testing this theory, I find some support. I find that increases in religious attachment leads to increases in partisan attachment. In terms of public opinion and my overall research question, this means that religion (and by extension I argue religious groups though this still must be tested directly) is influencing the opinion of the political parties and thus of elected officials making government, I argue, responsive to group opinion. I also find that state Supreme Court justices listen and respond to religious groups (evangelical Protestants in particular) in their decision making on death penalty cases. Hence, I find that the branch of government least theoretically likely to listen to public opinion does in fact listen and respond to group opinion more specifically. These results show that groups are indeed an important mediator of public opinion and as such deserve attention in the public opinion literature.

However, I also find potential limitations of my theory of group influences on public opinion. In examining whether ballot initiatives have spillover effects on candidate choice in elections, I find at the aggregate level that gay marriage amendments had no effect on turnout or turnout for Republican officials (including President Bush) among religious groups. Religious groups were arguably the groups most likely to be

primed by these initiatives and so show group influence on opinion yet I did not find this to be the case. This finding can be read in two different ways. It shows either a limitation to my theory of group influence on opinion or it shows that direct democracy may not in fact ‘add’ anything to democracy in terms of public opinion. Citizens and religious groups in particular were already likely to voice their opinion with or without the mechanism of ballot initiatives to get them to the polls and prime them in who to vote for. Further tests are needed to confirm which story is the correct one.

Beyond demonstrating the continued significance of groups to American politics and to public opinion in particular, my results also highlight the importance of examining both individual and aggregate level data. As I argued in the introduction and theory, most studies of public opinion tend to focus on the individual. Yet, while the study of individual opinion and opinion formation is important, it is only in the aggregate that politics is ultimately carried out. In almost every case, government cannot listen and respond to individual opinion but must respond to the opinion of the ‘collective’. Though the collective can be conceived of in different ways, I argue that one way to do so is through groups in American society. Consequently, I argue that it is important to look not just at individual public opinion but public opinion at the aggregate level.

Accordingly, for two of my three analyses (state Supreme Court decision making and ballot initiatives) I focus on the effect of the aggregate. For the case of ballot initiatives in particular, I find discrepancies between individual level analyses (e.g. evangelicals did increase their turnout for President Bush in gay marriage amendment states) and my aggregate level findings (e.g. no effect for evangelicals increasing turnout for President Bush). This demonstrates, I argue, that individual opinion and aggregate or collective

opinion can and often do behave in two distinct ways. It highlights the danger of the ecological fallacy that scholars have long noted. It also highlights the need for more aggregate level opinion studies if it is indeed true that politics is ultimately carried out in terms of the aggregate.

Finally, the fact that my theory holds for two out of the three analyses shows that future research is needed to refine where and when group influences on public opinion applies. By examining three separate aspects of how public opinion can be listened to and translated into government decision making, I demonstrate the importance, and arguably the necessity, of scholars testing the breadth and depth of their theories in their research.



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