When I interviewed for my faculty position at BYU-Idaho, I knew very little about the institution. Graduate school trained me to conduct rigorous academic research, but I was aware that BYU-Idaho is not a research institution. President Clark and Vice President Broadhead strongly encouraged me to continue conducting research at BYU-Idaho, but to focus my attention to student-mentored research. I quickly learned that it is more difficult to mentor students in research projects than it is to complete them on my own. What follows is a summary of a research project that a student began as a paper for a class. Walter Schmidt developed the skeleton of the idea and conducted one portion of the analysis with my mentorship. After the class was over, we worked together to polish the paper, tighten the theory, add some additional analyses, and submit it for publication. The idea was strong enough that a kind journal editor patiently guided our paper to a peer-reviewed publication. In the end, Walter finished BYU-Idaho with a degree in Political Science and a peer-reviewed publication of which he is the lead author.

People derive meaning and self-esteem from the groups to which they belong, and this has potent attitudinal and behavioral consequences. Religious belonging influences political attitudes and behaviors through two mechanisms: first, religious groups develop the religious beliefs that are associated with political beliefs (i.e. attitudes about abortion); second, religious groups help individuals make the connection between their religious views and the appropriate political views. Religious leaders and religious social networks are the primary means through which belonging translates into political attitudes and behaviors. Considerable research substantiates the power of religious social networks and clergy to influence the political views and political activity of congregants. However, religious belonging does more than transmit beliefs and create social relationships.

In new research published in Politics and Religion, Walter Schmidt and I posit that conceptualizing religious affiliation as a social identity yields considerable clarity and predictive power. Many people who no longer “belong” to a religious community retain a social identification with that religion, which can influence attitudes and behaviors similar to other social identities. If religious identity functions like other social identities, it may influence public support for elected representatives via descriptive representation. In this theory, representation is less about the outputs of a representative body and more about how well the representative body is a representative sample of the population being represented. Even if the outputs of government are not congruent with public demands, the people will express support for their representatives because descriptive representation ensures that “on any given topic, every opinion—or every worthwhile opinion—in the country finds its spokesman.”

We merged survey data from the 2010 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), with information from Pew on the religious affiliation of each member of the 111th Congress to create a variable indicating if the survey respondent had the same religious identity as their House representative.

We lose a little clarity because Pew’s data on religious affiliation of House members does not distinguish between Evangelical or mainline Protestants, but these data show how well members of various religious traditions are
trust in government is not much different than individual trust: when people think that another person is dishonest or self-centered, they are less likely to trust that person. Finally, belief in God is a strong predictor of interpersonal trust: the same processes that motivate those who believe in God to distrust those who do not could function at a different level. If so, people would be more likely to trust an elected official when they think that they share a common religious belief.

We contracted with Clear Voice Research to recruit an online sample of American adults to test these expectations. The survey was fielded in June 2015. Using language from Gallup surveys, respondents were asked to identify the religious identity of President Obama. Much to our initial surprise, close to 25% of the respondents thought Obama was Muslim. By September 2015, surveys conducted following a Trump rally found similar proportions of Americans believing that Obama was Muslim, which represented by someone who shares their religious identity. Nearly two-thirds of the Protestants in America have a House representative who shares their religious identity, compared to less than two percent of Eastern Orthodox Christians. This is important because people are significantly more likely to approve of a representative who shares their religious identity. Controlling for party identification, gender, race, and political ideology, we find that if religion is “very important” to the person, they are 5.7% more likely to approve of their House member if religious identity is shared than if it is not.

This study has two major limitations which we attempted to overcome with the second study. First, we do not know whether respondents in the CCES are actually aware that their House representative shares a religious identity. Given how little most people know about politics, Americans may not know the religious identity of their House representative. Second, religion and politics have become intertwined in American politics. Since some use religion as a cue for the political ideology of House members, it is possible that these findings are simply functioning as an instrumental variable for political ideology.

The next study operationally defined descriptive representation not as approval but as trust. Among the first survey items shown to predict trust in government was a battery of questions that measured the ethical qualities of elected officials. Those who thought that hardly any elected officials were “crooked” were more likely to trust government than those who thought that quite a few people running government were. For many, trust in government is not much different than individual trust: when people think that another person is dishonest or self-centered, they are less likely to trust that person. Finally, belief in God is a strong predictor of interpersonal trust: the same processes that motivate those who believe in God to distrust those who do not could function at a different level. If so, people would be more likely to trust an elected official when they think that they share a common religious belief.

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alleviated our initial concerns. In addition, respondents were asked about their own religious affiliation. We matched individual responses on these two questions, without regard for the accuracy of the information about the President’s religion. That is, if a Hindu thought Obama is Hindu, we counted that as a shared religious identity because descriptive representation is a matter of perception. In our initial models, we discovered that most people who identified Obama as Muslim were political opponents. This exaggerated the size of the influence of shared religious identity on trust in President Obama because one fourth of the sample who distrusted the President were not acknowledging that they shared his religious identity. Subsequent analyses dropped these individuals and produced similar, smaller effects. Overall, we find that shared religious identity has at least as strong an influence on predicted trust in President Obama as race. One of the more interesting findings is presented in figure 1.

Among all partisan groups, those who share a religious identity with the President are more likely to trust him. The strongest differences are among Republicans: a Republican who shares a religious identity with the President has a predicted probability of trusting Obama “just about always” that is ten points higher than a Republican who does not.

These findings have two important implications for religion and politics today: first, we think that this suggests that religious social identity is conceptually similar to other social identities. One need not regularly attend religious services for religion to influence attitudes. In this context, strength of identity matters more than consistency of church participation. Second, public trust in the President gives him greater latitude in policy negotiations and decisions. When the politically attentive and mobilized public is sorted into polarized political parties, it is more difficult for the President to cooperate with the political opposition on salient policy matters. However, when the public trusts the president, they pay less attention to policy specifics and support the broader policy agenda. Shared religious social identity between the public and the President might mitigate some negative effects of partisan polarization.

References

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