Identity Negotiation Strategies Among Progressive Christians

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An abstract of
a thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences
of Emory University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of the degree of
Bachelor of Arts with Honors

Sociology

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Abstract

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Background. Public perceptions of American Christians suggest that all Christians are conservative, creating identity discrepancy for Christians who identity as politically liberal. Identity theory suggests several possible identity negotiation strategies in such situations to resolve this discrepancy and achieve identity verification.

Methods. In this study, I utilize a mixed methods approach to identify the liberal Christian population in the United States, learn about their identity experiences, and examine the factors mediating their choice of identity negotiation strategy. The first phase uses data from the 2018 General Social Survey (N=2,344) to identify the significant demographic characteristics of politically liberal Christians via chi squared tests. Religious identity, political preference, and demographic characteristics were all self-reported by study participants. For Study 2, I conduct in-depth interviews with 15 individuals who identify as both politically liberal and Christian to understand their experiences and the identity negotiation strategies they employed.

Results. Study 1 finds that people who are non-white, highly educated, either under 24 or over 65, and with a Christian spouse (if married) are most likely to be both liberal and Christian. 365 GSS respondents (15.6%) identified as both liberal and Christian. Study 2 provided examples of identity discrepancy experiences that politically liberal Christians faced and offered insight into the ways individuals saw their faith and their politics as intertwined but also at times in conflict.

Discussion. The paper highlights ways in which respondents in a nationally representative survey, and in a set of qualitative interviews conceptualize the intersection of these two identities. The analysis explores the impact of experiencing identity discrepancy and the availability of mutual verification spaces on identity prominence. The results extend existing research by applying identity theory to a specific population of individuals with identities that are seen by many as incongruent.

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Acknowledgements

To Dr. Idler – thank you for taking a chance on a random junior who emailed you about a thesis idea and for believing in my potential. Your advice and encouragement have been invaluable throughout this process. I am a better student, scholar, and person because of your mentorship.

To my committee members, Dr. Mullis and Dr. Lambelet – thank you for your time, your insight, and your feedback. I am so grateful for the ways you have supported me and have made this thesis better.

To everyone who participated in my thesis interviews – thank you for trusting me with your ideas, your experiences, and your stories. I am so grateful for your time and your contributions and I have learned so much from each of you.

To my mom, Debi Alexander – thank you for always believing in me and reminding me what it's all for when I feel discouraged. You inspire me always.

To the staff and students at Bread Coffeehouse – thank you for giving me a safe space to have conversations about the complicated, nuanced ways politics and Christianity interact, long before my interest in the subject developed into this thesis. This thesis wouldn't have happened without the conversations, the mentorship, the endless supply of coffee, and the encouragement you've all given me throughout this year. I can't wait to continue growing and learning in this community.

To my business school peers and the staff at the Goizueta Business and Society Institute – thank you for not thinking I was crazy when I said I wanted to write an honors thesis in Sociology. The opportunities you have provided to think critically about social issues and the responsibilities we have to society have immeasurably shaped my experience at Emory and my desire to be a Sociology double major. To Dr. Wes Longhofer, especially – thank you for showing me how great a combination Business and Sociology can be, and for being the first person to believe in me when I said I wanted to do a thesis.

To Hailey, Chris, and Abby – thank you for keeping me company on long thesis work days and reminding me that I wasn't alone. I am so grateful for and so proud of each of you.

To every friend who asked about my thesis and offered encouragement – thank you.

To my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ – everything I do is because of You, and this project especially is deeply inspired by my faith. All glory and honor to You always.

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Introduction

Literature Review

Christianity and Political Conservatism

Studies have shown a correlation between Christian beliefs and political conservatism, particularly among the devout and evangelical Protestants. In a survey of college students, Levy, Walls, and Woodford (2013) find that variation across denomination, religiosity, and religious beliefs impacted an individual's support for legalizing same-sex marriage, a social cause largely supported by liberals and opposed by conservatives. Their results indicate that Evangelical Protestants are the least likely to support the legalization of same-sex marriage, with Catholics 2.4 times more likely, mainline/liberal Protestants 1.5 times more likely, and nonreligious individuals 7.4 times more likely than evangelical Protestants to support the right of the LGBTQ+ community to marry (p. 231). Interestingly, no evidence that church attendance significantly influences a person's stance on same-sex marriage emerges, but more frequent prayer was associated with decreased support for same-sex marriage (p. 234). Finally, beliefs such as moral absolutism (a rigid sense of right/wrong), anti-universalism (a low level of concern for the welfare of all people), and belief in the idea that Christian principles should be applied to social problems were associated with decreased support for gay marriage (p. 235). These findings demonstrate a clear correlation between a more conservative religious identity and conservative political attitudes.

Moreover, analysis of religious involvement in the political history of America suggests a tradition of using religious rhetoric to fuel support for conservative politicians and policies. From the founding of America to the rise of the Religious Right and now the Christian Nationalist movement's support for Trump, religious and social leaders have married Christian values to

Republican ones, suggesting to in-group and out-group members alike that Christianity and conservatism are one and the same.

Political Theology of American Conservatives and the Rise of the Religious Right

Political conservatism in America has long been defined by an emphasis on individual rights and limited government. Though these values are not enshrined in the Christian Bible, they have long been upheld as "Christian values" by large swatches of the American church.

Drawing on the sermons and writings of prominent American theologians, as well as religious social movement leaders, Lynerd (2014) examines the development of the link between political conservatism and the American church through the lens of theological rhetoric. He proposes that the political theology of American evangelicals is grounded in the ideas that limited government creates space for a thriving church and that the health of society depends on the church elevating the country's moral standards (p. 6). As early as the American Revolution, religious leaders linked Christian ethics to the values of the new government they were fighting for to persuade their congregations to support the war. Lynerd describes how John Witherspoon, a Protestant religious leader and American founding father, connected the Christian charge to love one's neighbors to support of the new American republic, arguing that "we love others… by respecting their rights - to life, health, liberty and property" (p. 84).

Others have also linked American Christianity to values traditionally championed by political conservatives, such as capitalism and fiscal conservatism. Max Weber (1930), for example, argued that Protestants experienced a religious calling to work hard at their vocation, thus accumulating wealth. To Weber, the poor failed to glorify God by not working. According to Weber, this religious motivation laid the groundwork for the development of the spirit of capitalism, which emphasizes the pursuit of profit and glorifies hard work as the route to

wellbeing. Though Weber noted that the spirit of capitalism had largely become entrenched in society independent of religion by the time Weber offered his seminal work "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism" in the early 20th century, his work points to a link between Christian values and capitalist values.

In the 1970s, Christian conservatives began to take a more prominent position in the public sphere, coalescing around opposition to the 1973 Roe v. Wade ruling legalizing abortion. In 1979, Jerry Falwell founded the Moral Majority to mobilize conservative Christian voters against what Falwell viewed as the moral breakdown of America. Fallwell wrote about the organization's founding,

> I was convinced that there was a moral majority out there among those more than 200 million Americans sufficient in number to turn back the flood tide of moral permissiveness, family breakdown and general capitulation to evil and to foreign policies such as Marxism-Leninism. ("People & Ideas: Jerry Falwell.")

Lynerd (2014: 183) argues that Fallwell and the new Religious Right urged Christian voters to fight for traditional "Christian values" in American public life, proposing the idea that the country's decline in the 20th century was due to the nation's abandonment of the virtues of limited government and Christian morality. Recognizing the rising support for moral reform, the Republican party began to add social conservatism to their free market-based platform (Lynerd 2014:188), marrying the two issues. Though President Jimmy Carter was Christian, Lynerd (2014) notes that his liberal social policy clashed with the political theology of the New Right. While his opponent Ronald Reagan didn't embody Christian virtue in his personal life as a former Hollywood star, divorced man, and infrequent church attendee, Reagan took advantage of the New Right's disdain for Carter, positioned himself as an advocate for Christian morality, was able to swing evangelical voters (Lynerd 2014:189). As the fight for same-sex marriage, abortion rights, and more continued to grow, American evangelicals threw their weight more solidly

behind the Republican party, with 78 percent of white evangelicals voting for Bush in 2004

("Religion and the Presidential Vote" 2004) and 81 percent for Donald Trump in 2016 (Martinez

and Smith 2016).

Christian Nationalism and Support for Donald Trump

Current scholarly and media narratives exploring the intersection of Christianity and

American politics focus on growing social movements grounded in political and religious

conservatism. Building off the Religious Right movement, Donald Trump's relationship with

American evangelicals helped cement the association between Christianity and conservatism in

the public eye and has fascinated scholars. More than a dozen books have been written exploring

the relationship between white evangelicals and Donald Trump. Throughout Trump's two

campaigns and intervening presidency, citizens were inundated with media pieces highlighting

endorsements by megachurch pastors such as Robert Jeffress (Mooney 2019) and analyses of the

rise of "Christian Nationalism." Defined as the belief that America is fundamentally a Christian

nation and that the United States government should actively work to preserve that status (Miller

2021), a growing sector of the American public has embraced this school of thought.

Sociologists Whitehead and Perry have emerged as some of the leading experts on the topic,

exploring the rise of Christian Nationalism and its link to Trumpism in their 2020 book *Taking*

America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States. The authors argue that

Christian Nationalism is ultimately a political stance cloaked in religious rhetoric, focused on

preserving the "status quo that historically placed white, Christian men at the top of the social

order" (p. 74). Drawing on data from the 2017 Baylor Religion Survey, Whitehead and Perry

find that nearly 20 percent of Americans strongly endorse Christian Nationalism (p. 26). They

add that of these "Ambassadors" for Christian Nationalism, 69 percent are conservative, and

only 4 percent are liberal (p. 37). The authors suggest Christian Nationalism as a driving factor behind evangelical support for Trump. As such, Christian Nationalists enthusiastically supported Trump despite his lack of religious background and violation of Christian moral principles. "If Trump (or other politicians) can espouse Christian Nationalist rhetoric and signal their willingness to restore conservative Christian influence in American cultural and political life, personal piety is of little concern" (p. 67).

Categorization and Association Processes

Given the media attention on evangelical support for the Republican party and scholarly efforts to understand that link, it is unsurprising that most Americans associate Christianity with conservatism. Social cognitive processes exacerbate the impacts of this link on interpersonal interactions.

When forming impressions of social group members, humans rely on category-based thinking to form assumptions and expectations about how others should act or appear. Current research suggest that social categories are conditionally activated, but that everyday life is often sufficient to activate categorical processing (Fiske and Taylor 2021: 124). When categorizing people, individuals use prototypes or exemplars to form an expectation for what a category member is like (Fiske and Taylor 2021: 129). A prototype is an average category member, generalized from knowledge of many different category members to form an abstract representation of what a category member "should" be (Fiske and Taylor 2021: 120). Exemplars, meanwhile, are specific individuals or instances that a person has encountered that represent the category to that person (Fiske and Taylor 2021: 125).

Americans have an abundance of sources to draw on to find both exemplars and abstract prototypes for the category of "Christian." A majority of Christians in America identify as

politically conservative and/or Republican ("Religion in America: U.S. Religious Data, Demographics and Statistics."), so people are likely to encounter instances of Christians identifying as conservative both in the media and in their day-to-day lives more often than politically liberal Christians. As such, the prototype they develop is likely to associate conservatism with Christianity. This generalization is exacerbated by the tendency of the media to use such categories, further cementing the conservative Christian prototype. The media also offers exemplar Christians to illustrate the conservative-Christian association. Individuals such as televangelist Paula White, conservative activist Candace Owens, and political commentator Tucker Carlson are all prominent media figures who marry Christianity with outspoken conservative political views. The abundance of representation of politically conservative Christians in the media bolsters the association of these two traits in the minds of the public. With this association in mind, it can be challenging for individuals not to assume one trait (i.e. political conservatism) if the other is invoked (someone says they are Christian).

Additional cognitive processes further contribute to this phenomenon. Heuristics, for example, are cognitive shortcuts that individuals use to make decisions and form judgements more efficiently. They allow people to switch from conscious, controlled processing to subconscious, automatic processing, shortening decision-time and decreasing the cognitive burden of responding to a situation. One common heuristic people rely on is the availability heuristic, wherein people "evaluate an event's likelihood based on how quickly instances come to mind" (Fiske and Taylor 2021: 200). In the context of Christianity, several examples of conservative Christians (both public figures and individuals encountered in their personal life) are likely to be easily brought to mind, while the average American may struggle to think of specific cases of Christians who are progressive. As such, using the availability heuristic, an

individual would take the easily recalled instances of Christians being politically conservative as evidence that Christians are much more likely to be politically conservative than politically liberal. As such, these two traits become further attached in people's minds.

Identity Management Among Politically Progressive Christians

Religion and Political Views as Important Identity Factors

Identities can be defined as self-definitions held by a person that represent the various meanings attached to oneself (Hegtvedt and Johnson 2018: 102). These meanings are shaped by a person's interactions with the social world and their social context, including their roles, group memberships, social categories, and personality traits (Hegtvedt and Johnson 2018: 102). Identity theory (Burke and Stets 2009) suggests that individuals seek to verify their identities in social interaction by having their self-concept match how they believe others perceive them. The importance of an identity to a person is conceptualized by sociologists in two key ways: salience and prominence. Identity salience refers to the likelihood that an identity will be invoked in an interaction, while identity prominence refers to the value the identity holds as it relates to a person's sense of self (Brenner, Serpe, and Stryker 2016). These two concepts are related but not equivalent, as identity salience is impacted by the prominence of that identity but also by social context and the ease of identity verification (Brenner et al. 2016).

Sociologists have long considered religion an important part of an individual's self-concept (Serpe and Stryker 1982). Religion offers guidance for how one should act, informs a sense of who one should be, and can help reduce existential uncertainty (Stroope, Walker, and Franzen 2017). Given that religion encapsulates both personal beliefs and often social ties, religious identity can be seen as both a personal identity and a social one (Walker, Drakeford, and Stroope 2021). Religious identity is thus bolstered both by private religious practice, such as

prayer or Bible reading, and participation in social religious spaces, such as church services (Walker et al. 2021).

Political identity similarly can inform how individuals view themselves and how they interact with others. West and Iyengar (2020) found that "partisans in fact internalize the sense of party identification as an important component of their self-concept" (p. 3). Their study results also demonstrated that party identity was more important to an individual's identity during times of high political salience, such as the 2020 national election.

Navigating Conflicting Identities

While individuals strive to maintain consistency between their identities and how they believe others perceive them, this is often challenging. When faced with a lack of identity verification, individuals experience negative emotions, such as frustration, sadness, or discomfort. Given that identity verification is shown to decrease negative emotions and increase positive ones (Burke and Stets 1999), individuals facing inconsistency between their identity and how others perceive them will strive to resolve that inconsistency through changed behavior or changing their identity standard (Hegtvedt and Johnson 2018: 117-118). Identity work becomes particularly complicated when seeking verification of one identity makes it difficult to verify another. Burke and Stets (2005: 51) note that in some situations, "it is possible that more than one identity is salient… such that the verification of one identity results in a lack of verification of the other identities." For progressive Christians, this situation is particularly likely. Attempts to verify their Christian identity, for example, are likely to trigger assumptions from others that they are also conservative, causing inconsistency with their political identity. Similarly, efforts to emphasize their progressive politics may make it difficult for others to believe they are Christian,

again triggering negative emotions in response to the lack of verification for their religious identity.

So, how might progressive Christians respond to repeated experiences of inconsistency between their self-concept and how others perceive them? When individuals experience identity disruption, they either change their behavior to increase the likelihood of having their identity verified by those they are interacting with or change the prominence of identities that they hold (Burke and Stets 2005). For progressive Christians, behavior to confirm their political identity is likely to require them to distance themselves from their Christian identity, and vice versa to confirm their religious identity, which poses challenges to religious progressive political participation.

Laura Krull (2020) highlights this challenge in an ethnography of a progressive church. She explores how congregants talked about and participated in a local political/social movement, finding that church members used the concept of inclusivity to distance themselves from conservative Protestants. Overt political action was seen as a threat to this inclusivity since those with different political views might feel excluded (p. 90). To navigate this inconsistency, congregants depoliticized their support for social justice causes, tying it to their religious beliefs but not to politics or policies (p. 93). Congregation members were still somewhat politically active, but were less likely to voice their religious motivation in those political spaces and to voice political views in religious settings, and some failed to participate in political action despite strong verbal support for social justice causes (p. 95). Krull concludes that the association of political conservatism with Christianity ultimately "impedes liberal Protestants' articulation of their own religious voice" (p. 85). The way these liberal Christian congregants distanced themselves from one of their identities to conform to the perceived norms of another identity

highlights the challenges liberal Christians face in identity work. It is likely that this lack of self-verification in political spaces could dissuade individuals from engaging in political activities, as in the case of Krull's study.

Alternatively, some progressive Christians engage in the identity management strategy of disidentification, wherein individuals establish their identity by explaining who or what they are not like. Importantly, disidentification is a form of reactive identity work, as individuals try to counter a representation they believe others hold of them (McCall 2003). Beyerlein and Ryan (2018) demonstrate how some Christians hold onto both their Christian and their politically progressive identities through attempts to distance themselves from the dominant image of conservative Christians. The authors note that when progressive religious groups participated in the 2017 Women's March on Chicago (WMC), they publicly displayed their religious affiliation through apparel and banners, hoping "to correct public perception about religion" (p. 213). Subsequent interviews with these WMC participants indicated that many saw their religion as the basis of their moral and political worldview (p. 209), further connecting their Christian and politically progressive identities. This type of disidentification work aims to disrupt the Christian-conservative link in the minds of the people with whom these individuals interact with, allowing progressive Christians to verify both identities. However, Beyerlein and Ryan's study fails to address the effectiveness of this disidentification work in actually changing perceptions, and individuals interviewed indicated facing challenges navigating these dual identities despite their utilization of disidentification strategies.

Understanding Factors That Influence Identity Management

As evidenced, there is ample scholarly exploration of the evolution of the association between American Christianity and political conservatism. Though a less common research

topic, progressive Christian groups have also received attention. Notably, the Civil Rights Movement and the anti-war movement of the 1950s and the 1960s both integrated Christian rhetoric and religious leaders into their fight for liberal political causes. For both liberal and conservative causes, much research into the intersection between religion and politics has focused on the use of religious rhetoric to support political action, or religious organizations as vehicles for mobilizing supporters. Relatively few studies have taken a social psychological approach, exploring the experiences of individual Christians as they navigate expectations about the political meaning of their religious identity.

A few scholars have specifically explored the responses of progressive Christians to the conservative-Christian association, focusing on how this mediated engagement with political causes among progressive Christians. Krull (2020)'s ethnography, for example, focuses on a congregation emphasizing its religious identity over its political one, while Beyerlein and Ryan's Women's March case study highlights strategies for disidentification work. Other research highlights the number of politically progressive young people leaving the church (Margolis 2018), suggesting that some individuals are choosing their political identity over their religious beliefs. Though this research has explored responses to the lack of identity verification progressive Christians have encountered, the current body of research fails to consider *why* individuals choose one response over another when faced with inconsistency between their political and religious identities. Given the broad response options of verifying their religious identity at the expense of their political identity, or of verifying their political identity at the expense of their religious identity, or of engaging in disidentification work to try to verify both simultaneously, I explore which identity management strategies progressive Christians engage in and why they gravitate towards a certain strategy. I examine how the choice of identity

management strategy depends on the intensity of emotional response to the lack of identity verification the individual experiences as well as the availability of mutual verification contexts attached to each identity.

Emotional Response as an Indicator of Identity to Verify

The perceptual control model of identity (Burke and Stets 2009) suggests that individuals experience negative emotions when the identities they hold as important to their self-concept are not reflected back to them by others. Other emotion theories suggest that individuals also experience negative emotions when they are not making as much progress towards their goals as they expected to make (Trettevik 2016). If identity verification is a goal, then identity management involves handling emotions stemming both from the discomfort of the identity discrepancy itself and from how the individual understands their ability to fix that discrepancy. For progressive Christians, identity discrepancy is likely due to the common association between Christianity and conservatism. Given that religion and political views are both important parts of people's self-concepts (Serpe and Stryker 1982; Iyengar and West 2020), lack of verification of these either of these two identities causes emotional distress and attempts to find verification through modified behavior or modified cognitions. If unable to verify both identity standards, individuals may choose to focus on one of their identities over the other. Trettevik (2016) suggests that the emotional response to failure to verify, as well as beliefs about the individual's ability to work towards verification, may shape which identity an individual prioritizes:

> Only one identity an individual has can be the focal point at any one point in time. When failing to verify more than one identity, the emotions resulting from [the rate of progress towards the goal of identity verification] serve to prioritize one's focus on one identity or another. Positive emotions indicate that while the individual may not have reached verification, the progress toward the goal is at a rate faster than the reference standard. This may convey to the person that they are on the right course of action and can shift their focus to another identity. Conversely, negative emotions resulting from the [rate of progress] that are added to the negative emotions stemming from an identity discrepancy

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increase the amount of focus applied to this more problematic identity (Trettevik 2016: 279).

Trettevik's analysis suggests that individuals are likely to prioritize the verification of the identity that has the most negative emotions attached to its identity discrepancy. Drawing on this theory, I expect that progressive Christians struggling to find identity verification will focus on the identity that causes a stronger emotional reaction. This emotional reaction could indicate that that identity is more strongly held or that the individual sees particularly little progress towards identity verification through their current behavior. In response, they are likely to change their behavior to align with that one identity standard more specifically (i.e., religion), even if it means creating discrepancy with their other identity standard (i.e., political identity).

Availability of Mutual Verification Contexts

When seeking identity verification, there are some social contexts that are more conducive to verification than others. Mutual verification contexts are situations where a group of individuals help verify each other's identities and their own (Burke and Stets 2005). This frequently occurs when an individual interacts with others who hold an identity that they also hold. If I consider myself hardworking and studious, and I spend time studying with another friend who holds a similar identity, I am going to have my identity confirmed and also verify for that friend that they are a good student. In such spaces, verification takes less effort because you can presume others attach the same meanings to the identity in question as you do. Engagement through common language, actions, or symbols helps confirm the shared identity of all those involved (Burke and Stets 2005). These spaces are particularly important for identities that may be challenging to get verified in random everyday interactions. Given the increase in political polarization in America (Iyengar and West 2020) and the rise in secular-religious social

segregation (DiPrete et al. 2011), finding mutual verification contexts seems particularly important for the verification of political and religious identities.

For the Christian identity, religious services such as church services, campus ministry events, or Bible study groups are potential mutual verification spaces. Political rallies, organizations such as Young Democrats or other organizing groups, and political campaigns are all possible mutual verification contexts for the identity of politically liberal. Depending on an individual's social network and existing group memberships, one type of mutual verification space may be more available to an individual than another. I expect that the availability of these mutual verification contexts for each identity will inform which identity a progressive Christian chooses to focus on verifying. It is also possible that an individual may find one or more mutual verification contexts that focus on the specific identity of "progressive Christian," such as a church that is LGBTQ-affirming or otherwise engaged in liberal politics, in which case I believe that such individuals would focus on verifying that joint identity and engage in disidentification strategies to distance themselves from the "conservative Christian" stereotype in their everyday interactions.

Historical Involvement of Christians in Liberal Social Movements

I will also comment on some historical engagement by Christians in progressive political action to suggest a possible tradition today's politically liberal Christians can look to build on. Though less prominent on the public stage today, progressive Christian activists have led movements for social change throughout the nation's history. During the abolitionism movement, for example, many Christians stood against slavery even while others used the Bible to justify slaveholding. Pennsylvania Quakers were early advocates for abolition as an intensely egalitarian Protestant denomination (Ahlstrom 1972: 650). In the early 1830s, Christian

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abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison emerged as one of the greatest proponents for immediate abolition, utilizing his antislavery newspaper *The Liberator* to reawaken abolitionist sentiment in the white American public (Kendi 2016: 168). Christian abolitionists spanned race and gender lines, with Southern sisters and Quaker converts Angelina and Sarah Grimke becoming popular speakers on the Christian abolitionist circuit, as well as former slaves and free Blacks such as Sojourner Truth and Frederick Douglass (Wyatt-Brown). Many of these Christian abolitionists directly challenged the theologies of Christian slaveowners, instead outlining a biblical argument for emancipation and the condemnation of slavery. In her 1836 *Appeal to the Christian Women of the South*, Angelina Grimke shows how different biblical "slavery" was from the Southern institution, breaking down pro-slavery arguments that the institution was allowable because it was biblical. Frederick Douglass highlighted the chasm between Southern evangelical Christianity and what he saw as "true Christianity," grounded in God's character as loving, just, and a God of liberation. In his 1845 autobiography, Douglass wrote, "Between the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference" (p. 117). He added that in his experience, Christian slaveholders were some of the cruelest, and were deeply hypocritical for claiming to serve a loving God while willingly participating in such a cruel institution and treating their slaves so poorly (Douglass 1845:119). Many such Christian abolitionists took these views to the American Anti-Slavery Society (AA-SS), formed in 1833 to advocate for immediate emancipation (Kendi 2016: 176). With close ties to the church, at its peak in the late 1830s the AA-SS counted 160,000 churchgoers among its members (Wyatt-Brown).

After the Civil War, progressive Christian activism coalesced around the theological doctrine of the social gospel during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In 1921, University of

Chicago Divinity School professor Shailer Mathews defined the social gospel as "the application of the teaching of Jesus and the total message of Christian salvation to society, the economic life, and social institutions such as the state and the family, as well as to individuals" (Mathews and Smith 1921/2006: 416-417). Scholar Christopher Evans adds to this definition, outlining three key characteristics of the social gospel movement: social idealism; the belief that religion's primary goal should be to advocate for systemic social change (particularly from a politically progressive lens); and the vision of America as a religiously and culturally pluralistic society (Evans 2017: 3). In the wake of the rapid industrialization of America and the resulting wealth inequality that emerged after the Civil War, social gospel activists encouraged Christians to take an active role in advocating for systemic change to address these inequalities. Theologically, the movement expanded concepts of sin and personal salvation to a societal level; social gospel leader Walter Rauschenbusch wrote in his 1907 book *Christianity and the Social Crisis* that "social problems are moral problems on a large scale" (p. 6). From 1870 to 1920, the social gospel gained traction in churches and religious groups across America, and social gospel adherents advocated for workers' rights and policies addressing economic inequality.

While the social gospel movement waned during the World War periods and came under theological criticism, its ideals and values continued to inform the progressive Christian leaders of the Civil Rights Movement. Martin Luther King Jr. considered himself an adherent of the social gospel, taking a strong stance that the church must consider the material needs of its congregation along with the spiritual needs ("Social Gospel" 2018). King and other Civil Rights leaders were deeply inspired by their Christian faith; Catholic monk Thomas Merton called the Civil Rights Movement "the greatest example of Christian faith in action in the social history of the United States" (Marsh 2005: 2). Some, like King and the Southern Christian Leadership

Conference (SCLC), explicitly named their Christian faith as the motivation for their work; organizations like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) were more secular but relied heavily on religious language and ideals, especially in the early days of the movement (p. 2-3). King's vision of a "beloved community" and racial reconciliation built on a deeply theological tradition, using biblical hope to imagine a better America (p. 49-50). Particularly in the early days of the Civil Rights Movement, the southern Black church served as an organizing space, recruitment platform, and a leader calling out what could be in America. While secular activists and politicians undoubtedly contributed as well, there is no denying the politically progressive, religiously motivated work done by Black Christian leaders.

At the same time, social gospel adherents and liberal Christians were also involved in the anti-war movement, protesting against the Vietnam War. Organizations such as the National Council of Churches (NCC) and the newly formed Clergy and Laymen Concerned About Vietnam (CLCAV) articulated their opposition to American escalation and urged a negotiated settlement beginning in 1966 (Evans 2017: 185). King, too, outlined his moral and religious reasons for opposing the war in a 1967 speech: that war hurt the weak and the voiceless, and pitted spiritual brothers against each other (Evans 2017: 186-187). In *The Christian Century*, a 1968 issue declared, "a growing consensus among mature, morally sensitive people is that the spiritual integrity of the United States…cannot be secured by our present policy in Vietnam" (Fiske 1968). Christian ministers encouraged young men to avoid the draft, even if such civil disobedience led to arrest, and urged people to become conscientious objectors (Matheson 2009).

While recent political history has largely shown conservative Christian activism, particularly since the rise of the Religious Right in the 1970s, historical analysis demonstrates

there is also a long tradition of progressive religious social movements in America. For politically liberal Christians today, the question is: are they aware of this history? And if they are, can they tap into this tradition to change public perceptions of Christians and reduce the identity discrepancy they face from the assumption of conservatism?

Research Design

My mixed-methods study seeks to explore the demographic characteristics, identity experiences, identity negotiation strategies, and motivations of politically liberal Christians in America. For Study 1, I will use a statistical analysis of data from a cross-sectional social survey to identify the politically liberal and Christian population in the United States of America. Next, I will link the quantitative analysis to a Study 2 qualitative analysis, part of which will aid in interpreting the findings of Study 1. For Study 2, I will conduct in-depth interviews with self-identified liberal Christians to understand their identity management strategies, motivations, and experiences.

Expectations

Study 1

For the quantitative study, I have several hypotheses about the demographic characteristics of politically progressive Christians in America based on the historical analysis conducted in my literature review.

1. I hypothesize that non-white Americans are more likely to be both politically liberal and Christian than white Americans.

2. I hypothesize that individuals 55 years old and older (born in 1963 or earlier) will be more likely to be politically liberal and Christian than their younger counterparts, as they

would have grown up during liberal-Christian social movements like the Civil Rights Movement and the anti-war movement.

Study 2

I have three main expectations about how progressive Christians will engage in identity negotiation work and the factors determining which strategies they employ.

1. Politically liberal Christians will experience identity discrepancy when sharing that they are both politically liberal and a Christian. These experiences will elicit discomfort and other negative emotions.

2. The availability of mutual verification contexts for each identity will play a major role in determining which identity becomes most important to the progressive Christian over time. As such, the identity most represented in an individual's social network and organizational memberships will correlate with which identity (Christian or politically liberal) becomes most important to that individual. Moreover, individuals with access to politically liberal religious spaces will be more likely to hold both identities as equally important or consider them as a joint identity ("progressive Christian," rather than "progressive and Christian"). These individuals may engage in disidentification work outside of these mutual verification spaces to distance themselves from conservative Christians.

3. Progressive Christians struggling to achieve identity verification for both identities will focus on verifying the identity that causes a stronger emotional reaction when not verified. As such, over time they will change their behavior to better align with one identity standard to achieve verification at the expense of the other and will see the

identity with strong emotions attached to the lack of verification as the more important

identity of the two.

Study 1: Identifying Characteristics of the Liberal Christian Population in the United States

Methods

Sample & Data Collection

The initial phase of my research is quantitative, utilizing data from the 2018 General

Social Survey (GSS). The General Social Survey is a project of the independent research

organization NORC at the University of Chicago, with principal funding from the National

Science Foundation. The 2018 GSS is a nationally representative sample of sample size = 2348.

Participants were chosen through a random selection of households (via address) across the

United States, and from each household an adult was randomly chosen to participate. The

random selection of households allows for the GSS findings to be generalizable to the broader

U.S. population. Potential respondents were contacted by mail and email and asked to use the

login information provided to access the survey. Surveys were completed online, unless a

participant specifically requested to participate via phone, and took approximately 90 minutes to

complete online.

Measures

I utilized two survey questions to identify respondents who are both liberal and Christian.

To measure political identity, I looked at the survey question, "I'm going to show you a seven-

point scale on which the political views that people might hold are arranged from extremely

liberal--point 1--to extremely conservative--point 7. Where would you place yourself on this

scale?" For the purposes of my research, I categorized respondents ranking themselves "1 -

extremely liberal," "2 - liberal," and "3 - slightly liberal" as liberal. To measure religious identity, I used the survey question, "What is your religious preference?" and considered respondents who identify as "Protestant," "Catholic," "Christian," or "Orthodox-Christian" as Christian. I then used Stata to identify respondents who fall into both the "liberal" and "Christian" categories described and coded those respondents as "Liberal Christians." Other variables included for analysis as potential covariates were race, sex, income, education level, age, marital status, and spouse's religious preference (if applicable).

Analysis

Using the set of respondents identified as "Liberal Christians," I ran a set of descriptive analyses in Stata to determine the demographic characteristics of the liberal Christian population in the United States and which demographic characteristics were significantly related to the liberal Christian identity. I cross-tabulated the "liberal Christian" variable with each of my demographic variables to find the number of respondents in each response category of that variable who identified as liberal and Christian. Then, I ran a Pearson's chi squared test for each cross-tabulation to determine whether or not the relationship between the "Liberal Christian" identity and the demographic variable was significant, suggesting a dependent relationship, or if the two variables were independent. My null hypothesis for each variable was that the relationship between that variable and the "liberal Christian" identity variable was independent. If the p-value derived from the chi squared test was $p < 0.05$, I rejected the null hypothesis and considered there to be a dependent relationship. I describe the nature of that relationship for each variable pair where the chi squared test suggests a significant relationship.

Results

In the 2018 GSS data set, there were 2,344 individuals who answered both the political views question and the religious identity question. Of these individuals, 365, or 15.6% of the sample, were identified as both politically liberal and Christian based on the identification criteria listed above. The Pearson's chi squared tests I ran resulted in the following p-values for each potential covariate.

Table 1. Relationships Between "Liberal Christian" Identity and Demographic Variables

Variable	P-Value	Significant?
Race	<0.00001	Yes
Sex	0.688	No
Income	0.391	No
Education Level	0.002	Yes
Age	0.036	Yes
Marital Status	0.268	No
Spouse's Religious Preference	0.0002	Yes

The analysis shows that marital status, sex, and income did not have a significant relationship with the "liberal Christian" identity variable. For example, male respondents make up 43.8% of respondents who are liberal and Christian, 45.0% of respondents who are not liberal Christians, and 44.8% of the total respondents. As such, sex and "Liberal Christian" identity appear to be independent of each other, as the number of male vs female respondents is relatively consistent across identity categories. This conclusion is supported by the chi squared test, which returns a p value of $p=0.688$. This p-value is far greater than 0.05, so we accept the null hypothesis and conclude that sex and liberal Christian identity are independent.

Age group, education level, race, and the respondent's spouse's religious identity all were determined to have statistically significant variation with the "Liberal Christian" identity.

Racial identity was broken down into "White," "Black," and "Other," in the GSS survey data, and the analysis showed that Black respondents (26%) were overwhelmingly more likely to identify as both liberal and Christian than either white respondents (13%) or those that identified as "Other" (15%). "Other" had a marginally higher share of liberal Christians than white respondents as well. The p-value for race was $p < 0.00001$, far below $p = 0.05$, which suggests an extreme likelihood that the race and "Liberal Christian" variables are dependent. Specifically, the representation of Blacks in the Liberal Christian sample is far higher than in the overall population, while the representation of whites is much lower. *Chart 1* shows the percentage of respondents identifying as both liberal and Christian by racial identity.

Age of respondent also was shown to have a statistically significant relationship with being a liberal Christian, with the chi squared test returning a value of $p = 0.036$. *Chart 2* shows the percentage of respondents identifying as liberal and Christian by age group, with respondents age 65 and older (20%) having the highest share of liberal Christians, followed by 18-24 year olds (18%). These results are bimodal, with a lower share of individuals 25-64 identifying as liberal and Christian (12-14% depending on age group) than both the 18-24 year olds and the 65+ group.

Education level had a p value of 0.002, also suggesting that the difference between respondents identifying as liberal Christians or not by education level is also significant. The education findings were bimodal, with more liberal Christians in the groups with less than a high school diploma (18%) and those with a bachelor's degree or higher (19% of bachelor's degree holders and 20% of master's degree holders) than those with a high school diploma or some college. These results are shown in *Chart 3*.

Finally, the religious identity of the respondent's spouse was also shown to significantly influence whether the respondent identified as a liberal Christian. For this variable, the General Social Survey asked about the religious identity of the respondent's spouse, offering several religious traditions as options. I chose to code these response options the same way I coded the religious preference of respondents, and considered spouses who were identified as "Protestant," "Catholic," "Christian," or "Orthodox-Christian" to be Christian. From there, I found that the respondent was significantly more likely to be a liberal Christian if their spouse was also Christian (17%, compared to 7% of people with non-Christian spouses), with the chi squared test giving p=0.000165. The relationship between spouse's religious preference and the respondent identifying as a liberal Christian is shown in *Chart 4*.

Chart 1.

GSS 2018: Liberal Christian Identity by Race

Sample n = 2,344

Chart 2.

GSS 2018: Liberal Christian Identity by Age Group

Sample n = 2,344

Chart 3.

GSS 2018: Liberal Christian Identity by Education Level

Sample n = 2,344

Chart 4.

GSS 2018: Liberal Christian Identity by Spouse's Religious Identity
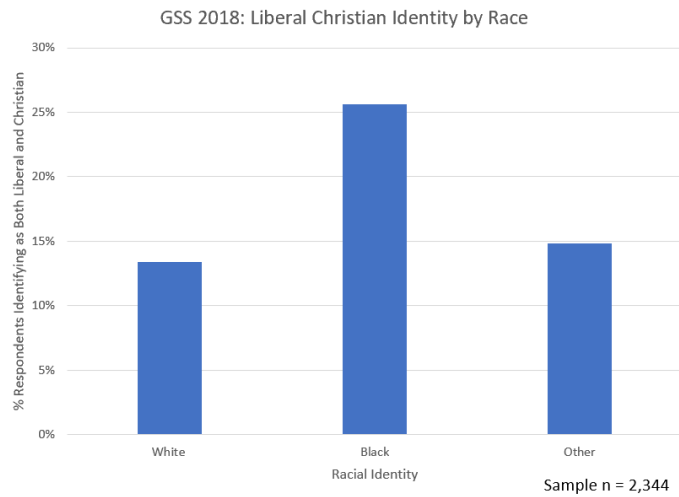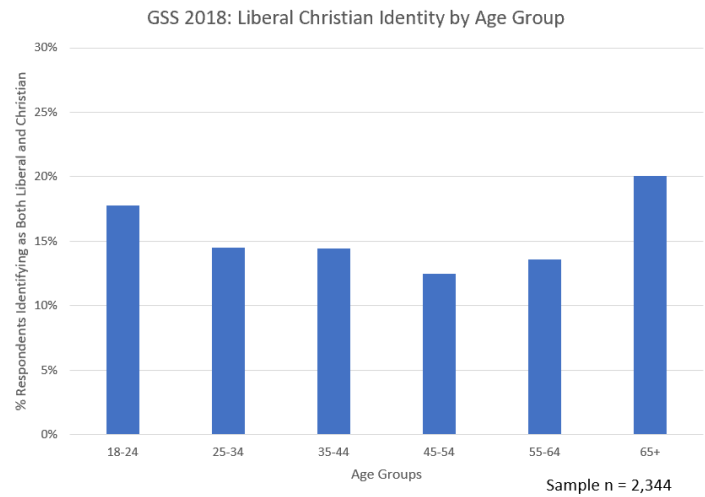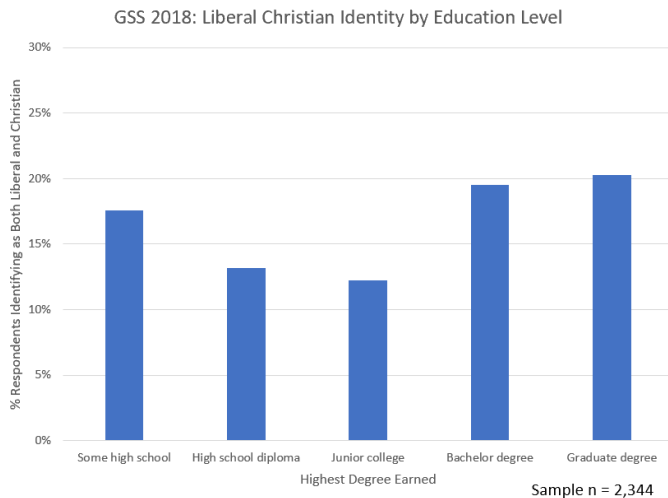
Sample n = 2,344
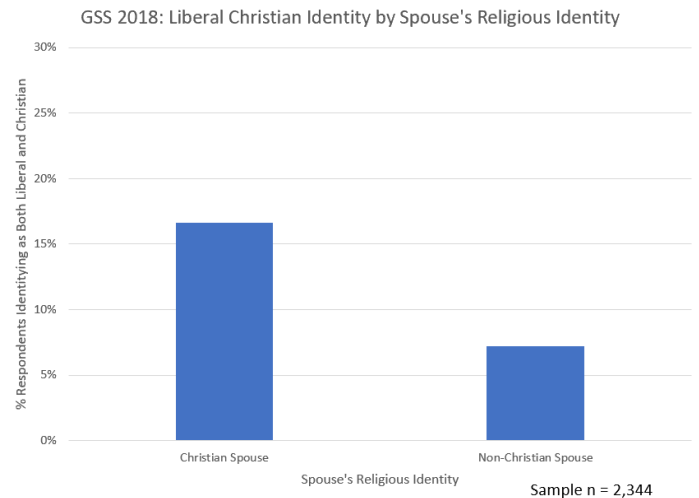
The results of Study 1 suggest a certain demographic profile of liberal Christian individuals in the United States. Liberal Christians are most likely to be Black or otherwise non-white, either ages 18-24 or 65+, have either no high school diploma or some level of higher education, and if married, have a spouse who also identifies as Christian. The group mirrors the general U.S. population on characteristics like sex, marital status, and income.

Discussion

  The 2018 General Social Survey is a nationally representative sample, and the data utilized from it in this study are recent, suggesting that the results obtained in this study are generalizable to the broader U.S. population. For each of the demographic variables analyzed, a distinct pattern emerged. For marital status, income level, and sex, there was not a significant difference between the distribution of liberal Christians across response categories and the overall distribution of people in the population.

  For race, non-white individuals were overrepresented in the "Liberal Christian" subset, particularly people who identified as Black. This is unsurprising given the long history of the Black church's engagement with theologies like liberation theology and the social gospel, both more progressive traditions than evangelicalism, as well as Black religious leaders' contributions to progressive social movements like the Civil Rights Movement. The race findings confirmed my first hypothesis for Study 1, which stated that non-white individuals would be more likely to identify as liberal Christians than their white counterparts.

  For age, 18–24-year-olds and 65+ individuals were overrepresented as liberal Christians compared to the overall population and were more likely to be both liberal and Christian than their 25–64-year-old peers. This did not match my second hypothesis, which stated that individuals 55 and older would be more likely to identify as both politically liberal and Christian than their younger counterparts. I formulated this hypothesis because I thought people who had grown up during the Civil Rights Movement and antiwar movements would be more receptive to the marriage of Christianity and political liberalism than those who grew up later, during and after the rise of the Religious Right. This rationale could still apply to the 65+ group, who would have been born in 1953 or younger, putting them in their teens or older during the 1960s social

movements. The higher representation of liberal Christians among 18–24-year-olds could suggest that younger generations may be pushing back against the conservative-Christian association that dominates the media, or that the increased progressivism of the younger generation simply means that there are few conservatives in the age group even among Christians, giving the group higher representation despite the increasing secularization of younger generations.

The education variable shows a particularly interesting pattern, as the least educated and most educated are the most likely to be liberal Christians. Past studies have shown that those who are college educated are more liberal than those who are not (Kurtzleben 2016), which could partially explain this result, but further research would be needed to fully make sense of this finding.

Finally, the data suggests that married respondents are more likely to be both liberal and Christian if their spouses are also Christian. Studies have indicated that people prefer to choose life partners who have similar values to them, including religious beliefs and political views (Masci 2016; Wang 2020). As such, it would make sense that people with Christian spouses are most likely also Christian themselves. The non- "Liberal Christian" category does not differentiate between people who are liberal but not Christian and people who are Christian but not liberal, so we cannot see how many respondents with Christian spouses are simply also Christian. Likely, many people with Christian spouses are also Christian, but not all are liberal; nonetheless, by making this pool of respondents a mostly Christian sample, the number of liberal Christians is increased.

The data from this study suggests a prototypical liberal Christian, but there are still individuals in this data set who are white, less educated, and ages 25-64 who also identify as

liberal and Christian. Additionally, the "liberal Christian" identity variable used in this study

draws on a rather broad definition of what it means to be liberal and what it means to be

Christian, so it is possible that the demographic characteristics explored here correlate with

certain more specific definitions of each of these identities that aren't captured in this analysis.

Ultimately, the analysis of study 1 suggests a broad demographic profile of progressive

Christians in the United States, which I will use to inform my sampling methods and analysis in

Study 2, which focuses on qualitative interviews with self-identified liberal Christians. I will also

use the qualitative study findings to dig deeper into some of the patterns uncovered in this study

to aid in further interpretation of these results.

Study 2: Qualitative Interviews with Liberal Christians About Identity Experiences

Methods

Sample

To develop a sample, I utilized a mixture of convenience and snowball sampling to the

Emory undergraduate, graduate, and faculty/staff community. My outreach aimed to connect

with individuals who were likely to be both progressive and Christian by targeting groups and

programs of study affiliated with Christianity or political progressivism. These groups included:

Religion majors, Political Science majors, Candler School of Theology students, the Religion

and Public Health Collaborative, political student groups, and Christian student organizations

chartered at Emory. Outreach occurred via email to such groups, and these groups were asked to

share the research participation opportunity, specifically the eligibility screening survey, which

was also used to indicate interest in participating, with members via email or announcements at

in person group meetings (*Appendix 1*). I asked relevant organizations to publicize this

opportunity to their members 2-3 times over a period of a few weeks, to allow as many potential

respondents as possible to see the participation opportunity. Convenience and snowball sampling were also used, as I recruited participants from my own social networks and asked interviewees to share the research opportunity with people they knew who also qualified. In particular, one interviewee, who worked with a campus ministry at Emory for undergraduate students, distributed the research materials to her network, which included Emory alumni and attendees of her previous congregation. This generated several responses. This use of snowball sampling greatly increased the diversity of my sample, particularly along age lines.

To determine eligibility for the in-depth interviews, I created an eligibility survey in the Qualtrics platform and distributed it via the channels outlined previously. The survey instrument (*Appendix 2*) was aimed at ensuring potential participants identified as both liberal and Christian. As such, the survey asked the participant if they self-identified as Christian and asked their religious denomination: Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox, or other. I recognize that this is a relatively broad measure of Christian identity, and that respondents may mean very different things when they say they identify as "Christian." I considered making this measure of Christian identity more specific, possibly through adding a question about religious activity participation and only including individuals who met a certain participation threshold eligible. However, I chose to use a relatively broad measure in hopes that my study would include a range of identity negotiation strategies. Specifically, I hoped that the broad measure of Christianity would lead to a sample including people who were heavily religious and minimally political, people who were minimally religious and heavily political, and people in between these two extremes. I worried that if I made the measure of Christian identity more specific, I would unintentionally exclude individuals who chose to prioritize their political identity over their religious identity. Therefore,

my measure of Christianity included only a yes/no self-identification, rather than adding a religious activity threshold.

To gauge if respondents identify as politically liberal, I asked them to rank their political views on the same 7-point liberal to conservative scale used in the GSS survey. I also ask them to describe any party identification on a 7-point scale (1 - Strongly Democratic to 7 - Strongly Republican). Individuals who answered, "Strongly liberal," "liberal," or "slightly liberal," were considered liberal for eligibility purposes. Again, this broad measure of liberal identity was meant to create a sample with a range of identity experiences.

Finally, I gathered information on demographic characteristics such as age, gender, marital status, income level, race, and education. This allowed me to compare the demographic makeup of my sample to the demographic profile of liberal Christians in America derived from Study 1. I also collected respondents' names and contact information for use in scheduling the interviews.

In total, 22 people filled out the eligibility screening to express interest in participating in the study. Of these, I conducted interviews with 15 individuals. Three respondents were excluded from the study because they did not meet the eligibility criteria (one was not a Christian, and two identified as politically conservative). Four others didn't respond to attempts to schedule an interview during the interview timeframe.

In designing my study, I had hoped to use the results from the Study 1 analysis to construct a nonrandom sample, with representation across age groups, racial groups, gender, education level, marital status, and income level commensurate with the representation in the "liberal Christian" group identified in the GSS data. However, the limited number of respondents as well as the constraints of my sampling pool meant it was difficult for me to intentionally

select cases based on these demographic characteristics. As such, I instead interviewed all individuals who met the eligibility criteria and responded to scheduling requests within the interview timeframe.

Data Collection Method & Measures

Interview Procedures

Eligibility screenings were reviewed on a rolling basis throughout the interview timeframe, and those who indicated that they identified as both politically liberal and Christian were contacted to schedule an interview. Individuals were sent the consent form and scheduling information via email. Emails were encrypted to ensure document security and protect participants' privacy. Participants chose an interview time via Calendly, an online scheduling platform. All interviews took place via Zoom.

At the beginning of each interview, I reviewed the consent form with the participant, addressed any questions or concerns raised by the participant, and obtained verbal consent for study participation and to record the interview. Participants were reminded that they could ask to skip a question or end the interview at any time if they did not feel comfortable answering. Before the recording commenced, I worked with each participant to choose a pseudonym to be referred to by in all study materials. The interviews were conducted with a semi-structured format following an interview guide *(Appendix 3)* and lasted 25-45 minutes. Participants were be asked open-ended questions about topics such as: experiences where they felt their identity as liberal, Christian, or both was invalidated by others; their emotional response(s) to that experience of identity discrepancy; their behavioral response to such experience(s); which identity they hold as most important to them now; reasons why that identity holds such importance; and spaces where they feel one or more of these identities are verified currently. The

subject was discussed in everyday terms whenever possible, and relevant sociological terms were

defined for participants. Participants were also be asked about their religious and political

activities within the past year. Additionally, participants were presented with and asked to briefly

comment on data from Study 1 showing the prevalence of the joint liberal-Christian identity by

age group. These procedures were approved by the Emory University Institutional Review

Board.

Analysis

All interviews were recorded via Zoom and transcribed verbatim using the Otter.ai

software. Once the transcription process was completed, all Zoom recordings were deleted to

help protect participants' privacy. The data was then analyzed using the MAXQDA qualitative

analysis software.

I used a combination of inductive and deductive qualitative research techniques because

my research questions are both derived from existing theory and in other ways seek to expand

existing research. I created an initial list of descriptive codes to help identify topics discussed

during the interview based on my interview questions. This was primarily to help me find areas

of the transcripts to focus on during later stages of coding. Examples of descriptive codes used

include *Christian identity, political identity, prioritized identity* (the identity participants

indicated was most important to them), and *disconfirmation experience* (an interaction where the

participant said they felt one or more of their identities was invalidated by someone else). I also

created a list of deductive codes based on the theory discussed in my literature review. These

codes were largely related to theoretical concepts about identity verification and identity

negotiation strategies. Examples of deductive codes include *mutual verification space* (a space

where the participant is interacting with others who share that same identity) and

disidentification (the participant tries to distance themself from how the person they are interacting with perceives "Christians" or "liberals"). Each of these codes had sub-codes to indicate if it related to the interviewee's Christian identity, political identity, or joint identity as both Christian and politically liberal. Inductive codes were developed when themes I had not anticipated became apparent during the coding process. All interviews were then coded to look for these themes. An example of an inductive code is *political views are informed by faith*, where participants talked about how their religious beliefs led to their liberal political views.

Finally, I also categorized each interviewee along three dimensions: prioritized identity, identity most commonly represented in the participants' social network, and identity that causes the participant the most emotional distress when invalidated.

Interviewees were categorized as prioritizing their Christian identity if they said their Christian identity was the most important to how they saw themselves and categorized as prioritizing their liberal identity if they said their political identity was most important to them. Interviewees were categorized as prioritizing both identities if they said they could not choose which was most important or if they discussed one identity incorporating the other in their explanation of why one identity was most important.

For the social network categorization, the options were: primarily engaged in a politically liberal social groups/spaces, primarily engaged in Christian social groups/spaces, or engaged in liberal Christian groups/spaces. Participants were categorized as primarily engaged in a network related to one identity if they indicated many organizational affiliations and activities related to one identity relative to the other. Participants were categorized as engaged in liberal Christian group/spaces if they discussed groups/activities they considered to be both liberal and Christian

and/or if they had an approximately equal amount of religious and political activities/organizations.

Identity that causes the participant the most emotional distress when invalidated was categorized based on the identity discussed in response to the question, "describe an experience in which your identity as politically liberal, as a Christian, or as both was in some ways invalidated by someone you were interacting with." The options were liberal identity discussed, Christian identity discussed, or liberal Christian identity discussed. The identity disconfirmation experience discussed in the interview is used as a proxy for the intensity of emotional response to invalidation because research suggests that emotionally intense experiences are more likely to be recalled (Kensinger 2009).

Results

Interview Sample

The individuals I interviewed for Study 2 came from a variety of different backgrounds. The most represented age group was 18–24-year-olds, with 12 of the 15 respondents in that age group. The three respondents outside of this age group were 25, 38, and 39 years old. The sample was roughly even in gender distribution, with eight female respondents, six male respondents (one of whom was trans), and one individual who identified as non-binary/gender non-conforming. Racially, the sample was majority white, with six respondents of color. The respondents of color included three Black people, one Latinx individual, one Indian individual, and one Asian individual. A majority of respondents were current undergraduate students or had recently obtained their bachelor's degree, and the remaining respondents were all either currently in graduate school or had their master's degree; all had completed at least some college. Only two of the fifteen respondents were married; the rest were single and had never been married.

Income levels ranged greatly, with a roughly equal number of respondents reporting annual incomes of less than $30,000 a year, $30,000 - $75,000, $75,000 - $150,000, and greater than $150,00 a year. The eligibility survey failed to ask about sexual orientation, but four individuals self-identified as part of the LGBTQ+ community during their interviews, with one trans individual and three who identified as gay/lesbian. It is possible other respondents identified as LGBTQ+ as well but did not bring it up in their interviews. Table 2 shows the demographic information of each respondent.

Table 2. Demographics of Study 2 Sample

Respondent	Age	Gender	Race	Education Level	Income Level	Marital Status	Sexual Orientation (if mentioned in interviews)
Alice	20	Female	White	Current undergraduate	>$150K	Single/Never Married	N/A
Jay	22	Trans Male	Asian	Current undergraduate	>$150K	Single/Never Married	Trans
Miriam	24	Female	Black	Current graduate student	$30K - $75K	Single/Never Married	N/A
Sophie	21	Female	White	Current undergraduate	$75K - $150K	Single/Never Married	N/A
Zach	22	Male	White	Bachelor's Degree	<$30K	Single/Never Married	N/A
Hannah	39	Female	White	Master's Degree	$30K - $75K	Married	N/A
Jack	22	Male	Hispanic/ Latino	Current graduate student	$75K - $150K	Single/Never Married	N/A
Caleb	24	Male	White	Bachelor's Degree	<$30K	Single/Never Married	N/A
Cass	21	Female	White	Current undergraduate	$30K - $75K	Single/Never Married	N/A
Olivia	19	Female	White	Current undergraduate	$30K - $75K	Single/Never Married	N/A
Edward	38	Male	White	Master's Degree	$75K - $150K	Married	Gay

Ethan	22	Male	Indian	Current undergraduate	Prefer Not to Say	Single/Never Married	N/A
Celeste	20	Female	Black	Current undergraduate	<$30K	Single/Never Married	N/A
Ava	25	Female	White	Master's Degree	Prefer Not to Say	Single/Never Married	Lesbian
Sam	21	Non-Binary	Black	Current undergraduate	<$30K	Single/Never Married	Lesbian/Queer

Respondents were also categorized across three dimensions based on their responses to interview questions. Table 3 shows the identity respondents saw as most important to their self-concept (prioritized identity), the identity most represented in their social networks and organizational affiliations (social network), and the identity discussed when asked about an experience of identity discrepancy (strongest emotional response to invalidation). The process for categorizing respondents was described in the methods section.

Table 3. Identity Categories of Study 2 Respondents

Name	Prioritized Identity	Social Network	Strongest Emotional Response to Invalidation
Alice	Liberal	Liberal	Both (Separately)
Jay	Liberal	Liberal	Christian
Miriam	Liberal	Liberal	Christian
Sophie	Liberal Christian	Liberal Christian	Liberal
Zach	Liberal	Christian	Both (Separately)
Hannah	Liberal Christian	Liberal Christian	Christian
Jack	Christian	Christian	Liberal
Caleb	Christian	Christian	Liberal
Cass	Liberal Christian	Liberal Christian	Liberal
Olivia	Christian	Christian	Liberal
Edward	Christian	Liberal Christian	Liberal Christian
Ethan	Christian	Christian	Liberal Christian
Celeste	Liberal Christian	Christian	Liberal Christian
Ava	Liberal Christian	Liberal Christian	Liberal Christian
Sam	Liberal	Liberal	Christian

Commentary on Bimodal Age Distribution of Liberal Christians

During the interviews I conducted with liberal Christian individuals, I shared the age

distribution data from Study 1 *(Appendix 5)* with participants and asked them to share their

thoughts on the data. Several respondents, particularly the undergraduate students I interviewed,

were deeply surprised that the 65+ age group had the highest share of liberal Christians. Sophie,

a 21-year-old white undergraduate student, shared that she was surprised by the liberal Christian

tendencies of the 65+ group because it didn't align with her own experiences.

> I think it's really interesting that it also peaks with the 65+ group, because, like, I have a
> lot of Christian conservative family in that age range. And like my parents who are in the
> like 45 to 54 age range are more liberal.

College student Cass expressed similar sentiments, sharing:

> I grew up in a very conservative Christian church where the majority of people are older.
> And I personally do not know anyone who is older like 65 plus and identifies as liberal so
> that was shocking to me, especially because news portrayals often portray the older
> generation as much more conservative compared to the younger generation. So that was
> most striking to me.

These college students were significantly less surprised by the prevalence of the liberal

Christian identity among their 18–24-year-old peers. Sophie shared that the data for that age

group made sense to her because of her own experiences as someone in that age range.

> I think it makes a lot of sense to me that 18-24 is one of those peaks in the liberal
> Christian intersection. Just because I know that a lot of people in my social circles, at
> least, identify with being both liberal and Christian, and so it makes sense to me that that
> would be one of the higher peaks. I think that especially there's been a lot of people
> recently trying to figure out how Christianity and politics intersect in our age group, so it
> makes a lot of sense to me that you would find that.

The two older respondents (in my sample, ages 38-39), in contrast, appeared to be less

surprised by the share of liberal Christians in the 65+ age group, but more surprised by the 18–

24-year-old findings. Edward, who is 38, shared:

The 65+ was a little surprising too, but I can see that convergence. And I live in Southern California, so the older church folk that I interact with are... tend to be to the left of center. So it the 65 plus is surprising, but not as surprising to my experience as [the 18-24-year-olds].

One factor that appeared to mediate the interpretation of these findings was personal anecdotes and connections to individuals who either confirmed or challenged the data. Jack, for example, is a 24-year-old graduate student and was one of the only 18- to 24-year-olds who didn't express surprise at the share of liberal Christians who were 65+. He said,

So both my parents are conservative Christian - good people, but you know I've sort of of course kind of skewed a bit more left within my beliefs. But also my grandparents are democrats, they're Christian Democrats, so like seeing that like 65 plus age group, like seeing that dip in the middle where like my parents are but seeing that height at the age of my grandparents is kind of interesting to see… It's just interesting to kind of see that shown in data. I've always just thought it was just kind of anecdotal but maybe there's something there that you've stumbled upon.

Sam, similarly, leveraged their personal experiences to help make sense of the trends they saw in the data. While initially surprised by the frequency of liberal Christian 65+ individuals, they used their own experiences with their family members to make sense of how older individuals might come to be more liberal.

I feel like [the data] shows how people can change over time. And maybe like, while they're aging, and getting to know younger people, they're like, oh, I want to accept my grandkids, or the people that I love. And so they start to become more liberal. I know that happened with my mom, because she was super homophobic. And then she was like, oh, okay, I love you, nevermind. And now she identifies as Christian and liberal. And she's 60.

This quote suggests that older persons began as more conservative and became more liberal as they aged. However, it is also possible that this age cohort was always more liberal, perhaps because of the time period they grew up in. The latter explanation seems more plausible, given that those who are 65+ would have grown up during the Civil Rights and antiwar movements, which combined Christian thought with progressive activism.

In general, the individuals I interviewed, who were mostly 18-24 years old, were largely surprised by the age distribution of liberal Christians in America, suggesting that the public perception of who is liberal and Christian does not accurately reflect the population. Particularly, respondents seemed surprised that the 65+ group had such a high share of liberal Christians because they expected older generations to be conservative, while for 18–24-year-olds the surprise stemmed from an expectation that that age group is predominantly liberal but nonreligious. These reactions can provide insight into the nuances of the public perceptions about the political/religious identity intersection that could help explain the challenges liberal Christians face in achieving identity verification.

Challenges Identifying as Liberal and Christian

As expected, nearly all of the study participants indicated facing challenges navigating interactions as someone who identified as both politically liberal and as a Christian. A majority of study participants recounted encountering skepticism, surprise, and judgement from individuals who didn't understand how they could identify as both liberal and Christian. Ethan, a college student, recounted experiences in high school where his peers couldn't understand his liberal identity because of his Christianity.

> I was teased a lot about being a liberal and a Christian and, and I was often called, like a fake Christian by some of my Christian friends. We're not my friends anymore, because, I don't know... it was really bad. But at my high school, like there were many times when I was called, like, a fake Christian, because I'm a liberal. And I just want to like, you know, all these, like, cliche lines, like, Oh, you're going to kill babies in the womb, blah, blah, blah, like really like nasty stuff. So I would say like, the main experience was like, kind of being teased because they would group together like, if you're a liberal, you're not a true Christian.

Other interviewees encountered similar backlash towards their joint liberal-Christian identity. Sam, a non-binary queer individual, shared that people didn't understand that they could be both Christian and queer, an identity they closely associated with their liberalness. They

encountered this type of invalidation from both liberal individuals and Christian individuals in

different ways, sharing:

> And like [liberal] people being like, you can't be Christian because the Christians will
> hate you for who you are. Or like, [Christians saying] but you shouldn't be gay because
> you're Christian.

Due to these types of reactions, many study participants suggested feeling some degree of

wariness about sharing that they identified as a politically liberal Christian. Several expressed a

hesitancy to voice their political views in religious spaces, seemingly to avoid misunderstanding

or conflict. Miriam, a Black leftist graduate student, discussed her experiences attending

churches that took traditionally conservative stances on political issues such as LGBTQ+ rights

and abortion. When asked if she brought up her own political views in such settings, she shared,

> I usually don't talk to other people about that because church spaces tend to be pretty
> determined on like what their sets of beliefs are, and I think it's easier to just try to find a
> church that has a set of beliefs that better aligns with yours.

Another interviewee, Zach, a recent college graduate working at a Christian organization,

expressed a similar hesitancy to share his liberal political views in certain Christian churches he

had attended. In addition to avoiding conflict, perceptions of if sharing one's opinions will

change people's minds also seems to play an important role. In her response, Miriam pointed out

that part of her discomfort in sharing her views was because "church spaces tend to be pretty set

in their ways." Similarly, undergraduate student Olivia shared that in her home congregation, a

conservative Southern church, she felt like her views weren't heard or respected because of her

youth. As such, she eventually stopped sharing her more liberal views on topics such as

LGBTQ+ rights.

Other respondents indicated similar experiences sharing about their Christian identity

with people who were politically liberal. College student Celeste shares that,

For my [liberal] friends, it's really hard to talk about being Christian. Because if you're liberal than you, like for them, if you're liberal, you shouldn't be Christian. It's just like, you pick one or the other.

Several study participants indicated encounters with liberal friends who had trouble understanding why they identified as Christian because of their political views. While individuals who spoke about Christian spaces and sharing their political views largely responded by either no longer bringing up their political views or by finding a more politically liberal church, the responses to pushback about their Christian identity by liberal peers was more varied. Miriam, who is active in politically leftist spaces, shared that,

Being a Christian and like politically leftist spaces is like slightly awkward. I think particularly there are some like - particularly left of democrat spaces, where, you know, like falling into like Marxist tradition or stuff like that, like and also anti-imperial like traditions, where the relationship between like people of color and Christianity can sometimes be seen as sort of oppressive or colonial or things like that... And so I think that there is more critique of Christianity in those spaces… When people critique Christianity I don't feel invalidated because, even though I am a Christian I don't feel… If the critique of Christianity is correct, like, I know that, and I hope that I am avoiding those things too.

For Miriam, her experiences facing critiques of Christianity in liberal spaces felt valid, as they aligned with her own critiques of Christianity. Another respondent, Sophie, encountered similar critiques of her Christianity by liberal peers, and described her response as focused on educating them about her views on Christianity. In this way, her response mirrored Miriam's by acknowledging the flaws of the institutional church that people were critiquing but separates her personal experience of faith from those critiques. Other respondents felt more frustrated or discouraged by challenges to their Christian identity. Ethan describes initially pushing back against peers who said he couldn't be both Christian and liberal, but eventually just tried to ignore their comments when it became clear his peers wouldn't listen. Celeste similarly talked about keeping her Christian identity and activities separate from her relationship with her liberal

friends. Other respondents indicated careful consideration of the ways they framed their

Christianity or when they brought it up in more liberal circles. Hannah, a woman in her late 30s

who is an ordained pastor, notes that it can take her awhile to share her Christian identity in

liberal spaces, though she does usually do so after a bit of time.

> Generally, when I meet people in strictly social or political settings, it usually takes me a while to admit that I am a pastor, because I kind of have to feel the waters out to be like, okay, is this okay for me to identify myself as Christian.

Edward, also in his 30s and pursuing a pastoral career, expresses similar sentiments.

> As a person who will eventually be doing some form of pastoral ministry and does pastoral ministry right now, I do feel a need - because in most of those spaces, people are politically liberal - I do feel the need to kind of like, put an asterisk behind things. Like, yeah, I go to church, and yeah, I do pastoring here and there. But I'm, I'm spiritual and religious, or... I put out a lot of feelers for like... How can I present my open ended religiousness and spirituality in a way that's non-threatening? I feel like that's important. But I also feel like that's defensive in some ways.

Ultimately, most respondents expressed a consciousness about potential confusion or

judgement they might face in interactions as a politically progressive Christian and utilized a

range of strategies for navigating such encounters. In general, there seemed to be a larger variety

of responses in how people responded to challenges to their liberal Christian identity in political

spaces than in religious ones. Of the respondents who talked about experiences in non-liberal

Christian settings, most responded by limiting the ways they expressed their liberal identity or by

leaving the community. When navigating how to express their Christian identity in liberal

spaces, strategies employed included limiting the times in which Christianity was brought up, but

also included tactics such as framing, education, and recognizing the validity of critiques of

Christianity. This could suggest that there is a more deeply ingrained association between

Christianity and conservatism among Christians than among non-religious progressives.

Several people also highlighted how aware they were of stereotypes about Christians, and how that created additional challenges in navigating interactions with others. Metastereotypes are the stereotypes a group member has about the way their group is stereotypically seen by non-group members (Vorauer et al. 1998). A common metastereotype that arose from my interviews was the idea that Christians are seen as conservative, close-minded, and self-centered. Jay shared:

> I've definitely felt invalidated like in terms of people being very dismissive of [Christian] beliefs I hold because they associate [Christians] so closely with like homophobic racists and like bigots.

Miriam added that she thought her liberal peers saw Christians as having a "persecution complex," even though the issues they cited were largely frivolous, such as people saying "happy holidays" instead of "merry Christmas." Cass was deeply concerned by the reputation of Christians, particularly the way the group was presented by the media in political contexts and saw that perception as limiting her ability to express her joint liberal-Christian identity.

> I think it's also really difficult being both a liberal and a Christian given the reputation of Christians in the media. Because my politics are so informed by my faith, and my faith is such an important part of my life, that I hate the portrayal of Christians and honestly other actions that very conservative Christians have taken to discourage people from my faith that is so important to me. And to discredit both of my identities.

She went on, describing public examples of Christians centering their individual rights over public safety measures and participating in displays of Christian nationalism, which is associated with white supremacy and narrow views of who is actually "American" (Whitehead and Perry 2020:74). Throughout my interviews, when people brought up Christians as a general group, they described them as conservative, intolerant of queer people, and at odds with the respondents' liberal identities. Respondents also reported that their liberal friends were surprised or confused at the fact that they were both liberal and Christian, suggesting that they believed

their friends saw the two as mutually exclusive. These metastereotypes of Christians likely play a role in the frequency of identity discrepancy experiences the liberal Christians I interviewed reported, as identity discrepancy occurs when there's a mismatch between how you perceive yourself and how you think other people perceive you. Respondents who showed an awareness of the metastereotypes about Christians and the ways they conflicted with the liberal identity often attempted to engage in disidentification work to distance themselves from "those Christians." For example, Hannah and Edward, both involved in pastoral work, discussed conscious efforts to frame their Christianity in a more palatable way or "adding an asterisk" when bringing their faith up in order to make their faith more understandable to liberal peers.

Disconfirmation Experiences

In the interviews, each participant was asked to recount a specific experience in which they felt like their identity as politically liberal, as Christian, or as both was in some way invalidated by another person. Most individuals were easily able to come up with at least one experience to share, though three respondents indicated having trouble coming up with specific encounters and instead discussed more general patterns of interaction. Respondents were mixed in terms of what identity they discussed having invalidated. Four respondents spoke about instances where their identity specifically as a progressive Christian was invalidated, two shared multiple instances and covered both political and religious identities separately, four spoke about experiences in which their Christian identity was invalidated, and five spoke about experiences in which their liberal identity was invalidated.

These responses partially confirm my first expectation, which stated that politically liberal Christians would experience identity discrepancy when sharing that they are both politically liberal and a Christian, and that such experiences would elicit negative emotions.

Every individual interviewed had experiences of identity discrepancy related to either their political or religious identity; however not all described experiences specifically related to the intersection of the two. Instead, the majority of respondents spoke about instances where one component of their liberal Christian identity received backlash, without the other explicitly coming up. While the identity challenged in an interaction is largely context-dependent, it is significant that respondents chose to recount instances of invalidation of only one of the identities, rather than the joint identity standard, particularly in a study focused on the intersection of the two identities.

Respondents who described having their identity as a liberal Christian invalidated largely spoke about encountering skepticism or disbelief that they could hold both identities. Celeste, for example, faced backlash from conservative Christian family members when expressing her support for the LGBTQ+ community (a traditionally liberal political position). Ava similarly described experiences where people tried to force her to choose between her Christian faith and her liberalness, particularly around her queer identity and belief in gender equality.

> I have often been invalidated by, you know, conservative Christians on like, that... It's not possible for you to be queer and a pastor. The most, you know, conservative would say, it's not possible for you to be a woman and a pastor.

Ava remembers receiving Facebook messages from conservative Christian acquaintances asking her to explain her "liberal theology" and expressing concern and judgement in turn. Ethan also faced judgement from conservative Christians in his life, who insisted it was impossible to be both liberal and Christian, going as far as to call him a "fake Christian." Across the board, the main emotional responses to these invalidating experiences were shock, anger, and hurt.

Behavioral responses fell into two main categories: Ethan, Edward, and Celeste all recounted feelings of helplessness and not knowing how best to respond, ultimately choosing not

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to force further conversation. Ava said she shared resources with individuals who asked

questions about her liberal Christian identity, allowing them to learn more if they were genuinely

curious, but personally wouldn't continue the conversation as it was often harmful to her own

mental health.

Five study participants spoke about experiences in which they were judged or faced

invalidation because of their liberal identity. For most of these individuals (four out of five), the

source of invalidation was from family members who shared their religious identity but were

politically conservative rather than liberal. Cass, an undergraduate student, talks about facing

judgement and ostracization for her liberal views while among family members.

> I have a grandma who is very, very conservative… We were going to have a zoom call
> with our whole extended family, and oftentimes my grandmother will bring up politics.
> My mom had explicitly asked my grandma to not bring up politics, and she definitely
> brought up politics, and it was just me defending [my liberal political views] to the rest of
> my family…

Sophie similarly described facing judgement and experiencing tension with a more

conservative family member. She described a long car ride with her grandfather where he

brought up topics such as gender identity and affirmative action in attempts to goad her into a

conflict.

> He refused to accept my beliefs… he was pushing so hard to get me to like come into
> conflict with him about it, so that he could prove that he was right.

Jack and Olivia described similar experiences where a more conservative family member

either didn't understand or judged them for their political views on topics such as racism and

LGBTQ+ rights. For all four individuals, these interactions elicited negative emotions such as

frustration, hurt, and confusion. The most common behavioral response was to stop discussing

their political opinions with the family members they faced such invalidation from. Olivia

explained that she initially kept pressing her views to try to get her family members to see things from her perspective, but eventually stopped because she didn't feel like it was effective.

> I think at the beginning, I, you know, continue to press it. But then as I kind of realized that there was nothing really that was gonna change… I just kind of stopped, like engaging in those conversations with him, you know, because it just kind of led to further conflict that I didn't want to have to deal with.

Jack similarly expressed that he chose not to push his conservative Christian father into a conversation about race when the topic came up because he felt he couldn't force his family to be open-minded. Sophie similarly expressed that she would engage in conversation if it would be "productive," but that she wouldn't with her grandfather because of his unwillingness to respect her point of view. Cass, the only respondent who indicated she continues to bring up politics with the conservative family members who try to invalidate her liberal identity, still expressed a desire to limit political conversations because of the conflict it could bring.

> My behavior did not change, especially with my nuclear family because I believe that those issues are important to stand up for, especially if I am one of the only people who identifies as liberal within my family. It's an important perspective to have. With my extended family, I've learned over time to be more gracious with politics and to avoid bringing it up because of the conflict that it would cause between us, especially because I so rarely see them.

Other respondents spoke about the invalidation of their Christian identity. For Hannah, Miriam, and Jay, some of this invalidation came from liberal peers who didn't understand the basis of their Christian faith. Jay describes liberal friends wondering why he was Christian,

> Because they know that I'm not hardcore Republican like the stereotypical like God-fearing American.

Hannah and Miriam also faced skepticism in liberal circles about their Christian faith, largely because of perceptions of Christianity as harmful or judgmental. According to Hannah, in conversations with liberal acquaintances,

It's not about me being a Christian… the most conflict that I have is that they have a hard time understanding me being religious at all. And there's a sense of wanting to argue about particularly the hurts and traumas, and really horrible things that the Christian church has done historically up to this point. I often have to have a lot of conversations about the nuance of Christianity.

Unlike the previous group of respondents, who all described experiences where individuals who did not share their liberalness invalidated their liberal identity, some respondents who talked about the invalidation of their Christian identity felt invalidated by other Christians. For two respondents, Sam and Jay, who both identify as queer, their queer identity appeared to be the main reason other Christians challenged their Christianity. Jay, a trans man, shared:

I used to be friends with a lot of church people, but I moved away from them because they kind of had a lot of judgment when it came to me being queer and I was just like I'm not dealing with this.

Sam also shared experiences not being accepted by Christian family and friends after they were outed, an experience that pushed them away from their faith for several years.

Across respondents, the experiences of invalidation shared elicited negative emotions, primarily anger, shock, and hurt. The most common behavioral response was to try to end the conversation and to either avoid future conversations about the identity in question or to remove themselves from the group/relationship. A minority of respondents responded by trying to educate their conversation partner or change their mind about the identity being discussed. This is consistent with identity theory, which posits that inconsistency between how an individual sees their identity and how they believe others perceive their identity will cause discomfort and distress. Identity theory suggests that if the lack of identity verification persists, the individual will either seek out other sources of identity verification (leave the group/relationship), try to change the mind of the person they are interacting with (educate them about the identity), or change how they present their identity to reduce inconsistency (stop talking about that identity in

this context). The experiences and responses described by interviewees in this study are consistent with the emotional and behavioral responses predicted by identity theory.

I initially expected that these identity discrepancy experiences would arise specifically in relation to the joint identity of being both liberal and Christian, given the predominant association between Christianity and conservatism in the public mind. However, over 2/3 of respondents spoke about challenges to the individual identity standards, rather than to the joint identity. For those who spoke about the invalidation of their Christian identity, the experiences shared were focused around the idea that the person couldn't be Christian either because of their liberal beliefs or because of their queer identity (an identity often associated with liberalness). As such, the root of their invalidation seems to still in some way be connected to challenges understanding the coexistence of Christianity and political liberalism. For individuals who shared about their liberal identity being invalidated, however, the experiences shared focused solely on their liberalness.

The focus on individual identities rather than the joint identities challenged my first expectation, which was that progressive Christians would face challenges with identity verification specifically because of their joint identity. While this was true to at least some extent for some study participants, four out of fifteen (27%) spoke specifically about the invalidation of their liberal identity entirely independent of their Christianity. Rather than pushing back at the idea that they were liberal because of their Christianity or that they were Christian because of their liberalness, these four all detailed experiences where family members judged their political liberalness simply because they disliked their politics. Their experiences of identity discrepancy arose not out of the "conservative Christian" association but instead out of negative perceptions of politically liberal people. This suggests that the tensions liberal Christians experience when

negotiating these two identities may not solely stem from challenges understanding their coexistence, but also from bias against one part of the joint identity.

Mutual Verification Spaces

My second expectation was that the availability of mutual verification contexts for each of the identities studied will be a major contributing factor in determining which identity becomes most important for a progressive Christian. Mutual verification contexts are social spaces where an individual can interact with other individual(s) who share their same identity, thus allowing both individuals involved to easily verify that identity standard in their interaction (Burke and Stets 2005). Mutual verification spaces can be formal organizations centered around a certain identity or less formal social structures such as friend groups. For the context of my study, I considered organizational affiliations and descriptions of the interviewee's social network makeup to be indicators of available mutual verification spaces. Based on these indicators, my data largely supports the idea that available mutual verification spaces will lead to increased identity prominence. For 12 out of 15 interviewees (80%), the identity they said was most important to them correlated with the identity that was most represented in their social network makeup. Two respondents' responses partially supported this expectation, with the mutual verification spaces available to them relating to at least part of their prioritized identity. For Celeste, her predominantly Christian network supported at least the Christian component of her prioritized joint identity. For Edward, his predominantly liberal Christian network affirmed his Christian identity, though he described his Christian identity as more important to his self-concept than his liberal identity.

Only one respondent, Zach, reported a mismatch between the mutual verification spaces available to him and the identity most important to his self-concept. When asked which identity was most important to how he saw himself, Zach shared:

> **Zach:** I'd say liberal is more inherent to how I view myself. Simply because I feel it gives more... it gives more of a definition to how I view the world on a base level than necessarily Christian does.
> **Interviewer:** Gotcha. Can you tell me a little bit more about that?
> **Zach:** I feel as if when you say you're liberal, it gives more of an idea to people of what you believe and who you are than necessarily saying you're Christian.

Zach described his social network as made up of both liberal and Christian friends, attends a Christian church and small group, and works at a Christian organization. This job strongly influences his social network makeup, as several of his close contacts are affiliated with the group and his job strongly encourages him to attend church. While not involved in many political organizations, his church is strongly affirming of the LGBTQ+ community, so I would classify it as a liberal Christian mutual verification space. Though his network leans Christian, his liberal identity is certainly also represented in his options for mutual verification spaces.

Several interviewees also spoke explicitly about their experiences with or gratitude for mutual verification contexts, particularly those who saw their joint liberal-Christian identity as the most important to them. Cass spoke at length about how her friendships with other people who identified as politically progressive Christians, as well as her involvement at a liberal Christian campus ministry, The Garden, supported the development of her joint identity.

> I live with three other roommates who identify as both liberal and Christian. I believe a lot of the people at The Garden, my campus ministry, also identify as liberal and Christian. And I believe that those spaces are spaces where we can raise current political issues and react to them and process them together because we have this common ground of both our faith and our political beliefs. And therefore we know that we're on the same page and we can like learn together and grow together and keep each other accountable. There have been several conversations I've had with friends, like, how do we address this issue? Or like, how can I incorporate my faith into what I'm believing here? A lot of my close friends are also liberal and Christian. Um, those spaces feel very validating for me.

They feel like a space where I can grow and flourish instead of where my views are suppressed, either my Christian or liberal identity. They feel like they grow me into a better person, and solidify my beliefs so that I'm more confident, especially in my political identity and how it is important to my faith.

Speaking about the same campus ministry, Sophie added that the willingness to have conversations about political issues as well as the organization's commitment to put their Christian values in action by serving the local community were crucial parts of what drew her to the ministry in the first place. Miriam similarly spoke about her experiences in the Black church and their commitment to serving local communities as a joint religious-political activity.

There is a lot of explicitly religious leftist spaces, particularly of color. And I'm not necessarily affiliated with any of those at the moment, but the idea of like joining a black church that does political work centered in their area… I think it is very common to certain extents, like mutual aid with the community.

For Miriam, these spaces exemplified her understanding of her faith, which she saw as centered in Jesus' outreach to poor, hurting, and marginalized people. Though she specifically saw her political identity as most important to her self-concept, she expressed that the possibility of getting involved in such spaces gave her hope about finding ways to support both her Christian and her political identity simultaneously.

Queer Christianity and Affirming Churches

One specific type of mutual verification space that several respondents attached a high importance to was LGBTQ+ affirming churches/Christian spaces. Seven of the fifteen people I interviewed spoke explicitly about supporting the LGBTQ+ community – four of whom identified as part of the LGBTQ+ community themselves. For those who identified as LGBTQ+, their queer identity played a major role in shaping their relationship to religion and the Christian spaces they participated in. Jay, a trans man, spoke about his experience coming out to friends from a non-affirming church:

The way that they kind of took it when I came out is like there were some or like openly just stopped talking to me, and there were some that were like we can work through this kind of like this is something that you can overcome you know, and I was just kind of like I don't know if I want to talk to you anymore.

Sam, a non-binary individual, also talked about facing negative reactions from Christian family members and friends who were non-affirming. For them, affirming Christian spaces were crucial in their return to their Christian faith.

Interviewer: Would you say that The Garden is the space where both your liberal and Christian identities and also like your queer identity are accepted and validated?
Sam: I feel like they're accepted and validated, I came out as non-binary at a public Garden event. And everybody was just so like, loving and kind and like, immediately gave me hugs. It was so beautiful. It was a radically different experience from what I had, you know, been outed to my mom. And so it was like, I'm loved, I'm cared for. It was wonderful.

According to Sam, their coming out experience had led them to question their Christian faith, but finding an affirming Christian community helped them reconcile their queer identity, liberal identity, and Christian identity. They added that The Garden was also a space where they met other queer Christians, which was important to them. Furthermore, many of the staff and students at the organization are vocal supporters of the LGBTQ+ community. Though Sam said they were still struggling to find an affirming church near their school to attend, the affirming Christian community at The Garden is something they value immensely.

Ava and Edward also talked in-depth about the relationship between their queerness and their faith, as both are in training to pursue pastoral ministry. Edward, a gay man, shared about his challenges reconciling his queer identity with his denomination's requirements for ordination.

And right now, I have officially stepped back from ordination in the [denomination] because of... well one because of the denominational stance on gay issues, as well as just the realities of the denomination in my in my local geography.

Despite issues with the larger denomination, Edward serves in a pastoral-adjacent role in a local congregation within that denomination that is LGBTQ+ affirming. Even within the

affirming congregation, he notes that he still sometimes feels on the outside of both the Christian and the queer communities because of his intersectional identity:

> I have a church circle, where I'm kind of like, the odd person out for being gay. And then I have my secular circle, which is largely LGBTQ, where I'm kind of the odd person out because I still attend church and I still identify as Christian.

Nonetheless, Edward also acknowledged that his liberal identity and even his queerness we're largely accepted across his social circles because of his tendency to gravitate towards affirming churches. Though he still experienced tension between his queer identity and his faith, he saw far less pushback from his Christian acquaintances because he found an affirming space to validate his Christian identity and queer identity together, rather than a non-affirming space that may have placed his Christian and queer identities at odds.

Ava shared that she felt a huge contrast in her experiences at non-affirming churches growing up as compared to the affirming spaces she is involved in now.

> For conservative Christians, when I say I am queer, they don't view that as, like, an inherent part of my identity, right? For them, that is maybe a temporary feeling that is changeable and should be changed. And so for them, that's not like... They, I have found, don't feel like that they have to respect that because it's not like an intrinsic part of who I am. That is a phase, you know, or a poorly made choice, you know, or something like that. And, yeah, that is obviously not the case among more progressive Christians who, you know, are affirming of the LGBTQ+ community. And, you know, I have not have those kinds of experiences there.

As a queer woman pursuing a pastoral ministry career, Ava emphasized the importance of finding a congregation that allowed her to publicly express her queer, liberal, and Christian identities.

> I, as a clergy person, still maintain a political identity. And I think that's important to, to share with folks and to help folks embody.

For several of the respondents who identified as queer, affirming churches offered spaces that they knew they could express multiple identities without fear of judgement. Given that

American Democrats are commonly associated with pro-LGBTQ+ policies, and Republicans are often known for anti-LGBTQ+ stances, a church's position on LGBTQ+ issues can also serve as an indicator of the congregation's political leanings. For individuals who identify as LGBTQ+, affirming churches guarantee a chance for simultaneous verification of their queer and Christian identities, and also suggests that they are likely to find verification of their liberal identity as well. For allies, an affirming stance can be a helpful public indicator of a church's politics, which otherwise may be hard to discern. As such, affirming congregations can act as crucial mutual verification contexts for the joint liberal Christian identity when such spaces may otherwise be hard to discover.

Emotional Attachment and Prioritized Identity

My study's third expectation stated that progressive Christians struggling to achieve identity verification for both identities will focus on verifying the identity that causes a stronger emotional reaction when not verified. As such, over time they will change their behavior to better align with one identity standard to achieve verification at the expense of the other and will see the identity with strong emotions attached to the lack of verification as the more important identity of the two. This expectation was not supported by the interviews I conducted. To test this expectation, I used the identity disconfirmation experience the respondent discussed as an indicator of which identity elicited a stronger emotional response when not verified. As such, I expected that for the majority of respondents, the identity brought up in the disconfirmation question would be the same as the identity they said was most important to them. In reality, however, this was only true for three out of fifteen participants. Seven out of fifteen participants' results partially supported this idea, and five out of fifteen countered the expected relationship. Though the majority of respondents reported experiencing negative emotions in response to

invalidation, as theory predicts, the emotional reaction doesn't seem to correlate with the importance of the identity.

There are two possible factors that could explain the discrepancy between my expectation and the responses from my interviewees. Due to challenges with self-reporting emotional intensity, I used the disconfirmation experience recalled as an indicator of the experiences that were most distressing, as intense emotions make memories easier to recall. According to Trettevik (2016)'s theory, the most distressing experiences would be the ones where the identity not verified was more strongly held or where little progress towards identity verification is being made. While I attempted to use the disconfirmation experience first recalled as a proxy for the strength of the reaction, it may not have worked as expected. One likely alternative is that the disconfirmation experience shared may have been influenced by availability, rather than intensity – that is, it served as a proxy for frequency of that type of experience, rather than intensity. As such, rather than measuring the level of emotional attachment to the identity, it is possible that this category measured the level of opposition to an identity the respondent faced. As such, my interviews may not provide adequate insight into the role that a person's emotional response to failure to verify an identity has on which identity becomes most prominent to them over time.

Trettevik's theory also proposes two key drivers of the emotional response to lack of verification: how closely held the identity is and the rate of progress towards identity verification through their current behavior. Trettevik argues that negative emotions will arise if an individual sees particularly little progress towards verification, and that as such they will be driven to focus on verifying that identity standard in order to resolve the negative emotional experience. However, Burke and Stets' identity theory (2009) suggests that prolonged inconsistency between a person's identity standard and how others see that identity results in one of three responses: the

person will change their behavioral patterns in an attempt to find a new path to identity

verification; the person will attempt to change the ideas the person they are interacting with has

about that identity standard; or, the person will change how they see their own identity and its

importance to them. While Trettevik anticipates that challenges verifying a core identity will lead

a person to focus on that identity more, Burke and Stets suggest that in at least some cases,

continued identity discrepancy will actually motivate a person to give the challenged identity less

weight. If the measures used in my study do capture the experiences that resulted in the largest

emotional response, then the results of my study suggest that Trettevik's theory does not hold

true in at least some cases of identity discrepancy.

Intertwined Identities

In addition to exploring the three expectations I outlined earlier in my study, the in-depth

interviews conducted revealed several other interesting themes across respondents. In particular,

a number of participants discussed the ways they saw their religious and political identities as

connected or in some way informing each other. The most common relationship described was

that the respondent's Christian faith served as the root of their liberal politics. Sophie talked

about how her interpretation of scripture informed her progressive political views:

> The crux of the Bible, for me, is love God and love each other, I always come back to
> that. And so having a liberal political belief system seems to help me figure out how to
> best love others and how to love God and to love others.

Cass added that her understanding of both her faith and of politics evolved as she became

an adult and began to ask questions about the systems she saw around her. Growing up in a

conservative family, she shared:

> I kept seeing more and more people becoming marginalized if I held the same beliefs that
> I held as a conservative person. And so I had to go back in my faith and ask myself, is
> this what I believe Jesus would have wanted? And I saw him continually reach out to
> people who were marginalized… I believe that the best thing to do is to figure out a

system that does treat every single person with equality and respect and inherent dignity, as what I believe to be loved children of God. And as a result, I adopt the liberal perspective, because I believe that the liberal perspective best dismantles [oppressive] systems and shows that love.

Several other interviewees shared experiences of reexamining scriptures outside of the conservative Christian contexts they were raised in and recognizing values of love, equality, and outreach to marginalized people in the Bible that they saw more reflected in the Democratic Party than in the Republican Party. Miriam described her Christian faith as providing a moral framing of the world that ultimately led her to leftism. While respondents varied significantly in their degrees of liberalness, a desire to put biblical values of justice, love, and equality into practice were cited as key motivators for their liberal political view.

Jack, who described himself as moderately liberal with conservative Christian relatives he greatly respects, shared that his attempts to understand and apply scripture to today's world led him to a series of questions about what living out these values looks like.

> One of my favorite verses is Isaiah 1:17, and it says "learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow." And I think hopefully every Christian can agree to that and say amen to that, like yes, that's what - that's a big thing that we're called to do. So then, the question that arises and where we have to have diligent conversation, is okay, how do we do that? What resources do we have at our disposal to do that? Is the government a resource, or is it not? Is the Church enough of a resource, or is it not?

According to Jack, biblical values served as common ground between himself and more conservative Christian relatives, such as his father. While they disagree on the answers to Jack's question about how to best put those values into practice, Jack said that he recognized that the conservative Christians he knew were doing their best to make wise, godly decisions about politics.

Jack was in the minority of interviewees for this view, as many of my interviewees shared that their faith not only informed their politics but seemed to explicitly point them towards liberalism. According to Celeste,

> I do feel like Christianity ultimately is being liberal. Because everything Jesus commanded us to do is liberal, like loving people being kind to people.

For Celeste, her Christian identity encapsulated her views on social issues, even before she adopted a liberal identity. Many interviewees centered the idea of "loving others," as the core intersection of their politics and their faith. This emphasis is very different from the focus of the political theology of conservative evangelicals, who center upholding public morality in their religiously motivated political work.

This differing focus made it hard for some interviewees to understand Christians who held more conservative views. According to Cass, seeing people with vastly different political views cite the same faith as their motivator can make her question her own faith and its validity.

> It can feel invalidating, because I believe in the kind of faith that comes in transforms us to be more loving to people. So when I see Christians who are adamantly not being loving, it makes me question the legitimacy of my faith, like, are people really transformed by Jesus's love? Or how can we hold such polar opposite beliefs and serve the same God?

Cass added that she had several liberal Christian peers who shared her confusion and shared about feeling frustrated when people cited Christianity as their reason for participating in the 2021 Capitol riot meant to overturn the election results or for opposing mask-wearing and other COVID-19 safety precautions. Her Christian faith led her to embrace public health measures and support liberal policies, so she struggled to reconcile her experience with the experiences and views of conservative Christians.

Reconciling Incongruent Identities

One other important theme that arose through the interview process the internalization of tension between the Christian and liberal identities. Nearly all respondents reported instances where they faced tension between the two identities externally, as they interacted with individuals or groups who told them the two identities couldn't fit together. Several respondents, however, indicated they also struggled internally to reconcile those two perspectives. Despite holding her faith and her leftism as core identities and seeing them as intertwined, Ava admitted that due to her conservative Christian upbringing:

> I don't automatically associate progressive ideology with those can also be religious people, too.

Despite the coexistence of political liberalism and Christianity in her own experiences, Ava still struggled not to see them as mutually exclusive for others. Other interviewees shared challenges reconciling typical Christian ideas on certain issues where their political views lead them to endorse a different perspective. Alice talked about being forced to reexamine some of the tenets of her faith as she came to believe more liberal things about issues such as abortion or gay rights.

> I had to reconcile what I knew to be right in my heart with like – how does that fit in with like my religious beliefs? So I didn't stop being Christian, it was just like my beliefs changed.

For Alice, the liberal perspective that she felt was true caused her to reimagine the ways she understood Christianity. Celeste expanded on that same idea as she tried to make sense of her views on queerness.

> I have battled with [ideas about LGBTQ+ rights] a lot because the Bible has a verse... and I know just one verse, but I'm pretty sure there might be more - of it being against the LGBTQ community. Which I still battle with today, because I think of God as love all the time. And God just wants us to love each other. Like no matter who it is.

60

Celeste's understanding of a "Christian view" on homosexuality, reinforced by her conservative Christian family and by scriptural evidence, still feels at odds with the understanding of God's character that led her to her liberal political views. Celeste described the internal negotiation of these two ideas about God as both difficult and ongoing.

Most if not all interviewees experienced some degree of internal discrepancy between their understanding of Christianity and their liberal worldview. For many, the task they face is finding a way to balance both identities. As Caleb shared,

> I feel like I can't express both in full. You know, if I express my Christian identity for what it is, then I'm not really being a liberal or conservative. But if I express... if I express my liberal identity or any political identity, I'm not really expressing Christianity. And so I've always leaned toward Christianity.

Discussion

The results of Study 1 and Study 2 provide a detailed portrait of the characteristics and experiences of liberal Christians in America. Taken together, the studies offer several interesting implications that help make sense of the public perceptions of this group and shed light on the ways incongruent identities are managed.

Study 1 shows that the joint liberal-Christian identity is most commonly held by individuals who are ages 18-24 (18% of age group) or over 65 years old (20%), yet Study 2 interviewees, who were largely under 25, were surprised by this finding, particularly for the older population. This highlights a mismatch between young people's perceptions of older generations as it relates to religion and political views. Individuals who were 65 or older in 2018, when the data for Study 1 was collected, would have been born in 1953 or earlier, meaning they would have grown up during the Civil Rights and antiwar movements. As the literature review highlights, both of these movements had prominent liberal religious activism. The fact that college-aged interviewees were so surprised by the liberalness of Christian 65+ year-olds

suggests that they were unaware of a connection between this age group and the Christian left-wing activism of 1960s social movements. Study 1 suggests that 18–24-year-old liberal Christians can find similar peers and mentorship in the 65+ age group, which has the highest share of liberal Christians; however, Study 2 shows that younger progressive Christians don't take advantage of this opportunity because they assume all older Christians are conservative. Building solidarity between young liberal Christians and their counterparts in the 65+ age group, particularly by educating 18–24-year-olds on the progressive activism of older Christians during the Civil Rights and antiwar movements could help create more spaces for liberal Christians to find community and achieve identity verification.

The interviews conducted in Study 2 also offer several interesting insights into the experiences of politically progressive Christians, as well as the factors that mediate identity negotiation strategies. Study 2 suggests that the identities held by people in one's social network and the availability of mutual verification spaces for an identity are an important factor in determining which identity becomes most prominent for an individual. The study is less conclusive about how a person's emotional reaction to lack of identity verification impacts their choice of identity management strategy. Interviewees engaged in a range of identity negotiation strategies, with some focusing on verifying one identity at the expense of the other, some attempting to educate those around them about their liberal Christian identity in order to achieve identity verification, and others choosing to focus on finding specifically liberal Christian spaces in order to simultaneously verify both identities. This suggests that there is not one clear best identity negotiation strategy for liberal Christians to address the challenges to verification they encounter, but rather that the strategies utilized are highly dependent on an individual's specific

discrepancy experiences, the importance of each identity to their self-concept, and the mutual verification contexts available to them.

Study 2 also offers insight into the ways liberal Christians think about and manage their joint identity in the face of challenges verifying that identity. My interviews suggest that liberal Christians are extremely aware of the stereotypes about Christians as conservative, and that these metastereotypes inform when and how they discuss their political and religious identities. The liberal Christians I interviewed faced numerous challenges to their joint political-religious identity, and experienced significant identity discrepancy in interactions because of the seeming incongruence between their Christianity and their liberalness. Many respondents attempted to engage in disidentification work or to change the views the people they interacted with held of liberal Christians by sharing the ways they thought about their identities, but few reported any success at changing people's minds. Largely, identity verification was achieved not through changing people's minds about the perceived conflict between the Christian and the liberal identities but instead by either only seeking to verify one and ignoring the other or by finding spaces where people already saw the two as compatible. Despite the significant challenges to verifying the joint liberal Christian identity, individuals shared that their political and religious identities were closely connected and that their faith directly informed their political liberalness, even as they struggled to fully reconcile the two identities.

Finally, Study 2 also has interesting implications about how intersectional identities such as racial identity and sexuality impact a person's experience as a liberal Christian. For example, four individuals in the Study spoke about how their queer identity resulted in more challenges to their Christian identity, as many Christians they interacted with saw Christianity and queerness and incongruent. Looking at the relationship between queerness, liberal politics, and Christianity

also highlighted LGBTQ+ affirming churches as a potential mutual verification context for all three identities.

Despite having six non-white interviewees in Study 2, racial identity was not discussed prominently in the interviews I conducted. Only three non-white interviewees discussed their racial identity at all, and two of those three mentioned it only in passing. Only one respondent, a Black woman, discussed the ways her racial identity in depth; she shared about how her Blackness complicated her relationship with Christianity due to the institutional church's role in colonialization and discussed her experiences in the Black church. One possible interpretation of the lack of in-depth exploration of racial identity in these interviews is that the respondents I interviewed didn't feel their race significantly shaped their political or religious identity experiences. However, this interpretation seems at odds with the historical narrative as well as with the Study 1 results, which suggest that Black Americans are far more likely to be both liberal and Christian than white Americans. This finding, coupled with the significant role of the Black church in historical religious-political movements such as the Civil Rights Movement, suggests that further exploration of the relationship between political, religious, and racial identity is warranted.

Limitations

While this study offers important insight into the identity experiences of politically liberal American Christians, it is important to recognize the limitations of these findings. For Study 1, the data comes from the 2018 General Social Survey, so it is not the most recent. This could particularly impact the age findings, as the individuals who were 18-24 in the 2018 data set would now be 22-28, which could alter the ages most represented in the liberal Christian population. Additionally, it's important to note that both Study 1 and Study 2 rely on self-

reported Christianity and liberalness, which means that people could mean very different things when they say they are liberal and Christian. This makes it hard to determine if respondents had different experiences and ideas about their identities because of factors like available mutual verification spaces or because they conceptualized their identities differently in the first place.

While Study 2 offers important insights into the experiences of liberal Christians and suggests potential directions for future research, it has several specific limitations that make it so the results are not generalizable. In particular, the sample of 15 people is too small to offer generalizable insights, and the use of convenience and snowball sampling means the sample is nonrandom. Furthermore, the demographic makeup of my interviewees doesn't match the demographic profile of liberal Christians in America constructed in Study 1, suggesting that the Study 2 sample is not a representative sample. In particular, the lack of racial diversity and representation of older liberal Christian respondents limits my ability to comment on the importance of intersectional identities such as age and race that the literature and my study 1 findings suggest have a significant impact on the ways these individuals conceptualize and negotiate their liberal Christian identity. Beyond that, the measures I used to look at the impact of available mutual verification spaces and emotional reaction to identity discrepancy on which identity becomes prominent are also imperfect measures. As discussed in my results section, the emotional reaction measure I used didn't effectively get at the intensity of emotional reaction to lack of identity verification, as the question asked likely invoked the identity that was most frequently challenged, rather than the identity which elicited the most negative emotions when challenged. As such, I was unable to really explore the role emotional response to identity conflict plays in determining identity prominence. Additionally, while I was able to categorize the mutual verification spaces available to a person based on the identity most commonly

represented in their social network and organizational memberships, the measure lacks nuance, as virtually all interviewees reported both identities represented to at least some extent. The self-reported nature of this measure also means that it is possible that there were other mutual verification spaces available to a person that they chose not to utilize and thus didn't mention to me, or that they categorized an organization as related to only one identity when it could potentially serve to verify both identities. For example, one respondent spoke about the campus ministry The Garden as a solely Christian verification space, but three other respondents involved in the group categorized it as a space that supported their joint liberal-Christian identity, which suggests that there is variation among the way people choose to report spaces and organizations that impacts categorization of the mutual verification contexts available to them.

 Future Research Directions

Several potential future research directions emerge from the research I have conducted that would expand on the findings presented in this study. First, it would be beneficial to repeat the qualitative portion of this study with a larger sample, particularly one that is more representative along racial and age group lines, as non-white people and older individuals were underrepresented in my data set. This study was also conducted in the American South, which is more politically conservative and more religious than the country at large, which suggests that the liberal-Christian identity might be more in the minority than in other parts of the country. It would be interesting to repeat these interviews in other parts of the country to explore the different types of discordance encountered and to determine if liberal Christians find more identity verification in conservative-religious regions or liberal-secular regions. My research also suggested that certain types of churches/Christian ministries, such as LGBTQ+ affirming churches and the Black church, can serve as particularly helpful mutual verification spaces for

liberal Christians, so a study focusing on such organizations could shed light on the ways in which such spaces help individuals achieve identity verification and offer insights into how such communities challenge the stereotypical image of American Christians. Finally, my study included individuals who attached a wide range of meanings to the identities of "Christian" and "liberal"; the terms meant very different things to different respondents. Future research could hone in on this by exploring how a liberal Christian's degree of religiosity or how far left they fall on the political spectrum impacts their choice of identity negotiation strategy.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Study 2 Recruitment Emails
Below we include scripts for three recruitment materials. The first is an email to organizations asked to advertise the research opportunity to their members. The latter two are to be distributed to study participants (Politically liberal Christians). The second email will be sent to students to invite them to participate in the study; it will include the link to the eligibility screening survey. The third email will be sent to individuals who fill out the screening survey to invite th7em to schedule an interview.

    1.   Email asking organizations to advertise research opportunity

Dear [Organization Name],

My name is Katalia Alexander and I am a senior at Emory University conducting honors research in the Sociology department. My research aims to explore the experiences of politically liberal Christians, particularly how they present that identity in political and religious spaces and which identities these individuals choose to emphasize in interactions. I am reaching out to you today to ask for your help identifying potential study participants who might be willing to participate in my research by emailing or otherwise sharing the following message about the research opportunity to your members.

Dear club members,

See the below message for a research participation opportunity that may be relevant to you!

[Insert email #2 below]

If you or any of your members have any questions about the study, please feel free to reach out to me and I am happy to help answer any questions you may have. Thanks so much for your time and consideration!

Sincerely,
Katalia Alexander
(206) 573-3347
kralexa@emory.edu

    2.   Email invitation to participate in study

Dear Individual,

You are being invited to volunteer to participate in a study that will explore the identity negotiation strategies of politically liberal Christians in both religious and political spaces to determine which identity becomes salient and why.

Participation in the study involves filling out a short screening survey to determine eligibility (estimated to take 5 minutes) and then participating in a 30-45 minute qualitative interview via Zoom.

More information is provided on the first page of the screening survey to help you make an informed choice about your participation. Click on the link below for the survey:

WEBLINK

Participation in the study is voluntary, and you may choose at any time not to participate or, if you choose to participate, you may skip items. During the interview, you will be able to ask to skip questions or end the interview at any time. All identifying information will be destroyed as soon as the interviews are transcribed. Whether you choose to participate or not will in no way affect your standing as an Emory student.

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact me. If you have questions about your rights as a participant in this study, you may contact the Emory Institutional Review Board (404-712-0720) or (877-503-9797) or irb@emory.edu.

Thank you for considering participation in my study!

Sincerely,
Katalia Alexander
(206) 573-3347
kralexa@emory.edu

3. Email to schedule interview

Dear (Name),

Thank you for your interest in participating in the study and for filling out the eligibility screening survey. Based on your survey responses, I would like to invite you to participate in a qualitative interview about your experiences as a politically liberal Christian.

The interview will last approximately 30 minutes. You will be asked open-ended questions about topics such as: experiences where you felt your identity as liberal, a Christian, or both was invalidated by others; your emotional response(s) to that experience of identity discrepancy; your behavioral response to such experience(s); which identity you hold as most important to you now; reasons why that identity holds such importance; and spaces where you feel one or more of these identities are verified currently. You will also be asked about your religious and political activities within the past year. If at any point you feel uncomfortable with the questions asked, you can ask to skip the question(s) or choose to end the interview.

Please read and review the attached informed consent form and reach out to me with any questions or concerns. If you agree to participate in the interview, please return the signed

informed consent form to me via email and schedule a time for your interview via this Calendly link: LINK.

Sincerely,
Katalia Alexander
(206) 573-3347
kralexa@emory.edu

Appendix 2. Study 2 Eligibility Screening

This survey will be distributed via email to potential study participants. Responses will be collected via Qualtrics. Email addresses will be collected to be used for interview scheduling.

Do you identify as Christian?
      Response options: Yes/No

What religious denomination are you a part of?
      Response options: Short response

On a scale of 1-7 please share how you identify politically, where 1 is strongly liberal and 7 is strongly conservative.
      Response options: Likert scale

On a scale of 1-7 please share how which political party you identify with, where 1 is strongly Democratic, 4 is moderate/no party affiliation, and 7 is strongly Republican.
      Response options: Likert scale

Demographic characteristics:

Age
      Response options: Short response

Gender
      Response options: Male, Female, Non-Binary/Nonconforming, Transgender

Race
      Response options: White, Black, Hispanic/Latino, Asian, Multiracial, Other (please describe)

Education Level
      Response options: Some high school, high school degree, some college, associates degree, bachelor's degree, masters degree, PhD

Income level (for full-time students who have less than 2 years full-time work experience: use parents' income level)
      Response options: Less than $30000, $30000 - $75000, $75000 - $150000, greater than $150000

Marital Status
      Response options: Single/never married, Married, Divorced/separated, widowed

Appendix 3. Study 2 Interview Guide

- Review informed consent form, obtain permission to record via Zoom, assign pseudonym
- [Share bar graph of bimodal age distribution from GSS data] This data from the General Social Survey about how different age groups identify as progressive, Christian, or both. What do you think? How does this relate to any of your experiences?
- Tell me about your political and religious identities. How important are they to you?
- Do you feel like people around you understand and respect both your political and religious identities?
- Describe an experience or experience in which you felt your identity as liberal, a Christian, or both was invalidated by others
    - What was your emotional response to that experience?
    - What was your behavioral response to that experience?
- How do these ID's inform/influence each other, if they do?
- Which identity do you hold as most important to you now and why?
- Which identity/identities (Christian/political liberal) is most commonly held by those in your social networks?
    - What communities or activities do you take part in that support or challenge one or both of these identities?
    - Are you a member of any political groups?
    - Are you a member of any religious groups?
    - Describe any political activities you participated in in the past year.
    - Describe any religious activities you participated in in the past year.
- Tell me about any other experiences or ideas you feel are important to understanding how you express your political and/or religious identity.

Appendix 4. Study 2 MAXQDA Codebook

Descriptive Codes
- Political identity
  - Political activity
  - Political organization
- Christian identity
  - Christian activity
  - Christian organization
- Disconfirmation experience
  - Emotional response
  - Behavioral response
- Social network
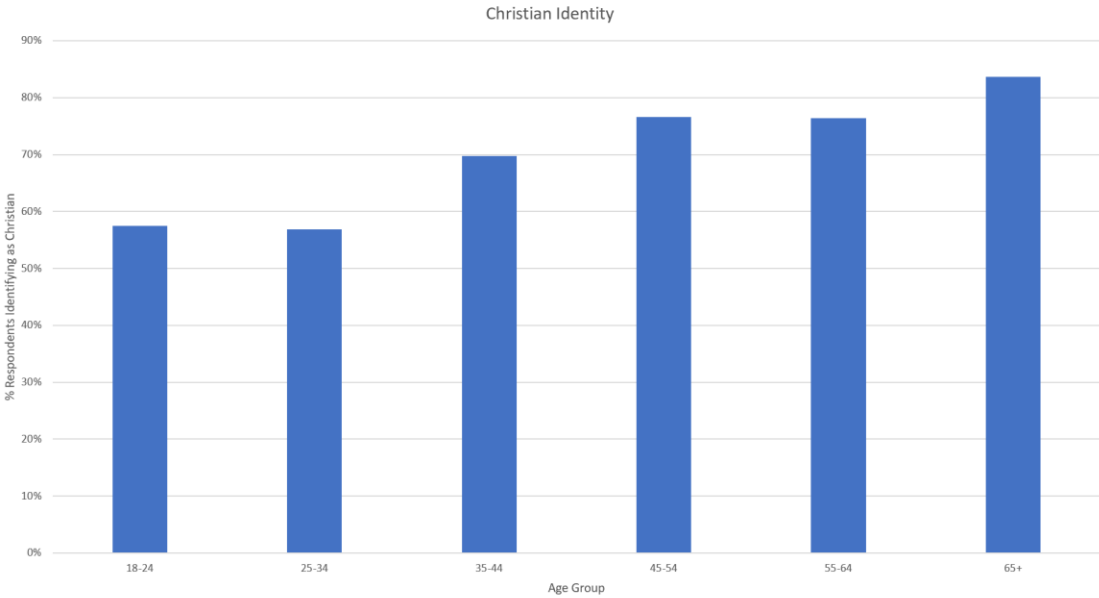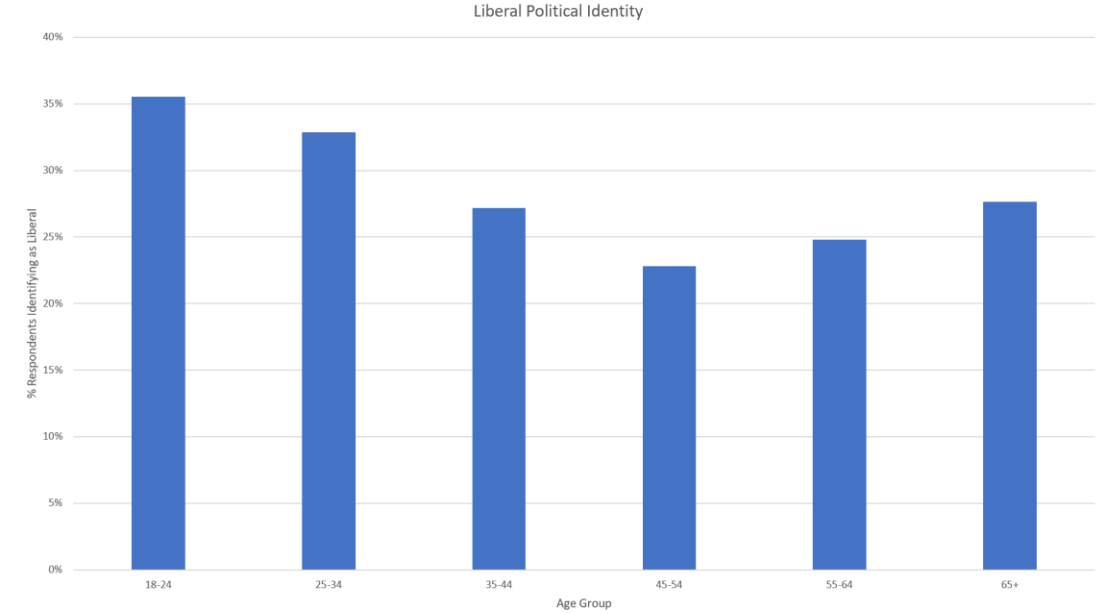- Prioritized identity
- GSS data impressions

Deductive Codes
- Mutual verification space
  - Christian space
  - Politically liberal space
  - Christian + liberal space
- Identity negotiation strategy
  - Emphasize Christian identity
  - Emphasize liberal identity
  - Disidentification work
- Tension between identities
  - Internal perception of tension
  - External perception of tension

Inductive Codes
- Political views are informed by faith
- Queer identity informs political views
- Affirming churches/religious groups
- Discomfort with perception of Christians as conservative
- Christian = liberal

Appendix 5. Study 1 Data Presented to Study 2 Participants

Liberal Political Identity

Christian Identity

Liberal + Christian Identities

x-axis: Age Groups (18-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55-64, 65+)
y-axis: % Respondents Identifying as Both Liberal and Christian (0% to 25%)