

**The Effect of Religiosity, Partisanship, and Identity-Seeking Behavior on Political  
Engagement**

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**Abstract**

GIAMMATTEI, JACKSON The Effect of Religiosity, Partisanship, and Identity-Seeking Behavior on Political Engagement

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Is politics increasingly substituting for religion as a source of identity? As organized religion is on the decline in the United States and the “nones” (those who are Atheist, Agnostic, or claim no religion) continue to be some of the most politically active people in the country, it seems that there is a shift away from religion and towards politics. The present study explored this idea by testing the relationships among religiosity, identity-seeking behavior, and political engagement. I hypothesized that people seeking an identity would become more politically engaged after a partisan threat, especially if they were lower in religiosity. I recruited 197 participants from the survey platform Prolific, who completed a series of scales relating to religiosity, partisanship, and identity-seeking. Participants also were randomly assigned to read a paragraph that either threatened the partisan identity of Democrats or Republicans, followed by questions about their future political engagement intentions. Linear regression analyses (though not statistically significant) revealed a trend in the data consistent with predictions: People low in religiosity, yet high in identity seeking, were more likely to say they wanted to engage politically in the future compared to people low in identity seeking. These findings have implications for the future navigation of our political and religious landscape as organized religion continues to decline and partisanship continues to become heightened.

*For Mom and Dad - love you from the ground up*

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## **The Relationship Between Religiosity and Partisan Identity-Seeking on Political Engagement**

Throughout history, religion has been important for individuals' sense of identity and psychological well-being (Galen, 2012; Itvzan, 2013; Moon et al., 2021; Oppong, 2013; VanCamp, 2010; Werbner, 2010). As organized religion is declining in industrialized countries such as the United States (Hout & Fischer, 2014; Inglehart, 2020) how are people compensating for its decline? Previous research has established that political partisanship can serve as another salient identity that individuals can draw self-esteem and meaning from (Greene, 1999; Huddy & Bankert, 2017; Mason, 2015; Moon et al., 2021; Oppong, 2013; Theodoridis, 2017). In fact, politics and religion share many similarities in that both create a sense of belonging, encourage ingroup bias and in some cases anger towards outgroups, and increase activism or participation on behalf of the group (Galen, 2012; Huddy & Bankert, 2017; Huddy, Mason & Aarøe, 2015; Moon et al., 2022).

Although research has begun to suggest overlap between partisan and religious identity, little research has explored if partisan identity could act as a compensatory replacement for religious identity among those who are lower in religiosity. If it could, then identity-seeking should act as a predictor of political engagement among individuals for whom religion is not an important part of their identity, especially when their partisan identity comes under threat. The present study tested whether this is the case. Such findings may help explain why our society seems to be shifting away from one that prizes religious identity, towards one based on partisanship and engagement.

## **Literature Review**

### **Religion, Spirituality, and Religious Identity**

Identity in general helps to define who we are and what characteristics we possess that have meaning. In relation to group membership, Tajfel and Turner's (1970) social identity theory helps to explain how a psychological attachment to a salient social group can form based on an individual's identity. They claimed that individuals' self-concept is derived from perceived membership to a relevant social group, and that group members need to "differentiate their own groups positively from others to achieve a positive social identity" (p. 42). Social identity theory can help to explain why and how religious and partisan identities are important at both the individual and group level. For example, the desire for positive group-based differentiation can explain the motivation to protect, defend, and simply have a preference towards one's ingroup (i.e., intergroup bias). Social identity theory provides valuable insight into the ways that social identities operate and how salient individual identities can dictate group dynamics and motivate an individual to act on behalf of the group.

Religious affiliation can be a salient identity for individuals, create a sense of group membership, dictate social relationships, and contribute to psychological well-being (Galen, 2012; Itvzan, 2013; Moon et al., 2021; Oppong, 2013; VanCamp, 2010; Werbner, 2010). The framework of religious identity is understood as a discourse of dividing lines, similarities, and otherness (Werbner, 2010). Religion is additionally associated with personal identity formation and providing a sense of identity in general (Itvzan et al., 2013; Oppong, 2013). In adolescence, religion can help to inform moral beliefs and guide behavior, empowering young individuals to explore their place in the world (Oppong, 2013). Religious identity is crucial at the individual level for identity formation and this identity can become salient for the individual throughout their life. Religion and religious identity also has implications for an individual's well-being and

influences their perception of meaning within their own life (Ivtzan et al., 2013; Moon et al., 2022; VanCamp, 2010). Those high in religious involvement tend to report higher levels of meaning in life, and in turn, greater overall well-being (Steger et al., 2006; Ivtzan et al., 2013).

Similar to other salient social identities, religious identity can create an “us versus them” relationship which can lead to favorable bias towards the ingroup (Galen, 2012; Moon et al., 2022; Oppong, 2013; VanCamp, 2010). Individuals derive a sense of unity and feeling of belonging from religious membership as well as the practices associated with them such as ritual, prayer, or ceremony (Oppong, 2013). Beyond participation, this sense of belonging is also entrenched due to the fact members of religious groups all share similar, personal, and meaningful beliefs (VanCamp, 2010). Consequently, religious identity, and membership in a religious group, can also create a sense of outgroup disfavor, such that an individual will want to protect the group and only want to engage with ingroup members (Galen, 2012; Moon et al., 2022; VanCamp, 2010; Werbner, 2010). Religious identity on behalf of a group can come to the surface when religious groups are challenged by other groups, leading to a sense of defensiveness to protect the ingroup (Werbner, 2010). Within the ingroup, religious belongingness is effective at creating a sense of connection that promotes prosocial behavior (Galen, 2012; Rowatt, Franklin & Cotton, 2005). When asked to form impressions of others, religious individuals tend to favor other religious individuals and put down non-religious individuals or individuals that do not belong to the same religious group (Rowatt, Franklin & Cotton, 2005). This sense of favoritism towards a group with the same identity is an important feature of religious identity and creates prosocial behavior bias towards the ingroup.

Overall, religious identity is important as it helps individuals who navigate who they are and what groups they associate with. This can lead to a sense of belonging and ingroup

favoritism but can also contribute to negative feelings aimed at religious outgroups. Additionally, religious identity contributes to an individual's psychological well-being and gives them greater feelings of meaning within their life. Meaning, group membership, and personal identity salience are all crucial to both individuals and those they associate with.

Since it is evident that religious identity can be extremely important for individuals on a number of factors, it is surprising to notice the overall trend of religious membership. Looking at the current state of organized religion, trends indicate it is on the decline in industrialized countries across the world, including the United States (Hout & Fischer, 2014; Inglehart, 2020). The United States has been slowly shifting away from religion over the past 80 years, with church membership dropping below 50% for the first time in 2020 (Jones, 2021). Also, from 1981 to 2007 compared to other countries, the United States was ranked one of the most religious. However, after 2007, the U.S. demonstrated the largest shift away from religion (Inglehart, 2020, p. 110). While this shift away from religion is occurring across the nation, there is also a shift occurring at the individual level. In 2012, 1 in 5 Americans expressed having no religious preference compared to 1 in 14 in 1987 (Hout & Fischer, 2014, p. 423). Additionally, denominationalism, or identification with a religious denomination, no longer creates strong divisions among social or cultural groups (Bader, Christopher & Froese, 2005), suggesting that affiliation with an organized religion may not be as important to individuals as it used to be.

While organized religion is on the decline, on the contrary spirituality has seen an emergence in more recent history (Ivtzan et al., 2013; Moon et al., 2022). However, despite its growing significance, spirituality does not serve as an important identity in the same way religion does. Spirituality is mainly concerned with the individual, subjective experience while religion is contingent on the practices, rituals, and beliefs that bind a social group together



(Ivtzan et al., 2013). Due to its inward and fluid nature, spirituality is not as functional as an identity compared to religion. For example, if someone were to say, “I am spiritual,” it does not hold the same weight as an identity as saying “I am a Catholic.”

Taken together, the literature on religion, spirituality, and more specifically religious identity has important implications for individuals as well as groups. For individuals, religion can serve as a salient factor in identity formation as well as provide individuals with a sense of meaning in life and purpose. This identity, while important at the individual level, can also contribute to the way individuals find belonging in groups. Often, these individuals will favor their religious ingroup, will be more willing to defend them, and engage in more prosocial behavior. Additionally, these works illustrate that the current state of religion in the United States is, in reality, one that prioritizes religion less. Organized religion at the macro level is declining at rates never seen previously in the nation’s history. Even if individuals are turning to spirituality instead, being spiritual may not hold the same weight as an identity as religion does. Since it is established that religious identity is salient at the individual level and powerful in determining behavior and belongingness at the group level, it begs the question of what would happen if this identity shifts? It is known that organized religion and religious identity in the United States are declining, so what identity, if any, will fill this void while possessing the same qualities?

### **Politics and Partisan Identity**

As organized religion has continued to wane, political polarization and partisanship have only increased. Partisan identity, defined as a psychological attachment to one party or another (Campbell et al., 1960), may offer a substitute identity for those who are less religious. *The American Voter* by Campbell, Converse, Miller & Stokes (1960) was the first piece to introduce

partisanship as an identity rather than a belief structure. Before, partisanship was generally understood as individuals feeling as though a certain party simply represented them best or that their beliefs aligned with a specific party. Through the understanding presented by *The American Voter*, the authors argue that partisan identity is one that is salient as individuals can say “I am a Democrat” or “I am a Republican” and have that mean something to them. So rather than having opinions or attitudes towards a certain party, individuals now have a social identification within a political party and develop a psychological attachment. This goes beyond belief and is now an identity in which to draw group membership from. Further, they go on to argue that this identity has important implications for voting, as individuals will vote primarily off of partisanship rather than ideology or personal beliefs (p.120-121).

Previous literature documents three main outcomes of partisan identity: identity salience, ingroup bias, and engagement. (Greene, 1999; Huddy & Bankert, 2017; Huddy, Mason & Aarøe, 2015; Mason, 2018). At the individual level, partisan identity is salient and is consistent with social identity theory where individuals will derive a sense of self from their group membership and place emotional significance on that membership as well (Greene, 1999; 2004). Further, this identity salience may be operating at an implicit level. When completing an implicit association task (IAT), participants were asked to make associations between the terms “I,” “me,” “myself,” and “they,” “them,” or “others” with Democratic or Republican images. Individuals were able to make automatic associations with their party suggesting that they identify with their party at a deep, automatic level suggesting a high level of partisan salience (Theodoridis, 2017).

Partisan identity can create a sense of ingroup bias similar to religious identity. Based on this bias, individuals will prefer members of their ingroup and want to advance or protect their group’s status. Mason (2018) in her book *Uncivil Agreement* speaks to how the political climate

now can often feel like rooting for a sports team, wanting your team to win every single time, and behaving in ways that will ensure the team's overall victory. She also finds in her other work about emerging partisanship that partisans are emotionally connected to how their party is succeeding, favor spending time with members of their party, and become angered when their party is under threat regardless of if they agree with the policy position at hand (Mason, 2015). This motivation to protect the group, advance their status, and find solutions to conquer threats is a main component of social identity theory which provides the psychological foundation for this ingroup bias (Huddy, Mason & Aarøe, 2015).

The psychological attachment and ingroup bias associated with partisan identity also motivates action and increases political engagement. Those who have a stronger sense of partisan identity will be more likely to engage politically in order to ensure that their party is winning in elections (Huddy, Mason & Aarøe, 2015; Mason, 2015; Mason, 2018; Miller & Conover, 2015). As partisanship has increased in strength more recently, this strength has influenced a range of political behavior including vote choice, voter turnout, and electoral campaign activity. Further, Democrats and Republicans specifically are known for voting at higher rates and participating in politics more actively compared to political independents (Huddy, Mason & Aarøe, 2015). This increased level of engagement can be traced back to Mason's (2015; 2018) findings that partisans want to see their ingroup succeed and will take measures to ensure that they do. Importantly, she finds that personal issue-importance is not driving political engagement, but rather social identity being tied to the group is (Mason, 2018, p. 102). Policy and ideologies are no longer at the forefront of voter's minds. When looking at the opinions of partisans, 41% of partisans agreed that simply winning elections is more important to them than policy or ideological goals in getting them engaged in politics, compared to 35% who viewed policy as

more important (Miller & Conover, 2015, p. 236). Taken together, the new political climate is not driven by an individual's policy preferences. Rather, growing partisanship is having an impressive impact on political engagement which is partly driven by a desire to win. This motivation to act and engage can be tied back into social identity theory as partisans feel connected to their group and want to see their group succeed.

This engagement in politics based on partisanship is only strengthened when this partisanship is threatened (Bankert, Huddy & Rosema, 2017; Huddy & Bankert, 2017; Huddy, Mason & Aarøe, 2015). As previously mentioned, partisans are continuously working to ensure that their party is consistently winning elections and being portrayed in a positive light. The strongest partisans therefore will be the most likely to respond to threats as a way to defend their group. This could mean voting in elections as they threaten a party's overall political power (Miller & Conover, 2015) or being more likely to respond when the overall status or social standing of the party is threatened (Huddy, Mason & Aarøe, 2015). Overall, partisanship has implications for political engagement when the political ingroup is threatened.

To summarize, partisanship is now more than ever being taken seriously as a social identity that is salient to individuals, creates a sense of ingroup bias, and can drive political engagement. First, partisanship can act very similarly to other social identities as an individual's self-concept and self-esteem can be affected by this group membership (Campbell, 1960; Greene, 1999; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Additionally, due to the ingroup bias created through partisan identity, individuals acting on behalf of the group will engage in behaviors to either protect the group's status or advance it (Huddy, Mason & Aarøe, 2015; Mason, 2015; Mason, 2018). Mason (2015) points to how the current political atmosphere now almost seems like rooting for a sports team, and the data supports her claim. Individuals now are motivated for their

political party simply to win, even if they do not agree with the positions the party holds at all times and will participate in order to ensure victory. Identifying as a Democrat, Republican, or other partisan identity is holding more importance than individual policy preferences in predicting political engagement (Huddy, Mason & Aarøe, 2015; Mason, 2015; Mason, 2018; Miller & Conover, 2015). Overall, this illustrates that partisanship is a salient identity that has implications for ingroup bias and political action.

### **Religion and Political Engagement**

I suggest that partisan identity and participation is, in part, substituting for religious identity among those who are not religiously affiliated. The category of religious “nones” (i.e. Atheists, Agnostics, or those who claim no religion) are an emerging group that only continues to grow in number in the United States (Hamid, 2021; Mitchell, 2021; Vernon, 1968) In 2020, 26% of Americans consider themselves “nones” which has increased from 17% in 2009 (Mitchell, 2020). Identifying as a religious “none” has implications for political engagement. While those who identify as nothing in particular are not typically politically active or interested in politics, Atheists and Agnostics are both politically interested and very likely to engage actively in politics such as voting (Schwadel, 2020). What is important to note here is that Atheists and Agnostics score low on measures of religiosity and report high levels of disaffiliation from religious organizations (Streib & Klein, 2013). This demonstrates both a lack of religious identity as well as movement away from religion among these individuals. Due to this identity absence and movement, these individuals may look for another identity to fill this void and as stated previously, partisan identity may be a candidate as these identities overlap on multiple factors.

### **The Present Study**

There are multiple conclusions drawn from the literature that illustrate the relationships between religious identity, partisanship, and political engagement. First, the United States is prioritizing religion less and less, as there has been a steady decline in overall church attendance (Jones, 2021). Individuals are also choosing to identify with a certain religious group at lower rates and the category of religious “nones” is continuing to increase (Hout & Fischer, 2014; Mitchell, 2021). While this is true, those who are still religious may benefit from holding a religious identity as it is shown to give individuals a sense of meaning in life and contribute to psychological well-being (Ivtzan et al., 2013; Moon et al., 2022; VanCamp, 2010). However, even if individuals are holding spiritual or religious beliefs, those who no longer associate with a religious organization may experience an identity-vacuum where they are in search of a new identity. I argue that partisanship may offer a replacement for those who are lower in religiosity.

Partisanship is a good candidate for a replacement identity as these two identities are not only perceived as similar, but these identities also have the three main overlaps of personal salience, ingroup bias, and creating engagement to advance group status. Both partisanship and religious identity are salient to the individual, acting as an identity that means something to them. Additionally, both identities, acting consistent with social identity theory, will bias towards the ingroup as their self-esteem is also bolstered through this group membership. Individuals will prefer their ingroup, engage with them more, and want to protect their group or enhance their status. Lastly, this drive to advance or protect the group status, especially when threatened by the outgroup, motivates action. Those with strong partisan or religious identities will continuously take part in activities to ensure their group is consistently in power, winning, or being portrayed in a positive light. Further, when partisanship is threatened, strong partisans will be more likely to engage politically following this threat. This demonstrates that for the purpose of this study,

equating partisan identity to religious identity is not a stretch as these identities operate in similar ways and fill similar facets of people's lives.

Overall, I first hypothesize individuals lower in religiosity who are seeking an identity will be more likely to engage politically compared to those high in identity seeking behavior. A second hypothesis is that this relationship should then be especially true following a partisan threat, which would undermine identity and motivate people to reaffirm it through engagement.

I also hypothesize that the concept of meaning in life may provide an alternative mechanism to identity seeking that explains the relationship between religiosity and political engagement. Meaning in life can be defined as a multitude of dimensions that include self-worth, purpose, personal significance and transcendence. Identity formation as well as the search for meaning in life are similar in the way that individuals ask fundamental questions about who they are, where they belong in the world, and what gives them purpose (Frankl, 1963; Luyckx et al., 2014; Negru-Subtirica et al., 2016; Steger et al., 2006; Steger et al., 2008). While the main purpose of this study is to see if identity-seeking is the main driver of this shift, it is important to examine how meaning and meaning search fits into this relationship.

What about highly religious people and political engagement? Church attendance positively correlates to voting participation as well as broader forms of engagement such as voter registration, campaigning, and attending speeches (Driskell, Embry & Lyon, 2008; Jones-Correa & Leal, 2001). This can be due to the fact that churches generally promote a civic associational role where individuals are encouraged to participate in their communities. Further, churches are known to be places of political recruitment and distributors of political information (Jones-Correa & Leal, 2001). Additionally, holding macro religious beliefs, or beliefs about broad, worldly concerns, increases an individual's likelihood to participate politically (Driskell, Embry

& Lyon, 2008). Religious identity can also have implications for political engagement as individuals who engage actively with their religious identity, such as Muslim individuals in the United States, are more likely to report that they voted (Ocampo, Dana & Barreto, 2018). Further, after examining various types of political engagement, religiosity on its own does not mobilize political engagement. Rather, it is the membership within a religious organization that is the largest predictor of political activity (Omelicheva & Ahmed, 2017). From this, I lastly hypothesize that those high in religious identity overall will also be likely to engage politically as politics acts as an extension of their religious participation and identity.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

This study consisted of 197 participants from the survey distribution platform Prolific. Of the 197 participants, 49.7% were male, 47.2% were female, 2.5% were non-binary, and 0.5% preferred not to say. In terms of racial demographics, 76.1% of participants were White or Caucasian, 10.7% were Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino Origin, 10.2% were Black or African American, 10.2% were Asian, 3% were American Indian/Native American or Alaskan Native, and 1% indicated Other. 16.2% of participants were 18-24 years old, 41.6% were 25-34, 24.9% were 35-44, 7.1% were 45-54, 7.1% were 55-64 years old, and 3.0% were 65+ years old. In terms of religious affiliation, 29.4% were Agnostic, 16.2% were Atheist, 16.8% were Protestant, and 10.7% were Roman Catholic, 3.6% were Jewish, 3.0% were Hindu, 2.0% were Buddhist, 1.0% were Muslim, and 1.0% were Orthodox such as Greek or Russian Orthodox. Additionally, 5.6% of participants preferred not to say and 10.4% of participants chose to self-describe which included affiliations such as Christian, Non-Denominational, Servant of Yahuah, Spiritual, Taoism, Unitarian Universalist, and Southern Baptist.



Ethics approval was obtained prior to the distribution of this survey. All Prolific users were invited to participate through advertisements on their platform. Participants were self-selected and compensated \$1.85 for their participation in this 10-minute survey, taking into account recommended payment rate on Prolific and the 25% service fee for an academic study. Power analysis prior to the study suggested that with an intended sample size of 200, two groups, an alpha level of 0.05, and a medium effect size of 0.25, there is an expected power level of 0.94.

### **Materials and Procedure**

In this survey, participants were asked to complete a series of scales and answer questions aimed at testing their levels of religious identity, partisan identity, identity-seeking behavior, and political engagement. All participants were briefed with the information that they would be participating in a 10 to 12-minute study for a senior thesis at Union College and that they would be provided with a series of scales and questions related to personality and attitudes. Indicating that the study would be examining personality and attitudes acted as a cover story to not reveal the true intention of what was being studied in order to reduce bias. The research was conducted according to the ethical guidelines for human subjects review and approved by an Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Participants first completed a section to measure their level of religiosity. Religious identity was measured using The Intrinsic/Extrinsic Religiosity Scale (Gorsuch, 1989). The scale consisted of 20 Likert Scale questions but only nine questions were included to test for intrinsic religiosity in order to test for religious identity and how religion relates to them more personally compared to religious action such as church attendance. The participants indicated their level of agreement with statements on a seven-point scale ranging from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree.” An example item is “My whole approach to life is based on my religion” ( $\alpha = .75$ ).

Participants then were asked to complete questions about their party identification and partisan identity. The traditional ANES party identification scale was used to measure partisanship. This measure asked participants: “Generally speaking do you think of yourself as a Democrat, a Republican, or an Independent?” If participants answered either Democrat or Republican, they were then asked to indicate if they were a strong or weak one. If they answered Independent, they were asked if they see themselves as closer to a Democrat or a Republican which would identify them as a partisan leaner. Huddy, Mason and Aarøe’s (2015) Expressive Partisanship Scale was used to measure partisan identity more specifically. This scale tests for an internalized sense of party membership, rather than simply asking participants their party identification. The questions were worded for a specific party based on how the participant answered the previous party identification question. For example, if a person answered that they are a Democrat, the Expressive Partisanship Scale would include questions about Democrats and not Republicans. Participants who identified as leaners received questions that aligned with what party they saw themselves as being closer to. Participants answered a series of questions on a four-point scale. Examples of items include “How well does the term Democrat describe you?” and “When talking about Republicans, how often do you use “we” instead of “they”?” ( $\alpha = .87$  to  $.88$ ).

Participants then completed The Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) (Steger et al., 2006) which was used to measure both the presence of, and the search for, meaning in one’s life. This scale has often been applied to the study of religion and spirituality to determine if these factors can provide meaning to individuals or aid individuals in their search for meaning (Ivtzan et al., 2013). The scale consisted of 10 Likert Scale questions in which participants indicated their level of agreement with statements on a seven-point scale ranging from “Absolutely untrue”

to “Absolutely true.” An example item is “I am looking for something that makes my life feel meaningful.” The MLQ questions were also randomized in order within the scale to reduce bias and survey fatigue ( $\alpha = .92$  for presence and  $\alpha = .93$  for search).

An original Identity Scale was created, adapted from the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (Steger et al., 2006), to test for the presence of as well as the search for meaning in one’s identity. While there have been scales that outline the behavior of searching for meaning in one’s life, including aspects such as purpose, value, and personal self-worth, no scale looks at meaning in an individual’s various identities or if an individual is seeking new identities. Identity formation as a whole is a crucial part of helping people answer the big life question of who they are and where they feel they exist in the world (Luyckx et al., 2014; Negru-Subtirica et al., 2016). Developing a new scale to address identity seeking will determine if those moving away from their religious identity are searching for something new. Participants completed this scale which consisted of 10 Likert Scale questions in which participants indicated their level of agreement with statements on a seven-point scale ranging from “Absolutely untrue” to “Absolutely true.” Further, this scale attempted to mirror the two subsections of the original MLQ which include the presence of an identity as well as the active search for an identity. Items included statements such as “I have discovered my identity” and “I am trying to figure out who I am (i.e., my identity)” ( $\alpha = .94$  for presence and  $\alpha = .93$  for search). The full original identity scale can be found in the Appendix.

To measure baseline political engagement and past electoral activity, participants answered two questions adapted from an ANES survey which included if they have ever worked for a political candidate, political party, or any other organization that supports candidates as well as if they have ever contributed money to a political party or candidate. Participants were

able to answer “Yes” “No” or “Unsure” in order to assess how actively participants already engage in political action. These questions helped to determine how engaged participants already were in politics as a baseline prior to receiving a partisan threat condition.

To manipulate partisan threat, all participants were first briefed with the following statement:

“We are interested in your reactions to statements about the outcome of the recent Congressional elections and the upcoming 2024 Presidential election that have been circulating on the web. Please read through the statement carefully.”

Participants were then randomly assigned to a partisan threat paragraph to read, either reading a threat paragraph directed at the Democrat or Republican party about the upcoming election in 2024 (Huddy, Mason & Aarøe, 2015). Since every participant received a partisan threat paragraph, the only people that were truly threatened were those whose party identification aligned with the randomized threat paragraph for their party. Thus, if an expressive Democrat was randomly assigned the Democratic threat paragraph, they would be threatened. These paragraphs were also updated with modern political candidates that could potentially run again for office in 2024, such as Joe Biden and Donald Trump. An example of part of the Democrat threat paragraph is:

“It pains me to say this, but we may as well admit that our ideas are out of favor right now and we’re not going to win the presidency in 2024. The Republicans are going to ruin our country and there’s nothing we can do to stop them. We’d better all get ready for being the minority in Washington for the foreseeable future and hope that Americans finally come to their senses.”

The paragraphs were timed so that participants could not move on to the next screen for a minute in order to make sure they were taking time to read the paragraph presented to them. For more information regarding the threat paragraphs, refer to the Appendix.

After reading, participants completed questions related to future campaign activity, political interest, political importance, and future vote intention. These scales were included to have a comprehensive measure of political engagement that touches on political action as well as personal interest and importance. Future campaign activity was assessed using four Likert Scale questions (Huddy, Mason & Aarøe, 2015). Participants indicated their level of likeliness to complete certain activities on a five-point scale ranging from “Extremely unlikely” to “Extremely likely.” Example items included “How likely are you to plan to volunteer for political organizations?” and “How likely are you to contribute money to a political organization?” ( $\alpha = .93$ ). Political interest was measured by asking participants to rate the statement “How interested are you in politics” on a seven-point Likert Scale ranging from “Not at all interested” to “Very interested” (Pingree et al., 2018). Political importance was also measured by asking participants to rate the statement “How important are politics to you” on a seven-point Likert Scale ranging from “Not at all important” to “Very important” (Brandt, 2022). Future voting behavior was measured by adapting an ANES survey question where participants were asked if they have ever voted or plan to vote in an upcoming election and were able to select “Yes” “No” or “Unsure.”

Qualtrics-certified demographic questions were included at the end of the survey. These questions asked participants to indicate their race, age, gender identity, and present religious affiliation. The list of religious affiliations included Protestant, Roman Catholic, Mormon,

Orthodox such as Greek or Russian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Atheist, Agnostic, something else/prefer to self-describe, and prefer not to say.

Lastly, participants were shown a screen that briefed on the true meaning of the study, provided them with the contact information of the primary researcher, and included a code to collect compensation for the completion of the survey.

## **Results**

### **Preliminary Analysis and Descriptive Statistics**

The data was examined for missing cases and four cases were initially removed for incomplete responses leaving 197 valid cases. The means and standard deviations of relevant study measures are presented in Table 1. For each measure, the means were examined based on the raw data scores. A new variable was created, expressive party identification, to measure overall how partisan the sample was as a whole without distinguishing between Democrats and Republicans. This variable was also based on a 1 to 4 scale. Based on the presented means it suggests that this sample was not particularly religious, partisan, or identity-seeking as these means were 3.48 for intrinsic religiosity, 2.16 for expressive party identification, and 3.25 for identity-search respectively. Expressive partisanship was also not particularly strong for each individual party as these means were 2.24 for Democrats and 1.96 for Republicans. Also, these participants were also not engaging in meaning-seeking behavior as the mean for that measure was 3.90.

**Table 1**

*Means and Standard Deviations for Measures of Religiosity, Expressive Democrat, Expressive Republican, Identity-Search, Meaning-Search, and Current Political Engagement*

	Mean	Standard Deviation
Religiosity	3.48	1.15
Expressive Democrat	2.24	.72
Expressive Republican	1.96	.74
Expressive Party Identification	2.16	.74
Identity-Search	3.25	1.60
Meaning-Search	3.90	1.71
Current Political Engagement	2.06	1.40

### Factor Analysis

Principal axis factor analysis was conducted on the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) as well as the new Identity Scale. From this three factors were extracted which captured 73.4% of the variance in the set of items and were positively correlated with each other ( $r = .75$ ). An analysis of the factor loadings suggests one factor that reflects the presence of meaning while another indicates the search for meaning, which is consistent with the original subscales of the MLQ. Additionally, a third factor reflects the identity scale as being distinct from the MLQ. However, while these scales may be distinct, the medium to high correlation strength supports the idea that these scales do have some conceptual overlap and may be testing a similar phenomenon. Table 2 provides factor loadings for each of the scales.

**Table 2**

*Factor Loadings and Communalities for the Ten Item Identity Scale and Ten Item Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ)*

	Factor 1 Meaning Presence	Factor 2 Identity Scale	Factor 3 Meaning Seeking
ID1S		0.748	
ID2PR		0.741	
ID3S		0.759	
ID4S		0.662	0.411
ID5P	0.509	-0.517	
ID6P	0.459	-0.628	
ID7P	0.478	-0.619	
ID8S		0.614	0.393
ID9S		0.430	0.331
ID10P	0.420	-0.641	
MLQ1P	0.787		
MLQ2S			0.861
MLQ3S			0.805
MLQ4P	0.872		
MLQ5P	0.857		
MLQ6P	0.909		
MLQ7S			0.854
MLQ8S			0.783
MLQ9PR	-0.546		
MLQ10S			0.683

*Note: All items labeled “ID” represent the identity seeking scale and all items labeled “MLQ” represent the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ). All items with a “P” are testing for presence and all items with an “S” are testing for search. All items with an “R” are reverse coded.*

Principal axis factor analysis was also conducted on the future political engagement questions which included participants' likelihood to vote, participate in certain political activities, as well as how important politics are to them and how interested they are in politics. From this, two factors were extracted which captured 71.0% of the variance in the set of items. An analysis of this factor loading suggests that one factor reflects the future campaign activity scale taken from Huddy, Mason & Aarøe's (2015) study. Another factor suggests the similarity between political interest and importance with a relationship occurring in the opposite direction in regard to voting. This demonstrates that future political engagement can be represented in two



categories for the purpose of this study: future campaign activity or political interest and importance<sup>1</sup>. The four-item future campaign activity item had a higher internal consistency ( $\alpha = .92$ ) compared to the other item which captured importance, interest, and future voting ( $\alpha = .56$ ).

Table 3 provides factor loadings for each of the scales.

**Table 3**

*Factor Loadings and Communalities for the Four Item Future Campaign Activity Scale, Question on Political Interest, Question on Political Importance, and Question on Future Voting*

	Factor 1 Future Campaign Activity	Factor 2 Interest, Importance, Voting
Interest1		0.843
Importance1		1.0222
CurrentVote		-0.392
CE1	0.876	
CE2	0.838	
CE3	0.860	
CE4	0.902	

*Note: All items labeled “CE” represent the four-item future campaign activity scale. The item labeled “Interest” represents the question related to political interest. The item labeled “Importance” represents the question related to personal political importance. The item labeled “Current vote” represents the question related to future voting behavior.*

### Main Hypothesis Test

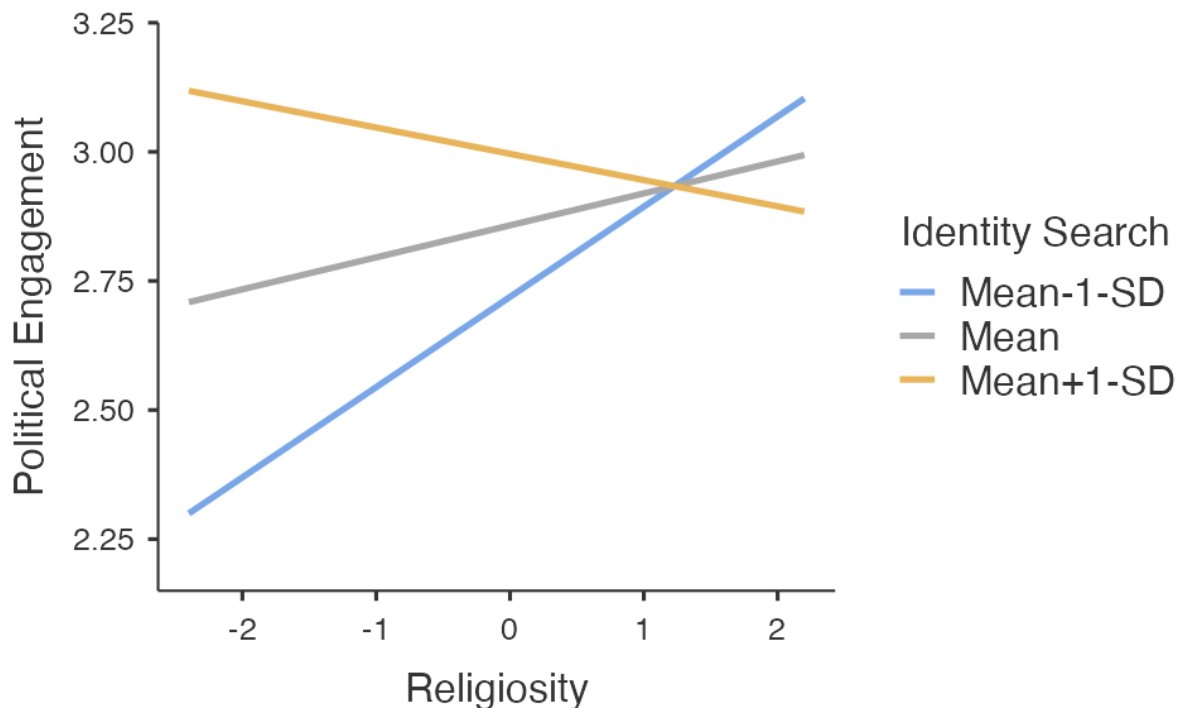
For the first hypothesis, a regression analysis was performed on the interaction between religiosity and identity-seeking on future political engagement controlling for past political engagement, which included intent to donate or volunteer in future campaigns. In the first regression, the relationship between religiosity and identity-seeking on future political activity appears non-significant ( $\beta = -.093, p < .132$ ). However, upon visual analysis of the interaction, the directionality of the relationships was consistent with the original hypothesis. As shown in

<sup>1</sup> No analysis using political importance and interest as the dependent variable representing political engagement were found to be significant or trending in the hypothesized direction. Future political engagement was measured through the four-question future campaign activity scale (Huddy, Mason, & Arøe, 2015).

Figure 1, those low in religiosity yet high in identity seeking are more likely to engage politically in the future compared to those lower in identity seeking. Additionally, highly religious individuals appeared equally engaged regardless of their level of identity seeking.

**Figure 1**

*Linear Regression Plot of Religiosity and Identity Search on Future Political Engagement Controlling for Past Political Engagement*



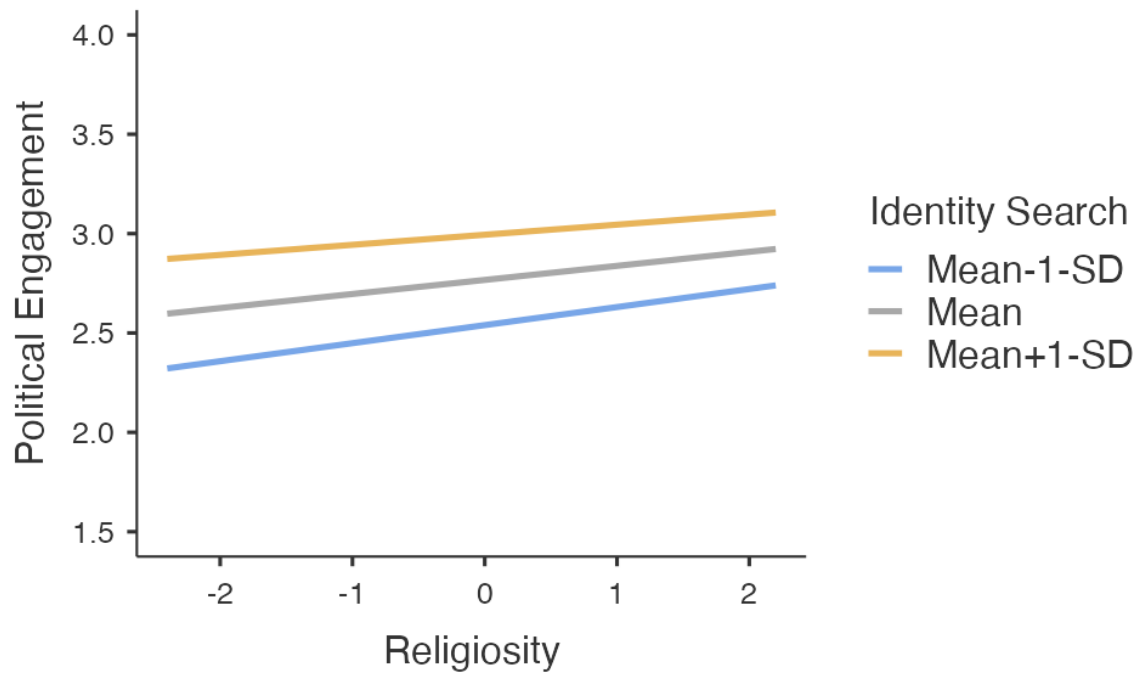
For the second regression testing this hypothesis, meaning-search was substituted for identity-search to explore if meaning could provide an alternative mechanism for the relationship between religiosity and future political engagement. The regression analysis of the interaction between religiosity and meaning-search on future political engagement controlling for past political engagement, which included future campaign activity, was non-significant ( $\beta = -.041, p < .521$ ). While the interaction graph appeared similar to the graph for identity-search, this relationship appeared even weaker.

For the second main hypothesis, the variable of partisan threat was introduced. The relationship between religiosity, identity-seeking, and partisan threat controlling for past political engagement and expressive party identification on future political activity appeared non-significant ( $\beta = -.184, p < .179$ ). As mentioned previously, participants who were in the partisan threat condition, indicated in the graph by Threat = 1, were those whose randomized partisan threat paragraph aligned with their party identification. Those who were not threatened, indicated in the graph by Threat = 0, were those whose randomized partisan threat paragraph contained information threatening the other party, rather than the party aligning with their party identification. Additionally, expressive party identification was introduced as a control variable as this variable has been shown to be an important predictor of political engagement in the presence of a partisan threat (Bankert, Huddy & Rosema, 2017; Huddy, Mason & Aarøe, 2015). Similar to the first hypothesis, the directionality of the relationships was trending in support of this hypothesis. As shown in Figure 2, in the absence of a threat to their party, those low in religiosity saw similar levels of future political engagement regardless of identity-seeking behavior. This is also consistent among those high in religiosity, with the levels of future engagement being even more similar. However, when partisan threat is introduced, as shown in Figure 3, the results look much different. Among participants lower in religiosity, those higher in identity seeking indicate nominally higher levels of future political engagement compared to lower identity seekers. For participants higher in religiosity, you see the opposite trend where those lower in identity seeking indicated nominally higher levels of future political engagement compared to those higher in identity seeking.

**Figure 2**

*Linear Regression Plot of Religiosity, Identity Search, and No Partisan Threat on Future Political Engagement Controlling for Past Political Engagement and Expressive Party Identification*

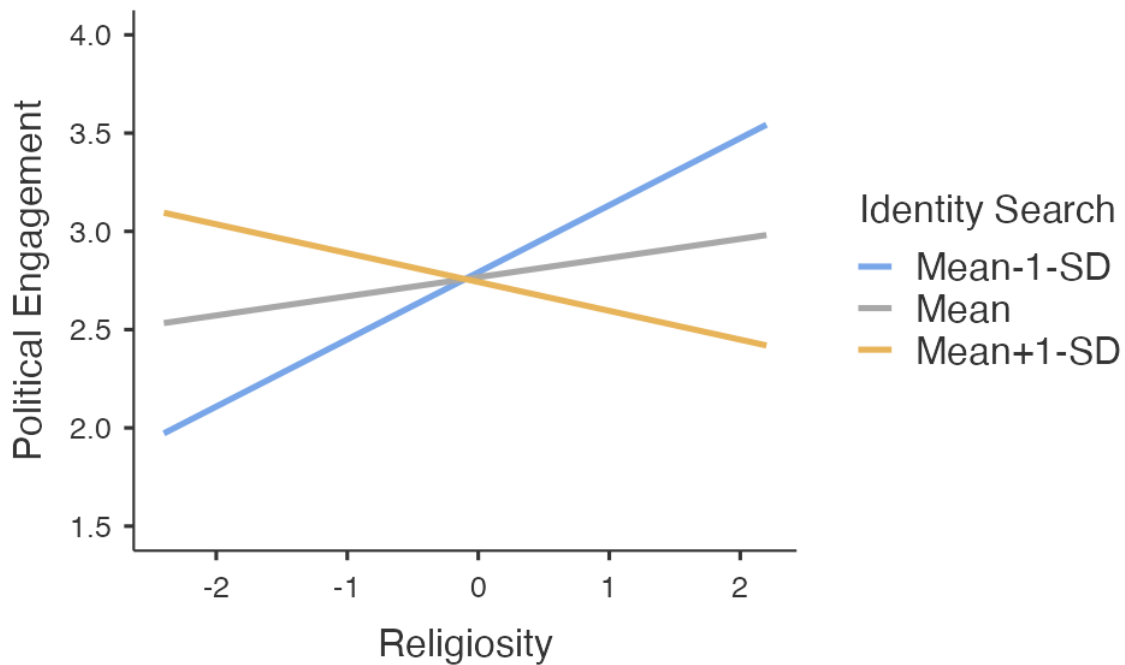
**Threat = 0**



**Figure 3**

*Linear Regression Plot of Religiosity, Identity Search, and Partisan Threat on Future Political Engagement Controlling for Past Political Engagement*

**Threat = 1**



### Discussion

This study was motivated by the question of whether partisanship could be acting as a compensatory identity to religious identity, which has been steadily declining for decades. If that is the case, then those low in religiosity yet high in identity seeking should indicate higher levels of future political engagement. This relationship should be especially true following a partisan threat condition. The goal of the present study was to test these hypotheses.

Although the expected results were not significant, they trended in the hypothesized direction. First, those lower in religiosity who are seeking their identity appeared more likely to engage politically in the future compared to those lower in religiosity who are not seeking their identity. This relationship was especially apparent in the condition where individuals' partisan

identity was threatened. These findings are consistent with the view that identity seeking may be acting as an underlying mechanism helping to demonstrate that those moving away from organized religion may be moving towards partisanship and political participation. One interesting finding to note is that when partisan threat was introduced, those higher in religiosity but low in identity seeking seemed more likely to engage in political activity compared to those higher in religiosity and higher in identity seeking. While this was a nonsignificant result, if future research reveals this to be a reliable finding, it may be occurring because of increasing ties between political and religious identities. Christian nationalism, right-wing evangelicalism, and American civic religion in general are all places where religion and politics are beginning to fuse (Hamid, 2021). Once partisan identity is threatened, this could also act as a salient threat to the religious identity of the highly religious, creating a drive to engage as a means of reaffirming their various identities.

Other results suggest that meaning search might not be a potential co-mechanism to identity seeking. Interestingly, although the identity-seeking scale and Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) were highly correlated, suggesting they are testing overlapping phenomena, the factor analysis illustrated that these scales were testing two distinct things. Two factors indicated the search for meaning and the presence of meaning, consistent with the two original subscales of the MLQ. A third factor loading showed the original identity-seeking scale with only slight overlap with the loadings that represented the MLQ. So, while these scales were highly correlated, the factor analysis shows that they are distinct. Further, meaning search was hypothesized to be a potential mechanism behind the relationship between religiosity and political engagement however the relationship appeared non-significant. This demonstrates that

identity-seeking, in this case, may be a slightly better candidate than meaning search as a mechanism.

There are some limitations to the study that must be discussed. As mentioned previously, the 197 survey participants from Prolific were not particularly religious or partisan. This demonstrates that, perhaps, the average person is neither a strong partisan nor extremely religious. Those who do identify strongly with their political party or are dedicated to their religion may represent more of a minority than previously thought as both religion and politics seem to be ingrained into society. However, it could also be that Americans are actually more partisan and religious than the subset of participants in this study. In other words, variation along these crucial identities is restricted in the sample. Such restriction is known to decrease the ability to detect significant results when measuring phenomenon (Linn, 1968). If that were to be the case, I would expect to see more of a pronounced result where a partisan threat would be even more salient and motivate more future engagement for both those who are extremely low in religiosity yet high in identity seeking, but also strong partisans. Future studies can aim to decrease this restriction of range in order to capture the full spectrum of religiosity and partisanship. Future studies can aim at diversifying and increasing the overall number of participants in order to have more representation from all levels of partisanship and religiosity.

Another limitation is that when scoring expressive partisan identity, participants who self-identified as Independent were then prompted to pick if they identified more as a Democrat or Republican. This was done based on the logic that many Independents, in reality, do lean closer to one party over the other (Greene, 1999). However, “forcing” participants to pick a party rather than identifying as an Independent may have the overall expressive partisanship means as it would make sense that self-reported Independents do not strongly identify with Democrats or

Republicans, or else they would have selected that party in the first place. In terms of religion, the largest religious percentages were Agnostic and Atheist participants. Once again, this may explain why the mean intrinsic religious identity was low as these two religions or identifications center around questioning a belief in God, or not believing in a God at all, which contrary to a main tenet of most religions. This low mean religiosity also makes sense given that organized religion is decreasing.

Finally, this study included an experimental partisan threat, however, some of the explored relationships are correlational in nature. It cannot be determined that identity-seeking behavior is a main mechanism responsible for the relationships shown as other factors could contribute to these results as well. In addition, the present study relied on self-reported measures of religiosity, partisanship, identity-seeking behavior, and political engagement. While all scales were shown to be reliable and most have been previously validated, relying on participants to complete these scales may not be entirely accurate as introspection is inherently limited and biased. Lastly, this study only consisted of 197 participants. In the future, the number of participants can overall be increased.

In terms of future directions, another hypothesis that could be derived from the idea of politics replacing religion is focusing on political or policy issues rather than identity. While partisan identity is shown to be one of the strongest predictors of political engagement, political issue-preference may also be playing a role. For example, it could be that those low in religiosity are politically engaged not because they are partisan or seeking a new identity, but they are politically engaged because they care about certain political issues and have various policy preferences. Therefore, a partisan threat may not matter to these individuals or they may not score high on an expressive partisanship scale because partisanship is not salient to them. Rather,



the movement away from religion and towards politics could be based on the political issues or ideological issue-based agenda a person is passionate about. This should be explored more fully in the future.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, while this study did not yield statistically significant results, the trending relationships between religiosity, identity-seeking, and partisan threat on future political engagement are consistent with expectations. This might be construed as modest support for the idea that identity-seeking may provide some insight into how individuals who have a lack of religious identity may be finding a place within politics once partisan identity is threatened. If supported by future research, this would suggest that as the United States moves away from organized religion, the political religious fervor will continue to increase as more people may find partisan identity to be compensatory to religious identity. Understanding the complex matrix of religiosity, partisanship, identity, and political engagement provides insight into the future of our political and religious landscapes. This also helps to describe the shifts of those existing on the outskirts of religious organizations into new groups. For those in which religious identity no longer applies or never applied to them as a salient identity in the first place, there may be a time where an individual feels as though they are lacking a sense of identity. Thus, examining identity more generally as a mechanism of movement between groups assists in shaping our conception of how individuals find meaning, make sense of the world around them, develop a sense of who they are, and bring purpose into their lives. This information taken together has important implications for the ways in which we understand religious identity and partisanship as potentially behaving in similar ways for individuals, being a part of identity-formation, and driving the movement away from organized religion towards politics.

## **Appendix**

### **Meaning in Identity and Identity-Seeking Scale:**

Questions are completed on a seven-point Likert Scale ranging from “Absolutely untrue” to “Absolutely true.”

Item 1: I am trying to figure out who I am (i.e., my identity).

Item 2: I do not have a clear identity.

Item 3: I am seeking my identity.

Item 4: I am always searching for my identity.

Item 5: I have discovered my identity.

Item 6: I have a good sense of who I am.

Item 7: I have a clear identity

Item 8: I am always looking to find my identity.

Item 9: I am looking for something to tell me who I am.

Item 10: I understand who I am.

Items 1, 3, 4, 8, and 9 indicate identity search and items 2, 5, 6, 7, 10 indicate identity presence. Item 2 was reverse coded during data analysis.

### **Democrat Partisan Threat Paragraph:**

Please read the following: Hey Democrats, it sucks but it's time to seriously face facts.

We're in trouble in 2024. Biden sucks for so many reasons. Even if you like his policies, there's no way he can win. The Republican candidates are actually raising more money than we are, which puts us in some kind of bizarro-world where our greatest advantages are now our weaknesses. It feels like it's just not going to be a pretty picture for the next 5 years. Our policies are not getting through to people. It looks like most voters have never heard of the founding fathers, much less care what they founded this country to be. It pains me to say this, but we may as well admit that our ideas are out of favor right now and we're not going to win the presidency in 2024. The Republicans are going to ruin our country and there's nothing we can do to stop them. We'd better all get ready for being the minority in Washington for the foreseeable future and hope that Americans finally come to their senses.

**Republican Partisan Threat Paragraph:**

Please read the following: Hey Republicans, it sucks but it's time to seriously face facts. We're in trouble in 2024. Trump sucks for so many reasons. Even if you like his policies, there's no way he can win. The Dem candidates are actually raising more money than we are, which puts us in some kind of bizarro-world where our greatest advantages are now our weaknesses. It feels like it's just not going to be a pretty picture for the next 5 years. Our policies are not getting through to people. It looks like most voters have never heard of the founding fathers, much less care what they founded this country to be. It pains me to say this, but we may as well admit that our ideas are out of favor right now and we're not going to win the presidency in 2024. The Democrats are going to ruin our country and there's nothing we can do to stop them. We'd better all get ready for being the minority in Washington for the foreseeable future and hope that Americans finally come to their senses.

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