Christian Nationalism and Views of Immigrants in the United States: Is the Relationship Stronger for the Religiously Inactive?

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Abstract
Previous research has shown that Christian nationalism is linked to nativism and immigrant animus, while religious service attendance is associated with pro-immigrant views. The findings highlight the importance of distinguishing between religious ideologies and practices when considering how religion affects politics. Using a national sample of U.S. adults, we analyze immigrant views by measuring levels of agreement or disagreement that undocumented immigrants from Mexico are “mostly dangerous criminals.” We find that Christian nationalism is inversely related to pro-immigrant views for both the religiously active and inactive. However, strongly pro-immigrant views are less likely and anti-immigrant views are more likely among strong Christian nationalists who are religiously inactive compared with strong Christian nationalists who are religiously active. These results illustrate how religious nationalism can weaken tolerance and heighten intolerance most noticeably when untethered from religious communities.

Keywords
politics, religion, Christian nationalism, secular, immigration

Immigration is a growing point of political conflict in Western democracies, including the United States (Abrajano and Hajnal 2015; Kaufmann 2019; Kriesi 2012). Anti-immigrant sentiment was especially salient for Trump voters leading up to the 2016 U.S. presidential election and, aside from party membership, was the strongest predictor of voters’ intention to support Trump’s 2020 reelection (Baker, Perry, and Whitehead 2020; Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2018). As such, nativism has become a core guiding value of today’s Republican Party. Christian nationalism—affirming Christian primacy in the public sphere—was another predictor of 2020 Trump support and is also strongly correlated with both anti-immigration sentiment and Republican Party membership (Baker et al. 2020; Bonikowski and DiMaggio 2016; Whitehead and Perry 2020).

Although nativism, religiosity, and conservatism have grown more closely related in the past several decades (Margolis 2018), a careful look at these relationships also show complexity. For instance, in an analysis of voting for Trump in the 2016 general election, Stroope et al. (2020) showed that Christian nationalism significantly predicted voting for Trump, but only among individuals who do not attend religious services. This indicates that the different dimensions of religiosity, in particular religious belief and behavior, can have diverging effects on political attitudes. In this case, belief in Christian nationalism strongly aligns with support of a nativist political candidate, but more intensely outside of religious communities.

In the present study we assess these ideas by focusing on views of undocumented immigrants from Mexico, the largest source of unauthorized immigration to the United States (Budiman 2020; Krogstad, Passel, and Cohn 2019). We

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contribute to prior research on nationalism, religion, and immigration by using a national probability sample of adults in the United States to assess whether active church attendance moderates the link between Christian nationalism and immigrant views. We find that active attendance tempers the strong relationship between religious nationalism and immigrant views. This suggests that participation in a religious congregation can bend nationalist views toward greater tolerance and that Christian nationalism can be especially erosive to tolerance in secular spheres.

**Religion and Politics**

Immigration has increasingly become a point of divergence between Republicans and Democrats in recent decades (Abrajano and Hajnal 2015; Hacker and Pierson 2020; Hajnal and Rivera 2014; Sides et al. 2018). Disagreements around immigration have also emerged between moderate and progressive wings of the Democratic party (Saich 2019). Similarly, religious belief and practice have grown increasingly partisan in recent decades. This ongoing trend indicates that although the religiosity of individuals influences their politics, it may be more precise to say that “partisan identities can profoundly shape identification with and engagement in the religious sphere” (Margolis 2018). Consequently, strong religiosity and nativist sentiment are often correctly presumed to be defining characteristics of the modern Republican Party.

Still, religiosity encompasses a wide range of beliefs, practices, and identities such that the relationship between religion and politics remains dynamic. Of particular interest to this study is the fact that religious belief and practice can sometimes influence political attitudes to different ends. Certain religious beliefs, such as faith in a vengeful or unloving God, share a moral affinity with strict conservative policies concerning the death penalty, harsh criminal sentencing, and strong militarism (Froese and Bader 2010; Thomson and Froese 2016; Unnever, Bartkowski, and Cullen 2010). In this way, conservative theology provides the moral foundations for punitive policies. Yet participation in religious communities, even very conservative religious groups, often promotes personal charity, tolerance, and volunteerism (Brooks 2007; Ekins 2018; but see Tranby and Hartmann 2008; Wald and Calhoun-Brown 2018). In fact, the Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey showed that the biggest gap in volunteering and charitable giving is between religious and secular conservatives, with both religious and secular liberals falling between these two poles (see Brooks 2007:193). In sum, conservatives without religion appear to be the group least likely to assist and care for others.

In the present study, we look more closely at the divergent effects of religion on immigrant attitudes. Multiple studies have shown that white evangelical Protestantism and self-reported religiosity are tied to negative views of immigrants (Guth 2019; Marti 2019; Rowatt 2019), while religious attendance or religious practice is associated with pro-immigrant views (Knoll 2009; McDaniel, Nooruddin, and Shortle 2011; Whitehead and Perry 2020). These seemingly contradictory findings become clearer when considering why religion affects politics.

The conceptualization and measurement of nationalism is an ongoing issue in the social sciences. One important element is religious or Christian nationalism, long underscored as a topic of considerable significance for scholars of American politics (Bonikowski and DiMaggio 2016; Gorski 2010, 2019). Christian nationalism is an interrelated set of beliefs that weaves together ideas about American history, triumph, the providential acquisition of land, moral order, divinely ordained boundaries, loss, and persecution (Brubaker 2012, 2017; Whitehead and Perry 2020). It is a “deep story” of nationhood set in “apocalyptic rhetoric” and a “conquest narrative” characterized by sacrifices of and ties of blood (Gorski 2020:110–11). In addition to its connections to a range of social values (e.g., Froese and Mencken 2009), Christian nationalism is a belief that is consistently associated with ethnoracial boundary drawing, nativism, and negative attitudes toward immigrants (Gorski 2020; McDaniel et al. 2011; Sherkat and Lehman 2018; Whitehead and Perry 2020). This may be because Christian nationalism, although not explicitly about nativism and ethnic prejudice, nevertheless asserts a narrative of American exceptionalism, a nation somehow chosen or favored by God. By fusing Christian and American identities and histories, Christian nationalism may be a more socially and morally acceptable means to express ethnically exclusionary and nativist views of national belonging (Marti 2020). It embraces nationalism as a valid expression of religious piety, perhaps to the exclusion of other religious identifiers. Indeed, once the strong anti-immigrant effects of Christian nationalism are taken into account, researchers find that evangelical Protestantism is no longer significantly related to anti-immigrant attitudes; only church attendance, religious practice, and nonwhite Catholic affiliation have significant pro-immigrant effects (McDaniel et al. 2011; Sherkat and Lehman 2018; Whitehead and Perry 2020).

Consequently, Christian nationalism’s connection to ethnoracial exclusion is most likely a function of religious politics rather than the result of church-based teachings and advocacy. For instance, congregational research has long noted that politics is seldom preached from the pulpit, and churches rarely organize political activities (Chaves 2004). In fact, American churches that are the most politically active tend to be liberal and composed largely of African American members (Putnam and Campbell 2010:424). And though theological “fundamentalism” is linked to low
levels of social trust in the overall U.S. population, regular churchgoers who are high in fundamentalism are more trusting than irregular churchgoers or nonattenders who are high in fundamentalism (Putnam and Campbell 2010:469). Overall, church attendance seems to promote public trust, even within theologically conservative communities. This may occur because churches often encourage forgiveness, caring for those in need, and the welcoming of strangers or travelers (Steenland and Goff 2013). Although examples of anti-immigrant church leaders can certainly be found (Massey 2019; Whitehead and Perry 2020), major Catholic and Protestant bodies, among others, in the United States and elsewhere often advocate for immigrant rights and humane treatment, citing religious teachings on compassion, witness, and solidarity (McCammon 2015; Storm 2011).

Patterns in other Western societies often concur. In a variety of European studies, religious affiliation is typically linked to anti-immigrant attitudes and ethnic bias (Scheepers et al. 2002; Storm 2011). However, the role of religion is reversed in the case of religious attendance: more frequent religious service attendance is associated with pro-immigrant attitudes and, conversely, infrequent religious attendance or nonattendance is associated with anti-immigrant views and policies (McAndrew 2020; Storm 2011). One potential reason for these contrasting effects is that religious nationalism may operate differently among religiously active and religiously inactive groups.

A variety of scholars have proposed that Christian nationalism can be a salient ideology for those who are not evangelical Protestant, who are not devoutly religious, or who are quite secular (Braunstein and Taylor 2017; Delehanty, Edgell, and Stewart 2019; Edgell and Tranby 2010; Gorski 2020; Stroope et al. 2020; Todd et al. 2020; Whitehead and Perry 2020). Whitehead and Perry (2020) noted that “many non-evangelicals (or non-Christians, for that matter) also hold strong Christian nationalist beliefs” and that “some Christian nationalists can be quite secular” (p. x). Braunstein and Taylor (2017) found that Christian-America beliefs were as high among religiously unaffiliated Tea Party members as they were among evangelical Protestant Tea Party members. This and other work indicate that it is “especially critical to examine Christian nationalism . . . in subcultures and social arenas both inside and outside of institutional religions” (Whitehead, Perry, and Baker 2018:151, 166–67). Synthesizing and applying these threads in the literature, Stroope et al. (2020) found that Christian nationalism was tied to 2016 Trump voting, but only among nonchurchgoers. Similarly, Christian nationalism may more strongly drive immigrant views among the religiously inactive.

Why would nativist strains of Christian nationalism be stronger and pro-immigrant strains of Christian nationalism weaker among the religiously inactive? One possibility is that a religious discourse can gain popularity in secular life (Delehanty et al. 2019; Williams 1995), and in doing so it can lose its philosophical, textual, and ethical granularity because believers are not actively engaging with a community seeking to refine its faith (Braunstein and Taylor 2017; Gorski 2020). Instead, an unchurched believer in religious nationalism may rely on nationalist rhetoric in the media and from political elites to define his or her beliefs and identity (Stroope et al. 2020). The result is that religious ideologies separated from religious communities become attuned to political symbolic boundaries and more strongly adverse to perceived ethnorracial outsiders (Asad 2003; Brubaker 2017; Gorski 2020).

For the religiously inactive, nationalist narratives depicting an incursion of immigrant interlopers and criminals are not offset by feelings of group solidarity within a church community. White nationalists believe that recent demographic and cultural shifts in the United States have increased social disorder, criminality, and physical danger (Stupi, Chiricos, and Gertz 2016). As such, immigrants are seen as not only a threat to a shared culture and identity but even a threat to the safety of families, children, and other vulnerable Americans who may need protection (Whitehead and Perry 2020). Given that fear, anger, and pessimism are associated with psychological distress, it is not surprising that holding right-wing populist views is linked to poor health (Backhaus et al. 2019; Shirom et al. 2008; Staicu and Cutov 2010). Studies indicate that greater involvement in religious communities can have positive effects on members’ mental well-being (Chen, Kim, and VanderWeele forthcoming); having a supportive church can ease the stress and fear associated with perceived threats seen in the media and the local environment (Acevedo, Ellison, and Xu 2014; Hill, Burdette, and Idler 2011; Stroope, Walker, and Franzen 2017). Troubled by fear of too many immigrants coming to the United States, churchgoing Christian nationalists may find a compensatory sense of belonging and security within their churches, soothing their distress and fear. In contrast, many religiously inactive individuals may have no similar support system and, as a result, can be susceptible to more lasting and uncensored fear, mistrust, and outrage directed at immigrants.

Christian nationalism also mythologizes a strictly ordered society in which rules are absolute and rule breakers need to be severely punished (Davis 2018). When Christian nationalists are not embedded in religious communities in which expressions of love for one’s neighbor and stories of grace and redemption are shared, they may more easily drift into unvarnished advocacy of “culturized religion,” populism, and a punitive nativism (Astor and
Divorced from a devout community, Christian nationalism leads to a singular focus on conformity and the strict rule of law. As Gorski (2017) asserted, “loosed from its religious moorings, religious nationalism” drifts toward “political authoritarianism” (p. 350). Perhaps religious participation keeps the ethos of grace and redemption alive in ways that are not mirrored in secular conservative life. Just as secular conservatives are less likely to help others (Brooks 2007), religiously inactive Christian nationalists may be prone to animus directed at immigrants and averse to immigrant tolerance.

Following prior research and theory, we expect that Christian nationalism will be positively associated with anti-immigrant views and inversely associated with pro-immigrant views. These relationships will be stronger for individuals who never or irregularly attend religious services compared with regular attenders.

**Data and Methods**

Our analytic sample is composed of 1,431 respondents in the fifth wave of the Values and Beliefs of the American Public study (otherwise referred to as the Baylor Religion Survey). The survey is the most recent round of a cross-sectional random national sample of Americans conducted with the Gallup Organization starting in 2005 (Froese 2017). Because of increasing problems with telephone-based samples, an address-based sample methodology (AAPOR 2016; Kennedy and Harting 2019; U.S. Census Bureau 2014) was used whereby questionnaires were mailed to 11,000 residences starting in February 2017 and subsequently trailed by two sets of prompts to complete the survey (n = 1,501). Individuals with missing values on the outcome variable were dropped (n = 70) (Von Hippel 2007). Following this data filter, we used multiple imputation in Stata’s mi procedure, which produces 20 data sets to impute values missing on predictor variables (n = 359). Study analyses used the survey’s sampling weight and were conducted in Stata 16.

**Outcome**

Following recent research (Rowatt 2019; Whitehead and Perry 2020), this study’s outcome variable comes from responses to the statement “Illegal immigrants from Mexico are mostly dangerous criminals.” Response options range from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 4 (“strongly agree”). For brevity, we refer to this variable as “immigrant views,” with strongly disagree and disagree levels referred to as more or less strong anti-immigrant views and strongly agree and agree views as more or less strong pro-immigrant views.

**Focal Predictors**

To measure Christian nationalism, we use a six-item scale gauging the degree to which people believe that religion or Christianity should be advanced in the public sphere through symbols, ideas, and actions (Froese and Mencken 2009). Responses to the following items range from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 5 (“strongly agree”): (1) “The federal government should declare the United States a Christian nation”; (2) “The federal government should advocate Christian values”; (3) “The federal government should enforce strict separation of church and state” (reverse coded); (4) “The federal government should allow the display of religious symbols in public spaces”; (5) “The success of the United States is part of God’s plan”; and (6) “The federal government should allow prayer in public schools.” The Christian nationalism index has a Cronbach’s $\alpha$ coefficient of .86 and is mean centered in analyses.

Our second key explanatory variable is an indicator of regular religious service attendance. Respondents were asked, “How often do you attend religious services at a place of worship?” and could respond “never” (0) to “several times a week” (7). To ensure ample cell sizes for group differences analyses, we dichotomized this variable at the conceptually distinct point of “once a month,” a standard cut point for indicators of regular religious service attendance (Ruiter and Tubergen 2009; Storm 2011; Voas and Chaves 2016). For brevity, we label individuals who attend regularly “religiously active” and those who never or irregularly attend “religiously inactive.”

**Covariates**

We control for several potentially confounding religion covariates, including prayer frequency, scripture reading frequency, and biblical literalism. We also control for a measure of religious tradition based on the RELTRAD classification scheme (Dougherty, Johnson, and Polson 2007; Steensland et al. 2000). Sociodemographic controls include age, gender, race, marital status, income, educational attainment, urbanicity, census region, political affiliation, political conservatism, and financial satisfaction. We include these controls to show that Christian nationalism’s association with immigrant views is not reducible to these other factors. In particular, we control for political conservatism to, as best we can, reduce the possibility that Christian nationalism on immigrant views depend on being a regular attender or not.

1Ancillary analyses using a trichotomous scheme of nonattenders, occasional attenders, and regular attenders showed that Christian nationalism effects for nonattenders and occasional attenders were not distinct; the differential effects of Christian nationalism on immigrant views depend on being a regular attender or not.
nationalism is simply a proxy for an underlying partisan identity. Study variable distributions are reported in Appendix Table A1 and descriptions in Table A2.2

**Analytic Method**

In the analysis that follows, we first present descriptive statistics for study variables. Second, using a bar graph, we present the trivariate relationship between immigrant views and five categories of Christian nationalism (ranging from low to high), showing differences for religiously active and inactive individuals. Next, we turn to a multivariable analysis to show the independent effects3 of focal variables after adjusting for background characteristics. Because our outcome is an ordinal variable and ancillary analyses show that the proportional odds assumption is not violated, we estimate ordered logistic regression models. The first model estimates the main effects of Christian nationalism and religious attendance on immigrant views. The second model adds an interaction term of Christian nationalism by religious attendance. Interaction effects in nonlinear regression models differ from linear regression models in that correct interpretation of interaction does not hinge on the statistical significance, sign, or magnitude of the cross-product term (Ai and Norton 2003; Breen and Karlson 2013; Mood 2010; Williams 2009). Instead, we use best practices and calculate average marginal effects (AMEs) and apply second-difference postestimation tests to compare the effect of Christian nationalism between the religiously inactive and active (AME tables are available upon request) (Long and Mustillo 2018; Mize 2019). We then graph predicted probabilities of holding each level of immigrant view over Christian nationalism for the religiously active and inactive. This statistical graphing approach parsimoniously provides the shape of the interaction and shows at which levels of Christian nationalism devout and nondevout individuals statistically differ.

**Results**

Figure 1 shows trivariate relationships among five levels of Christian nationalism and mean immigrant views across religiously active and inactive individuals. High values indicate greater agreement with anti-immigrant views, and lower values indicate greater disagreement. The general pattern is that higher levels of Christian nationalism are associated with greater average levels of immigrant animus. The active/inactive difference at the lowest level of Christian nationalism does not reach marginal significance. However, all subsequent levels are significant or marginally significant, with the religiously inactive showing greater average levels of anti-immigrant views, especially at the highest levels of Christian nationalism.

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2 We collapse some categorical variables because of small cell sizes across other study variable cells, which impeded multiple imputation and model convergence. Black Protestant is combined with “other faith,” Bible views are dichotomized as biblical literalism (1 = yes), and race/ethnicity is dichotomized as non-Hispanic white (1 = yes).

3 “Effect” denotes statistical relationships in our regression models and does not imply causality.
Model 1 in Table 1 shows the results of a regression in which immigrant views are regressed on Christian nationalism, regular religious attendance, and control variables. Here, Christian nationalism has a significant and positive association (exp\[b\] = 1.131, p < .001) with immigrant views, while religious attendance has a significant and inverse association (exp\[b\] = .586, p < .05). Model 2 adds the cross-product term of Christian nationalism by regular attendance, and this model is a better fit to the data. As recommended by Wood, White, and Royston (2008), we examined the model Akaike information criterion using listwise deletion and in each of the imputations separately and in all cases, the model with the interaction was favored (the Akaike information criterion ranged from 17.571 to 6.835 lower for the interaction model). In model 2, the lower order association for Christian nationalism (i.e., the effect for the religiously inactive) is positive and significant (exp\[b\] = 1.17, p < .001), such that a 1 standard deviation rise in Christian nationalism leads to more than 2.5 times greater odds of reporting a category increase in immigrant views (exp[.157 × 6.482] = 2.77). The effect of Christian nationalism for religiously active individuals is also positive and significant, but the effect size is notably smaller (exp[\(cn × attend\)] = 1.066, p = .017).

The interaction from the multivariate regression in model 2 is visualized in Figure 2, which shows predicted probabilities for all four levels of immigrant views and with covariates held at their observed values. Significant differences

| Table 1. Odds Ratios from Ordered Logistic Regressions of Anti-immigrant Views. |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
|                             | Model 1                     | Model 2                     |
| Christian nationalism \(A\) | 1.131*** (.025)             | 1.170*** (.030)             |
| Regular religious attender \(B\) | .586* (.131)               | .724 (.159)                 |
| \(A \times B\)             | .911** (.029)               | .967 (.058)                 |
| Prayer frequency            | .986 (.059)                 | .956 (.041)                 |
| Scripture reading frequency | .943 (.040)                 | .964 (.041)                 |
| Biblical literalism         | 1.053 (.241)               | 1.094 (.250)               |
| Religious tradition \(reference: Evangelical\) |
| Mainline Protestant        | .799 (.216)                 | .751 (.206)                 |
| Catholic                   | .894 (.211)                 | .837 (.198)                 |
| Other faith                | 1.083 (.299)               | 1.058 (.288)               |
| None                       | .804 (.255)                 | .908 (.295)                 |
| Age                        | 1.016** (.005)             | 1.016** (.005)             |
| Female                     | 1.158 (.191)               | 1.167 (.192)               |
| Non-Hispanic white         | 1.265 (.243)               | 1.277 (.247)               |
| Married                    | .696* (.120)               | .700* (.121)               |
| Income                     | 1.061 (.069)               | 1.066 (.068)               |
| Educational attainment \(reference: high school\) |
| Less than high school      | 1.231 (.536)              | 1.126 (.478)               |
| Some college               | .780 (.164)                 | .771 (.162)                 |
| Bachelor’s degree or more  | .510** (.114)              | .494** (.110)               |
| Urbanicity \(reference: large city\) |
| Rural                      | 1.048 (.291)               | 1.091 (.295)               |
| Small city/town            | .935 (.267)                 | .957 (.267)                 |
| Suburb near city           | .871 (.265)                 | .886 (.264)                 |
| Census region \(reference: Midwest\) |
| West                       | .539*** (.121)             | .562* (.127)               |
| Northeast                  | .655* (.144)               | .657* (.144)               |
| South                      | .751 (.161)                 | .761 (.163)                 |
| Political affiliation \(reference: Republican\) |
| Independent                | .682* (.141)               | .652* (.133)               |
| Democrat                   | .534* (.130)               | .521** (.126)               |
| Political conservatism     | 1.483*** (.115)             | 1.494*** (.116)             |
| Financial satisfaction     | .842* (.075)               | .842* (.075)               |
| Cut 1                      | .158 (.699)                 | .17 (.699)                  |
| Cut 2                      | 3.755*** (.711)             | 3.787*** (.713)             |
| Cut 3                      | 5.218*** (.730)             | 5.263*** (.731)             |

Note: n = 1,431. Standard errors are in parentheses.

* p < .10. ** p < .05. *** p < .01. **** p < .001.
Figure 2. Levels of agreement with immigrant views by Christian nationalism and active/inactive levels of religious attendance; attendance difference is $p < .05$ when lines are solid.
Note: Predicted probabilities are calculated from a multivariable ordered logit model (Table 1, model 2).

(using second-difference significance tests) between the religiously active and inactive are signified with solid portions of the line, and nonsignificant portions are signified with dashed lines. Whereas Figure 1 shows trivariate relationships between focal variables, which foreshadows the findings in the models, Figure 2 shows how the predicted probabilities of each level of immigrant attitudes as Christian nationalism increases for religiously active and religiously inactive groups, after adjusting for control variables.

Beginning with pro-immigrant views, or strongly disagreeing with the statement “Illegal immigrants from Mexico are mostly dangerous criminals,” we see that slopes of Christian nationalism differ for the religiously active and inactive. The probability of holding pro-immigrant views declines at a much steeper pace for those who do not regularly attend services compared with those who do (AME = $-0.025$ for inactive and AME = $-0.011$ for active, $p = .001$ in second-difference test). Although at low levels of Christian nationalism, the religiously inactive are more likely to hold strong pro-immigrant views than the religiously active, the steeper slope for the inactive group results in the inactive being less likely to hold pro-immigrant views than the active group at high levels of Christian nationalism. For the lowest value of Christian nationalism, the probability of strong pro-immigrant views is much higher for the religiously inactive at $0.720$ than for the religiously active at $0.500$ (a very large difference of $0.220$, $p = .009$). But for the highest value of Christian nationalism, the probability of strong pro-immigrant views is a great deal lower for the religiously inactive ($0.093$) than the religiously active ($0.223$) and results in a large difference in predicted probabilities of $-0.130$ ($p = .004$). For less strong pro-immigrant views, or disagreeing (but not strongly disagreeing), the effect of Christian nationalism is significantly stronger for the religiously inactive than active ($p = .000$, AME for inactive = $0.015$ and AME for active = $0.005$).4

4At very low values of Christian nationalism, the predicted probability of being pro-immigrant for religiously active individuals is higher than that of religiously inactive individuals. However, at moderately high values of Christian nationalism, these two groups reverse such that the religiously inactive have slightly higher predicted probabilities of being pro-immigrant compared with the religiously active. We suspect that the best explanation for this pattern is that at the low end of Christian nationalism, nearly everyone states that they either strongly disagree or disagree with anti-immigrant views, but for religiously inactive individuals, about three quarters fall into the strongly disagree category, leaving only one quarter in the disagree category. This split is about half and half for religiously active individuals.
For anti-immigrant views, there is a fairly low probability of agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement “Illegal immigrants from Mexico are mostly dangerous criminals” and few differences between the religiously active and inactive. The Christian nationalism slope for the religiously active and inactive does not statistically differ for either anti-immigrant response (for agree, the difference in AME between active and inactive is \(-0.003\) \(p = 0.121\)), and for strongly agree, the difference is \(-0.002\) \(p = 0.111\)). And there are no significant differences in the probability of strongly agreeing with anti-immigrant views between the religiously active and inactive at any level of Christian nationalism. Nevertheless, at high levels of Christian nationalism, the religiously inactive have significantly higher probabilities of agreeing with anti-immigrant sentiment compared with the religiously active. The gap between active and inactive believers is also considerable. For a person with the highest levels of Christian nationalism, the predicted probability of agreeing that undocumented immigrants from Mexico are “mostly dangerous criminals” is 0.105 for those who regularly attend religious services. But for those who are religiously inactive, the predicted probability is 0.197. This .092 difference in the probability of anti-immigrant attitudes is a notable gap \(p = 0.021\).

**Discussion**

In this study, we have tried to deepen our understanding of the role of religion in determining immigration attitudes by examining the interplay between belief in Christian nationalism and active religious attendance. We analyzed immigrant views by measuring levels of agreement or disagreement that undocumented immigrants from Mexico are “mostly dangerous criminals.” We confirm past research by demonstrating that Christian nationalism is robustly associated with anti-immigrant views and inversely associated with pro-immigrant views.

Some journalistic and qualitative accounts of Christian nationalism have focused on church leaders and churchgoers (e.g., Bailey 2017; Whitehead and Perry 2020); one interpretation of these accounts is that Christian nationalist ethnoracial exclusion is stronger among the actively religious. We shed light on this issue by examining whether effects of Christian nationalism on immigrant views differ for regular churchgoers compared with those who never or only occasionally attend church. Although we find effects of Christian nationalism on immigrant views for the religiously active and inactive alike, the effects are frequently stronger for religiously inactive individuals.

Specifically, as seen in Figure 2, at low levels of Christian nationalism the religiously inactive have a higher likelihood of holding strong pro-immigrant views compared with the religiously active. But at high Christian nationalism, the two groups trade places; here, religiously inactive individuals have a lower likelihood of holding strong pro-immigrant views compared with religiously active individuals. We also find that the religiously active and inactive have similar probabilities of agreeing with anti-immigrant views at low Christian nationalism, but as Christian nationalism strengthens, the probability of religiously inactive individuals being anti-immigrant surpasses that of religiously active individuals. In short, we find that effects of Christian nationalism are magnified by church inactivity. Returning to our hypotheses from the outset, our results generally confirm that Christian nationalism is positively associated with anti-immigrant views and inversely associated with pro-immigrant views. Our results also confirm that these relationships are stronger for individuals who never or irregularly attend religious services compared with regular attenders, especially for pro-immigrant views.

Taken together, these findings pose challenges for accounts of anti-immigrant Christian nationalism that focus on church leaders and active church attenders in the pews. Our results align with prior research showing that Christian nationalism most strongly shapes the politics of the religiously disengaged (Stroope et al. 2020). Indeed, though politics and religion often do mix through social networks within a congregation (Putnam and Campbell 2010), the mixing of religion and politics is frequently fostered outside of churches and is strongly championed by political actors seeking to establish their religious legitimacy and further their cause (Bean 2014; Domke and Coe 2008; Margolis 2018). Our findings are also consistent with the argument that the dispersion of religious beliefs into secular society can lead to a reductionist discourse imbued with a politics of ethnic resentment, nativist boundary making, and political authoritarianism (Asad 2003; Brubaker 2017; Delehanty et al. 2019; Gorski 2020). Corollaries to this pattern can in some ways be most crisply seen in Europe, where it is precisely the ongoing erosion of Christianity as doctrine, organization, and ritual that makes it easy to invoke Christianity as a cultural and civilizational identity, characterized by putatively shared values that have little or nothing to do with religious belief and practice. (Brubaker 2017:1199)

Here, even in the context of secularizing patterns, right-wing figures and political movements have effectively invoked emblematic and ideational elements of religion in service of their political and exclusionary goals (Asad 2006; Hervieu-Léger 2006; Karakaya 2020).

More broadly, our results highlight the need for incorporating “lived religion” that operates beyond institutional settings and their members (Ammerman 2016). Studies of how religious sentiments bleed into the thinking of the religiously
inactive and influence secular life take on added importance in this light (Ammerman 2014). In particular, our findings demonstrate that an ostensibly religious belief, Christian nationalism, may be powerfully operative among religiously inactive Americans. This suggests that religious identities and beliefs appeal to many Americans for their political and cultural meaning and not necessarily their traditional spiritual intent. For instance, cross-national research indicates that political and ethnic conflict can inflate levels of religiosity because people identify with religious groups for solely political purposes (Froese and Pfaff 2001; Stark and Finke 2000).

Finally, our findings accord with the possibility that communal religious participation or participation in religious services has palliative effects on religious believers. Social support is an important contributor to mental well-being, and participation in religious communities can buffer stress through provision of social support to members (Schieman, Bierman, and Ellison 2013; Stroope and Baker 2018; Stroope et al. 2017). Linkages among anti-immigrant right-wing populism, fear, psychological distress, and poor health are suggestive in this context (Backhaus et al. 2019). We hypothesize that religious activity may reduce the stress of anti-immigrant fear for Christian nationalists by providing participants with a supportive community to mitigate those fears. Speculatively, church activity may also help protect pro-immigrant views from the negative pull of Christian nationalism by promoting a more optimistic and kinder image of others than is depicted in popular conservative media which focuses on the erosion of “traditional” America (Skocpol and Williamson 2012; Stroope et al. 2020). Another possibility is that participating in a religious congregation can stoke anti-immigrant fears depending on the types of social networks in the congregation and religious messaging at formal or informal levels. Future research should examine these possibilities.

The present study’s findings are particularly informative because few national probability samples contain a multi-item scale of Christian nationalism, an array of religion controls, and views of immigrants. The strengths of the study notwithstanding, several limitations remain. The study outcome comes from a measure of negative views of undocumented immigrants from Mexico. Although Mexican migrants constitute the largest share of undocumented immigrants to the United States, undocumented immigrants come from a variety of countries and regions. For example, Central America is a source, and migrants from Central America traveling to the United States in “caravans” have been highlighted by anti-immigrant political leaders, the media, and outrage groups (Peters 2018). Additionally, Asia is one of the fastest growing sources of undocumented immigrants to the United States (Krogstad et al. 2019). Future research should examine views of undocumented immigrants from a variety of countries or regions of origin.

Additionally, this study’s outcome measure focused on immigrants as “dangerous criminals.” Other negative and positive beliefs and stereotypes of immigrants are widespread. Examples include beliefs about high fertility in order to receive welfare support, “anchor babies,” sapping public health care resources, not contributing taxes, work ethic stereotypes, and taking away jobs from American citizens (Abrajano and Hajnal 2015; Arnold 2011; Huang 2008; McDaniel et al. 2011). Multidimensional measurement of attitudes toward immigrants can advance future research.

Finally, though this study’s cross-sectional analysis of national survey data has considerable strengths, it lacks rich description of the lives and meaning-making of religiously inactive Christian nationalists, both over time and in multiple regions of the country. In-depth interviews and observations of nonchurchgoers or infrequent churchgoers from multiple regions who hold a variety of religious and political beliefs are needed to deepen our understanding. Examples from research on allied topics point to potentially fruitful approaches (e.g., Duina 2018). Additionally, our results and inferences are based on a snapshot of the American public. The dynamics of religious nationalism and immigrant animus and whether its base is inside or outside of churches may give “limited guidance” depending on the shifting importance of different beliefs and social issues in religious institutions and secular society (Wald and Calhoun-Brown 2018:335). Additional studies across time that allow more granular subgroup analysis can shed greater light on when and where religious nationalism and nativism are most potently linked among the religiously inactive.

Global migration promises to be a growing issue in part because of demographic shifts, climate change, and increased economic and political instability (McAuliffe and Khadria 2019). The push and pull between migration and nationalism is a mounting concern (Kaufmann 2019). How Christian nationalism plays out in its relation to immigration attitudes in the coming years may be among the most important issues determining the appeal of right-wing populism in the United States. As American religious participation continues to recede (Chaves 2017; Hout and Fischer 2014; Voas and Chaves 2016), Christian nationalism’s appeal to secular and religiously nominal populations may become a dynamic increasingly leveraged by anti-immigrant political movements.

5Religious congregational participation and attendance are strongly correlated with having friends at one’s congregation (Stroope 2012).

6Although we measure regular religious attendance, this does not tell us the about the cultural context of the congregation that people attend. This is an area for future research.
### Table A1. Summary Statistics for Study Variables.

|                                | Full Sample (n = 1,431) | Minimum | Maximum | No (n = 788) | Yes (n = 643) |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------|---------|---------|--------------|--------------|
| Immigrant views                |                          |         |         |              |              |
| Strongly disagree              | .40                      | 0       | 1       | .46          | .32          |
| Disagree                       | .50                      | 0       | 1       | .44          | .59          |
| Agree                          | .07                      | 0       | 1       | .06          | .08          |
| Strongly agree                 | .03                      | 0       | 1       | .03          | .02          |
| Christian nationalism          | .40                      | (6.48)  | −11     | 13           | −2.08        | 4.03         |
| Regular religious attender     | .41                      | 0       | 1       |              |              |
| Prayer frequency               | 2.62                     | (1.86)  | 0       | 5            | 1.80         | 3.83         |
| Scripture reading frequency    | 2.66                     | (2.83)  | 0       | 7            | 1.25         | 4.73         |
| Biblical literalism            | .18                      | 0       | 1       | .09          | .31          |
| Religious tradition            |                          |         |         |              |              |
| Evangelical Protestant         | .28                      | 0       | 1       | .19          | .42          |
| Mainline Protestant            | .11                      | 0       | 1       | .13          | .09          |
| Catholic                       | .26                      | 0       | 1       | .22          | .31          |
| Other faith                    | .17                      | 0       | 1       | .16          | .18          |
| None                           | .18                      | 0       | 1       | .30          | .01          |
| Age                            | 49.12                    | (17.03) | 17      | 98           | 45.88        | 53.89        |
| Female                         | .52                      | 0       | 1       | .48          | .59          |
| Non-Hispanic white             | .66                      | 0       | 1       | .67          | .64          |
| Married                        | .50                      | 0       | 1       | .46          | .56          |
| Income                         | 4.21                     | (1.70)  | 1       | 7            | 4.27         | 4.13         |
| Educational attainment         |                          |         |         |              |              |
| Less than high school          | .09                      | 0       | 1       | .09          | .09          |
| High school                    | .27                      | 0       | 1       | .24          | .32          |
| Some college                   | .31                      | 0       | 1       | .33          | .27          |
| Bachelor’s degree or more      | .33                      | 0       | 1       | .34          | .32          |
| Urbanicity                     |                          |         |         |              |              |
| Rural                          | .13                      | 0       | 1       | .12          | .15          |
| Small city/town                | .34                      | 0       | 1       | .33          | .35          |
| Suburb near city               | .28                      | 0       | 1       | .30          | .26          |
| Large city                     | .25                      | 0       | 1       | .25          | .24          |
| Census region                  |                          |         |         |              |              |
| West                           | .28                      | 0       | 1       | .28          | .26          |
| Midwest                        | .18                      | 0       | 1       | .17          | .20          |
| Northeast                      | .23                      | 0       | 1       | .26          | .19          |
| South                          | .31                      | 0       | 1       | .29          | .35          |
| Political affiliation          |                          |         |         |              |              |
| Republican                     | .29                      | 0       | 1       | .21          | .41          |
| Independent                    | .34                      | 0       | 1       | .39          | .26          |
| Democrat                       | .37                      | 0       | 1       | .41          | .33          |
| Political conservatism         | 4.12                     | (1.56)  | 1       | 7            | 3.75         | 4.67         |
| Financial satisfaction         | 3.05                     | (1.04)  | 1       | 5            | 3.00         | 3.13         |

Note: Means and proportions are reported, with standard deviations in parentheses.
### Table A2. Study Variable Descriptions.

| Variable Name                | Description                                                                                                                                 |
|------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Immigrant views             | “Illegal immigrants from Mexico are mostly dangerous criminals.” Range: 1 = “strongly disagree” to 4 = “strongly agree.”                          |
| Christian nationalism       | Christianity/religion should be advanced in the public sphere (six-item index). High values indicate agreement.                               |
| Regular attender            | 1 = Attends religious services once a month or more often                                                                                   |
| Prayer frequency            | How often spend time alone praying outside of religious services. Range: never to several times a day.                                       |
| Scripture reading frequency | How often spend time alone reading the Bible, Koran, Torah, or other sacred book. Range: never to several times a week.                     |
| Biblical literalism          | 1 = The Bible means exactly what it says. It should be taken literally, word-for-word, on all subjects.                                       |
| Religious tradition<sup>a</sup> |                                                                                                                                               |
| Evangelical Protestant      | 1 = Southern Baptist, Assemblies of God, Lutheran-Missouri Synod, Nazarene, etc.                                                             |
| Mainline Protestant         | 1 = United Methodist Church, Episcopal Church, Presbyterian Church-USA, etc.                                                               |
| Catholic                    | 1 = Catholic/Roman Catholic                                                                                                                  |
| Other faith                  | 1 = African Methodist, Jehovah’s Witness, Latter Day Saints, Judaism, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, etc.                                          |
| None                         | 1 = No religion                                                                                                                             |
| Age                          | In years. Range: 18–98.                                                                                                                     |
| Female                       | 1 = Female                                                                                                                                   |
| Non-Hispanic white           | 1 = Non-Hispanic white                                                                                                                      |
| Married                      | 1 = Married                                                                                                                                   |
| Income                       | Best estimate of total household income last year, before taxes. Range: ≤$10,000 to ≥$150,001.                                               |
| Educational attainment      |                                                                                                                                               |
| Less than high school       | 1 = No high school diploma or GED certificate                                                                                               |
| High school                 | 1 = High school graduate (grade 12 with diploma or GED certificate)                                                                         |
| Some college                | 1 = Technical, trade, vocational, business school or program after high school. Some college but no degree.                                   |
| Bachelor’s or more           | 1 = Four-year bachelor’s degree from a college or university                                                                               |
| Urbanicity                  |                                                                                                                                               |
| Rural                       | 1 = Lives in a rural area                                                                                                                    |
| Small city/town             | 1 = Lives in a small city or town                                                                                                             |
| Suburb near city            | 1 = Lives in a suburb near a large city                                                                                                       |
| Large city                  | 1 = Lives in a large city                                                                                                                     |
| Census region               |                                                                                                                                               |
| West                        | 1 = West                                                                                                                                     |
| Midwest                     | 1 = Midwest                                                                                                                                   |
| Northeast                   | 1 = Northeast                                                                                                                                |
| South                       | 1 = South                                                                                                                                     |
| Political affiliation       |                                                                                                                                               |
| Republican                  | 1 = Republican                                                                                                                               |
| Independent                 | 1 = Independent                                                                                                                              |
| Democrat                    | 1 = Democrat                                                                                                                                  |
| Political conservatism      | How would you describe yourself politically? Range: extremely liberal to extremely conservative.                                              |
| Financial satisfaction      | Satisfaction with household’s current financial situation. Range: not at all satisfied to completely satisfied.                               |

<sup>a</sup>See Dougherty et al. (2007) for detailed religious tradition classifications.

*Note: Additional variable details are available at http://www.thearda.com/Archive/Files/Descriptions/BRSS.asp.*
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