Save the Economy, Liberty, and Yourself: Christian Nationalism and Americans’ Views on Government COVID-19 Restrictions

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During the COVID-19 pandemic, state and local governments implemented lockdown restrictions that were tremendously polarizing. Those on the cultural and political left supported restrictions hoping to protect the vulnerable, while those on the cultural and political right challenged restrictions citing threats to the economy and liberty. We theorize that libertarian and authoritarian impulses within Christian nationalism undergirded much of the resistance to government restrictions. Analyzing national panel data collected before and during the pandemic, we find Christian nationalism is either the first or second strongest predictor that Americans prioritize the economy and liberty and deprioritize the vulnerable when asked about government restrictions. Religiosity works in the opposite direction, however. Findings underscore the centrality of Christian nationalism as an ideological driver of far-right discourse shaping COVID-19 responses.

Key words: Christian nationalism; COVID-19; coronavirus; religiosity; libertarianism.

INTRODUCTION

In response to the surging outbreak of COVID-19 in Spring 2020, U.S. state and local governments across the nation enacted a variety of social distancing restrictions in order to try to curb infections and “bend” or “flatten the curve”

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1Referencing graphs tracking the rate of COVID-19 infections, “bending” or “flattening” the curve refers to the collective attempt to slow down the rate at which persons were being infected with COVID-19 so as not to overrun medical care providers with too many patients.

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(Evans and Hargittai 2020; Smothers, Burge, and Djupe 2020). Many of these included shutting down non-essential businesses, demanding that persons “shelter-in-place” (stay home unless forced to leave for essentials or emergencies), requiring individuals to wear masks, and requiring individuals to social distance or self-quarantine. While polls showed that the majority of Americans did actually follow most of the recommended precautions (Burge 2020; Igielnik 2020; Pew Research Center 2020a), the government restrictions enforcing social distancing and the temporary shutting down of businesses proved to be highly controversial, with clear political lines drawn (Burge 2020; Newport 2020; Singal 2020).

Those on the cultural and political left largely supported the “lockdown” measures, stressing the need to protect those most vulnerable to infection (institutionalized populations, the elderly, the otherwise immune-compromised). Those on the cultural and political right, however, often expressed that the measures were completely unnecessary or went too far, particularly to the extent that they harmed the thriving economy and encroached on individual liberty (Mascaro 2020; Roy 2020). Some even reacted in protest to the restrictions (Roy 2020). Observing this heated polarization, commentators often concluded that partisan politics was ultimately to blame with Republicans following the lukewarm response of the President to the threat of COVID-19 or cynically looking to preserve economic vitality with the looming November 2020 election (Friedman and Plumer 2020). Others, observing the religious patterns behind who tended to support or object to the government restrictions, argued that evangelical Protestants driven by conspiracy theories, science skepticism, and populism had laid the ideological foundations for resistance (Donmez 2020; Stewart 2020).

We propose that a critical ideological element that undergirds many of the political and religious rationales for anti-restriction discourse is “Christian nationalism.” By this we mean a pervasive ideology constituted by identities, values, and historical narratives that center on preserving or “restoring” the preeminence of an identitarian and embattled form of Christianity in American civic life (Gorski 2017; Whitehead and Perry 2020a). Recent research by Perry, Whitehead, and Grubbs (2020a) has already shown that Christian nationalist ideology powerfully predicted Americans’ behavioral responses to the COVID-19 outbreak. But understanding Americans’ views on government-mandated restrictions requires we highlight different ideological elements within Christian nationalism than those identified by Perry et al. For example, recent work identifies a distinctly libertarian and neoliberal impulse within Christian nationalism that motivates certain Americans to oppose government regulations and prioritize economic prosperity and individual liberty as sacred values (Kruse 2016; Marti 2020a, 2020b). Thus, in this study, we draw on data from a nationally representative panel survey collected before and during the COVID-19 outbreak in order to examine the extent to which Christian nationalism influences Americans’ attitudes toward government-imposed COVID-19 restrictions, net of other factors.

To better frame the current study, the following section outlines the areas of contention involving state and local governments imposing lockdown
restrictions to reduce COVID-19 infections. We then briefly survey the recent research on Christian nationalism, highlighting its connections to libertarianism and neoliberal economics. We then build on these insights to theorize Christian nationalism’s connection to Americans’ views on COVID-19 restrictions.

BACKGROUND

Polarized Responses to COVID-19 Restrictions: Politics and Religion

As COVID-19 began to spread throughout the United States in February and March of 2020, state and local governments began lockdown restrictions in late-March, largely in the areas most severely affected by early spread of COVID-19 such as California and states in the Northeast. By early-April, most states had implemented some form of stay-at-home order in order to stem a tidal wave of infections (National Conference of State Legislatures 2020). Soon after the government restrictions had been passed, however, polls began to reveal deeply polarized attitudes toward the measures.

Though the majority of Americans supported emergency lockdowns early on (Millhiser 2020), as weeks progressed, a stark political divide emerged with Republicans and Independents being less favorable toward sustained government restrictions compared to Democrats (Burge 2020; Daniller 2020; Evans and Hargittai 2020; Freking and Fingerhut 2020). Among the central reasons cited by Republican lawmakers seeking to lift restrictions as soon as possible were the economy (Evans and Hargittai 2020; Freking and Fingerhut 2020; Mascaro 2020) and concerns about encroachment on individual liberties (Seymour 2020).

While the media focus centered on political polarization, other lines of division beyond partisan identification or political ideology also emerged regarding restrictions. In particular, according to Pew Research Center (2020b) data collected in late March 2020, white evangelical Protestants were the religious group least likely to express concern that the government would lift restrictions too quickly; they were also the least likely to support the forced closure of businesses. While some journalists and scholars proposed that the underlying theology of white evangelicals (distrusting science, supporting conspiracy theories and populist leaders, allegiance to neoliberal conservatism) largely influenced those on the right to oppose government restrictions (Donmez 2020; Stewart 2020), we propose that both political and Christian conservatism unite and amplify one another within Christian nationalism.

Theorizing Christian Nationalism and Opposition to COVID-19 Restrictions

“Christian nationalism” represents a pervasive ideology and discourse that advocates a fusion of identitarian Christian identity and cultural conservatism with American civic belonging (Baker, Perry, and Whitehead 2020a, 2020b; Whitehead and Perry 2020a). Though the majority of research on Christian nationalism documents its authoritarian (Davis 2018, 2019; Davis and Perry
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2020; Perry, Whitehead, and Davis 2019) and boundary-enforcing (McDaniel, Nooruddin, and Faith Shortle 2011; Perry and Whitehead 2015; Stewart, Edgell, and Delehanty 2018) elements, recent research highlights its historical connection to contemporary libertarianism and neoliberalism. Specifically, historical work by Kruse (2016) and Marti (2020a, 2020b) documents how the concept of America as a “Christian nation” emerged amidst post-WWII debates about America’s political and economic identity vis-à-vis totalitarian communist regimes. Allegiance to free-market capitalism and a concomitant suspicion of government overreach became a “Christian” value. In subsequent decades, Marti (2020a, 2020b) shows, the Republican party was able to further solidify the ideological link between Christian identity, patriotism, and a preference for neoliberal political economy, most recently manifesting itself in what Marti calls “white Christian libertarianism.” Indeed, studies that have focused on the “individualism” or “anti-structuralism” of “white evangelicals” or “white conservative Protestants” (e.g., Bartkowski 2004; Emerson and Smith 2000) may have unwittingly been observing the latent Christian nationalism/libertarianism within that subculture. In addition to its role as an ideology, Braunstein and Taylor (2017) document that Christian nationalism often serves as a “discourse” (see also Delehanty, Edgell, and Stewart 2019) among groups like the Tea Party whose constituency is religiously diverse and united not around evangelical piety or ascriptive boundary-formation per se, but allegiance to ideals of libertarian, small-government economic policy (Skocpol and Williamson 2016).

This identification of libertarian and neoliberal elements within Christian nationalism is critical for understanding how Americans would interpret government-mandated COVID-19 restrictions. To the extent that the term “Christian” within Christian nationalist ideology is not only freighted with ethnocultural implications (see Whitehead and Perry 2020a) but with implications about the inherent “morality” of free markets and a lack of government intervention, we would expect that greater adherence to Christian nationalism would signal an impulse to preserve economic prosperity and individual freedoms, even during national emergencies. Indeed this is what we have observed in the responses of prominent Christian nationalist leaders since lockdown restrictions were introduced in March. Former Governor and GOP presidential candidate Mike Huckabee, for example, expressed concerns in mid-April that lockdown enforcement was threatening Americans’ “civil liberties,” and effectively “shredding the Constitution” (Nelson 2020). So too, editor of the Conservative Catholic magazine First Things, R. R. Reno thought Americans were foolishly exchanging

3Unlike Gallagher and Smith’s (1999) analysis suggesting the inequality attitudes of white evangelicals are more “symbolic” while being practically “egalitarian” (at least regarding gender), Emerson and Smith’s (2000) study affirms the ways that the conservative Protestant subculture (strongly influenced by Christian nationalism; see Whitehead and Perry 2020a) holds attitudes that are ostensibly about responsibility, freedom, individualism, etc. that actually serve to reproduce racial inequality.
sentimentalism for liberty, “There is a demonic side to the sentimentalism of saving lives at any cost…the mass shutdown of society to fight the spread of COVID-19 creates a perverse, even demonic atmosphere” (Reno 2020). Elaborating on the contradiction between fear and freedom, Pastor John MacArthur, who recently drew national criticism for re-opening his megachurch during the pandemic and discouraging mask use, explained:

[...] just terrify people that they might die and they’ll all roll over in complete compliance. They’ll give up their freedoms, they’ll put on silly masks, they’ll put gloves on their hands, and they’ll sit in their house for as long as you tell them to sit there. You can conquer an entire nation in fear…whatever happens in terms of the future of America, we’re going to enjoy probably less and less freedoms anyway. There may be speedups to the robbing us of those freedoms coming through something like [COVID-19]. (MacArthur 2020)

Other Christian nationalist leaders, such as pastor Lance Wallnau, a proponent of “7 Mountains” dominionist theology, argued COVID-19 restrictions only served to threaten the economy: “The virus will touch just a fraction of the population…The Left [sic] wants the economy distressed because crisis improves their chances of taking office” (Wallnau 2020). Similarly, Charlie Kirk, Founder and President of Turning Point USA and director of the Falkirk Center for Faith and Liberty at Liberty University, wrote in an op-ed:

It is impossible to dispute the math that taking extreme action now will lessen the spread of the virus. Fewer sick people should be the best ethical choice, right? The question we’re not allowed to ask, however, is should the number of people who get sick be the only variable we factor into our ethical calculation? It’s also impossible to dispute that the steps we are taking are destroying the American economy (Kirk 2020).

We see potential connections with this mindset in the general public as well. Recent work documenting an association between Christian nationalism and COVID-19 behaviors may be highlighting this relationship. Perry, Whitehead, and Grubbs (2020a) show that adherence to Christian nationalist ideology was the leading predictor that Americans engaged in “incautious” behavior in May 2020 such as attending gatherings with 10+ people, eating out at restaurants, or shopping for non-essential items; and it was the second leading predictor that Americans failed to follow recommended precautions such as wearing masks or washing hands more often. While Perry, Whitehead, and Grubbs (2020a) reason that much of the association was due to anti-science/pro-Trump impulses within Christian nationalism (cf. Baker, Perry, and Whitehead 2020b; Evans and Hargittai 2020; Whitehead and Perry 2020b), part of the connection could also be due to the libertarian/small-government values with which conservative Christianity has been imbued. Building on these insights, we predict that Christian nationalism will powerfully predict that American prioritize the economy and individual liberty over protection for immune-compromised or otherwise vulnerable populations. Previous research also documents that religiosity seems to evidence effects that contradict Christian nationalism, once both are included in models together (e.g., Perry, Whitehead, and Grubbs 2020a, 2020b;
Whitehead and Perry 2020a). Consequently, we expect that in full models religiosity will predict Americans prioritize protecting the vulnerable over economic considerations or individual liberty.

METHODS

Data

Data for this study come from three waves of the Public Discourse and Ethics Survey (hereafter PDES) (Perry and Grubbs 2020). Wave 1 was collected in August, 2019; Wave 2 in February of 2020; and a supplemental Wave 3 was collected in May 2020 to gather data on experiences and interpretation of the COVID-19 crisis. Survey waves were designed by the authors and the survey instrument was fielded by YouGov, an international research data and analytics company. YouGov recruits a panel of respondents through websites and banner ads. These respondents are not paid directly but are entered into lotteries for monetary prizes. In order to draw a nationally representative sample, YouGov employs a method called “matching.” Drawing a random sample from the American Community Survey, YouGov then matches a respondent in the opt-in panel who is the closest to the Census respondent based on key sociodemographic factors. Because of the specific recruitment and sampling design used by YouGov, the company does not publish traditional response rates. However, YouGov develops sampling weights in order to ensure that the survey sample is in line with nationally representative norms for age, gender, race, education, and census region. Results from the PDES compare favorably with results from the 2018 General Social Survey on demographic factors such as age, gender, race, marital status, region, educational attainment, and evangelical affiliation (see supplementary table S1). The resulting original survey sample included 2,519 Americans that were matched and weighted. Due to sample attrition between waves and a very modest amount of missing data, our final analytic samples contain between 1,305 and 1,307 cases in full models.3

3Missing cases are handled with listwise deletion. There were no missing cases on our control variables from Wave 1, which covers all the predictors except for Christian nationalism at Wave 2, which reduced to N = 1,613 cases all from attrition. Remaining missing cases were all from dependent variables in Wave 3. In order to account for whether panel attrition significantly altered our findings, we estimated a logistic regression model predicting attrition between Waves 1 and 3 using age, gender, race, marital status, parental status, region, education, income, and religiosity as predictors. Americans who were younger, male, unmarried, childless, lower education, higher income, and more religious were more likely to drop out of survey waves. We calculate inverse probability weights by multiplying the probability of attrition by the sampling weights for the PDES and weighting each case in our regression analyses (table 3). We also ran models unweighted, with only the sampling weights, and with only the attrition probability weights, and all results were virtually identical.
Measures

Dependent variables for this study consist of three indicators that we constructed from six measures in Wave 3 of the PDES indicating Americans’ views about government-mandated distancing restrictions during COVID-19. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the six statements presented in table 1 that we organize under the headings “Save the Economy” (Cronbach’s alpha = .84), “Save Liberty” (Cronbach’s alpha = .76), and “Save the Vulnerable” (Cronbach’s alpha = .83). For each statement, respondents could answer 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Measures were averaged to create scales ranging from 1 to 5, which we predict using Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression.

Key predictor: Christian nationalism. While there have been several measures of Christian nationalism (e.g., McDaniel, Nooruddin, and Faith Shortle 2011; Perry and Whitehead 2019; Stewart, Edgell, and Delehanty 2018), all with similar results, our measure is a scale constructed from measures repeatedly asked in surveys like the Baylor Religion Surveys and the Chapman University Survey of American Fears (Baker, Perry, and Whitehead 2020a, 2020b; Perry and Whitehead 2020; Whitehead, Perry, and Baker 2018). This scale typically includes six level-of-agreement questions using the same statements: “The federal government should advocate Christian values,” “The federal government should declare the United States a Christian nation,” “The federal government should enforce strict separation of church and state” (reverse coded), “The federal government should allow religious symbols in public spaces,” “The federal government should allow prayer in public schools,” and “The success of the United States is part of God’s plan.” Responses range from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Following previous research, we combine these measures into an additive scale (set to zero) ranging from 0 to 24, with higher scores indicating greater adherence to Christian nationalism (Cronbach’s alpha = .90). Our Christian nationalism measures were all taken from Wave 2 of the PDES in order to leverage the panel design of the survey and ensure temporal precedence to the Wave 3 outcomes.

A correlation matrix of all these outcome variables and Christian nationalism are presented in the supplementary table S2. The table demonstrates that while these variables are all strongly correlated, the two variables we use to make each scale are the most similar to one another.

We also tested our Christian nationalism scale from Wave 1 (August 2019) predicting these Wave 3 outcomes and the substantive results were virtually identical. We also combined Christian nationalism scales from Waves 1–3 by averaging the scores from each wave and predicting the Wave 3 outcome. Results were again identical. All ancillary models are available upon request. Ultimately we kept the current coding strategy with Christian nationalism at Wave 2 predicting the outcomes at Wave 3 in order to simplify estimation and preserve temporal precedence.
Analyses also included a variety of controls theorized to be potentially connected to both Christian nationalist ideology and Americans’ views on mandated COVID-19 restrictions. All controls are from Wave 1 of the PDES. Sociodemographic controls are included for gender (male = 1, female = 0), race (white = 0, Black = 1, Latino = 1, Asian = 1, other race = 1), age (in years), marital status (married = 1, other = 0), parental status (children under 18 = 1, other = 0), educational attainment (1 = less than high school, 6 = postgraduate degree), family income (dummy variables: 0 = zero to $29,999 per year, 1 = $30,000–59,999 per year, 1 = $60,000–99,999 per year, 1 = $100,000–199,999 per year, 1 = $200,000 or more, 1 = did not report), region (South = 0, Northeast = 1, Midwest = 1, West = 1), and employment status (full-time employment = 0, part-time employment = 1, temporarily laid off = 1, unemployed = 1, retired = 1, permanently disabled = 1, homemaker = 1, student = 1, other = 1). As a robustness check, we recoded a number of control variables in order to ensure that our substantive findings were not due to coding decisions. We recoded education as a series of dummy variables; we recoded marital status as a series of dummy variables including divorced, cohabitating, etc.; we used a shortened and expanded version of the income measure; and we rotated reference categories for all our dummy variables. None of these checks changed the substantive findings reported below. In addition, we would have preferred to control for urban, suburban, or rural residence in this analysis as well as other indicators of authoritarianism or libertarian attitudes, but such controls were unavailable in the data and we acknowledge this as a limitation.

### TABLE 1 Scales and Measures Indicating Americans’ Views on Imposed Distancing Restrictions

| Scale                          | Statements                                                                                   |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Save the Economy \( (\alpha = .84) \) | • We must lift social distancing restrictions as soon as possible in order to avoid economic collapse.                               |
|                                 | • Saving the economy by lifting social distancing restrictions is worth the health risk to older Americans. |
| Save Liberty \( (\alpha = .76) \)   | • Governments have the right to restrict our businesses and travel for the sake of minimizing COVID-19 infections. (reverse coded) |
|                                 | • Citizens have the right to expose themselves to risk if they would prefer to work and travel freely. |
| Save the Vulnerable \( (\alpha = .83) \) | • Those who are protesting social distancing restrictions are endangering others with their ignorance. |
|                                 | • States should continue social distancing restrictions as long as necessary in order to protect the vulnerable. |

*Source: PDES Wave 3.*

*Note: For each scale, measures are averaged to create a scale ranging from 1 to 5. Responses ranged from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree.*
Political and religious characteristics are also important to include since Christian nationalism may simply be a proxy for political and/or religious conservatism. Political controls include party identification (Republican = 1, other = 0), and political conservatism (1 = very liberal, 5 = very conservative). Religion controls include religious tradition and religiosity. Religious tradition is measured with six categories: born-again Protestant (reference), liberal Protestant, Catholic, other Christian, other religions, and seculars (including atheists, agnostics, and the unaffiliated). Religiosity is a summative scale from three standardized measures: religious service attendance, prayer frequency, and respondents’ self-reported importance of religion in their lives (Cronbach’s alpha = .85). For descriptive statistics on all variables included in the analyses, see table 2.

**Plan of Analysis**

The analysis proceeds as follows. In order to establish base-line bivariate relationships, table 2 presents zero-order correlations between all predictor variables in the models and each of our three scales of Americans’ attitudes toward government-mandated distancing restrictions. Table 3 presents OLS regression models predicting our three attitudinal scales. Models 1, 3, and 5 include the full battery of controls without Christian nationalism, while Models 2, 4, and 6 introduce the Christian nationalism measure in order to assess how Christian nationalism improves our predictive power regarding whether Americans take an orientation to mandated distancing restrictions that prioritize the economy, liberty, or the vulnerable. All models report unstandardized and standardized beta coefficients. Figure 1 graphs out the significant associations.

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7“Born-again Protestants” are those respondents who indicated they were “Protestant” and then on a separate question indicated they were “born again or evangelical.” This makes this measure similar to that used by Pew and other polling firms, with the exception that polling firms also constrain this category further by specifying “white born-again Protestants.” Liberal Protestants, in contrast, are those Protestants who indicated they were not “born again or evangelical.” “Other Christians” refers to Mormons and Eastern Orthodox Christians who do not have large enough numbers to be included separately but nonetheless should be included in the analysis. “Other religions” included all non-Christian religious faiths (Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, etc.).

8Bible beliefs, and specifically biblical literalism, are traditionally held to be highly indicative if not the sine qua non of conservative Christian subculture (e.g., Franzen and Griebel 2013; Hempel and Bartkowski 2008; Perry 2020; Perry and Grubbs 2020). Wave 1 of the PDES actually included a Bible belief measure similar to that found in the General Social Surveys and Baylor Religion Surveys. However, this was only asked of a subsample, thereby reducing the sample size. Thus we opted not to include it in the main models. However, as a robustness check we ran models with Bible beliefs included (see supplementary table S3) and the results are substantively identical. The only difference is that Christian nationalism is now the second strongest predictor in all models behind political conservatism. However, none of the Bible belief measures are significant predictors. This gives us confidence our findings are not unduly biased by this omitted variable.
TABLE 2 Descriptive Statistics and Bivariate Correlations

|                          | Range   | Mean or % | SD    | $r$ With Save the Economy | $r$ With Save Liberty | $r$ With Save the Vulnerable |
|--------------------------|---------|-----------|-------|---------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------------|
| Save the Economy         | 1–5     | 2.5       | 1.3   | .75***                    | .75***                |                              |
| Save Liberty             | 1–5     | 2.6       | 1.3   | .75***                    | .75***                |                              |
| Save the Vulnerable      | 1–5     | 3.8       | 1.3   | -.72***                   | -.78***               | -.45***                      |
| Christian nationalism   | 0–24    | 11.1      | 7.2   | .53***                    | .46***                | -.45***                      |
| Male                     | 0–1     | 47%       | .06*  | .06*                      | -.07*                 |                              |
| White (ref.)             | 0–1     | 66%       | .05   | .06*                      | -.06*                 |                              |
| Black                    | 0–1     | 12%       | -.16***| -.11***                   | .11***                |                              |
| Latino                   | 0–1     | 14%       | .03   | -.03                      | .03                   |                              |
| Asian                    | 0–1     | 3%        | -.01  | -.03                      | .04                   |                              |
| Other race               | 0–1     | 5%        | .10** | .11***                    | -.10**                |                              |
| Age                      | 18–90   | 52.8      | 15.9  | .09**                     | .04                   | -.04                         |
| Married                  | 0–1     | 52%       | .10***| .08**                     | -.08**                |                              |
| Kids under 18            | 0–1     | 23%       | .01   | .01                       | -.04                  |                              |
| Education                | 1–6     | 3.3       | 1.5   | -.11***                   | -.09**                | .07*                         |
| Income less than $30,000 (ref.) | 0–1 | 25%       | -.09**| -.09**                    | .10**                 |                              |
| Income $30,000–59,999    | 0–1     | 31%       | .06*  | .08**                     | -.04                  |                              |
| Income $60,000–99,999    | 0–1     | 19%       | -.03  | -.04                      | -.04                  |                              |
| Income $100,000–199,999  | 0–1     | 13%       | .04   | .03                       | -.66*                 |                              |
| Income $200,000 or more  | 0–1     | 2%        | .00   | .02                       | -.04                  |                              |
| Income did not report    | 0–1     | 10%       | .04   | .01                       | -.04                  |                              |
| South (ref.)             | 0–1     | 38%       | .05   | .07*                      | -.03                  |                              |
| Northeast                | 0–1     | 17%       | .09** | -.07**                    | .07**                 |                              |
| Midwest                  | 0–1     | 22%       | -.01  | .00                       | -.02                  |                              |
| West                     | 0–1     | 23%       | .03   | -.01                      | -.01                  |                              |
| Full-time employed (ref.)| 0–1     | 37%       | .00   | .00                       | -.04                  |                              |
| Part-time employed       | 0–1     | 10%       | .01   | .02                       | .02                   |                              |
| Occupation                  | Range | Mean or % | SD   | \( r \) With Save the Economy | \( r \) With Save Liberty | \( r \) With Save the Vulnerable |
|-----------------------------|-------|-----------|------|---------------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Temporarily laid off        | 0–1   | 1%        |      | .01                             | .00                      | −.03                            |
| Unemployed                  | 0–1   | 7%        |      | −.03                            | −.01                     | −.03                            |
| Retired                     | 0–1   | 24%       |      | .08***                          | −.02                     | −.01                            |
| Permanently disabled        | 0–1   | 9%        |      | −.03                            | .00                      | .04                             |
| Homemaker                   | 0–1   | 8%        |      | −.04                            | .04                      | .00                             |
| Student                     | 0–1   | 3%        |      | −.05                            | −.05                     | .07**                           |
| Other                       | 0–1   | 1%        |      | .01                             | .00                      | .03                             |
| Republican                  | 0–1   | 26%       |      | .39***                          | .34***                   | −.29***                         |
| Political conservative      | 1–5   | 3.0       | 1.2  | .57***                          | .53***                   | −.48***                         |
| Born-again Protestant (ref.)| 0–1   | 22%       |      | .16***                          | .14***                   | −.11***                         |
| Liberal Protestant          | 0–1   | 13%       |      | −.02                            | −.02                     | .04                             |
| Catholic                    | 0–1   | 17%       |      | .02                             | −.02                     | −.01                            |
| Other Christian             | 0–1   | 3%        |      | .06*                            | .06*                     | −.08**                          |
| Other religion              | 0–1   | 12%       |      | −.02                            | .00                      | .00                             |
| Secular                     | 0–1   | 32%       |      | −.15***                         | −.10***                  | .10**                           |
| Religiosity scale           | −4 to 3.9 | −.18 | 2.6  | .22***                          | .16***                   | −.16***                         |

Source: PDES, Waves 1–3 (weighted with standard population weights).

*\( p < .05 \); **\( p < .01 \); ***\( p < .001 \) (two-tailed tests).
**TABLE 3**  Ordinary Least Squares Regression Models Predicting Americans’ Views on Social Distancing Restrictions

| Predictors                  | Save the Economy | Save Liberty | Save the Vulnerable |
|-----------------------------|-------------------|-------------|---------------------|
|                             | Model 1           | Model 2     | Model 3             | Model 4           | Model 5             | Model 6           |
|                             | b                 | β          | b                  | β               | b                  | β              |
| **Christian nationalism**   |                   |            |                    |                 |                    |                 |
| Male                        | 0.139*            | 0.053      | 0.152*             | 0.058           | 0.152*             | 0.061           |
| Black                       | -0.326**          | -0.078     | -0.415***          | -0.099          | -0.181             | -0.045          |
| Latino                      | 0.153             | 0.043      | 0.103              | 0.029           | -0.038             | -0.011          |
| Asian                       | 0.083             | 0.011      | 0.007              | 0.001           | -0.068             | -0.010          |
| Other race                  | 0.713***          | 0.127      | 0.507***           | 0.090           | 0.683***           | 0.128           |
| Age                         | -0.003            | -0.036     | -0.003             | -0.038          | -0.002             | -0.024          |
| Married                     | 0.123             | 0.047      | 0.088              | 0.033           | 0.140*             | 0.056           |
| Kids under 18               | -0.020            | -0.007     | -0.001             | 0.000           | -0.122             | -0.045          |
| Education                   | -0.037            | -0.042     | 0.013              | 0.015           | -0.020             | -0.024          |
| Income $30,000–59,999        | 0.114             | 0.039      | 0.141              | 0.049           | 0.151              | 0.055           |
| Income $60,000–99,999       | -0.095            | -0.029     | -0.027             | -0.008          | -0.082             | -0.027          |
| Income $100,000–199,999     | 0.054             | 0.014      | 0.110              | 0.029           | -0.001             | 0.000           |
| Income $200,000 or more     | -0.110            | -0.013     | -0.045             | -0.005          | 0.113              | 0.014           |
| Income did not report       | 0.223*            | 0.054      | 0.339**            | 0.083           | 0.118              | 0.030           |
| Northeast                   | -0.126            | -0.034     | -0.110             | -0.030          | -0.126             | -0.036          |
| Midwest                     | -0.087            | -0.028     | -0.048             | -0.015          | -0.084             | -0.028          |
| West                        | -0.074            | -0.025     | 0.020              | 0.007           | 0.180*             | -0.063          |
| Part-time                   | 0.139             | 0.033      | 0.183              | 0.043           | 0.133              | 0.033           |
| Predictors                | Save the Economy |                  | Save Liberty |                  | Save the Vulnerable |                  |
|--------------------------|------------------|------------------|--------------|------------------|---------------------|------------------|
|                          | Model 1          | Model 2          | Model 3      | Model 4          | Model 5             | Model 6          |
|                          | b                | β                | b            | β                | b                   | β                |
| Temporarily laid off     | .163             | .012             | -.007        | .002             | -.333               | -.025            |
| Unemployed               | -.153            | -.031            | -.086        | -.019            | -.052               | -.011            |
| Retired                  | -.095            | -.027            | -.327**      | -.097            | -.355**             | -.105            |
| Permanently disabled     | -.333**          | -.070            | -.368**      | -.077            | .430**              | .090             |
| Homemaker                | -.393**          | -.083            | -.386**      | -.081            | .346**              | .072             |
| Student                  | -.484**          | -.085            | -.449**      | -.079            | .661***             | .115             |
| Other                    | .143             | .011             | .048         | .004             | .425                | .034             |
| Republican               | .264**           | .088             | .220**       | .078             | .042                | .025             |
| Political conservative   | .536***          | .503             | .495***      | .491             | -.499***            | -.466            |
| Liberal Protestant       | .063             | .015             | .202         | .049             | .028                | .007             |
| Catholic                 | -.038            | -.011            | .116         | .034             | -.112               | -.032            |
| Other Christian          | .091             | .012             | .339         | .046*            | -.401*              | -.054            |
| Other religion           | .069             | .017             | .234         | .058*            | -.121               | -.030            |
| Secular                  | .235*            | .083             | .411         | .145***          | -.252*              | -.089            |
| Religiosity scale        | .017             | .035             | -.050        | -.099**          | -.010               | .051**           |
| Intercept                | .975***          | .370             | 1.196***     | .740***          | 5.232***            | 5.783***         |
| Adjusted $R^2$           | .340             | .417             | .294         | .343             | .261                | .324             |
| N                        | 1,307            | 1,307            | 1,307        | 1,307            | 1,307               | 1,307            |

Source: PDES, Waves 1–3 (weighted with inverse probability weighting to adjust for attrition).

Note: Reference categories are white, income less than $30,000, South, full-time employment, and born-again Protestant.

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001 (two-tailed tests).
Bivariate results in table 2 affirm that Christian nationalism is positively associated with taking an orientation toward government-mandated distancing restrictions that prioritize protecting the economy \((r = .53, p < .001)\) and liberty \((r = .46, p < .001)\), while de-prioritizing protecting the vulnerable \((r = -.45, p < .001)\). These trends are consistent with the direction of associations we see among males, Republicans, political conservatives, born-again Protestants, and those who are more religious (in other words, all those characteristics we would associate with Christian nationalism). In contrast, these trends are reversed for Black Americans, those who are more educated, those who make less than $30,000 a year, and secular Americans (i.e., those who are more vulnerable to COVID-19 themselves and/or on the cultural or political left). Given that the patterns we observe for Christian nationalism so closely align with what we would expect for religious and political conservatives, we turn to the multivariate analyses to assess Christian nationalism’s independence as a predictor.

In the full models presented in table 3, we see that Christian nationalism powerfully predicts Americans’ views toward mandated distancing restrictions in the ways predicted above. Comparing models with and without Christian nationalism also affirms that the inclusion of Christian nationalism greatly improves the \(R^2\) for each outcome measure. In Model 2, Christian nationalism \((b = .080, p < .001, \beta = .436)\) is the leading predictor that Americans wish to prioritize the economy in thinking about social distancing restrictions, even ahead of political conservatism \((b = .346, p < .001, \beta = .325)\). When looking at whether Americans wish to prioritize liberty over imposed restrictions in Model 4, Christian nationalism \((b = .060, p < .001, \beta = .347)\) is the second leading predictor just behind political conservatism \((b = .341, p < .001, \beta = .348)\). And lastly in Model 6, Christian nationalism \((b = -.073, p < .001, \beta = -.396)\) is again the leading
predictor that Americans do not wish to prioritize the vulnerable when considering social distancing restrictions, followed again by political conservatism ($b = -0.325, p < .001, \beta = -0.303$).

Importantly, in Table 3, we also see a change in the association between religiosity and Americans’ attitudes toward the lockdown measures. While at the bivariate level, religiosity was associated with Americans prioritizing the economy and liberty and de-prioritizing the vulnerable (see Table 2), once Christian nationalism is accounted for in multivariate models, religiosity is associated with actually favoring imposed restrictions in spite of concerns over the economy and liberty, and is also positively associated with concern for protecting the vulnerable.

Figure 1 illustrates the clear linearity of the net associations between Christian nationalism and Americans’ orientation toward the mandated distancing measures. As Americans subscribe more to Christian nationalist ideology, with virtually every increase, they are consistently more likely to stress that the economy and individual liberty needs to be protected, causing them to favor lifting social distancing restrictions. Simultaneously, as Christian nationalism increases, Americans are less likely to hold views that favor maintaining the distancing restrictions in order to protect the vulnerable.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Americans’ polarized responses to government-mandated “lockdown” restrictions often cite the tradeoff between collective sacrifices to protect the most vulnerable populations, on the one hand, and removing restrictions in order to save the economy and maximize personal liberty, on the other (Evans and Hargittai 2020; Kirk 2020; Mascaro 2020; Roy 2020; Seymour 2020). Building on recent findings showing that Christian nationalism plays a powerful role in shaping Americans’ behavioral responses to COVID-19 (Perry, Whitehead, and Grubbs 2020a) and incorporating insights from research highlighting the libertarian nature of Christian nationalism (Marti 2020a, 2020b), our study examined how Christian nationalist ideology predicts Americans’ expressed priorities when considering maintaining COVID-19 restrictions. Consistent with expectations, we find that Christian nationalism is among the leading predictors that Americans prioritize saving the economy and preserving individual liberty over protecting the vulnerable.

Our findings provide several implications for research on COVID-19 as well as research on Christian nationalism and health outcomes more generally. Most relevant to the current crisis, the polarized responses Americans are currently exhibiting toward state and local governments intervening with restrictions to limit the spread of the virus are not simply due to partisan divides, nor are they due to something inherent within the white evangelical sub-culture. Indeed, Republican identification seldom predicted our outcomes and “born-again
Protestants” (essentially the measure used to identify evangelicals in other national opinion polls) were not significantly different from liberal (non-born again) Protestants or Catholics on these measures. In fact, religious tradition was not predictive of COVID-19 attitudes even before Christian nationalism was included in models and Republican party identification was only slightly stronger as a predictor without Christian nationalism considered (see table 3: Models 1, 3, and 5). Rather, Christian nationalist ideology, even after accounting for sociodemographic, religious, and political characteristics, is the leading predictor that Americans prioritize the economy and deprioritize the vulnerable. And it is the second leading predictor (behind only political conservatism) of prioritizing individual liberty. Clearly, social scientists, pollsters, and those in the media need to employ greater nuance when explaining why so many Americans are resistant to governments implementing and/or maintaining sweeping social distancing restrictions. The answer is not political partisanship or evangelicalism per se, but much of it has to do with the pervasive ideology that blends Christian identity with conceptions of economic prosperity and individual liberty (Marti 2020a, 2020b), even at the expense of the vulnerable.

Though beyond the scope of this paper, future studies of Christian nationalism’s libertarian, neoliberal influence should explore how these tendencies are potentially moderated by race and gender. Following recent calls to grapple with “complex religion” (the fact that religious characteristics are generally contextualized within other socially significant characteristics; see Wilde 2018; Wilde and Glassman 2016), it is possible that Christian nationalism’s tendency to devalue or exclude minorities (particularly Blacks and Latinos) amplifies whites’ disregard for “the vulnerable,” particularly since ethnoracial minorities have been shown to be more susceptible to COVID-19 infection due to isolation, labor conditions, lack of access to medical care, or institutionalization (incarceration). Among white Americans, it is predictable that Christian nationalism would encourage a particular insensitivity to the needs of these populations over the abstract idea of personal liberty or the need to defend economic prosperity, both situations that tend to favor whites within our racialized social system (Perry, Whitehead, and Grubbs 2020b; Ray 2019; Wilde 2018).

So too, just as recent research points out (Deckman and Cassese 2019; Du Mez 2020; Smothers, Burge, and Djupe 2020; Whitehead and Perry 2019), Christian nationalism has a strongly gendered component—it connects masculine toughness with national character. Thus, it would be expected that men who embrace Christian nationalist ideology would be more likely to pick up on these elements

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9 We tested for cross-product interactions between Christian nationalism, racial identity, and gender (see supplementary table S4). Though several of the interaction terms were statistically significant, an examination of trend lines revealed that the differences across whites and non-whites or men and women were not particularly large. Because the focus of this study was to document Christian nationalism’s association with Americans’ views about COVID-19 restrictions, we do not elaborate on those potential moderating effects here.
and thus more likely to formulate a calculation about priorities during COVID-19 that elevates personal freedom and economic prosperity over those who are “too weak” to protect themselves (i.e., the economically, politically, or medically vulnerable). Additionally, future studies, to the extent that they have a large enough sample size, should also consider the potential moderating influences of nativity, citizenship, and secularity. Being born in another country or a lifelong openly secular American may provide different interpretive lenses through which Christian nationalist ideology may work compared to Americans who are native-born and/or have identified with a religious tradition at some point in the life course.

Finally, it is worth considering the implications of these findings for future research on Americans’ views on health-related behaviors and policies. The fact that Christian nationalism has now been shown to powerfully predict both individual behavioral responses to the COVID-19 pandemic (Perry, Whitehead, and Grubbs 2020a) and Americans’ values regarding how the government should respond to the crisis suggests that other implications need to be explored. One obvious example would be how Christian nationalism shapes Americans’ attitudes toward health care policy. For example, studies could examine how Christian nationalism is associated with both use of and favorability toward the Affordable Care Act (ACA) also known as “Obamacare.” Given the libertarian and pro-Trump impulses of Christian nationalism, the direction of that association would be highly predictable. In addition, such studies would also need to consider how such an association is potentially modified by racial identity and class, which would be highly probable considering the populations that Obamacare is more likely to serve.

Another issue that would need further exploration is how Christian nationalism potentially influences Americans’ behavioral responses to a possible COVID-19 vaccine. Conservative Protestants are among the groups most likely to be anti-vaxxers (Hornsey, Harris, and Fielding 2018; Quinn and Lewin 2020) and recent research has shown Christian nationalism to be a strong predictor of anti-vaccine attitudes generally (Whitehead and Perry 2020b). To the extent that Americans are influenced by Christian nationalist ideology, it is likely that such Americans (likely more skeptical of science and supportive of libertarian freedom) will be more skeptical of a COVID-19 vaccine and more reluctant to vaccinate their children, thus potentially curbing attempts to build herd immunity.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

Supplementary data are available at Sociology of Religion online.
TABLE S1 Comparison of PDES W1 and 2018 GSS on Key Demographic Variables.
TABLE S2 Correlation Matrix for Key Variables.
TABLE S3 Ordinary Least Squares Regression Models Predicting Americans’ Views on Social Distancing Restrictions With Bible Beliefs Measure From Wave 1.
TABLE S4 Ordinary Least Squares Regression Models Predicting Americans’ Views on Social Distancing Restrictions With Interaction Terms for Race and Gender.

FUNDING

Data collection was supported via a research grant awarded by the Charles Koch Foundation to Joshua B. Grubbs and by the Jack Shand Research Grant from the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion awarded to Samuel L. Perry. Neither granting agency played any role whatsoever in designing the survey instrument or analyzing the results.

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