

The Conflicting Influences of Religiosity on Attitude Toward Torture

Ariel Malka¹ and Christopher J. Soto²

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Abstract

This research examines the thesis that religiosity has conflicting influences on Americans' attitudes about the use of torture on terrorism suspects: an organic influence favoring opposition to torture and a discursively driven influence favoring support of torture. In each of two national samples, religiosity had both a direct effect toward opposition to torture and an indirect effect—via conservative political alignment—toward support of torture. Multiple-group analyses revealed that the direct effect toward opposition to torture did not vary across Americans with differing levels of exposure to political discourse, whereas the indirect effect toward support of torture via conservative political alignment was much stronger among Americans highly exposed to political discourse. Among such individuals, the indirect effect was so strong that it completely counteracted the competing direct effect. Discussion focuses on the competing influences that a single nonpolitical psychological characteristic may have on a political preference.

Keywords

conservatism, ideology, political attitudes, religion, torture

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Religion has been a central feature of American culture throughout the nation's history, and one with a great influence on Americans' social worldviews. Since Gordon Allport's (1954, 1959) seminal work on religion and prejudice, social and personality psychologists have empirically examined the influence of religion on various social attitudes, values, and beliefs (e.g., Batson, Schoenrade, & Ventis, 1993; A. B. Cohen & Rozin, 2001; Johnson, Rowatt, & LaBouff, 2010; Rohrbaugh, McClelland, & Quinn, 1980; Rokeach, 1968, 1969; Saroglou, Delpierre, & Dernelle, 2004; Schwartz & Huismans, 1995). Allport (1954) argued that, in the case of prejudice, religion appears to have conflicting attitudinal implications, with some aspects of religion contributing to prejudiced attitudes and other aspects combating such attitudes. Rokeach (1968) expressed a similar view about the influence of religion on belief systems in general, noting that "institutionalized religion's special predicament arises from a conflict between the contradictory beliefs it unwittingly inculcates in its adherents" (p. xiii). Consistent with the variegated and sometimes contradictory messages of religious doctrines, religious beliefs have often been invoked to justify contrasting stances on major social and political issues, including slavery, federal social welfare provision, and the American-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, to name but a few.

In this research we examine the association of religiosity with a contemporary political attitude of great social importance—attitude about the torture of terrorism suspects who

are in U.S. custody. Specifically, we address three related questions stemming from the contention that religion may produce competing influences on social attitudes. First, does religion have competing effects on torture attitude, such that high religiosity will lead some individuals to support the use of torture but others to oppose it? Second, if high religiosity leads some individuals to support the use of torture, is this effect explained by the tendency of contemporary religious Americans to gravitate toward a conservative political alignment, and for such a political alignment to, in turn, produce support for torture? Finally, are the effects of religiosity on torture attitude "discursively driven" or "organic" (Malka, Soto, Cohen, & Miller, in press)? By discursively driven influence, we mean influence of a nonpolitical characteristic (such as religiosity) on a political attitude (such as torture attitude) that is dependent on people being exposed to information from discourse regarding which particular attitudes and values appropriately go with which others under the broad "conservative" and "liberal" postures (e.g., Converse,

¹Yeshiva University, New York, NY, USA

²Colby College, Waterville, ME, USA

Corresponding Author:

Ariel Malka, Yeshiva College, Yeshiva University,
2495 Amsterdam Avenue, New York, NY 10033
Email: amalka@yu.edu

1964). For example, it is possible that religiosity relates to support of torture only because of the prevalence of political messages insinuating that being religious and being conservative is a natural combination (e.g., Seyle & Newman, 2006) and the prevalence of messages conveying that it is “conservative” to support torture. By organic influence, we mean influence of a nonpolitical characteristic on a political attitude that is not dependent on exposure to such discourse but rather results from particular temperaments, styles, and traits leading people to naturally gravitate toward a particular stance on a political issue (e.g., Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003). For example, religiosity may relate to support of torture because religious people possess a psychological makeup that naturally leads them to favor conservative social outcomes and policies.

We predict that religiosity does indeed have competing associations with attitude toward torture and that its association with support of torture is mediated by conservative political alignment. Moreover, we predict that the mediated association between religiosity and support of torture is discursively driven; that is, it is dependent on receipt of messages from political discourse. In contrast, we predict that religiosity’s association with opposition to torture is organic in that it occurs independently of exposure to such discourse.

American Public Opinion About Torture

During the past decade Americans have debated the acceptability of torturing suspected terrorists to extract useful security information. The question of whether or not American interrogators should torture (or apply “enhanced interrogation techniques” to) terrorism suspects is one of great social importance, and one whose psychological relevance to religiosity would seem to be complex. The social importance of the issue stems from its relevance to the values of national security, humanitarianism, rule of law, and promotion of a positive international image of the United States. As for the complex psychological linkages with religiosity, there seem to exist both reasons why the religious would be expected to support the use of torture and reasons why the religious would be expected to oppose the use of torture.

Americans appear to be divided with respect to attitude about torturing suspected terrorists, with more Americans opposed than supportive and with small differences emerging across different question and response option formats (Gallup, 2005; Gronke et al., 2010; Pew Research Center, 2009). The division in public opinion about torture, like the divisions on many other contemporary issues (e.g., Abramowitz & Saunders, 2006; Baldassari & Gelman, 2008), has unfolded along partisan and ideological lines. Liberal identifiers and Democrats are less inclined to support the use of torture than are conservative identifiers and Republicans (Haider-Markel & Vieux, 2008; Pew Research Center, 2009). This is consistent with the contemporary partisan and ideological divisions in foreign

policy postures, in which conservative identifiers and Republicans generally favor more “hawkish” policies (Huddy, Feldman, Taber, & Lahav, 2005; Hurwitz & Peffley, 1987; Shapiro & Bloch-Elkon, 2007).

Less attention has been paid to the potential association of religiosity with attitude about torture. Religiosity is usually conceptualized as degree of psychological and behavioral commitment to religion (e.g., Layman & Carmines, 1997; Smith, McCullough, & Poll, 2003). It is often measured as a composite of items tapping frequency of various religious behaviors (e.g., attendance at a place of worship, prayer) and items tapping the subjective importance of religion (e.g., rating of how much guidance religion provides in one’s life; e.g., Blaine & Crocker, 1995; Layman & Green, 2005), although it is sometimes measured with single items tapping religious attendance or importance (e.g., Gorsuch & McFarland, 1972; Schwartz & Huismans, 1995). Religiosity is a psychologically important cultural characteristic within the United States (e.g., A. B. Cohen, 2009; Wald, 2003), and it has become an increasingly strong correlate of political alignment (Fiorina, Abrams, & Pope, 2006; Malka, Lelkes, Srivastava, Cohen, & Miller, in press; Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2005; Putnam & Campbell, 2010). We presently evaluate the thesis that religiosity’s association with torture attitude is complex, involving competing statistical effects.

Reasons to Expect a Discursively Driven Influence of Religiosity Toward Support of Torture

There are reasons to expect that the more religious would be more inclined to support the use of torture. One such reason has to do with political discourse and the way in which some Americans respond to it. American political discourse has, since the birth of contemporary religious conservatism in the 1970s, dictated that religious commitment “goes with” conservative ideology (Hunter, 1991; Layman, 2001; Wuthnow, 1988). Americans receive the messages associated with this discourse through both news media exposure and informal political communication (Mutz, 1998, 2002; Zaller, 1992). Cultural issues, such as abortion and homosexual rights, have been emphasized as the most religiously relevant political issues (Davis & Robinson, 1996; Jelen, 2009). But some religious and political elites have discursively linked religiosity with a more general “conservatism,” including preferences for low domestic social welfare spending and hard-line foreign policy (Baumgartner, Francia, & Morris, 2008; Hunter, 1991; Layman & Green, 2005).

Political scientists have long recognized the powerful influence of elite political discourse on the structuring of Americans’ political attitudes (e.g., Carmines & Stimson, 1989; Converse, 1964; Jennings, 1992; Layman, Carsey, & Horowitz, 2006; Lupia & McCubbins, 1998; Nyhan & Reifler, 2010; Sniderman & Bullock, 2004; Zaller, 1992).

Political scientists emphasizing such discursively driven influence have also recognized that this form of influence should not affect all Americans to an equal extent. Specifically, only Americans with relatively great exposure to political discourse should structure their political attitudes and related characteristics in a manner consistent with political discourse. Indeed, research has reliably demonstrated that political engagement indicators—such as political knowledge, political interest, and, by proxy, education—moderate “consistency” among political attitudes and between political attitudes and background characteristics. Only individuals who are relatively high in exposure to political discourse tend to display a consistently “conservative” or “liberal” packaging of attitudes (Federico & Schneider, 2007; Jacoby, 1995; Jennings, 1992; Judd & Krosnick, 1989; Sniderman, Brody, & Tetlock, 1991; Stimson, 1975), and only these individuals display relatively strong relations between background characteristics (such as prepolitical beliefs and religiosity) and political attitudes (Federico & Goren, 2009; Federico, Hunt, & Ergun, 2009; Malka, Lelkes, et al., in press). These findings dovetail with social psychological evidence that people committed to social identities tend to adopt attitudes that are presented as consistent with these identities (e.g., G. L. Cohen, 2003; Mackie, Worth, & Asuncion, 1990; Malka & Lelkes, 2010; Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Turner, 1991; also see Seyle & Newman, 2006).

To the extent that religiosity has a discursively driven influence toward support of torture, one would expect this influence to be mediated by a more general conservative political alignment involving conservative and Republican identities. If this influence is discursively driven, it should also be stronger among Americans with great exposure to political discourse.

Reasons to Expect an Organic Influence of Religiosity Toward Support of Torture

Religiosity may also have an organic influence toward support of torture. Evidence suggests that certain basic, largely heritable, psychological predispositions favor a general conservative (or “absolutist”) versus liberal (or “contextualist”) orientation toward the social and political world (Alford, Funk, & Hibbing, 2005; Block & Block, 2006; Carney, Jost, Gosling, & Potter, 2008; Gerber, Huber, Doherty, Dowling, & Ha, 2010; Jost, 2006; Jost, Federico, & Napier, 2009). According to some social scientists, individual differences in this dimension include high (vs. low) levels of support for traditional religious institutions as well as relatively strong concerns with security, order, certainty, safety, and vigilance against potential threats (Alford et al., 2005; Jost, 2007). Religiosity and conservatism may satisfy the same fundamental needs to deal with threat and uncertainty (Jost, 2007). Indeed, religiosity is linked with placing strong value on

security, order, and predictability (Kay, Gaucher, Napier, Callan, & Laurin, 2008; Saroglou et al., 2004; Schwartz & Huismans, 1995). Moreover, religious fundamentalism appears to be associated with prejudice against outgroups (e.g., Hunsberger & Jackson, 2005), and this relation may be partly mediated by a cognitive style aimed at achieving epistemic certainty, consistency, and closure (Brandt & Reyna, 2010; Hill, Terrell, Cohen, & Nagoshi, 2010). Thus, there may be some type of organic linkage between religiosity and support of torture. A high sensitivity to threat, concern with security and other “conservation” values, motivation for epistemic certainty, and untrammelled support for authority may lead those higher in religiosity to support doing whatever is deemed necessary to prevent terrorism, including torture.

Like the discursive perspective, this perspective suggests that religiosity’s influence toward support of torture may be mediated by conservative political alignment. That is, religiosity may lead to support of torture via a general conservative or absolutist orientation toward the social world, encompassing the various values and styles associated therewith. Indeed, “conservative ideology” is often measured with scales that tap support of violence against those deemed deviant and support of group-based social dominance (e.g., Altemeyer, 1981; Duckitt, Wagner, du Plessis, & Birum, 2002; Jost et al., 2003; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). However, unlike the discursive perspective, the organic perspective linking religiosity to support of torture also suggests that this relation should *not* vary across levels of political engagement. To the degree that religiosity organically influences support of torture, exposure to political discourse should not be necessary for the translation of religiosity into support of torture.

Reasons to Expect an Organic Influence of Religiosity Toward Opposition to Torture

Other findings suggest that religiosity may produce opposition to torture. In particular, evidence suggests that religiosity may be associated with various values and styles that would favor humanitarianism and opposition to violent solutions to social problems. For example, analyses of national survey data have revealed that religious individuals, despite holding conservative and Republican identifications, are *less* inclined to support the death penalty than are less religious individuals (Gallup, 2004; Malka, Lelkes, et al., in press). Support of the death penalty has been treated as an indicator of a more general desire for punitiveness against social transgressors, and it tends to converge with other violence-related policy views (Ellsworth & Ross, 1983; Liberman, 2006; Orth, 2003; Sargent, 2004; Tyler & Boeckman, 1997).

Other evidence is consistent with the hypothesis that religious involvement should relate to less support of violent policies, including torture. For example, there is evidence of

relations between religiosity and various indicators of prosocial value orientation (Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002; Malka, Soto, et al., in press; Saroglou, Pichon, Trompette, Verschueren, & Dernelle, 2005), generosity (La Barbera & Gurhan, 1997), and forgiveness (McCullough & Worthington, 1999). Individuals primed with religious concepts have been shown to engage in more charitable behaviors (Pichon, Boccato, & Saroglou, 2007; Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007). For these reasons the religious may have less motivation for retribution, and low motivation for retribution would be expected to produce opposition to torture (Carlsmith & Sood, 2008). All of these characteristics may lead religious individuals to disapprove of violence against social transgressors and to consequently oppose the use of torture.

Such an influence would appear to be organic, in the sense that it should not depend on information from political discourse indicating which political attitudes and related characteristics appropriately go with which others. Therefore, this influence should not vary in strength across levels of political engagement.

The Present Research

We used data from two near-representative national samples, one from 2004 and the other from 2008, to test four key hypotheses about the effects of religiosity on support for torture. We have argued that there are reasons to expect religiosity to promote support of torture as well as reasons to expect religiosity to promote opposition to torture. Therefore, our first hypothesis was that religiosity would have competing positive and negative associations with support for torture. In other words, we hypothesized that high religiosity would lead some individuals to support the use of torture on terrorism suspects but would lead other, equally religious individuals to oppose it.

We have further argued that, if religiosity does have a positive influence on support for torture, both perspectives conceptualizing this influence as discursively driven and perspectives conceptualizing this influence as organic imply that it should be mediated by conservative political alignment. Therefore, our second hypothesis was that the positive association of religiosity and support for torture would be mediated by conservative political alignment, such that many highly religious individuals would identify as politically conservative and Republican, and these individuals would in turn tend to support the use of torture.

Third, we have argued that religiosity's positive link with support for torture may be partially or entirely driven by discursive norms regarding religiosity and conservatism and therefore dependent on exposure to political discourse. Therefore, our third hypothesis was that the positive association between religiosity and support for torture, by way of conservative political alignment, might be moderated by level of political engagement, such that it would be stronger at higher levels of engagement. In fact, if this positive association were driven

entirely by political discourse, then it might be absent at low levels of political engagement.

Finally, we have argued that religiosity's influence toward opposition to torture is organic, rather than driven by political discourse. Therefore, our fourth hypothesis was that the strength of religiosity's negative association with support for torture would be consistent across levels of political engagement.

Method

2004 Sample

Participants in this sample were 983 respondents to an ABC News/*Washington Post* poll conducted May 20–23, 2004 (ABC News/*Washington Post*, 2004). The survey data and codebook were obtained from the Roper Center iPoll database. Respondents composed a near-representative national sample that was interviewed by telephone and selected with random-digit dialing. Analyses with this sample were weighted using poststratification weights.

Measures

To facilitate interpretation of the results, all measures were coded to range from 0.00 (lowest possible value) to 1.00 (highest possible value). That is, each response was coded as a proportion of the measure's possible range. For example, a raw score of 3 on a measure with a possible minimum value of 1 and maximum value of 5 would be coded as 0.50; that is, $(3 - 1) / (5 - 1)$. Thus, unstandardized regression coefficients may be interpreted as the predicted increase (or decrease) in the outcome variable (as a proportion of its possible range) associated with an increase from the predictor variable's lowest possible value (0.00) to its highest possible value (1.00). This coding does not affect standardized regression coefficients or hypothesis tests.

Respondents provided demographic information and reported their frequency of religious attendance, their ideological and partisan identifications, and their attitudes about torture.

Religiosity was measured using a single item in which respondents reported their frequency of religious service attendance, with descending levels of "at least once a week," "a few times a month," and "less often than that."

Support of (vs. opposition to) torture was measured as a composite of four items ($\alpha = .83$). For the first item, respondents indicated whether they believed torture is acceptable in some cases (= 1) or that torture is never acceptable (= 0). Respondents chose one of these stances in response to this statement and question, with the components in parentheses presented in reverse order for a random half of respondents:

"[S]ome people say (it's acceptable to torture people suspected of terrorism, in cases where other methods have failed and the authorities believe the suspect has

information that could prevent terrorist attacks and save lives). Other people say (the use of torture is never acceptable because it's cruel, it may violate international law, it may not work, and it could be used unnecessarily or by mistake on innocent people)."

With this question wording, 62.9% of respondents reported belief that torture is never acceptable and 35.2% of respondents reported belief that torture is sometimes acceptable.

For the second item respondents indicated whether they believed "physical abuse that falls short of torture" is acceptable in some cases (= 1; 45.9% of sample) or is never acceptable (= 0; 51.3% of sample). For the third item, respondents indicated whether they believed that in cases where people were "suspected of involvement in recent attacks against U.S. forces in Iraq or Afghanistan" torture is acceptable (= 1; 33.9% of sample) or not acceptable (= 0; 63.8% of sample). Finally, respondents indicated whether they believed that physical abuse described as falling short of torture was acceptable (= 1; 44.3%) or unacceptable (= 0, 53.1%) when used against people suspected of attacking U.S. forces in Iraq or Afghanistan.¹

Political alignment was measured as a composite of party identification (1 = *Republican*, 0.5 = *neither Republican nor Democrat*, 0 = *Democrat*) and ideological identification (1 = *conservative*, 0.5 = *neither conservative nor liberal*, 0 = *liberal*; $r = .31, p < .001$).

Because direct indicators of political engagement were not available in this dataset, education was used as a proxy for political engagement, with high- and low-engagement groups defined as participants with and without a college degree, respectively. This type of education measure is frequently used in public opinion research as a proxy for political engagement. It tends to be correlated with more direct indicators of political engagement and to hold similar patterns of correlates as do the more direct indicators (e.g., Jacoby, 1991; Judd & Krosnick, 1989; Sniderman et al., 1991; Stimson, 1975).

2008 Sample

Participants in this sample were 1,893 respondents to the 2008 American National Election Studies time series (ANES 2008 Time Series Study)² who completed preelection face-to-face interviews between September 2 and November 3, 2008, and postelection face-to-face interviews between November 5 and December 20, 2008. They were selected using multistage area probability sampling and the drawing of Black American and Latino American oversamples. Analyses with this sample were weighted using poststratification weights.

Measures

As with the 2004 sample, all measures were coded to range from a low value of 0.00 to a high value of 1.00. In the pre-election assessment, respondents reported demographic

information and responded to items assessing religiosity, some of the items assessing political engagement, and items assessing ideological and party identification. In the post-election assessment, respondents completed the item assessing attitude about torture and the remaining items used to assess political engagement.

Religiosity was measured as a composite of religious attendance (six-level variable ranging from *never* to *more than once per week*), a rating of the amount of guidance that religion provides in one's life (four-level variable ranging from *religion is not important* in one's life to *religion provides a great deal of guidance* in one's life), and the frequency of personal prayer (five-level variable ranging from *never* to *several times per day*; $\alpha = .83$).

Attitude about torture was measured in the following way. First, respondents indicated whether they favored or opposed torture in response to this item: "Do you favor, oppose, or neither favor nor oppose the U.S. government torturing people, who are suspected of being terrorists, to try to get information?" With this question wording, 23.9% favored, 51.2% opposed, and 23.2% neither favored nor opposed. Respondents who indicated that they either favored or opposed torture were then asked if they did so *a great deal, moderately, or a little*. From responses to these items a seven-level support of torture variable was formed that ranged from a low value of oppose torture a great deal to a midpoint value of neither favor nor oppose torture to a high value of support torture a great deal.

Political alignment was measured as a composite of ideological identification, reported on a 7-point scale from *extremely liberal* to *extremely conservative*, and party identification, reported on a 7-point scale from *strong Democrat* to *strong Republican* ($r = .61, p < .001$). Finally, political engagement was measured as a composite of seven items, four of which assessed political interest and three of which assessed political knowledge ($\alpha = .69$). The political interest items included a rating of how interested the respondent was in presidential campaigns, an indicator of whether or not the respondent cared about the presidential election outcome, a rating of how interested the respondent was in government and public affairs, and a rating of how frequently the respondent discussed politics with family and friends.³ The objective political knowledge indicators included the following three questions that respondents answered correctly (= 1) or incorrectly (= 0): which party is more conservative? which party controls the House of Representatives? and which party controls the Senate?

Results

Descriptive statistics for the main variables and the zero-order correlations among them are reported in Table 1a (for the 2004 sample) and Table 1b (for the 2008 sample).

To test our main hypotheses, we conducted, with each of the two samples, a series of path analyses to examine the

Table 1a. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations in the 2004 Sample

Measure	M	SD	Support for torture	Religiosity	Conservative political alignment	Political engagement
Support for torture	0.41	0.40	—			
Religiosity	0.42	0.45	-.06*	—		
Conservative political alignment	0.52	0.31	.18***	.21***	—	
Political engagement	0.26	0.44	.05	.04	.02	—

Note: $N = 983$. All measures are scaled to range from 0 (lowest possible score) to 1 (highest possible score).

* $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 1b. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations in the 2008 Sample

Measure	M	SD	Support for torture	Religiosity	Conservative political alignment	Political engagement
Support for torture	0.39	0.34	—			
Religiosity	0.50	0.32	-.08***	—		
Conservative political alignment	0.49	0.28	.25***	.18***	—	
Political engagement	0.54	0.41	-.06**	.14***	.16***	—

Note: $N = 1,893$. All measures are scaled to range from 0 (lowest possible score) to 1 (highest possible score).

** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

relations among religiosity, conservative political alignment, political engagement, and support for torture. We fit these models using maximum-likelihood estimation in Mplus Version 6 (Muthén & Muthén, 2010). We tested the significance of direct and indirect effects using the bootstrap method, with $k = 10,000$ iterations. All models included only observed variables. Except where noted, all models were saturated and therefore fit the data perfectly.⁴

An initial model included only a direct effect of religiosity on support for torture. Results indicated that, overall, more religious individuals were somewhat *less* likely to support the use of torture on terrorism suspects than were less religious individuals, in both the 2004 sample ($b = -.057$, $\beta = -.064$, $p < .05$) and the 2008 sample ($b = -.084$, $\beta = -.079$, $p < .01$).

A second model added conservative political alignment as a potential mediator of this effect (see Figures 1a and 2a). Results for this model indicated that, in both the 2004 and 2008 samples, conservative political alignment both mediated and suppressed the relationship between religiosity and support for torture. Specifically, religiosity had a positive effect on conservative political alignment ($bs = .148$ and $.155$, $\beta s = .215$ and $.177$, respectively; $ps < .001$), which in turn had a positive effect on support for torture ($bs = .258$ and $.335$, $\beta s = .199$ and $.277$, respectively; $ps < .001$). Together, these paths created a positive indirect effect of religiosity on support for torture by way of conservative political alignment ($bs = .038$ and $.053$, $\beta s = .043$ and $.049$, respectively; $ps < .001$). Furthermore, controlling this positive indirect effect strengthened the *negative* direct effect of

religiosity on support for torture ($b = -.096$, $\beta = -.107$, $p < .01$, and $b = -.136$, $\beta = -.128$, $p < .001$, respectively).

A third, multiple-group model tested whether political engagement moderated the direct and indirect effects of religiosity on support for torture. In the 2004 sample, this model included two groups defined using education as a proxy for level of political engagement (e.g., Sniderman et al., 1991): low engagement ($n = 657$ participants without a college degree) and high engagement ($n = 326$ participants with a college degree). In the 2008 sample, it included three groups defined by a three-way split of the political-engagement composite: low engagement ($n = 608$), moderate engagement ($n = 620$), and high engagement ($n = 665$).

Preliminary analyses of this model indicated that, in both the 2004 and 2008 samples, constraining the direct effect of religiosity on torture attitude to be equal across levels of political engagement did not significantly reduce model fit, $\chi^2(1) = 2.48$, $p > .10$, and $\chi^2(2) = 0.38$, $p > .10$, respectively, but that constraining (a) the direct effect of religiosity on conservative political alignment, $\chi^2(1) = 4.24$, $p < .05$, and $\chi^2(2) = 38.90$, $p < .001$, respectively; (b) the direct effect of conservative political alignment on support for torture, $\chi^2(1) = 3.06$, $p < .10$, and $\chi^2(2) = 16.47$, $p < .001$, respectively; or (c) the indirect effect of religiosity on support for torture, by way of conservative political alignment, $\chi^2(2) = 9.10$, $p < .05$, and $\chi^2(4) = 53.31$, $p < .001$, respectively, to be equal across levels of political engagement *did* reduce model fit. In other words, political engagement did not moderate religiosity's negative direct effect on support for torture but did moderate religiosity's positive indirect effect on support for

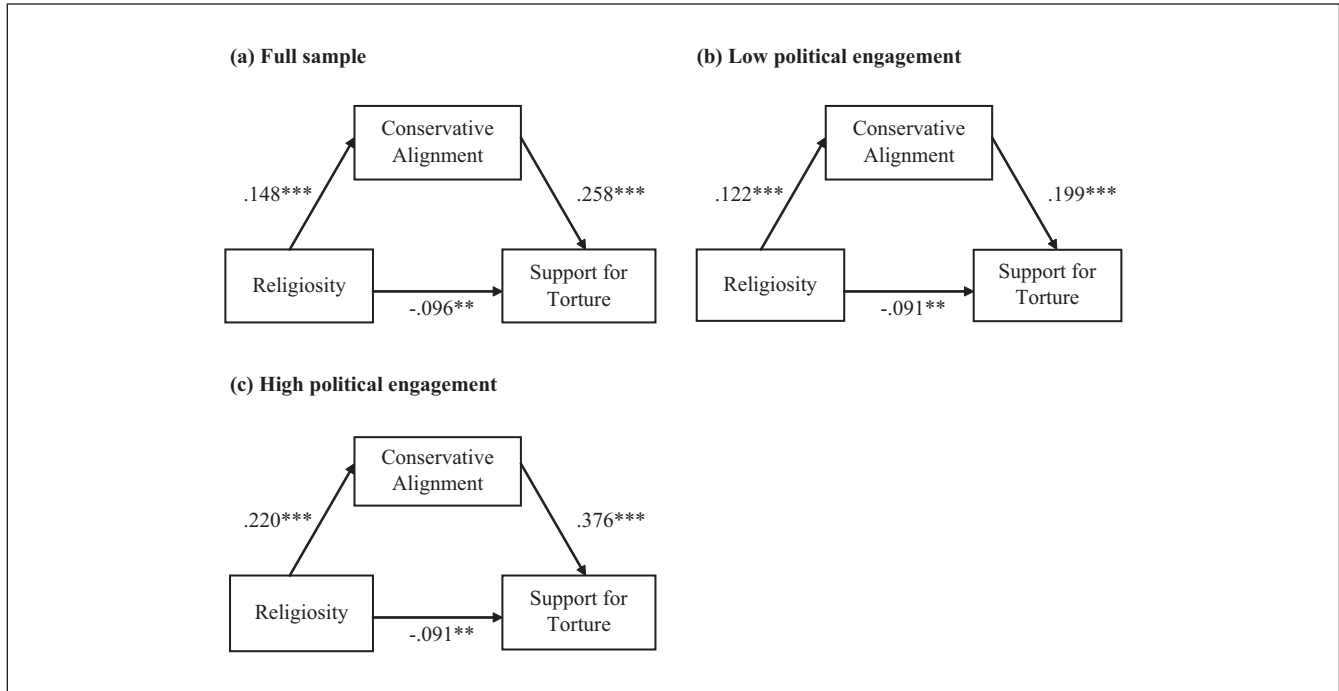


Figure 1. Direct and indirect effects of religiosity on support for torture in the 2004 (ABC News/Washington Post) sample
 Note: $N = 983$ (657 in the low-engagement group and 326 in the high-engagement group). Values are unstandardized regression coefficients with all variables coded to range from 0.00 to 1.00. The full-group model is saturated and therefore fits the data perfectly. For the multiple-group model, $\chi^2(1) = 2.48, p > .10$, comparative fit index = 0.985, Tucker–Lewis index = 0.910, root mean square error of approximation = 0.055.
 * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

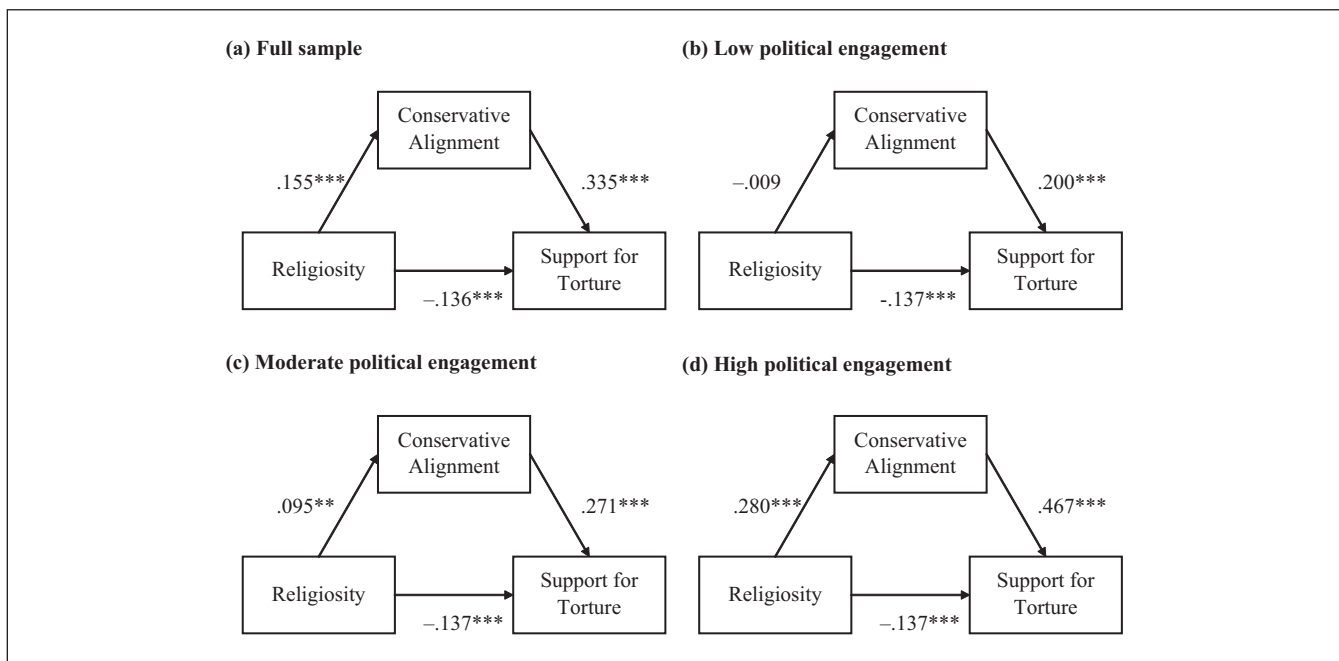


Figure 2. Direct and indirect effects of religiosity on support for torture in the 2008 (American National Election Studies) sample
 Note: $N = 1,893$ (608 in the low-engagement group, 620 in the moderate-engagement group, and 665 in the high-engagement group). Values are unstandardized regression coefficients with all variables coded to range from 0.00 to 1.00. The full-group model is saturated and therefore fits the data perfectly. For the multiple-group model, $\chi^2(2) = 0.38, p > .10$, comparative fit index = 1.000, Tucker–Lewis index = 1.030, root mean square error of approximation = 0.000.
 * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

torture. Therefore, the final version of this model (see Figures 1b, 1c, 2b, 2c, and 2d) constrained religiosity's direct effect—but not its indirect effect—on support for torture to be equal across levels of political engagement.

Results for this final model indicated that, in both samples, the positive effect of religiosity on conservative political alignment, the positive effect of conservative political alignment on support of torture, and therefore the positive indirect effect of religiosity on support of torture, by way of conservative political alignment, were all much stronger at higher levels of political engagement. In the 2004 sample, this positive indirect effect was statistically significant in both political engagement groups ($ps < .001$) but was more than 3 times as strong in the high-engagement group ($b = .083, \beta = .095$) as in the low-engagement group ($b = .024, \beta = .027$). In the 2008 sample, the group differences were even more dramatic. Specifically, the positive indirect effect of religiosity on support for torture was statistically significant in the high-engagement ($p < .001$) and moderate-engagement ($p < .05$) groups, but not in the low-engagement group ($b = -.002, \beta = -.002, p > .10$). Moreover, this indirect effect was more than 5 times as strong in the high-engagement group ($b = .131, \beta = .127$) as in the moderate-engagement group ($b = .026, \beta = .023$). In fact, in each sample's high-engagement group, the positive indirect effect of religiosity on support for torture was so strong that it fully offset the competing negative direct effect, such that the total effect of religiosity on support for torture was not statistically significant ($ps > .10$).⁵

Discussion

The present results were extremely consistent across two near-representative national samples—samples drawn using different methods, assessed 4 years apart from one another, and administered different measures of the underlying constructs. Taken together, they strongly support four conclusions about the effects of religiosity on support for torture. First, religiosity has competing positive and negative associations with support for torture, such that some highly religious individuals support the use of torture on terrorism suspects, whereas other, equally religious individuals oppose it. Second, the positive association of religiosity and support for torture is mediated by conservative political alignment, such that many highly religious individuals identify with the political right, and these individuals are especially likely to support the use of torture. Third, political engagement moderates this positive indirect association, such that highly religious and politically engaged individuals are more likely to identify with the political right—and therefore more likely to support the use of torture—than are their equally religious but less politically engaged counterparts. Finally, political engagement does not similarly moderate the negative direct association of religiosity and support for torture;

instead, this negative effect is quite consistent across levels of engagement.

This overall pattern of effects supports the thesis that religiosity has competing organic and discursively driven influences on support for torture. On one hand, the finding that religiosity's positive indirect effect, by way of conservative political alignment, is much stronger at higher levels of political engagement suggests that this indirect effect is discursively driven: At high levels of engagement, but not at low levels, discursive norms regarding religion and conservatism seem to pull highly religious individuals toward conservative political alignment, and thereby toward support for the use of torture. On the other hand, the finding that the negative direct effect of religiosity on support for torture is quite consistent across levels of political engagement suggests that this effect is organically driven: Independent of exposure to discursive norms, some aspects of religiosity—perhaps including the prosocial and humanitarian values central to almost all religions—seem to pull highly religious individuals toward opposing the use of torture.

Limitations of the Present Research

Before considering the present research's broader implications, we should note two of its important limitations. One is its reliance on concurrent correlational data, which prevents strong conclusions regarding causality. Our findings are consistent with the hypothesis that religiosity causally influences support for the use of torture. But other patterns of causal relations may also provide a good explanation for the data. However, it is worth noting that previous theory and research support the causal priority that we assigned to the present variables. In particular, religiosity is theoretically specified as causally prior to political characteristics (e.g., Guth, Kellstedt, Smidt, & Green, 2006; Layman & Carmines, 1997; Layman & Green, 2005). Furthermore, among political characteristics, political identities (partisan and ideological) tend to be more temporally stable than are specific policy preferences (e.g., Converse & Markus, 1979; Green, Palmquist, & Schickler, 2002) and have also been shown to have prospective effects on political attitudes in longitudinal data (Layman & Carsey, 2002; Malka & Lelkes, 2010; McCann, 1997). Nonetheless, a test of the present hypotheses using longitudinal data would help gain a firmer grip on causal direction.

A second important limitation of the present research is that it did not directly assess variables that might mediate the negative organic influence of religiosity on support for torture. Previous theory and research suggest several potential mediators, including prosocial values (e.g., Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007) and opposition to punitiveness (e.g., Malka, Lelkes, et al., in press). Testing the precise mechanisms underlying religiosity's negative organic influence on support for torture remains an important goal for future research.

Understanding Americans' Attitudes Toward Torture

The present data support the conclusion of Gronke et al. (2010) that, despite concerns to the contrary, most Americans oppose the use of torture. In both samples, majorities opposed the use of torture. Even when respondents were led to believe that physical abuse of detainees may not amount to torture, a majority opposed such physical abuse. Perhaps most notably, majorities opposed the torture of individuals believed to have been involved in attacks on American soldiers, both when this torture was described as torture and when it was described as abuse falling short of torture. It appears, as Gronke et al. (2010) contend, that Americans, on average, oppose torture.

One of the main goals of this research was to test the possibility that religiosity influences torture attitude differently across different Americans. However, the overall “net” effect of religiosity on torture attitude is interesting in its own right. We found that, overall, the organic influence of religiosity toward opposition to torture appears to win out, but not overwhelmingly. Our findings indicated that a full increase from the lowest to highest possible level of religiosity would lead to a decrease in predicted support for torture of approximately 5% to 9% of the full range of the torture attitude measures. The relatively modest size of this overall effect appears to be the net outcome of competing influences, one of which involves people’s responses to discursive norms. The facts that (a) the overall influence of religiosity on torture attitude was not extremely large and (b) part of this influence was attributable to discursive messages suggest that the overall influence of religiosity on attitude toward torture may vary around the zero point at different times and places, and with slight differences in sampling (cf. Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2009).

Religiosity and Political Attitudes

The next point that we make has to do with general perspectives on the relation between religiosity and political attitudes. It is common for Americans to receive news media messages that imply or explicitly state that religiosity “goes with” conservatism. Some social scientists posit theoretical frameworks that would emphasize the organic nature of this influence (Alford et al., 2005; Jost, 2007). This research tends to take a unidimensional approach to political ideology (i.e., proposing that broad sets of political attitudes are rooted in a single causal factor), in contrast to the multidimensional approaches (i.e., proposing that different political attitudes tend to be influenced by different, narrowly acting causal factors) favored by other social scientists (e.g., Claggett & Shafer, 1995; Duckitt, Bizumic, Krauss, & Heled, 2010; Stenner, 2009). It is now fairly well established, however, that religiosity relates to different types of “conservative”

political attitudes differently (Gallup, 2004; Guth et al., 2006; Layman & Green, 2005; Malka, Lelkes, et al., in press). That religiosity—like agreeableness (Gerber et al., 2010), authoritarian disposition (Stenner, 2005), and education (Napier & Jost, 2008; Stenner, 2005)—differentially predicts diverse political attitudes discussed along the conservative–liberal dimension calls into question the view that these diverse political attitudes are linked through common bottom-up psychological sources (although see Gerber et al., 2010, for a suggestion to the contrary). A more realistic view, we contend, is that diverse political attitudes are intercorrelated to the extent they are because of discourse, and that this sometimes occurs *in spite of* background psychological characteristics favoring opposing stances on these issues.

Organic and Discursively Driven Influences on Political Attitudes

Generalizing beyond religiosity, a broader conclusion that may be drawn from the present findings is that a single psychological background characteristic—such as a personality trait, a (nonpolitical) value, or a cultural group membership—may exert complex and competing influences on a policy preference. In prior work, we demonstrated that religiosity is one characteristic that may promote competing influences on political views (Malka, Soto, et al., in press). Specifically, we showed that religiosity has competing influences on attitudes toward federal social welfare provision. We speculated that religiosity’s influence toward opposition to social welfare provision may be discursively driven, in that it depends on political discourse indicating which attitudes (e.g., opposition to social-welfare provision) and characteristics (e.g., religiosity, conservatism) are offered together as appropriate packages in discursive “menus” (e.g., Sniderman & Bullock, 2004), whereas religiosity’s influence toward support for social welfare provision was potentially organic, in that it may not be menu dependent. The present research goes beyond such speculation. Specifically, it shows that one influence of religiosity toward a political attitude—support for the use of torture—does, in fact, depend on exposure to political discourse, whereas religiosity’s competing influence toward opposition to torture is, in fact, independent of exposure to political discourse. These findings directly support our contentions that (a) religiosity has both discursively driven and organic influences on political attitudes and (b) these influences sometimes compete with each other. Moreover, they show that exposure to political discourse helps determine whether—for a particular religious individual—a discursively driven influence or a competing, organic influence will win out.

This framework distinguishing organic and discursively driven influences may prove useful in examining the influences of other nonpolitical characteristics on political attitudes. A central goal of ideology researchers is to integrate

findings of bottom-up psychological influences on political ideology with those of top-down “discursive-superstructural” influences on ideology (Jost et al., 2009). Identifying competing organic and discursively driven influences on political attitudes can shed light on which aspects of ideological organization emerge naturally from individuals’ basic psychological characteristics and which aspects of ideological organization are driven by historically shifting discursive surroundings. Furthermore, such a perspective may illuminate the potential for value conflict or ambivalence to emerge when a single psychological characteristic naturally leads to one preference but is tied in discourse to an opposing preference (e.g., Lavine, 2001; Tetlock, 1986). Future research might fruitfully apply this framework toward studying the influences exerted by other psychological characteristics—such as personality traits, goals, and values—on political attitudes.

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Notes

1. We regard physical abuse of detainees as torture, regardless of whether or not it is explicitly labeled as such by particular individuals. Moreover, the high alpha level across the four items indicates that the two items assessing attitudes about “physical abuse that falls short of torture” and the two items assessing attitudes about “torture” form a reliable four-item scale.
2. Respondents in the 2008 sample were included in the analyses of Malka, Lelkes, Srivastava, Cohen, and Miller (in press), which addressed political engagement as a moderator of the influence of religiosity on various attitudes long discussed with reference to the conservative versus liberal dimension. However, unlike the Malka, Lelkes, et al. (in press) analyses, the present analyses use attitude toward torture as the dependent variable and test a hypothesis of competing effects of religiosity on this attitude.
3. For the last two political interest items, respondents were randomly assigned to complete either “new” or “old” versions of the items, with slightly different wordings (see <http://www.electionstudies.org/study pages/2008prepost/2008prepost.htm>). Results did not vary significantly across respondents receiving these different item formats.
4. We reanalyzed all of these models with the following control variables included sex, age, household income, Protestant religious affiliation, Catholic religious affiliation, Black ethnicity, and Hispanic ethnicity. We also reanalyzed them, in the 2008 sample, using religious attendance as a single-item measure of religiosity (i.e., paralleling the religiosity measure used in the 2004 sample). In all cases, the results were conceptually identical to those described in the text and figures.

5. We also analyzed the effects of political engagement using moderated multiple regressions and obtained results consistent with those from the multiple-group path models described in the text. In both samples, political engagement moderated the effect of religiosity on conservative political alignment (2004 sample: interaction $b = 0.098$, $p < .05$; 2008 sample: interaction $b = 0.516$, $p < .001$), the effect of conservative political alignment on support for torture (2004 sample: interaction $b = 0.167$, $p = .06$; 2008 sample: interaction $b = 0.412$, $p < .001$), and the total effect of religiosity on support for torture (2004 sample: interaction $b = 0.146$, $p < .05$; 2008 sample: interaction $b = 0.373$, $p < .001$).

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