

When politicians use religious rhetoric it doesn't appeal to everyone – even among the religious

The use of religious references and rhetoric in political campaigns is nothing new – but is it actually effective in making certain candidates more appealing to voters? In new research [Jay T. Jennings](#) finds that candidates' religious rhetoric has different effects on voters, depending on their religious motivation. He writes that those who use religion to define themselves or see it as filling a social need tend to be receptive or indifferent to candidates' religious rhetoric, while those who see religion in less black and white terms may end up with a lower evaluation of the candidate.



American politicians frequently use religious references and rhetoric when speaking in public. This practice has been used by both [Republican and Democratic Presidents](#), but more famously utilized by Republican presidential nominees in [this election campaign](#). One might assume the more religious someone is, the more appealing religious rhetoric will be, and [it appears](#) most politicians who use these appeals are operating under such an assumption. [My research](#) challenges the simplicity of this expectation. While it is true some find religious rhetoric in politics appealing, others – even those who are religious – find such use of religious rhetoric to be unattractive.

In a randomized survey experiment I found certain religious citizens had lower evaluations of a fictitious political candidate when he used the words “God” and “Scripture” than when he used no religious rhetoric in his speech. Which citizens found this language attractive and which ones found it unappealing is important and provides new insights into how we measure religiosity and its effects on politics.

We most frequently see religiosity differentiated in three ways:

1. Separating religious traditions or denominations (e.g. Catholic, Methodists, Jewish Orthodox);
2. Frequency of religious behavior (attending services or frequency of prayer); or
3. Fundamentalist beliefs (how literally is scripture to be taken).

The field of social psychology, however, has had a different approach to measuring religiosity. Since the 1950s and the [research of Gordon Allport](#), scholars have focused on the individual's motivation to be religious. Religious motivation measures the place religion has in an individual's life and gives a perspective on how religion is used to interact with their internal and external life. This type of differentiation is particularly appealing when looking at the relationship between religion and political behavior; knowing the direction and intensity of religion's impact in someone's life helps us understand how religion can affect politics. Religious motivations have largely been described as three different types: extrinsic, intrinsic and quest motivation.

A desire to gain external rewards drive those high in *extrinsic motivation*. Fellowship and a need to connect with a community motivate these individuals.

A more personal and internal desire draws those high in *intrinsic motivation*. Practicing religion brings them closer to God and is critical to their well-being.

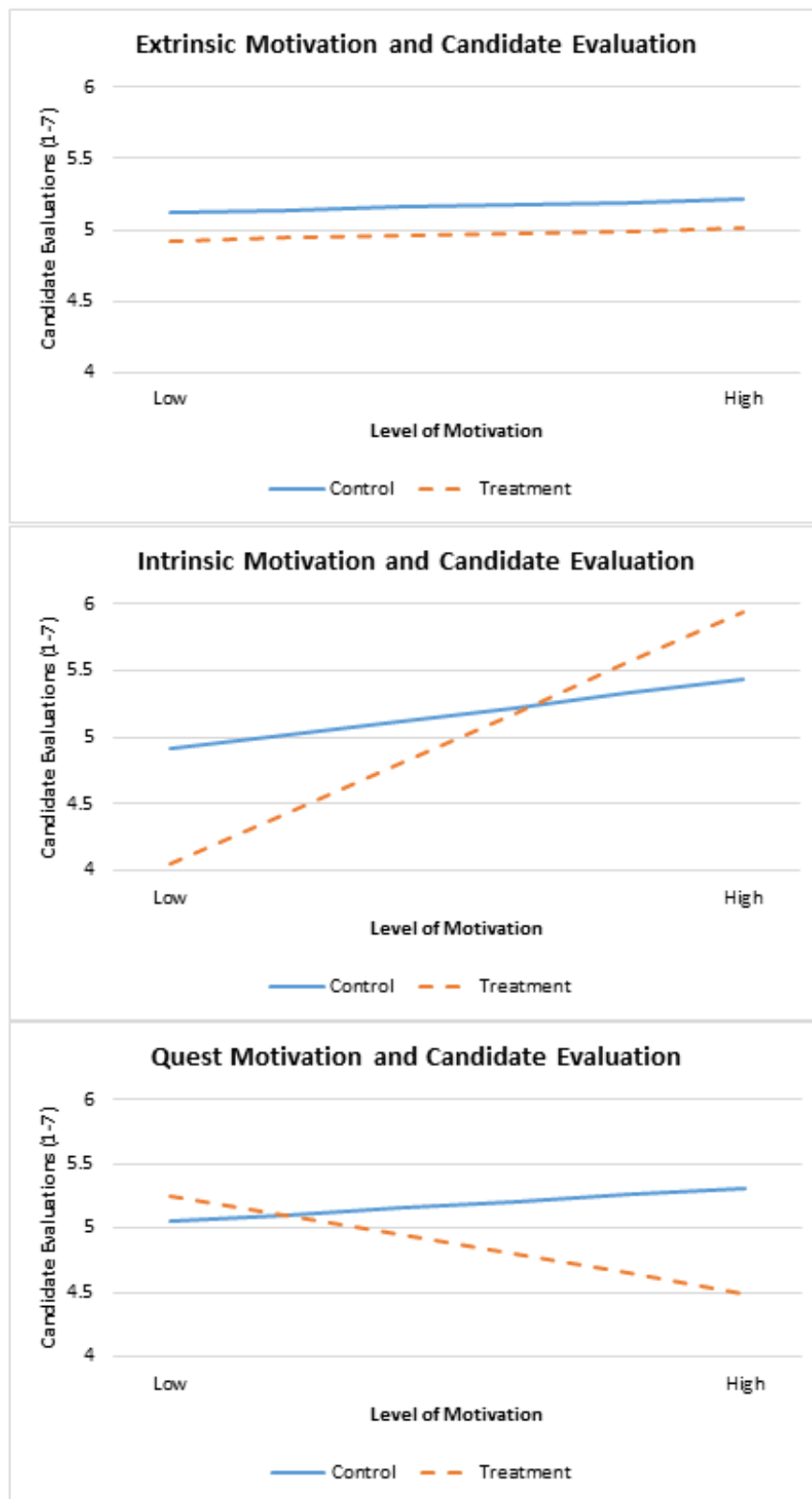
An inquisitive desire to search for answers to existential questions and learn more about God drives those with *quest motivation* to be religious. These individuals are on a journey to search for a truth as large as it is unknowable.

I administered an online survey experiment in order to test the relationship between religious rhetoric, religious motivations, and candidate evaluations. In this study, respondents were asked to read a short article about a fictitious mayoral race where one candidate was quoted during a public campaign speech. I randomly assigned respondents into two groups. The candidate's quote for the treatment group included religious rhetoric, referencing words such as "God" and "Scripture". All religious rhetoric was stripped for the control group, although the subject of the quote remained the same.

The results of my study show strong differences between the reactions of those who are high in the three different types of religious motivation. Figure 1 shows that, those high in extrinsic motivation (community desire) were not affected by religious rhetoric; both the treatment and control groups rating the candidate similarly. Those high in intrinsic motivation (personal desire) had a much higher evaluation of the candidate when he used religious rhetoric.

Conversely, those high in quest motivation (searching for answers) had a lower evaluation of the candidate when he used religious rhetoric. The differences between the treatment and control groups are significant for both the intrinsic and quest motivations. These finding hold even when controlling for political ideology, personality, and the other measures of religiosity referenced above (religious tradition, religious behavior, and religious belief).

Figure 1 – Religious Rhetoric Treatment and Candidate Evaluations



Why do we see these differences? Those high in intrinsic motivation view religion as a self-defining aspect of life; they have a sense of solidarity for politicians who use religious rhetoric. The use of religious rhetoric by a politician provides a cue, not unlike a [dog-whistle](#), that this candidate also views religion as an internal compass directing their actions.

Those who view religion in less black and white terms, like those high in quest motivation, may meet religious rhetoric with a level of skepticism and be wary of politicians who use it. This negative cue may indicate, based on

past experience, that this candidate is more likely to view religion in more dogmatic terms. Or they may bristle at the insertion of religion where they do not believe it belongs.

Finally, for those high in extrinsic motivation who view religion as a means to meeting external needs such as social interaction and prestige, the use of religion in a political environment does not offend, as they also see religion as to be used to meet other goals.

These findings have significant implications on when candidates should use religious rhetoric. The ageless adage of “know your audience” is highlighted by the results of this study, but also made more difficult. Politicians cannot assume just because they are speaking to a religious audience that religious rhetoric will make them more appealing.

*This article is based on the paper, ‘[Mixed Reactions: How Religious Motivation Explains Responses to Religious Rhetoric in Politics](#)’, in *Political Research Quarterly*.*

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