

# **The Black Sheep Effect: Party Identification amongst Religious and Non-Religious Blacks in the United States**

## *Working Paper (1)*

**Abstract:** *Do higher feelings of social belongingness reflect higher levels of Republican identification amongst religious Blacks? Using the 1996 National Black Election Study and the 2012 American National Election Study, I hypothesize that, as socioeconomic status increases, feelings of belongingness will increase as well. In addition, I predict that the feelings of belongingness associated with higher socioeconomic status will increase the level of Republican identification for this group. Ultimately, I find no support for my first claim. However, I do find that the effect of social belongingness on movement away from the Democratic Party is much larger for non-religious Blacks than for religious Blacks.*

In a history fraught with racial discrimination and minority disenfranchisement, the Democratic Party has emerged as the champion of marginalized groups in their struggle for political rights. However, at times, the literature on voting behavior too readily attributes Democratic affiliation amongst Black Americans to the Democratic Party's platform. As more research about Black culture emerges, it has become evident that the conservative ideology of Black evangelicals is at odds with the Democratic agenda. Although the GOP is known to garner a disproportionate amount of support from religious Americans, blacks consistently score higher on various measures of religiosity when compared to their counterparts in the U.S. population. In a 2009 poll by the Pew Research Center, 53 percent of African Americans reported attending religious services at least once a week, 76 percent said that they prayed on at least a daily basis, and 88% indicated that they were "absolutely certain that God exists." Blacks are not only the most likely to express a high degree of comfort with religion's role in politics but are also highly conservative on moral issues like homosexuality and abortion (Pew Research Center 2009; Gallup 2003). All things considered, in addition to holding morally

conservative values, blacks consistently engage in behavior that is highly characteristic of Republican identifiers. Put in this way, the conventional knowledge about Black party affiliation is quite an anomaly.

The analyses in this paper uncover some of the mechanisms that move highly religious blacks away from their affiliation with the Democratic Party. Broadly speaking, social belongingness and socioeconomic status are the central factors at play when it comes to party identification amongst religious Blacks. Stemming from the assumption that moral issues are especially salient for this group, when paired with high socioeconomic status, feelings of belongingness to American society may move religious Blacks away from the Democratic Party and, ultimately, increase levels of Republican identification amongst them. Data from the 1996 National Black Election Study (NBES) and the 2012 American National Election Study (ANES) are used to test these assumptions. Ultimately, although the results do not support the claim that high socioeconomic status results in higher feelings of belongingness amongst highly religious Blacks in either dataset, higher levels of social belongingness result in a shift away from the Democratic Party for Black respondents in the 1996 NBES. This shift, however, does not result in Republican identification and, surprisingly, this effect is greater for non-religious Blacks.

### **The Theoretical Puzzle: Black Conservatism and Democratic Affiliation**

Research shows that Black evangelicals are more likely to describe themselves as conservative than any other religious group in the United States (Pew Research Center 2009). At the same time, highly religious Blacks are overwhelmingly Democratic voters in spite of the Party's blatantly liberal agenda. 64 percent of blacks identify as Democrats

compared with 25 percent of whites (Pew Research Center 2015). For many, the former statistic will not come as a shock but, theoretically, Black Americans' consistent and resolute loyalty to the Democratic Party is an enigma that has continuously puzzled scholars of religion and politics. Leaders of the Democratic Party have historically garnered the support of racial minorities by advocating for the social justice issues that are salient in their communities. Therefore, on one hand, Democratic affiliation amongst blacks seems like a clear and natural choice. On the other hand, high levels of religiosity are typically associated with Republican affiliation so, considering that blacks express higher levels of religious belief than most other Americans, it would seem that they would be just as likely to support the Republican Party in some respects. A succinct description of the paradox is summarized by Putnam and Campbell (2010, 283) like so: "Among every major religious group...highly traditional religious beliefs generally lead to political conservatism and support of the Republican party. However, Black Protestants have the highest degree of traditionalism and the highest level of religious activity and...are the staunchest members of the Democratic coalition." Untangling the apparent conflict between black conservatism and democratic affiliation requires a deeper look into the socioeconomic dynamics of black communities and the theological influences of the Black Church.

Social justice has been the "...hallmark of activist black churches for generations" (Harris 2010, 258-259). Improving the plight of the poor and uplifting marginal communities is not only the basis of Black theology but it has also acted as the predominant catalyst for political involvement within the Black Church (McDaniel 2008). However, as time progresses, the leadership within certain sects of the Black

Church are beginning to emphasize other socioeconomic aspirations in their sermons. The emergence of the “prosperity gospel” is one example of how the religious doctrine of the Black Church has moved away from the long-held religious values associated with liberation theology and, instead, focused on the economic mobility of church members. Although research has yet to substantiate this claim, it is plausible that this movement away from the “...concerns of the poor and pursuit of social justice” could manifest itself in politically relevant ways (Harris 2010).

As McDaniel (2008) notes, resources are the primary reason why black churches orient their interests toward social issues. In churches where leaders are not overly concerned with the allocation of monetary resources and, rather, more focused on the acquisition of them, it is possible that liberal agenda will seem like less of an obvious choice for black congregants, especially because the vast majority of them are already in sync with the GOP’s stance on moral issues. Furthermore, Bartels (2006) finds that, amongst white constituents, those with college degrees attach twice as much weight to cultural issues like abortion than their working-class counterparts. Therefore, it is equally plausible that, amongst religious blacks (who tend to be morally conservative on cultural issues regardless of how much education they have) cultural issues may be more salient than economic ones in congregations with higher levels of educational attainment or financial security.

In many respects, the glue that has bound highly religious Blacks to the Democratic Party seems to be slowly falling apart. Not only has a new theology that is not centered on community improvement emerged to compete with the civic traditions of black churches, but evidence also suggests that certain subsets of the black community

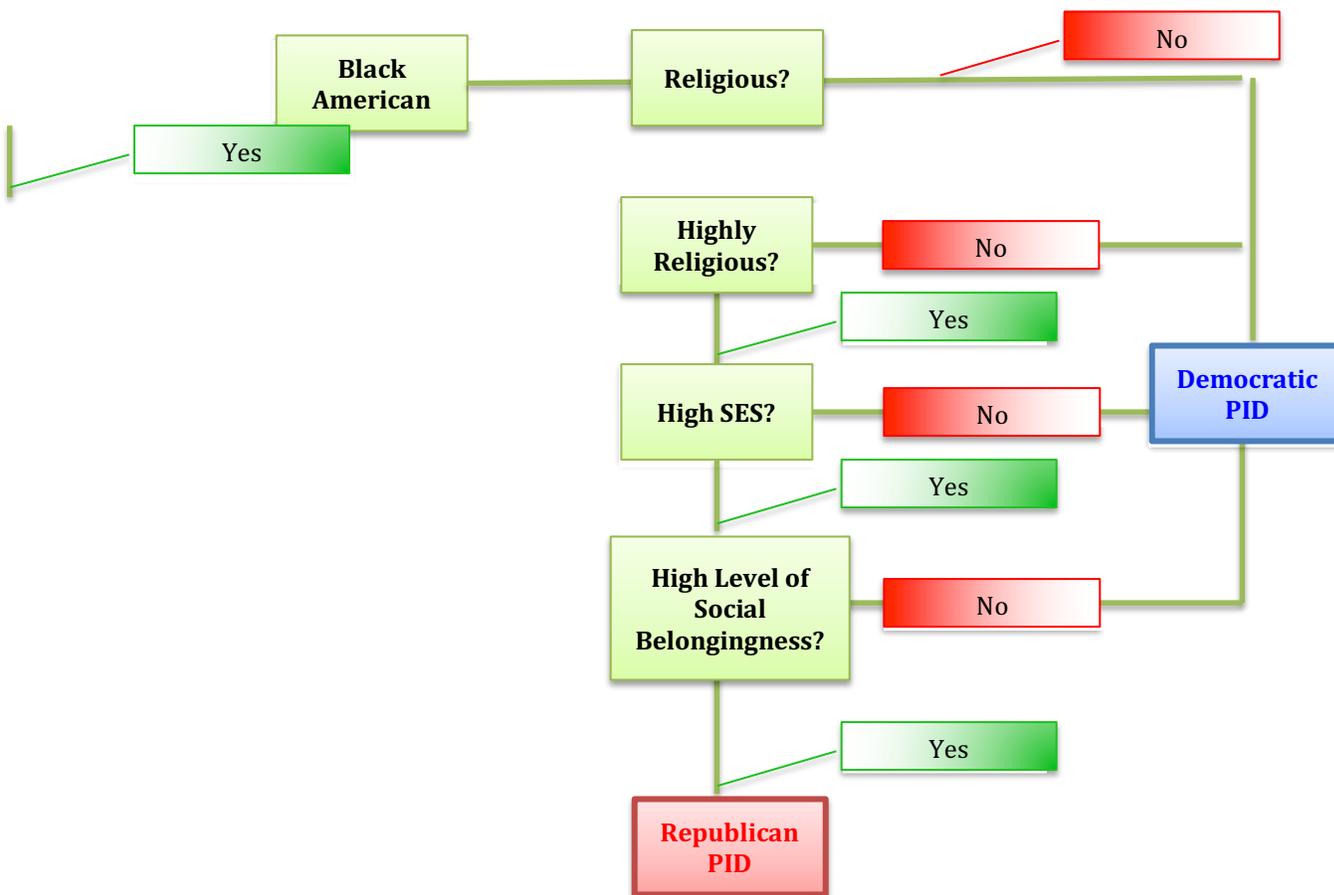
may be more concerned with moral issues like abortion and gay marriage as opposed to redistributive justice. Taken together, it seems as though there are various theological, ideological, and socioeconomic attributes that may push highly religious Blacks toward the GOP.

### **The Missing Pieces: Social Belongingness and Socioeconomic Status**

The story about what it would take to move black constituents toward the GOP is not a simple one. It is evident that high levels of conservatism and education have not thwarted Democratic support amongst Black Americans and, so, the question still remains: assuming that there are Blacks who identify as Republican, what is it that drove them to do so? There are at least two factors that must work in tandem to move black citizens toward the GOP: social belongingness and socioeconomic status. Levels of belongingness may correspond with levels of assimilation; if this is the case, it is probable that Blacks who feel as though they are more assimilated within American society may base their party identification on something other than socioeconomic considerations. In addition, middle and upper class Blacks who are financially stable may not relate as strongly to the narrative of economic disenfranchisement that the Democratic Party claims it is seeking to alleviate in black communities. In light of the fact that highly religious blacks are prone to agree with the Republican agenda on moral issues, two hypotheses are tested:

**H1:** Amongst highly religious blacks, as socioeconomic status increases, levels of belongingness to American society will increase as well.

**H2:** As feelings of belongingness to American society increases, movement toward the Republican Party (away from the Democratic Party) will occur, resulting in Republican identification.



**Figure 1.** Hierarchy of PID Movement

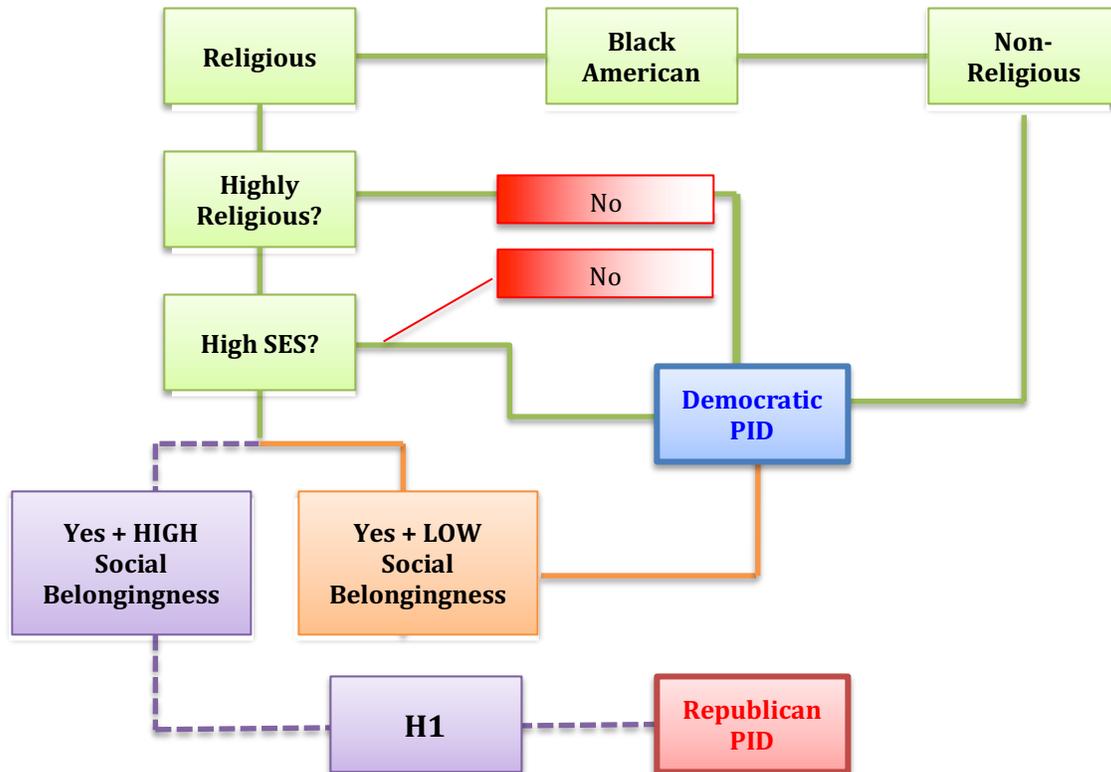
It is important to note that there is variation in *who* is most likely to move toward the GOP in the Black community. The hypotheses do not imply that religious Blacks must have *either* high levels of belongingness *or* high socioeconomic status to drift away from the Democratic Party; they suggest that Blacks who will shift away from the Democratic Party must have *both*.

The key variable of interest is social belongingness. There are four steps in the hierarchy of party identification movement presented in Figure 1, and they are all dependent on one another. Amongst Black Americans, first, one must be religious and, then, highly religious. Next, one must be on the upper end of the socioeconomic scale. Finally, one must feel as though he or she belongs to American society. This is an

exceptionally hard standard to meet, which is, perhaps, why there are not many Black Republicans. However, admittedly, some levels of this theoretical hierarchy may be ultimately disregarded.

Research shows that upward mobility for low status groups is often dependent on out-group support. Van Laar et al. (2014) find that support from high status groups is significantly driven by the behavioral identity expression of upwardly mobile individuals. For those seeking to move up the social ladder, failing to adequately adapt the behaviors of the high status group often results rejection (Van Laar et al. 2014). In other words, even when marginalized citizens finally achieve upward mobility, acceptance within high status groups is almost entirely dependent on how they express their identity. Failing to meet the standards of the status quo can cause transient individuals to feel as though they do not belong (Van Laar et al. 2014). Therefore, it is entirely plausible that financial stability may not result in higher feelings of belongingness amongst both religious and non-religious Blacks (Figure 2).

Regardless of whether socioeconomic status affects levels of social belongingness, there is still potential for social belongingness to influence the likelihood of Republican identification on its own. The Democratic Party is successful in attracting minorities primarily because of their marginalized status in society. For high-income Blacks that do not feel as socially marginalized as their counterparts, the Democratic emphasis on giving minorities a “leg up” may not hold too much weight. Therefore, in spite of the former caveats, I hypothesize that highly religious, financially stable Blacks *who perceive themselves as receiving primarily the same treatment as white Americans* will be the most likely to identify as Republican. Surprisingly, the results of the analyses



**Figure 2.** Hierarchy of PID Movement Refined

tell an entirely different story.

### Data and Measures

To test my hypotheses, data from the 1996 National Black Election Study (NBES) and the 2012 American National Election Study (ANES) are utilized. The 1996 NBES is a nationally representative telephone survey that was administered to a sample of voting-eligible Black Americans before and after the 1996 presidential election. It is the ideal dataset to test this theory because the principal investigator (Dr. Katherine Tate) began the project with the explicit purpose of designing measures that would specifically tap into the sociopolitical attitudes and behaviors of Black constituents in the United States. However, in light of the fact that the 1996 NBES was conducted almost two decades ago, data from the 2012 ANES are also analyzed for comparison.

The independent variables of interest are socioeconomic status (SES), social belongingness, and religiosity. The measure of SES includes respondents' income and education level. In each datasets, two questions are combined to create a single indicator for the measure of social belongingness. Respondents in the NBES were asked to indicate how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the following statements:

1. Being Black determines a lot how you are treated in this country, more than how much money a person earns.
2. In this country, people judge you more on the content of your character than on your race.

The former questions were combined such that scoring high on social belongingness indicated higher levels of belongingness to American society. In other words, those who scored high on social belongingness strongly disagreed that being Black determines how Black people are treated and strongly agreed that Black people are judged more on their character than their race. The same process is repeated using data from the 2012 ANES. However, respondents in the 2012 ANES were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the statement that "blacks would be just as well off as whites" if they would only try harder, and also asked to indicate how much discrimination they thought that Blacks in the United States continued to face.

Admittedly, the measure of social belongingness in the 1996 NBES is superior to that of the 2012 ANES. The questions in the former were specifically created to measure Black constituents' perceptions of their position in American society. The questions in the latter were intended to apply to a wide swath of the American public. Trying to find questions in the 2012 ANES that would measure the same underlying concept of belongingness in the 1996 NBES was, therefore, quite difficult. Whether "blacks would

be just as well off’ can be interpreted in economic or social terms. It is a question that is asking Black respondents if what *they* do will improve their position in society; it is not asking if how they are *perceived* affects their social treatment. Similarly, when we ask a question about judgment, we gather important insights about respondents’ perceptions of external stimuli. Asking what the state of discrimination is like for the entire population of blacks in America gets close to this idea, but it does so in a somewhat impersonal manner. Although the measure of social belongingness in the 2012 ANES is arguably comparable to that of the 1996 NBES, whether or not they are capturing the exact same concept of social belongingness is not entirely clear.

Unlike the measure of social belongingness, the three-item measure of religiosity in each dataset is nearly identical.<sup>1</sup> For each sample, the relationship between SES and social belongingness, and the effect of social belongingness on the strength of Republican Party identification (PID) are analyzed. In addition to the standard controls<sup>2</sup>, a measure capturing feelings of political efficacy<sup>3</sup> is included in the models used to predict Republican identification.

## Results

Does high SES predict greater levels of social belongingness amongst highly religious blacks? The results do not support H1 in either the 1996 NBES or 2012 ANES. The regression analyses from both datasets indicate that SES has no significant effect on levels of social belongingness for religious and non-religious Blacks alike (see

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<sup>1</sup> 1996 NBES: Religious importance, church attendance, guidance from religion; 2012 ANES: Religious importance, church attendance, frequency of prayer. Religiosity is coded from 0 to 3, with 0 indicating the least religious respondents and 3 indicating the most religious respondents.

<sup>2</sup> Gender, age, SES, and PID.

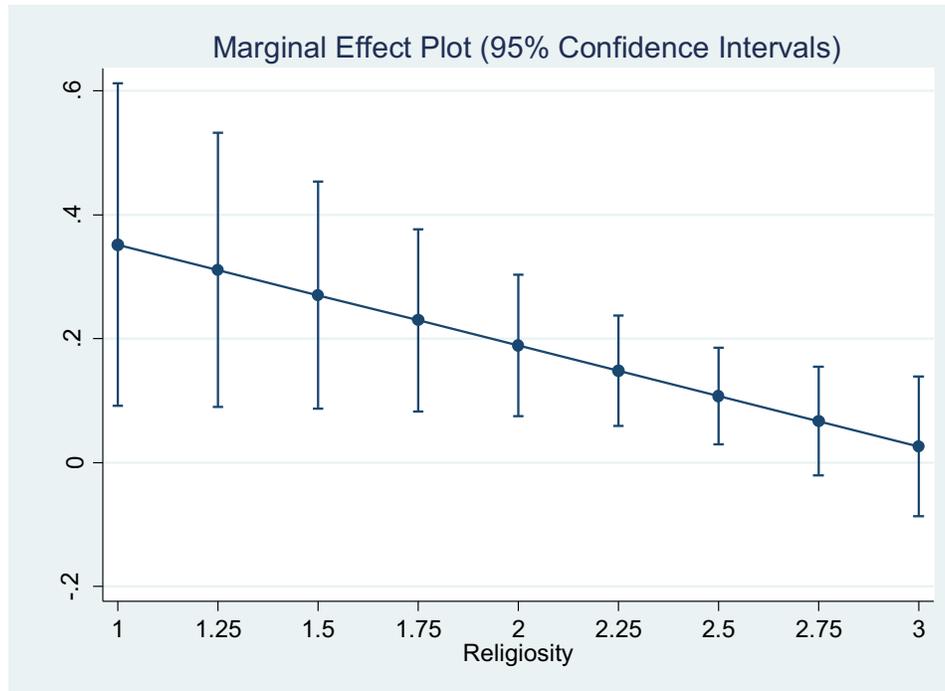
<sup>3</sup> I make a theoretical distinction between social and political belongingness and, therefore, included a control for the latter as a precautionary measure.

Appendix). Therefore, we cannot say that high levels of socioeconomic status automatically translate into higher feelings of belongingness for Black Americans, regardless of how religious they are. As aforementioned, Van Laar et al. (2014) provide a framework that helps us understand why it is difficult for affluent Blacks to feel fully integrated within their social environments in spite of their upper-income status. These results confirm that feelings of social belongingness are essentially unaffected by income level. However, the results from the first analyses do not tell us anything about the effect of social belongingness in and of itself.

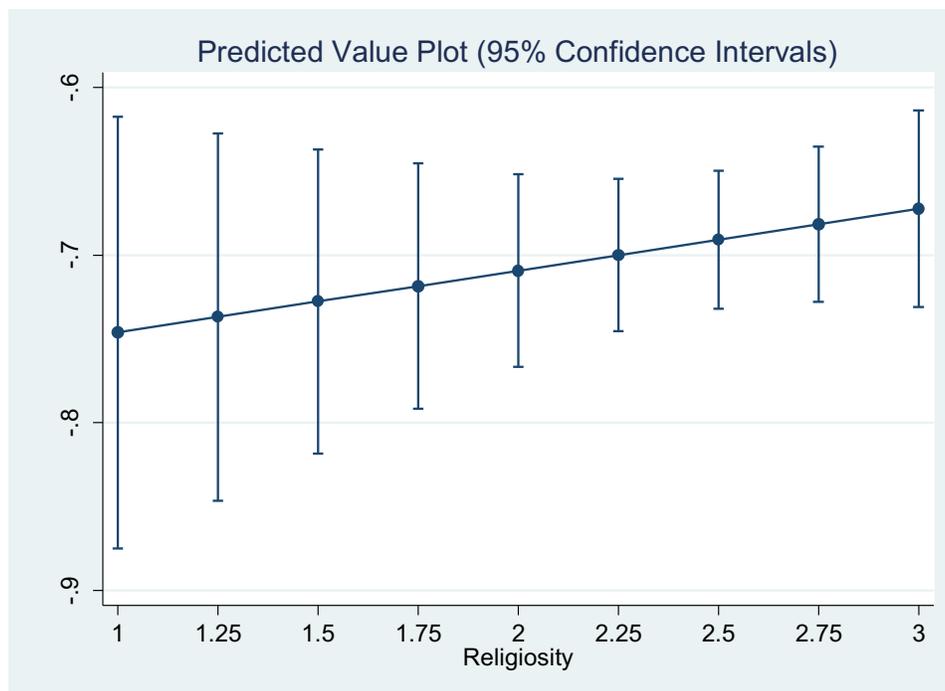
According to the second hypothesis, higher feelings of social belongingness should move highly religious blacks away from the Democratic Party and, perhaps, result in Republican identification. Figure 3 shows the marginal effect of a one-unit increase of social belongingness on the strength of Republican identification amongst respondents in the 1996 NBES. Surprisingly, the effect of social belongingness is much larger for non-religious Blacks (1-1.75) than it is for highly religious Blacks (2.25-3). Although we cannot compare the effects against one another, it is evident from the 95 percent confidence intervals in Figure 3 that social belongingness has no effect for the two most religious groups of respondents (2.75 and 3).<sup>4</sup> In other words, amongst less-religious Blacks, an increase in social belongingness has a larger effect amongst the least religious respondents in the group than it does amongst the highly religious, and, for the most religious groups amongst the highly religious, social belongingness has no effect at all.

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<sup>4</sup> Since the confidence intervals for these groups contain zero, we know that the effect of social belongingness will not be significant at the 0.05 level.



**Figure 3.** Marginal Effect of Social Belongingness on Strength of Republican PID<sup>5</sup>



**Figure 4.** Predicted Values of Republican Identification as Religiosity Increases<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> **Y-Axis:** One-Unit increase in Social Belongingness on Republican Party Identification (all else at means).

<sup>6</sup> **Y-Axis:** Predicted Value of Republican Party Identification (all else at means).

The predicted values of Republican identification in Figure 4 add partial support to H2 but, once again, unexpected results concerning less-religious Blacks appear. The results suggest that, as religiosity increases, movement towards the Republican Party increases as well. However, that increase is much larger amongst non-religious Blacks than highly religious Blacks, and, ultimately, neither religious nor non-religious Blacks identify as Republicans; they simply become more moderate. While the effect of social belongingness is statistically significant in the 1996 NBES, it is not significant in the 2012 ANES.

In sum, although SES is not a significant indicator of social belongingness, social belongingness does predict party identification amongst Black Americans. For the religious, a small increase in social belongingness does not shift their party identification toward the Republican Party as much as it does for less-religious Blacks. The less-religious are not only more affected by small changes in social belongingness, but they also experience larger shifts towards the GOP as religiosity increases.

## **Discussion**

Before delving into a discussion about the implications of these findings, it is important to make a note about the quality of the social belongingness measure in the ANES. Some will suggest that these findings are spurious; after all, the 1996 NBES is an older dataset by modern standards, and the number of observations in the 2012 ANES was slightly larger than that of the 1996 NBES.<sup>7</sup> However, one could argue that the measure of social belongingness in the 1996 NBES is superior to that of the 2012 ANES for all of the reasons mentioned above. While significant estimates in the 2012 ANES

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<sup>7</sup> *N 2012 ANES: 678; N 1996 NBES: 643.*

give us more modern statistics, because the goal of this paper was to tap into the political attitudes of Black Americans in particular, not reaching significance in the 1996 NBES would have been far more detrimental. Therefore, in spite of the fact that these findings are indicative of the sociopolitical atmosphere in 1996, they can still tell us much about what factors may be significant at present.

One motivation of this paper was to explain levels of Republican identification amongst Black Americans. However, as evidenced by the results, socioeconomic status, social belongingness, and religiosity do not explain this. What they do explain is how feelings of belongingness to American society affect party identification amongst religious and non-religious Black Americans. It is important to note that the relationship between social belongingness and the strength of Republican identification is endogenous. The results of my analyses do not tell us whether, for less-religious blacks, becoming more moderate increases their feelings of belongingness to American society, or whether an increase in feelings of social belongingness makes them more moderate. The “black sheep effect” is simply a reference to the fact that feeling like less of a societal “other” affects the strength of PID for this group.

Throughout American history, Blacks have not only occupied the lowest tier of the racial hierarchy, but also faced the largest barriers to entry when it comes to gaining full membership in the American polity (Masuoka and Junn 2013). If the Civil Rights Movement has taught us anything, it is that Black Americans desire to be recognized as equal members of American society. Unfortunately, there has been little if any majority-minority integration over the last few decades (Litcher 2013). A poll by Gallup in 2013 shows that 52 percent of blacks felt dissatisfied with the way that Black people were

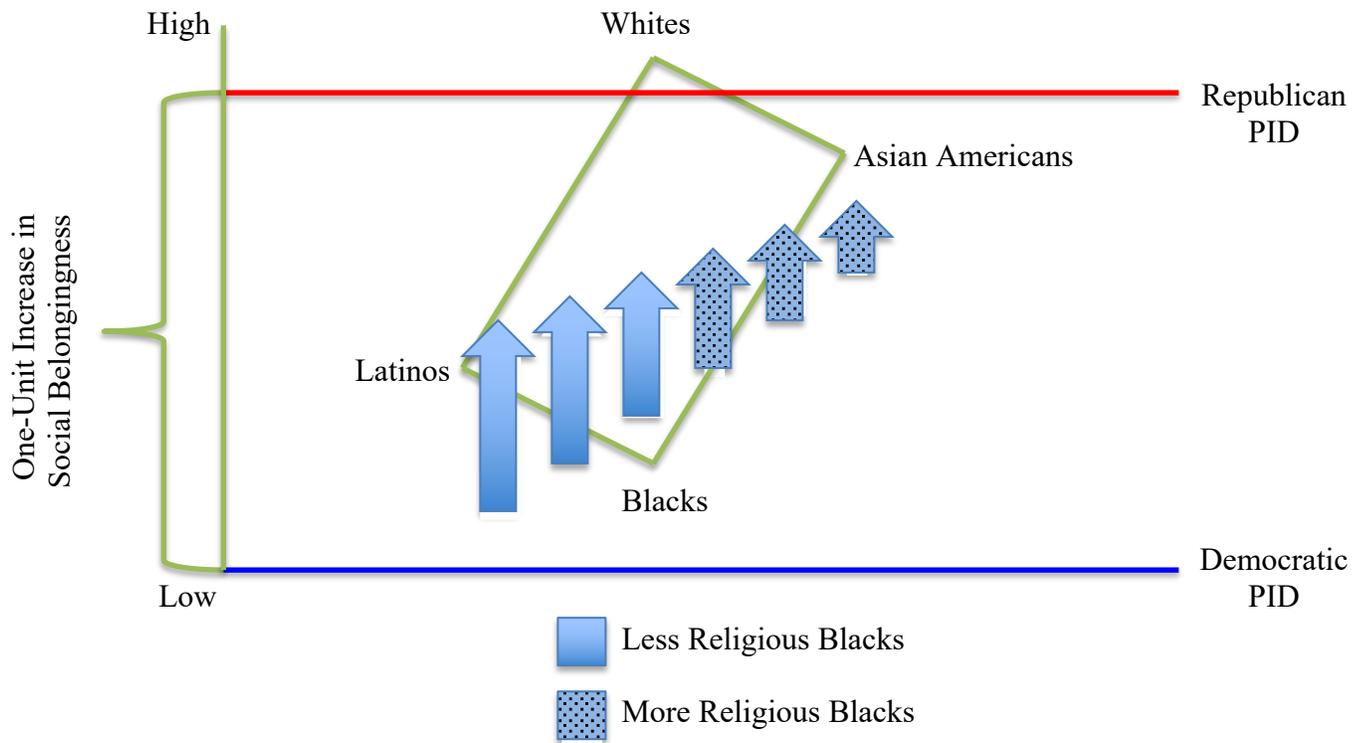
being treated in the United States at that time. However, the same poll also indicates that blacks' feelings of dissatisfaction had significantly declined since 2001. Taken together, the former findings suggest a few things.

First, barring any caveats about my measure of belongingness in the ANES, it is possible that feelings of social belongingness were simply a greater factor for Black Americans in 1996 than in 2012. Even though polls show that blacks in contemporary America are more satisfied with their position in society than they have been in the past, I would not suggest that the null findings in the 2012 ANES are a reflection of greater social integration. On the contrary, the instances of police brutality in recent years have made discrepancies in racial treatment blatantly apparent on a national scale, so much so that my concept of social belongingness may be all but null and void for Black constituents in the modern era. The shooting of Trayvon Martin on February 26, 2012 serves as one example, and happens to have occurred several months before Black respondents were interviewed for the 2012 ANES. A year later, in the short months following the acquittal of Martin's perpetrator (George Zimmerman), blacks' feelings of satisfaction with their treatment in American society went down by six percentage points (Gallup 2013). In other words, although the occurrence of overt discrimination has substantially decreased and, therefore, improved feelings of dissatisfaction amongst blacks over time, it is possible that the manifestation of symbolic racism in the acts of police brutality leading up to the 2012 presidential election may have quelled any hopes that blacks could be just as well off or experience as little racism as whites in the United States (Pearson et al., 2009). If this were the case, then feelings of belongingness to American society would not have been as salient for blacks in 2012 as it was in 1996.

Second, the literature on religion and politics can help us understand why social belongingness as it is measured here affects the non-religious more than the religious. In addition to belief and behavior, belonging to a community is a key component of religiosity. Belonging is much more than affiliation to a religious denomination; it primarily consists of a "...conscious recognition of membership in a social group" (Layman 2001, 57). While religious Blacks may have a "moral vision" for society, that does not necessarily imply that they have or desire a connection with it. For the highly religious, church communities provide feelings of fellowship and belongingness that non-religious blacks may seek from American society at large. Furthermore, the call for "otherworldliness" that stems from conservative Black Theology can have a weakening effect on congregants' attachment to civil society by reinforcing the idea that they should not be "of the world" in spite of the fact that they live in it. This is not to say that non-religious blacks do not have social communities that provide the same needs that the religious get from their churches. However, because congregations tend to be the most salient social communities to which highly religious blacks belong, it is plausible that an increase in belongingness to American society will not be as meaningful for this group.

## **Conclusion**

In Hunter's (1991) conception of the "culture war", orthodox believers across religious traditions are coming together to fight the policy agendas of secular progressivists. But this line of thought alludes to the conundrum that is posed at beginning of this paper: why are highly religious blacks loyal to the Democratic Party in spite of their moral conservatism? If it cannot be explained by socioeconomic status, social belongingness, or religiosity, perhaps it is better explained by the concept of



**Figure 5: REVISED Hierarchy of PID Movement<sup>8</sup>**

shared-fate (Masuoka and Junn 2013) or by the prevalence of uplift ideology in social gospel and black liberation theology (Harris 2010). The question remains unanswered. The findings of this paper do make one thing clear: increases in social belongingness resulted in the moderation of Democratic Party identification amongst blacks in 1996.

Borrowing from Masuoka and Junn's (2013) conception of the American racial hierarchy, a refined hierarchy of PID movement is presented in Figure 5. To reiterate, these findings are bound to the sociopolitical environment surrounding the 1996 presidential election. However, movement toward moderate PID is also a trend in the current political climate. Gallup reported a new high in their records of independent identification, noting that 43% of Americans identified as political independents in 2014

<sup>8</sup> To reiterate, what we learn here is that, even though the more religious start closer to the line of Republican PID than the less-religious, an increase in belongingness amongst the less-religious moves them much closer to the line of Republican PID relative to where they were before while the same movement amongst more religious Blacks is not as large.

(Gallup 2015). Although there are a variety of reasons why partisans may become more moderate, these results capture one of the factors that contributed to this shift amongst Black Americans at one point in time. Future research about partisanship amongst blacks would benefit from an analysis of how their position as the “black sheep” of society affects their political attitudes and ideological leanings.

### Appendix

**Table A.1 The Effect of SES on Social Belongingness (1996 NBES)**

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>
	( <i>N</i> = 919)	
SES	0.04	0.236
Religiosity	-0.06	0.093
Female	-0.04	0.178
Age	-0.003	0.007
Strength of Republican PID	0.34**	0.173
SES#Religiosity	-0.11	0.093
Female#Religiosity	-0.003	0.071
Age#Religiosity	0.003	0.003
Republican PID#Religiosity	-0.10	0.068

**Source:** 1996 Black National Election Study

\**p* < 0.10, \*\**p* < 0.05, \*\*\**p* < 0.01

**Note:** All independent variables are interacted with religiosity.

## Appendix Continued

<b>Table A.2 The Effect of SES on Social Belongingness (2012 ANES)</b>		
	(N= 678)	
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>
SES	0.24*	0.126
Religiosity	0.04	0.098
Female	0.11	0.127
Age	0.01*	0.004
Strength of Republican PID	0.04	0.123
SES#Religiosity	-0.03	0.051
Female#Religiosity	-0.03	0.051
Age#Religiosity	-0.001	0.002
Republican PID#Religiosity	-0.02	0.050

**Source:** 2012 American National Election Study

\* $p < 0.10$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.01$

**Note:** All independent variables are interacted with religiosity.

## Appendix Continued

**Table A.3 The Effect of Social Belongingness on Strength of Republican Party Identification (1996 NBES)**

	<i>B</i>	( <i>N</i> = 643)	<i>SE</i>
Social Belongingness	0.51**		0.214
Religiosity	0.30		0.20
Female	0.11		0.083
Age	-0.0003		0.008
SES	0.48*		0.28
Political Efficacy	-0.21		0.171
Social Belongingness#Religiosity	-0.16**		0.084
Female#Religiosity	-0.08		0.083
Age#Religiosity	-0.002		0.003
SES#Religiosity	-0.17		0.111
Political Efficacy#Religiosity	0.08		0.068

**Source:** 1996 Black National Election Study

\* $p < 0.10$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.01$

**Note:** All independent variables are interacted with religiosity.

**Political Efficacy:** (1) Don't have a say about what government does; (2) Blacks elected don't have the power to change (Agree strongly, agree somewhat, disagree somewhat, disagree strongly).

Table 4

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**Table A.4 The Effect of Social Belongingness on Strength of Republican Party Identification (2012 ANES)**


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	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>
	( <i>N</i> = 678)	
Social Belongingness	0.90	0.242
Religiosity	-0.03	0.136
Female	-0.17	0.169
Age	-0.007	0.006
SES	-0.13	0.178
Political Efficacy	Omitted	N/A
Social Belongingness#Religiosity	-0.04	0.095
Female#Religiosity	0.0007	0.069
Age#Religiosity	0.00063	0.0024
SES#Religiosity	0.06	0.072
Political Efficacy#Religiosity	Omitted	N/A

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**Source:** 2012 American National Election Study

\**p* < 0.10, \*\**p* < 0.05, \*\*\**p* < 0.01

**Note:** All independent variables are interacted with religiosity.

**Political Efficacy:** (1) Do the policies of the Obama administration favor whites over blacks, favor blacks over whites, or do they treat both groups the same? (Favors whites over blacks, favors blacks over whites, treats both groups the same). (2) How much influence do blacks have in U.S. politics? (Too much influence, just about the right amount of influence, too little influence).

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