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Executive behavior and the influence of religious factors: evidence from gubernatorial State-of-the-State Addresses, 2000–2013

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As scholars and pundits increasingly note, debate has intensified over religion in contemporary American politics. Yet, Presidency and Executive Politics researchers know relatively little about how executive behavior is influenced by religion, especially in regard to the impact religious identity and context may have on gubernatorial decision-making. It is the core purpose of this study to explore this understudied topic and begin to fill a large, overlapping, gap that exists across multiple literatures. In pursuit of this goal, the “president-/presidency-centered” framework of analysis is employed to examine religious rhetoric found in a new data-set containing all State-of-the-State Addresses (SoSA) from 2000 to 2013. The study provides the first evidence that gubernatorial decision-making is influenced by both identity-based and contextual factors. Indeed, the probability of whether “God” (or an equivalent term) is mentioned in the agenda-setting SoSA is significantly influenced by the governor’s gender, race/ethnicity, and partisan and religious affiliations as well as the racial, partisan, and religious composition of the state’s population.

Keywords: executive politics; gubernatorial behavior; religion; communication; State-of-the-State Address; “Sound of Silence” strategy

A large gap

Researchers recognize that religious factors influence mass political behaviors (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Putnam 2000; Layman 2001; Legee et al. 2002), as well as the votes of members of Congress (Green and Guth 1991; Fastnow, Grant, and Rudolph 1999). However, presidency and executive politics (PEP) scholars know very little about how executive behavior is influenced by religion.¹ This is especially true when study is expanded to overlap with state politics scholarship via focus on gubernatorial decision-making.² This is surprising given the fact that the unitary design of the office gives every reason to suspect that factors associated with religious identity could influence important decisions made by American state governors. Similarly, given the decentralized nature of the US’ federal structure, the state-level religious context could help shape governors’ decision-making. It is the core purpose of this study to investigate these possibilities and begin to fill a large, overlapping, gap that exists across multiple literatures. In pursuit of this goal, the commonly utilized “president-/presidency-centered” framework of analysis is employed to examine religious rhetoric found in a new data-set containing all State-of-the-State Addresses (SoSA) from 2000 to 2013. The study provides the first evidence that gubernatorial decision-making is influenced by both identity-based and contextual

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factors. Indeed, the probability of whether “God” (or an equivalent term) is mentioned in the agenda-setting SoSA is significantly influenced by the governor’s gender, race/ethnicity, and partisan and religious affiliations as well as the racial, partisan, and religious composition of the state’s population.

Locating the executive power in a single hand subjects it to the vagaries of a solitary personality, creating the potential for differences in temperament, aptitude, background, and group-based identities to play an important role in shaping behavior. Students of executive politics have long referred to this as a “president-centered” account, wherein individual-level factors are critical to shaping outcomes. This is distinguished from a “presidency-centered” explanation, which instead claims that contextual variables, such as technological, economic, and political environment, are most influential in shaping executive behavior. Debate between the two schools of thought has raged for some time in presidential studies (Heclo 1977; Rockman 1986; Moe 1993), with a number of quantitative studies pitting the two theories against each other (Hager and Sullivan 1994; Shields and Huang 1997; Gilmour 2002; Eshbaugh-Soha 2003).

While it is significant to note that there is some empirical support for both theories, this line of research has limited itself by largely framing the debate in terms of “either/or” explanations – wherein either identity-based or contextual factors are expected to matter. To some degree, this stifling tendency has methodological origins. First, there are considerable limitations to studying the question through the presidency, where only 43 non-consecutively serving individuals have held office. Not only does this provide a small universe to draw cases from, but also it ensures study of a rather homogenous pool of political elites. Second, study of the decision most commonly investigated in the scholarship – whether to issue a veto – is problematic. There is little theoretical reason to expect that identity-based factors will impact that decision. No one in any literature has yet overcome both problems simultaneously.

However, this study overcomes these problems, respectively, by: (1) shifting analysis of the applicability of these two competing perspectives to the study of American state governors (see also: Klarner and Karch 2008) and (2) concentrating focus on the decision to use specific religious language in an important public speech. These moves increase the number ($N = 661$) and quality of observations, providing more variation on key measures. Additionally, they suggest many theoretically compelling reasons why governors would behave in predictable ways. Taken together, the new focus creates the conditions under which large- N , probit, analysis can begin to explore the extent to which gubernatorial decision-making is influenced by identity-based and contextual-related factors – including understudied religious determinants. In doing so, the study conducts what is arguably the fairest empirical test that exists within the president-/presidency-centered debate and demonstrates that both set of explanatory variables are influential.

Filling the gap

As scholars and pundits increasingly note, debate has intensified over religion in contemporary American politics (Holley 2011; Layman 2001; Hogue 2012). Incidents – like that which occurred in 2012 at the National Democratic Convention, when reference to “God” was stripped from and later ham-handedly forced back into the official party platform (Jackson 2012) – demonstrate that religion plays an important and controversial role in contemporary political life. Yet, political science research provides little insight into events like this, leaving questions unanswered as to the degree to which the personal (identity-based) and strategic (contextual-related) considerations of elites play a role. This project provides a start-point for answering important questions like this and begins to close a large gap by studying how gubernatorial decision-making is influenced by religious factors.

Gubernatorial agenda setting and the State-of-the-State Address

American state governors often see themselves as “issue catalysts” taking a subject, focusing it, and seeking to take action upon it (Herzik and Brown 1991; Beyle 1999). One of the ways in which they perform this function is through the SoSA. Like the president’s public perception-shaping/agenda-setting State-of-the-Union Address (Cohen 1995), the SoSA traditionally functions as a direct statement of a governor’s policy priorities and legislative goals for the year (van Assendelft 1997; Ferguson 2003). A highly anticipated public speech for the politically involved, it is delivered annually or biennially in every state around the same time of the year, therefore serving as a very comparable unit of analysis across states and time. As such, SoSAs have been widely used to measure the policy agendas and ideologies of governors (Herzik 1983, 1991; DiLeo 2001).

Analyzing executive behavior via the gubernatorial SoSA has multiple analytical advantages. First, the speech is given by governors in all 50 states. This allows a perennial constraint of presidency-focused research to be overcome. Namely, since only 43 individuals have ever served as president, moving analysis to the state level and investigating a particular phenomenon over a short span of time can quickly multiply observations. Furthermore, unlike presidents, 50 governors serve simultaneously, allowing control for some historical and technological forces. This cannot always be done when comparing nineteenth- and twenty-first-century presidents. Governors should also vary more than presidents on key independent variables. Indeed, because they are products of single state electorates, they should be less similar as a group, and diverge more widely than presidents on individual-level measures – especially religious affiliation, a cornerstone of religious identity. Moreover, because states are quite different in some important aspects, (e.g., the religiosity of their populations) – while remaining comparably similar in others – scholars should expect to see significant variation across an array of key contextual factors.

More specifically, as the SoSA is intended to help the governor frame issues and establish the overall mood or tone of governance, it must be thought of – in part – as a highly personal speech, in which identity-based factors could play an important role in shaping its contents (Coffey 2005). This would provide determinants – such as the governors’ gender, race/ethnicity, or partisan and religious affiliations – room to be influential. Yet, because the address is also clearly intended to influence the legislature and citizenry (Rosenthal 1990; van Assendelft 1997), it must also be thought of as a strategic speech. This would allow contextual factors – such as the racial, ethnic, partisan, and religious composition of the state’s citizenry – to influence whether “God” is mentioned in the speech.³

The influence of religious identity and context

The driving force behind the president-centered account is the idea that individual-level factors are highly influential in structuring executive behavior. This is to say that the unique experiences, backgrounds, and identities that shape governors as individuals, as well as their inherent differences in talent, skill, and character, play the key role in explaining their decisions. As such, and most unique to this study, the president-centered account allows for the possibility that followers of different religious traditions may use religious rhetoric differently in their public pronouncements (Kellstedt and Green 1993). Members of some religious groups may be more likely to mention “God” in their SoSAs and some may be less likely. Indeed, it might be expected that governors who are members of the more traditionalistic and evangelical Christian denominations are more likely to mention “God.” Meanwhile, governors with mainline Protestant or non-Christian backgrounds might be less likely.

The presidency-centered account of executive behavior centers on the notion that contextual determinants – more particularly thought of as relating to the specific circumstances in a state that may motivate a governor to take strategic action (Herzik and Wiggins 1989, 855) – drive decision-making.⁴ This study is unique in accounting for the religious context within each state. This is important because recent research shows that religious rhetoric is sometimes employed in political speeches to serve as a “heuristic device” (Brady and Sniderman 1985; Lau and Redlawsk 2001) or cognitive shortcut to send identity-based signals to evangelical listeners (Kuo 2006). When deployed covertly and used to “boost” a politician’s credibility and acceptability with this “ingroup” (without drawing the notice and ire of “outgroups”), this type of “cue” is labeled “God Talk” within the politics and religion literature (Calfano and Djupe 2009; Calfano, Friesen, and Djupe 2013, 563; Djupe and Calfano 2013).

The “God Talk” scholarship suggests several possibilities. First, governors may be more likely to mention “God” as part of their communication strategies when their audience includes greater numbers of evangelicals, the religiously devout, or the religiously active. Second, and conversely, governors facing larger mainstream Protestant constituencies may be less likely to make the same decision. Third, the decision-making of Democratic governors (only) may be influenced by the presence of larger numbers of their secular base. In which case, a governor’s Democratic partisan identification (PID) will interact with larger unaffiliated populations to lower their probability of mentioning “God.”

In the latter two scenarios, governors may be wishing to subtly signal that they share (or at least respect) the values and opinions of the more secular within their constituency. They might try to accomplish this, without alarming others, through application of what might be called a “Sound of Silence” strategy. This original hypothesis might be thought to operate by dynamics similar to those behind the clandestine “God Talk” strategy. In the instances when it happens, omission of commonly used religious rhetoric is employed as heuristic device or cue; and, the governor strategically fails to mention “God.”

Expectations

Exploration of the factors that influence whether “God” is mentioned in a SoSA proceeds as follows. First, expectations about the relationship between gubernatorial decision-making and president-centered determinants are established for investigation. These identity-based factors include measures of gender, race/ethnicity, and partisan and religious affiliation. Then, expectations relating to the relationship between state-level executive behavior and presidency-centered factors are established. These contextual determinants include measures of the racial/ethnic, partisan, and religious composition of the state’s population. Following common practice in the politics and religion literature, three different measures for religious context are tested separately.

Identity-based factors

Political behaviors have been found to be influenced by gender- and race/ethnicity-based individual differences (Verba and Nie 1972; Miller et al. 1981; Jones-Correa and Leal 2001; Barth and Ferguson 2002; McClain et al. 2009). These factors may, therefore, be expected to influence gubernatorial decision-making. Since women tend to be more religious than men in the USA (Wald and Calhoun-Brown 2010), we might expect *Female* governors will be more likely to mention “God.” We might expect the same of racial and ethnic minority governors, since they come from groups that all tend to be socially and religiously traditionalistic and might be more likely to conform to norm by mentioning “God.” Unfortunately, there are not enough SoSAs in the population given by African-American, Latino, or Asian governors to test for independent

effects. There were, however 39 SoSAs given by 9 *Non-White* governors, which can be aggregated into a single category.⁵

One of the most common variables examined in presidential studies is PID.⁶ As conservative politics has become increasingly connected with conservative theology, and both have become associated with the Republican brand (Green et al. 1996), we might expect *Democrat* governors to be less likely to mention “God” in their SoSAs.⁷ Such a finding would lend support to the idea that the governor’s individual-level partisan identity plays a role in their decision calculus. However, it would not shine light on whether a governor is influenced by contextual partisan considerations that may influence how they address their audience. Nor would individual PID simply account for any interactive effect that being a Democratic governor might have in conjunction with the presence of larger, religiously unaffiliated, populations. Both of these additional possibilities are, however, further examined.

Finally, it might be expected that governors who are members of the more traditionalist and evangelical Christian denominations are more likely to mention “God.” Meanwhile, governors with mainline Protestant or non-Christian backgrounds might be less likely. To test this hypothesis, a series of dummy variables are constructed to analyze whether an individual governor’s decision-making is influenced by their religious affiliation. To ensure sufficient ingroup variation and the existence of an omitted category, only five religious affiliations are considered: *Roman Catholic*, *Baptist*, *Presbyterian*, *Methodist*, and *Jewish*. This measurement strategy accounts for the religion of governors in 485 out of 661 SoSAs analyzed and leaves *Episcopalian* as the largest single omitted group.⁸

Contextual factors

The racial, ethnic, religious, and partisan composition of the state’s citizenry matters to governors. Therefore, census data are used, first, to account for the percentage of the state’s population that is *Black*, *Latino*, and *Asian*.⁹ Given the social and religious traditionalism of all three communities, we might expect that governors are more likely to mention “God” when large audiences of these groups exist in the state. Second, to test the impact of religious context, Models 1–3 of this study include measure(s) of religiosity. Model 4 includes none.¹⁰ Following common practice within the politics and religion literature (Kohut et al. 2000; Putnam and Campbell 2008; Bridge 2014), distinction is made between three related, yet conceptually distinct, dimensions of measure of religiosity – belonging, belief, and behavior. Higher levels of religious belief and behavior have recently been found to be equally – if not more – important than belonging in predicting important political behaviors (Driskell, Lyon, and Embry 2008). Finally, we might also expect that governors from states where Democrats won a higher percentage of the two-party presidential vote will be less likely to mention “God” in their SoSAs.¹¹ This finding would support the conclusion that strategic partisan considerations influence gubernatorial decision-making.

To explore the effect of state-level religious **belonging**, results from the Pew Forum’s 2007 Religious Landscape Survey ($n=35,556$)¹² are used in Model 1 to gain three continuous measures accounting for the percentage of the state’s population identifying as: *Evangelical*, *Mainline* (Protestant), and *Unaffiliated*.¹³ The Catholic population is the omitted group.¹⁴ Scholars now believe this to be a more accurate way to account for differences in religious affiliation than a simple Protestant and Catholic dichotomy (Olson and Warber 2008, 193). Following research suggesting that politicians can send identity-based cues to religious followers through their communications, it is expected that governors addressing larger evangelical populations are more likely to mention “God” in their SoSAs. This leaves open the possibility that governors facing more secular audiences might behave in the opposite manner. In these cases, it is expected that: (1) all governors encountering larger mainline Protestant crowds and, (2) Democratic

governors facing larger religiously unaffiliated populations are less likely to mention “God.”¹⁵ This is the first study to suggest this possibility and search for evidence that governors may be utilizing a “Sound of Silence” strategy to subtly cue more secular groups.

To measure the impact of religious **belief** within a state, the Pew Forum’s 2007 Religious Landscape Survey is again used in Model 2. Here, the continuous variable, *Importance (very)* records the percentage of respondents in a state that answered “very important” in reply to the question “How important is religion in your life?”¹⁶ Religious belief “refers to the strictness with which an individual interprets and understands the teachings of his or her particular faith tradition” (Olson and Warber 2008, 195). It is therefore expected that governors addressing populations with greater belief – regardless of their religious affiliations – will be more likely to mention “God” in their SoSA. This, again, is considered a strategic calculation in the president-/presidency-centered framework, wherein governors are influenced by the particular religious context or religiosity of the state’s population to behave in predictable ways.¹⁷

To explore the impact that state-level religious **behavior** has, Pew’s survey is used in Model 3 to measure of the frequency of attendance at religious services. The continuous variable *Attendance (weekly)* corresponds to the percentage of respondents in a state replying that they attend religious services either: “once a week” or “more than once a week.”¹⁸ A so-called, “religious gap” literature (Layman 2001; Olson and Green 2006; Putnam and Campbell 2008) shows that individuals of different denominations who spend similar amounts of time in the practice of religion (e.g., worshiping or praying) are more like each other than those of similar affiliations who behave differently. For example, a Baptist who attends church weekly will probably have more in common with a similarly attending Roman Catholic than with another Baptist who almost never goes to church. As a result, it is expected that governors from states with higher frequency attendance at religious services will be more likely to strategically mention “God.”

Model 4 does not include a measure of religious context. This helps test the robustness of measures in other models and allows partisan context to be added to the specification instead. It is possible that religious context is causally prior to partisan context in the USA (Patrikios 2008).¹⁹ This is to say that religious identity has been shown to influence the choice of partisan affiliation, with the more religious shifting toward the Republican Party (and vice versa) (Layman 2001).²⁰ Including measures of both religious context and partisan context in the same model could reduce the estimated impact of the causally prior variable. To guard against this possibility, partisan context is left out of Models 1–3 and religious context is left out of Model 4. It is expected that governors from states giving a higher percentage of the two-party vote to the Democratic candidate in the last presidential election will, strategically, be less likely to mention “God.”

Data and method

To test the expectations outlined in the previous section, executive behavior is studied via examination of an original data-set containing all 661 SoSAs given by American state governors from 2000 to 2013.²¹ The online archives at pewstates.org contained complete transcripts for 570 SoSAs. The other 91 transcripts were located via other means, including contact with personnel in various state archives.

Forty-four states follow the practice of scheduling annual SoSAs. Six states, namely Arkansas, Montana, Nevada, North Carolina, North Dakota, and Texas, instead follow a biennial schedule. However, neither category of scheduling practice is without anomaly or exception. For example, although Minnesota’s constitution calls for an annual SoSA to be given, Independent Governor Jesse Ventura simply elected not to give one in 2000.²² Meanwhile, Republican Governor Jim Gibbon of Nevada broke from normal practice to give an additional even year

address in 2010.²³ Finally, after a temporary stint of giving annual addresses, North Dakota's governors reverted back to their traditional biennial schedule in 2006.²⁴

The study's dependent variable is a dichotomous measure of whether "God," or an equivalent term, was mentioned in the address.²⁵ Using a keyword search, an address containing any of the target words was coded as 1. Other addresses were coded as 0. The method is probit regression, and robust standard errors are applied to address possible problems caused by heteroskedasticity.

A broad range of factors that may influence executive behavior are analyzed. Eight different individual-level variables, five of which account for religious identity, are consistently evaluated in each of the four models. Additionally, each specification contains four to six contextual variables. In every model three of these variables control for racial/ethnic context. One to three additional variables account for either religious context – via measure of belonging, belief, or behavior – or partisan context. Model 1 also includes one identity-based variable that interacts with a contextual variable.

Findings

Descriptive results

Before presenting regression results, it is important to situate findings within the context of the data utilized for analysis. Two tables are presented. Table 1 both lists information about the SoSAs and describes how they were scored on the dichotomous identity-based variables indicated. In this table, the proportions listed are calculated as a percent of total SoSAs, respectively, and are not cumulative. Table 2 reports the minimum and maximum scores, and the mean of the continuous contextual variables, and the one interactive term. The figures listed in the final "Impact" column of both tables indicate the substantive effect of each variable on the probability of "God" being mentioned in the SoSA. Detailed explanation of this column will follow, later, in discussion.

Table 1 reveals that from 2000 to 2013, there were 661 SoSAs given, with 497 of them (75.2%) mentioning "God" (or an equivalent term). This suggests that something like a national norm exists in regard to the practice. Overall, 306 SoSAs were given under Democratic gubernatorial leadership, 87 by females and 39 by non-whites. As is shown, more total addresses (258) were given by Catholics than were given by governors of the other four affiliations considered combined.

Table 1. Description of select variables.

	# SoSAs	as %	Impact (% pts)
DV	661	100.0	–
Mention "God"	497	75.2	–
Identity-based IVs	# SoSAs	as %	–
Female	87	13.2	8.99**
Non-White	39	5.9	11.41*
Democrat	306	46.3	–14.20**
Catholic	258	39.0	10.37**
Baptist	50	7.6	19.01**
Presbyterian	62	9.4	8.70
Methodist	86	13.0	–17.23**
Jewish	29	4.4	–22.57**

Note: All calculations of "Impact" determined using Model 3.

* $p < .10$.

** $p < .05$.

Table 2. Description of contextual factors.

Contextual IVs	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Impact (% pts for varying from 25th–75th percentile)
Black Pop. (%)	0.3	37.3	10.5	4.57*
Latino Pop. (%)	0.7	46.7	9.0	1.42
Asian Pop. (%)	0.5	41.6	3.5	–1.74**
Evangelical Pop. (%)	7	53	26.2	10.48**
Mainline Pop. (%)	6	36	19.3	–7.51**
Unaffiliated Pop. (%)	6	27	17.1	Not directly comparable
Dem* Unaffiliated	0	27	8.3	Not directly comparable
Very Important (%)	36	82	55.0	12.85**
Weekly Attend (%)	22	60	38.7	11.08**
Dem % 2-Party Vote	25.4	72.9	48.7	–12.60**

Note: Calculations of “Impact” determined using Model 3 for racial/ethnic “population” and partisan context variables only. The impact of the “Unaffiliated Pop.” and “Dem.*Unaffiliated” variables are not directly comparable to the other terms because of their interaction in the later term.

* $p < .10$.

** $p < .05$.

Table 2 presents the broad variation that exists across the context of the 50 states. This can be seen by comparing the minimum and maximum percentages of the Black, Latino, and Asian populations. Similarly, broad variation exists in the religious context of states. This is demonstrated in the group of five religious context variables, accounting for belonging, belief, and behavior. Also shown is variation in one of these measures, *Unaffiliated Population*, when interacted with Democrat partisan affiliation. Finally, partisan context also varies widely in the states, as revealed by the fact that the Democrat presidential candidate received from 25.4% to 72.9% of the two-party vote in elections between 2000 and 2012.

Regression results

Overall, the four models perform quite well. Table 3 displays the results and indicates that 15 out of 18 variables are statistically significant, at conventional levels, in one or more model. With the exception of the *Asian* contextual variable, all of the statistically significant variables work in the expected direction. The pseudo- R^2 of the very similarly specified models ranges from 0.165 to 0.193, which suggests that a reasonably good amount of variance is explained.

Of the identity-based factors, *Roman Catholic*, *Baptist*, and *Methodist* are the most robust predictors of whether a governor mentions “God” in their SoSA, attaining statistical significance across all four models. Measures for *Democrat*, *Female*, and *Jewish* also demonstrate robustness via achievement of statistical significance at the $p \leq 0.05$ level in three out of four models. The variable *Non-White* attains this level of significance in Models 1 and 4. Only *Presbyterian* never achieves conventional levels of statistical significance. However, it bears noting that much of this nuance is lost when standards of statistical significance are modestly relaxed. As Table 3 demonstrates, at the $p \leq .10$ level of significance, every individual-level variable – save two (*Democrat* and *Presbyterian*) – exhibits across-the-board robustness.

As for contextual factors, none of the variables controlling for the racial/ethnic percentage of the population is statistically significant in every model. The *Asian* variable comes closest, demonstrating robustness across the three models that include a religiosity measure. Alternately, the *Black* variable is statistically significant only in Model 4, which – instead – controls for partisan context. The *Latino* variable never attains significance. Four out of five of the variables

Table 3. Influences on mentioning "god" in SoSA: 2000–2013.

Variable	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	Coefficient	(se)	Coefficient	(se)	Coefficient	(se)	Coefficient	(se)
Identity-based factors								
<i>Female</i> (+)	0.326**	0.159	0.328**	0.156	0.363**	0.158	0.285*	0.156
<i>Non-White</i> (+)	0.620**	0.309	0.589*	0.311	0.559*	0.295	0.604**	0.300
<i>Democrat</i> (–)	0.450	0.468	–0.513***	0.121	–0.498***	0.120	–0.488***	0.122
<i>Roman Catholic</i> (+)	0.535***	0.151	0.406***	0.144	0.389***	0.144	0.437***	0.146
<i>Baptist</i> (+)	0.975**	0.497	1.097**	0.457	1.163***	0.451	1.183***	0.451
<i>Presbyterian</i> (+)	0.347	0.275	0.345	0.265	0.365	0.261	0.499*	0.266
<i>Methodist</i> (–)	–0.441**	0.191	–0.568***	0.194	–0.531***	0.193	–0.567***	0.194
<i>Jewish</i> (–)	–0.489*	0.281	–0.661**	0.277	–0.660**	0.274	–0.561**	0.275
Contextual factors								
<i>Black Population</i> (+)	0.001	0.007	0.008	0.010	0.013	0.008	0.033***	0.008
<i>Latino Population</i> (+)	–0.003	0.004	0.007	0.007	0.006	0.007	0.007	0.007
<i>Asian Population</i> (+)	–0.034***	0.028	–0.028***	0.011	–0.026**	0.010	–0.011	0.011
Belonging								
<i>Evangelical Population</i> (+)	0.028***	0.007	–	–	–	–	–	–
<i>Mainline Population</i> (–)	–0.035***	0.012	–	–	–	–	–	–
<i>Unaffiliated Population</i> (–)	–0.012	0.016	–	–	–	–	–	–
<i>Democrat * Unaffiliated Population</i> (–)	–0.057**	0.025	–	–	–	–	–	–
Belief								
<i>Importance (very)</i> (+)	–	–	0.031***	0.007	–	–	–	–
Behavior								
<i>Attendance (weekly)</i> (+)	–	–	–	–	0.030***	0.008	–	–
<i>Dem % 2-Party Vote</i> (–)	–	–	–	–	–	–	–3.346***	0.701
Constant	0.772	0.573	–0.951*	0.373	–0.465	0.289	2.054***	0.348
<i>Observations</i>	661	0.193	661	0.169	661	0.165	661	0.176
<i>Pseudo-R²</i>								

Note: The dependent variable is a dichotomous measure of whether "God" (or equivalent term) was used in the State-of-the-State Address. Expected direction is in parentheses. All tests of significance are two-tailed.

Robust standard errors reported.

* $p < .10$.

** $p < .05$.

*** $p < .01$.

accounting for the different dimensions of religious context – belonging, belief, and behavior – were statistically significant in the model they were included. Only *Unaffiliated Population* did not achieve statistical significance at the $p \leq .05$ level.²⁶ However, this variable is statistically significant when interacted with *Democrat* in Model 1.

Discussion

These findings show that a governor's decision whether to mention "God" is influenced by both identity-based and contextual factors. When the analysis of executive behavior is shifted from study of presidents to governors and a phenomenon is examined wherein there are strong theoretical reasons to believe that both president- and presidency-centered variables will matter, they do. Multiple insights are suggested. Discussion proceeds to consider each category of variables in terms of statistical and, then, substantive significance.

First, identity counts. In influencing whether specific religious rhetoric is used in a SoSA, gender, race/ethnicity, and partisan and religious affiliation all impact gubernatorial decision-making. Indeed, in Model 4 every individual measure attains a reasonable level of statistical significance. Female governors and those from racial and ethnic minority groups, as well as Catholics, Baptists, and Presbyterians are more likely to mention "God." Meanwhile, Democratic governors and those that identify as Methodist and Jewish are less likely. Of note is the statistical robustness of understudied religious measures. The 661 SoSAs under study were given by 159 different governors. Of this total number, 110 governors identified with one of the five religious affiliations that was likely to influence gubernatorial decision-making. This not only shows that executive behavior can be influenced by religious affiliation, but it also suggests that students of presidential and executive politics may be missing something important by almost always failing to include a measure of this identity-based factor in their investigations.

Second, identity counts a lot. The relative impact of individual-level determinants is anything but trivial. The fourth column in Table 1 (labeled "Impact") reports the number of percentage points that a single factor has, calculated using Model 3, in changing the probability of mentioning "God" in a SoSA.²⁷ So, for example, after setting all other variables at their value at the mean,²⁸ the substantive impact of being a female raises the probability of a governor mentioning "God" 8.99 percentage points. Baptists are 19.01 percentage points more likely to mention "God" than governors in the omitted religious category. Democrat PID lowers the probability of a governor mentioning "God" 14.20 percentage points. Jewish governors are 22.57 percentage points less likely to mention "God" than those in the omitted religious group. Thus, the substantive impact of individual factors is quite large. In Model 3, a governor such as Oregon's John Kitzhaber – a white, Jewish, Democrat – is 36.77 percentage points less likely to mention "God" than the "mean" state chief-executive; while New Mexico's governor, Susana Martinez, a Female, Latino, Catholic Republican, is 40.77 percentage points more likely.

Third, contextual factors are important. The decision whether "God" is mentioned in the SoSA is influenced by the racial/ethnic composition of the state's population, as well as its religiosity and partisanship. Thus, as logically flows from the president-/presidency-centered framework of thought, strategic considerations impact a governor's decision-making.

Yet, racial and ethnic contextual factors are not as robust predictors as expected. Indeed, only the Asian population had a statistically significant influence on mentioning "God" in more than one model and its effect was negative – against expectation. This finding is somewhat surprising. Indeed, because research into this understudied group is in its infancy, it is worth drawing attention to this oddity – even as any attempt at explanation must remain highly speculative at this point.²⁹

Religious context appears significant no matter if measured as a function of belonging, belief, or behavior;³⁰ or, alternately, interacted with the PID of the governor. Most originally, Model 1 provides evidence that religious rhetoric can be used in more than one way as signaling cue to identity-based groups. Specifically, governors are more than just influenced by the presence of larger evangelical crowds. Additionally: (1) the larger the mainline Protestant population, the less likely it is for all governors to mention “God” and (2) the larger the religiously unaffiliated population, the less likely it is for Democratic governors (only) to mention “God”. Governors are thus, most likely, highly aware of the religious nuances that exist within their constituencies and appear doubly strategic when addressing them through the SoSA. This is especially true of Democratic governors whose decision-making is, alone, influenced by the most secular elements of the state’s citizenry. Not only does this suggest that the religiosity of the population may need to be accounted for more consistently in many fields of social–scientific research, it provides the first empirical evidence of governors employing a “Sound of Silence” strategy.

Fourth, contextual factors are substantively important – even if sometimes less so than identity-based factors. Since all contextual factors are continuous measures, their substantive impact is calculated by holding all other variables at their value at the mean, and determining the effect of moving from the 25th to the 75th percentile within a contextual variable (Table 2). For example, the substantive impact of moving from 25th to the 75th percentile within the evangelical population raises the probability of mentioning “God” by 10.48 percentage points. Meanwhile, moving from a low to high percentage mainline Protestant population decreases the probability of mentioning “God” by a somewhat smaller 7.51 percentage points. In Model 4, which includes no contextual measure of religiosity, a similar move from a low to high percentage partisan population decreases the probability of mentioning “God” by 12.60 percentage points. Unfortunately, it is notoriously difficult to interpret the substantive effect of both the factors and product of an interactive relationship.³¹ In Model 1, perhaps the best that one can say is that because the interaction term for Democratic governor multiplied by unaffiliated population is negative, the magnitude of the negative relationship between unaffiliated population and mentioning God is larger for Democratic governors compared with non-Democratic governors.³²

When taken all together, the results of this analysis – using the president-/presidency-centered rubric as framework – begin to fill a large gap in multiple literatures. Findings provide evidence that the decision whether to mention “God” in the important, agenda-setting, SoSA is impacted by identity-based factors (including religious affiliation) even as context (including the religiosity of the state’s population) remains influential.

Conclusion

The rhetoric employed in a SoSA sheds light on the extent to which executive behavior is influenced by president- and presidency-centered factors. Analysis reveals that a wide array of identity-based factors, including those based on the governor’s gender, race/ethnicity, and partisan and religious affiliation, can have a significant impact on the decision to mention “God.” Furthermore, the study reveals that many contextual factors are also influential. Indeed, whether “God” is mentioned can be structured by the racial/ethnic composition, partisanship, and religiosity of the state’s population. Ultimately then, both religious identity and context can influence gubernatorial decision-making.

This study suggests several avenues for future research. First, it recommends examining hypotheses about executive behavior, often generated in presidential studies, via an analysis of the governors of the American states. As Klarner and Karch suggest, “the states represent a promising venue in which to evaluate (many) claims” (2008, 582). Not only are there more chief executives to study, and therefore more data, but also governors will vary more widely than presidents

do on important determinants of decision-making. This allows for the generation and testing of new hypotheses – like those suggesting how religious identity and context will influence gubernatorial decision-making. Second, the study reinforces Eshbaugh-Soha's (2003) call to frame future research in terms of evaluating the extent to which identity-based determinants matter *within* a particular context. Since it is clear that neither the president- or presidency-centered account can explain all of executive behavior, the challenge is for scholarship to untangle relative influences upon a given behavior. Most broadly, a final avenue for future research exists in further closing the gap and probing the important role that religious rhetoric, identity, and context play in executive politics. Follow up questions to this study include, how does religion enter into and impact gubernatorial decision-making processes?³³ What are the electoral and policy implications of mentioning "God" in the SoSA?

If religion is becoming a polarizing issue in American politics, again, one of its battlefields will be within the realm of executive communications. As this study suggests, this conflict may happen through very subtle means – like governors' strategically failing to mention "God" to larger secular audiences. Yet, until the gap in multiple literatures is closed and we know more about the relationship between executive behavior and religion, the social sciences may be ill attuned to hearing things like the "Sound of Silence."

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Notes

1. The relevant American Political Science Association organized group recently changed its name to the PEP section as reflection of the broader, more inclusive, focus of study being promoted in this area.
2. But see: Kahane (1994), who finds that religious identity (but not context) helps determine a governor's stance on abortion.
3. Context has always been treated as a presidency-centered variable within the president-/presidency-centered debate (Gilmour 2002; Klarner and Karch 2008). It is considered an exogenous factor thought to impact the strategic calculations of executives and not function as an individual, identity-based, factor (e.g., like gender, race/ethnicity, PID, or religious affiliation).
4. Some gubernatorial studies refer to this class of factors as "institutional" variables (Bernick and Wiggins 1991; Klarner and Karch 2008), but this term focuses on both the formal powers of the governor and legislature and contextual factors. Because neither formal powers (e.g., the ease of the legislative veto-override and the governor's budgetary power) nor legislative impediments (e.g., the existence of divided government) were ever influential in this study, I use the term "contextual" to refer to the general class. I thank Andy Karch for his insights on this point.
5. Aggregation assures confidence that this dichotomous variable works independently of the partisan variable, because the *Non-White* group consists of five Democrats and four Republicans. African-American: Patrick (D-MA); Patterson (D-NY). Latino: Martinez (R-NM); Richardson (D-NM); Sandoval (R-NV). Asian: Cayetano (D-HI); Haley (R-NC); Jindal (R-LA); and Locke (D-WA).

6. Besides being a clear object of choice, PID is included in the president-centered set of variables in the only other existent study of gubernatorial decision-making using the president-/presidency-centered theoretical framing (Klarner and Karch 2008).
7. In order to not lose any observations and cleanly account for Democratic governors, Independent governors (e.g., Lincoln Chaffee (RI), Angus King (ME), Jesse Ventura (MN)) are coded = 0 and thus lumped in with Republicans. In alternate specifications, “Independent” PID was not a statistically significant predictor of mentioning “God,” even as there is little theoretical reason to think Independents would behave distinctly from members of both major parties.
8. The number of SoSAs given by governors of particular religious affiliations not listed in Table 1 is as follows: Episcopalian 50; “Christian” 27; Mormon 22; Lutheran 19; “Protestant” 17; Disciples of Christ 10; Eastern Orthodox 6; Congregationalist 6; Quaker 3; Christian Scientist 2; “Non-Denominational” 4; Undeclared 6; and Atheist 3. The omitted category thus includes 175 out of 661 SoSAs. In alternate specifications, none of the individual affiliations included in the omitted category was ever a statistically significant predictor of mentioning “God.” They are all alike in this way.
9. 2000 census numbers are used for SoSAs given between 2000 and 2003. 2005 census estimates are utilized for the 2004–2007 SoSAs, and 2010 census numbers are used for 2008–2013.
10. It is possible that religious context or partisan context is causally prior to the other. If either possibility were true, then including both variables in the same specification would reduce the estimated impact of the causally prior variable. I thank an anonymous reviewer for bringing attention to this possibility.
11. The 2000 election results are applied to SoSAs from 2000 to 2004; the 2004 to SoSAs from 2005 to 2008; the 2008 to SoSAs from 2009 to 2012; and the 2012 election results are applied to the 2013 SoSAs.
12. See: <http://religions.pewforum.org/> The survey was conducted from 8 May to 13 August 2007.
13. To test for robustness, measures taken from the *Religious Congregations Study* of 2000 and 2010 were also used as substitutes of the state’s population identifying as *Catholic*, *Evangelical*, and *Mainline*. Results were substantively the same.
14. Research has suggested that Catholics are not the target of the “God Talk” strategy. In alternate specifications, the Catholic population variable was never statistically significant in grouping with any of the other measures of belonging.
15. I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this “interactive” possibility for testing. In alternate specifications, Democratic PID was interacted with the every other contextual factor. However, none was found statistically significant.
16. The groups omitted were: “somewhat important” and “not too important or not at all important.” They were either highly (negatively) correlated with “very important” or had little within group variance.
17. While governors could, alternately, be influenced by religious context because they are “from” it (i.e., behave more or less religiously because they are from a more or less religious state themselves), the influence of individual religious identity is already controlled for in Models 1–4 and found to be statistically significant. While context may work through more complex mechanisms than can be modeled here, this paper’s findings suggest that scholars utilizing the president-/presidency-centered theoretical framework have been correct in always considering contextual factors of presidency-centered determinants.
18. The question is: “aside from weddings and funerals, how often do you attend religious services?” The omitted groups were: the aggregate response “once or twice a month/few times a year” and the “seldom” or “never” responses.
19. I thank an anonymous reviewer for bringing attention to this possibility.
20. It is also possible, and perhaps probable, that the causal arrow works both ways – with religious devoutness driving some Americans into the increasingly conservative Republican Party and progressive ideological devoutness pushing other citizens further into the more secular ranks. This paper’s findings, lending support to the “Sound of Silence” thesis, can be interpreted to provide indirect support for this possibility. Additionally, in alternative specifications, evidence was found suggesting that religious and partisan context are each causally prior to the other. This is unlike the racial and partisan context, wherein African-American percent of the population is clearly prior to Democratic share of the two-party vote.
21. The study follows National Governor’s Association Report’s standard (<http://www.nga.org/files/live/sites/NGA/files/pdf/GOVSPEAK05.pdf>), wherein:

... references to 'state-of-the-state addresses' are often used as shorthand to refer to all the addresses being analyzed. ... For each state, only one address was analyzed. In determining which address to use in those cases where governors gave multiple major addresses during the time period, the priority was as follows: (1) if available, the state-of-the-state, state-of-the-commonwealth, or state-of-the-island address was used; (2) if none of these was available, then the inaugural address was used; and (3) if none of the above was available, then the budget address was used.

22. See: <http://www.leg.state.mn.us/lrl/mngov/stateofstate.aspx>.
23. See: <http://renotahoe.about.com/b/2010/02/07/state-of-the-state-address-from-governor-jim-gibbons.htm>.
24. See: http://bismarcktribune.com/news/state-and-regional/no-state-of-the-state-this-year/article_e38087f5-c964-5117-ac4e-94ee584400ed.html.
25. Early analysis suggested that "God" was most often mentioned once or not at all. Future research, extending the SoSA database back in time, may want to see how long this trend has held true. Additionally, when scholars determine which governors are 'evangelicals,' it might be fruitful for specialists to investigate if this factor influences how many times "God" is mentioned.
26. The *Unaffiliated Population* variable is not statistically significant in alternate specification that does not include the interactive term; although, the *Democrat* PID variable is.
27. It is not a straightforward proposition to interpret the substantive impact of variables with probit analysis, as the effect of one independent variable is contingent on the values of the others. However, it is possible to set all other variables at their value at the mean and determine the impact any single dichotomous variable has by toggling its measure from zero to one.
28. Setting all individual measures at their value at the mean results in the following coding: *Democrat* = 0; *Female* = 0; *Non-White* = 0; *Roman Catholic* = 0; *Baptist* = 0; *Presbyterian* = 0; *Methodist* = 0; *Jewish* = 0 (see Table 2 for the value of the means of contextual variables). The "mean" governor in this study is thus a white, male, Republican, with omitted group religious affiliation.
29. One explanation might be that Asians, with their varied national origins and experiences with Christianity, are fundamentally more secular as a group. Governors appeal to them as such. A second explanation might be that the *Asian Population* variable is reflecting and magnifying the secular norms of the few states this group tends to cluster in (e.g., California and Hawaii) rather than saying something intrinsic about Asian group religiosity. This follows from research suggesting that Asian "group consciousness is contingent on context" (Junn and Masuoka 2008, 736) and would help explain how Asian governors can, simultaneously, be more likely than white governors are to mention "God."
30. Factor analysis demonstrates that the belief and behavior measures load (as expected) on a single factor – as does the evangelical variable. However, attempts to extract and use all five measures to generate one religious context variable never produced statistically significant results.
31. The impact of interactive terms is not, in fact, directly comparable to the other variables in the specification. Mathematically, it is impossible to hold both component variables (i.e., the multiplication factors) constant while varying their product (or vice versa), which is how differential effect is determined.
32. I thank Pat Flavin for recommending this description of impact.
33. Further background research into the religious identities of governors may provide more nuance and fresh insights. Extension of the SoSA database may enable additional time-series studies.

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