

Personal Section

My research observed how Christian Nationalism and anti-Semitism affect Americans attitudes toward the War in Ukraine. The paper investigates how these ideologies affect Americans opinions towards Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Vladimir Putin, and how they therefore support or do not support these countries in their war effort

I recently graduated from Paul D. Schreiber High School, where I was in the Social Science Research program for three years. During the program I was able to explore topics in politics and social psychology. At the end of my junior year I began brainstorming for the creation of a full-scale research project and paper to be submitted in the Regeneron Science Talent Search.

I wanted to study something related to politics, and something timely which would be exciting to delve into. I had the pleasure of collaborating with Dr. Howard Lavine, the Associate Dean of Political Science at the University of Minnesota. While discussing the various geopolitical issues I could explore through a research lens, the war in Ukraine was brought up, and Professor Lavine immediately recommended the books *The Power Worshipers* by Katherine Stewart and *Taking America Back for God* by Samuel Perry and Andrew Whitehead. Prior to learning about Christian Nationalism I had bore witness to its presence in American society and the far-right political sphere, but I hadn't thought about it in the context of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Learning more about both the conflict itself and Christian Nationalism simultaneously allowed me to see the intersections between these topics.

While looking into the intersections between Christian Nationalism and the Russia Ukraine conflict in the news, I discovered that a number of far-right conservative pundits have faced backlash for making anti-Semitic comments or using anti-Semitic slights when referring to Ukraine's Volodymyr Zelenskyy. I began to wonder if Zelenskyy's Jewish identity had something to do with the far-right's lack of empathy for the Ukrainian people, or their atypical lack of interest in pursuing a military initiative to defend against Putin's advances. Though anti-Semitism had never (to my knowledge or to my mentor's knowledge) been observed in the context of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, I had a strong sense

that because Zelenskyy's Jewish identity was often referred to in conservative media outlets, anti-Semitism could be a driving force between the lack of American condemnation towards Putin and Russia on the right.

In compiling information for my literature review, I came across several studies that piqued my interest, while simultaneously overwhelming me with concern for the trajectory of the protection of civil liberties worldwide. The alliance of cultural conservatives in the United States and Russia has embraced retrograde views on issues of race, gender, class, and sexuality. As the nation grapples with societal changes, the ethno-nationalist urgency to "purify" the population has strengthened. The amalgam of Christian Nationalism, white replacement theory, and conspiratorial zeal has attracted a substantial constituency in the United States and beyond.

What is dangerous about Americans' positive sentiments towards Putin and Russia is that it is representative of a much larger issue – the growing favorability towards authoritarian governments and illiberal policy. The Christian Nationalist community in the United States has shown staunch opposition to American support for Ukraine. Therefore, Russia has found support from the citizenry of a democratic nation, as the citizenry themselves have warranted authoritarianism excusable for the protection of their beliefs and traditional values.

While conducting this research project, I was reminded of the work of American political scientist Samuel Huntington. In his book *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late 20th Century*, Huntington warned about the impact of polarization and political stagnation in nations on the future of their democracy, and their ability to aid in the democratization of foreign nations. Though the political right has criticized the substantial aid the U.S. has offered to Ukraine, as Huntington demonstrated, Ukraine's stability impacts not only the preservation of its own democracy but the preservation of democracy worldwide.

In addition to being named a semifinalist in the Regeneron STS, I was also granted the opportunity to compete in the Long Island Science and Engineering Fair (LISEF), and earned an honorable mention.

Doing research was an incredibly rewarding experience. I had used statistics in research projects in the past, but never for so many different correlations or with a sample size as large as I used in my research. I had to familiarize myself with the research program Stata and learn how to interpret the different coefficients. I also needed to find an easy way to illustrate the relationships I was measuring with the makeshift triangle figures (see below). Working on my study made the answers to my questions come to life, and gave me motivation and confidence in experimentation and statistics that I will no doubt use when I get to college. I am excited and ready to tackle the next question I have with research, and more importantly I feel prepared to do so.

My advice to any high schooler interested in doing research is to not be overwhelmed by how complicated and scary statistics programs can look. Once you have some practice it will be so easy. If you don't have a topic in mind, think of the questions that come to you in your everyday life. Don't be afraid to take a shot at investigating something even if there's a chance there is nothing there -- disproven hypotheses are just as important and valid as proven hypotheses.

Research Section

As Vladimir Putin retains his strong grip on political power in Russia, growing networks of conservative actors in the United States have drawn together the potential political futures of both countries (Stoeckl and Uzlaner, eds. 2020). Since the mid 2010s, conservative support for Russia has increased, a trend which continued during the commencement of the Ukrainian invasion in February 2022 (Gallup, 2022). Despite the bipartisan condemnation of the invasion and the humanitarian concerns expressed by many on the political left, several vocal leaders on the Christian right continue to express support for Putin and his authoritarian regime, and as data has demonstrated, this has significantly impacted the favorability that Americans show for Russia, especially the conservative far-right (Perry, Samuel L., 2021).

Christian Nationalism is a type of religious nationalism that is affiliated with Christianity, which primarily focuses on the internal politics of society, such as legislating civil and criminal laws that reflect the Christian Nationalist's view of Christianity and the role of religion in political and social life. As stated by Kristin Kobes Du Mez, a professor of history at Calvin University, “At the core of Christian nationalism in contemporary politics is really the idea of privileging certain views over others, in terms of determining our laws, in terms of even interpreting our Constitution, and in terms of implementing our democracy.” However, there is a necessary distinction to be made between Christian and religious engagement in politics and Christian Nationalism. While all Americans presumably want to see their values reflected in the US government, typically this means viewing issues as it may relate to a person’s given faith, while Christian Nationalists would instead hold the ideology which instructs, “my faith tells me not only how we should handle this issue, but how we should structure our government, who should have a say, and who should not have a say.”

This study proposes that Christian Nationalist ideology inclines Americans towards authoritarian forms of social control, white ethno-nationalism, support for strongman leaders, sexual and gender traditionalism, and racial and ethnic resentment. In addition to these factors, there has been a recent targeting of the Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in far right conservative news platforms, transparently referring to his Jewish identity (Berman, 2023). This study expects to find that Christian nationalism, along with Zelenskyy’s identity as Jewish and the possible anti-Semitism urging anti-Ukrainian sentiment, are a cause of the support for Putin, which in turn leads to support for Russia in the war. Thus, the cause of the conservative support for Russia is solely based on ideological affinity for the policies and characteristics expressed by its leader, rather than being based on whether the invasion can be justified as a foreign policy action.

This study hypothesized that higher scores in Christian Nationalism and anti-Semitism would correlate with more favorable attitudes towards Putin (H1, H2), less favorable attitudes towards Zelenskyy (H3, H4), and greater support for Russia over Ukraine in the conflict (H5, H6, H7, H8). There

were also hypothesized mediated effects: CN and AS would influence support for Russia indirectly through attitudes towards Putin and Zelenskyy (H9, H10, H11, H12).

As there are no existing surveys that could be used for the specific goal of this study, a new survey was constructed with a combination of original questions, as well as previously validated scales for testing the various factors under investigation, namely authoritarianism, Christian Nationalism, anti-Semitism, racial resentment, and attitudes towards Putin, Zelenskyy and the war in Ukraine.

Prior to survey distribution, the study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Schreiber High School to ensure the safety of participants and the researcher. The entirety of the respondents were over the age of 18 and required to consent to take the survey after reading a brief survey description.

The survey was distributed across the United States using the research firm Bovitz. The survey took an estimated minimum of 5 minutes to an estimated maximum of 13 minutes to complete. In order to appropriately test the trends expected to be observed from the respondents, the survey utilized a quota sample of Republicans, Democrats, and “true” Independents, equal numbers of men and women, along with a quota to match population values on educational attainment, to mirror a national probability sample.

Following the completion of data collection, the results of the survey were analyzed using the statistical package Stata to determine if the hypotheses were confirmed.

Upon analysis of the results, Hypotheses 1-12 can all be corroborated, as significant relationships were discovered between each of the respective variables. The mediated relationships were tested and confirmed in H9-H12, and the impact of anti-Semitism and Christian Nationalism on attitudes toward Putin, Zelensky and the war were tested and confirmed in H1-H8. These four mediational models (H9-H12) demonstrate that a statistically significant portion of the impact of anti-Semitism and Christian Nationalism on attitudes toward the war (i.e., favoring Russia) run through – i.e., are “mediated” by – attitudes toward Putin and Zelenskyy. Attitudes toward the leaders, in turn, influence one’s position on the war.

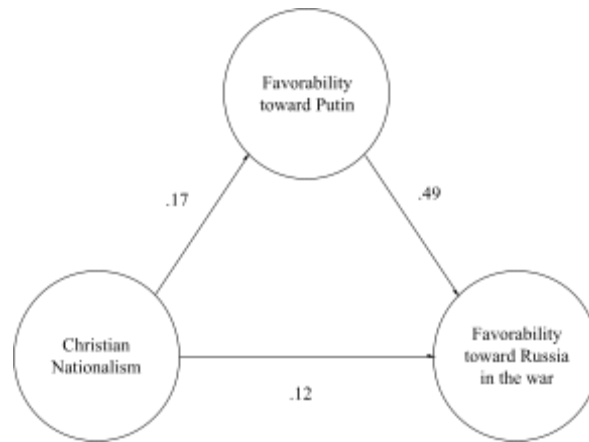


Figure 1. Putin as Mediator of the Effect of CN on Support for Russia in the War.

Figure 1 shows the direct effects of (a) CN on attitudes toward Putin (.17); (b) attitudes toward Putin on favoring Russia in the war (.49), and; (c) CN on favoring Russia in the war (.12). All three effects are statistically significant ($p < .05$). The statistical model that produced these coefficients also provides a statistical test for the indirect effect of CN on favoring Russia in the war through attitudes toward Putin. That indirect effect is .08, or 8% ($p < .001$). The total effect of CN on favoring Russia in the war is .20. This is a function of two independent effects: a direct effect of CN on favoring Russia in the war (.12, $p < .05$) and an indirect effect of CN on favoring Russia in the war (.08, $p < .05$). The latter (indirect) effect is not shown in the figure, but is provided by the statistical model.

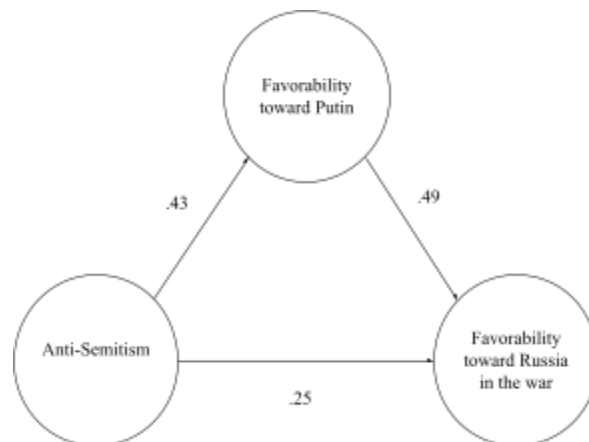


Figure 2. Putin as Mediator of the Effect of AS on Support for Russia in the War

Figure 2 shows the direct effects of (a) AS on attitudes toward Putin (.43); (b) attitudes toward Putin on favoring Russia in the war (.49), and; (c) AS on favoring Russia in the war (.25). All three effects are statistically significant ($p < .05$). The statistical model that produced these coefficients also provides a statistical test for the indirect effect of AS on favoring Russia in the war through attitudes toward Putin. That indirect effect is .21, or 21% ($p < .001$). The total effect of AS on favoring Russia in the war is .46. This is a function of two independent effects: a direct effect of AS on favoring Russia in the war (.25, $p < .05$) and an indirect effect of AS on favoring Russia in the war (.21, $p < .05$). The latter (indirect) effect is not shown in the figure, but is provided by the statistical model.

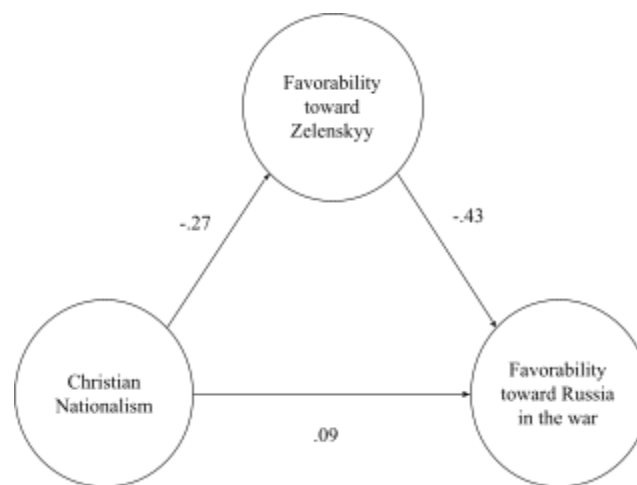


Figure 3. Zelenskyy as Mediator of the Effect of CN on Support for Russia in the War.

Figure 3 shows the direct effects of (a) CN on attitudes toward Zelenskyy (-.27); (b) attitudes toward Zelenskyy on favoring Russia in the war (-.43), and; (c) CN on favoring Russia in the war (.09). All three effects are statistically significant ($p < .05$). The statistical model that produced these coefficients also provides a statistical test for the indirect effect of CN on favoring Russia in the war through attitudes toward Zelenskyy. That indirect effect is .12, or 12% ($p < .001$). The total effect of CN on favoring Russia

in the war is .21. This is a function of two independent effects: a direct effect of CN on favoring Russia in the war (.09, $p < .05$) and an indirect effect of CN on favoring Russia in the war (.12, $p < .05$). The latter (indirect) effect is not shown in the figure, but is provided by the statistical model.

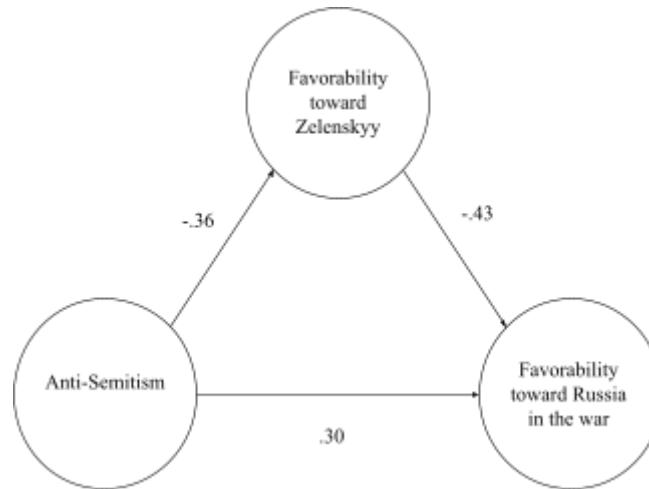


Figure 4. Zelenskyy as Mediator of the Effect of AS on Support for Russia in the War

Figure 4 shows the direct effects of (a) AS on attitudes toward Zelenskyy ($-.36$); (b) attitudes toward Zelenskyy on favoring Russia in the war ($-.43$), and; (c) AS on favoring Russia in the war ($.30$). All three effects are statistically significant ($ps < .05$). The statistical model that produced these coefficients also provides a statistical test for the indirect effect of AS on favoring Russia in the war through attitudes toward Zelenskyy. That indirect effect is .15, or 15% ($p < .001$). The total effect of AS on favoring Russia in the war is .45. This is a function of two independent effects: a direct effect of AS on favoring Russia in the war ($.30$, $p < .05$) and an indirect effect of AS on favoring Russia in the war (.15, $p < .05$). The latter (indirect) effect is not shown in the figure, but is provided by the statistical model.

Thus, attitudes toward Putin and Zelenskyy directly flow from AS and CN, and attitudes toward the leaders connect AS and CN on one hand, with attitudes toward the war on the other. For example, those who score high in AS have more favorable attitudes toward Putin than those who score low on AS. In turn, those who like Putin have more favorable attitudes toward Russia in the war than those who have less favorable attitudes toward Russia in the war. However, not all of the impact of AS and CN on attitudes toward the war are mediated by the two leaders; that is, not all of the effects of AS and CN on war attitudes are “indirect.” As the figures show, there remains a direct effect of both AS and CN on attitudes toward the war, with those who score higher on both variables (AS and CN) directly influencing attitudes toward the war (H5-H6).

Why is it likely that the causal models in figures 1-4 are modeled such that Christian Nationalism and anti-Semitism are exogenous (i.e., causes)? Given that this is only one way of ordering the variables, it is important to justify the exogeneity of these two stable psychological dispositions (i.e., anti-Semitism and Christian Nationalism). Logically, as anti-Semitism and Christian Nationalism are both deeply ingrained orientations, they are likely to precede the formation of attitudes toward specific people, such as political leaders (i.e., Putin and Zelenskyy). Thus, CN and AS should be exogenous to attitudes toward Putin and Zelenskyy. Next, Americans do not generally have crystallized views of foreign conflicts in faraway places (Aldrich, Sullivan & Borgida, 1989). Therefore, it would seem easier for people to form opinions toward the countries’ leaders – in this case, Putin and Zelenskyy. Putin, for example, has been on the radar screen of Americans since, at least, the time of Donald Trump’s election in 2016. In sum, attitudes toward the leaders should be informed by the stable psychological dispositions (CN and AS), and attitudes toward the war – favoring Russia or Ukraine – should follow directly from attitudes toward the countries’ leaders.

Each of the ideological variables measured are, to some degree, related to Christian Nationalism and anti-Semitism. The failure to include them could mean that the effects found for CN and AS are inflated, as they would be carried not just by CN and AS but by everything they are correlated with. The objective of this study was to rid the measured effect of CN and AS of the influences of these ideological

variables, in order to discover the unique effect of these two orientations. All of these other ideological variables were included in the model, and thus had every chance of having a greater relationship with attitudes towards the war and the two countries' respective leaders, but the effect of CN and AS held up. CN and AS held up even as party ID was included, which is interesting considering the strong relationship previous literature has outlined between party ID and Christian Nationalism.