

Theodicy and Crisis: Explaining Variation in U.S. Believers' Faith Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Based on a national survey of U.S. adults conducted six weeks into the COVID-19 pandemic, this article investigates how crisis affects religious faith. Almost no Americans reported losing or a weakening of faith in response to the pandemic at this time. By contrast, nearly one-third of believers indicated that the coronavirus outbreak had strengthened their faith. We theoretically develop and empirically test three religious factors—theodicy, practices, and tradition—to explain variation in the strengthening effect of the COVID-19 pandemic among believers. Results from statistical models show that two theodicy interpretations—believing that God: is using the pandemic as a way to tell humanity to change; and will personally protect you from the virus—significantly increased believers' reports of faith strengthening, controlling for other factors. We also found that Black Protestants were more likely to report these interpretations, which in turn strengthened their faith in response to the pandemic.

Key words: theodicy; crisis; faith; pandemic; COVID-19.

INTRODUCTION

Religious ideas have played an important role in shaping how people interpret, explain, and endure disease and disaster: “Why is this happening? Why is it happening to me and not to them (or vice-versa)? What does it mean?” These questions, and some answers to them, form part of many foundational

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texts and scriptures (Iliad Book 1; Num. 21, Deut. 28.21–24, 27–28; Qur'an 2.155).

Two broad competing potentials emerge already from interpretations of the Book of Job in the Hebrew Bible, and remain relevant today: If suffering can be justified or assigned meaning within a religious system, faith can be maintained or even strengthened. If not, faith may be questioned, weakened, or lost. Numerous historical cases demonstrate the complex cultural work that goes into the creation of frameworks of explanation or justification in the face of pandemics and the effects of that work on faith. Medieval observers such as [Giovanni Boccaccio \(1972\)](#) reported divergent responses to the fourteenth-century bubonic plague that killed approximately one-third of Europe's population within only 2 years. Responses ranged from hedonism to intensified piety, with the latter clearly prevailing at a societal level, if we judge from the ongoing efflorescence of religious movements in the following decades.

The COVID-19 period we live in is also one of deep uncertainty and crisis, providing us with a timely opportunity to examine the impact of calamity on religious faith. How, if at all, has the COVID-19 pandemic affected religious faith in the United States? Based on a national survey of over 1,000 U.S. adults conducted between April 30 and May 4, 2020, we find that less than 1% of Americans lost their belief in God because of the pandemic. Moreover, among persistent believers, not even 1% reported a weakening of faith. By contrast, nearly a third of believers reported that the pandemic *strengthened* their religious faith. What, then, explains why the COVID-19 pandemic bolstered the faith of certain U.S. believers but not others?

Combining insights from classical sociological texts on theodicy and the psychology of religion on religious coping, we develop theoretical arguments for how four types of theodic framings of the coronavirus outbreak affect the faith response to it and theorize the ways in which different religious traditions and prepandemic religious practices influence pandemic-relevant theodicies. We test our theoretical arguments empirically with survey data from American adults collected 6 weeks into the COVID-19 pandemic. Polarization in press coverage suggests that even at this early date the pandemic was being politicized ([Hart, Chinn, and Soroka 2020](#)). [Perry et al. \(2020a\)](#) argue that Christian nationalism—"a fusion of identitarian Christian identity and cultural conservatism with American civic belonging" ([Perry, Whitehead, and Grubbs 2020b](#): 3)—was working to conscript the COVID-19 pandemic into the culture wars. This political context likely shaped to some degree Americans' theodic responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Theodicy

The term theodicy refers to believers' attempts to understand and sometimes justify why something is happening in terms of the action or inaction of gods or God. These explanations can help preserve or even strengthen religious faith in the face of disease and disaster. King Edward III of England exemplified one form of that logic when in 1348, in the midst of the bubonic plague striking Asia, Africa, and Europe he declared that "Those whom [God] loves he censures

and chastises; that is, he punishes their shameful deeds in various ways during this mortal life so that they might not be condemned eternally” (Horrox 1994: 113–4). Insofar as believers accept that disease is deserved punishment or correction for the behavior of the afflicted, so that they might yet be saved in the afterlife, they may find it easier to understand a pandemic as the action of a just or even loving God.

A stuffed library of classics in the social sciences argue that crisis can heighten religious faith and suggest reasons why that is so. Bronisław Malinowski (1992 [1948]), for instance, found that uncertainty and risk tend to intensify belief in the supernatural, while E. E. Evans-Pritchard’s (1976) showed how witchcraft beliefs thrived in relation to tragedy because they helped stitch together existential questions about why obvious adverse events happened just *then*, and to just *that* person. The more anomalous the suffering, the more the need for religious sources to suture together empirical cause-effect accounts with “higher-purpose” reasons. For Sigmund Freud (2010 [1927]), the worse one’s situation, the more religion is used to “compensate.” More recently, Clifford Geertz (1993) argued that chaos and suffering produce crises of meaning that drive the organization of disparate beliefs and practices into more systematic forms. “Religion,” then, does not just provide explanations to suffering, but gives one affective cues and scripts (“structure”) on *how* to suffer.

In the sociological canon, Max Weber (1966 [1922]) identified two broad families of theodicies: a “theodicy of suffering” in which people turn to religion to explain perplexing situations (why “bad things” happen to “good people”) and a theodicy of “good fortune,” focused on explaining why certain individuals or category of people are blessed with riches, health, or other forms of successes and fortune (Weber 1992). For our purposes, Weber’s (1966 [1922]) most important contribution was his observation that the “problem of theodicy” is greatest in religious systems adopting a transcendental, unitary, and universal god, since it becomes difficult to reconcile “the extraordinary power of such a god [...] with the imperfection of the world” (139). For this reason, Peter Berger (1967) noted that theodicy poses a special problem in Christianity, with the potential to rip apart the “sacred canopy.” Despite its centrality in theology (e.g., see Hick 2010) and in classical social scientific theories of religion, contemporary research in the sociology of religion—particularly quantitative work—has paid scant attention to theodicy. Over the last two decades, however, psychologists of religion have made ample use of “religious coping,” theodicy’s conceptual cousin, defined as “ways of understanding and dealing with negative life events that are related to the sacred” (Pargament and Raiya 2007: 23). Because religious coping frames tragedies in terms of divine action, it directly relates to and is relevant for discussions about theodicy. Importantly for our purposes, numerous studies on different types of crises show that reliance on religious coping strengthens religious faith (e.g., see Pargament et al. 2004; Smith et al. 2000).

Theodicy can however fail to provide satisfactory explanations for suffering, in which case religious faith may be weakened in the face of tragedy. Over the course

of the Shoah, for example, many Jewish theologians and believers alike rejected the possibility of a theodicy capable of justifying the mass murder of European Jewry (e.g., see Braiterman 1998; Katz, Biderman, and Greenberg 2007). In his study of Holocaust survivors, Brenner (1992) observed that nearly 40% of Jews who were observant before the Nazi genocide became nonobservant afterward (only 4% became observant for the first time after). In their study of religious coping in response to massive flooding, Smith et al. (2000) found that discontent with God about the disaster significantly reduced residents' "spiritual growth" in the short-term.

What specific theodicies and religious coping mechanisms, then, could individuals draw on to make sense of the COVID-19 pandemic?¹ We identify four distinct theodic interpretations, two of which we predict will have a strengthening effect on faith, another that could potentially do so, and a fourth one that should undermine this effect.

The first type of theodicy is the belief that God is using the current pandemic to push forward personal and social improvement, and inspire spiritual growth. In the words of a middle-aged respondent from a Pew Research Center report, "God is telling us that we need to change our ways or he will send a virus that will make us be alone so that we have time to think about how we live our lives."² This view is consistent with Pargament and colleagues' (Pargament, Koenig, and Perez 2000; Pargament et al. 2004) "benevolent religious reappraisal" construct. Studies show that the higher people score on this construct, the greater their spiritual growth in reaction to trauma (Pargament et al. 2004). Likewise, we expect that respondents who perceive the COVID-19 pandemic as God's invitation for humanity to reflect on our values and change our lifestyles will report a strengthening of faith.

The second type of theodicy is the view that God will protect believers from the virus. A powerful example of this view is the response of a churchgoer in Ohio to a reporter asking if she was afraid to contract COVID-19 or infect others: "...No [...]. I'm covered in Jesus's blood! [Other people] could get me sick but they're not because I'm covered in His blood."³ Here, belief in God serves as a reassurance that one is immune to disease, a belief synthesized in the "Jesus is my vaccine" motto seen and heard at several anti-lockdown protests in the United States.⁴ This belief was echoed in a number of conservative congregations (e.g.,

¹Research on the importance of religious coping for well-being and related health outcomes during the COVID-19 pandemic is emerging. Examples include Counted et al.'s (forthcoming) study of residents of Columbia and South Africa who were subject to lockdown orders and Pirutinsky et al.'s (2020) study of American Orthodox Jews during the initial peak of the coronavirus in the United States.

²<https://www.pewforum.org/essay/what-lessons-do-americans-see-for-humanity-in-the-pandemic/> (accessed January 23, 2021).

³<https://www.cnn.com/videos/us/2020/04/04/ohio-church-service-covid-19-pandemic-tuchman-pkg-ac360-vpx.cnn> (accessed January 23, 2021).

⁴See also the music video of Paddy Goodwin's song "Jesus Is My Vaccine." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=MthVGsrxhM> (accessed January 23, 2021).

see Zhao 2020), likely reflecting the linkage between Christian nationalism and the coronavirus outbreak (Perry, Whitehead, and Grubbs 2020a). Such beliefs may also help to explain why more religious states had increased population mobility early in the COVID-19 pandemic (Hill, Gonzalez, and Burdette 2020). The theodicy response that God will shield believers from coronavirus also relates to both “active religious surrender” and “passive religious deferral” in the religious coping scholarship (Pargament et al. 2004), known to increase the likelihood of people reporting spiritual growth during crisis. We therefore expect this type of theodicy to bolster the religious faith of those embracing it during the pandemic.

A third type we consider is the understanding of disease or disaster as divine punishment for human sinfulness, or what Pargament et al. (2000) termed “retributive reappraisal.” Some studies observe that believing that tragedy is God’s way of punishing humans for sin is not a significant predictor of spiritual growth in response to crisis (e.g., see Pargament et al. 2004; Smith et al. 2000). Still other research finds that African American Protestants are the most likely to report that God punishes them for their sins or lack of spirituality, and yet, across a range of measures, they tend to be the most religious relative to other groups (Shelton and Emerson 2012). It is possible that Americans who accept that the COVID-19 pandemic is deserved punishment or correction for sinful behavior will be more likely to understand the pandemic as the action of a just and even loving God. If so, this theodicy interpretation should strengthen their religious faith, since they are reassured that the coronavirus outbreak is part of a divine plan.

Not all theodicies justify events in terms of God’s actions, however. The fourth type of theodicy we consider is one that stresses God’s inaction, neglect, or even absence. Psychologists of religion have studied spiritual discontent—“expressing confusion and dissatisfaction with God’s relationship to the individual in the stressful situation” (Pargament, Koenig, and Perez 2000: 523), and found that they generally reduce the likelihood of faith strengthening in the face of tragedy. Given the high number of COVID-19 deaths and related suffering, economic hardship, social isolation and mental health crises, we expect some people to believe that God has abandoned humanity. For those who do, we predict a negative effect on faith strengthening in response to the coronavirus outbreak.

Religious Practices

People bring different habits and histories of religious practice to their experience of crisis. Some are highly engaged in religious communities and devotional rituals, attending services weekly or praying daily, for instance, while others participate seldom or not at all. Nooney and Woodrum (2002) found that the more often people from a nationally representative sample attended religious services or prayed, the more likely they were to reach for religious coping methods in times of crisis. Pargament (1997) argued this is the case because religious coping is more readily available and familiar to people who are religiously active prior to the crisis. Another study of patients undergoing major cardiac surgery showed that a composite measure of generic religiosity significantly increased patients’ reliance

on (“positive”) religious coping measures such as “benevolent reframing,” but not on (“negative”) ones such as “retributive reappraisal” (Ai et al. 2007). We posit that individuals’ greater levels of prepandemic participation in religious practices will increase the probability that they interpret the COVID-19 pandemic as God’s way of telling humanity to change (Type 1) and that God will personally protect them from the virus (Type 2). Given the theoretical arguments we outlined in the previous section, these views about God should then be important conduits for how prior religious service attendance and prayer deepen faith in response to the current pandemic. By contrast, and in line with the Ai et al.’s (2007) study, we do not expect interpreting the coronavirus outbreak as God’s abandonment of humanity (Type 4) to be significantly related to religious behaviors before the pandemic.

The potential effect of prior religious practices on the theododic framing that the current pandemic is divine retribution for human sinfulness (Type 3) is more complicated. While contemporary psychologists of religion associate such religious coping methods with a weakening of faith in times of crises (e.g., see Pargament, Koenig, and Perez 2000; Pargament et al. 2004), it could in fact strengthen faith, as we discussed above. We thus lack a clear prediction about how religious service attendance and prayer in 2019 will shape people’s view of divine punishment for the current crisis.

To what extent will the impact of prior religious practices on faith strengthening be attributable to respondents’ theodicies or religious coping styles? When these are not accounted for in statistical models, the scholarship on religion and well-being tends to observe positive effects for generic religious practices (but see Hastings and Roeser 2020 for a more complicated picture about how these practices moderate the effect of unemployment on happiness). The inclusion of religious coping, however, generally renders these effects insignificant. In other words, the explanatory power of religious practices is indirect, channeled through religious coping. Indeed, in their study of people living in flood-affected communities Smith et al. (2000) found that disaster-specific religious coping completely mediated the relationship between prior religious practices and the faith response to the flood (see also Pargament et al. 1999).

Differentiating religious service attendance from private prayer and bringing in congregation-based social support is more analytically useful for our purposes. Previous scholarship has shown that while the impact of prayer on well-being operated entirely through religious coping, religious service attendance also boosted subjective well-being by promoting the perception that respondents’ congregations would provide support to them during crisis (Lim and Putnam 2010; Nooney and Woodrum 2002). We know that congregation-based social networks heighten religious beliefs (e.g., see Stroope 2012); we also know that a positive relationship between religious service attendance and coreligionist ties exists. Since we assume that people who attended religious services more frequently before the coronavirus outbreak would have had a more developed and tighter web of social ties with their coreligionists than those who attended infrequently or

never, we predict that prior religious service attendance will strengthen faith in response to the current pandemic, net of theodicy. By contrast, we expect the strengthening effect of prayer to be reducible to theodicy, since this private form of religious practice is unrelated to religious social networks.

Religious Tradition

Religious tradition is the final religious factor we consider to explain variation in faith responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. While the psychology of religion's scholarship on religious coping and trauma does not generally pay attention to religious tradition—even as a control variable (but see [Nooney and Woodrum 2002](#) for a measure of fundamentalism)—we know from a rich literature in the sociology of religion that it matters whether respondents are Catholic, evangelical or mainline Protestant, or affiliated with a Black Protestant group (e.g., see [Steensland et al. 2000](#)).

Sociological research found that the 9/11 attacks had mixed effects on the religiosity and spirituality of members of different religious traditions ([Uecker 2008](#)). Young adults raised as evangelical or Black Protestants, for instance, generally reported lower levels of spiritual importance in their lives in the months following the 9/11 attacks relative to before them, while none of the effects for those who grew up as mainline Protestants reached significance at conventional levels. By contrast, young adults reared in Catholic households reported significantly higher levels of both religious salience and prayer in the month following the attacks, but not over a longer period.

Building on that study, we focus on how religious tradition affects prepandemic religious practices as well as theododic interpretations or religious coping styles. Our approach, then, links religious traditions to established mechanisms of religious and spiritual growth. We know that during normal times, the frequency at which people pray and attend in-person religious services varies among members of different religious traditions. In general, Catholics and mainline Protestants are less likely to engage in these religious practices than are evangelical and Black Protestants (e.g., see [Shelton and Emerson 2012](#); [Stroope 2012](#)). We also know that higher levels of religious service attendance and prayer heighten faith during catastrophes by promoting theododic interpretations or forms of religious coping ([Ai et al. 2007](#); [Nooney and Woodrum 2002](#); [Pargament et al. 1999](#); [Smith et al. 2000](#)) and that the positive effect of religious service attendance on well-being is due to congregation-based social networks ([Krause et al. 2001](#); [Lim 2008](#); [Nooney and Woodrum 2002](#)). We therefore predict greater rates of faith deepening in response to the coronavirus outbreak for evangelical and Black Protestants relative to Catholics and mainline Protestants given their higher prepandemic levels of religious service attendance and prayer.

We also expect differences in theododic framings between Black Protestants and members of other religious traditions to have an effect on their faith response to the current crisis. Relative to their white counterparts, [Shelton and Emerson \(2012: 230\)](#) observed that Black Protestants are more likely to believe

that they have been beneficiaries of a miracle—“an event that could not have happened without the interaction of God or a spiritual force.” Moreover, other research shows that African Americans derive more psychological benefits from religion (Schnabel 2021) and report in higher numbers entrusting their health to God and waiting for divine intervention in the case of illness (Hayward and Krause 2017). We therefore posit that Black Protestants will be more likely than Catholic and mainline Protestants to believe that God will protect them from the coronavirus. Since research also shows that evangelical Protestants are more likely to defer health concerns to God (Hayward and Krause 2017), we likewise expect members of this tradition to be more likely to believe that God will protect them from the virus.

Moreover, some scholarship suggests that Black Protestants are also more likely than are white Protestants to view God as a liberator, reflecting an important theme in African American theology (Shelton and Emerson 2012). This image of God is likely to result in a benevolent religious reappraisal of the COVID-19 pandemic, such as the view that a loving God is using it to free humanity from the evils of racism, inequality, and other social ills. To the extent that Black Protestants religiously reframe the current global health crisis in that fashion, this gives members of this religious tradition not one, but two forms of theodicy that should strengthen their faith: the first as a call for societal change (Type 1); and the second individual, by way of personal protection from the virus (Type 2).

Research also suggests that Black Protestants should differ from members of other religious traditions in the third type of theodicy we identified, “divine punishment for human sinfulness.” Shelton and Emerson (2012) found that they were more likely to report feeling God’s punishment of them as individuals for their sins or their lack of spirituality. While “retributive reappraisal” is generally theorized to have a negative impact on faith (e.g., see Pargament, Koenig, and Perez 2000, Pargament et al. 2004), we have outlined reasons why this theodicy interpretation could actually strengthen faith in response to the coronavirus outbreak. Whatever its effect, Black Protestants should be more likely than mainline Protestants and Catholic to interpret the pandemic as divine punishment. Because human sinfulness is also a dominant view among evangelical Protestants (e.g., see Grasmick et al. 1992), we do not expect differences in this reappraisal between members of this religious group and Black Protestants.

Shelton and Emerson’s (2012) research is also relevant for the fourth type of theodicy interpretation about the COVID-19 pandemic—“God abandoned humanity”—which we posit should reduce the likelihood of faith strengthening. They found that Black Protestants were no more likely to report feeling that God had abandoned them than members of other religious traditions, and they were less likely to report being angry with God. We therefore expect a null or negative relationship between Black Protestants and spiritual discontent, removing a barrier to faith strengthening in response to the current pandemic.

To summarize our theoretical expectations:

1. The theodic interpretations that “God is using the current global pandemic to push humanity to change its ways” (Type 1) and that “God protects people from the coronavirus” (Type 2) should both increase the probability of faith strengthening. For reasons we explained above, Black Protestants should be more likely to adopt these theodicies relative to members of all other religious traditions, with one exception: because of evangelical Protestants’ deferral of health concerns to God (Hayward and Krause 2017), we predict no difference between evangelical and Black Protestants regarding the belief that God will protect them from the virus. These two theodicies should therefore mediate the effect of religious tradition on COVID-19 faith strengthening.
2. We expect prepandemic religious service attendance and prayer to influence indirectly COVID-19 faith strengthening by promoting the above two theodicies (Types 1 and 2). Prepandemic religious service attendance should also have a direct effect on this strengthening through coreligionist ties, as argued above. As other research has shown that Black and evangelical Protestants have higher rates of prepandemic religious practices, we hypothesize that members of these religious traditions will have additional indirect effects on COVID-19 faith strengthening through these practices.
3. The theoretical prediction for the third type of theodicy—that the pandemic is divine punishment for human sinfulness is less clear. Some scholars consider such an interpretation as a “negative” religious coping method (Pargament, Koenig, and Perez 2000), and would posit that this type of theodicy decreases the likelihood of faith strengthening in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. We have, however, argued that there are reasons to expect the opposite finding, namely that the belief in this punishment in response to global pandemic would strengthen religious faith. Competing hypotheses therefore exist for this specific theodicy.
4. We expect the theodic framing that “God has abandoned humanity in the face of the global pandemic” (Type 4) to have a negative effect on faith strengthening.

As previously discussed, we do not predict prepandemic religious practices to increase the likelihood that respondents will adopt the third and fourth types of theodicies. By contrast, relative to members of other religious traditions, Black and evangelical Protestants should be more likely to believe in divine punishment regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, for reasons noted in the prior section.

DATA

We analyze data from the “Religious Practice in the Time of Coronavirus” module included on the April 30–May 4, 2020 AmeriSpeak Omnibus, a monthly multiclient survey that the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago conducts. Based on NORC’s probability-based panel design, the Omnibus is a nationally representative sample of U.S. households. Using NORC’s National Sample Frame, known households across the country were

randomly selected and then recruited for inclusion via mail, email, telephone, and in-person visits from field staff. The sample covers approximately 97% of American households (examples of those excluded are those who only have a P.O. address or live in newly constructed housing).

We designed the questions for the above module in collaboration with a team from NORC and the Associated Press. Adults (those 18 years or older) were randomly selected from the Omnibus and invited to complete the survey of which our module was a part, with 1,002 of them doing so (884 on the internet and 118 over the telephone).⁵ All interviews were conducted in English, so the results cannot be generalized to U.S. adults who are not fluent in this language. NORC constructed a poststratification weight to address any nonresponse among invited Omnibus panelists for our survey as well as any noncoverage or under and oversampling of demographics identified after all data were collected. The variables used in the poststratification weight are age, gender, race/ethnicity, educational level, and census region, and come from the 2018 Current Population Survey. When the survey data are weighted, they reflect the U.S. adult population as a whole.

Because so few respondents changed their prior belief about God in reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic—not even 1% stopped and only 2% started believing—we did not focus on them in the analyses that follow. Moreover, the roughly 16% of respondents who did not believe in God before and at the time of the survey were also excluded since it is not relevant to ask persistent atheists how the current pandemic affected their religious faith, nor to ask them whether, for instance, they think that God will protect them from the virus. For these reasons, we restrict the data to the nearly 80% of respondents who believed in God before and at the time of the survey.⁶ Dropping certain cases because they were missing data on at least one variable in the multivariate models, left us with a final analytical sample of 725 American adult believers.

MEASURES

Faith Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Our dependent variable is a binary measure for whether or not the coronavirus outbreak made respondents' sense of religious faith or spirituality "stronger."

⁵For probability-based internet panels, [Callegaro and DiSorga \(2008\)](#) advise—which the [American Association for Public Opinion Research \(2016: 48–9\)](#) includes in its guidelines for these panels—researchers to report the recruitment rate (RECR), the profile rate (PROR), the completion rate (COMR), and then the final cumulative response rate (CUMRR), which is the product of multiplying the three components together. For the Omnibus survey of which our module was a part, RECR = .229, PROR = .75, and COMR = .144; and thus CUMRR = .025. This rate is on par with what, for example, the [American National Election Studies](#) report for their probability-based internet panel (e.g., see [American National Election Studies 2014](#)). While it may be tempting to compare CUMRR to response rates from random digit dial (RDD) surveys, [Callegaro and DiSorga \(2008\)](#) argue against doing so given substantive differences between these types of surveys.

⁶Twenty-one respondents who self-identified as atheist or agnostic when asked about their current religious preference are also excluded.

TABLE 1 Descriptive Statistics for Dependent and Religion Variables

	Mean	SD
Faith strengthened	0.311	0.463
Religious tradition		
Evangelical Protestant	0.245	0.430
Mainline Protestant	0.291	0.455
Black Protestant	0.097	0.296
Catholic	0.246	0.431
No particular religion	0.058	0.233
Other	0.063	0.244
2019 In-person services		
Never	0.441	0.497
< Monthly	0.188	0.391
Monthly	0.125	0.331
Weekly	0.246	0.431
2019 Prayer		
Never	0.197	0.398
< Monthly	0.100	0.301
Monthly	0.150	0.358
Weekly	0.553	0.498
Theodicic framings		
God is telling humanity to change	0.637	0.481
God will protect me	0.552	0.498
Human sinfulness	0.145	0.352
God has abandoned humanity	0.068	0.252

N = 725.

While “weaker” was a response option, less than 1% of American believers selected it, so the few cases for this response were coded as zero along with those answering “remained the same.” We see in [table 1](#) that nearly one-third of believers reported that the coronavirus outbreak strengthened their religious faith or spirituality.⁷

Theodicic Framings to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Types 1, 2, and 4 were operationalized as binary variables with affirmative answers coded as one if respondents felt when “thinking about the coronavirus outbreak” that God: is telling humanity to change how we are living (Type 1); would protect them from being infected (Type 2); and has abandoned humanity (Type 4). The third type of theodicy is also measured with a binary variable,

⁷A Pew Research Center survey conducted from April 20 to 26, 2020 found roughly the same percentage of believers who reported a strengthening faith in response to the coronavirus outbreak (<https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/worship-topline.pdf>).

coded as one if respondents selected the response that “human sinfulness is a cause of the current coronavirus situation in the U.S.”

Religious Practices

We include measures for attending in-person religious services and praying in private (outside of a congregation) in 2019. Four mutually exclusive dichotomous variables ranging from never (the base category in the statistical models) to weekly or more are included for prepandemic measures.

Religious Tradition

The survey did not include a question about specific denominational affiliations for Protestants and non-Catholic Christians, and thus constructing measures for RELTRAD (Steensland et al. 2000) was not possible. That said, Smith et al. (2018) have recently shown that in combination with respondents’ race, general religious preference and self-identification as a “born-again or evangelical Christian” serves an “effective proxy” for capturing evangelical, mainline, and Black Protestants when denominational measures are unavailable given the substantial overlap between this approach and RELTRAD.⁸ Among non-Black respondents who said their present religion was either “Protestant” or “Just Christian” (“Catholic” was also an option), those who self-identified as a “born-again or evangelical Christian” were coded as evangelical Protestant, while we coded those who did not as mainline Protestant. African American respondents who selected one of the same two choices from the general religious preference question were coded as Black Protestant.⁹ Separate binary variables were also created for Catholics, other religious traditions (Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, etc.), and “nothing in particular.” Because of the small number of each of the non-Christian groups, we could not analyze them separately. The variable for other religious traditions is included in the

⁸Smith et al. (2018) found over 80% of white respondents who self-identified as a “born-again or evangelical Christian” and over 70% of those who did not were classified as evangelical Protestant and mainline Protestant, respectively, in the RELTRAD scheme. Among Black respondents who self-identified as Protestants in general, nearly 75% fell into one of RELTRAD’s historically Black Protestant denominations. Moreover, the self-identification approach for evangelical, mainline, and Black Protestants showed very high correspondence for demographic, political, and religious characteristics to that of RELTRAD for these groups.

⁹Revisiting the Black Protestant tradition from the original RELTRAD scheme (Steensland et al. 2000), Woodberry et al. (2012) discuss the issue of collinearity in regard to entering this variable and African American racial identity in the same statistical model, noting that this should not be a problem in surveys with a large number of cases. Our sample size of 725 Americans who believed in God before and after the COVID-19 pandemic is relatively small. Based on Smith et al.’s (2018) approach, we have a total of 82 Black Protestants. The numbers for African Americans who are not coded as Black Protestant are very small (13 Catholics; 8 non-Christian religions; 7 nothing in particular; and 1 Unitarian Universalist). Given the substantial overlap between the Black Protestant measure and African American racial identity measure, entering both of them in same statistical model generates VIF values that considerably exceed acceptable cutoff levels (Allison 1999: 89).

statistical models so direct comparisons among Catholics, no particular religion, and Black, evangelical, and mainline Protestants can be made. The heterogeneity of the other religious tradition variable renders it substantively meaningless, so effects for this variable are neither reported nor interpreted.

Control Variables

We include numerous variables to minimize confounding effects. The first is a binary variable coded as one if respondents or close friends/relatives had received a coronavirus diagnosis from a healthcare provider, and zero if not. Because of the strong connection between politics and religion in the United States, not controlling for political party or ideology leaves open the possibility that they could explain any significant effects we observe for theodicy, religious practice, or religious tradition. This could take two forms. The first is a spurious effect in which political party or ideology is an antecedent variable, affecting both religion and COVID-19 faith strengthening. The second scenario is that political party or ideology acts as an intervening variable, mediating the relationship between religion and faith strengthening. Controlling for political party and ideology is thus essential. Four mutually exclusive dichotomous political party variables are included: Democrat, Republican (reference category in the statistical models), Independent, and other. We measure political ideology with these three mutually exclusive binary variables: liberal, moderate, and conservative (the base category). Four mutually exclusive dichotomous variables ranging from “never” to “weekly” for streaming online religious services in 2019 are also entered into the multivariate models to disentangle these services from our two substantively important prepandemic religious activity measures—in-person religious service attendance and private prayer. Turning to demographics, binary variables for sex (1 = female), race/ethnicity (1 = Latinx),¹⁰ marital status (1 = married), employment status (1 = working), geographic location (1 = live in a Southern state), urban dwelling (1 = live in metropolitan area), and people under 18 living in the household (1 = children present) are included. In addition, the statistical models that follow enter three mutually exclusive binary variables for education, with “no college education” serving as the base category. Household income was an eighteen-point interval variable, ranging from less than \$5,000 to \$200,000 or more. We measure age with a continuous variable (min of 19 and max of 86). See [table A1](#) for descriptive statistics for all control variables used in the analysis.

Analytical Approach

Given the binary nature of our dependent variable, we estimate a series of nested logistic regression models that match our theoretical arguments, which contain mediating relationships as previously explained and summarized. The

¹⁰This variable is based on the racial and ethnic identity question and the reference category consists of respondents who selected white, Black, Asian, or another non-Latinx race or ethnicity.

first model regresses faith strengthening in response to the COVID-19 pandemic on religious tradition and control variables only. Next, we add the measures for prepandemic religious practices. Our final model introduces the theodicy framing measures.¹¹ To facilitate interpretation, we use the natural metric of the dependent variable, calculating predicted probabilities from the logistic regression models (Long 1997). The `coefplot` command in Stata (Jann 2014) is used to display visually average marginal effects for a discrete change in the religious factors since they are all binary variables. Because intervening relationships were theorized, we also conducted formal mediation analysis for them using the `KHB` command in Stata (Kohler, Karlson, and Holm 2011) to decompose total, direct, and indirect effects (e.g., see Breen, Karlson, and Holm 2013) across model specifications.

Unlike univariate and bivariate statistics, questions remain about whether multivariate models should use unweighted or weighted estimation and how best to decide (Bollen et al. 2016, see also Gelman 2007; Kott 2007). Based on the test that DuMouchel and Duncan (1983) and Winship and Radbill (1994) recommend, support was not found for using unweighted data in these models. That is, enough difference (bias) across estimates was detected for the unweighted estimates. Using weighted data protect against biased inference that this test detected. In addition, the weights did not add significant imprecision to estimates as evidenced by similar standard error sizes and similar results for hypothesis tests. For these reasons, all analyses that follow apply the survey weight, previously described.¹²

RESULTS

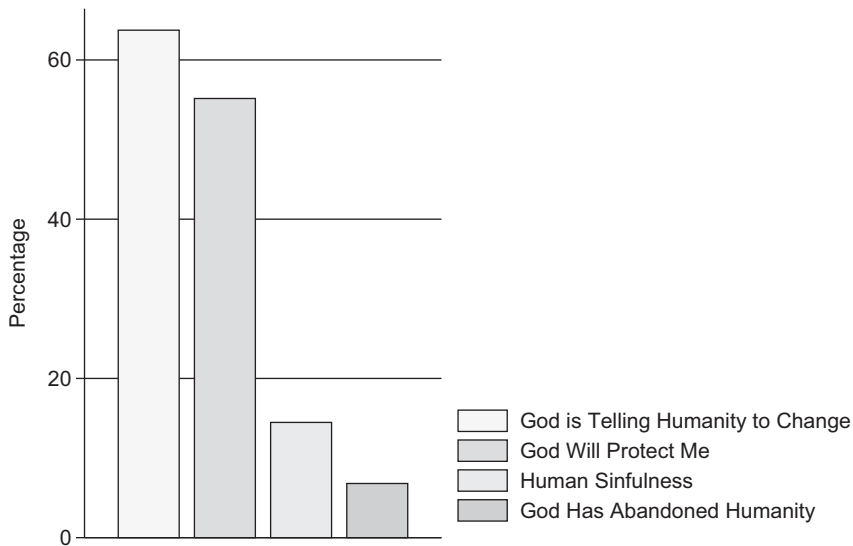
As figure 1 shows, we see considerable variation in the four different types of theodicy interpretations of the COVID-19 pandemic. Nearly two of every three American believers reported that the pandemic was God's way of telling humanity to change how we live. At 54%, over half felt that God would personally protect them from the coronavirus. By contrast, only 7% of U.S. believers interpreted the current pandemic as God abandoning humanity. Twice as many believers—at 14%—viewed human sinfulness as the cause of the COVID-19 pandemic.

To what extent do the various theodicy measures differentiate American believers who reported a strengthening of faith in response to the coronavirus outbreak from those who did not? And do the other religion variables—practices and tradition—relate to these measures as expected, in turn influencing the faith

¹¹The mean variance inflation factor (VIF) among the independent variables was 1.5 and all but one VIF was under the 2.5 threshold, indicating that collinearity was not a cause of concern (Allison 1999: 89). At 2.6, the VIF for praying weekly in 2019 was just above this threshold.

¹²For helpful comments on this matter, we thank Sharon Christ.

FIGURE 1. Theodic Interpretations of the COVID-19 Pandemic among U.S. Believers.



reaction to the pandemic? We turn to our statistical models to answer these questions.

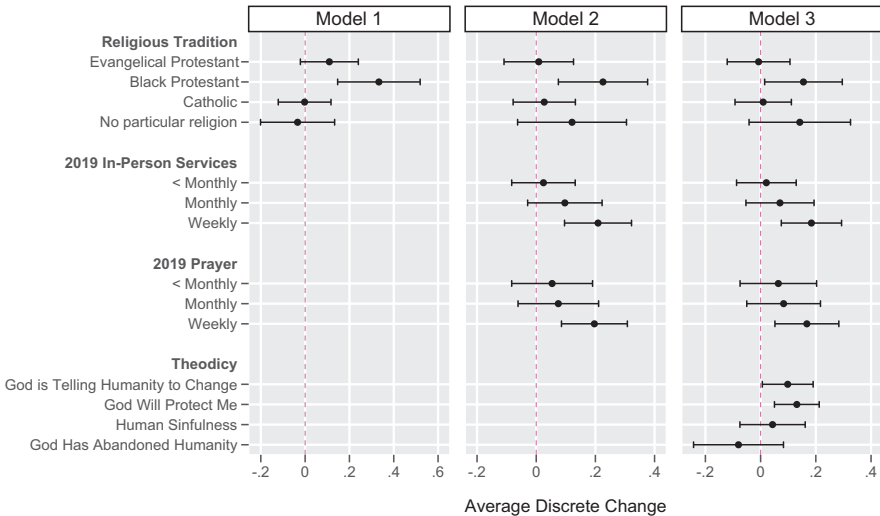
Figure 2 presents average marginal effects for faith strengthening in response to the COVID-19 pandemic derived from logistic regression models. In Model 1, including only demographic, political, and a COVID-19 diagnosis (either respondent or close friend/relative) variables, we see that Black Protestants are significantly more likely to report a strengthening of faith relative to mainline Protestants. This is the case as well relative to Catholics, evangelical Protestants, and those with no particular religion (results not shown, available upon request from the authors). On average, Black Protestants increase the probability of faith strengthening in response to the coronavirus outbreak by .33 ($p < .001$) compared with their mainline counterparts.

Model 2 shows that the “weekly” response for both pre-pandemic religious practices (in-person attendance and private prayer) significantly increases the likelihood of faith strengthening in response to the COVID-19 crisis compared to the “never” option, net of other factors.¹³ Regarding the magnitude of the effects: on average, attending religious services in person and praying privately weekly in 2019 increase the probability of faith strengthening by .21 ($p < .001$) and .20 ($p < .001$), respectively, relative to never engaging in these practices before the current crisis.¹⁴

¹³For Model 1, the AIC = 865.188 and the BIC = 975.256, while these fit statistics for Model 2 are 784.292 and 935.636, respectively. The smaller AIC and BIC measures for Model 2 indicate support for it over the first one.

¹⁴In results not shown, we also observe significant effects for the contrast between weekly and less than monthly for both religious practices.

FIGURE 2. Marginal Effects for Probability of COVID-19 Faith Strengthening among U.S. Believers.



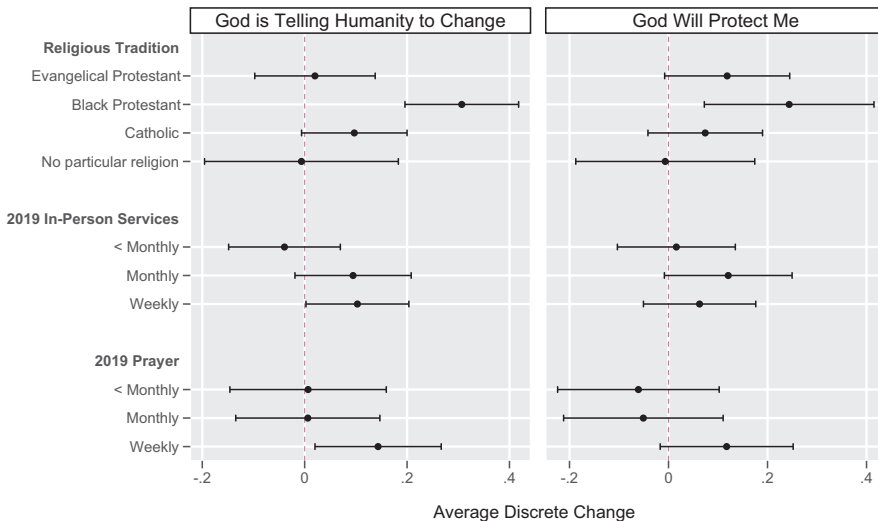
Note: $N = 725$; 95% confidence intervals; all models control for a COVID-19 diagnosis, 2019 online religious services, political party and ideology, and demographics (see [supplementary table S1](#) for results for these control variables).

The inclusion of the pre-pandemic religious practices somewhat reduces the strength of the Black Protestant finding as its marginal effect falls from .33 in the first model to .23 in the second one. Formal mediation analysis shows that 12% of this religious tradition's total effect on COVID-19 faith strengthening in Model 2 is due to weekly in-person religious service attendance and private prayer before the pandemic, with in-person religious service attendance contributing considerably more to the total effect. Even with the addition of pre-pandemic religious practices, however, Black Protestants are still significantly more likely to report a strengthening of faith in response to COVID-19 compared with mainline Protestants. In results not shown, the significant strengthening effect for Black Protestants in Model 2 also remains relative to evangelical Protestants and Catholics, but not to those with no particular religion.

The final model adds the four theodicy framing measures.¹⁵ Two of them are significant predictors: believing that God is using the COVID-19 pandemic to tell humanity to change how we are living (Type 1) and offering personal protection from the coronavirus (Type 2). Both of them, as expected, have strengthening effects on faith. On average, interpreting the current pandemic as a sign from God for humanity to change increases the probability of faith strengthening by .10 ($p < .05$) relative to not interpreting the crisis in this way.

¹⁵See [supplementary table S1](#) for results for the control variables; for Model 3, the AIC = 762.081 and the BIC = 931.769, indicating support for it relative to its predecessor.

FIGURE 3. Marginal Effects for Probability of Theodicic Interpretations of the COVID-19 Pandemic among U.S. Believers.



Note: $N = 725$; 95% confidence intervals; all models control for a COVID-19 diagnosis, 2019 online religious services, political party and ideology, and demographics.

The probability for believing that God will protect you from the coronavirus is .13 ($p < .01$).

The inclusion of the theodicy measures further reduces the magnitude of the faith strengthening effect for Black Protestants, though it remains significant relative to mainline Protestants (and to evangelical Protestants and Catholics; results not shown). As [figure 3](#) shows, identifying as a Black Protestant has significant positive effects on framing the pandemic as God's way of telling humanity to change (Type 1) as well as believing that God will protect you from the coronavirus (Type 2). Black Protestants increase, on average, the probability of the first theodicic interpretation by .31 ($p < .001$) and the second one by .24 ($p < .01$) compared with mainline Protestants. In results not shown, Black Protestants are also more likely than are evangelical Protestants, Catholics, and those with no particular religion to believe that the current pandemic is a divine message and that God will be their personal armor against the coronavirus. All of these differences are significant at the .05 *alpha*-level (two-tail test) or lower, except the Black-evangelical-Protestant difference for the latter (Type 2) theodicic interpretation, which is insignificant.¹⁶

¹⁶We observed no significant religious tradition differences in human sinfulness as the cause of the COVID-19 pandemic (Type 3). By contrast, respondents with no particular religion were significantly more likely than all religious traditions to believe that the pandemic signals God's abandonment of humanity (Type 4).

Formal mediation analysis shows that the interpretation that the pandemic is God's way of telling humanity to change and that God will protect people from the coronavirus (Types 1 and 2) together account for nearly 30% of Black Protestants' total effect on faith strengthening in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, these two theodicy framings explain 69% of Black Protestants' indirect effect on faith strengthening.

With regard to prepandemic religious practices, both weekly in-person religious service attendance and private prayer remain significant positive predictors of faith strengthening in response to the COVID-19 pandemic with the addition of the theodicy framing variables. That said, these variables partly explain the total effect of these religious practices, especially for private prayer. Formal mediation shows that 18% of prepandemic weekly private prayer's total effect is due to the theodicy measures. [Figure 3](#) shows that, on average, praying weekly in 2019 increases the probability of perceiving the pandemic as a divine lesson by .14 ($p < .05$) relative to never praying before the coronavirus outbreak. The weekly-never prayer difference for believing that God will protect you from the virus is marginally significant ($p = .086$).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This article brings the case of the COVID-19 pandemic to bear on the age-old question of whether crisis affects religious faith, and if so, how. We found that less than 1% of Americans stopped believing in God because of the pandemic, and, among persistent believers, less than 1% reported a weakening of their faith. The dominant religious response to COVID-19 was instead faith maintenance, as 70% of U.S. believers declared that the coronavirus outbreak did not influence their faith. However, nearly a third of believers reported that the pandemic *strengthened* their faith. Our theoretical arguments and statistical models therefore focused on explaining this important variation: why did the COVID-19 pandemic strengthen the faith of certain American believers but not others?

Our most important contribution is in showing the relevance of theodicy framings to answer that question. Despite the significance of the concept in canonical texts of the anthropology and sociology of religion, theodicy is one of the most underutilized concepts in contemporary sociology of religion, and especially so in quantitative studies. Our study shows that two theodicy interpretations of the COVID-19 pandemic increased the likelihood of the pandemic strengthening American believers' faith. The first was interpreting the coronavirus outbreak as God's way of telling humanity to change the way we live, and the other was believing that God will act as a personal shield against the virus. [Perry et al. \(2020a\)](#) theoretically suggested that Christian nationalism's influence on politicizing the pandemic played a role in activating such theodicy framings, but future empirical work is needed to establish this role.

Attending in-person religious services and praying privately before the current pandemic also played an important role in strengthening faith in response to the

pandemic. The psychology of religion literature specifies that the strengthening effects of these practices during catastrophe operate through religious coping. We found some support for this perspective in that theodidic framings partially mediated the strengthening effect of the weekly prepandemic religious practices, especially private prayer.

Theodidic framings explained little of the impact of attending religious services in-person before the pandemic on faith strengthening in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. While we did not measure congregation-based social networks, we suspect they are the primary reason for this prepandemic religious practice's strengthening effect. Other studies observe that these networks are an important intervening variable between religious service attendance and well-being. From a sociological perspective, preexisting ties to coreligionists constitute an important "social" resource of religion that reinforces and deepens faith in response to the coronavirus outbreak. The contrasting findings for prepandemic prayer and in-person religious service attendance underscore the importance of distinguishing between private and public forms of religiosity and explicating the different mechanisms underlying them when studying faith reactions to tragedy (cf. [Nooney and Woodrum 2002](#)).

While the scholarship in the psychology of religion has focused on religious coping, it has generally not taken into account the religious traditions of respondents. Our study, by contrast, drew on a rich literature in the sociology of religion in order to attend to the effects of religious tradition on the faith response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In the first model, we found that Black Protestants were more likely to report that the current pandemic strengthened their faith relative to mainline and evangelical Protestants, Catholics, and those with no particular religion. Prepandemic religious practices partly explained the strengthening effect of Black Protestants, which is not surprising given prior research showing greater levels of engagement in religious behavior among members of this religious tradition during normal times, especially compared to mainline Protestants, Catholics, and those with no particular religion.

Arguably, however, the most important religious tradition finding was that theodidic framings played a considerable role in explaining the Black Protestant strengthening effect. Members of this religious tradition, we observed, were more likely to believe that the COVID-19 pandemic is God's way of telling humanity to change and that God will protect them from the coronavirus. Both of these interpretations in turn deepened faith in response to the coronavirus outbreak. How to explain these findings? Although our empirical analysis cannot answer this question, other research points to plausible explanations. Past racial oppression, perduring systemic racism, and persistent violence have produced a distinctive African American Protestant relationship to their religious faith, shaping a belief that the world is in need of change, and that neither the individual nor the community can survive hard times *but for the grace of God* ([Shelton and Emerson 2012](#)). In other words, Black Protestants' interpretation that God is communicating the need for change through the pandemic and that God will protect them from the virus, are a product of their historical experience and social

location, which differ substantially from those of other religious traditions. Our research, then, calls for renewed sociological attention to the concept of theodicy, to how diverse religious traditions shape theodicies, and to the effects of societal crises and structures on faith, as opposed to psychologists of religion's general focus on individual trauma.

It is important to note that our measure of Black Protestant was not based on RELTRAD (Steensland et al. 2000) since denominational measures were not asked on the survey. Rather, we employed Smith's (2018) self-identification approach. While that approach overlaps with RELTRAD, it is not identical to it. Because this approach uses African American identity in combination with general Protestant religious preference in its operationalization of Black Protestants, it was not possible for us to distinguish racial and religious tradition effects. Future scholarship on the COVID-19 pandemic would benefit from using RELTRAD to measure Black Protestants, with a large enough sample to differentiate the diverse membership of this tradition (Shelton and Cobb 2017).

Another caveat is that the data on Americans we analyzed were collected 6 weeks into the COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, our paper captures a short-term faith response to this pandemic in the United States. Future research should investigate whether the significant factors we observed for a strengthening faith response to the coronavirus outbreak hold beyond its initial phase.

Last, our theoretical predictions and empirical findings are specific to the United States. We know that overall, Americans are more religious than members of most other nations, both in terms of beliefs and practices (e.g., see Pew Research Center 2018: 47–9), and that the religious traditions we identified, while not unique to the United States, nevertheless are shaped by the specific religious field and broader historical context of this country (e.g., see Nelson and Gorski 2014; Warner 1993). A cross-national survey conducted in the summer of 2020 confirms Americans' high religiosity: 28% of Americans reported that the coronavirus outbreak had strengthened their religious faith (Pew Research Center 2021), while respondents from Spain were a distant second at 16%. Only 2% of Danes reported faith strengthening. Though the same survey noted some secularization trends in the United States, notably with a drop in the number of those regularly attending religious services, the fact that Americans' faith was more likely to be strengthened during the COVID-19 pandemic than that of residents of other countries suggests the overall resilience of religious beliefs in the United States. Future research is needed to establish causal relationships among theodicy, religious practices, and religious traditions across different societies during pandemics and other crises, and how those affect religious faith.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

Supplementary data are available at *Sociology of Religion* online.

Table S1. Marginal Effects for Probability of COVID-19 Faith Strengthening Among U.S. Believers, Control Variables.

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APPENDIX TABLE A1 Descriptive Statistics for Control Variables

	Mean	SD
2019 online services		
Never	0.530	0.499
< Monthly	0.150	0.357
Monthly	0.136	0.343
Weekly	0.184	0.388
Coronavirus diagnosis	0.148	0.355
Political party		
Democrat	0.318	0.466
Republican	0.305	0.461
Independent	0.216	0.412
Other	0.161	0.367
Political ideology		
Liberal	0.402	0.491
Moderate	0.232	0.423
Conservative	0.292	0.455
Have not thought about it much	0.074	0.261
Female	0.531	0.499
Age	48.800	17.009
Latinx	0.170	0.376
Education		
No college	0.404	0.491
Some college	0.254	0.436
Four-year or higher degree	0.342	0.475
Married	0.515	0.500
Children in Household	0.332	0.471
Employed	0.546	0.498
Household income	9.569	4.217
Live in Southern state	0.228	0.420
Live in metropolitan area	0.802	0.399