

Social Imagery and Subjective Ideological Proximity to the Supreme Court: Evidence From Evangelical Christians

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Alex Badas¹  and Eric R. Schmidt²

Abstract

Public opinion about the U.S. Supreme Court is heavily influenced by whether people perceive that the Court aligns with them ideologically. However, most Americans do not follow the Court closely enough to make informed inferences about their proximity to the Court. To explain this paradox, we theorize that when Americans perceive that they share a salient identity with the Supreme Court Justices, they attribute their own ideological orientation to the Court. Focusing on evangelical Christians, we find strong evidence for this theory. Survey analysis reveals that when evangelicals perceive that a majority of the Justices are evangelical Christians, they report less ideological distance from the Court, even though this does not affect their objective distance from the Court. To clarify the causal direction of this relationship, we conduct a conjoint experiment—showing that when evangelicals evaluate hypothetical nominees to the Court, they report that evangelical nominees are closer to them ideologically. By showing that the Court’s social imagery influences subjective ideological distance judgments, we help explain both the disconnect between subjective and objective proximity and the continued significance of subjective proximity judgments.

Keywords

social imagery, Supreme Court, ideology, attitude attribution, group heuristics, religion and politics

This article confronts a paradox in the judicial politics literature: even though most Americans do not closely follow the Supreme Court’s decisions (Gibson et al. 2017), Americans’ perceived ideological proximity to the Court reliably influences their attitudes about the Court itself (Bartels and Johnston 2012). Moreover, Nelson and Gibson (2020) find that when respondents are informed of their ideological distance from the Court—based on their own evaluation of the Court’s decision-making and their self-reported ideological orientation—they often disagree with this information. Because measures of subjective proximity appear to capture more than ideology, Nelson and Gibson (2020) challenge public opinion researchers to better account for Americans’ perceptions that the Court reflects (or does not reflect) their ideological orientation. If democratic citizens are not inclined to make abstract political judgments (Achen and Bartels 2016; Converse 2000; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996), why does *this* abstract judgment have so much explanatory power, let alone produce so much resistance in the face of new information?

In the analysis that follows, we take up Nelson and Gibson’s (2020) challenge—exploring non-ideological

factors that might cause Americans to perceive they are ideologically aligned with the Court. Recent work has shown that beliefs about the Court’s legitimacy depend on perceptions of the socioeconomic (Badas and Justus 2023) and religious (Badas and Schmidt 2023) identities of the Supreme Court Justices. Our analysis builds upon this work, drawing on the literature that highlights the significance of group identity for political judgments (e.g., Achen and Bartels 2016; Kinder and Kam 2009; Mason 2018). To preview results, we provide strong evidence that when Americans perceive that the Supreme Court Justices share their descriptive identities, they see themselves as more ideologically proximate to the Court.

¹Department of Political Science, University of Houston, Houston, TX, USA

²Department of Government and Politics, Millsaps College, Jackson, MS, USA

Corresponding Author:

Alex Badas, Department of Political Science, University of Houston, 3551 Cullen Boulevard, Room 447, Houston, TX 77204, USA.
Email: abadas@uh.edu

Our analysis proceeds as follows. First, we explain why non-ideological factors likely drive Americans' subjective ideological proximity to the Supreme Court. We propose that proximity judgments reflect an *ideological projection* effect, similar to the way many Americans project their ideology onto political parties and candidates. Second, we describe recent work on the Supreme Court's social imagery and describe why proximity judgments might reflect perceptions of the Justices' descriptive identities. Focusing on evangelical Christians—a group of perennial significance to Supreme Court politics—we derive several observable implications of this theory.

Next, we test our hypotheses using nationally representative survey data, gathered from YouGov in November 2020. Our survey measured respondents' perceptions of the Supreme Court Justices' religious identities, as well as their perceived and objective ideological proximity to the Court. Results indicate that as their perceived number of evangelical Justices increases, evangelical Christians report less ideological distance between themselves and the Court. This pattern holds even after controlling for partisanship, liberal-conservative ideology, political interest, and objective ideological proximity (measured using respondents' feelings about six salient Supreme Court decisions). Just as importantly, the perceived number of evangelical Justices does not influence evangelicals' objective ideological distance from the Court.

From there, we conduct a follow-up study to clarify the causal direction of this relationship. Using a conjoint survey experiment, conducted on CloudResearch in April 2024, we presented respondents with several profiles of Supreme Court nominees. The experiment randomized nominees' partisanship, judicial philosophy, and demographic characteristics; the focal manipulation was the nominee's religious tradition. Consistent with our theory, evangelical respondents reported that evangelical nominees more closely matched their ideological orientation. This suggests that Americans perceive that the Court aligns with their ideological orientation because they perceive that the Justices match their descriptive identities.

To conclude, we underscore how our results contribute to the judicial politics literature. To our knowledge, ours is the first analysis to propose a theoretical explanation for the origins of subjective proximity judgments. Moreover, we highlight even deeper implications for our knowledge of public opinion and group identity. Until now, research on ideological projection has largely focused on the way people evaluate candidates and political parties. Yet, because political parties have such well-understood policy reputations in a polarized America (Sniderman and Stiglitz 2012; Zingher 2022), ideological projection

might be more pronounced for institutions with less settled reputations. Indeed, our results suggest not just that ideological projection influences how Americans think about the Supreme Court—but also that attitudes toward the Court offer one of the richest opportunities for applied research in political psychology.

Subjective Ideological Proximity

Subjective ideological proximity is among the most reliable predictors of attitudes toward the U.S. Supreme Court (Badas 2019a; Bartels and Johnston 2012). People feel more favorable toward the Court when they perceive that the Court shares their ideology and less favorable toward the Court when they perceive that the Court does not reflect their ideological orientation.

However, scholars have questioned the validity of Americans' subjective reports of ideological proximity to the Court. According to Gibson et al. (2017), ideological proximity cannot be objective because most Americans do not follow the Court's decisions. For example, public health research suggests that in the aftermath of the Court's decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health* (2022), most Americans were unaware of either the Court's decision or its implications for abortion access in their state (Jozkowski et al. 2023). In other words, even the Court's highest-profile decision in decades was poorly understood by many Americans (but see Gibson 2024a).

Unsurprisingly given these findings, Nelson and Gibson (2020) find that when Americans are shown the distance between their self-reported ideology and their perceptions of the Supreme Court's decision-making (e.g., generally liberal, generally conservative, or on a case-by-case basis), they often disagree with this information. This suggests a disconnect between subjective and objective ideological proximity. However, this disconnect does not negate the importance of subjective proximity judgments. Whatever the origins of subjective proximity judgments, and no matter public awareness of the Court's decisions, subjective ideological proximity influences how Americans evaluate the Supreme Court (Badas 2016, 2019a; Bartels and Johnston 2012).

Thus, Nelson and Gibson (2020) challenge scholars to determine the sources of subjective proximity judgments. Under what conditions do Americans report that the Supreme Court aligns (or does not align) with their ideological orientation? Clearly, Americans are not merely taking stock of the Court's decisions, determining which are liberal and which are conservative, and basing their proximity judgment on this information.

An alternative possibility is that in the absence of information about the Court's objective ideology, Americans *project* their ideological orientation onto the Court using heuristics only tangentially related to policy.

Indeed, canonical research on political behavior demonstrates that even when they do not follow politics closely, people often infer that their preferred candidate aligns with their ideological orientation (Bartels 1988; Berelson et al. 1954). Considered against the public's dearth of knowledge about the Court (Bullock and Rader 2022), ideological projection makes more sense.

Yet without more context, this explanation encounters similar difficulties as the first. Canonically considered, projection explains how people estimate the ideology of political actors when they will not or cannot seek out objective information. This implies that people feel the need to project in the first place—perhaps because they feel social pressure to form an opinion, perhaps because they identify with a particular party or candidate, or perhaps because parties and candidates are among the few political stimuli that matter to disengaged Americans. Viewed this way, the *point* of projection is to make inferences about the limited range of political actors that the public bothers to think about.

It follows that most political stimuli, precisely because the public *is* so disengaged, are unlikely to be the subjects of projection. After all, no one expects Americans to project their own ideology onto the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Secretary General of the United Nations, or the Federal Reserve. And even if they did, no one would expect these projections to have a systematic effect on the way people perceive these institutions or figures. If projection is a form of motivated reasoning (see Lodge and Taber 2013), the absence of projection implies the absence of motivation.

Yet subjective proximity judgments about the Supreme Court indeed influence the way people view the Court (Bartels and Johnston 2012). This poses a challenge for public opinion research. On the one hand, the public does not possess enough information to assess their objective ideological proximity to the Court (Jessee et al. 2022). Thus, their subjective determinations are likely the product of projection. But projection is a powerful political impulse in its own right. When it happens, it must be driven by considerations powerful enough to motivate projection in the first place. In the next section, we propose a possible source of ideological projection—beliefs about whether one's social group identities are represented among the Supreme Court Justices.

Social Imagery and Ideological Projection

According to one of political science's dominant paradigms, political conflict is group conflict—conflict that informs how we understand both political behavior and its intersection with political institutions (Achen and Bartels 2016; Bentley 1908; Berelson et al. 1954; Truman 1951). This means that even if the Supreme Court is not *itself* a

source of group identity, Americans' attitudes toward the Court might reflect some manifestation of group membership or group conflict.

In the analysis that follows, we theorize that the Court's *social imagery* influences judgments of subjective ideological proximity to the Court. To our knowledge, the term "social group imagery" was first used by Green et al. (2002) to describe popular wisdom about the groups associated with the Republican and Democratic parties (109). For our purposes, we define the term even more broadly, to include any subjective perceptions about the demographic composition of political institutions. Thus, when we say that the Supreme Court has a *social imagery*, we mean that the public associates the Court with some social groups and not others, and perceives that some social groups are better-represented among the Supreme Court Justices.

Indeed, extant research suggests that social imagery or related attitudes influence how people perceive the ideological orientation of political actors. Early research by Berelson et al. (1954) showed that people often conclude that their preferred party or candidate aligns with their positions on the issues (see also Bartels 1988), rather than take the time to research the validity of this assumption. Building on this research, Brady and Sniderman (1985) showed that Americans use the likeability of social groups to draw conclusions about these groups' ideological orientations. According to Brady and Sniderman (1985), people perceive that favored social groups align with their ideological orientation, while disfavored social groups do not.

At the time, Brady and Sniderman (1985) argued that this "likeability heuristic" could produce accurate judgments of groups' ideological orientations, because of "the role of groups in organizing ideological thinking" (1985, 1073). We agree that group affect might produce accurate proximity judgments under certain conditions. However, subsequent work relaxes this assumption—focusing instead on the importance of shared group identity with the politically relevant group or actor. To this point, Amira (2018) shows that "positive projection" based on shared group identities occurs more frequently than "negative projection" based on unshared identities. For example, Lerman and Sadin (2016) show that Black voters tend to perceive that Black candidates share their ideological orientation, while White voters stereotype Black candidates as liberal.

To date, scholars have not examined whether shared group identity influences how people perceive their ideological proximity to the Supreme Court or similar institutions. However, research has highlighted the role of partisan affective polarization in structuring attitudes toward the Court. If partisan identity influences attitudes toward the Court, other group identities and

considerations might do the same. Consistent with this premise, research shows that support for Supreme Court decisions reflects feelings toward groups affected by the Court's decisions (Zilis 2018, 2021); that Americans are more sympathetic toward Supreme Court nominees with whom they share a descriptive identity (Badas and Stauffer 2018); and that Americans' support for civil liberties declines when disliked racial or religious groups stand to exercise these liberties (Bennett and Strother 2024; Strother and Bennett 2023). In other words, group theory helps explain how people think about the Court.

Moreover, perceived ideology can also reflect *misperceptions* of a group's demographic composition. In a path-breaking analysis, Ahler and Sood (2018) demonstrate that when Americans overestimate the share of stereotypical groups in the Republican or Democratic coalitions (e.g., Black Democrats or evangelical Republicans), they infer that higher percentages of Republicans and Democrats share their party's position. While Ahler and Sood (2018) do not examine the misperceptions that *specific* social groups hold, their work establishes that social imagery-based misperceptions are politically consequential.

Indeed, Americans appear to hold politically consequential misperceptions of the Supreme Court's demographic composition. Most significantly for our purposes, Badas and colleagues analyze perceptions of the Supreme Court Justices' descriptive identities. While 8–9 Justices have a net worth of \$1M or higher, Badas and Justus (2023) find a significant variation in Americans' beliefs about the number of millionaire Justices. Similarly, while there are no evangelicals or atheists on the Court, Badas and Schmidt (2023) find that evangelical Christians believe (on average) that between 3 and 4 Justices are evangelicals and 1 and 2 are atheists.

These misperceptions are politically consequential. When Americans do not know that the Justices are overwhelmingly millionaires, they perceive the Court to be both more legitimate and less sympathetic to wealthier Americans (Badas and Justus 2023). Moreover, when evangelical Christians believe that evangelicals are well-represented on the Court, they give the Court higher legitimacy ratings; when they believe atheists are well-represented, they give the Court lower legitimacy ratings (Badas 2019b).¹

Of the processes implicated in ideological projection, shared group identity (Amira 2018; Lerman and Sadin 2016) has been front-and-center, as have affective appraisals of social groups (Brady and Sniderman 1985) and political parties and candidates (Bartels 1988; Berelson et al. 1954). Because the Court's *social imagery* directly taps whether people believe the Court's membership

includes people like them, it makes sense that we would see ideological projection here too.

For our purposes, this recommends two hypotheses. First, when Americans perceive that the Supreme Court Justices share their descriptive identities, they should perceive themselves as more ideologically proximate to the Court. But second, these perceptions should not influence respondents' objective proximity to the Supreme Court—for the simple reason that projection is not an objective process. In other words, the Court's social imagery should influence subjective but not objective ideological proximity.

The Case of Evangelical Christians

Of course, Americans have numerous group identities that make demands on their political attitudes. For several reasons, the present study focuses on evangelical (or “born-again”) Christians.

First, being evangelical ranks among the most politically salient group identities in the United States. As culture-war issues became sources of partisan conflict and the Republican Party embraced moral traditionalism (see Leege et al. 2002; Lewis 2018), evangelical Christians became a reliably Republican voting bloc (Layman 2001). Moreover, scholars have already shown that evangelical Christians have diverse beliefs about the Justices' religious identities. The first study on the Court's social imagery (Badas and Schmidt 2023) focused on evangelical Christians' attitudes about the Court's legitimacy. By determining whether social imagery influences evangelicals' perceptions of the Court's ideological orientation, we can clarify the scope of Badas and Schmidt's (2023) contribution. After all, it is one thing to find that an institution's social imagery influences whether people have positive or negative feelings about an institution. It would be quite another to find, as we propose, that people use the social imagery of an institution to make *inferences* about the worldview that institution endorses.

Just as importantly, looking at evangelical Christians represents an especially conservative test of our theory. While many evangelicals believe that several Supreme Court Justices share their religious tradition (Badas and Schmidt 2023), evangelicals have more objective reasons to make conclusions about the Court's ideology. In recent years, the Court has issued high-profile, conservative decisions on culture-war issues. Abortion in particular has defined the way evangelical churches interact with contemporary American politics (Lewis 2018; Putnam and Campbell 2010). Even if most Americans are unaware of the Court's recent decisions, evangelicals that attend religious services have likely heard about them. For example, the president of the Southern Baptist Convention—the largest evangelical denomination in

the United States—recommended that SBC clergy celebrate the Court’s decision in *Dobbs* (2022) at their upcoming Sunday services (Burgess 2022). Yet even before *Dobbs* (2022), the Court had issued conservative decisions on culture-war issues: ruling that religious war memorials on public property posed no Establishment Clause problem (*American Legion v. American Humanist Association*, 2019), that Catholic social service providers were eligible for government funding even if they refused to place foster children with same-sex couples (*Fulton v. City of Philadelphia*, 2020), and that public officials were permitted to begin City Council meetings with sectarian prayers (*Town of Greece v. Galloway*, 2015).

This makes evangelicals an ideal group for testing our theory that ideological projection reflects the perceived social imagery of the Court. If evangelicals have more insights into the Court’s ideological orientation, their proximity judgments should be less influenced by their perceptions of the Justices’ religious identities. For the same reason, evangelicals’ subjective proximity judgments should be less distinct from their objective proximity judgments. However, if the Court’s social imagery causes evangelicals to project their ideological orientation onto the Court, this would be especially strong evidence that our theory generalizes to other groups and group-based perceptions.

Data and Methods

YouGov Survey: November 2020

To assess our expectation that evangelical Christians will perceive less ideological distance between themselves and the Supreme Court when they believe evangelicals are a larger share of the Court’s composition, we conducted a survey. The survey was fielded by YouGov in November 2020 and included a nationally representative sample of 1,000 participants.²

To measure our independent variable, we asked participants how many of the nine Supreme Court Justices they believed to be evangelical Christians. This question has many benefits (Badas and Justus 2023; Badas and Schmidt 2023; Stauffer 2021). First, Americans do not have accurate beliefs about the number of evangelical Christians on the Supreme Court. Our data suggest that on average, Americans think the Court has roughly three evangelical Justices. However, there are zero evangelical Justices on the Court. While the public seems misinformed about the number of evangelicals on the Supreme Court, it is likely that individuals will use their own perceptions about the composition of the Court to inform their attitudes and beliefs about the Court (Badas and Justus 2023; Badas and Schmidt 2023; Stauffer 2021). Thus, this question format allows us to exploit

heterogeneity in beliefs about the number of evangelical Justices to answer whether evangelicals who believe there are more evangelical Justices perceive less ideological distance between themselves and the Court.³

Our first dependent variable is the perceived ideological distance between an individual and the Supreme Court. We measure this by using the subjective ideological distance measure innovated by Bartels and Johnston (2012). This measure takes the absolute difference between an individual’s self-reported ideology and their perception of the Supreme Court’s ideology, both measured on the same five-point scale. Because of the affective nature of social imagery, we anticipate evangelicals who believe there are more evangelical Justices will perceive less ideological distance between themselves and the Court.⁴

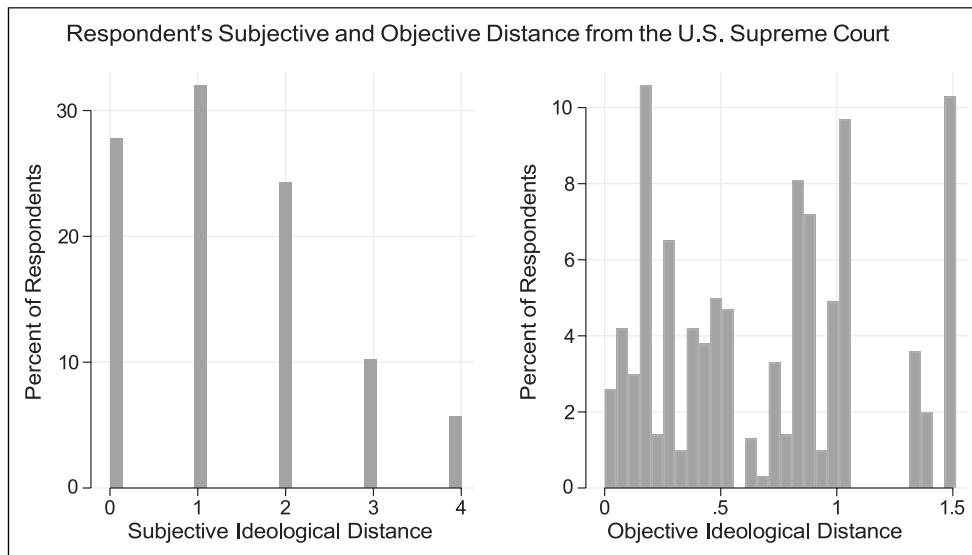
Our second dependent variable measures objective ideological distance between an individual and the Supreme Court. We measure this by fielding six survey questions based on recent Supreme Court decisions. Respondents were asked whether they would support or oppose a law corresponding with the issue involved in each Supreme Court case. Table 1 summarizes the six issues that respondents were asked about. These six issues were selected because they represent recent, salient Supreme Court cases from a diverse set of legal issues.⁵ The six issues scale onto a single factor (eigenvalue 1.30).

We use item-response models to generate ideology scores from responses to these six questions. We then compute the Court’s ideology score based on the Court’s decisions in the six cases. From there, we take the absolute difference between the respondent’s ideology score and the Court’s ideology score. Similar approaches have been used in other studies on the Supreme Court and public opinion (Jessee et al. 2022; Malhotra and Jesse 2014). Unlike subjective ideological proximity, we anticipate no relationship between evangelicals’ perceptions of the number of evangelical Justices and their objective ideological distance from the Court. Figure 1 displays the distribution of each measure of ideological distance.

To estimate the effect of social imagery on evangelicals’ perceptions of ideological alignment with the Supreme Court,⁶ we estimate two linear regression models predicting subjective ideological distance and objective ideological distance, respectively. Our models control for variables that could potentially be associated with perceptions of ideological distance. Knowledge and awareness of the Supreme Court have been shown to condition attitudes towards the Supreme Court across many studies (Gibson and Caldeira 2009; Gibson et al. 2005; Gibson et al. 2014). To assess individuals’ attention to the Court, we use a single question asking respondents how closely they follow the Court; responses are recorded on a four-point scale ranging from “not at all” to “very closely.” We

Table 1. Supreme Court Decisions Used to Construct Measure of Objective Ideological Distance From the Court.

Issue	Case
Citizenship question on the Census	Department of Commerce v. New York (2019)
Unanimous jury verdicts	Ramos v. Louisiana (2020)
Abortion clinics meet requirements of surgical centers	June Medical Services v. Russo (2020)
Employers' religious exemption from ACA contraception mandate	Burwell v. Hobby Lobby Stores (2013)
Federal charges when already found not guilty of state-level offenses	Gamble v. United States (2019)
Religious monuments on public grounds	American Legion v. American Humanist Association (2019)

**Figure 1.** Distribution of ideological distance measures.

also control for how informed the respondent is about the Supreme Court. We measure this using two objective knowledge questions. The first asks respondents to identify how Supreme Court Justices are selected, and the second asks respondents to identify the length of a Supreme Court Justice's term in office. The knowledge scale ranges between 0 and 2.⁷ We also control for partisan identity, ideological identity, and personal demographic traits. Lastly, each model controls for the alternative measure of ideological distance; the subjective ideological distance model controls for objective ideological distance and the objective ideological distance model controls for subjective ideological distance.⁸ The results of our linear regression models are presented in Table 2; the substantive relationships between evangelicals' perceived number of evangelical Justices and their ideological distance from the Court are presented in Figure 2.

The results support our hypothesis that social imagery will influence subjective perceptions of ideological distance but have no meaningful relationship with an objective measure of ideological distance. The left panel in Figure 2 presents the marginal effect on subjective

ideological distance of being evangelical, across the range of perceived number of evangelical Justices. To draw a substantive example, an evangelical Christian who perceives there to be an evangelical majority on the Court is predicted to have a subjective ideological distance score 0.219 points lower than non-evangelicals. This represents 16 percent of a standard deviation change in subjective ideological distance.

Meanwhile, the right panel in Figure 2 presents the marginal effect of being evangelical on objective ideological distance, again across the range of perceived number of evangelical Justices. For no perceived number of evangelical Justices is the difference between evangelical and non-evangelical respondents statistically distinguishable from zero. Thus, our results demonstrate that social imagery influences subjective perceptions of ideological distance but not objective measures of ideological distance. When evangelicals perceive that a majority of the Supreme Court Justices share their religious identity, they feel ideologically closer to the Court—regardless of whether their objective ideological distance justifies this perception.

Table 2. Linear Regression: Determinants of Subjective and Objective Ideological Proximity to the U.S. Supreme Court.

	(1)	(2)
	Subjective Court Distance	Objective Court Distance
Evangelical respondent	0.129 (0.109)	0.006 (0.052)
Perceived number of evangelical justices	0.0187 (0.0115)	-0.005 (0.00717)
Evangelical × perceived no. of evangelical justices	-0.069* (0.034)	-0.001 (0.012)
Objective court distance	0.183** (0.060)	
Subjective court distance		0.060** (0.020)
Follows the court	0.072* (0.029)	0.016 (0.015)
Court knowledge	0.119* (0.048)	-0.014 (0.027)
Democrat	0.131* (0.066)	0.060 (0.041)
Republican	-0.180* (0.080)	-0.087* (0.039)
Very liberal	2.269*** (0.126)	0.068 (0.072)
Liberal	1.152*** (0.073)	0.033 (0.057)
Conservative	0.348** (0.083)	-0.041 (0.041)
Very conservative	1.309*** (0.114)	-0.011 (0.058)
Male	-0.023 (0.051)	-0.042 (0.029)
Black respondent	0.127 (0.088)	-0.233*** (0.049)
Hispanic respondent	-0.106 (0.095)	-0.075 (0.049)
Education	0.0309 (0.017)	0.020* (0.010)
Age group	0.006 (0.016)	-0.010 (0.009)
Constant	0.015 (0.120)	0.643*** (0.074)
Observations	949	949

Standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, and *** $p < .001$.

Conjoint Experiment: April, 2024

Using a survey, we have shown that evangelical Christians who believe there are more evangelical Justices on the Supreme Court view the Supreme Court as ideologically closer to themselves. This was only true for the subjective ideological distance measure, not the objective ideological distance measure.

Yet while the survey provides evidence of our expectation, there are limitations to observational surveys.

First, there may be an unobserved confounding variable that is responsible for the relationship we observe between evangelical Christian identity, perceived number of evangelical Justices, and subjective ideological distance. This would mean that our key finding is spurious. Second, there is potential for endogeneity in the context of an observational survey. For example, people might draw inferences about the number of evangelical Justices based on their subjective ideological distance from the Supreme

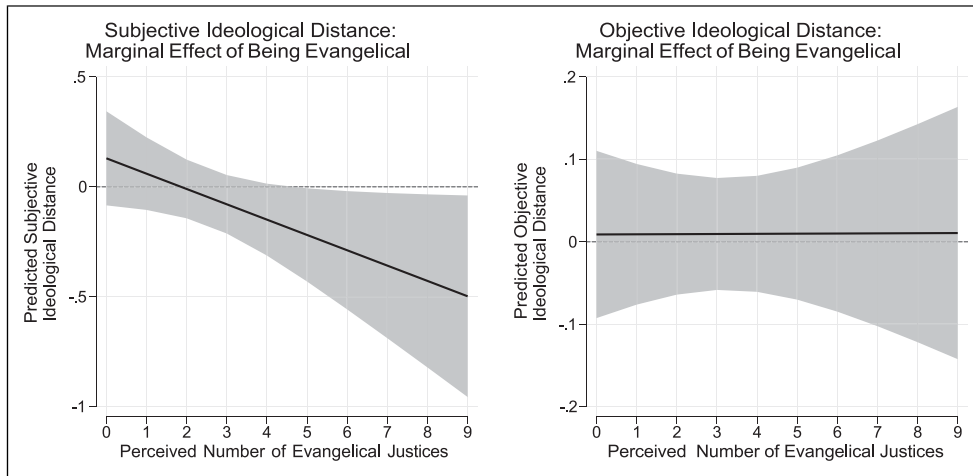


Figure 2. Perceived number of evangelical justices and ideological proximity to the Supreme Court: Marginal effect of being evangelical with 95 percent confidence intervals. Results from Table 2. The left and right panels show the marginal effects of being evangelical on subjective and objective ideological proximity, respectively.

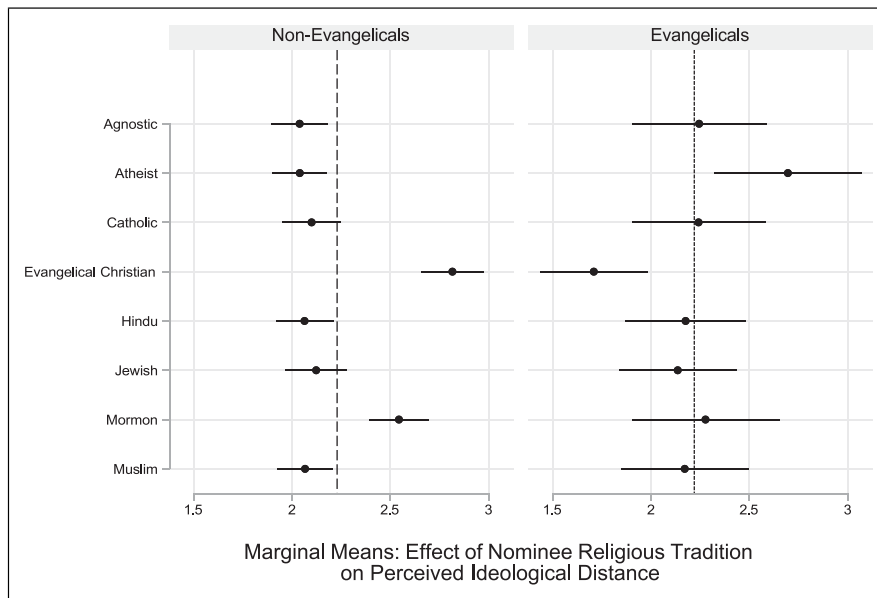


Figure 3. Marginal means from conjoint experiment: Effect of nominee religious tradition on perceived ideological distance with 95 percent confidence intervals. The left panel shows results for evangelical Christians; the right panel shows results for evangelicals. The dashed line visualizes the mean ideological distance for all nominees (mean for non-evangelicals = 2.23; mean for evangelicals = 2.22).

Court, rather than vice versa. In other words, if people feel that they are ideologically close to the Court, they might perceive that more of the Justices share their own social group identities. Yet our argument is that people make inferences about their subjective ideological distance from the Supreme Court, in part, based on the number of Justices on the Supreme Court who they think share salient social identities with them.

To overcome these potential limitations and better demonstrate causality, we conduct a conjoint experiment. Conjoint experiments are often used to better understand preferences towards judicial institutions and judicial actors (Armaly et al. 2024; Badas 2022; Krewson and Owens 2021, 2022, 2024; Sen 2016). We follow the conventional design used in studies focusing on public attitudes towards Supreme Court nominees which display

a single profile to respondents and ask them to evaluate the nominee on the concept of interest. We informed participants that we were conducting a study to better understand how the public evaluates potential Supreme Court nominees. After answering basic questions about their partisanship, religious identity, and demographic traits, participants viewed profiles from five potential Supreme Court nominees, evaluating just one nominee profile at a time.⁹ The focal manipulation of each profile was the nominee's religious tradition—randomly presented as agnostic, atheist, Buddhist, Catholic, evangelical Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Mormon, or Muslim. The profile also manipulated the nominee's partisanship, judicial philosophy, gender, age, prior experience, an expert's rating of their qualifications, and the ranking of their law school.¹⁰

After viewing each profile, participants were asked to evaluate the ideology of the nominee. The question asked “where would you place [nominee number] on this scale” with the response options “extremely conservative,” “conservative,” “slightly conservative,” “moderate; middle of the road,” “slightly liberal,” “liberal,” and “extremely liberal.” To construct a measure of perceived ideological distance, we take the absolute distance between the respondent's placement of themselves on the ideological scale and their placement of the nominee. The scale can potentially range from zero indicating no distance and six indicating the maximum amount of distance.¹¹

There is one main difference between our YouGov observational survey and our conjoint experiment. While the focus of our YouGov survey was the Supreme Court, the focus of our conjoint experiment is Supreme Court nominees. Most modern presidents have the opportunity to appoint at least one Justice to the Supreme Court—and at a time of profound partisan polarization, Supreme Court confirmation hearings have become especially salient. Indeed, the salience of Supreme Court confirmation hearings lends external validity to our experiment.

Changing the focus to nominees also promotes a more feasible experimental design. To test our theory that the Court's social imagery influences perceptions of ideological distance, we cannot simply manipulate the number of Justices that respondents are told are evangelical Christians. As we show in our YouGov survey, there is a great variation in the number of evangelicals individuals think are on the Supreme Court. This means that if we created a vignette experiment that varied the number of evangelicals on the Supreme Court, some treatments would mean different things depending on respondents' existing beliefs about the Justices' religious identities. For example, if we created a “high” treatment condition that informed participants that there were five evangelicals on the Court, that would be fewer evangelicals than some

people believe sit on the Court, and more than others do. Meanwhile, a “low” treatment of zero or one evangelical Justice would align with many individuals' prior beliefs and thus be unlikely to influence our key outcome measures.¹² For this reason, assessing how evangelicals perceive their ideological distance from evangelical nominees offers a cleaner experimental design. This approach has been used in similar studies examining preferences towards the Supreme Court (Badas and Justus 2023; Badas and Schmidt 2023).

Moreover, the manipulation in the conjoint experiment still taps the social imagery of the Court as an institution. Suppose that an evangelical reads that a Supreme Court nominee is an evangelical Christian, and then reports that the Court will be closer to their ideological orientation if the nominee is confirmed. Much like the results in our YouGov survey, this proximity judgment would reflect a belief about the Court's social imagery. After all, the respondent in this case would not simply be registering an attitude about a particular nominee. They would be assessing their ideological proximity to a Court in which the number of evangelical Justices has increased. In other words, the “treatment” in our conjoint experiment involves not just evangelical *nominees* but a Court that includes the nominee and thus has more evangelical Justices.¹³

The conjoint experiment was fielded to a sample of 1,001 participants on the CloudResearch platform in April 2024. The recruitment of participants was weighted such that the ultimate sample would match the demographic benchmarks of the most recent U.S. Census.

Research comparing methods of recruiting convenience samples finds that CloudResearch tends to have higher quality than alternatives such as Qualtrics, Amazon's Mechanical Turk, Prolific, and undergraduate student samples (Douglas et al. 2023). Participants were asked to rate five nominee profiles, creating an effective sample size of 5,005. Sixteen percentage of our participants identified as evangelical Christians.¹⁴

Figure 3 presents the estimated marginal means (Leeper et al. 2019) of subjective ideological distance, based on evangelical identity and the religious belief displayed for the nominee profile they viewed.¹⁵ The vertical dashed lines in each panel of Figure 3 represent respondents' average perceived ideological distance between the nominees; the means for non-evangelicals and evangelicals are, respectively, 2.23 and 2.22. The point estimates and 95 percent confidence intervals represent the average perceived ideological distance from nominees from each of the religious backgrounds manipulated in the profiles. The results¹⁶ demonstrate that when a Supreme Court nominee matches them on a salient identity trait—in this case, evangelical Christian identity—participants perceive less ideological distance between themselves

and a Supreme Court nominee. For example, evangelical Christians perceived an average ideological distance of 1.70 between themselves and an evangelical Christian nominee. The difference from the baseline average of evangelical Christians' ratings is 0.52; this represents 34 percent of a standard deviation for evangelical Christians on the ideological distance measure. Meanwhile, we find the reverse pattern for those who do not identify as evangelical Christians. Non-evangelicals perceive more ideological distance between themselves and nominees who identify as evangelical Christians. The average perceived ideological distance between a non-evangelical respondent and an evangelical Christian nominee was 2.81. The difference from the baseline average of non-evangelicals' ratings is 0.58, which represents 36 percent of a standard deviation for non-evangelicals on the ideological distance measure.¹⁷

Conclusions and Implications

This paper began with a paradox: while the public does not closely follow Supreme Court politics—possessing only fragmented knowledge even of watershed decisions—they evaluate the Court based on their subjective ideological distance to the Court itself. Even then, their perceived ideological distance often contrasts with more objective measures. In other words, the public has politically consequential attitudes about an institution it does not follow closely, based on an abstract judgment that we would not expect the average citizen to make.

In the analysis above, we developed and tested a comprehensive theory to explain why some Americans believe the Court aligns with their ideological orientation. We proposed that when Americans perceive that they share descriptive identities with the Supreme Court Justices, they are more likely to *project* their own ideological orientation onto the Court. Assuming that projection reflects some type of motivated reasoning (see Lodge and Taber 2013), projection should not exist without the motivation to project. Whether or not perceptions of the Justices' descriptive identities are accurate, group identities provide powerful motivation to form political judgments (e.g., Bentley 1908; Berelson et al. 1954; Kinder and Kam 2009; Truman 1951; Wagner and Shafer 2022). If people perceive themselves as ideologically proximate to the Court because they believe the Court's membership includes people like them (see Badas and Justus 2023; Badas and Schmidt 2023), this would help explain the disconnect between subjective and objective proximity judgments, as well the measurement validity concerns that Nelson and Gibson (2020) raise with respect to self-reported perceptions of the Supreme Court's decision-making.

While future research will focus on other group attachments, the present analysis studied evangelical Christians, who have already been shown to overestimate the number of evangelicals on the Court (see Badas and Schmidt 2023). As one of the most politically salient groups in Supreme Court politics, evangelicals posed an especially conservative test for our theory. Unlike other social groups, evangelical Christians might have more objective reasons to infer that the Court shares their ideological orientation—not least, the Court's conservative turn on culture-war issues.

Nevertheless, we found strong evidence that evangelicals' proximity judgments were influenced by the Court's social imagery. Using nationally representative survey data, we showed that compared to non-evangelicals, evangelicals' perceived number of evangelical Justices produced lower perceived ideological distance from the Court. However, evangelical identity did not condition the relationship between the perceived number of Supreme Court Justices and *objective* ideological distance from the Court—a null result we would expect if proximity judgments reflected group-based considerations rather than ideology. Even among evangelicals, then, subjective and objective proximity judgments were two different things—the first influenced by perceptions of the Justices' religious identities, the second not.

Of course, skeptical readers might wonder whether the projection effect works in the opposite direction. Perhaps evangelicals perceived that the Justices share their religious backgrounds because they believe that the Court aligns with their ideology, rather than vice versa. To investigate the direction of the causal relationship, we conducted a conjoint experiment on CloudResearch, using a convenience sample pre-weighted to match U.S. Census benchmarks. We showed respondents profiles of hypothetical Supreme Court nominees, randomizing their partisanship, qualifications, judicial philosophy, and other potential criteria used to judge Supreme Court nominees. Our focal manipulation was the nominee's religious tradition; roughly 10 percent of profiles included nominees described as evangelical Christians.

The conjoint experiment supported our causal narrative. Compared to non-evangelical respondents that viewed profiles of evangelical nominees, evangelical respondents perceived evangelical nominees to be closer to their ideological orientation. We found these effects even though nominees' profiles contained a variety of other bases that might inform proximity judgments, such as partisanship and judicial philosophy.

Simply put, our findings suggest that the Court's *social imagery*—the perceived descriptive identities of the Supreme Court Justices—is an important reason why some people perceive themselves to be ideologically proximate

to the Court. If proximity judgments reflect perceptions of the Court's social imagery, this explains both the significance of proximity judgments for evaluations of the Court (Bartels and Johnston 2012) and the "systematic measurement error" (Nelson and Gibson 2020, 75) associated with proximity judgments. Thus, most Americans probably do not use the Court's decisions to make an objective determination about their ideological proximity to the Court. Rather, these judgments reflect whether people believe the Justices share their descriptive identities—a more subjective and biased criterion, to be sure, but perhaps closer to the way Americans think about politics.

At the same time, our findings do not mean that ideology does not inform proximity judgments. Rather, the way ideology informs proximity judgments produces biased conclusions detached from objective reality. The nerve of our theory is that in the absence of objective information, projection determines judgments of ideological proximity to the Court. Indeed, if an evangelical Christian perceives that most of the Supreme Court Justices are evangelicals, they might rationally conclude that the Court aligns with their ideological orientation (see Brady and Sniderman 1985). For our purposes, it does not matter whether this inference is correct nor whether it is motivated by accurate information. As we have shown, Americans have diverse and often inaccurate beliefs about the Justices' descriptive identities. It is through these beliefs, our results suggest, that Americans make inferences about the Court's ideology.¹⁸

Our analysis presents opportunities for further research. First, scholars should investigate the extent to which our findings generalize to the way other social groups perceive the Court's ideological orientation. Evangelicals are hardly the only group whose attitudes about the Court are informed by perceived ideological proximity to the Court itself. On a related note, future work might also consider what kinds of groups are likely to base their proximity judgments on the perception that the Justices share their social identities. After all, not all groups demand descriptive representation. Some of the Justices' descriptive characteristics (such as race or ethnicity) are more obvious than others and might yield less variation in perceptions of shared group identity. Groups' salience to Supreme Court politics ebbs and flows. By attending to these complexities, research can clarify the boundary conditions of our theory.

Second, research should clarify whether social imagery taps in-group reasoning, out-group reasoning, or both. By focusing on evangelicals' perceptions of the number of evangelical Justices, we have conceptualized social imagery as tapping in-group reasoning—the perception that political figures share one's descriptive identities. When evangelicals believe that the Justices share their religious

faith, they perceive the Court to be more aligned with them ideologically. But in some contexts, the perceived absence of descriptive representation might facilitate out-group reasoning—the perception that "others," unlike the respondent, hold positions of power. By showing that non-evangelicals perceived that evangelical nominees were further from them ideologically, our conjoint experiment provided some evidence for out-group reasoning. Because the relative importance of in-group and out-group reasoning likely depends on context, future research can clarify the conditions that give rise to each.

Finally, we would like to explore whether social imagery can produce accurate perceptions of ideological proximity. Proximity judgments raise concerns about democratic competence. Of course, if someone has an inaccurate perception of the Justices' descriptive identities, this perception could only by accident produce an accurate inference about the Court's ideology. Yet in their work on attitude attribution, Brady and Sniderman (1985) propose that the public can accurately infer the ideology of social groups based on their feelings toward these groups. This comes with conditions, though. Accurate inferences require that the group belongs to a pair of groups (e.g., Republicans and Democrats) understood to be competitors in the political marketplace, both of which produce meaningful affective evaluations. This suggests that if the public were better-informed about the Justices' descriptive identities, they might make more accurate judgments of their ideological proximity to the Court.

Indeed, the present study has implications far beyond public opinion toward the Supreme Court. By studying the social imagery of the U.S. Supreme Court, political scientists can build upon numerous lines of research: the relationship between ideological and affective judgments (e.g., Webster and Abramowitz 2017), the effects of social group identities on political attitudes (e.g., Achen and Bartels 2016), the consequences of political misperceptions (e.g., Ahler and Sood 2018), and the role of heuristics in promoting democratic competence (e.g., Brady and Sniderman 1985; Sniderman et al. 1991), to name just a few. In our judgment, there are very few dimensions of American politics research not implicated by the questions raised in this analysis. We look forward to unpacking these further and invite others to follow our lead.

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ORCID iD

Alex Badas  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6379-0375>

Supplemental Material

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Notes

1. Our theory is agnostic about *why* people misperceive the descriptive identities of the Supreme Court Justices. Our point is only that where such misperceptions occur, it makes sense that they would promote ideological projection, especially concerning an institution as poorly understood as the Supreme Court.
2. Our survey was conducted prior to the Supreme Court's decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* (2022), which overturned *Roe v. Wade* (1973). There is strong evidence that the *Dobbs* decision changed how many evaluated the Supreme Court's legitimacy (Gibson 2024a, 2024b). This potentially means that our results are time-bound to an era pre-*Dobbs*. However, we later present an experiment fielded post-*Dobbs* that supports our theory and hypotheses. This consistency gives us confidence that our results are robust to any specific temporal dynamics occurring around the time frame of our study.
3. To be clear, we are not proposing that being an evangelical Christian is somehow a politically neutral identity. In a polarized political era, many social identities have partisan or ideological associations, and work on ideological projection (e.g., Brady and Sniderman 1985) has recognized that groups are associated with ideological positions. However, our theory is about the importance of group identity itself. Because our models control for objective ideological distance from the Court, knowledge of the Court, political interest, and liberal-conservative ideology, any projection effects are likely due to evangelicals' perceptions of the religious *identities* of the Supreme Court Justices, not any inference about the policy implications of these identities.
4. Crucially, our measure of *subjective ideological proximity* is different from the general perception that the Court has become more conservative. Liberals, moderates, and conservatives, depending on their beliefs about the Court's ideological orientation, could all theoretically believe that the Court shares their ideological orientation. Our theory seeks to explain why people of all ideological orientations perceive themselves as ideologically proximate to the Court, not why *conservatives* perceive themselves as ideologically proximate to the Court. To ensure that our results hold for liberals, moderates, and conservatives alike, we re-estimated the models presented below, including only respondents that identified as "moderate," "liberal," and "very liberal." This left our core findings substantively unchanged.
5. While *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby Stores* (2013) is the oldest case of the six, our results are substantively the same if we remove this case from our analyses and focus on the remaining five issues.
6. Research finds that white evangelicals and Black evangelicals differ in their political beliefs and attitudes (Lockerbie 2013). For this reason, the results may be conditional on racial identification. In the [appendix](#), we estimate an alternative model that accounts for this possibility. The results suggest that our principal finding is not conditional on race. However, due to limitations in statistical power, these results should be seen as preliminary, and future research can design studies that are better able to address this particular question.
7. It may be argued that our results are conditional on knowledge of the Court. It may be the case that those high in knowledge may be less likely to rely on the social imagery of the Court when making their evaluations since these individuals have more information about the Court's decisions and procedures. We test this in the [appendix](#) by estimating a model that includes an interaction with Court knowledge. Our results show that those high in Court knowledge are not less likely to use social imagery to make their subjective assessments of their ideological closeness to the Court.
8. We present minimally specified models in the [appendix](#). This demonstrates that our results are not model-dependent or due to suppression effects (Achen 2005) of including many control variables. The results of our minimally specified models replicate the findings presented here.
9. This contrasts with many conjoint experiments that mimic elections. These conjoint experiments show two profiles because elections are competitive. Supreme Court nominations are not contested between two opposing candidates. Rather, the public evaluates each nominee as they are presented. A single profile design better replicates this process.
10. An example profile is provided in the [appendix](#), along with all possible outcomes for each manipulation.
11. In the [appendix](#), we demonstrate the robustness of our results by using an alternative measure of ideological distance. This alternative measure asks respondents whether they believe the nominee is "much too liberal," "too liberal," "about right," "too conservative," or "much too conservative." From this we create a distance scale that ranges between 0 and 2. Using this scale, we are able to replicate the results presented here.
12. Randomization between conditions could help eliminate the potential problem mentioned here, but it would still result in very noisy estimates. For example, 25 percent of respondents believe there are no evangelicals on the Court. In a vignette experiment with two conditions, one with "high" and the other "low" evangelical representation, 12.5 percent

of the sample in the “low” condition would receive a treatment that confirms their beliefs about the Court. The conjoint experiment avoids this potential problem and creates less noisy estimates of a treatment effect since each nominee is viewed on their own.

13. We are indebted to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this additional justification for our conjoint experiment.
14. To identify evangelical Christians, we rely on the Pew Research Center’s standard question tapping identification as a “born-again” or evangelical Christian. This branching question was asked of all respondents that initially identified as either Protestant, Catholic, Mormon, or Orthodox. By asking the “born-again” branching question this way, we avoid under-counting respondents that identify as evangelicals, even if their specific denomination is not classified as “Evangelical Protestant.”
15. Another option for analysis would be to present the results for evangelical nominees compared to all non-evangelical nominees. In the [appendix](#), we collapse all non-evangelical nominees into a single category and re-estimate the marginal means. Using this approach, we replicate the results presented here.
16. Full results for each of the conjoint traits are available in the [appendix](#).
17. Like many survey experiments, ours presents intriguing results beyond the scope of the present analysis. For example, *non*-evangelicals perceive themselves to be especially ideologically distant from both evangelical and Mormon nominees. One possible explanation for this finding is that non-evangelicals feel more threatened by nominees from religious traditions they perceive to be dominant. This would be consistent with our overall theory of social imagery, and theories of social distance more generally. However, we cannot test this supposition directly and we encourage future research to address this question more thoroughly.
18. To be sure, Americans do not always agree with the subjective proximity ratings implied by their survey responses ([Nelson and Gibson 2020](#)). Yet this, too, is consistent with an ideological projection effect. If social imagery influences subjective proximity judgments, we would *expect* people to second-guess their attitude attributions, for the simple reason that attitude attribution is inherently uncertain. For someone using social imagery as a heuristic for the Court’s ideology, the most likely source of uncertainty involves Justices perceived to *not* share one’s descriptive identity. For example, suppose that an evangelical Christian believes that six Justices are evangelical Christians too. They might feel confident extrapolating that at least two-thirds of the Court align with their ideological orientation—but if they are uncertain about the descriptive identities of the other three Justices, they might indeed second-guess their judgment of ideological proximity to the Court.

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