


Can Religious Reinterpretations Bridge the Secular-Religious Divide? Experimental Evidence from Tunisia

Journal of Conflict Resolution
2022, Vol. 0(0) 1–29
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DOI: 10.1177/00220027221119097
journals.sagepub.com/home/jcr


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Abstract

Domestic politics around the globe have become increasingly polarized along secular-religious lines. Recent literature suggests that one way to ease secular-religious tension and gridlock is for religious leaders to offer progressive reinterpretations of religious texts, that might convince religious conservatives to compromise from their seemingly-fixed policy positions. But can everyday citizens deploy religious reinterpretations themselves? We examine this question through a series of citizen debates in Tunisia, in which 602 participants attempted to reach a compromise over two ‘culture wars’ issues. Across both experiments, we find that having secular liberals engage religious conservatives with religious reinterpretations backfired, nearly halving the rate of compromise. Religious reinterpretations produced both defensive conservatives and emboldened liberals, obstructing compromise between them. While scholarship suggests that religious leaders may be able to deploy reinterpretations effectively, our results caution that everyday citizens may not.

Keywords

religion, compromise, polarization, Tunisia

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The rise of the Christian right in the United States, Hindu nationalists in India, and Islamist parties in the Middle East mark a global upswell of conservative religious mobilization (Norris and Inglehart, 2004; Toft, Philpott, and Shah, 2011). This resurgence of religion into politics, and the accompanying salience of secular-religious cleavages, have upended politics in democracies worldwide. Religious conservatives are thought to be particularly dogmatic, leading them to reject the pragmatic compromises that sustain healthy democratic governance (Rawls, 1997). When religious movements meet secular liberal opposition, the result is typically polarization, gridlock, and conflict (Layman, 2001; Toft, 2006; Svensson, 2007).

To break this gridlock, a growing literature advocates for what we call “religious reinterpretations”¹: progressive readings of scripture intended to endow liberal policies with religious legitimacy. The hope is that liberals can better convince religious conservatives to compromise by engaging them on their own terms, working within religion rather than struggling against it. In this vein, recent scholarship demonstrates that progressive messages delivered by church leaders increased their followers’ tolerance for homosexuality and immigration (Adkins et al., 2013; Djupe, Neiheisel, and Olson, 2015; Wallsten and Nteta, 2016; Margolis, 2018).

But in contexts where religious authorities are not often making progressive reinterpretations, scholars have sought to examine whether everyday citizens can deploy reinterpretations themselves. In Egypt, Masoud, Jamal, and Nugent (2016) find that Quranic reinterpretations, without a source or endorser, can shift attitudes in a more progressive direction, but Hassan and Shalaby (2019) find that they do not. From a practical perspective, adjudicating between these divergent studies is important for assessing who can actually deliver religious reinterpretations. After all, Robinson (2010) highlights that the effect of religious appeals depends on their source, so we should not assume that what works for religious authorities would also work for the masses.

To that end, this article offers a careful theoretical and empirical assessment of religious reinterpretations and support for political compromise among everyday citizens. Contrary to the prevailing wisdom, we theorize that religious reinterpretations by citizens may actually *decrease* the odds of compromise, and identify two mechanisms driving this effect. The first is *Conservative Backlash*: religious conservatives may defensively resist reinterpretations that challenge their religious beliefs and identity, particularly from a source that they do not view as an authority. The second is *Liberal Emboldenment*: armed with reinterpretations, liberals may become less willing to tolerate religious motivations for conservative policies, which they now perceive to be hypocritical or baseless.

For empirical support, we conducted two lab-in-the-field experiments in Tunisia in 2016-18. At that time, Tunisian religious leaders had succeeded in bridging the secular-religious divide in part through reinterpretations advocating compromise (Marks, 2015), making Tunisia an ideal setting for testing whether everyday citizens can similarly deploy reinterpretations. Our experimental design entailed a series of 301 citizen debates (602 participants), pairing everyday Tunisians to debate a ‘culture

wars' issue, and asking them to find a mutually agreeable compromise. In Experiment 1 (2016-17), 240 Tunisians debated restrictions over the sale of alcohol. In Experiment 2 (2018), 362 Tunisians debated restrictions on women in political office. The outcome of these debates—did participants agree on a common policy—provides a direct, behavioral measure of compromise.

The experimental component was to provide each side a sample argument that they could use in the debates, allowing us to randomize whether the liberal side was armed with a religious reinterpretation. Across both experiments, we find that providing the liberals with a reinterpretation backfired, cutting the rate of compromise nearly in half. Rather than facilitating compromise with religious conservatives by speaking their own language, reinterpretations instead caused conservatives to become defensive, expressing less support for multiple interpretations of religion in a post-debate questionnaire. We likewise find that liberals armed with a reinterpretation became emboldened, expressing less pressure to conform to religious tradition. The combination of this 'defensive conservative' and 'emboldened liberal' was a breakdown in dialogue, resulting in significantly lower rates of compromise. The results thus suggest that when deployed by everyday citizens, religious reinterpretations may be more likely to obstruct than facilitate compromise.

Our study makes both methodological and substantive contributions to the literature on religion and politics. On the former, prior experimental research on religious reinterpretations is non-interactive—participants do not engage with one another, and outcome measures are purely attitudinal. But politics, and especially compromise, is a fundamentally interpersonal process. Our study develops a novel interactive and behavioral measure of compromise with enhanced real-world validity, that could be adopted for future research. On the latter, our findings suggest that everyday citizens may not be able to bridge the secular-religious divide through religious reinterpretations. While our results do not speak to their potential efficacy when deployed by religious leaders, they caution us to theorize and validate precisely when and how reinterpretations might facilitate compromise.

Secular-Religious Polarization

Secular-religious political cleavages are thought to be especially acrimonious. Indeed, political scientists across almost every subfield argue that secular-religious cleavages are prone to polarization, democratic breakdown, and even civil war. In American politics, for instance, scholars have argued that the religious right have made politics increasingly divisive (Putnam and Campbell, 2010; Jacoby, 2014). Layman (2001, 3) is emblematic, arguing that "On one side of the contemporary cultural divide are [...] religious traditionalists [who...] believe in certain non-negotiable moral 'truths' and see these truths as the backbone of American society."

That religion impedes compromise is also a common theme in the study of global politics. Scholarship on comparative democratization contends that secular-religious cleavages are particularly detrimental to compromise, and thus to democratic

transitions. As Rustow (1970, 360) writes, “on matters of economic policy and social expenditures you can always split the difference. [...] But there is no middle position [...] between Calvinism, Catholicism, and secularism as principles of education.” Similarly, international relations scholars find that secular-religious conflicts are more intense and less negotiable, as religion discourages bargaining over sacred issues (Fox, 2004; Toft, 2006; Svensson, 2007; Canetti et al., 2019).

Yet the most extensive discussion of religion and compromise comes from political theory. On the one hand, some theorists worry that religion functions as a “conversation stopper,” obstructing compromise by grounding policy reasoning in scripture that secular actors perceive to be wholly illegitimate (Rorty, 1999). Rawls (1997, 766), for instance, asserted that “citizens [...] cannot reach agreement or even approach mutual understanding on the basis of their irreconcilable comprehensive doctrines” like religion (see also Audi and Wolterstorff (1997)). Rawls accordingly proposed that religion should be excluded from public discourse.

On the other hand, critics have argued that marginalizing religion in the name of democracy is both incompatible with democratic values and imposes a disproportional burden on religious actors (Carter, 1993). Recent empirical scholarship has lent weight to this criticism, finding that religious reasoning distorts but does not wholly obstruct public reasoning (Kettell and Djupe, 2020); that US secular citizens are not as universally hostile to “God Talk” as the Rawlsian approach suggests (Evans, 2017); and that churches employ forms of inclusive democratic deliberation to help cohere diverse congregations (Djupe and Calfano, 2012). These results suggest that religious reasoning is not wholly incompatible with democracy, and that secular-religious polarization can be overcome.

Religious Reinterpretations

One seemingly promising approach to overcoming secular-religious polarization is to engage religious conservatives with progressive re-readings of religious scripture, hereafter called “religious reinterpretations.” By speaking to religious conservatives “in their own language,” such reinterpretations are thought to be more likely than secular arguments to encourage conservatives to reassess their positions. As Masoud, Jamal, and Nugent (2016, 1564) argue: “Individuals who hold traditional attitudes shaped by religious teachings are more likely to update those attitudes if the alternative, progressive position is demonstrated to have equal religious validity.”

Proponents of such religious reinterpretations often point to the experience of the Catholic Church. Its embrace of democracy and human rights in the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) is thought to have contributed to the third wave of democratization (Huntington, 1991), while Pope Francis’ more recent reinterpretations on immigration, climate change, homosexuality, and abortion may have increased tolerance on these issues as well (Gehring, 2015). Indeed, experimental research suggests that progressive messaging by religious leaders can shape their followers’ beliefs. Margolis (2018), for instance, finds that listening to a pro-immigration radio advertisement by

Evangelical leaders increased Evangelical respondents' support for immigration reform. Likewise, [Adkins et al. \(2013\)](#), [Djupe, Neiheisel, and Olson \(2015\)](#), and [Wallsten and Nteta \(2016\)](#) similarly find that a progressive appeal by church leaders can breed greater tolerance.

Yet these studies all focus on reinterpretations deployed by religious leaders—what about everyday citizens? Can secular liberals motivate religious conservatives to compromise by deploying religious reinterpretations themselves? Here the literature is more mixed.² On the one hand, [Masoud, Jamal, and Nugent \(2016\)](#) find that a progressive reinterpretation of the Qur'an in favor of gender equality, even without a source or endorser, increased support for female political leadership in Egypt. They thus conclude that “religious discourse in favor of women's equality can serve as a useful tool in the hands of women who are trying to encourage change in the attitudes of men” (1589). On the other hand, [Hassan and Shalaby \(2019\)](#), likewise in Egypt, find that priming Quranic verses in favor of tolerance failed to increase out-group tolerance. We are thus left with considerable uncertainty about the efficacy of non-elite religious reinterpretations.

To that end, this article conducts a careful theoretical and empirical assessment of religious reinterpretations and compromise. Overall, we theorize that when deployed by everyday citizens, religious reinterpretations are more likely to obstruct, rather than facilitate, policy compromise.

Religious Reinterpretations in Theory and Practice

Although religious reinterpretations are intuitive in theory, we argue that in practice they may have other, competing effects. We theorize that when deployed by everyday citizens, religious reinterpretations may reduce the odds of political compromise in two ways: first, by triggering a defensive backlash from religious conservatives; and second, by emboldening secular liberals to reject cooperation with their conservative religious counterparts.

Conservative Backlash

First, religious reinterpretations may provoke a defensive backlash from religious conservatives, hardening their beliefs instead of changing them. As an example, consider efforts to persuade conservative Muslims to lessen restrictions on the sale of alcohol. Reformers might argue that alcohol sales are good for the economy. Such a claim challenges religious conservatives' policy preference, but does not directly implicate their religious beliefs. Alternatively, reformers might deploy a religious reinterpretation, asserting that the consumption of alcohol is not sinful and is actually permitted by the Quran. This claim directly challenges conservative Muslims' interpretation of the Quran and their religious tradition. We contend that religious individuals may feel that criticism of this latter nature threatens their foundational religious beliefs, producing a defensive backlash and resistance to compromise.

Our argument builds on an expansive literature on motivated reasoning, which illustrates that humans are psychologically predisposed to resist claims that challenge their convictions (Kunda, 1990; Redlawsk, 2002). Trevors et al. (2016) find that this rejection of dissonant information is driven by a negative emotional reaction of “confusion, anxiety, and frustration” in response to perceived criticism. Importantly, motivated reasoning is thought to be especially fierce when the new information threatens core aspects of identity. Kahan (2013) describes “identity-protective cognition” in which individuals dismiss facts that challenge dominant beliefs among their primary affinity groups. Similarly, Trevors (2019, 61) contends that “intentional correction resistance” is especially likely when “accepting a correction would mean the rejection of some valued aspect of their identity.” For instance, presenting committed partisans with a counter-argument tends to spark a defensive backlash, *increasing* respondents’ support for their prior policy or vote preferences (Taber and Lodge, 2006; Nyhan and Reifler, 2010). Likewise, religion can be a core component of personal identity, and insinuations that one is mistaken in their religious beliefs may be perceived as a challenge to that identity. In that case, religious individuals will be psychologically motivated to reject the reinterpretation and resist compromise.

Whether religious reinterpretations trigger this defensive backlash or not may depend on whether the actor deploying them is viewed as a credible, trusted authority and/or member of their in-group (Lupia and McCubbins, 1998). In those cases, religious reinterpretations may not activate perceptions of identity threat. But if the interlocutor lacks such an affiliation, religious conservatives may perceive their reinterpretations as adversarial or disingenuous manipulations of religious scripture from out-group threats. For instance, Robinson (2010) finds that Evangelicals are less tolerant of progressive positions on the death penalty and immigration when they are attributed to actors outside the Christian Right social movement. And in general, social psychology has established that out-group members are often perceived as less trustworthy than in-group members (Williams, 2001). In the case of liberal actors engaging with religious conservatives, then, religious reinterpretations may do more harm than good, triggering a defensive and dogmatic resistance to compromise.

Liberal Emboldenment

Second, religious reinterpretations may embolden liberal actors to reject partial compromises with religious conservatives. Armed with religious reinterpretations, liberals may feel less need to accommodate religious conservatives’ beliefs, which they now perceive as fundamentally hypocritical or inconsistent—if anything, God is on *their* side. In other words, reinterpretations may make liberals more outspoken critics of religion as a justification for conservative policy, and therefore increasingly intransigent interlocutors.

While scholars have shown that conservative religious messaging can provoke liberal backlash (i.e., Adkins et al., 2013), liberal emboldenment as a byproduct of religious reinterpretations is a relatively novel concept. Nevertheless, the U.S. context

offers some anecdotal support. In recent years, U.S. religious elites have emphasized the Christian obligation to embrace refugees and the poor in an effort to generate support for immigration reform.³ Yet these progressive appeals do not appear to have encouraged pragmatic liberal engagement with conservative Christians. Indeed, liberals routinely wield these reinterpretations not to persuade conservatives, but to shame them, dismissing their policy preferences as indefensibly hypocritical. For instance, at a 2019 Democratic primary debate, presidential hopeful Pete Buttigieg declared to resounding applause: “we should call out hypocrisy when we see it. And for a party that associates itself with Christianity to say that it is OK to suggest that God would smile on the division of families at the hands of federal agents, that God would condone putting children in cages, [that party] has lost all claim to ever use religious language again.”⁴ Viewing religious conservatives now as hypocrites, liberals may be emboldened by religious reinterpretations to categorically reject conservative policy proposals.

In sum, we theorize that religious reinterpretations may obstruct political compromise both by triggering a defensive conservative backlash, and by emboldening liberals to dismiss conservative religious arguments.

Case Selection

To test this theory, we conducted a series of citizen debates in Tunis, Tunisia from 2016-2018. Two considerations drove the selection of Tunisia. First, Tunisia offers a ‘least likely’ case for religious reinterpretations to backfire. After the Arab Spring, Tunisia’s democratic transition became increasingly polarized along secular-Islamist lines (Ozen, 2020). Yet, Tunisians eventually overcame this divide to find common ground, producing a constitution by consensus in 2014 and forming a grand coalition government between Islamists and secularists from 2014-2019 (Grewal, 2020). Notably, in making the case for consensus, the leader of the Islamist party, Rached Ghannouchi, often invoked a religious reinterpretation. While some verses in the Quran prescribe death for apostates and infidels, Ghannouchi argued that in practice the Prophet Muhammad included them even as leaders in his army: “if it wasn’t for that [inclusion], the Arabian peninsula [...] would have fought civil war instead of spreading Islam all over the world” (quoted in Marks 2015, 11.) If religious reinterpretations are effective in breeding compromise, it stands to reason that they will be in Tunisia, where they seem to have worked in the recent past. Tunisia is thus a hard case for our theory showing that reinterpretations may actually backfire.

Second, Tunisia also offers a uniquely hospitable environment to study secular-religious dialogue. As the only Arab Spring country to successfully democratize, Tunisians are now free to debate religion and politics without fear of government repression or monitoring. Relatedly, while most other contexts in the Arab world skew heavily religious, producing social desirability bias to mask secular attitudes, Tunisia instead features relatively equally balanced Islamists and secularists (Brownlee, Masoud, and Reynolds, 2015; Grewal et al., 2019, 864). From a practical

standpoint, Tunisia thus boasts the freest and fairest environment in the Arab world to study secular-religious debates.

Recruitment

Our experimental design, described in more detail below, entails a series of citizen debates in Tunisia pitting liberals against conservatives on two ‘culture wars’ issues. We conduct these debates in downtown Tunis, the capital. As with most lab experiments, our sample of participants is therefore not nationally representative.

However, Tunis is one of the most economically and religiously diverse cities in Tunisia, home to both very impoverished, religiously conservative areas like Sidi Hassine and Ettadhamen, as well as some of the richest and most liberal areas like La Marsa and Gammarth. In the electoral district of Tunis 1, where we conducted our study, Islamists received about 35% of the vote in the 2019 legislative elections, compared to about 15-20% in the coastal Sahel and 40-50% in the conservative south.⁵ In other words, Tunis features a more diverse political spectrum than either heavily secular or heavily Islamist regions, thus offering a useful location for bringing together liberals and conservatives for citizen debates.

To best capture Tunis’ political diversity, we rented storefronts in heavy-pedestrian areas in downtown Tunis to serve as our research sites (see [appendix](#)). We intentionally chose storefronts close to major metro stations (Bardo in 2016; Passage in 2017 and 2018) in order to recruit a relatively diverse sample of everyday Tunisians, both those who live downtown and those commuting to work. The survey team recruited directly from passerby, inviting them to participate in an opinion survey on the particular policy issue (see below). We implemented quotas in recruitment to ensure an equal number of liberals and conservatives to pair up for the debates (more below).

In our first lab experiment, we recruited 240 Tunisians, and in the second, 362, for a total of 602. The [Appendix](#) provides the demographics of the samples, comparing them to the 2014 census. As expected given the location and method of recruitment, the samples skew more urban, male, and single than the national population. However, what is most important for our lab experimental design is that the covariates are balanced across treatment groups (described below, with covariate balance plots in [appendix](#)), thus permitting a valid test of our theory.

Topics and Reinterpretations

To ensure that our results are not skewed by the peculiarities of any particular debate topic, we conducted citizen debates on two “culture wars” issues in Tunisia: the sale of alcohol and female political leadership. These topics were chosen with two criteria in mind: (1) political salience, to ensure respondents had a policy preference and actively participated in the debates; and (2) the presence of religious arguments on both sides of the debate, allowing us to make a liberal religious reinterpretation.

The first debate topic was whether to restrict the sale of alcohol, a salient issue in Tunisian politics. The 2011 Jasmine Revolution that toppled Tunisia's former dictator soon brought Islamists to power, sparking fears from secularists that the Islamists would restrict access to alcohol. While the Islamist party Ennahda slightly increased alcohol taxes, the subsequent secular-led government of Nidaa Tounes, to the ire of Islamists, slashed taxes on spirits from 650 to 50 percent in 2016 (Lageman, 2015; HBN, 2018).

Further, alcohol was a fortuitous topic of debate because it featured a viable religious counterargument. The dominant interpretation of the Quran supports banning alcohol, drawing on verses labelling it an "abomination" (chapter 5:90), asserting that it has more sin than profit (2:220), and imploring believers not to "draw near prayer when you are intoxicated" (4:43). However, other verses treat alcohol more positively. Chapter 47:15 observes that in Heaven, there are "rivers of wine, a joy to those who drink, and rivers of honey, pure and clear." On Earth, chapter 16:67 notes that "from the fruits of the date palm and the grapevine, you obtain intoxicants and goods. Verily in that is a sign for those who reason." While one interpretation of this verse is to praise those who can distinguish between intoxicants and goods, another is to praise those who are able to use reason to obtain intoxicants and goods from these fruits (Kueny, 2001; Kennedy, 2002). While the dominant interpretation today is that alcohol is a sin, "a careful and critical analysis of all references reveals that the Qur'an treats wine with a great ambivalence; the potent liquid that constitutes an abomination in one verse becomes a source of "good food" in another. [...] The prohibition is hardly unconditional or absolute" (Kueny, 2001, 1).

The second debate topic was over female political leadership, another controversial topic in Tunisia (Blackman and Jackson, 2021; Bush and Prather, 2021). On the day our second study ended, Tunis elected its first female mayor, Souad Abderrahim. Her candidacy for mayor had sparked heated debate, with the typically secular ruling party, Nidaa Tounes, making religious arguments against her eligibility. Fouad Bouslema, a spokesman for Nidaa Tounes, claimed that Abderrahim's candidacy was "unacceptable" in a Muslim country because as a woman "she cannot be present in the mosque" on Laylat al-Qadr, the most sacred night of Ramadan (Grewal and Cebul, 2018).

In addition to its political saliency, the topic of female political leadership also features religious arguments on both sides of the debate. Conservative voices often draw upon Quranic verses to argue that women should not serve in political positions. Some cite a verse from Surat al-Nisa (chapter of women): "Men are the protectors and maintainers of women," which "they interpret to mean that God gave men more capabilities than women" (Masoud, Jamal, and Nugent, 2016). Others cite a hadith by Imam Bukhari about the Battle of the Camel: "When news reached the Prophet (peace be upon him) that the Persians had appointed Khosrow II's daughter as their ruler, he said: 'A people who make a woman their ruler will never be successful.'"⁶

On the liberal side, progressive scholars deploy reinterpretations of the Quran to permit women in positions of authority (Mernissi, 1991). In their survey experiment in Egypt, Masoud, Jamal, and Nugent (2016) test the effect of the following verse from

Surat al-Tawba (chapter of atonement): “Believing men and believing women are protectors of one another,” which “they interpret to mean that God does not distinguish between men and women in their capabilities.” Others cite a verse from Surat Ali Imran suggesting that God equally values the work of men and women: “I shall not lose sight of the labor of any of you who labors in My way, be it man or woman; each of you is equal to the other.”

While both topics were controversial issues in Tunisia, they are also different in theoretically important ways. Alcohol is a topic still dominated by religious conservatives; a reinterpretation advocating the permissibility of alcohol is relatively novel. Meanwhile, religious reinterpretations in support of female political leadership are more common today, particularly in Tunisia, which has historically been a regional leader in women’s empowerment. While the novelty of reinterpretations might in theory shape their effectiveness, consistent results that reinterpretations backfire across both topics would provide particularly strong support for our theory.

Citizen Debates

To test whether these religious reinterpretations facilitate or impede compromise, we developed an innovative lab experimental design. While most studies measure compromise indirectly, we propose to directly measure compromise through a series of citizen debates. We pair together two respondents with opposing viewpoints on a culture wars issue and have them debate one another in an attempt to reach a compromise. We then assess, experimentally, whether priming the liberal side to engage the conservative with a religious reinterpretation makes compromise more or less likely.

To do so, we must first split our respondents into “liberal” and “conservative” on a culture war issue. To ensure equal numbers of each, we asked respondents during recruitment for their preferred policy on the debate topic. For each culture war issue, we developed a six-point scale (see [Table 1](#)) arranged from the most liberal policy (i.e., allow the sale of alcohol completely) to the most conservative policy (ban the sale of alcohol completely). The intermediary positions, meanwhile, represent real-world policy compromises. Position 2 on alcohol represents the status quo in Tunisia – a fairly liberal Muslim country. Positions 3 and 4 represent policies pursued in more conservative Egypt, while the more extreme position 5 applies in Saudi Arabia. Likewise, for female political leadership, policy 1 represents the status quo in Tunisia,⁷ policy 3 represented Iran until 2020,⁸ and policy 6 represented Saudi Arabia until 2015.⁹ These policy scales are thus realistic ways to think about the possible compromise positions in Muslim-majority countries.

[Figure 1](#) depicts the policy preferences of the 240 participants in Experiment 1 and the 362 in Experiment 2. Naturally, the status quo option in Tunisia (position 2 for alcohol; position 1 for female leadership) sees the highest support, yet there is considerable variation throughout the scale. For alcohol, we split respondents at the midpoint, labelling respondents selecting positions 1-3 as “liberal” and randomly pairing them with a respondent selecting 4-6 (the “conservative”). For female

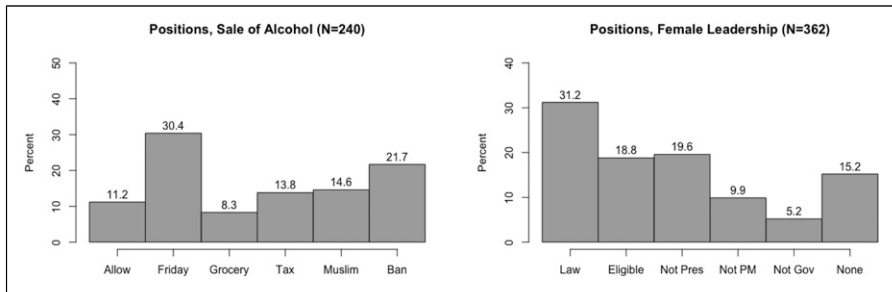
Table I. Policy Scales, Alcohol and Female Leadership.

Experiment 1: Sale of Alcohol

1. Allow the sale of alcohol completely.
2. Allow the sale of alcohol except on Fridays and during Ramadan.
3. Allow the sale of alcohol except in grocery stores and on Fridays and during Ramadan.
4. Increase the tax on alcohol and ban it from grocery stores and on Fridays and during Ramadan.
5. Ban the sale of alcohol to Muslims and increase the tax on alcohol for non-Muslims.
6. Ban the sale of alcohol completely.

Experiment 2: Female political leadership

1. A law should guarantee that women are eligible for president and prime minister.
2. Women should be permitted in any executive position.
3. Women should not be permitted to be the president of the republic.
4. Women should not be permitted to be president or prime minister.
5. Women should not be permitted to be president, prime minister, or governor.
6. Women should not be permitted to assume any executive position.

**Figure 1.** Preferred positions on alcohol ($N = 240$) and female leadership ($N = 362$).

leadership, for which Tunisians were generally more liberal, we categorize the 50% selecting options 1 and 2 as “liberal” and pair them with the 50% choosing options 3-6 (“conservative”). In our analyses, we control for both their initial position (1-6) and the distance between their position and their opponents’.

One liberal and one conservative were then paired, and asked to discuss the issue with each other to see if they could agree on a common policy from the same policy scale. The participants were given 5 minutes to debate with each other in a presence of a moderator, who observed the debate and then recorded whether the debaters agreed on a common policy at the end.¹⁰ The outcome of these discussions – was a common policy reached or not – provides a behavioral, rather than attitudinal, measure of respondents’

ability to compromise. This two-person debate also captures the interpersonal or relational element of compromise, rather than examining individuals in isolation.

In measuring compromise, [Delton, DeScioli, and Ryan \(2020\)](#) highlight the importance of adding real stakes to the negotiations, in their case via financial incentives for successful compromises. When compromise is incentivized, they contend, a refusal to compromise clearly signals the respondent's conviction and dogmatism. For our study, however, monetary incentives may confound the analysis if religious conservatives are more likely to see them as a form of bribery ([Rogers, 2017](#)). Religious individuals may appear dogmatic in these settings not because they are actually dogmatic, but rather because their religion frowns upon greed or materialism.

To overcome this concern, we offered a political incentive instead of a monetary one. Moderators told respondents that if they are able to reach a compromise, their suggestion would be sent to their district's parliamentarians as a compromise solution that their constituents endorse.¹¹ If they failed to agree on a common policy, no recommendation would be sent. This possibility incentivizes compromise by giving participants who compromise the chance to impact government policy, but also incentivizes respondents to take these compromises seriously; otherwise, their ultimate recommendation may diverge from their true policy preferences.

Overall, 57 out of 120 pairs (47.5%) debating alcohol were able to reach a compromise. Meanwhile, 64 of 181 pairs debating female leadership (35.3%) found a compromise. The considerably lower rate of compromise for female leadership suggests this was a relatively more controversial or polarizing topic. The modal compromise position likewise varies considerably by topic. For alcohol, the modal compromise position was position 4, more conservative than the mid-point, suggesting liberals tended to compromise to the conservative position. However, for female leadership, the modal compromise position was position 1, suggesting conservatives tended to compromise to the liberal position.

Our concern in this paper, however, is whether the rate of compromise differs by the type of arguments used by each debater. Is compromise more or less likely when liberals engage conservatives with religious reinterpretations? Despite the overall differences in each debate topic, we find consistent results that reinterpretations impede compromise.

Experimental Design

The experimental component in these citizen debates was to present each side, prior to the debate, with a "commonly heard argument for their side," ostensibly to help them prepare for the conversation. This argument, printed on a paper handed to each debater, presented an argument in support of their position that they could then make in the conversation. Conservatives (those restricting the sale of alcohol/women in higher office) were presented with a conservative argument, and liberals (those supporting the sale of alcohol/women in higher office) with a liberal one.

We used these arguments to encourage the liberals to make religious reinterpretations. In our treatment group, we present the liberal a religious argument in support of their liberal position. Based on the discussions above, we used the following reinterpretations:¹²

Religious Reinterpretation, Experiment 1: Several verses of the Quran permit the consumption of alcohol. For instance, chapter 16:67 states: *“And from the fruits of the date-palm and the grape-vine, you obtain intoxicants and goods. Verily in that is a sign for people who reason.”*

Religious Reinterpretation, Experiment 2: Some say that there is no problem if a woman assumes a political office, such as the presidency of the republic or the mayor of Tunis. And they rely on a verse from Surat al-Tawba in the Holy Qur’an that says, *“Believing men and believing women are protectors of one another.”* And they interpret it to mean that God does not distinguish between men and women in their capabilities. They also rely on a verse from Surat Ali’ Imran: *“I shall not lose sight of the labor of any of you who labors in My way, be it man or woman; each of you is equal to the other.”*

Our motivation for examining religious reinterpretations is to assess whether they might facilitate dialogue and compromise with *religious* conservatives. To heighten the salience of religious arguments on the conservative side as well, we provide the conservative with a comparable religious argument. In our treatment group, the conservative thus received the following argument to help them prepare:

Conservative Religious Prime, Experiment 1: The Quran explicitly prohibits the consumption of alcohol. For instance, chapter 5:90 states: *“O you who believe! Intoxications and gambling, (dedication of) stones and (divination by) arrows are an abomination of Satan’s handwork: avoid it so that you may prosper.”*

Conservative Religious Prime, Experiment 2: Some people say it is not good for a woman to assume a political office, such as the presidency of the republic or the mayor of Tunis. And they rely on a verse from Surat al-Nisa’ in the Holy Qur’an that says, *“Men are the protectors and maintainers of women.”* And they interpret it to mean that God gave men more capabilities than women. They also rely on a hadith narrated by Imam al-Bukhari: *“A people who make a woman their ruler will never be successful.”*

In short, in our treatment group, the conservative side received a religious argument in favor of the conservative position, while the liberal side received a religious reinterpretation in favor of the liberal position. With both sides primed with religion, these **“religious-religious”** debates should encourage the liberal to challenge the conservative on their own religious terms. This treatment group will thus allow us to directly examine the efficacy of religious reinterpretations.

To compare to this treatment group, we develop two different control groups. In both, we switch out the liberal’s prime from a religious reinterpretation to instead a

secular argument. To make these primes realistic, we first conducted ten practice debates without any primes, and then selected the most commonly used secular arguments in favor of alcohol and female leadership:

Secular Liberal Prime, Experiment 1: The sale of alcohol has been an important part of the Tunisian economy for hundreds of years. The Association for the Production of Beverages in Tunisia found that sales of local beer bring in 23 million dinars in revenue each year. Banning alcohol would have negative consequences for tourism and for the economy, and would in addition represent an unwarranted infringement on freedom.

Secular Liberal Prime, Experiment 2: Some say that there is no problem if a woman assumes a political office, such as the presidency of the republic or the mayor of Tunis. And they rely on article 21 of the constitution, which states: “all citizens, male and female, have equal rights and duties, and are equal before the law without any discrimination.” And they interpret it to mean that men and women are equally capable of serving in positions of authority. They also observe that article 74 grants all “male and female voters the right to run for the presidency.”

In the first control group, which we call “**secular-religious**,” the liberal side receives the secular prime above. The conservative side, meanwhile, continues to receive the same religious prime provided in the treatment group. These debates thus mimic the secular-religious polarization that serves as the motivation for this study, pitting secular liberals on one side v. religious conservatives on the other. When comparing the treatment group (religious-religious) to the first control group (secular-religious), the only difference is therefore the prime given to the liberal side (a secular argument instead of a religious reinterpretation).

We also develop a second control group as a robustness check, which we call “**secular-secular**.” In this group, both sides receive secular arguments in favor of their positions. The liberal receives the secular argument above, while the conservative receives the following, also based on the most commonly heard secular argument in the practice debates:

Secular Conservative Prime, Experiment 1: The consumption of alcohol contributes to addiction and unproductive behavior, and is detrimental to one’s health. The World Health Organization states that: “Alcohol consumption is a causal factor in more than 200 disease and injury conditions [...including] mental and behavioural disorders, [...] liver cirrhosis, some cancers and cardiovascular diseases, as well as injuries resulting from violence and road clashes and collisions.”¹³

Secular Conservative Prime, Experiment 2: Some people say it is not good for a woman to assume a political office, such as the presidency of the republic or the mayor of Tunis. And they rely on scientific studies showing that men are seen as more “assertive, independent, self-confident, and prone to act as a leader”¹⁴ than women. And they interpret

Table 2. Treatment Groups, Alcohol and Female Leadership.

Group	Prime		Alcohol		Female leadership	
	Liberal	Conservative	Debates	Participants	Debates	Participants
Treatment	Religious	Religious	40	80	61	122
Control 1	Secular	Religious	40	80	60	120
Control 2	Secular	Secular	40	80	60	120
Total	—	—	120	240	181	362

this to mean that women are unfit for positions of authority. They also observe that women are biologically different from men in ways that may impede their judgment.

Table 2 sums up the three groups. In the treatment, religious-religious, both the liberal and conservative sides of the debate receive religious primes, mimicking liberals engaging religious conservatives with religious reinterpretations. In control 1, secular-religious, liberals are instead primed to engage religious conservatives with secular argumentation. Finally, in control 2, secular-secular, both sides are primed to engage each other with secular argumentation. The last four columns then show our 240 and 362 respondents in each experiment are evenly split into the three groups.

Three clarifications are in order. First, the primes are not perfectly parallel – some may appear stronger than others, some more novel than others, and some present a logic of principles and others of consequences. Rather than aim for equivalence, we designed the primes to be realistic representations of the debates on each topic, based on the most common arguments used in the practice debates. By incorporating the arguments that Tunisians themselves make, we grant our lab experiment the highest degree of external validity.

Second, we do not include the final combination of the hypothetical two-by-two: a religious-secular group; that is, a liberal wielding a religious reinterpretation against a secular conservative. The stated intent of religious reinterpretations is to sway religious conservatives, not secular conservatives, and thus including this combination made the least sense theoretically. Given sample size considerations, we preferred to grant more power to the existing treatment groups.¹⁵

Finally, while we hope respondents will use our primes in their debates, there may be noncompliance. Hence, our experimental design is one of ‘encouragement’ or intention to treat (ITT). To determine if respondents actually made the arguments given to them in the primes, we asked the moderators to record what type of arguments – religious or secular – the debaters were making. As we show below, the primes indeed shaped debaters’ arguments, but not with full compliance. While we first show the ITT analysis, we thus supplement it with an analysis of the compliers, examining both whether they received the reinterpretations prime and whether they actually deployed that reinterpretation in the debate. We see consistent results using either method.

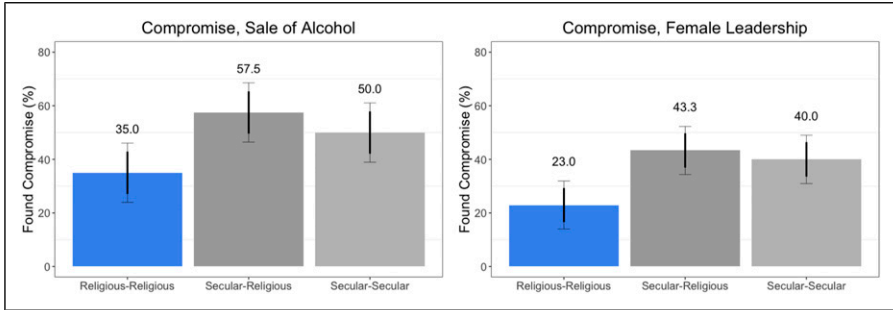


Figure 2. Compromise by treatment group.

Intention to Treat Results

Figure 2 presents our main results: the percent of debates reaching compromise in each treatment group.¹⁶ Across both debate topics, our treatment group (religious-religious) saw significantly lower rates of compromise than the control groups. For alcohol, only 14 of the 40 debates (35%) were able to reach a compromise in the religious-religious treatment, compared to 57.5% in the secular-religious control group and 50% in the secular-secular control group. For female leadership as well, only 14 of 61 pairs (23%) compromised in the religious-religious treatment, compared to 43% in secular-religious and 40% in secular-secular. In other words, across both experiments, we see consistent results: when we provided the liberal debater with a religious reinterpretation, the rate of compromise was nearly cut in half.

Tables 3 (alcohol) and 4 (female leadership) test the statistical significance of these differences in the presence of covariates. Both Tables present three regressions with the dependent variable as whether a group reached compromise (0-1). In all models, the omitted or reference category is the secular-religious treatment (control 1; we present results using control 2 in the [appendix](#)). In model 1, we present the simple bivariate correlation, showing that the differences in Figure 2 were statistically significant.

In model 2, we add debate-level controls.¹⁷ First, we include the ideological distance between the two debaters' policy preferences (on the 6-point scale), on the assumption that pairs that were more polarized in their preferred positions should find it harder to compromise. Second, we control for the gender of the pair (male-male, female-female, mixed), which we blocked on during randomization to ensure balance across treatment groups.¹⁸ Third, conscious of enumerator effects (i.e., [Benstead, 2013](#)), we control for the gender of the debate moderator. For alcohol, all moderators were women, while for female leadership, we blocked to ensure that 55% of debates in each treatment group featured a female moderator. Finally, for debates with a female moderator, we also control for whether the moderator was veiled (wearing hijab), which might create social pressure to appear religious ([Blaydes and Gillum, 2013](#)). We blocked on this

Table 3. Rate of Compromise by Treatment Group, Alcohol (OLS).

	DV: Compromise (0-1)		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Religious-Religious	-0.225** (0.111)	-0.208* (0.110)	-0.193* (0.116)
Secular-Secular	-0.075 (0.111)	-0.073 (0.110)	-0.054 (0.113)
<u>Debate level covariates</u>			
Ideological Distance		-0.058 (0.042)	-0.050 (0.046)
Male-male pair		0.077 (0.182)	0.089 (0.171)
Mixed pair		0.197 (0.195)	0.206 (0.188)
Veiled enumerator		0.158* (0.091)	0.179* (0.093)
Wave		-0.134 (0.091)	-0.123 (0.096)
<u>Individual level covariates</u>			
Age			0.005 (0.004)
Female			0.013 (0.041)
Outward piety			0.013 (0.063)
Unemployed			-0.145 (0.167)
Student			0.016 (0.095)
Urban			-0.050 (0.089)
Married			-0.094 (0.105)
Education			0.0005 (0.030)
Income			0.061 (0.148)
Intensity			-0.016 (0.106)
Hear			0.087 (0.076)
Position 2			0.016 (0.099)
Position 3			-0.079 (0.125)
Position 4			-0.022 (0.069)
Position 5			0.030 (0.105)
Position 6			-0.021 (0.099)
Clustered SE			✓
Constant	0.575*** (0.079)	0.784*** (0.271)	0.554 (0.382)
Unit of analysis	Debate	Debate	Individual
Observations	120	120	237
R ²	0.035	0.105	0.125
Adjusted R ²	0.019	0.049	0.031

Note: * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

Note: The reference group is Secular-Religious.

characteristic as well, ensuring 45% of the female moderators in each treatment group were veiled. Each of these proportions reflect the actual proportions in the survey team.

Table 4. Rate of Compromise by Treatment Group, Female Leadership (OLS).

	DV: Compromise (0-1)		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Religious-Religious	-0.204** (0.086)	-0.208** (0.087)	-0.186** (0.084)
Secular-Secular	-0.033 (0.086)	-0.033 (0.087)	-0.034 (0.090)
<u>Debate level covariates</u>			
Ideological distance		-0.040 (0.027)	-0.041 (0.028)
Male-male pair		-0.071 (0.124)	-0.036 (0.120)
Mixed pair		-0.067 (0.128)	-0.070 (0.124)
Female enumerator		0.058 (0.074)	0.049 (0.072)
Veiled enumerator		0.010 (0.143)	0.017 (0.147)
<u>Individual level covariates</u>			
Age			-0.002 (0.003)
Sex			0.012 (0.031)
Outward piety			0.052 (0.053)
Unemployed			0.096 (0.102)
Student			0.063 (0.074)
Urban			-0.010 (0.069)
Married			0.151* (0.082)
Education			-0.042* (0.024)
Income			-0.002 (0.009)
Income (refused)			-0.068 (0.076)
Intensity			-0.033 (0.059)
Hear			0.143*** (0.056)
Position 2			0.039 (0.070)
Position 3			0.042 (0.048)
Position 4			-0.095 (0.074)
Position 5			0.137 (0.112)
Position 6			0.026 (0.055)
Clustered SE			✓
Constant	0.433*** (0.061)	0.590*** (0.148)	0.682*** (0.238)
Unit of analysis	Debate	Debate	Individual
Observations	181	181	362
R ²	0.035	0.054	0.112
Adjusted R ²	0.024	0.015	0.049

Note: *p < 0.1; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01.

Note: The reference group is Secular-Religious.

In model 3, we add individual-level controls. To do so, we shift the unit of analysis from the debate to the individual, clustering standard errors at the debate level. Individual-level covariates, collected before the debates, included each debaters' initial position on the 1-6 point scale, the intensity of preference for that position, their willingness to hear an alternative viewpoint, as well as demographics: age, gender, employment, student, urban, marriage, education, income, and whether respondents were outwardly religious.¹⁹

Across all three models and across both experiments, the religious-religious condition has significantly or marginally significantly lower rates of compromise than secular-religious, whether with no controls (model 1), debate-level controls (model 2), or individual-level controls (model 3). This suggests that compromise did become more difficult when the liberal was primed to challenge the religious conservative with religious counterarguments.

Measuring Compliance

As mentioned earlier, the results above reflect an encouragement or intention to treat (ITT) design, where we provided the liberal a religious reinterpretation in the hopes that they would use that argument in debate. To assess whether they actually did so, we had debate moderators record whether respondents made religious arguments (unfortunately, for alcohol, we only asked moderators to do this in wave 2).

Figure 3 plots the percent of liberal respondents that invoked religious arguments by treatment group. Across both experiments, the primes worked as expected, increasing the likelihood that liberals made those arguments. For alcohol, 40% of liberals in the religious-religious treatment made religious arguments, compared to just 10% in the control groups ($p = 0.02$). For female leadership, 30% of liberals did so, compared to about 16% in the control groups ($p = 0.046$).

While the primes therefore succeeded, there is still considerable non-compliance. Many liberals did not make religious arguments in the treatment group,²⁰ while there are also a small number of liberals who did make religious arguments in the control

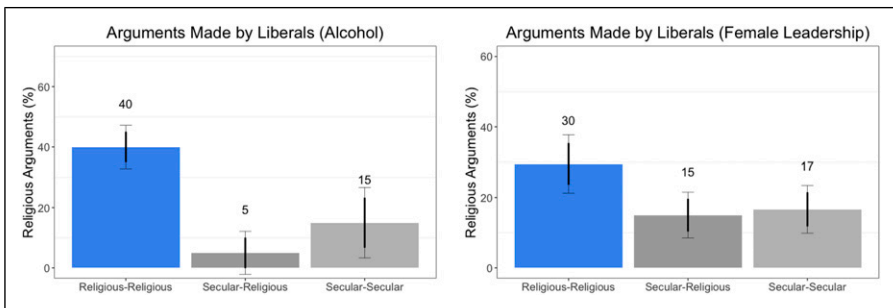


Figure 3. Liberal religious reinterpretations by treatment group.

Table 5. Subsetting by Compliance, Female Leadership (OLS).

	Dependent variable: Compromise (0-1)					
	Compliers			Non-compliers		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Religious-Religious	-0.429** (0.171)	-0.392** (0.188)	-0.424*** (0.145)	-0.156 (0.103)	-0.143 (0.103)	-0.122 (0.102)
Secular-Secular	-0.029 (0.127)	-0.012 (0.137)	-0.067 (0.142)	-0.036 (0.123)	-0.012 (0.124)	-0.013 (0.126)
Debate-level covariates		✓	✓		✓	✓
Individual-level covariates			✓			✓
Constant	0.429*** (0.100)	0.372 (0.264)	0.795* (0.427)	0.436*** (0.077)	0.599*** (0.186)	0.362 (0.299)
Unit of analysis	Debate	Debate	Individual	Debate	Debate	Individual
Clustered SE			✓			✓
Observations	67	67	134	114	114	228
R ²	0.103	0.109	0.263	0.022	0.083	0.167
Adjusted R ²	0.075	0.004	0.101	0.005	0.023	0.067

Note: * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

Note: The reference group is Secular-Religious.

groups. There is similar non-compliance among conservatives, with some but not all making religious arguments when primed to do so (see [appendix](#)).

We deal with this non-compliance in two ways. First, we subset the data to compliers and non-compliers, showing that the ITT results were driven by the compliers. We focus on experiment 2 (female leadership), given that we only recorded debaters' arguments for half of experiment 1. For each treatment group, we code compliance as both sides of the pair utilizing the argument provided: i.e., a compliant debate in the religious-religious treatment is both sides making religious arguments, while a complier in the secular-secular treatment is both sides making secular arguments.

The data suggest that the ITT results were indeed driven by the compliers. Among the subset of debates in the religious-religious treatment that actually featured religious-religious argumentation, *none* of them were able to reach a compromise. That 0% is significantly lower than either the 43% compromise rate among compliers in secular-religious or the 40% among compliers in secular-secular ($p < 0.001$). Meanwhile, among non-compliers, that effect is weaker: 28% found a compromise in the religious-religious treatment compared to a similar 44 and 40% in the control groups. [Table 5](#) shows that the results among compliers were significant with or without controls, but never significant among the non-compliers.

A second approach is instrumental variable analysis, treating the religious-religious treatment as an instrument that increases the likelihood of an actual religious-religious debate. [Table S8 \(Appendix\)](#) presents these results. In line with [Figure 3](#), the religious-

religious treatment was indeed a strong instrument of religious-religious argumentation. In turn, these exogenously induced religious-religious debates have a negative effect on compromise, though not quite reaching statistical significance, with p -values between 0.108 and 0.134.

One explanation for these weaker results is that there is a potential violation of the exclusion restriction, a key assumption for this analysis. Even when liberals did not actually make the religious argument provided to them, it may have still affected their behavior, particularly by emboldening them not to compromise. If so, we may see a reduction in compromise even without compliance. We test this proposition more explicitly in the next section on mechanisms.

In short, the ITT results appear to be driven by the compliers, those who actually took up our treatment and deployed the religious reinterpretation provided to them. It thus suggests that liberal efforts to persuade religious conservatives by “speaking their language” backfired, obstructing compromise between them. To examine why, we now turn to the mechanisms.

Mechanisms

As theorized, we find evidence that both sides were to “blame” for the breakdown in dialogue in the religious-religious treatment. Conservatives grew defensive in response to religious counterarguments, while liberals were emboldened by having religion on their side.

The Defensive Conservative

In the post-debate questionnaire, respondents were asked for their level of support (1-5) with the statement: “Differences in interpretations of religious matters is a good

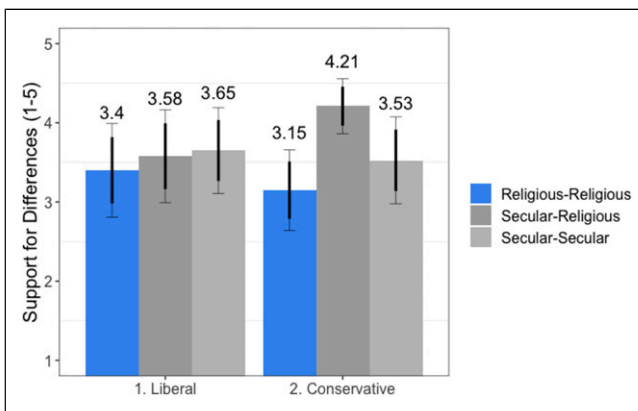


Figure 4. Support for different interpretations, alcohol.

thing.”²¹ For conservative respondents, this statement captures whether they are open or close-minded toward religious counterarguments. Figure 4 plots the level of support by treatment condition in the alcohol experiment. When only the conservative side is given a religious argument, the conservative claims to be highly supportive of different interpretations (4.21/5). However, that support drops considerably when the liberal is actually armed with a religious counterargument (3.15/5), a statistically significant drop ($p = 0.021$). The liberal side, meanwhile, remains unchanged by treatment group.

The conservative thus appears to become defensive and resistant when confronted with alternative interpretations of their religion. However, this finding does not replicate in the female leadership debates. In those debates, conservatives were no different by treatment group in their level of support for multiple interpretations. One possible explanation is that for female leadership, the liberal reinterpretation may have simply been more common: conservatives may have already heard this reinterpretation, and hence its repetition in this particular debate did not elicit a backlash.

The Emboldened Liberal

Religious conservatives, however, were not the only force obstructing compromise. We also find that their liberal opponents were emboldened after reading the religious counterargument. Post-debate, respondents were asked for their level of agreement with the statement: “I feel pressure to conform to the opinions of members of my religious community.” If they became emboldened, liberals should feel less pressure to conform to the dominant religious interpretation. Figure 5 shows that while liberals in the secular-religious treatment felt strong pressure to conform, liberals in the religious-religious treatment – now equipped with a religious counterargument – felt significantly less pressure to conform (from 2.89 to 1.55, $p = 0.012$). The conservative, meanwhile, was unchanged by treatment group.

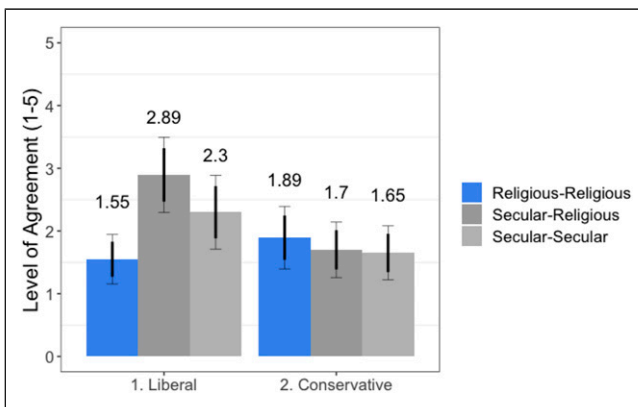


Figure 5. Pressure to conform to religious community, alcohol.

The liberal thus appears to become emboldened to stand their ground when given a religious counterargument. But once again, this effect did not replicate in the second experiment on female leadership ($p = 0.579$). One possible explanation mirrors that for conservatives: the reinterpretation was already well-known by liberals, and thus did not embolden them further. Another explanation could be that the egalitarian position was simply more powerful in Tunisia: as we showed above, when they did reach a compromise, liberals tended to ‘win’ on this issue, bringing conservatives to their side, unlike for alcohol. Perhaps Tunisian liberals face little pressure to conform with hardline conservative beliefs on this issue, making it unlikely that a reinterpretation would bring that down any further.

In short, for alcohol, we find evidence of both mechanisms: religious reinterpretations, when deployed by everyday citizens, tended to obstruct compromise by producing both a defensive conservative and an emboldened liberal. By contrast, for female leadership, we do not find evidence of either. However, the treatment group still obstructed compromise over female leadership, suggesting there may also be other mechanisms at play.

Discussion and Conclusion

Overall, the results of our two experiments dampen optimism that religious reinterpretations might be a remedy to secular-religious polarization. While it appeared intuitive that ‘speaking the same language’ would facilitate compromise, our citizen debates suggest the opposite: that attempting to persuade religious conservatives on their own religious terms is more likely to backfire. We uncover evidence that reinterpretations make conservatives defensive, while also emboldening liberals, with both effects combining to make compromise more difficult. When deployed by everyday citizens, therefore, religious reinterpretations may not be effective means of bridging the secular-religious divide.

However, this does not negate their potential efficacy when deployed by religious scholars. As we noted at the start, the identity and credibility of the interlocutor conveying the religious counterargument likely shapes its efficacy (Robinson, 2010). In short, the results in our study caution us to think through – and empirically validate – precisely when and how religious reinterpretations could be effective. If they are only effective when deployed by religious leaders, it would suggest that liberals and activists should try to privately lobby religious authorities rather than attempt to deploy reinterpretations themselves. At the same time, they should be cognizant that an appearance of politicization might undermine those religious leaders’ authority (Williamson et al., 2022).

One potential scope condition concerns the progressive context of Tunisia. For both issues, the status quo position in Tunisia was at the liberal end of the spectrum. However, we would anticipate that results might be even stronger in a more conservative context. First, the religious reinterpretation would be relatively more novel in these contexts, likely producing an even sharper conservative backlash or dismissal of

the viewpoint. For a similar reason, liberals may be more emboldened by reinterpretations in such contexts, having not often heard this viewpoint before.

The results in this paper, and in particular the mechanisms, may also have important implications beyond reinterpretations. First, the notion of the ‘defensive conservative’ highlights a potential qualification to the assumption that religious conservatives are inherently dogmatic. Across both of our experiments, the two control groups – secular-religious and secular-secular – produced roughly similar results. In other words, when conservatives were primed with religion, they did not seem to become any more dogmatic or unwilling to compromise. On the contrary, they only appeared to become dogmatic when their religious interpretations were directly challenged by their liberal opponents. These findings accord with recent empirical work on religion and democracy, which show that religion is not inherently incompatible with democracy, and that productive dialogue between religious conservatives and secular liberals may still be possible (Evans, 2017; Kettell and Djupe, 2020).

Likewise, the notion of an ‘emboldened liberal’ should spark additional inquiries into whether the secular-religious divide is solely the result of conservative intransigence. In the Middle East, for instance, it suggests that additional attention should be paid to the secularists, and not just the Islamists, as potential sources of dogmatism and democratic breakdown. That would accord with the new wave of scholarship suggesting that the failure of the Arab Spring transitions, like in Egypt, are due to the actions and dogmatism of both sides, not just the Islamists (Brownlee, Masoud, and Reynolds, 2015; Faruqi and Fahmy, 2017). Overall, we hope that our analysis will provide useful food for thought for both theorization and empirical testing for future scholarship on religion and politics.

Acknowledgement

For helpful feedback, we thank two anonymous reviewers, Editor Paul Huth, Amaney Jamal, Mark Aveyard, Chris Dawes, Kristen Kao, Macarten Humphreys, Daniel Masterson, Rebecca Morton, Salma Mousa, Nikos Nikiforakis, Elizabeth Nugent, Ernesto Reuben, Mark Tessler, and participants at the American Political Science Association (APSA) annual conference, the Winter Experimental Social Science Institute (WESSI) and Princeton University’s Politics Research in Experimental Social Science (PRESS) workshop. We are indebted to the excellent work of One to One for Research and Polling in administering the experiments. Experiments approved through Princeton IRB #7848 and Yale HSC #1609018431. Replication files are available on the *Journal of Conflict Resolution* webpage.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

For their generous support, we thank Princeton University's Politics Research in Experimental Social Science (PRESS), the Bobst Center for Peace and Justice, and the Global Religion Research Initiative.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. We use the term reinterpretation to signal that these interpretations differ from what is currently the dominant reading. Given that existing interpretations are often conservative, reinterpretations are typically more progressive. We do not mean to imply that reinterpretations are any less valid, just different.
2. While not engaging reinterpretations, a large experimental literature on religion suggests that religious cues, even without endorsers, can shape political attitudes. See, e.g., [Glazier \(2015\)](#); [McClendon and Riedl \(2021\)](#); [Djupe and Smith \(2019\)](#).
3. See for instance statements from Southern Baptist Convention and Rev. James Martin.
4. Video is available here.
5. These figures add up the performance of Ennahda and the two more hardline Islamist parties, 'Itlaf Karama and Hizb Errahma. The latter two performed relatively well in Tunis 1 (7 and 5%, respectively), suggesting Tunis is not in short supply of salafists, either.
6. We are indebted to One to One for Research and Polling for bringing this hadith to our attention.
7. The 2014 Tunisian constitution explicitly guarantees both men and women the right to run for president.
8. In 2020, Iran's Guardian Council clarified that women can run for president.
9. Saudi women gained the right to run in municipal elections in 2015.
10. Moderators were enumerators from the survey team. Our coding of compromise includes one side moving entirely to the other's position, as our focus is on whether agreement is found and not on what position it is found.
11. We are indebted to Macarten Humphreys for this suggestion. The district in which we conducted our experiments, Tunis 1, featured a diverse array of MPs, both liberal and conservative, religious and secular. All sides should therefore equally value the prospect of informing their MPs.
12. We were careful not to mention a particular scholar as the source of these reinterpretations, as we wanted to isolate the effect of a reinterpretation from its endorser. The female leadership prime is intentionally modeled off of the one used by [Masoud, Jamal, and Nugent \(2016\)](#).

13. <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs349/en/>. Footnote not included in prime.
14. Quoted in Eagly and Karau (2002, 574). Footnote not provided in the prime itself.
15. For similar reasons, we do not include a third control group without any primes at all.
16. For all figures, crosshatches represent 95% confidence intervals, while the bolded portion represents 84%, in line with Knol, Pestman, and Grobbee (2011), MacGregor-Fors and Payton (2013), and an anonymous reviewer's point that visually these better reflect the test of significance at the 0.05 level.
17. For alcohol, conducted over two waves, we also control for wave (August 2016 or January 2017).
18. For alcohol, each treatment group of 40 debates had 27 male-male pairs, 10 mixed pairs, and 3 female-female pairs. For female leadership, each group of 60 debates included 32 male-male pairs, 22 mixed pairs, and 6 female-female pairs. These proportions were based on the rate of recruitment of women and men in the pilot. While this breakdown would not be ideal for examining heterogenous treatment effects by gender, for this study we merely require the gender of the pair to be balanced across each treatment group.
19. We did not ask directly about religiosity, not wanting to contaminate our priming of religious arguments in the debates. We instead had enumerators record whether women wore a veil, and whether men had a religious beard or zabiba (a raisin-shaped mark on one's forehead induced by pressing into a prayer mat).
20. Liberals who were more religious were significantly more likely to use our reinterpretations, as were those who were more feminist. Those who were debating in front of veiled enumerators, meanwhile, were less likely to use them. Given these correlates of compliance, we continue to control for all demographics.
21. For alcohol, this was only asked in wave 2.

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