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WHAT IS GUIDING THE HEALTH INFORMATION-SEEKING BEHAVIORS  
OF RIGHT-LEANING CHRISTIANS  
REGARDING THE COVID-19 VACCINES?

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WHAT IS GUIDING THE HEALTH INFORMATION-SEEKING BEHAVIORS  
OF RIGHT-LEANING CHRISTIANS  
REGARDING THE COVID-19 VACCINES?

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**~Dedicated to my mother and sister~**

***Your love and support have meant the world to me! Thank you both!***

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## **ABSTRACT**

Research has shown that politics influence Americans' religious identities (Christian, atheist, etc.) and behaviors (church attendance). However, the research on how right-leaning Christians view the Covid-19 vaccines (and other measures to control the virus) has focused mainly on religion as driving the narrative (through Christian nationalism, etc.). Research also has not been done on where right-leaning Christians are receiving (and not receiving) information on the Covid-19 vaccines. This study aims to fill this gap by analyzing 17 interviews with right-leaning Christians about their information-seeking behavior on the Covid-19 vaccines. Contrary to media reports about famous pastors discussing the Covid-19 vaccines, the participants seldom discussed them in their churches. Also, most of my participants' information-seeking behavior was driven by politics and their preconceived notions about vaccines rather than religion. The messages they received about the vaccines from these sources had a secular and political bent, not a religious one. This study adds to the research on Covid-19 and religion by suggesting that many right-leaning Christians' negative feelings toward the vaccines were driven more by politics than religion.

## INTRODUCTION

Scholars have shown that Americans' political identities influence their religious identities and behaviors as much as the other way around. As religion has declined as a central marker in Americans' identities, political identities have become more prominent. People are now sorting in and out of identity groups (including religion) associated with their political identity (Egan 2020; Margolis 2018a). In this study, I explore how right-leaning Christians articulate their health-seeking behaviors and sources of information to understand how politics and religion shape their efforts. Their narratives reveal that politics seems to play the central role.

Along with most of the Western world, America has become more secular (Voas & Chaves 2016). As a result, political identities influence things like who goes to church and who does not (Djupe, Neiheisel, and Sokhey 2018). Americans' political identities are beginning to guide their religious ones and behavior when it used to be the reverse. After Trump was elected, more supporters began identifying as Evangelical (Smith 2021). This might be because a disproportionate number of Evangelicals supported Trump during the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections, so this political group might have associated that religious group with being pro-Trump. This is a sign that the word "Evangelical" is moving from a religious label to a political one.

Despite knowing that politics is beginning to dominate (and drive) religion, much of the research on right-leaning Christians and their adverse reactions to the Covid-19 vaccines (and other protections against the virus) has centered religion as central to the narrative, e.g., through Christian Nationalism<sup>1</sup>, etc. (Corcoran, Scheitle, & DiGregorio 2021; Perry, Whitehead, & Grubbs 2020a; Whitehead & Perry 2020). Media outlets have also featured stories about

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<sup>1</sup> Christian nationalism is a religiopolitical ideology that assumed white Christian norms and values should be privileged in the public and private sphere (Gorski & Perry 2022).



established pastors speaking out for (McCammon 2021) and against (Hals 2021; Wilson 2021) the vaccine. Additionally, few studies have inquired where right-leaning Christians are receiving information on the Covid-19 vaccines (for an exception using survey data, see Gorski & Perry 2022, pgs. 30-36). This study aims to fill that gap by using qualitative interview data to explore right-leaning Christians' health information-seeking behavior regarding vaccines and assess whether politics or religion plays the leading role in determining health information consumption.

## **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

Since the Covid-19 vaccine's release, researchers have asked which people are the most hesitant to receive it and why. In the first few months of 2021, about 17 percent of the US population said they did not plan on getting the vaccine (Kaiser Family Foundation 2021). One prominent group that viewed the vaccine with relative skepticism has been right-leaning Christians. According to the Pew Research Center, a third of white evangelicals—a subset of right-leaning Christians—have said they would not be vaccinated against Covid-19 (Funk & Gramlich 2021).

Studies on vaccination decisions have suggested several reasons why Americans may choose not to receive their vaccines. Some scholars have suggested that individualism has contributed to Americans' choices not to vaccinate themselves or their children. The schemes that Americans used to frame this choice were individualist ones, not ones made for the collective (Chen, Frey, & Presidente 2021; Cole, Schofer, & Velasco 2023; Estep and Greenberg, 2020). This fits with DeSourcey & Waggoner's (2022) *individual liberty* (caring about one's rights and comfort over the wellbeing of those around them) and *responsible sociality* (caring about the wellbeing of those around them over one's rights and comfort).

Americans have also lost trust in public institutions (e.g., medical establishments, government, etc.), so they might choose not to vaccinate themselves for that reason (Cole, Schofer, & Velasco 2023; Hornsey, Harris & Fielding 2018; de Figueiredo et al. 2020; Gauchat 2012; Goldenberg 2021; Kozlowski 2022; Larson, et al. 2011). Historically marginalized ethnic groups tend to report relatively greater distrust of government and medical institutions when it comes to vaccines due to legacies of scientific racism and negative experiences with the healthcare profession (Decoteau & Sweet 2023; Dong, et al. 2021; Whitehead & Perry 2020). Americans might also choose not to vaccinate because they have high levels of conspiratorial thinking (Corcoran, Scheitle, & DiGregorio, 2023; Hornsey, Harris & Fielding, 2018).

One of the most reluctant groups to embrace the Covid-19 vaccines and other measures to contain the virus have been right-leaning Christians (particularly those who score high on measures of Christian nationalism). Studies of right-leaning Christians and Covid-19 tend to center their religious identity in explaining their reactions to these measures. Scholars of Christian nationalism suggest this group was the most likely to decline to wear masks, practice social distancing (Perry, Whitehead, & Grubbs, 2021a), and vaccinate themselves against the virus (Corcoran, Scheitle, & DiGregorio, 2021; Gorski & Perry, 2022; Guidry et al., 2022; Whitehead & Perry, 2020). They might have been reluctant to embrace these measures because they favored protecting capitalism and personal liberty over protecting groups like older people and disabled people (Perry, Whitehead, & Grubbs, 2021b). Some right-leaning Christians are also hesitant about receiving vaccines, in general, because they believe vaccines were created using fetal stem cell tissue—which they link to abortion (Randal, 2019).

This research is centering religion over politics despite scholars showing that Americans' political identities are driving other identities and behaviors (including religion) (Egan 2020;

Margolis 2018a). For example, while right-leaning Americans stay in church, the left-leaning are self-selecting out of church (Djupe, Neiheisel, and Sokhey 2018). This research also shows that Americans whose politics do not align with their church attend less frequently (Margolis 2018a 2018b; Patrikios 2008). Due to political polarization, the association of Christianity with right-leaning politics has caused left-leaning Americans to identify as nonreligious or secular (Hout and Fischer 2002, 2014; Margolis 2018a, 2018b; Putnam and Campbell 2010). If politics is guiding behaviors like church attendance, it also stands to reason that it might be guiding other behaviors thought to be influenced by religion.

There are reasons to think politics might drive these behaviors as much (if not more than) religion. Research has shown that conservative Christians are also more likely to answer science questions incorrectly, not because they are ignorant of science per se, but because they go against their stated religious and political identity (Baker, Perry, & Whitehead, 2020). Thus, as vaccination became politicized and hesitancy became associated with conservative identity, this may have also stoked skepticism for individual right-leaning Christians (Gorski & Perry, 2022). Yet outside of survey questions like those used by Gorski and Perry (2022), little qualitative research exists on where this group gathers information about Covid-19 vaccines and whether religion or politics is the primary driver of their health information-seeking behavior.

The current article focuses on an unanswered question in the literature on right-leaning Christians and the Covid-19 vaccine regarding where this group receives information to support their views. As seen above, much of the research centers religion over politics in how right-leaning Christians view the vaccines (and Covid-19 protections generally). I aim to assess whether politics might drive the narrative on right-leaning Christians' health information-seeking behavior more so than religion.

### *The Information Sources Among Conservatives*

According to a YouGov poll conducted between March 26-28, 2022, Republicans were asked what media sources they consumed (Sanders 2022). When asked if Republicans followed cable TV news, 40% said they did (compared to 47% of Democrats). About a quarter (23%) of Republicans consumed Conservative news websites. Republicans (31%) and Democrats (33%) consumed social media for news at about the same rates. Most Republicans (50%) said they trusted Fox News—10% more than the far-right Newsmax and 20% more than any other news source. They also distrusted every other news outlet listed in the poll (except for the Weather Channel). The news personalities they trusted—Tucker Carlson, Laura Ingraham, and Sean Hannity—were not journalists out in the field but were late-night talk show hosts.

### *Are Religious Leaders Providing Political Information?*

People might think pastors are a source of political information. With that said, most pastors do not discuss politics with their congregation (Djupe & Gilbert 2009). They know their congregations' stances on political issues and might speak about politics if their stances align (Djupe and Gilbert 2003; McDaniel 2008; Owens 2007). However, they will remain silent on political issues if their congregations' political views do not align with theirs (Djupe & Neiheisel 2022; Stark et al. 1971). Therefore, pastoral political engagement largely reflects the congregation they are leading.

Some research has been done on the effects of religious leaders providing information on vaccines and encouraging people to be vaccinated against Covid-19. These studies claim that when pastors encourage their congregants to receive the Covid-19 vaccines, they are more likely to do so (Ruijs, Hautvast, et al. 2013; Guidry et al. 2022). News outlets have also covered celebrity pastors encouraging (McCammon 2021) and discouraging (Hals 2021; Wilson 2021)

others to vaccinate against Covid-19. This picture suggests pastors might provide moral guidance and information regarding the Covid-19 vaccines. However, as mentioned earlier, research suggests most pastors do not talk about politics from the pulpit, so this might apply to the Covid-19 vaccines (Djupe & Gilbert 2009). Therefore, research should be done to explore what congregants hear from their Church leaders about the vaccines—if anything.

*Do Conservatives Live In An Information Echo Chamber? Does It Matter?*

Whether conservatives reside in an information echo chamber has been debated among scholars. Some scholars suggest that conservatives are more likely to live in an information echo chamber (Hmielowski, Hutchens, & Beam, 2020; Jamieson & Cappella, 2008), while others suggest that they consume a wider variety of information outlets (Heatherly et al., 2017). Even if Republicans are exposed to competing viewpoints, research indicates that being exposed to left-leaning views does not change their minds but strengthens their pre-existing beliefs (Bail et al., 2018). This might spill over into other areas of inquiry.

A phenomenon called *belief perseverance* might explain why exposure to various news sources may not change people's minds. This phenomenon suggests that people do not change their beliefs when exposed to new information that indicates they are wrong about a topic (Anderson 2007). If someone reads information that convinces them that vaccines are unsafe, this belief will persist even if the information is redacted and proven false (Siebert & Siebert, 2023). Sometimes, the belief might become stronger. For example, when vaccine-hesitant people were exposed to information supporting the safety and effectiveness of flu vaccines, their distrust increased (Nyhan & Reifler 2014). Therefore, mere exposure to information that contradicts people's views on the Covid-19 vaccines may not be enough to change someone's mind—it might make them double down on their beliefs.

*Confirmation bias* is parallel to *belief perseverance*. Confirmation bias consists of people seeking information supporting their preexisting beliefs (Nickerson 1988). For example, the vaccine-hesitant seek out doctors and other medical experts that defect from the mainstream consensus on vaccines (Brubaker 2021; Goldenberg 2021). There are also online chat rooms supporting vaccine-hesitant peoples' preexisting beliefs about vaccine harm and the medical establishment (Ma & Stahl 2017; Kata 2012). Research needs to be done on whether right-leaning Christians live in an information echo chamber regarding vaccines or if they're exposed to various perspectives. We also need to know how they respond to new information contradicting their vaccine views.

## **THIS STUDY**

This study aims to fill three gaps in the literature. Firstly, while studies have suggested that right-leaning Christians have more negative views on the Covid-19 vaccines than other groups, research has not investigated what information sources (religious leaders, social media, traditional news media, etc.) support these views. Secondly, most of the quantitative research done on right-leaning Christian's reaction to the Covid-19 vaccines (and precautions against the virus generally) assumes religion is at least partially (if not totally) driving the narrative—e.g., through Christian nationalism, etc. In this study, I aim to see if the health-information-seeking behavior regarding the Covid-19 vaccine is driven by religion or other motivations (e.g., politics, etc.). Thirdly, I tap into these sources' moral rhetoric they use to discuss the Covid-19 vaccines. I am using in-depth interviews for this study because they allow me to probe deeper into my participants' answers for more detail. This is useful for a study on health information-seeking behavior because it will enable the participants to articulate what information they seek and why they trust it.

## **METHODS**

### *Study Design*

Several research methods have been productively applied to uncover how people understand the Covid-19 vaccines (and the virus generally)—including content analysis of online forms (Parmigini 2021) and when the data are available, survey analysis (Corcoran, Scheitle, & DiGregorio, 2021; Gorski & Perry, 2022; Whitehead & Perry, 2020; Guidry et al., 2022). However, in-depth interviews have been a common method because they allow interviewees to voice their views and experiences in their own words (Decoteau & Sweet, Forth.; Dong et al., 2021). This means they are not only a productive tool for answering questions about Covid-19, but interviews are a research method that empowers the interviewee. While in-depth interviews have been carried out with other groups that are hesitant about the Covid-19 vaccines, they have not been done with right-leaning Christians (Decoteau & Sweet Forth.; Dong et al. 2021). My analyses utilized data from semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 17 politically right-leaning Christians.

This study aimed to understand how politically right-leaning Christians sought health information on the Covid-19 vaccines. I used semi-structured interviews to have my subjects detail their health information-seeking behaviors. This approach allowed my participants to talk in-depth about the information they consumed and how they went about finding it while allowing me to probe for more details. Because my participants lived in various locations within the United States, my interviews took place through three different mediums: in-person, over the phone, or via Zoom call. Semi-structured interviews allow the interviewees to create a narrative about their information-seeking behavior and discuss the reasoning behind their choices.

I asked the participants about their race and sex at the beginning of the interview before asking about religious and political beliefs.<sup>2</sup> I then asked about people’s views on the Covid-19 pandemic and the Covid-19 vaccines. Next, I would ask my participants about who they thought were advocating for the vaccines, and if they considered them to be trustworthy. I would ask what their family, friends, churches, and media sources say about the Covid-19 vaccines. For each participant, I would ask, “What does your [X] say about Covid-19?” and then follow up with, “Do you trust them?” I would then probe for more details to gain further depth when needed. At the end of the interview, I asked questions about their age and profession if they did not come up naturally (they mostly did). Getting people to discuss income was hard, so I settled on acquiring their profession. All interview subjects were sent my interview schedule beforehand.

Two interviews were conducted in person, and the others were carried out over the phone or video call. There were little—if any—discernable differences between my Zoom and in-person interviews, but phone interviews did come with challenges. Phone interviews made it possible to talk to people who could not meet in person but did not want videos of themselves recorded. However, because I could not see the person I was interviewing over the phone, I could not read their body language to see if a line of questioning made them uncomfortable. This made it hard to determine whether probing into sensitive topics was wise. Therefore, phone interviews were shorter than those carried out in person or over Zoom. Other than length, there were no discernible content differences between the three interview mediums.

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<sup>2</sup> The interview schedule is in the Appendix.



### *Data Collection*

I primarily took a snowballing approach to sampling. I also collected my first interviews by contacting people directly or through a flier I posted on social media (Twitter and Instagram). I contacted people who self-identified as Christian, politically right-leaning, and who were willing to talk about the Covid-19 vaccines. I did not try to collect quotas based on race, class, or gender—seeing that the primary goal was finding people within this group willing to talk about this subject. I tried to interview a roughly even number of people for and against the Covid-19 vaccines to compare the two groups. Given that different types of Christians have different theologies that impact their views on various topics, I also tried to collect participants from multiple Christian groups (Catholic, Mainline, Evangelical) to see if there were any differences in how they talked about the vaccines. I only interviewed people who were legally considered adults who lived in the USA. Data were collected from February 2023 to July 2023. I explained that I wanted to discuss their views on religion, politics, and the Covid-19 vaccines—through the consent form and during the interview.

### *Sample Characteristics*

The participants were primarily from Oklahoma ( $N=5$ ), Texas ( $N=2$ ), and Florida ( $N=3$ ), but seven were from other states. The sample skewed slightly younger, with more people under 40 ( $N=9$ ) than those over ( $N=8$ ). That said, my sample was almost entirely white, with one person half-white and half-Hispanic. There were ten men and six women. With the expectation of one person who was episcopalian (mainline), this sample was predominantly conservative protestants ( $N=12$ ) and Catholics ( $N=4$ ). My sample consisted of people with middle-class jobs (healthcare administration, information technology, professors, etc.) and four college students.

### *Data Analysis*

I used thematic analysis to create codes from this data. I went through the interviews line-by-line to develop salient first-level themes. I started with broader themes and then transitioned to more specific ones. The themes that emerged were that the churches the participants attended did not discuss whether people should receive the Covid-19 vaccines. Therefore, they turned to other sources (social media and other news sources) for information and moral guidance on the vaccines—most of which were not religious. I also included codes that dealt with whether they were in an echo chamber, how much they trusted these sources, and the moral messages they received from them. There were not any notable differences across Christian subgroups, gender, or age, so I did not subcode across these categories.

### *Positionality Statement*

As is often the case in studies on religion, I have connections to the religious group I am writing about. Having attended several conservative Protestant churches throughout my life, my ties to this world brought this topic to my attention. I am biased by my conversations with right-leaning Christians about Covid-19 and its vaccines because these discussions provided an idea of what I might find in my data. However, I believe that my comfort in navigating conservative Christianity and my knowledge of the culture made people more comfortable talking to me about this topic than otherwise.

I use pseudonyms for the privacy of the participants in this study,

I received ethical approval from the University of Oklahoma before this study.

## **FINDINGS**

### *Views on Vaccine*

I categorized my participants as vaccine hesitant (VH) ( $N=7$ ) and vaccine optimists (VO) ( $N=10$ ) based on their perceived attitudes and beliefs toward the Covid-19 vaccines. While most (15/17) of my participants received the vaccine, people were almost evenly split on whether they thought they were effective. Most (15/17) agreed that older and disabled people should receive the vaccine, but they diverged on whether young adults should be vaccinated. Even some vaccinated people did not see the point in receiving the vaccine because they viewed themselves as healthy and cited other health concerns, like developing heart disease from the vaccine. Pete, a college student, said,

What stood out to me is government is governments like, I think Australia, I think several governments in the, in Europe, um, basically not any longer recommending the vaccines for people under 30, or particularly young men under 30 because they, they claim that it, the risk of myocarditis and other effects is higher than the need for people under 30 to receive the vaccine.

Most people did not connect their reasons for getting or not getting the vaccine to their religious beliefs. They drew a clear line between religion and science. Science is related to how we observe the natural world. For Moe, a vaccine optimist and father, and people like him, the Bible was authoritative but did not address every imaginable topic. Therefore, people needed other ways to acquire knowledge. He said, “The Bible doesn’t have a way to create, doesn’t contain the instructions on how to create a, the inoculation against a virus. All right? Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, it has no concept of that. And I’m okay with that because it’s a spiritual book. It’s

there to inform us on one level of things.” Therefore, Moe thought people needed other ways to acquire knowledge:

There’s a whole another level of things in society in the world that it does not speak to.

Um, I think that undergirding all of that goes into creating a vaccine is science. I believe that ultimately the rules that govern science are rules of the universe that were by God mm-hmm. <affirmative>, and I don’t see a, I don’t see a conflict between those two things.

Moe thought that God provided science to allow for the creation of things like vaccines, so there was any conflict for him. Some people did not draw a clear line between the vaccine’s creation and their religious beliefs. However, two said they feared aborted fetuses were used to create the vaccine. Pete said,

I wish now I would've gotten the Pfizer or Moderna vaccine instead because, um, I didn't realize a time that Johnson & Johnson, um, may I, I don't know like a hundred percent the facts on this, um, but I'm pretty sure it's pretty, pretty widely discussed about how it was tested using, um, aborted beta cells.

People like Pete say at least one of the vaccines is a product of abortion—which they were religiously opposed to. Therefore, they wish to avoid partaking in promoting it. Their ideas came from a variety of different sources.

#### *Church Silence on Vaccination Against Covid-19*

Aligning with Djupe’s & Gilbert’s (2009) finding that pastors do not talk about politics from the pulpit, all my politically right-leaning Christians told me their churches avoided discussing the Covid-19 vaccines. They might talk about the other realities of Covid-19. For example, the vaccine-hesitant Jimmy said,

My pastor has never said anything about Covid-19 in terms of anything other than just talking about, you know, um, you know, people struggling, you know, whether it was loss of life, loss of job, you know, struggling with the decision to make, you know, whether or not to get the vaccine, you know, for their livelihood because they have to work.

During the Covid-19, Pastors seemed to stick to common themes that most congregants could observe and were experiencing—joblessness, death, and other health issues. There was a common acknowledgment that people may not have a choice in whether they receive the vaccine. Vaccine optimist and college professor Chuck’s experience with church leadership was also the norm, “Our church hasn’t taken an official position on it.” From the participants’ perspectives, church leadership’s silence stemmed from not wanting to alienate congregants. A variety of factors would influence people’s vaccination choices, and taking a stance would risk putting off certain members of their congregations. Pastors’ personal views on the Covid-19 vaccines were typically unknown to their congregants. Chuck said, “Our pastor hasn’t talked about it from the pulpit, uh, nor have I talked with him about it, just personally.” The fact that church leaders’ stances on this topic were not known to their congregants means that pastors were not providing moral or spiritual guidance on the Covid-19 vaccines. Therefore, they don’t give a religious basis for making vaccine choices.

Neither church leaders nor congregants provided a religious rationale for making vaccine choices. Responses, like the one Pete gave, were the norm. When I asked him if the people at his church discussed the Covid-19 vaccines, he said, “They don’t talk about it.” One of two people to suggest that vaccines were talked about at all, Moe, said that the unvaccinated members of the church he transitioned out of would make the vaccinated people feel “stupid” for being

vaccinated, so he left of his own free will. He attended a new church that he believed took the Covid-19 protection measures—social distancing, masking, etc.—seriously. Others might have felt uncomfortable disclosing their vaccination status to their fellow congregants for fear of similar judgment. According to Djupe and Neiheisel (2022), pastors know how their congregants feel about political issues. Therefore, they might have declined to talk about vaccines and other Covid related issues because they did not want to offend people and have them leave their church.

Among my participants, only one recounted an instance of people talking about the Covid vaccines in a formal setting within churches and providing a religious rationale for making vaccine choices. A Sunday school teacher, Jimmy, who teaches an apologetics class, said, “One of the questions that the class wanted us to walk through biblically was, you know, the idea of the vaccine and, and mandates around that.” Notably, he was not the one who brought up the topic of vaccines; his Sunday school class brought it up. It was also a Sunday school class—typically small—and not a church-wide event. This might suggest they would be uncomfortable conversing in a large setting. He told me that he did not tell his class whether they should be vaccinated against Covid-19 and that if someone got the vaccine, “I don’t think that was a sin.” Even though he was not vaccinated, he wanted to be sure he was not coming off as telling his congregants what they should do.

In summary, churches were not a significant source of information on the Covid-19 vaccine. This contradicts some news reports about influential pastors speaking up for (McCammon 2021) and against the vaccines (Hals 2021; Wilson 2021). With one expectation, leaders and congregants did not discuss the topic. The one documented instance where it was discussed was in a Sunday school class, and the issue was brought up by the course members—

not the leader. Instead, my participants described receiving most of their information about the vaccine from sources outside of their congregations.

*Sources Consumed: Secular Over Religious*

Only a few (4/17)<sup>3</sup> politically right-leaning Christians mentioned following explicitly religious sources for general news. Of those four, only two consumed religious news to gain information about the Covid-19 vaccines. The vaccine optimists Luke followed the Christian Broadcast Network (CBN). He said, “I trust them implicitly” because of their Christian outlook on the news. Vaccine hesitant and retiree Betty followed pastors who have political shows on the internet—like Jacks Gibbs and D.J Farag—who she thought were knowledgeable on the Covid-19 vaccine, because they were meant to be “spiritual leaders” to Christians. The other two (Pete and Britteny) relied on sources like the *Daily Wire* or Bert Weinstein, vaccine skeptic and atheist podcaster, for information on the Covid-19 vaccines. These two and the rest of my sample consumed secular right-leaning and alternative sources for information on the Covid-19 vaccines. These findings do not align with media reports about the influence of celebrity pastors on vaccine choices.

The most frequently mentioned source of information by my participants was social media—particularly Twitter. This was true for both people who were pessimistic and optimistic about the vaccines. Most (12/17) of my participants used social media because it allowed them to have a variety of news sources in one feed. Social media-savvy participants made comments similar to schoolteacher and vaccine hesitant Britteny, who said, “Sometimes Twitter itself can be, um, can serve as an aggregator.” Twitter was used to keep up with a variety of different news outlets. Instead of visiting news sites directly, people often followed them on Twitter and clicked

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<sup>3</sup> Numbers are not provided to suggest my findings are mathematically generalizable, but for transparency alone.

on the articles as they came up. Britteny says she follows “a smattering of things” through Twitter. Social media was my participants' primary means of keeping up with the conversation in real time.

Some (3/7 VHs) right-leaning Christians that were hesitant about the Covid-19 vaccines wanted information sources that were further from the mainstream than the *Daily Wire* and Twitter. For example, vaccine-hesitant teacher Jude said he preferred more “authentic” sources like “citizen journalists.”

One of the things that I've seen pretty, um, consistently with more citizen journalists is that they share stories from people who have had adverse reactions, who have, um, had had people that they have known who, who have actually died, um, things like that, that that doesn't tend to, to make it to more mainstream sources.

The right-leaning Christians that used these more alternative outlets felt like these sources were giving them information about the vaccines they needed to know—like people's adverse reactions to them.

Other people (3/7 VHs) who were skeptical of the mainstream media tried doing their research on the Covid-19 vaccines. Britteny said her family had a “joint research process” after her mother was vaccine injured. She said she and her parents would “independently gather info and then compare notes.” This process was done because they felt like the truth about the vaccines was not being shown by the media and the medical establishment. During the research process, Britteny said,

I did my own inquiring and, and asking people to share their stories and looking at various data and that sort of stuff. Um, so then each of us would kind of bring what we had found, uh, to the table and compare and, and discuss it.



Britteny's research project aligns with how my other participants how decided to collect their data. While some people would try to find numeric data to support their claims, my participants who distrusted mainstream institutions enough to do their own research did not trust their data collection methods. Therefore, they viewed stories as more legitimate.

Pundits, podcasters, and social media occupied the place traditionally held by experts (scientists, journalists, etc.) and community leaders (religious leaders, local doctors, etc.) in providing information and guidance regarding the Covid-19 vaccines. My participants who used social media seemed to form communities on social media that bolstered their views on the Covid-19 vaccines and their advocates. These communities either saw validity in people's stories outside of traditional realms of authority, or they specifically sought out people because of the status they held and the education they acquired.

#### *Widening and Restricting One's Moral Influences*

A couple of people (2/17) did make religion-based choices about widening and restricting the diversity of views they followed. Even though Pete followed people who were both on the political right and left to avoid creating an echo chamber, he made sure to mention that everyone he follows is "still like all Christians." While he wanted to expand the perspectives he was exposed to, he seemed to want to limit the people who shaped his moral views to Christians. This and Betty's restricting herself to exclusively listening to pastors were the only restrictions made for religious reasons. The other choices were made for secular reasons.

Following research suggesting conservatives consume a variety of news sources, some participants suggested they used social media to escape their "bubble," or political echo chamber (Heatherly et al. 2017). For example, Jimmy said,

And I kind of take that same approach on Twitter, where I follow quite a few people that I wouldn't agree with, maybe, um, theologically speaking all the time. But I like to hear their perspectives and understand where they're coming from.

People like Jimmy used Twitter to purposefully expose themselves to contradicting viewpoints and see what people on the other side of the political spectrum were saying. Jimmy used social media to widen his moral influences. Like with social media, my participants suggested that paying attention to different news outlets was a way to collect a variety of viewpoints—both on the left and the right to widen their number of moral influences. Pete would consume two media sources from different perspectives in juxtaposition. He said,

Um, I've been in the mornings sometimes listening to, uh, NPR's up first and then also, um, Daily Wire's Morning Wire. And I feel like listening to those two together gives me kind of a good of, oh, this is what, um, more liberal media, the stories that they want to talk about, and these are the stories that more conservative media is wanting to talk about today.

My participants mentioned widening their sources of information by consuming several different media outlets to see what both sides were saying. People felt that one side's media sources might withhold information that does not support their views, so they must consume multiple media sources to get the whole picture. The vaccine optimist and retiree Mike said, "I look at them all. And the reason I do is I've found an interesting phenomenon. It's not what they tell you that they've, that, that that's been massaged by an editor. It's what they don't tell you." Therefore, to see the whole story, he had to look at media outlets from both sides of the political spectrum. This sentiment also demonstrates a shared distrust right-leaning Christians had about mainstream media because they thought they were leaving out information that did not support their

viewpoints. However, as Bail et al. (2018) suggested, none of my right-leaning participants changed their views when they consumed media from various viewpoints (which might have even strengthened their existing ideas).

One way of restricting moral influences online was joining private online groups. Britteny's mother joined a Facebook group for people harmed by the Covid-19 Vaccines. The group limited whom they let in:

They were very careful in who they admitted. And so they wouldn't admit people who were just there to spew against vaccines in general. They, uh, they screened people very carefully, like, you know, do you have a legitimate injury story? If no, sorry; if yes, then you know, you can join us and, and we'll, and we'll discuss.

Britteny could not even enter the group because the Covid-19 vaccines did not injure her. Private groups like this were another means my participants could restrict the people whom they could engage with. For example, the people in the group mentioned above did not want to encounter people who wanted to “spew against vaccines in general;” they only wanted to talk about their experiences with others with a “legitimate injury story.”

When choosing who influenced them, vaccine-optimistic people were more restrictive of whom they took seriously on social media. For example, Moe made sure to say, “I follow probably 10 or 15 doctors that I found over the course of the pandemic that, um, was pushing the vaccine, we're advocating for the vaccine, this kind of thing.” The fact that these respected doctors advocated for the vaccine was meaningful to him. Vaccine optimists valued authority and legitimacy in those they follow on social media. Chuck said this about the news sources he follows on Twitter,

**Interviewer:** And do you trust them, like the information these sources give you on the vaccines?

**Chuck:** Generally, uh, editorial accountability is helpful. So, yeah, I tend to trust that process more than random people on the internet.

For him and others, the “editorial accountability” made mainstream news sources more trustworthy than “random people on the internet” who can say what they want without being held accountable. This legitimacy held in mainstream authority helped vaccine-optimistic people choose to be vaccinated against covid-19 when weighing the risk of whether to be vaccinated.

#### *Trusting Mainstream Media Vs. Trusting Right-Wing and Alternative Media*

Right-leaning Christians who were optimistic about the vaccines trusted more mainstream and centrist sources. Vaccine optimists followed the same sources Mike did. “I subscribe to the Wall Street Journal. Mm-hmm. The Washington Post, the New York Times. Um, I’ll, I’ll look at Fox News, I’ll look at CNN, I’ll look at, uh, MSNBC.” While these sources vary a little in political outlook, all of them are mainstream and widely respected. Vaccine optimists trusted these sources for reasons Han listed previously; they trust the “editorial accountability” and not “some random person on the internet.” The fact that the information these sites presented was vetted made them trustworthy.

Although my vaccine-hesitant participants consumed a variety of news sources, they did not completely trust them. The vaccine-hesitant participants trusted right-leaning sources. Right-leaning Christians brought up the Daily Wire several times throughout my study and spoke more positively of them than other outlets. Pete said he was “pleasantly surprised” by how the Morning Wire, the Daily Wire’s morning show, covers the vaccine. They draw from what he sees as more credible signs that the Covid-19 vaccine is not worth getting, like “the Australian

government or the, or like European government, whatever has said this and doesn't recommend it anymore to people.” The fact that the Morning Wire is not drawing from random people but instead from world governments made them seem more credible than other news outlets.

According to Pete, the Morning Wire would also have doctors on their program to discuss the Covid-19 vaccine. According to him, The Morning Wire would say, “Here's this doctor that they brought on. He's saying, um; actually, this conspiracy about it isn't really that true. I wouldn't trust this.” Right-leaning Christians liked the fact that the Daily Wire projected an image of fair and balanced reporting. It made them feel that this outlet was trustworthy—specifically with vaccine information. Pete expressed a common sentiment about the Daily Wire: “And so I think like, you know, Daily Wire’s, um, Morning Wire show has actually done a pretty good job of like, uh, leaning kind of anti-vaccine, but they give sources that are reliable or like downplay some of their, um, audiences more conspiratorial tendencies.” Right-leaning Christians felt like the Daily Wire did an excellent job of providing information against the vaccine but not veering too far into misinformation.

People who consumed information from alternative sources like “citizen journalists” or did their own research felt that the fact that this information was suppressed made them feel that they were viewing things that the people in power did not want them to know. Jude said,

Now it's not to say, you know, you can't make generalizations from that, but the fact that it's suppressed, you know, people would get kicked off of a Facebook group or something like that if they talked about adverse reactions from a vaccine. That, that, that to me is a little bit strange. Um, I, I don't think that, I, I think that suppressing information is dangerous.

Like Jude, several right-leaning Christians who were hesitant about the Covid-19 vaccines felt like the fact that this information was suppressed implied that mainstream sources had an agenda they wanted to promote. This made these alternative information sources more trustworthy to them.

While most of my participants engaged on social media in some way, not everyone thought these sites had the public's best interest at heart. Some people thought social media sites were involved in pushing the same pro-vaccine narrative as everyone else. For example, Jude said, “So, so mainstream media doesn't talk about it. Uh, Facebook, Google, Twitter, any of the the social networks will, will immediately take it off.” Likewise, others felt that social media companies pushed the mainstream vaccine narrative through censorship. Pete talked about doctors being “shadow-banned” from Twitter for talking about people receiving heart conduction called myocarditis from the Covid-19 vaccines: “Like even a Twitter file of stuff that came out showing that, you know, certain doctors were like a guy from Stanford University or a guy from Harvard, um, being shadow banned essentially for discussing this.” For several politically right-leaning Christians who did not trust the Covid-19 vaccines, social media was not a safe place for them to talk about their views on the Covid-19 vaccine because their posts might be removed.

*Moral Messages: Individual Liberty Over Responsible Sociality*

Private and public social media discussions are replacing the moral advice people might receive from religious leaders. The social media accounts people consumed promoted DeSourcey & Waggoner's (2022) *individual liberty over responsible sociality*. The moral messages regarding the vaccines my politically right-leaning Christians received were pretty much consistent—it was about personal comfort, not about what is best for the community. Vaccine-

hesitant people primarily derived an individualized risk-benefit analysis from social media. For example, a college student and vaccine hesitant Ron describes a meme he found on social media,

Somebody made a chart and it had, you know, four columns and then it said somebody who gets vaxxed and somebody who did not get vaxed. And it, uh, it said, you know, can you spread covid if you're vax or not? Yes. For both. Can you die from Covid? Yes, for both. Uh, can you, um, what was the third one? Spread. Oh, can you get covid? Yes. For both. And then the fourth column, you know, it said, uh, you can die from the vaccine.

This meme displays the logic of many vaccine-hesitant participants' moral objections to receiving the vaccine. Whether or not they got the vaccine, they could still receive and die from Covid-19. There was also the perceived risk of being harmed by the vaccine itself. Therefore, vaccinating against Covid-19 was not worth the risk to these participants. This message has a risk-benefit analysis focusing on the individual's well-being (*individual liberty*) and not what might be good for those around them (*responsible sociality*).

The moral messages the vaccine hesitant got from the Daily Wire and other right-leaning media outlets were like those they received from social media. These outlets valued *individual liberty* over the well-being of the collective (*responsible sociality*). Ron recounts what he heard popular Daily Wire podcaster and author Ben Shapiro say about his family's vaccination choices:

I think Ben shared my opinion the most about this. It's a, it's a cost-benefit analysis for him. He, for example, he did get the vaccine and he also advocated that his parents get it.

So they're all vax and boosted. Um, but then he didn't. He didn't want his kids to get it.

Ron says bluntly that Shapiro presented the choice to be vaccinated against Covid-19 as an individualized “cost-benefit analysis” and weighed the cost of getting it for each member of his

family. This cost-benefit analysis did not account for the impact an unvaccinated family member might have on others. Therefore, *responsible sociality* was not a goal to be aimed for here. The suggestion was that other people should treat their families with the same mindset.

## **CONCLUSION**

Right-leaning Christians are among the groups most likely to refuse the Covid-19 vaccines (Funk & Gramlich, 2021). This could be attributed to things specific to right-leaning Christianity—e.g., Christian Nationalism, etc.—or the right-leaning media’s generally negative coverage of the Covid-19 vaccines. This distrust could also be due to factors affecting the general population, such as individualism, increasing mistrust in institutions, and conspiratorial thinking. My research suggests the internet and alternative right-wing news sources, rather than face-to-face interactions with religious leaders and congregations, also allow right-leaning Christians to do their research and find data and experts that will support whatever hesitations they might have about being vaccinated against Covid-19 and other diseases. Politics appeared to be driving the narrative more than religion.

Despite research suggesting the positive effect of church leaders encouraging the laity to be vaccinated (Ruijs, Hautvast et al. 2013; Guidry et al. 2022), within my sample, my participants reported talking about the Covid-19 vaccine with neither church leadership nor fellow churchgoers. This vaccine silence might be due to a reluctance to cause division on vaccine issues. Some people also claimed to feel judged for their vaccination choices, so others might have declined to discuss their choice to avoid the same judgments. This lack of discussion about the vaccines encouraged people to search for guidance and information elsewhere. Most of these other sources were not religious. Most of my sample gathered data from social media, using it to follow various sources. The vaccine hesitant gave more credence to people that spoke



out against the medical establishment on vaccines, and the vaccine optimistic gave more credence to medical professionals' voices and mainstream news outlets. Both groups on social media tended to receive messages on individual risk assessment and not focus on the public good. When following other news sources outside social media, the vaccine-hesitant followed conservative news outlets (e.g., Daily Wire, etc.) or alternative outlets (e.g., citizen journalists) due to their distrust of mainstream media. Vaccine optimists followed more widely respected outlets (NPR, MSNBC, Wall Street Journal, New York Times, etc.).

This study extends our understanding of right-leaning religion and vaccine hesitancy in several ways. Outside the quantitative research (e.g., Gorski & Perry, 2022), little has been done to understand right-leaning Christians choices whether to vaccinate against Covid-19 and how they acquire the information to make that choice. While research suggests that pastoral advice on whether to vaccinate against Covid-19 can affect people's choices, my research provides evidence from my participants' words that their church leadership rarely discussed options. This suggests that religious leadership and communities may not influence people's willingness to be vaccinated—even though they might be able to. Furthering this point, only a few of my participants consumed religious media for vaccine news; they mostly consumed secular media and right-leaning news outlets. Celebrity pastors and Christian influencers may not significantly influence right-leaning Christians' vaccination choices.

My research also extends what we know about the information-seeking behavior of right-leaning Christians regarding the Covid-19 vaccines. As noted in past studies, the vaccine-hesitant people I encountered often went to social media to discuss their concerns about the vaccines. They also used the internet to find people with medical expertise (primarily doctors) that shared their hesitations about these vaccines—granting them validity. They also consumed right-leaning

media—like the Daily Wire—that would have these medical experts on to discuss their concerns with Covid-19 vaccines. As suggested by other research, the right-leaning Christians in this study expressed concerns about mainstream institutions, so they tried to find other sources of information on the vaccines. Some people found “citizen journalists” and carried out their own research projects.

This research also shows the moral language people receive from these media outlets regarding the Covid-19 vaccines. People are not receiving *responsible sociality* framing from these news outlets, but one that focuses on *individual liberty* (DeSourcey & Waggoner, 2022). The moral messages right-leaning Christians receive from these outlets frame the vaccines in terms of personal risk assessment; they do not seem to discuss what people’s choice of whether to vaccinate against Covid-19 might have on their communities. This makes sense seeing that research has shown that increases in individualism are connected to decreases in vaccine use.

A potential limitation of this study is that it consists of white people and contains almost no people of color. We know that people of color have histories with the medical establishment that might impact their vaccination choices (Decoteau & Sweet 2023; Dong et. al 2021; Whitehead & Perry 2020). Also, religion expresses itself differently across racial lines (Yukich & Edgell 2020). Therefore, more research must be done to see if Christians of color have similar information-seeking behaviors to those in this study. Another limitation is that none of my participants were pastors. While we saw the lack of messages people received from the pulpit, we do not know why their pastors declined to discuss the Covid-19 vaccines with their congregants. A future study could interview pastors themselves to see why they made these choices. A limitation of all qualitative studies is that they are not mathematically generalizable. However, the findings of this study are consistent with the significant findings of quantitative

research in this area, so there is little reason to think my participants differ substantially from the general population. With that said, quantitative research would help determine the impact of these information-seeking behaviors.

The information-seeking behavior of right-leaning Christians regarding the Covid-19 vaccines provides insight into why they are among the groups with the lowest vaccine rates against the virus. The vaccine-hesitant members of my sample consumed online sources and news media that framed the Covid-19 vaccines as a health risk and an individual choice. These participants also were skeptical of mainstream sources that often viewed the vaccines favorably. This study hopes to encourage future qualitative studies on the health information-seeking behavior of right-leaning Christians.

## **APPENDIX: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE**

Opening Statement: My name is Kenneth Ethan Frantz and I'm a graduate student at the University of Oklahoma. I'm interested in getting your views on the Covid-19 vaccines.

### Topic 1: Opening Questions

Question #1: What's your sex?

Question #2: What's your race?

### Topic 2: Religious Beliefs and Political Orientation

Question #3: How would you describe your religious beliefs?

Follow Up: How does religion impact the way you make choices in your day-to-day life?

Follow Up: Would you stop being someone's friend over a religious difference? Why or why not?

Question #4: How would you describe your political orientation?

Follow Up: Would you stop being someone's friend over a political difference? Why or why not?

Follow Up: How would you describe your views on the separation of Church and State?

### Topic #3: Views on Covid-19 and The Covid-19 Vaccines

Question #5: How would you describe the impact of Covid-19 in America?

Question #6: How would you describe other people's reactions to Covid-19 in America?

Question #7: What have you heard about the Covid-19 vaccines?

Question #8: What are your thoughts on the Covid-19 vaccines?

Follow Up: What do you think about the creation of the Covid-19 vaccines?

Follow Up: What do you think about the rollout of the Covid-19 vaccines?

Question #9: Would you get the Covid-19 vaccine? Why or why not?

Question 10: Is your view on the Covid-19 vaccine informed your religious beliefs?

Follow Up: How do you feel about people receiving religious exemptions from receiving the Covid-19 vaccines?

#### Topic #2: People Associated with The Covid-19 Vaccines

Question #10: What types of people do you think are advocating for the Covid-19 vaccines?

Question #11: How would you describe the morals of these people?

Follow Up: Do you trust them? Why or why not?

#### Topic #3: Information on the Covid-19 vaccines

Question #12: What does your family say about the Covid-19 vaccines?

Follow Up: Do you trust them?

Question #13: What do your friends say about the Covid-19 vaccines?

Follow Up: Do you trust them?

Question #14: What does your church say about the Covid-19 vaccines?

Follow Up: Do you trust them?

Question #15: What media sources do you consume?

Follow Up: What do they say about the Covid-19 vaccines?

Follow up: Do you trust them?

#### Topic #4: Ending Questions

Question #16: What is your profession?

Question #17: What is your age?

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