



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Cognitive Ability and Christian Nationalism

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ABSTRACT

Americans who subscribe to Christian nationalist beliefs tend to be characterized by lower education and substantial knowledge deficits across multiple domains. Building on research connecting lower cognitive ability to religious fundamentalism and reactionary political views, I theorize cognitive ability as an important factor influencing Americans' adherence to Christian nationalism. Analyses of multiple waves of the General Social Survey reveal that cognitive ability (measured with the *wordsum* vocabulary exercise) is significantly, negatively associated with believing that being a Christian is important to being "truly American" and favoring mandatory Christian prayers and Bible-reading in public schools. These associations persist after controlling for education and various religious, political, and demographic characteristics. Interactions reveal these associations hold across survey waves and subgroups, disappearing only among the least educated Americans. Findings affirm that Christian nationalism appeals to Americans with lower verbal intelligence, suggesting an underlying role of differential cognitive resources not reducible to educational disparities.

1 | Introduction

Despite some evidence that the American "Christian right" (a loose coalition of actors and organizations working toward promoting conservative Christian supremacy and policy goals) is declining in its demographic representation (Newport 2022; Rotolo and Smith 2026), it has arguably never had more cultural and political influence than within the past decade. Owing to both conservative Christians' increasingly prominent role in the Republican Party and the Republican Party's recent dominance in each branch of national governance, the Christian right has seen numerous culture-war objectives come to fruition. These include overturning *Roe v. Wade*, walking back civil rights protections for LGBT Americans, increased government supports for "school choice," and new protections against "anti-Christian bias" by the Trump administration (DeRose 2026; Lopez 2022; Smith 2025). Yet even though the Christian right has been a force in American politics since at least the Civil Rights movement, social scientists have only within the past decade turned their attention to mea-

suring the religiopolitical ideology of the Christian right, what scholars and journalist commonly call "Christian nationalism" (Djupe et al. 2023; McDaniel et al. 2022; Whitehead and Perry 2020b).

What factors predict Americans' adherence to Christian nationalism? Studies have documented its connection to sectarian Protestant affiliation and theologically fundamentalist views that might increase Christian nationalism's plausibility and appeal, and demographic characteristics (lower income and education; rural, Southern residence; and raised in authoritarian household) that might increase Americans' exposure to Christian nationalist messages (McDaniel et al. 2022; Rotolo 2022; Sherkat et al. 2024; Whitehead and Scheitle 2018; Whitehead and Perry 2020b). But one factor that has been all but ignored in understanding Christian nationalism is the role of "cognitive ability," that is, actors' capacity for learning and applying information and engaging in more complex, abstract thought processes necessary for critical thinking and social skills like empathy and tolerance

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(Wodtke 2016; see also Carl 2014; Edwards et al. 2025; Ståhl and Van Prooijen 2018).¹ Drawing on multiple waves of data from the General Social Surveys (GSS), the current study aims to fill that lacuna.

Among the numerous reasons why I would anticipate cognitive ability to be powerfully associated with Christian nationalism, studies on the latter have frequently identified what would appear to be knowledge deficits among its adherents. Americans who score higher on measures of Christian nationalism tend to have lower education across datasets (McDaniel et al. 2022; Sherkat et al. 2024; Whitehead and Scheitle 2018; Whitehead and Perry 2020b), and they also tend to score relatively poorly on questions about science, history, and current political events (Gorski and Perry 2022; Perry et al. 2021, 2022; Whitehead and Perry 2020a). Though studies often attribute these knowledge deficits to siloed information streams and motivated reasoning, a large body of literature has documented that cognitive ability (often measured with the common GSS *wordsum* vocabulary exercise) is associated with more fundamentalist Christian identities and beliefs (Kanazawa 2010; Mazur 2023; Sherkat 2010, 2021, 2022) as well as reactionary political views (Bobo and Licari 1989; Carl 2014; Edwards et al. 2025; Ganzach et al. 2019; Kanazawa 2021; Onraet et al. 2015; Wodtke 2016). Applying this latter literature to understanding Christian nationalist ideology, I anticipate that Americans who score lower on the standard GSS measure for verbal ability will be more likely to endorse Christian nationalist views, all else equal.

My findings strongly affirm my expectations. Even after accounting for educational attainment (whether measured in degrees or years of education), religious and political characteristics, and relevant sociodemographic correlates, higher scores on the GSS verbal ability measure are consistently, negatively associated with believing that being a Christian is important for being “truly American” and disapproving the Supreme Court’s decision to ban compulsory Christian prayers and Bible-reading from public schools. Moreover, these associations appear across GSS waves and subgroups, including all but the least educated Americans (those with less than a high school degree). My findings, thus, ultimately suggest that the religiopolitical ideology of the Christian right—Christian nationalism—appeals to Americans with lower cognitive ability suggesting an underlying role of differential cognitive resources that cannot be explained away by educational differences in the general population.

2 | Background and Expectations

2.1 | Cognitive Ability, Christian Fundamentalism, and Reactionary Politics

Scholars have for decades studied how cognitive abilities and styles correspond to systems of belief. This includes religious as opposed to secular beliefs or politically conservative as opposed to more progressive beliefs. Indeed, the literature on these connections is so thick as to justify numerous meta-analyses and reviews (see, e.g., Dürlinger et al. 2024; Dürlinger and Pietschnig 2022; Onraet et al. 2015; Zuckerman et al. 2013, 2020). Within this research, the overwhelming consensus is that higher scores on measures of intelligence (after accounting for education) are

negatively associated with indicators of religious commitment and theological conservatism and negatively associated with various indicators of ideological conservatism. Though measures of cognitive ability have included picture vocabulary tests, base-rate conflict problems, cognitive reflection tests, numeracy tests, as well as multi-battery IQ tests (Edwards et al. 2025; Ganzach and Gotlibovski 2013; Pennycook et al. 2012; Nyborg 2009; Stankov 2009; Sterling et al. 2016), I focus on the studies that have assessed cognitive ability using vocabulary tests and specifically the *wordsum* vocabulary exercise in order to establish a more explicit foundation for my study.

Several studies, for example, have documented that Americans who score higher in verbal ability are more likely to be atheists or at least less committed to their religious tradition (Blanchard-Fields et al. 2001; Kanazawa 2010; Zuckerman et al. 2013). In addition, employing a structural equation model, Sherkat (2021) found that verbal ability influenced voting for Donald Trump in the 2016 Presidential election primarily through its influence on religion, with higher scores predicting greater secularism and lower scores corresponding to greater religious fundamentalism, and subsequently, Trump support. Related to this argument, Mazur (2023; see also Meisenberg 2015) documents that shifts in verbal ability among Democrats and Republicans since the 1970s can be attributed to the sorting of Christian fundamentalists (who tend to score lower on verbal ability) into the Republican Party and secular Americans (who tend to score higher) into the Democratic Party.

Focusing on political outcomes specifically, studies have frequently found that Americans who score lower on the *wordsum* test or other measures for verbal ability are not only more likely to identify as politically conservative (Kanazawa 2010; Meisenberg 2015) but are also more likely to score higher on measures of political intolerance, social traditionalism, anti-egalitarianism, nationalism, anti-intellectualism, and right-wing authoritarianism (Bobo and Licari 1989; Brandt and Crawford 2016; Carl 2014; Edwards et al. 2025; Kanazawa 2021; Motta 2018); to hold reactionary views regarding race and immigration (Caplan and Miller 2010; Wodtke 2016); and to vote for right-wing authoritarian candidates, like Donald Trump (Ganzach et al. 2019; Sherkat 2021).

In addition, though most studies proceed under the assumption that vocabulary scores (once education is accounted for) are measuring something more like “crystallized intelligence” or “cognitive ability” and, thus, their theoretical frames suppose that ability is influencing religious or political views (Onraet et al. 2015; Zuckerman et al. 2013, 2020), these relationships can technically be bidirectional in datasets like the GSS. Sherkat (2010, 2022) and Dürlinger et al. (2024), for example, use religious characteristics to predict *wordsum* scores, finding that sectarian Protestantism, biblical literalism, theistic belief, and indicators of religious participation/commitment were negatively associated with verbal ability, though Sherkat (2022) also finds these associations can be nuanced across race/gender combinations.

In accounting for the persistent negative association between verbal/cognitive ability and both conservative Christianity and reactionary politics, scholars have theorized that part of the connection may be explained by the dual contributions of cognitive

ability and analytic cognitive styles (e.g., Pennycook et al. 2012; Ståhl and Van Prooijen 2018; Zuckerman et al. 2020), with both leading adults to reject right-wing and religious claims that tend to be more intuitive and simplistic (Deppe et al. 2015). A related line of argument is that persons with greater cognitive ability have a greater capacity and willingness to scrutinize (and, thus, apply skepticism toward) social conventions, myths, traditions, and narratives that sound like “bullshit” (Sterling et al. 2016). In a later section, I theorize how these arguments should shape my expectations regarding Christian nationalist views. But first, I consider how empirical findings regarding Christian nationalism and knowledge deficits point me in this direction as well.

2.2 | Christian Nationalism and Knowledge Deficits

Though definitions can vary slightly due to the rapidly growing literature on the construct, scholars generally understand “Christian nationalism” as a set of beliefs about America’s conservative Christian foundations (often supernatural in nature) and the need to institutionalize some form of Christian supremacy in America’s self-understanding and policies (Djupe et al. 2023; Gorski and Perry 2022; McDaniel et al. 2022). In addition, though ideological elements of Christian nationalism transcend denominational boundaries, and to some degree even religious boundaries (Delehanty et al. 2019; Gorski and Perry 2022; Saiya 2025; Whitehead and Perry 2020b), studies of its social antecedents suggest that it is primarily associated with sectarian, politically far-right Protestant communities and families (Rotolo 2022; Sherkat et al. 2024) making it the default ideology of the “Christian Right.”

Within the burgeoning literature on the construct, studies have documented patterns that suggest knowledge deficits as characteristic of those who subscribe to Christian nationalism, potentially owing to a variety of factors. First, numerous studies on the social correlates of Christian nationalism find that its adherents tend to have lower levels of educational attainment compared to those who reject the ideology (Delehanty et al. 2019; McDaniel et al. 2022; Pew Research Center 2021; PRRI Staff 2023; Sherkat et al. 2024; Whitehead and Perry 2020b). Relatedly, studies also show that Americans who subscribe to Christian nationalism are more likely to trust news sources known for extreme partisan slants while discounting most mainstream outlets like newspapers that are more likely to abide by norms of journalistic integrity (Perry and Whitehead 2023; PRRI Staff 2023).

Potentially a consequence of these different patterns of information exposure and consumption, studies find that Americans who affirm Christian nationalist views tend to hold erroneous views on science, history, and current political events. For example, Whitehead and Perry (2020a) documented that Christian nationalism was associated with affirming factually incorrect views about vaccines, including that they cause autism or that they fail to protect children from diseases. In addition to promoting moral competition and skepticism with scientists (see Baker et al. 2020), Whitehead and Perry propose that Christian nationalists consume information on vaccines from sources, like Donald Trump, who regularly tweeted before his presidency about the

supposed connection between vaccines and autism. Relatedly, in a subsequent survey collected during the COVID-19 pandemic, Gorski and Perry (2022, 32) found that Christian nationalism was positively associated with trusting Donald Trump for information about the pandemic and negatively associated with trusting information from actual medical professionals, scientists, or the Centers for Disease Control.

Attempting to better understand the link between Christian nationalism and scientific literacy more broadly, Perry et al. (2021) employed a scientific knowledge quiz similar to the one used in numerous waves of the GSS (Evans 2011; Sherkat 2011). The authors found that Christian nationalism is associated with lower scientific literacy in the aggregate, even after accounting for educational attainment and relevant religious characteristics. However, when they disaggregated the science items into “religiously contested” and “uncontested” items (following Evans 2011), Christian nationalism was only marginally associated with lower scores on uncontested items and strongly associated with lower scores on religiously contested items. Consistent with previous work on conservative Christians and, the authors propose that the link is thus less about Christian nationalism and ignorance per se and more about motivated reasoning.

Documenting a similar pattern using a five-item quiz about religion in American political history, Perry et al. (2022; see also Gorski and Perry 2022) found that Americans who subscribe to Christian nationalism are more likely to hold factually incorrect views, such as the US Constitution mentioning our country’s obligations to God or the Supreme Court in the 1960s, making it illegal for students to pray or read their Bibles in schools. Importantly, however, these associations did not vary significantly by educational attainment, suggesting that the effect was not due to ignorance per se, but some other factor, possibly motivated reasoning, but not excluding other possibilities. Related to this idea, Christian nationalists are also more likely to endorse beliefs about *current* political or social situations for which there is no supporting evidence, such as the 2020 Presidential election being stolen from Donald Trump, or that the violence at the Capitol on January 6 was instigated by Antifa and Black Lives Matter operatives, or that the COVID-19 vaccines were deadly and ineffective at preventing COVID-19 (Gorski and Perry 2022; Perry and Whitehead 2023). Unsurprisingly, Christian nationalism also corresponds with the acceptance of outlandish conspiracy theories, providing another indicator that its adherents hold a weaker grasp on facts (Seto and Upenieks 2024; Walker and Vegter 2023).

The dominant explanatory mechanisms to which scholars appeal throughout these studies are siloed information sources and motivated reasoning. Specifically, Americans who affirm Christian nationalism are more likely to find themselves exposed to highly partisan and inaccurate information about science, history, and current events, and their in-group loyalty makes them more credulous to misinformation. These accounts are almost certainly true, but thus far they have completely ignored the possibility that Americans lower in cognitive ability (who also score lower on tests of scientific and political knowledge; see Allum et al. 2018; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996) may find Christian nationalist narratives and values more appealing. In the following section, I turn back to research on cognitive ability to theorize this connection.

2.3 | Theorizing Cognitive Ability and Christian Nationalism

In his work connection verbal ability in the GSS to religious and political outcomes, Sherkat (2021, 194, 2022, 614) calls for future research to examine the implications for Christian nationalism, though he frames Christian nationalism as potentially influencing cognitive ability, much like he argues for religious outcomes. I propose that the previous work on cognitive ability, religion, and politics suggest that once educational attainment and other sociodemographic factors are accounted for, verbal ability is better thought of as characteristic shaping adult adherence to Christian nationalist views. This is for the same reasons scholars argue verbal ability precedes and influences religious and political views and behaviors.

Secularism and liberal political views seem to appeal to adults who are inclined toward more analytic cognitive styles and capable of more cognitive effort (Pennycook et al. 2012, Sterling et al. 2016, Zuckerman et al. 2013, 2020), whereas supernatural religious beliefs and political conservatism are linked with more intuitive, low-effort cognition (Eidelman et al. 2012, Şeker et al. 2025). “Christian nationalism” most often references an ideology or set of beliefs that combines intuitive “us vs. them” heuristics, mythological narratives about America’s supernatural chosenness or at least conservative Christian foundations, and ultra-conservative values of social hierarchy and authority (Gorski and Perry 2022, McDaniel et al. 2022). Thus, it is unsurprising that it should be so powerfully associated with the very religious and political characteristics cognitive ability so consistently predicts (Sherkat et al. 2024).

Proceeding from this reasoning, I expect that cognitive ability measured with scores the standard *wordsum* vocabulary exercise will be negatively associated indicators of Christian nationalist ideology in the GSS. In addition, I anticipate this association will be consistent across survey years of the GSS as well as relevant social characteristics, which I test in a variety of supplemental analyses.

3 | Methods

3.1 | Data

Data for this study are taken from numerous waves of the GSS, a nationally representative cross-sectional survey of Americans. The National Opinion Research Center (NORC) has conducted the GSS since 1972, and biennially since 1994. Though numerous GSS waves contain my measure of cognitive ability going back to 1974, only the 1996, 2004, 2014, and 2024 waves include one of my Christian nationalism items of interest. For my second Christian nationalism item, I will use the 1989, 1990, 1991, 1993, 1994, 1996, 1998, 2000, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2014, 2016, 2018, 2022, and 2024 GSS waves. Because both the Christian nationalism items I use and the measure of cognitive ability are often only asked of subsamples in each GSS wave, the sample sizes differ greatly from survey to survey. Data in multivariate analyses were weighted using the WTSSPS variable.

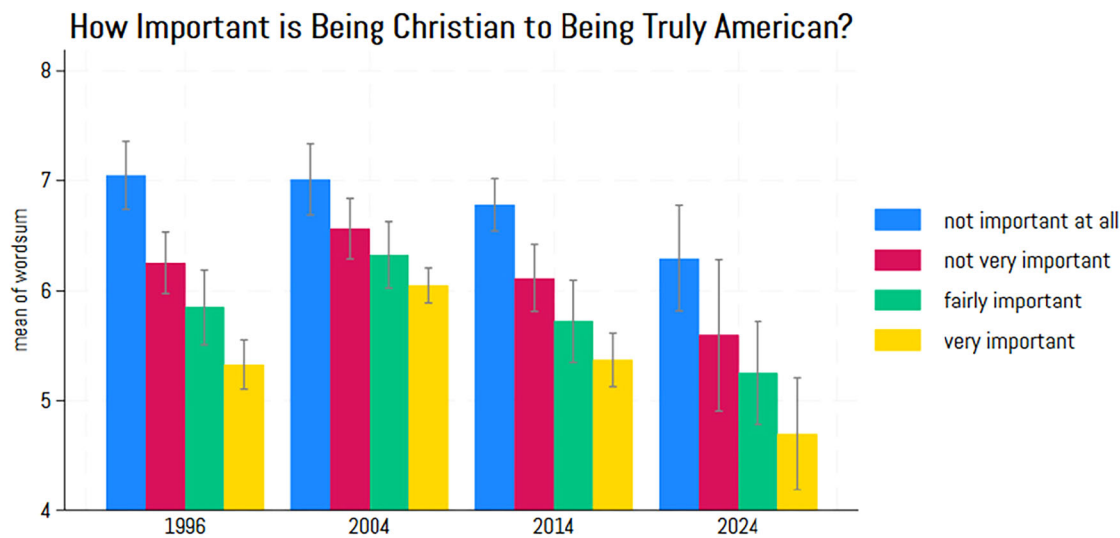
3.2 | Outcomes

My outcomes are items used to measure adherence to Christian nationalism. Christian nationalism has been measured in a variety of ways, including multi-item indexes and single-item measures.² My first outcome is an item only included in the 1996, 2004, 2014, and 2024 GSS waves in which Americans are first prompted with the statement: “Some people say the following things are important for being truly American. Others say they are not important.” Then they are asked, “How important do you think each of the following is ... To be a Christian.” Responses ranged from 1 = very important to 4 = not important at all. I reverse-coded this, so higher scores indicate greater adherence to Christian nationalist belief. Though it is a single-item measure, it has been profitably used in numerous studies of Christian nationalism (e.g., Davis and Perry 2021, Perry 2026, Perry et al. 2024, Perry and Whitehead 2019, Seto 2025, Sherkat et al. 2024, Sherkat and Lehman 2018, Straughn and Feld 2010, Whitehead and Perry 2020b, Whitehead and Scheitle 2018). Because this outcome is ordinal, I estimate models with ordinal logistic regression.³

My second outcome is an item that has been included in GSS waves since 1974. Respondents are prompted with the statement: “The United States Supreme Court has ruled that no state or local government may require the reading of the Lord’s Prayer or Bible verses in public schools.” They are then asked “What are your views on this—do you approve or disapprove of this court ruling?” Because the prompt specifies “the Lord’s Prayer” and “Bible verses,” the item is clearly not asking about “religion” generically, but Christianity or at least Judeo-Christianity. Consequently, this item has also been used in previous studies to track Christian nationalist belief over time (e.g., Liberman 2022, Schwadel 2013, Whitehead and Perry 2020b). Because this is a binary outcome, I estimate models with logistic regression.⁴

3.3 | Cognitive Ability

I follow numerous studies in using the GSS *wordsum* vocabulary exercise as a serviceable measure of “cognitive ability.” The GSS has regularly included this quiz (though not at every wave or with the full sample) in the GSS since 1974. Respondents are given a series of 10 vocabulary words. For each word, they are then given a list of five words and they are asked to choose which word comes closest in meaning to their vocabulary word. Scores represent the sum of correct answers on this vocabulary quiz (ranging 0–10). Though this measure is understandably strongly associated with educational attainment (e.g., Ganzach et al. 2019; Mazur 2023, Meisenberg 2015, Sherkat 2010, Wodtke 2016), it is not simply a proxy for education. Rather, studies have shown that similar “word knowledge” or vocabulary measures correspond with other indicators of intelligence or cognitive ability, such as numeracy or abstract reasoning (Nyborg 2009, Pennycook et al. 2012, Sterling et al. 2016), and virtually all studies discussed thus far that have documented a connection between the *wordsum* item and various indicators of religious or political belief have statistically controlled for respondents’ education (and in the case of Wodtke (2016), mother’s and father’s education as well).



SCOTUS's Decision to Ban Compulsory Christian Prayer and Bible from School?

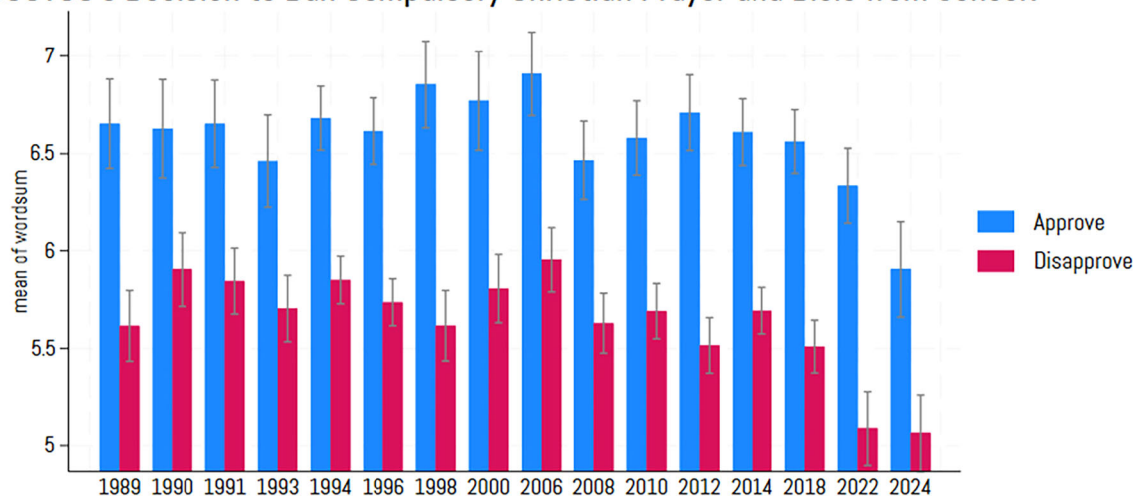


FIGURE 1 | Mean scores on the GSS *wordsum* vocabulary exercise (range 0–10) across Americans' responses on the importance of being Christian for being truly American and Americans approval or disapproval of the Supreme Court removing compulsory Christian prayers and Bible-reading from public school by survey year. Error bars are 95% confidence intervals. All samples are analytic samples used in full models. See [Supporting Information Tables A2 and A3](#) for specific mean scores, confidence intervals, and sample sizes. *Source:* General Social Surveys. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](#)]

Consequently, it is commonly used as a stand-alone measure of “cognitive ability” across social science disciplines (Brandt and Crawford 2016, Carl 2015, Caplan and Miller 2010, Ganzach et al. 2019, Mazur 2023, Meisenberg 2015, Panish 2025, Wodtke 2016), and thus, it is serviceable for that purpose here, which I demonstrate with a robustness check using two other items capturing cognitive ability.

3.4 | Controls

Given that my measures of Christian nationalism and cognitive ability are both related to similar inputs and outcomes, it is essential to control for numerous ideological and demographic factors to ensure any observed connection between them is not spurious. The most important of these is educational attainment, which I measure with degree categories (less than high school = refer-

ence, high school, associates/junior college, bachelor's degree, or graduate degree) instead of years of education so as to account for the possibility that the relationship might not be linear.⁵

Other controls include respondents' religious and political characteristics which are highly predictive of Christian nationalism as well as cognitive ability and education. Religious characteristics include religious affiliation, fundamentalist belief, and religious commitment. Religious affiliation is measured with evangelical Protestant (reference), mainline Protestant, Black Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Other Religion, and Unaffiliated.⁶ Fundamentalist belief is measured with viewing the Bible as the literal word of God (reference), true but not literal, an ancient book of history, or something else. In addition, religious commitment is measured with worship attendance frequency (0 = never to 8 = several times a week). Political characteristics include political ideology included as an ordinal measure (1 = extremely

liberal to 7 = extremely conservative) and partisan identity measured with five dummy variables (strong Democrat = reference, lean Democrat, Independent/Other, lean Republican, or strong Republican).

Lastly, I control for various demographic characteristics, including respondents' age (in years), race (White = reference, Black, and other), sex (male = 0, female = 1), household income (Less than \$25,000 = reference; \$25,000–\$49,999; \$50,000–\$99,999; \$100,000–\$149,999; \$150,000 or more; Did not answer), region of the country (Northeast = reference, South, Midwest, and West), and nativity (born in the USA = 0, foreign born = 1). I also include controls for survey year in multivariate models. For the first outcome, I include the year for each wave for which all predictor variables are available (1996, 2014, and 2024), and for the second outcome, I use a dummy variable for survey decade (1980s, 1990s, 2000s, 2010s, and 2020s) so as to not have 17 dummy variables for survey year.⁷

3.5 | Plan of Analyses

The analysis proceeds as follows. In order to demonstrate the clear bivariate connection between cognitive ability and Christian nationalism, Figure 1 presents mean scores on the *wordsum* vocabulary exercise across responses on Christian nationalism questions for each survey year. Turning to the multivariable analyses, Table 1 presents ordinal logistic regression models predicting Americans' views on the importance of being Christian to being truly American. Key predictors are included in a step-wise fashion. Model 1 is the baseline and includes cognitive ability with basic demographic controls. Model 2 introduces education. Model 3 adds religious characteristics. In addition, Model 4 adds political characteristics. Table 2 presents binary logistic regression models predicting Americans' disapproval of the Supreme Court decision on Christian prayer and Bible-reading. Models follow the same pattern as in Table 1.

Though I do not present all tests for potential moderating effects, educational attainment ultimately was a consistent moderator for both Christian nationalism outcomes. Thus, Table 3 then presents results from interactions between *wordsum* scores and educational attainment in order to demonstrate how the link between cognitive ability and Christian nationalism is potentially moderated by education. All *p* values are calculated with robust standard errors to account for survey weighting.

4 | Results

Figure 1 uses bars to display means with 95% confidence intervals for Americans' scores on the *wordsum* vocabulary measure across responses for both Christian nationalism outcomes and for each survey year. (For precise mean scores with confidence intervals and sample sizes, see [Supporting Information Tables A4 and A5](#).) The bivariate patterns are unmistakable. In the top panel, the more importance Americans attach to being Christian for being "truly American," the lower their average vocabulary score. This roughly linear pattern is consistent across survey years, though it is less pronounced in 2004 in which more Americans on average were affirming nationalistic views possibly due to a post-

9/11 effect (see Straughn and Feld 2010, Whitehead and Scheitle 2018). In the bottom panel, for each survey year of analysis, those Americans who disapprove of the Supreme Court's decision to remove compulsory Christian prayer and Bible-reading from public schools score significantly lower in on the *wordsum* vocabulary quiz than those who approve of the Supreme Court's decision. Thus, for both outcomes, my measure of cognitive ability is negatively associated with Christian nationalism.

Table 1 presents ordinal logistic regression models predicting Americans' belief that being a Christian is important for being truly American. The baseline Model 1 shows that *wordsum* scores are negatively associated with this outcome at the 0.001 level, with standard demographic controls in place. Model 2 adds educational attainment and the effect of cognitive ability is minimally affected in terms of substantive size but remains statistically significant at the 0.001 level. In fact, when religious characteristics are added in Model 3 and political characteristics in Model 4, the effect of cognitive ability on Americans' belief that being a Christian is important to being truly American does not change at all. Thus, even with full controls in place (education, fundamentalist belief, and other relevant correlates), cognitive ability remains a strongly significant, negative predictor of Christian nationalism.

Table 2 replicates this analytical approach using binary logistic regression models to predict disapproval of the Supreme Court's decision to remove compulsory Christian prayers and Bible-reading. Across models, the results are nearly identical as those presented in Table 1. Vocabulary scores are negatively associated with the outcome in the baseline Model 1. In addition, the effect is diminished slightly when educational attainment is included in Model 2, but not in statistical significance. Similarly, the substantive effect is diminished slightly when religious characteristics are included in Model 3, but not when political characteristics are introduced in Model 4. Ultimately, cognitive ability measured with *wordsum* scores remains significantly (at $p < 0.001$), negatively associated with disapproval of the Supreme Court's decision to remove compulsory Christian prayer and Bible-reading from public school. In other words, cognitive ability is negatively associated with this measure of Christian nationalism.

Though theory did not necessarily lead me to anticipate consistent moderating effects, in ancillary analyses (not shown) I tested interactions between vocabulary scores and key predictors in order to ensure that the observed link between cognitive ability and Christian nationalism was not limited to particular Americans or during particular survey years. Ultimately these interactions yielded almost no significant patterns for the first outcome. In addition, although some significant interactions resulted for the second outcome (unsurprising with an *n* of 18,700 respondents), these were either not reflected for the first outcome, or inspection of marginal effects revealed little of substantive interest.⁸

Among the consistent moderating patterns, however, was the interaction for educational attainment presented in Table 3. Here, once I interact *wordsum* scores with attainment categories, the lower order term for cognitive ability is no longer significant, indicating that for those Americans in the "less than high school" category, cognitive ability is not significantly associated with

TABLE 1 | Ordinal logistic regression model predicting importance of being Christian to being truly American, 1996–2024.

Predictors	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	<i>b</i>	RSE	<i>b</i>	RSE	<i>b</i>	RSE	<i>b</i>	RSE
Vocabulary exercise	−0.29***	0.03	−0.23***	0.03	−0.23***	0.04	−0.23***	0.04
High school			−0.38	0.20	−0.21	0.22	−0.27	0.22
Assoc./Junior coll.			−0.49	0.27	−0.25	0.28	−0.31	0.29
Bachelor's			−0.84***	0.24	−0.64*	0.26	−0.69*	0.27
Graduate			−1.30***	0.29	−0.87**	0.32	−0.87**	0.32
Mainline Protestant					−0.51**	0.19	−0.45*	0.19
Black Protestant					−0.59	0.35	−0.55	0.36
Catholic					−0.56**	0.17	−0.51**	0.17
Jewish					−3.93***	0.69	−3.91***	0.67
Other					−1.40***	0.29	−1.34***	0.29
Unaffiliated					−1.45***	0.22	−1.34***	0.22
Inspired word					−0.85***	0.14	−0.80***	0.15
Ancient book					−1.75***	0.19	−1.70***	0.19
Other					−2.10***	0.55	−2.01***	0.55
Worship attendance					0.12***	0.02	0.11***	0.03
Conservative ideology							0.19***	0.06
Lean Democrat							−0.23	0.19
Independent/Other							−0.26	0.23
Lean Republican							−0.25	0.21
Strong Republican							−0.38	0.28
Age	0.04***	0.00	0.04***	0.00	0.04***	0.00	0.04***	0.00
Black	0.56***	0.17	0.59***	0.17	0.65*	0.26	0.64*	0.27
Other race	0.38	0.24	0.47*	0.24	0.53*	0.25	0.58*	0.25
Female	0.36***	0.11	0.36**	0.11	0.21	0.12	0.23*	0.12
\$25,000–\$49,999	−0.19	0.15	−0.11	0.15	−0.23	0.15	−0.23	0.15
\$50,000–\$99,999	−0.21	0.15	−0.03	0.15	−0.18	0.16	−0.19	0.16
\$100,000–\$149,999	−0.47*	0.22	−0.21	0.22	−0.41	0.23	−0.48*	0.23
\$150,000 or more	−1.45***	0.32	−1.07***	0.32	−1.11***	0.33	−1.16***	0.33
Income: Did not say	−0.48*	0.22	−0.35	0.22	−0.42	0.23	−0.42	0.24
Midwest	0.37*	0.16	0.34*	0.16	0.21	0.17	0.21	0.17
South	0.88***	0.16	0.86***	0.16	0.56**	0.17	0.54**	0.17
West	−0.25	0.18	−0.28	0.18	−0.12	0.19	−0.13	0.19
Foreign born	−0.46*	0.19	−0.47*	0.19	−0.43*	0.21	−0.45*	0.21
2014	−0.46***	0.12	−0.41***	0.12	−0.37**	0.13	−0.39**	0.14
2024	−0.99***	0.22	−0.93***	0.22	−0.85***	0.22	−0.89***	0.22
Cut 1	−0.86**	0.28	−0.88**	0.29	−2.24***	0.33	−1.81***	0.41
Cut 2	0.35	0.27	0.35	0.29	−0.69*	0.33	−0.24	0.40
Cut 3	1.16***	0.27	1.16***	0.29	0.31	0.33	0.76	0.40
Pseudo <i>R</i> ²	0.123		0.133		0.237		0.241	

Note: Unstandardized beta coefficients; *p* values calculated with robust standard errors. Excluded categories are less than high school, Evangelical Protestant, Word of God, Strong Democrat, White, less than \$25,000, Northeast, and 1996.

p* < 0.05; *p* < 0.01; ****p* < 0.001 (two-tailed tests).

Source: 1996, 2014, and 2024 General Social Survey (*N* = 1659).

TABLE 2 | Binary logistic regression model predicting disapproval of the Supreme Court removing compulsory Christian prayer and Bible-reading from public school, 1989–2024.

Predictors	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	<i>b</i>	RSE	<i>b</i>	RSE	<i>b</i>	RSE	<i>b</i>	RSE
Vocabulary exercise	−0.21***	0.01	−0.17***	0.01	−0.12***	0.01	−0.12***	0.01
High school			0.04	0.07	0.08	0.07	0.04	0.07
Assoc./Junior coll.			0.01	0.09	0.05	0.10	0.00	0.10
Bachelor's			−0.51***	0.08	−0.44***	0.09	−0.48***	0.09
Graduate			−0.93***	0.10	−0.75***	0.10	−0.72***	0.10
Mainline Protestant					−0.43***	0.06	−0.39***	0.06
Black Protestant					−0.09	0.12	0.01	0.12
Catholic					−0.32***	0.06	−0.25***	0.06
Jewish					−1.88***	0.18	−1.70***	0.18
Other					−0.76***	0.09	−0.72***	0.09
Unaffiliated					−0.95***	0.08	−0.86***	0.08
Inspired word					−0.63***	0.05	−0.57***	0.05
Ancient book					−1.16***	0.07	−1.05***	0.07
Other					−0.82***	0.24	−0.75**	0.25
Worship attendance					0.06***	0.01	0.04***	0.01
Conservative ideology							0.16***	0.02
Lean Democrat							0.09	0.06
Independent/Other							0.20**	0.08
Lean Republican							0.20**	0.07
Strong Republican							0.46***	0.09
Age	0.03***	0.00	0.03***	0.00	0.02***	0.00	0.02***	0.00
Black	0.43***	0.06	0.45***	0.06	0.24**	0.09	0.39***	0.09
Other race	−0.03	0.09	0.01	0.09	−0.09	0.10	0.00	0.10
Female	0.18***	0.04	0.17***	0.04	0.01	0.04	0.07	0.04
\$25,000–\$49,999	0.02	0.05	0.06	0.05	−0.00	0.05	−0.02	0.06
\$50,000–\$99,999	−0.14**	0.05	−0.00	0.06	−0.07	0.06	−0.12*	0.06
\$100,000–\$149,999	−0.20*	0.08	0.04	0.08	0.07	0.08	−0.03	0.09
\$150,000 or more	−0.37***	0.11	−0.05	0.11	0.03	0.11	−0.05	0.12
Income: Did not say	−0.06	0.08	0.01	0.08	−0.04	0.08	−0.10	0.08
Midwest	0.09	0.06	0.08	0.06	−0.12	0.06	−0.13*	0.06
South	0.48***	0.06	0.48***	0.06	0.18**	0.06	0.15*	0.06
West	−0.30***	0.06	−0.33***	0.06	−0.37***	0.07	−0.39***	0.07
Foreign born	−0.16*	0.08	−0.08	0.08	−0.04	0.08	−0.02	0.08
1990s	0.03	0.07	0.03	0.07	0.03	0.07	0.01	0.07
2000s	−0.03	0.08	−0.02	0.08	0.07	0.08	0.04	0.08
2010s	−0.21**	0.07	−0.18*	0.07	−0.03	0.07	−0.06	0.07
2020s	−0.74***	0.10	−0.68***	0.10	−0.48***	0.11	−0.55***	0.11
Constant	0.40***	0.11	0.12	0.12	0.95***	0.14	0.11	0.16
Pseudo R^2	0.088		0.100		0.170		0.181	

Note: Unstandardized beta coefficients; *p* values calculated with robust standard errors. Excluded categories are evangelical Protestant, Word of God, Strong Democrat, less than High School, White, less than \$25,000, Northeast, and 1980s.

p* < 0.05; *p* < 0.01; ****p* < 0.001 (two-tailed tests).

Source: 1989–2024 General Social Survey (*N* = 18,700).

TABLE 3 | Ordinal and binary logistic regression models predicting Christian nationalism measures with interactions for educational attainment.

Predictors	Importance of being Christian for being truly American		Disapprove SCOTUS removing Christian prayer and Bible-reading	
	<i>b</i>	RSE	<i>b</i>	RSE
Vocabulary exercise	−0.10	0.11	0.05	0.03
High school	0.24	0.56	0.79***	0.19
Assoc./Junior Coll.	−0.53	0.92	1.32***	0.33
Bachelor's	1.37	0.72	1.12***	0.27
Graduate	−0.79	1.02	0.67*	0.31
Vocabulary exercise × high school	−0.12	0.12	−0.17***	0.04
Vocabulary exercise × assoc./junior coll.	−0.01	0.16	−0.26***	0.05
Vocabulary exercise × bachelor's	−0.36**	0.13	−0.29***	0.04
Vocabulary exercise × graduate	−0.07	0.16	−0.26***	0.05
Full controls	✓		✓	
<i>N</i>	1659		18,700	

Note: Unstandardized beta coefficients; *p* values calculated with robust standard errors. Full controls from Tables 3 and 4 include in each model.

p* < 0.05; *p* < 0.01; ****p* < 0.001 (two-tailed tests).

Source: 1989–2024 General Social Survey.

support for either Christian nationalism measure. Moreover, the interaction terms are all negative, with the term for vocabulary scores × bachelor's degree significant for the first Christian nationalism outcome and each interaction term significant for the second outcome. Marginal probabilities presented in Figures 2 and 3 illustrate what these coefficients signify.

Figure 2 presents marginal probabilities of selecting one of the four possible responses to the first Christian nationalism outcome. It seems that as vocabulary scores increase, Americans tend to be less likely to affirm that being a Christian is “very important” to be truly American and more likely to affirm this is “not important at all.” But this pattern is so muted as to be non-significant among those with less than a high school degree. But the patterns are virtually identical for Americans who have only a high school degree or a college degree, suggesting that the effect of cognitive ability on this Christian nationalism measure is not a reflection of exposure to college education.

Figure 3 presents the marginal probabilities of disapproving of the Supreme Court's decision to remove compulsory Christian prayer and Bible-reading from public school across vocabulary scores within educational attainment categories. Again, those with less than high school education show the different pattern. Though Christian nationalism by this measure declines with cognitive ability for all other educational categories, agreement actually increases slightly (though not to a significant degree) for those with less than high school education. As in Figure 2, it is clear that the effect of cognitive ability on this measure of Christian nationalism is not attributable to college education because a similar pattern holds for those with only a high school education.

Ancillary analyses in which I look at interactions between *wordsum* scores and the GSS measure for years of education (*educ*) help to clarify that the anomalous pattern for Americans

with less than a high school education is actually specific to Americans with almost no education whatsoever (see Supporting Information Table A6 and Figures A1 and A2). Once Americans attain middle school-level education (Supporting Information Figure A1), the relationship between cognitive ability and the first Christian nationalism outcome is similar to those with college education. In addition, once Americans have some high school education (Supporting Information Figure A2), vocabulary scores are no longer positively associated with affirming the second Christian nationalism outcome but become unassociated by the 10th grade and negative upon completing high school.

4.1 | Robustness Checks

In addition to analyses for moderating effects, I also conducted a number of robustness checks in order to ensure the reliability of the patterns observed in Tables 1 and 2. The first of these was to estimate regression models for each survey year separately (see Supporting Information Tables A7 and A8). The cognitive ability measure was a statistically significant, negative predictor of the first Christian nationalism outcome in the 1996, 2004, 2014, and 2024 waves.⁹ The results for the second outcome across survey waves were also consistent, though with some variations. Vocabulary scores were always signed in the negative direction in predicting disapproval of the Supreme Court's decision to remove compulsory Christian prayer and Bible-reading from public schools, but it was only statistically significant in 11 out of 17 survey waves. However, it was significantly associated in 7 out of 8 waves conducted since 2008. Overall, these patterns suggest cognitive ability measured with the *wordsum* score consistently predicted Christian nationalism outcomes across years.

Another robustness check involved accounting for parents' education and respondents' economic background so as to ensure

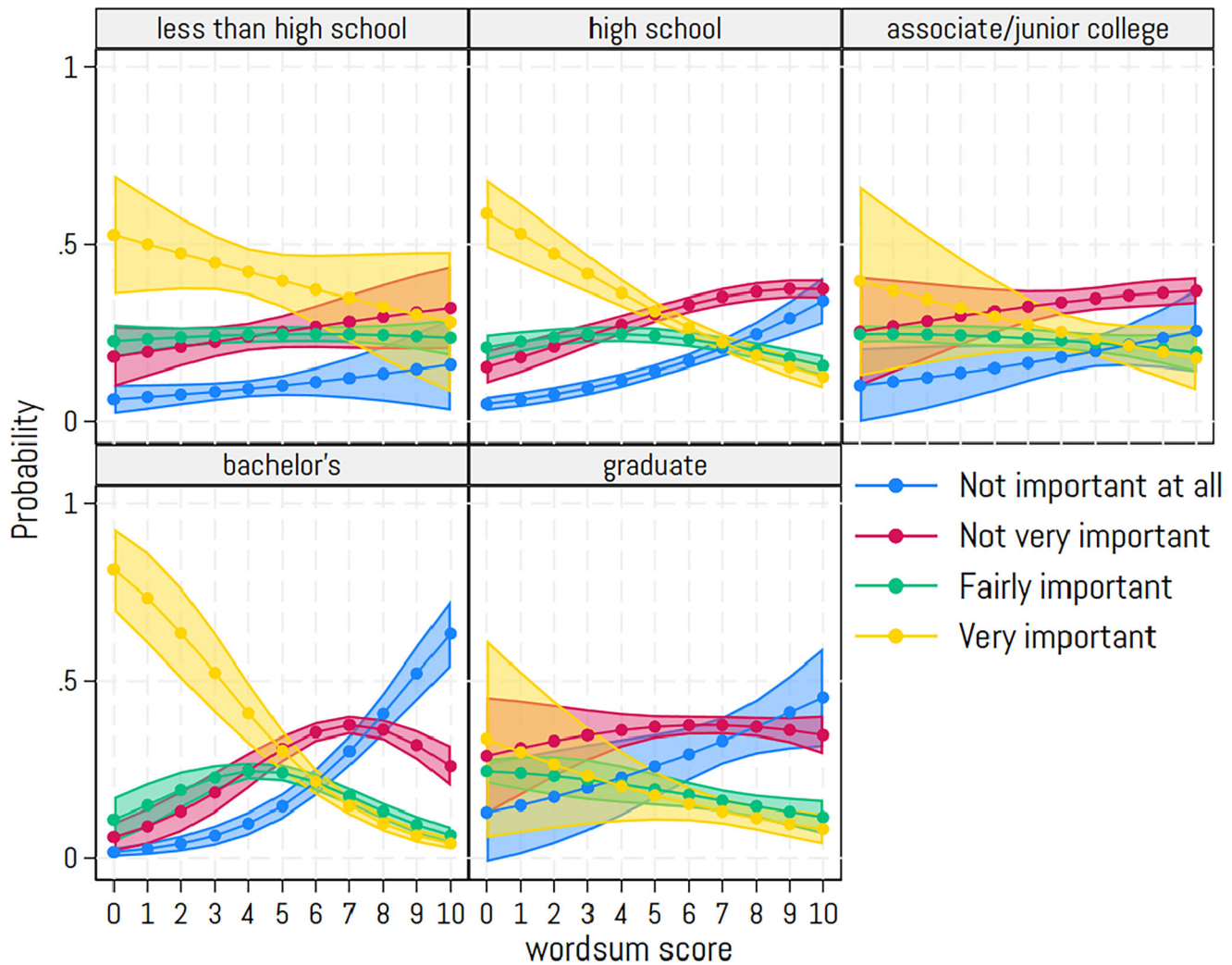


FIGURE 2 | Marginal probabilities of selecting various responses regarding the importance of being Christian to being truly American across scores on the *wordsum* vocabulary exercise and educational attainment. Confidence bands are 84% confidence intervals. All controls held at their means. *Source*: 1996–2024 General Social Surveys ($N = 1659$). [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions)]

that vocabulary scores were not due to some household contextual factor that the main models did not account for. This is following the approach used by Wodtke (2016). [Supporting Information Tables A9 and A10](#) present models in which I include measures for mother's years of education, father's years of education, and one's household income (in subjective categories) at age 16. Ultimately, none of these measures changed the effect of vocabulary scores on either outcome, despite including them reducing sample size considerably. Thus, I did not include them in the main analyses.

Third, I tested quadratic terms for the *wordsum* measure in order to ensure that the relationship to Christian nationalism was roughly linear. For the first outcome regarding Christianity being important to be truly American, the quadratic terms were not significant indicating *wordsum* has a more linear relationship to this outcome (see [Supporting Information Table A11](#)). For the second outcome, both quadratic terms were significant at 0.001 with the direction of coefficients suggesting an inverted U-shaped distribution with the greatest adherence to Christian nationalism among those who score in the middle, not the lowest

(see [Supporting Information Table A12; Figure A3](#)). However, further analyses revealed that this pattern was largely due to low Christian nationalism agreement among the very small percentage of respondents who score quite low in the vocabulary exercise (the distribution of *wordsum* having a clear left-skew). When I divide *wordsum* into quartiles—thus grouping the low-scoring outliers together with others closer to the middle of the distribution—and test that in regression models, the pattern once again looks more linear with Christian nationalism being highest among the lowest *wordsum* quartiles and declining for higher quartiles (see [Supporting Information Table A12; Figure A3](#)).

The GSS has also included variations of the standard *wordsum* quiz with slightly fewer or different words (*wordsumnew* and *wordsum7*). [Supporting Information Tables A13 and A14](#) compare full models using *wordsum*, and these different iterations of the vocabulary quiz and the results for the alternate items were either identical to those presented in the full models of [Tables 1 or 2](#), or they were substantively stronger. Thus, the associations I document between cognitive ability and Christian nationalism in the main analyses are not due to idiosyncrasies

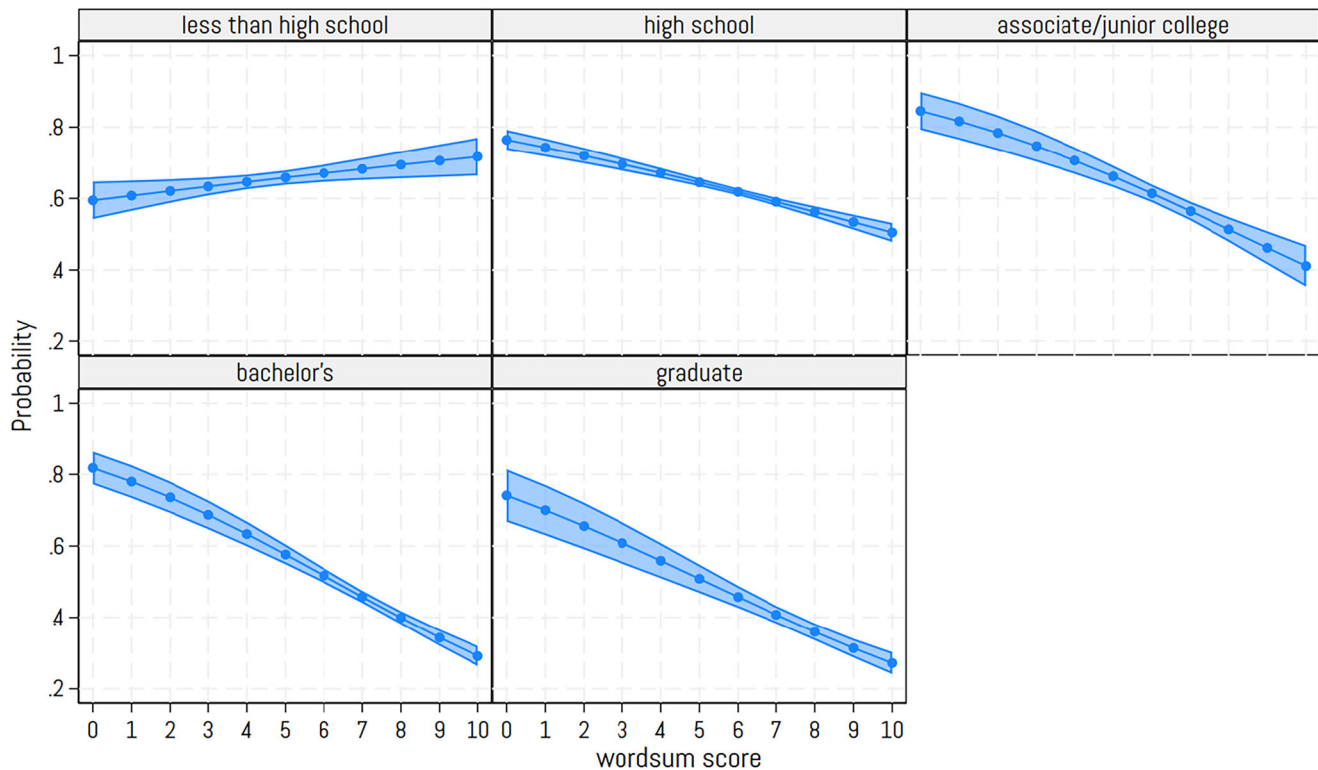


FIGURE 3 | Marginal probabilities of disapproving of the Supreme Court removing compulsory Christian prayer and Bible-reading from public school across scores on the *wordsum* vocabulary exercise and educational attainment. Confidence bands are 84% confidence intervals. All controls held at their means. Source: 1989–2024 General Social Surveys ($N = 18,700$). [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com)]

in the *wordsum* test that are not present in the alternative measures.

Finally, to demonstrate *wordsum*'s utility as a proxy for cognitive ability (with qualifications), I tested its correspondence with other items capturing cognitive ability in the GSS and examined their association with Christian nationalism items. In the 1994 wave, the GSS asked a series of eight similarity questions (called “alike1” through “alike8”), a subtest from the Wechsler intelligence test (Wechsler 1958). Respondents were shown paired items (orange–banana, dog–lion, etc.) and asked what they had in common, providing a test of abstract reasoning. Composite scores on these “alike” questions (ranging 0–16) correlated with *wordsum* at 0.445 ($p < 0.001$) and combining the two indexes yields a Cronbach's alpha of 0.756. Similarly, in the 2006–2018 waves, the GSS asked Americans two yes/no questions intended to capture how well they understood odds in a scientific context (called “odds1” and “odds2”), thus serving as a proxy for numeracy. I added responses into a 3-value index. This measure corresponded with *wordsum* at 0.30 ($p < 0.001$), thus again indicating a moderate, positive association. Moreover, these alternative cognitive ability items correspond with Christian nationalism in expected ways. The alike index is negatively associated with disapproving of the Supreme Court's decision to remove compulsory prayer and Bible-reading from public school at -0.21 ($p < 0.001$). In addition, the odds index is negatively associated with believing that being a Christian is important to being truly American at -0.26 ($p < 0.001$), and support for compulsory prayer/Bible-reading in school at -0.13 ($p < 0.001$). These intercorrelations between the *wordsum* quiz,

alternative cognitive ability items, and both Christian nationalism measures give me greater confidence that *wordsum* is capturing the association between cognitive ability and Christian nationalism.

5 | Discussion and Conclusions

Despite the large body of research conducted on Christian nationalism over the past decade, scholarly explanations for why Americans affirm Christian nationalist views have largely been limited to its connection with sectarian or fundamentalist religious communities that would establish plausibility structures for Christian nationalist claims and various familial or educational contexts in which Americans would hear such claims (Gorski and Perry 2022, Rotolo 2022, Sherkat et al. 2024, Whitehead and Perry 2020b). Though certainly part of the explanation, scholars have yet to consider whether Christian nationalism also appeals to Americans with lower cognitive ability, just as numerous studies have found for various religious beliefs and right-wing political views (e.g., Bobo and Licari 1989, Carl 2014, Edwards et al. 2025, Ganzach et al. 2019, Kanazawa 2010, 2021, Mazur 2023, Motta 2018, Onraet et al. 2015, Sherkat 2010, 2021, 2022, Wodtke 2016). Integrating this latter literature with empirical findings on educational and knowledge deficits among Americans who subscribe to Christian nationalism (e.g., Gorski and Perry 2022, Perry et al. 2021, 2022, Whitehead and Perry 2020a), I theorized that Americans who score lower on one common measure of cognitive ability in the GSS would be more likely to affirm Christian nationalist views, all else equal.

My findings strongly supported my expectations. Specifically, the higher Americans' score on the GSS *wordsum* vocabulary exercise, the less likely they were to (1) believe that being a Christian is important to being truly American or (2) disapprove of the Supreme Court's decision to ban compulsory Christian prayers and Bible-reading from public schools. These associations remained statistically significant beyond the 0.001 level even after controlling for educational attainment (in degrees or years), religious fundamentalism, and other relevant ideological and demographic characteristics. Moreover, ancillary analyses revealed that these patterns were not consistently, significantly moderated by survey year and were generally consistent for all subgroups except for the least educated Americans.

These findings provide a number of insights that expand our understanding of Christian nationalism and its adherents and consequently helps us better apprehend the American religious and political landscape today. Most directly, the findings are unequivocally clear that Americans who score lower on a commonly-used measure of cognitive ability tend to find Christian nationalist views more appealing, and these associations cannot be explained away by education or relevant religious and political characteristics that would also be associated with both verbal ability (Blanchard-Fields et al. 2001, Dürlinger et al. 2024, Kanazawa 2010, Sherkat 2010, 2021, 2022) and Christian nationalism (Delehanty et al. 2019, McDaniel et al. 2022, Sherkat et al. 2024, Whitehead and Perry 2020b).

Though the GSS does not contain additional measures that could be used to assess other indicators of intelligence or various cognitive styles, it is likely that the same cognitive mechanisms that connect verbal ability to religious beliefs and reactionary politics hold for Christian nationalism. Cognitive ability represents the capacity of individuals to learn and deploy new abstract information and to reason through problems, which is why persons who are higher in cognitive ability tend to be more analytical and skeptical of myth, tradition, convention, conspiracies, and “bull shit” (Edwards et al. 2025, Pennycook et al. 2012; Ståhl and Van Prooijen 2018, Sterling et al. 2016, Zuckerman et al. 2013, 2020). Persons higher in cognitive ability also tend to eschew political intolerance, traditional social divisions, and nationalism and to favor egalitarian, humanistic principles (Bobo and Licari 1989, Carl 2014, Kanazawa 2021, Wodtke 2016). Christian nationalism depends on myths about America's founding, and studies suggest it is fundamentally an “us vs. them” ideology. Perry et al. (2022) argue that Christian nationalists not only tended to be wrong about facts of American religious history and politics, but they were dogmatically wrong. Thus, it is quite reasonable to conclude that Americans averse to or less capable of deeper, more rigorous cognitive reflection would find the mythological, reactionary, socially divisive, and hierarchical core of Christian nationalism more appealing.

How do I explain the fact that cognitive ability did not seem to incline the least educated Americans (those with less than a high school degree) to reject Christian nationalist views? As the findings in Figures 2 and 3 and ancillary analyses (Supporting Information Figures A1 and A2) demonstrate, this is not due to some uniquely liberal or progressive set of ideals or values college education bestows on brighter students, because the trends for high school and college graduates were highly similar. Instead,

it suggests that there is a basic threshold of exposure to a broad set of epistemic commitments and social values that crystalize by the end of high school and activates cognitive ability to discern between worldviews. Thus, although the relationship between cognitive ability and Christian nationalism cannot be explained away simply as a function of education, there does seem to be a baseline (sometime during middle or high school) below which cognitive ability is not activated or equipped to incline Americans to reject Christian nationalist frames of thinking or views. Future studies would ideally unpack this pattern further.

This study's findings also help us understand the contemporary American religious and political landscape. Though research suggests that Christian nationalist views are not necessarily increasing in the general population (Rotolo and Smith 2026, Whitehead and Perry 2020b), there is evidence to suggest that right-wing politicians (because of the growing alignment between conservative Christians and the Republican Party) are deploying overt Christian nationalist rhetoric with greater frequency (e.g., Bond and Neville-Shepard 2023, Hughes 2019). To the extent that such rhetoric targets Americans lower in cognitive ability (who are already more inclined to embrace conservative religious beliefs and reactionary political views), such audiences will likely find this rhetoric more appealing. In addition, because the intention of this rhetoric is to polarize, there may be a continued trend toward social sorting of more educated and cognitively capable Americans sorting in the Democratic Party and less educated, religious, conservative, and less cognitively capable Americans sorting into the Republican Party (following trends already identified elsewhere; see Mazur 2023, Meisenberg 2015). This is another pattern that future studies should track over time.

On the topic of future studies, I wish to acknowledge several data limitations that provide opportunities for extension and clarification of my findings. First, although the GSS allows for comparison of repeated cross-sectional findings over time, they are still cross-sectional, and thus, causal direction could plausibly be reversed. Indeed, Sherkat's (2010, 2021) studies on the topic of verbal ability and religion proceed under this assumption. In addition, consistent with Sherkat's argument, both Christian nationalism items predict *wordsum* scores when I simply reverse the independent and dependent variables in full OLS regression models (see Supporting Information Table A15). Thus, although I contend that the majority of research on cognitive ability and religious and political characteristics favor my theoretical approach, the alternative causal direction cannot be ruled out.

Additionally, another limitation is that a single-item measure of “cognitive ability” is not ideal. Though it is quite common to use verbal ability in the GSS for just this purpose (Caplan and Miller 2010, Carl 2015, Mazur 2023, Meisenberg 2015, Wodtke 2016) and correlated with other available intelligence measures in the GSS, other studies deploy multi-battery measures of intelligence that include abstract reasoning, numeracy, standardized test scores, and other established indexes (Ganzach and Gotlibovski 2013, Pennycook et al. 2012, Nyborg 2009, Sterling et al. 2016), and this would also be more ideal in future studies testing a link between Christian nationalist ideology and cognitive ability. Lastly, the Christian nationalism items were unfortunately limited in the GSS. Though the items I used have considerable precedence in the literature (e.g., Davis and Perry 2021, Whitehead and Perry

2020b), recent studies have proposed more comprehensive multi-item index with greater face validity, and future studies should consider using these (Pew Research Center 2021, PRRI Staff 2023).

These limitations notwithstanding, the current study has taken the discussion of the American Christian right and its underlying ideology in a different direction. By documenting a connection between lower cognitive ability and acceptance of Christian nationalist views (specifically, connecting Christian identity to American-ness, favoring compulsory Christian prayers and Bible-reading in public schools), this study highlights *one* potential source of Christian nationalism's appeal and sheds light on why that appeal may be more intractable than previously considered.

Funding

The author has nothing to report.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data for this study are publicly available at www.TheARDA.com and code for replication will be available at the author's Harvard Dataverse page after publication.

Endnotes

¹Because the General Social Surveys are technically measuring Americans' scores on the *wordsum* vocabulary exercise, they are specifically measuring something more like "verbal intelligence," and because such scores are dependent on education and being measured in adults, this could also be called "crystallized intelligence" or one's cognitive ability having been shaped by background and educational experiences (Caplan and Miller 2010). Moreover, it should be recognized that verbal ability is not a comprehensive indicator of overall intelligence like multi-battery assessments. Nevertheless, studies find *wordsum* scores correspond to more comprehensive measures of adult intelligence (e.g., Wechsler 1958, Wolfle 1980) or various other individual indicators of intelligence (Meijer and Oostdam 2001, Nyborg 2009, Pennycook et al. 2012, Sterling et al. 2016). Moreover, because I control for educational attainment, other demographic factors, and even parents' level of education, I am accounting for background factors that might differentially shape exposure to word items and thus can capture something closer to ability or intelligence. Lastly, I will demonstrate how *wordsum* corresponds to alternative indicators of intelligence in the GSS. Thus, I will follow Wodtke (2016) and numerous others across social science disciplines (Brandt and Crawford 2016; Caplan and Miller 2010, Carl 2015, Ganzach et al. 2019, Mazur 2023, Meisenberg 2015, Panish 2025) and use this an imperfect-but-serviceable proxy for "cognitive ability."

²Though the 2021 GSS included several Christian nationalism items that studies have used to construct an index (Perry 2026, Schmidgall et al. 2026), the 2021 GSS did not include any variation of the *wordsum* vocabulary exercise in the same subsample as the Christian nationalism items.

³Although ordinal logistic regression models technically violated the proportional odds assumption with a Brant test in Stata, given the 4-value ordinal coding I did not consider this sufficient reason to use ordinal least squares (OLS) regression as the main modeling strategy. Nevertheless, as a robustness check, I ran these models with OLS (see Supporting Information Table A1) and results were unsurprisingly identical.

⁴The two items are moderately correlated ($r = 0.37, p < 0.001$). So I tested models with the two items combined by first transforming them into z scores and summing them creating an index with eight values. Though the alpha for this approach is fairly weak ($\alpha = 0.54$), the OLS regression results (see Supporting Information Table A2) produce results that are virtually identical to those I present in Tables 1 and 2 here (i.e., cognitive ability is a strongly significant, negative predictor of Christian nationalism throughout all models).

⁵As I discuss later, I also tested models with "years of education" (ranging from 0 = no formal schooling to 20 = 8 or more years of college) and the results are virtually identical (see Supporting Information Table A6). I also test models in which I control for parents' level of education (following Wodtke 2016) and these results are also identical (though much smaller in sample size due to missing information) to what I present in the main models (see Supporting Information Tables A9 and A10).

⁶Though the author prefers to classify religious tradition following the scheme of Lehman and Sherkat (2018), this recoding strategy is unfortunately unavailable in the 2024 GSS and aggregated dataset with the 2024 wave.

⁷Because cognitive ability (Christopher Auld and Sidhu 2005) and Christian nationalism (Upenieks 2022) are both related to indicators of health, I also tested models, including the GSS measure of self-rated health (1 = excellent to 4 = poor) as a control (see Supporting Information Table A3). Ultimately, this yielded little information, cost a number of cases, and did not affect the key associations at all. Thus, I do not include this in the main model.

⁸One significant interaction of note was for *wordsum* scores $\times$ Black Americans and Black Protestants in predicting the second Christian nationalism outcome. Though there was a clearly negative association between cognitive ability and disapproving of the Supreme Court banning compulsory Christian prayers and Bible-reading from public schools for everyone else, for Black Americans and Black Protestants there appeared to be a slightly positive association. Though this might reflect what is often thought to be a divergent pattern for Black Americans and Christian nationalist items (e.g., Gorski and Perry 2022, Perry and Whitehead 2019), this interpretation is unclear given that the interaction does not hold for the first Christian nationalist outcome, which is arguably the more explicit of the two. Thus, I do not focus on it here.

⁹As the Supporting Information Table A7 makes clear (see also Whitehead and Scheitle 2018), measures for biblical literalism and political ideology were not asked in the same sub-sample as the Christian nationalism measure in 2004, and thus, I had to estimate these models without biblical literalism or political ideology. Nonetheless, the models still accounted for party identification and other religious characteristics and showed the same overall pattern. Moreover, although the effect of verbal ability in the 2024 GSS was marginal ($p < 0.10$), this was largely due to the reduction in sample size attributable to the biblical literalism measure (resulting in $n = 173$). When I tested the same model with an alternative biblical literalism measure (biblelv) in the 2024 GSS, the sample size increased ($n = 231$) and verbal ability was significantly, negatively associated with the Christian nationalism measure at 0.001.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.

Supporting Table A1: Ordinary least squares regression models predicting importance of being Christian to being truly American, 1996–2024. **Supporting Table A2:** Ordinary least squares regression models predicting Christian nationalism with two outcome measures combined into an index, 1996–2024. **Supporting Table A3:** Ordinal and binary logistic regression models predicting Christian nationalism measures with an additional control for self-related health. **Supporting Table A4:** Mean scores on the GSS *wordsum* vocabulary exercise (range 0–10) across Americans' responses on the importance of being Christian for being truly American and survey year. **Supporting Table A5:** Mean scores on the GSS *wordsum* vocabulary exercise (range 0–10) across Americans' approval of disapproval of the Supreme Court removing compulsory Christian prayer and Bible reading from public school and survey year. **Supporting Table A6:** Ordinal and binary logistic regression models predicting Christian nationalism measures with interactions for educational attainment *measured with years of education*. **Supporting Table A7:** Ordinal logistic regression models predicting importance of being Christian to being truly American *disaggregated by survey year*, 1996–2024. **Supporting Table A8:** Binary logistic regression models predicting disapproval of removing compulsory Christian prayer and

Bible reading from public school *disaggregated by survey year*, 1989-2024.

Supporting Table A9: Ordinal logistic regression model predicting importance of being Christian to being truly American *with parents' education and respondents' income at age 16*, 1996-2024. **Supporting Table A10:** Binary logistic regression model predicting disapproval of the Supreme Court removing compulsory Christian prayer and Bible reading from public school *with parents' education and respondents' income at age 16*, 1989-2024. **Supporting Table A11:** Ordinal logistic regression model predicting importance of being Christian to being truly American *with quadratic terms for wordsum*, 1996-2024. **Supporting Table A12:** Binary logistic regression model predicting disapproval of the Supreme Court removing compulsory Christian prayer and Bible reading from public school *with quadratic terms for wordsum*, 1989-2024. **Supporting Table A13:** Ordinal logistic regression model predicting importance of being Christian to being truly American *with different wordsum measures*, 1996-2024. **Supporting Table A14:** Binary logistic regression model predicting disapproval of the Supreme Court removing compulsory Christian prayer and Bible reading from public school *with different wordsum measures*, 1989-2024. **Supporting Table A15:** Ordinary least squares regression models predicting *wordsum* scores using different Christian nationalism measures. **Supporting Figure A1:** Marginal probabilities of selecting various responses regarding the importance of being Christian to being truly American across scores on the *wordsum* vocabulary exercise and educational attainment *measured with years of education*. **Supporting Figure A2:** Marginal probabilities of disapproving of the Supreme Court removing compulsory Christian prayer and Bible reading from public school across scores on the *wordsum* vocabulary exercise and educational attainment *measured with years of education*. **Supporting Figure A3:** Marginal probability of disapproval of the Supreme Court removing compulsory Christian prayer and Bible reading from public school *with quadratic terms for wordsum and wordquart (quartiles)*, 1989-2024.