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Americans, Death, Politics*

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Abstract

This study investigates the relationship between religious beliefs, particularly belief in life after death, and political inclinations among Americans. Utilizing data from the 2022 General Social Survey (GSS), we explored the sociopolitical impact of religiosity through statistical analyses, including Pearson's chi-squared tests and independent samples t-tests. Findings indicate that religiosity significantly correlates with belief in life after death, with more religious individuals demonstrating a stronger inclination toward belief in an afterlife. Additionally, race and gender were found to be influential, as black Americans and American women were more likely to believe in life after death. However, socioeconomic factors such as income and education showed no significant association with afterlife beliefs. Contrary to expectations, age also lacked a meaningful relationship with belief in life after death. Lastly, we found that belief in the afterlife is significantly associated with one's inclination towards republicans in the elections. These results emphasize the enduring influence of religious identity and spiritual beliefs on social and political attitudes.

Keywords: American Politics, Life after Death, Political Inclination, Religiosity, Social Beliefs

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1. Introduction

The fear of death, or thanatophobia, is a central psychological phenomenon deeply rooted in human consciousness. This existential fear stems from an awareness of mortality and the inevitability of life's end (Bauman, 1992). It transcends cultural and historical boundaries, shaping human thought, behavior, and social systems. Psychological perspectives on death anxiety encompass emotional, cognitive, social, and even political dimensions, and influences mental health, personal development, and even cultural practices. Understanding the psychological mechanisms behind this fear provides insights into how individuals cope with mortality and find meaning in life.

The awareness of death is unique to humans due to their capacity for self-reflection and temporal consciousness (Becker, 1973; Greenberg et al., 1997; Bauman, 1992). Unlike other animals, humans anticipate the future and recognize their mortality. This awareness creates existential anxiety, which scholars such as Irvin Yalom and Ernest Becker argue is central to the human condition. Becker, in his seminal work *The Denial of Death* (1973), posits that much of human behavior stems from an unconscious effort to repress death-related fears. Cultural systems, religious beliefs, and social norms, according to Becker, act as psychological defenses against this awareness by offering meaning and symbolic immortality through legacy building and social contributions.

Several psychological theories explain the fear of death from different perspectives. Terror Management Theory (TMT), developed by Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg, and Tom Pyszczynski in the 1980s, is a social psychological framework that explores the ways in which humans cope with the existential anxiety stemming from the awareness of their own mortality.

Rooted in the work of cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker, particularly his seminal book *The Denial of Death* (1973), TMT posits that the fear of death is a fundamental driver of human behavior. To manage this terror, humans rely on cultural worldviews, self-esteem, and close relationships as psychological buffers (Greenberg et al., 1997). Research has shown that when individuals are reminded of their mortality—whether through explicit prompts or subtle cues—they tend to reinforce their cultural beliefs and values. This reinforcement serves as a defense mechanism, providing a sense of meaning, order, and permanence in the face of life's impermanence (Pyszczynski et al., 1999; Devoe, 2012; Batthyány, 2016; Frankl, 1966). For example, studies have demonstrated that mortality salience increases adherence to cultural norms, patriotism, and religious beliefs, as these constructs offer a sense of symbolic immortality (Greenberg et al., 1990). Additionally, self-esteem acts as a critical buffer against death-related anxiety, as it provides individuals with a sense of value and significance within their cultural framework (Pyszczynski et al., 2004).

TMT has been applied to a wide range of psychological phenomena, including prejudice, aggression, and altruism. For instance, when mortality is made salient, individuals often exhibit increased hostility toward those who threaten their worldview, such as outgroup members or individuals with opposing beliefs (Greenberg et al., 1990). Conversely, mortality salience can also enhance prosocial behavior when helping others aligns with one's cultural values (Jonas et al., 2002; Greenberg et al., 1997; Pyszczynski et al., 1999). TMT provides a compelling explanation for how humans confront the existential challenges posed by the awareness of mortality.

Attachment theory, developed by Bowlby (1969) and expanded by Mary Ainsworth, offers a complementary perspective on death anxiety by linking it to early emotional bonds formed between infants and their caregivers. According to attachment theory, the quality of these early relationships shapes an individual's ability to regulate emotions, cope with stress, and form secure relationships throughout life. These attachment patterns also influence how individuals respond to existential threats, such as the awareness of mortality (Mikulincer & Florian, 2000). Secure attachment, characterized by consistent and responsive caregiving, fosters a sense of safety and trust, which can buffer against death anxiety. In contrast, insecure attachment—whether anxious or avoidant—can exacerbate existential fears, as individuals may lack the internal resources to manage the distress associated with mortality (Cassidy & Shaver, 2016).

Research has demonstrated that securely attached individuals tend to exhibit lower levels of death anxiety because they have internalized a sense of safety and support from their early relationships. This secure base allows them to confront existential threats with greater resilience and to seek comfort from others when needed (Mikulincer & Florian, 2000). For example, studies have shown that securely attached individuals are more likely to use adaptive coping strategies, such as seeking social support or engaging in meaningful activities, when reminded of their mortality (Taubman–Ben-Ari et al., 2002). In contrast, insecurely attached individuals may struggle with death anxiety due to their reliance on maladaptive coping mechanisms, such as avoidance or hyperactivation of attachment needs. Anxiously attached individuals, who crave closeness but fear abandonment, may become overwhelmed by death-related thoughts, while avoidantly

attached individuals, who distance themselves from emotional intimacy, may suppress or deny their fears (Mikulincer & Florian, 2000).

Attachment theory also highlights the role of close relationships in mitigating death anxiety. According to Bowlby (1969), attachment figures serve as a "safe haven" during times of distress, providing comfort and reassurance. This function extends to existential threats, as the presence of supportive relationships can help individuals manage the anxiety associated with mortality. For instance, research has shown that reminders of close relationships reduce death anxiety and its associated defensive behaviors, such as worldview defense or aggression (Cox et al., 2008). This suggests that the emotional bonds formed in early childhood continue to play a critical role in how individuals cope with existential challenges throughout their lives (Mikulincer et al., 1990; Milberg & Friedrichsen, 2017; Mikulincer, 2019).

The fear of death manifests in various psychological and behavioral patterns. Generalized anxiety and specific phobias, such as necrophobia (fear of corpses) and thanatophobia (fear of dying), are common (Kashif et al., 2023). Health anxiety is another manifestation, where individuals become preoccupied with potential illnesses that could lead to death. This may result in obsessive medical checkups or avoidance of medical care. Avoidance behavior extends to death-related conversations, funerals, or even life planning tasks such as creating a will.

Cultural worldviews shape how societies conceptualize death and manage associated fears. Collectivist cultures emphasize family and community bonds, providing emotional support and reducing death anxiety through a sense of shared continuity.

Individualistic cultures, by contrast, often stress personal achievements and legacy creation as forms of symbolic immortality. Rituals such as funerals, memorial services, and ancestor veneration help process grief and reaffirm cultural values about life and death.

Several psychological interventions help individuals cope with death anxiety. Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) is effective in addressing irrational beliefs and catastrophic thinking about death. CBT techniques such as cognitive restructuring and exposure therapy help individuals confront their fears and reframe death-related thoughts more constructively. Existential therapy encourages individuals to accept mortality and find personal meaning despite life's impermanence (Malkinson, 2001). Viktor Frankl's meaning-centered therapy, particularly useful in palliative care, helps patients create a sense of purpose even when facing terminal illnesses.

Mindfulness-based interventions, such as meditation and breathing exercises, encourage present-moment awareness and acceptance of life's fleeting nature. Recent studies on psychedelic-assisted therapy indicate that substances like psilocybin can trigger profound spiritual experiences, alleviating death anxiety by fostering feelings of interconnectedness and transcendence. Additionally, social support networks are vital in providing emotional security and mitigating existential isolation.

The experience of death anxiety changes throughout a person's life. In childhood, a limited understanding of death often leads to magical thinking or fears of being separated from caregivers. During adolescence, as awareness of life's impermanence grows, individuals may engage in existential questioning or risk-taking behaviors as a way to assert control over their mortality. In

adulthood, coping mechanisms often shift to career accomplishments, family life, and spiritual growth. For older adults, the focus tends to move toward reflecting on their legacy and the meaning of their life, often replacing earlier anxieties about death. Religion also plays a significant role in shaping attitudes toward death across all stages of life, even for those who identify themselves as atheists.

Religious engagement often serves as a coping mechanism for managing death anxiety. Beliefs in an afterlife, reincarnation, or spiritual continuity provide comfort by mitigating the finality of death. Religious practices such as prayer, meditation, and rituals create a sense of spiritual connection and reassurance. However, individuals with ambivalent or uncertain religious beliefs may experience heightened existential distress, as spiritual uncertainty can exacerbate fear of the unknown (Pargament et al., 2005).

2. Religion, Religiosity and Death

The relationship between religion, religiosity, and the fear of death has long been a central topic in psychology, sociology, theology, and politics. For centuries, humans have turned to religion as a means of coping with the existential anxiety caused by the awareness of mortality. Religious beliefs provide narratives that explain what happens after death, offering comfort, hope, and a sense of purpose for life.

Religions provide existential security by offering promises of life after death, resurrection, or reincarnation. In Christianity, the belief in heaven and eternal life through salvation offers comfort to believers confronting mortality. Similarly, Islam assures its

followers of paradise for those who lead righteous lives. Hinduism and Buddhism emphasize reincarnation and spiritual liberation (moksha or nirvana), guiding adherents toward transcending the fear of nonexistence. The human psychological need for security in the face of the unknown transforms religious belief into a protective mechanism, helping individuals navigate and cope with the uncertainty of death. Religion also provides a cognitive framework for understanding death. According to cognitive psychology, humans possess an inherent need to make sense of their environment, particularly in situations involving uncertainty or danger. Death, being the ultimate uncertainty, stimulates the human mind to seek explanations. Religious narratives fill this cognitive gap by offering coherent stories about life, death, and the afterlife. Studies in cognitive science suggest that humans have evolved cognitive mechanisms that favor belief in supernatural agents and afterlife concepts. Pascal Boyer, a cognitive anthropologist, argues that religious beliefs arise from mental processes that detect intentional agents, even in ambiguous contexts (Boyer, 1992). This "hyperactive agency detection" system predisposes people to believe in gods, spirits, and ancestral beings that can influence their fate, particularly in matters of life and death.

Moreover, religious doctrines often address the moral and existential questions that arise from death awareness. They provide clear guidelines on how to live a meaningful life, thus reducing uncertainty. For instance, the Ten Commandments in Judeo-Christian faiths and the Five Precepts in Buddhism guide moral conduct and reinforce the belief that living ethically will result in positive afterlife outcomes.

Beyond individual psychology, religion serves a critical social

function by creating and pinpointing community solidarity and shared beliefs about death. Social cohesion is strengthened through communal religious practices such as funerals, memorials, and prayers for the deceased. These rituals provide emotional support and reinforce shared beliefs about the afterlife**.** Durkheim's sociological theory of religion highlights the way in which religious practices reinforce social norms and collective identity. Religious communities serve as protective networks in which individuals find comfort in shared rituals and common narratives about death. When faced with bereavement, collective mourning rituals reduce individual grief by redistributing emotional burdens across the community (Shilling & Mellor, 2011; Edgell, 2012; Furseth & Repstad, 2017).

Anthropological studies of death rites further illustrate this social function. In many indigenous cultures, death rituals involve ancestor worship, suggesting that deceased family members remain spiritually present. These practices not only honor the dead, but also maintain social continuity by linking the living and the dead through ritualized remembrance**.**

Empirical research supports the idea that religiosity increases in response to death anxiety. Numerous psychological studies have demonstrated a positive correlation between death anxiety and religious belief. In experiments examining mortality salience, participants exposed to death-related stimuli displayed increased religiosity, greater adherence to moral codes, and stronger defense of religious worldviews (Jong, 2021). For example, studies have shown that religious individuals tend to reaffirm their beliefs when reminded of death. This reaction aligns with TMT’s prediction that existential threats activate defense mechanisms aimed at bolstering religious faith. Interestingly, both devout believers and religious

skeptics exhibit stronger adherence to their pre-existing beliefs when confronted with mortality salience, indicating that belief reinforcement is not exclusive to the religious, but extends to atheistic worldviews as well.

Additionally, studies on deathbed conversions suggest that fear of death may intensify religiosity at life's end. Individuals facing terminal illnesses or near-death experiences often report increased spiritual awareness, a phenomenon attributed to the psychological need for reassurance and meaning (Sauvey, 2024).

Beliefs about the afterlife differ widely across religions and this reflects how varied cultural understandings of death are. Some religions, like Christianity and Islam, provide clear depictions of the afterlife, such as heaven and hell or paradise. In contrast, others, like Hinduism and Buddhism, focus on more abstract spiritual continuities. Hinduism's concept of reincarnation and karma highlights the interconnectedness of life, death, and moral actions within a cyclical process. Buddhism, however, offers a unique perspective by emphasizing transcendence over personal continuation. According to Buddhist teachings, death is part of the endless cycle of *samsara* (birth, death, and rebirth), and achieving enlightenment allows one to break free from this cycle. For Buddhists, embracing mortality without fear is a crucial aspect of spiritual growth.

Indigenous spiritual systems often incorporate animistic beliefs, where death signifies a transition rather than an end. Ancestors are believed to watch over the living, influencing daily life. These beliefs integrate spiritual continuity into the natural world, minimizing the existential dread associated with death.

Religion provides coping mechanisms that alleviate death-

related stress. Prayer, meditation, and religious rituals offer psychological relief by fostering a sense of spiritual connection. In the context of grief and bereavement, religious practices provide structured frameworks for mourning, allowing individuals to process loss within culturally accepted norms**.** In clinical psychology, religious coping is recognized as a significant factor in mental health. Patients experiencing terminal illnesses often draw strength from religious faith, reducing emotional distress and enhancing life satisfaction. Hospice care programs frequently integrate spiritual counseling to address existential concerns, reinforcing the therapeutic role of religious belief in end-of-life care**.**

American society has long been characterized by high levels of religiosity, with a significant portion of the population identifying with Christian denominations and holding strong beliefs in an afterlife (Wuthnow, 2007; Silva et al., 2021). This religious orientation is deeply connected to the psychological need to mitigate the existential fear of death. Belief in an eternal afterlife provides a sense of purpose and moral structure, alleviating the anxiety associated with mortality. In the U.S., religious beliefs often translate into political inclinations, shaping views on issues such as abortion, same-sex marriage, and social welfare policies. Conservative political ideologies frequently align with religious doctrines emphasizing moral responsibility, family values, and the sanctity of life. Thus, fear of death indirectly influences political behavior through religious frameworks, reinforcing social norms that prioritize stability, tradition, and divine authority. In this way, religiosity functions as both a personal coping mechanism and a sociopolitical force in shaping American political culture.

In our time, fear of death might find manifestations in seemingly

irrelevant activities. For instance, social media platforms -partly- provide a sense of belonging and continuity (Soroori Sarabi et al., 2020), helping people cope with the anxiety of mortality. By creating and sharing content, individuals can leave a digital legacy, ensuring a form of immortality through their online presence. Social networks also offer communities in which people can find emotional support (Nosrati et al., 2020), share experiences, and engage in meaningful interactions, which can alleviate feelings of isolation and existential dread. Moreover, the fear of death may push individuals to seek validation and recognition online, as accumulating likes, followers, and comments can provide a temporary sense of purpose and significance. In times of uncertainty, such as during global crises or personal struggles, social networking becomes a refuge where people can express fears, find solidarity, and reinforce their identity (Zamani et al., 2021). Interestingly, we can see in more dangerous regions where violence and instability is higher, people might use social media more (Shahghasemi & Prosser, 2019), although we should note that excessive use of social media has its own downsides and might create anxieties itself (Sabbar & Matheson, 2019).

In this study, we will study the connection between death, religiosity and politics on a recently completed cross-country survey. In this way, religiosity serves not only as a personal coping mechanism, but also as a sociopolitical force that influences American political culture. This study aims to explore the relationship between death, religiosity, and politics using data from a recently completed cross-country survey. By examining this connection, we seek to better understand how religious beliefs about mortality intersect with political attitudes and behaviors.

3. Review of Literature

Although we could not find any fieldwork study on the relationship between belief in the afterlife and political position in the American society, the issue of death, as well as Americans' perceptions of death have been studied extensively. Jackson (1977) examined the evolving academic and cultural engagement with the topic of death in the United States, focusing on developments initiated by Herman Feifel's 1959 edited volume, *The Meaning of Death*. This interdisciplinary collection marked a pivotal shift in the mid-20th century, transforming death into a legitimate subject for academic inquiry after a prolonged period of societal neglect. In the decade following its publication, the field experienced a significant expansion, producing a diverse body of work. Notable contributions included Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's seminal *On Death and Dying*, which approached the topic with scholarly rigor and empathy, and Jessica Mitford's *The American Way of Death*, a critical exploration of the funeral industry. By 1970, scholarly output on death, grief, and bereavement had proliferated, exceeding the cumulative output of the previous century within a span of five years. This surge in literature reflected broader shifts in cultural attitudes and underscored the increasing relevance of death studies in both academic and social contexts. Jackson's analysis highlights the interplay between intellectual inquiry and societal change during this transformative period.

Fulton and Owen (1988) analyzed the significant shifts in American attitudes and responses toward death throughout the 20th century, emphasizing differences between two generational cohorts: those born before the advent of the atomic bomb and those born during the nuclear age. These groups experienced distinct socio-historical contexts, environmental influences, and life

expectancies, shaping their perceptions of mortality. The study highlighted the evolving portrayal of death in media, which, by the latter half of the century, was pervasive, yet paradoxical—rendering death simultaneously fantastical and starkly real. The authors explored how youth in the nuclear age grappled with a heightened awareness of sudden, impersonal death, juxtaposed with societal tendencies to distort or deny death's immediacy. This dissonance manifested in cultural expressions such as music, drug use, violence, and vicarious engagements with mortality. The paper called for further research into contemporary phenomena, including the rising interest in spirituality and the alarming increase in adolescent suicide rates, as potential indicators of existential despair in an increasingly impersonal and insecure world.

Gruneir et al. (2007) investigated the factors influencing the site of death in the United States, focusing on disparities between individuals' preferences and actual experiences. Although many individuals express a desire to die at home, the majority of deaths from terminal illnesses occur in hospitals. The study employed a systematic literature review and a multilevel analysis linking death certificates with county- and state-level data to explore these variations. Their findings revealed that opportunities for home death were more prevalent among white individuals, those with greater access to resources and social support, and those dying from cancer. The multilevel analysis showed that regions with higher proportions of minority populations and lower educational attainment were associated with higher probabilities of hospital death. Conversely, a greater investment in institutional long-term care, indicated by the density of nursing home beds and Medicaid payment rates, correlated with a higher likelihood of nursing home death. The study underscored the critical role of both social determinants and structural factors in shaping end-of-life care and

highlighted the need for policy interventions to address inequities in end-of-life experiences.

Soros (1999) reflected on the cultural and professional approaches to death and dying in America, focusing on the objectives and impact of the Project on Death in America (PDIA). Established to foster a deeper understanding of dying and bereavement, the initiative aimed to transform societal and professional attitudes toward end-of-life care. Central to its efforts was the Faculty Scholars Program, which provided three-year fellowships to emerging academic leaders committed to advancing the care of the dying. These fellows were envisioned as future mentors and role models for health professionals in this critical field. Additionally, the PDIA implemented a broad Grants Program to support innovative projects addressing diverse aspects of the culture surrounding death. This included a newly launched initiative to integrate the humanities into the discourse on death and dying, promoting a multidisciplinary approach to cultural transformation. Soros highlighted these efforts as essential to improving end-of-life experiences and fostering a more compassionate societal perspective on mortality.

Greeley and Hout (1999) analyzed changes in Americans' beliefs about life after death, using data from the General Social Survey to document a significant increase in such beliefs between the 1970s and 1990s. The study revealed that the increase was most pronounced among Catholics, Jews, and individuals with no religious affiliation, while Protestants consistently exhibited high levels of belief across all cohorts, with approximately 85% affirming belief in an afterlife. For Catholics, belief in an afterlife rose markedly from 67% among those born in 1900 to 85% among the 1970 cohort. Jewish respondents displayed an even more dramatic

shift, with belief increasing from 17% to 74% over the same generational span. The authors attributed this growth, in part, to immigration patterns, noting that immigrants were less likely to hold such beliefs compared to their grandchildren. Among Catholics, the increase was linked to the efforts of Irish American clergy in religious teaching and organization. Importantly, the study found no evidence that interactions with Protestants influenced afterlife beliefs in those who did not convert to Protestantism. These findings highlight the role of religious competition, acculturation, and generational change in shaping Americans' spiritual outlook.

Cheung et al. (1998) examined the cultural attitudes of Asian Americans toward death and their impact on organ donation behaviors. The study addressed the persistent shortage of organ donors, particularly among minority groups, despite the higher success rates of cadaveric kidney transplants when donor and recipient share the same ethnicity. Using surveys mailed to 2,000 households in a predominantly urban U.S. county, the researchers compared attitudes between Asian Americans (Japanese, Chinese, Korean, and Filipino) and Caucasians, focusing on variables like beliefs about body integrity, communal orientation, and trust in healthcare providers. Their results showed that Asian Americans were significantly less likely than Caucasians to consent to organ donation, citing concerns about body integrity after death and lower trust in doctors. They also demonstrated weaker communal responsibility and held less favorable attitudes toward organ donation overall. Notably, Asian Americans were less likely to possess an organ donor card. These differences were partly attributed to cultural and religious beliefs, including the importance of maintaining bodily wholeness.

Lock (1996) examined the cultural, technological, and ethical dimensions of death and dying in North America and Japan, with a

focus on the redefinition of death facilitated by biomedical advancements. The essay explored the ways in which technological interventions, such as organ transplantation and artificial respirators, have altered perceptions of death, shifting it from a natural and social process to a biologically defined event. In North America, the adoption of "whole-brain death" as a legal standard was driven by both medical pragmatism and the demand for transplantable organs, effectively routinizing the "harvesting" of organs and reducing public debate on the redefinition of death. In contrast, Japan's public and professional debates about brain death reveal deep-seated cultural and social anxieties. Lock highlighted that in Japan, death is often viewed as a process rather than a fixed event, with lingering concerns about the spirit of the deceased. Ethical controversies, distrust in medical professionals, and cultural perceptions of body integrity have slowed the acceptance of organ transplantation from brain-dead donors. These discussions are further complicated by Japan's ambivalent relationship with Western scientific practices and the pressures of modernization.

Merrick (2005) explored the multifaceted influences on how and where Americans die, highlighting that the majority of deaths occur in hospitals and predominantly affect the elderly. The analysis begins with the impact of the absence of a universal healthcare system on terminal care, addressing both the logistics and costs associated with end-of-life care. Merrick then examines public policy issues related to death, tracing significant developments in terminal care, debates on physician-assisted suicide, and the implications of major state and national legal decisions over the preceding 35 years. This work underscores the interplay between healthcare systems, legal frameworks, and societal attitudes in shaping the American experience of death and dying.

Hijiya (1983) provided a historical analysis of American gravestones as reflections of societal attitudes toward death from the colonial era to the modern period. He categorized gravestone styles into six overlapping periods—Plain Style, Death's Head, Angel, Urn-and-Willow, Monumentalism, and Modern Plain Style—each symbolizing shifting cultural views on mortality. For instance, early gravestones, such as the Plain Style and Death's Head motifs, expressed resignation and awe, often embodying Puritan religious beliefs that emphasized human mortality and divine judgment. Over time, styles evolved to reflect changing attitudes, such as the Angel motif's confidence in salvation during the Enlightenment and the Urn-and-Willow's focus on mourning during the early 19th century. The Monumentalism of the late 19th century represented defiance of death, as elaborate and personalized gravestones sought to preserve memory and individuality. By contrast, the 20th-century Modern Plain Style, characterized by minimal decoration and inscription, suggested an increasing secularization and pragmatic attitude toward death, often prioritizing collective anonymity over personal legacy.

Gold (2011) examined the complex interplay between social factors, medical advancements, and cultural attitudes surrounding death and dying in 21st-century America, with a focus on late-life mortality. The chapter highlighted significant changes driven by 20th-century medical technologies that have extended life expectancy and transformed death from a personal, often home-based event to one largely managed within institutional settings. Social institutions and cultural frameworks shape how death is perceived and managed, with variations across and within societies. Key factors influencing these perceptions include age, religiosity, education, socioeconomic status (SES), race/ethnicity, and gender.

Gold explored how changing mortality rates and the leading causes of death have impacted end-of-life care, often intensifying the use of medical and institutional resources. Despite the advances in extending life, care for the terminally ill imposes significant emotional and financial burdens. The heterogeneity of the American population contributes to a wide spectrum of beliefs and coping strategies related to death, shaped by cultural, social, and economic disparities. The chapter also reviewed theoretical perspectives that enhance the understanding of death and dying, underscoring the need for culturally sensitive approaches in addressing the diverse needs of America's aging population.

Flannelly et al. (2006) explored the relationship between belief in life after death and mental health outcomes in a national sample of 1,403 American adults. The study measured six dimensions of psychiatric symptomatology—anxiety, depression, obsession-compulsion, paranoia, phobia, and somatization—and found a statistically significant inverse relationship between belief in an afterlife and symptom severity across all dimensions. This association persisted even after controlling for various demographic, psychological, and social factors, including stress levels and social support. Interestingly, the frequency of attending religious services was not significantly associated with any of the mental health measures, highlighting the potential differential impact of religious beliefs versus practices on mental health. The findings suggest that religious belief systems, particularly those involving an afterlife, may play a beneficial role in mitigating psychological distress. The authors emphasized the importance of focusing on beliefs rather than behaviors in future research on the intersection of religion and mental health.

Hohman and Hogg (2011) investigated how uncertainty about

life after death influences group identification, integrating insights from uncertainty–identity theory and terror management theory. Two experiments were conducted to test whether uncertainty, rather than mortality-induced fear alone, would motivate group identification. In Experiment 1 (n = 187), participants were exposed to a mortality salience manipulation, and their uncertainty about the afterlife was assessed. Results indicated that mortality salience strengthened national group identification only among participants who were uncertain about the afterlife. In Experiment 2 (n = 177), in addition to mortality salience, belief in an afterlife was experimentally manipulated. Participants were primed to believe either in the existence of an afterlife, the nonexistence of an afterlife, or uncertainty about an afterlife. Consistent with the findings from Experiment 1, mortality salience enhanced group identification only among participants in the uncertainty condition. Hohman and Hogg's findings demonstrated that existential uncertainty, particularly about the afterlife, significantly influences responses to mortality salience by increasing group identification. These results support uncertainty–identity theory's emphasis on self-uncertainty as a key driver of ideological conviction and collective behavior, highlighting the importance of addressing uncertainty in understanding human reactions to mortality.

4. Methodology

The 2022 General Social Survey (GSS) on American people employed a comprehensive multimode data collection strategy designed to balance historical continuity with methodological innovation. This approach included face-to-face interviews, web-based self-administered surveys, and telephone interviews to accommodate a broad respondent base and optimize data quality.

The methodological design reflected key adaptations driven by the COVID-19 pandemic and efforts to modernize the survey process, while preserving longitudinal comparability.

The survey utilized a full-probability sampling method based on the U.S. Postal Service's metropolitan statistical area (MSA)/county frame. The primary sample included U.S. adults aged 18 or older residing in noninstitutional housing. To enhance representativeness, the GSS included an oversample of Black, Hispanic, and Asian respondents recruited through NORC's Ameri Speak® Panel, creating a combined sample size of 4,149 cases with a weighted response rate of 46.5%.

The GSS employed a two-phase contact protocol. In one condition, respondents were initially contacted for face-to-face interviews, with nonrespondents offered the web-based survey option. In the alternate condition, web invitations were sent first, followed by face-to-face follow-ups for nonrespondents. This dual-path approach allowed researchers to disentangle data collection mode effects from selection biases. Fielding spanned May to December 2022, with regional variations to ensure robust coverage.

Respondents were selected using a randomized Kish grid procedure following household enumeration. Households provided a roster of all adult members, from which a respondent was chosen at random. This enhanced precision in household-based demographic data collection while reducing potential coverage error.

The 2022 GSS maintained its long-standing core questionnaire, while integrating updated modules on health, family dynamics, and labor market experiences. Innovative experiments tested survey design elements such as response scales, question wording, and

item order. Specific modules, including those on racial attitudes, voting behavior, and social networks were fielded to align with emerging societal issues.

To correct for sampling and nonresponse biases, the GSS applied post-stratification weights based on demographic variables such as age, sex, race, education, and geographic location. These adjustments ensured alignment with U.S. Census benchmarks. For the first time, mode-specific weights are planned for future releases to facilitate comparative mode analyses.

Preliminary analyses highlighted potential mode sensitivity across several variables, notably in social and political attitudes, religious participation, and voting behavior. Multivariate logistic regression models assessed differential response patterns, controlling for demographic and experimental conditions. These findings guided the development of improved weighting schemes and methodological recommendations for future survey rounds.

5. Findings

For the sake of clarity, we divided our findings into two sections. First, we provided the descriptive analyses of the results; we then tested our hypotheses about possible relationships.

5. 1. Descriptive Findings

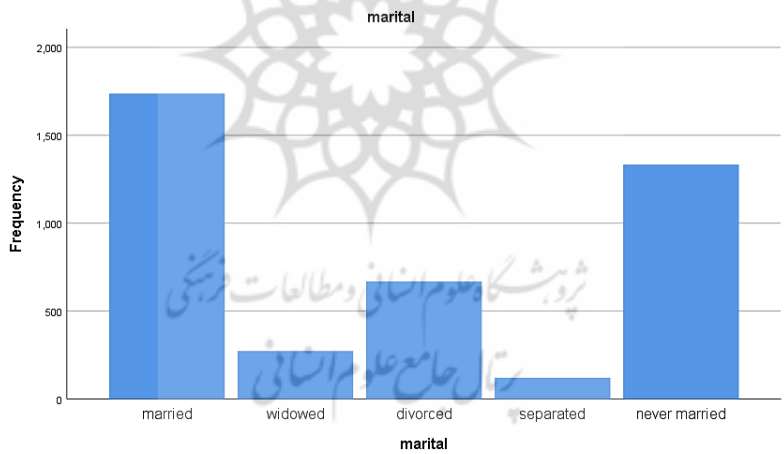
Diagrams and tables were used to present our demographic and descriptive findings of the research. Marital status is an important demographic factor in one's attitudes. Table 1 shows that 41.9% of the sample were married, 6.6% were widowed, 16.1% were divorced, 2.9% identified themselves as separated, 32.1% said they never married, and 0.4% did not respond to this question. Figure 1 shows marital status in a visual way.

Table 1. Marital Status

Marital	Frequency	Percent
Married	1737	41.9
Widowed	273	6.6
Divorced	669	16.1
Separated	121	2.9
Never married	1333	32.1
No data available	16	0.4
Total	4149	100

Source: Author

Figure 1. Marital Status



Source: Author

We were interested in knowing about our respondents' education level. According to table 2, 9.3% of the population, comprising 385 individuals, have less than 12 years of education. The largest segment, at 25.0%, consists of those who have

completed 12th grade, accounting for 1036 individuals. Following this, 7.7% of the population, or 320 individuals, have completed 1 year of college. Those with 2 years of college make up 14.8% of the population, totaling 612 individuals. Individuals who have completed 3 years of college represent 5.5% of the population, with a frequency of 230.

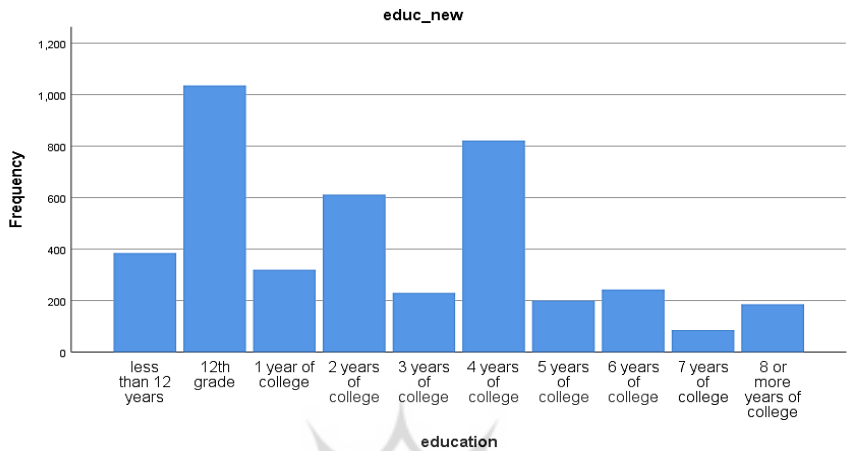
The distribution shows that 19.8% of the population, or 822 individuals, have 4 years of college education. Additionally, 4.8% (200 individuals) have completed 5 years of college, while 5.9% (243 individuals) have 6 years of college education. A smaller segment, comprising 2.1% of the population, has 7 years of college education, amounting to 86 individuals. Those with 8 or more years of college make up 4.5% of the population, totaling 186 individuals. The information on respondents' education level has been represented in Table 2 and Figure 2.

Table 2. Education

Education	Frequency	Percent
Less than 12 years	385	9.3
12th grade	1036	25.0
1 years of college	320	7.7
2 years of college	612	14.8
3 years of college	230	5.5
4 years of college	822	19.8
5 years of college	200	4.8
6 years of college	243	5.9
7 years of college	86	2.1
8 or more years of college	186	4.5
No data available	29	0.7
Total	4149	100

Source: Author

Figure 2. Level of Education



Source: Author

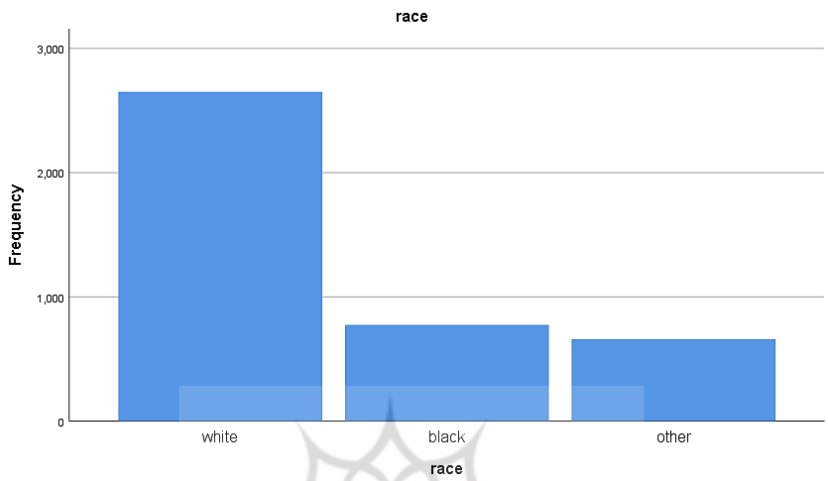
Race is an important demographic factor in the US. Table 3 and Figure 3 show the distribution of race in our sample. Results show that 63.9% of the respondents identified themselves as white, while 18.9% considered themselves black. 15.9% of the respondents considered themselves as "other" races and 1.5% did not respond to this question.

Table 3. Race Distribution

Race	Frequency	Percent
White	2651	63.9
Black	775	18.7
Other	659	15.9
Missing	64	1.5
Total	4149	100

Source: Author

Figure 3. Race Distribution



Source: Author

According to table 4, 3.0% of the population, representing 123 individuals, have an income under $4,999. 2.4% of the population, amounting to 99 individuals, fall within the income range of $5,000 to $9,999. Those earning between $10,000 and $14,999 make up 5.2% of the population, with a frequency of 215 individuals. Similarly, 3.0% of the population, or 126 individuals, have an income between $15,000 and $19,999. Individuals earning $20,000 to $24,999 account for 5.2% of the population, totaling 216 individuals.

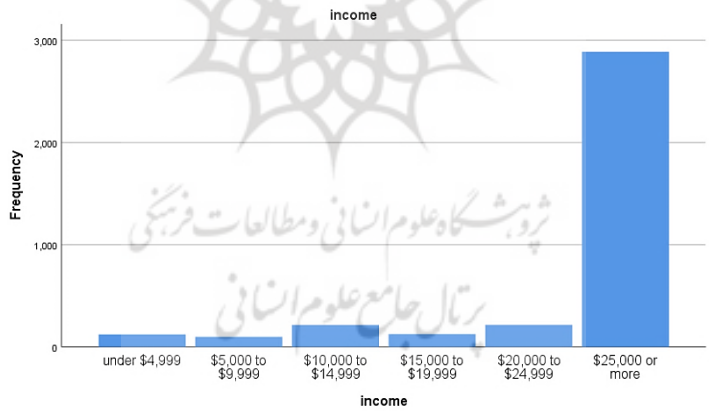
Figure 4 shows that the largest segment of the population, comprising 69.6%, earns $25,000 or more, which includes 2,886 individuals. Additionally, there is a segment representing 11.7% of the population, or 484 individuals, for whom income data is missing.

Table 4. Income Distribution

Income	Frequency	Percent
Under $4,999	123	3.0
$5,000 to $9,999	99	2.4
$10,000 to $14,999	215	5.2
$15,000 to $19,999	126	3.0
$20,000 to $24,999	216	5.2
$25,000 or more	2886	69.6
No data available	484	11.7
Total	4149	100

Source: Author

Figure 4. Income Distribution



Source: Author

The majority of Americans are known to be Christian and religion is still an important issue in this country. According to table 5, 13.14% of the population, representing 555 individuals, identify themselves as very religious. The largest segment, at

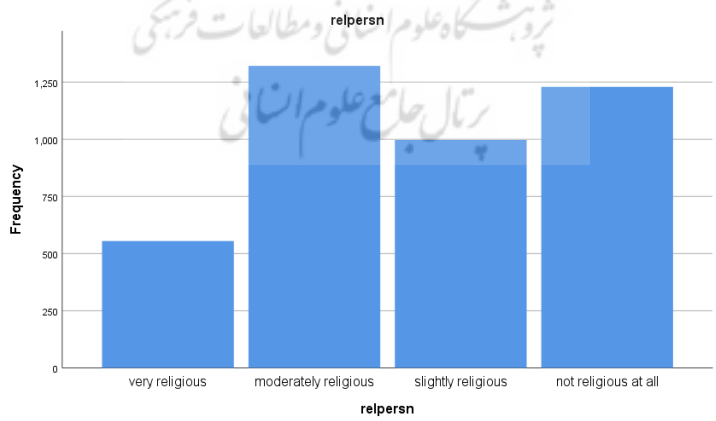
31.8%, consists of those who are moderately religious, accounting for 1321 individuals. Those who consider themselves slightly religious make up 24.0% of the population, with a frequency of 997 individuals. Individuals who are not religious at all represent 29.6% of the population, totaling 1229 individuals. There is also a small percentage, 1.1%, comprising 47 individuals, for whom religiosity data is missing. Figure 5 shows the information on religiosity of the respondents in a visual manner.

Table 5. Religiosity

Religiosity	Frequency	Percent
Very religious	555	13.14
Moderately religious	1321	31.8
Slightly religious	997	24.0
Not religious at all	1229	29.6
No data available	47	1.1
Total	4149	100

Source: Author

Figure 5. Religiosity



Source: Author

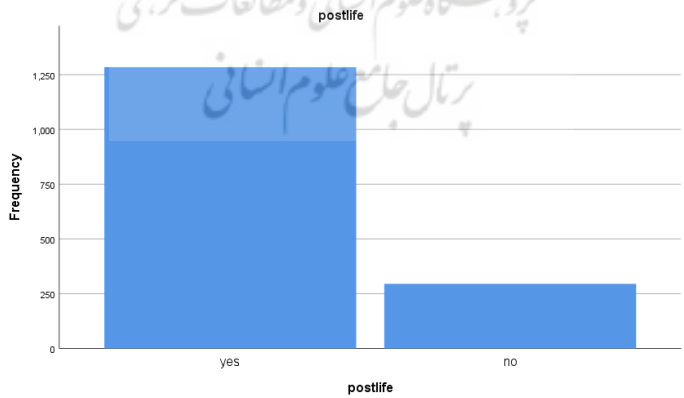
We were interested in knowing respondents' beliefs regarding life after death. According to table 6, 30.9% of the population, representing 1284 individuals, believe that there is life after death. A smaller segment, 7.1%, comprising 295 individuals, do not believe in life after death. The largest portion of the data, 61.9%, representing 2570 individuals, is missing or unreported. Table 6 and Figure 6 represent how Americans are divided on belief in the life after death.

Table 6. Belief in Life after Death

Postlife	Frequency	Percent
Yes	1284	30.9
No	295	7.1
No data available	2570	61.9
Total	4149	100

Source: Author

Figure 6: Belief in Life after Death



Source: Author

Our data bank also contained information about respondents' age. According to table 7, the kurtosis value for age variable is -1.02, indicating a platykurtic distribution. This means that the data has lighter tails and a flatter peak compared to a normal distribution. The skewness value is 0.199, suggesting a slight positive skew. This indicates that the age distribution is slightly skewed to the right, meaning there are marginally more older individuals in the population compared to younger ones.

The standard deviation of 17.747 represents the dispersion of ages around the mean, highlighting significant variability within the population. The variance, calculated as the square of the standard deviation, is 314.954, further emphasizing this variability. The mean age of the population is 48.24, indicating that the average age is just under 50 years.

The age range within the population spans from a minimum of 18 years to a maximum of 89 years, resulting in a range of 71 years. This wide range demonstrates a diverse age distribution. The total number of individuals in the dataset, denoted by N, is 3,893.

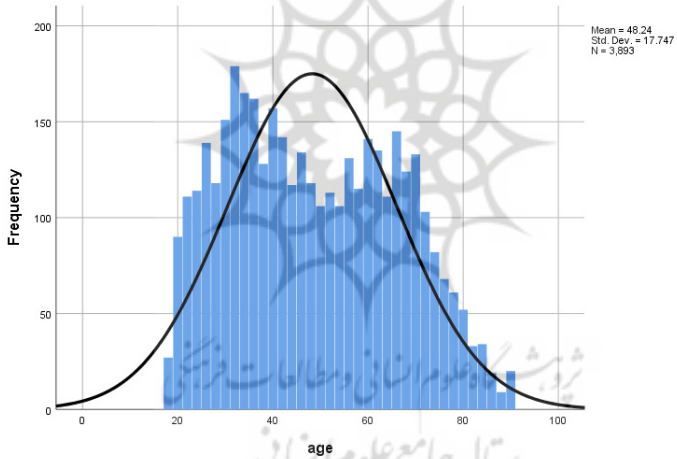
Table 7 shows the frequency distribution of ages, which shows that the majority of the population falls within the middle age range, with the highest frequency around the mean age of 48.24. Also, in the diagram presented at Figure 7 the slight positive skewness is visually evident, as the tail on the right side of the histogram is slightly longer, indicating a higher frequency of older individuals.

Table 7. Age Distribution

Kurtosis	Skewness	St. Deviation	Variance	Mean	Maximum	Minimum	Range	N
-1.02	0.199	17.747	314.954	48.24	89	18	71	**3893**

Source: Author

Figure 7. Age Distribution



Source: Author

5. 2. Inferential Findings

As mentioned earlier, we were interested in knowing the relationship between belief in life after death (measured by variable postlife) and used Pearson's chi-squared. In addition, we used t-test

to compare two independent samples t test to find if there is a relationship between age and postlife.

In order to measure the relationship between variables postlife and marital, we used Pearson's chi-squared test, in which H0 means existence of independence or lack of relationship between these two variables.

Table 8. Pearson's Chi-squared Test for Postlife and Marital

Test type	Test value	Significance	Result
Pearson's chi-squared	5.549	0.235	No relationship

Source: Author

As illustrated in table 8, there is no relationship between the variables postlife and marital.

Table 9 and Pearson's chi-squared test show that there is no relationship between postlife and education (Pearson's chi-squared= 11.054, Sig. = 0.272).

Table 9. Changes in Education Variable in Two Categories of Postlife

Postlife	Education									
	Less than 12 years	12th grade	1 years	2 years	3 years	4 years	5 years	6 years	7 years	8 or more
Yes	146 (11.4%)	402 (31.4%)	101 (7.9%)	178 (13.9%)	69 (5.4%)	204 (15.9%)	51 (4.0%)	68 (5.3%)	15 (1.2%)	47 (3.7%)
No	40 (13.6%)	88 (29.9%)	20 (6.8%)	29 (9.9%)	10 (3.4%)	60 (20.4%)	14 (4.8%)	15 (5.1%)	6 (2.0%)	12 (4.1%)

Source: Author

As we can elicit from Table 10, and according to Pearson's chi-squared test results, there is a relationship between race and postlife. Black people are more likely to believe that there is a life after death (Pearson's chi-squared = 7.557; P=0.023).

Table 10. Race by Postlife

Postlife	Race		
	White	Black	Other
Yes	826 (65.3%)	274 (21.7%)	164 (13.0%)
No	206 (71.0%)	42 (14.5%)	42 (14.5%)

Source: Author

Table 11 and Pearson's chi-squared test results indicate that there is no relationship between income and postlife (Pearson's chi-squared = 2.965; P = 0.707).

Table 11. Income and Postlife

Postlife	Income					
	Under $4,999	$5,000 to $9,999	$10,000 to $14,999	$15,000 to $19,999	$20,000 to $24,999	$25,000 or more
Yes	43 (3.8%)	35 (3.1%)	92 (8.2%)	46 (4.1%)	78 (6.9%)	833 (73.9%)
No	9 (3.4%)	10 (3.7%)	16 (6.0%)	15 (5.6%)	20 (7.5%)	197 (73.8%)

Source: Author

Based on Pearson's chi-squared test results, there is a relationship between one's religiosity and belief in the existence of a life after death (Pearson's chi-squared =177.612; P = 0.000). Table 12 shows the distribution of religiosity by postlife variable.

Table 12. Religiosity by Postlife

Postlife	Relpersn			
	Very religious	Moderately religious	Slightly religious	Not religious at all
Yes	266 (20.9%)	521 (41.1%)	281 (22.1%)	204 (16.0%)
No	20 (6.8%)	57 (19.5%)	70 (23.9%)	146 (49.8%)

Source: Author

According to Pearson's chi-squared test results, there is a relationship between gender and belief in life after death (Pearson's chi-squared = 4.240; P = 0.043). American women are more likely to believe that there is another life after death. Table 13 shows the distribution of gender by postlife variable.

Table 13. Gender by Postlife

Postlife	Gender	
	Male	Female
Yes	314 (48.2%)	338 (51.8%)
No	83 (57.6%)	61 (42.4%)

Source: Author

We were interested in knowing if age was a significant factor in an American citizen's perception of life after death. We used t-test to see if there was a meaningful age difference between those who responded yes or no to the postlife question. It was revealed that there is no age difference between the two groups. Table 13 shows the distribution of age by postlife variable.

Table 14. Age by Postlife

St. Deviation	Mean age	Postlife
18.39	49.94	**Yes**
18.68	49.94	**No**

Source: Author

Lastly, we were interested in knowing if there is a relationship between belief in the afterlife and political inclination. In our dataset, there was a question about whether respondents voted for Joe Biden, Donald Trump, another candidate, or did not vote in the presidential elections in 2020 (PRES20). The variable is numeric, with values assigned to each category: 1 for Biden (40.0% of respondents), 2 for Trump (24.9%), 3 for another candidate (2.3%), and 4 for those who did not vote (0.4%). The subtotal for these categories is 67.6% of the entire sample, with Biden receiving 59.1% and Trump 36.9% of the valid votes. Reserved codes include "Don't Know" (1.1%), "No Answer" (4.5%), "Not Applicable" (26.5%), and "Skipped on Web" (0.4%), which account for the remaining 32.4% of responses. The total sample size is 3,544 respondents, ensuring comprehensive coverage of voting preferences and non-responses.

We removed all the respondents who said they did not vote for

Trump or Biden and in the new dataset, out of the total valid responses, 1,728 respondents (64.3%) voted for Biden, while 958 respondents (35.7%) voted for Trump. The result of Chi-Square test conducted on dataset, with 1,025 valid cases, showed that Trump supporters were more likely to believe in the afterlife. The Pearson Chi-Square test yields a value of 31.244, with 1 degree of freedom and an asymptotic significance (p-value) of .000, indicating a statistically significant association between the belief in the afterlife and leaning towards republicans.

Intellectuals, celebrities and some wealthy figures mock Trump for his baseless discourses, although elsewhere (see Shahghasemi, 2019) I have argued that Trump has unique characteristics that make him unfamiliar to less-sophisticated commentators. It seems that Trump's rhetoric is smartly attuned to the interwoven relationship between death, religiosity, and politics. His media team has adeptly exploited this dynamic, particularly in the wake of the assassination attempt on his life on July 13, 2024. This incident has likely been utilized to amplify narratives of resilience, divine intervention, and a higher moral calling, further cementing his appeal among religious and politically conservative groups.

6. Conclusion

The relationship between beliefs about death and political inclinations in the U.S. is deeply intertwined with cultural and psychological factors. Research suggests that mortality awareness often heightens the need for security, order, and meaning, which can influence political attitudes. By analyzing data from the 2022 General Social Survey (GSS), we found that religiosity remains a significant predictor of political inclination and this reinforces the

notion that religious identity serves as a crucial framework, through which individuals interpret existential questions. Additionally, demographic factors such as race and gender played a notable role, with black Americans and women exhibiting a higher likelihood of believing in an afterlife. Interestingly, socioeconomic variables, including income and education, showed no significant correlation with afterlife beliefs, challenging the assumption that material security or intellectual exposure necessarily diminish religious convictions. Furthermore, the lack of association between age and belief in the afterlife defies traditional developmental theories, which often posit that aging increases existential contemplation and religiosity.

The data suggest that individuals who believe in life after death are significantly more inclined to support Republican candidates, particularly Donald Trump. This finding aligns with broader sociopolitical trends in the American society, where religious conservatism is deeply intertwined with right-wing politics. Historically, religious institutions have played a critical role in shaping ideological narratives, reinforcing moral frameworks that emphasize tradition, social order, and divine authority. The alignment of afterlife belief with Republican support reflects the party's success in mobilizing religious voters through appeals to existential security, national identity, and moral absolutism. Trump's rhetoric, which frequently invokes themes of divine providence, resilience, and existential struggle, exemplifies this dynamic. His political messaging not only resonates with religiously devout Americans, but also strategically amplifies themes of fear, redemption, and moral righteousness—narratives that have long been embedded in religious traditions.

The decline of traditional religious values in the United States,

coupled with a growing sense of cultural and political alienation among more traditional, family-oriented Americans, has fueled a significant backlash in recent years. As secularism and progressive ideologies gained prominence, many Americans who prioritize faith, family, and conservative values felt increasingly marginalized. This sense of oppression, real or perceived, became a rallying cry for a movement that sought to reclaim what they viewed as the nation's foundational principles. Donald Trump's resurgence as a political figure can be seen as a direct response to this cultural shift. His rhetoric, which often emphasized restoring traditional values, protecting religious freedoms, and challenging the perceived overreach of progressive policies, resonated deeply with this disenfranchised demographic.

Trump's second rise to power is not simply a national phenomenon, but a reflection of broader global trends. As traditional values clash with rapid societal changes, similar movements are emerging worldwide, challenging established norms and institutions. This cultural and political domino effect is likely to reshape the global landscape over the next decade, as nations grapple with the tension between modernity and tradition. The U.S., as a cultural and political leader, will play a pivotal role in this transformation, with Trump's movement serving as both a catalyst and a symbol of this worldwide realignment.

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