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Religion, politics, and climate-protective behaviors: Insights on individual intentions in Italy

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Abstract

Climate-protective behaviors (CPBs) aim to reduce one's carbon footprint and to engage others in climate saving. Under the late Pope Francis's leadership (2013–2025), the Catholic Church, to which most Italians belong, paid increasing attention to the planetary crisis and advocated for lifestyle changes to protect the climate. Drawing from a survey of a representative sample of Italian citizens, we checked if religiosity, which research connects to altruistic predispositions predicting prosocial behavior, impacts the intention to adopt CPB. We find modest variance, indicating that older respondents, women, working people, the highly educated, non-believers, and politically interested individuals are more willing to adopt behavioral changes. Religiosity is significantly and positively associated only with some climate-friendly behaviors: the willingness to buy sustainable clothing, to mobilize others, to invest in sustainable funds, and to avoid air travel. Political determinants are stronger predictors of intended climate activism and reduced red meat consumption.

KEYWORDS
Catholicism, climate change, climate-friendly behaviors, moral norms, Pope Francis, religiosity

Public significance statement

Amidst growing calls for climate justice and action by religious leaders, this research found that religiosity moderately influences the willingness to adopt some climate-friendly behaviors, whereas religion itself has no significant impact. To boost climate-protecting action, appealing to altruistic inclinations and targeting messages to the various audiences to that effect could enhance the meaningfulness of religious elites' climate communication.

INTRODUCTION

In addition to governmental efforts to curb anthropogenic emissions, a lifestyle change, notably in societies most responsible for greenhouse gas emissions, is urgently crucial to help prevent further rises in global temperatures. The vast majority of the world's population seems willing to contribute to climate action (André et al., 2024). Yet individual behavioral change is all but easy to achieve (Masciangelo et al., 2024). Besides economic and behavioral costs, one of the reasons is that climate change (CC) allegedly "fails to generate strong moral intuitions, it does not motivate an urgent need for action in the way that other moral imperatives do" (Markowitz and Shariff, 2012, 243). Religious beliefs are all but irrelevant in this respect. Research has burgeoned on factors and strategies in this regard, and there is a corpus of evidence on the connection between religion and opinions on CC.

The interest in this topic lies in the argument supported in moral psychology and religious psychology according to which appealing to "existing moral values", which is religious leaders' typical mission, can "bolster moral sentiments about climate change" (Markowitz and Shariff, 2012, 245) and thus contribute to triggering climate action. This claim is subject to debate. While it is asserted that individuals often have more confidence in their own intuitive feelings about moral matters than in the logical reasoning presented by others (Haidt, 2008), it is also argued that organized religion can influence followers' views by promoting specific beliefs about how humans should relate to and interact with the environment (Kennard, 2021). Grasping the cultural aspects of CC needs recognizing its religious elements. Since CC is entangled with human existence, it is also intertwined with the ways religion influences human life (Jenkins et al., 2018; Skirbekk et al., 2020).

As a matter of fact, religious institutions and activists have a remarkable role as educational and advocacy agencies, notably in the global South (Nche, 2023), where confessional affiliation is most widespread (Skirbekk et al., 2020). Within the context of a growing, though not homogenously, political significance and influence of religion (Haynes, 2023; Inglehart, 2018), this could thus contribute to efforts to spread sustainability imperatives (Koehrsen, 2015; Preston & Baimel, 2021) and "political action" (Sherkat & Ellison, 2007, 72). Since the last decade, leaders of different faiths

have called for action and promoted CC initiatives within their flocks (Becci & Manconi, 2026; Ives et al., 2023; Jenkins et al., 2018).

And yet, religion and religiosity have been overlooked in numerous analyses of determinants of climate policy preferences (Bergquist et al., 2022; Bretter & Schulz, 2025; Dechezleprêtre et al., 2025; Drews and van den Bergh 2016; Ejelöv & Nilsson, 2020) and environmental opinions in the global North (Cipriani et al., 2024; European Commission, 2023; Klöckner, 2013; Masciangelo et al., 2024; Panno et al., 2018; Paulson & Büchs, 2022). Some analyses yield mixed findings about the relationship between religious affiliation and practice, environmental concern, and activism (Arbuckle & Konisky, 2015; Sherkat & Ellison, 2007). In short, findings are inconsistent. Moreover, the bulwark of evidence and interpretations is based on the USA, and the effect of religious belonging and beliefs may have been overlooked in many other contexts (Jenkins et al., 2018). Several studies imply that the mechanisms linking these variables differ across areas of the world (Jenkins et al., 2018; Nche, 2023) and depend on situational cues (Biel & Nilsson, 2005) and the varying socio-political contexts (Cipriani et al., 2024, 1). On the contrary, it is becoming clearer in the global North that views on environmental protection and CC mitigation align with the established political cleavages of Left versus Right and populism versus non-populist opinion (Brulle et al., 2024; Huber et al., 2022).

Focusing on a single country, whilst carrying limited potential for global generalizations, could highlight insights that may be used for further empirical analyses. Attempting to understand the structure of Germany's public opinion on climate policy for the sake of "the development of targeted communication and policy strategies", Lütkes et al. (2025, 10) conclude that "national-level models provide the most accurate and actionable insights for practitioners and policymakers" to that effect. Therefore, this work provides evidence on a country where the vast majority of citizens belong to a single denomination. This religion is Catholicism, and the nation is Italy. Its capital city, Rome, is home to the center of the Catholic Church, which plays a significant role in Italian society and politics (Caielli, 2022; Ceccarini, 2009; Giordan & Zrinščak, 2018; Macrì, 2022). Italy is indeed classified by Inglehart and Welzel's (2023) comparative analysis of political cultures as belonging to the "Catholic Europe" cluster and is demographically the 6th "most Catholic" country in the world (Garelli & Palmisano, 2025, 66).

Italy's Catholicism is quite distinctive among European Catholic-majority nations. Its peculiarity lies in its diversity. Literature and empirical data, summarized by Garelli (2020), highlight the co-existence, within the Catholic flock, of several populated clusters: a minority of active religious persons, who have consistently been around 22% of Italian Catholics since the 1990s; around 30% of committed believers who, nonetheless, practice only occasionally; finally, an increasing majority of individuals, who has lately passed 40%, who define themselves as Catholics following tradition, for whom religion "has thinned down to be essentially a marker of culture or identity" (DeHanas, 2026, 430). It is the numerical magnitude of the latter categories that makes Italy stand out amongst other countries in Europe (Garelli, 2020, 16; 58). This has political consequences. As happened in Catholic-majority states such as Poland and Hungary, also in Italy, the last "culturalized Christianity" group has been "discursively mobilized" by illiberal populists and blatantly "turned into (…) a resource for illiberal collective identity" (Haynes, 2023, 4). Here, the populist Right's leaders Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini have captured most of the Christian identity-related public discourse in recent years (DeHanas, 2026).

The late Church's leader, Pope Francis—at the time, the widely respected (Demos & Pi, 2022; Garelli, 2020) guide of the largest Italian denomination—issued in 2015 his seminal encyclical *Laudato si'*, followed by the apostolic exhortation *Laudate Deum* (Francis, 2023). While the encyclical centers on the "care for our common home" and the several dimensions

of environmental protection (pollution and CC, water, loss of biodiversity, human life quality, and global inequality), the exhortation specifically focuses on the climate crisis, underscores its anthropogenic nature, and emphasizes the urgency to act, given that the earth is getting closer to the "breaking point" (Francis, 2023, 3), as highlighted by climate science (Eberle et al., 2023). Flanked by additional papal speeches and teachings and undertakings of the Catholic hierarchy, namely the Italian Bishops' Conference (CEI, 2020; CEI, 2025), Francis's discourse was meant to be a guideline for action and unambiguously advocated for a change in human behaviors, notably in the "irresponsible lifestyle connected with the Western model" (Francis, 2023, 72). All this in a context where, as stressed by critics of the current policy regime on CC, there is the "paradox (…) that most people (including those who take climate change seriously) simultaneously acknowledge" scientific evidence on CC origin and urgence "while at the same time continue to act as if they do not know" and "continue doing what they have always been doing, or at best slightly adjust basic consumption patterns" (Swyngedouw, 2022, 906).

The paper draws evidence from a survey of a sample of Italian residents stratified according to gender, age class, geographical area of residence, urban size, education level, and employment status. In the sample, 56.8% declare being Catholic, of which 32.0% assert regularly attending religious services.

The research question we address is whether religiosity is linked with climate-friendly behavior, or rather, partisanship is a better predictor of the latter. This would suggest future avenues for research on the faithful's readiness to follow religious environmental ethics. While political scientists conducted this study, the latter could offer an empirical contribution of potential interest to several disciplines.

The paper proceeds as follows. The next section offers an overview of the literature focusing on theoretical and empirical aspects of the link between religion and climate-friendly behaviors. This review chiefly focuses on mainstream religious traditions and does not account for either religious beliefs on the environment or spirituality, an attribute of both believers and non-religious individuals. Then ensues the illustration of the methodological design of our analysis, followed by a presentation of findings and, in the next section, their discussion. The conclusive remarks encompass the relevance of religious leaders' climate communication in a context of growing polarization on the issue.

RELIGION, POLITICS, AND CLIMATE-RELATED BEHAVIORS

Pro-environmental behavior consists of the "commission of acts that benefit the natural environment" and "the omission of acts that harm it" (Lange & Dewitte, 2019, 92). Hence, climate-friendly or climate-protective behavior (CPB) is a conduct aimed at mitigating CC or preventing climate harm. Beginning with the comprehensive list of the General Ecological Behavioral Scale (Kaiser & Wilson, 2000), social research has identified many pro-environmental behaviors (Newman & Fernandes, 2016; Sherkat & Ellison, 2007) and CPBs included in social surveys (European Commission, 2023). They consist of both public (e.g., donating to or joining pro-environment organizations, signing petitions) and private activities concerned with conservation (e.g., saving water, reducing home energy use), consumption (e.g., buying organic food), recycling, transportation (e.g., sustainable transportation alternatives to car use), and littering (Bergquist et al., 2022). Amongst their underlying rationales, we now focus on those concerned with religion and religiosity.

Theoretical background

Decades of research on human reasoning have ushered in manifold explanations of the formation of citizens' social opinions. People do not think only through logical processes, but based on heuristics that guide them in the formation of judgments (Kahneman, 2011; Zaller, 1992) about political objects and, in this, are influenced by interiorized values and cultural structures (Kahan et al., 2011; Kahan, 2014), let alone emotions (Maor & Capelos, 2023). Political analysis has long stressed the relevance of long-term personal identities and values (Ross, 2009) in leading individuals to adopt political stances, such as electoral preferences (Oesch & Rennwald, 2018). Situational factors and external circumstances, which are likely to change over time, appear to interact with entrenched personal traits, such as ideological and social identities, in molding individual inclinations on specific issues (Lewis-Beck et al., 2008), as well as forms and extents of political engagement (Kitschelt & Rehm, 2023).

Psychological models such as Schwartz and Howard's (1981) norm-activation (NAT) and Stern's (1999, 2000) value-belief-norm (VBN) frameworks, as well as structuration theories (Sherkat & Ellison, 2007), posit that stable personality factors, like egoistic, altruistic, and biospheric values (Stern, 2000), impact personal stances on social issues. This causal chain is understood as activated by specific circumstances perceived as threatening (NAT) and as mediated through more focused moral considerations about specific objects (VBN), such as interaction with the environment, and/or habits (Klöckner, 2013). Consequently, individuals who exhibit concern for others, alongside high pro-social values, are more inclined to protect the environment. Especially when these values are jeopardized, and personal intervention can be a remedy, personal moral standards or a sense of duty to act can motivate environmentally responsible behavior.

In this respect, communication studies and cognitive sciences underscore the role of external cues (Slothuus & de Vreese, 2010; Zaller, 1992) and cognitive heuristics (Ray, 2003), particularly for uninterested and uninformed people, in shaping opinions on specific political objects. This notably holds for objects with a high level of uncertainty, as CC appears to many. Elite cues are theorized as affecting individual opinions (Steenbergen et al., 2007), also in environmental (Johnson et al., 2005) and climate politics (Carmichael & Brulle, 2017), provided subjects trust the message sender (Druckman, 2001; Nicholson, 2012). Cognitive biases such as the self-efficacy bias (Loy et al., 2020), the confirmation bias (Stanley et al., 2020), and reactance (Brehm & Brehm, 1981; Kees et al., 2010) have been identified as mediating the impact of exposure to messages on social and political action. In particular, when people face messages that conflict with their beliefs or come from opposing sources (Druckman, 2001; Nicholson, 2012; Zaller, 1992), they tend to protect their identity by siding with their peer group's views. This helps them avoid cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) and preserve their social standing (Li et al., 2016). Experiments show that people understand information about CC and environmental degradation according to their personal beliefs (Zhou, 2016).

Religiosity, that is, the "intensity" (Hwang, 2018, 665) or "strength of one's religious beliefs" (Muralidharan et al., 2024, 72), seems relevant in this respect, insofar as it significantly spurs electoral choices in Europe (Esmer & Pettersson, 2007) and is growing elsewhere (Nwankwo, 2019; Smith, 2019). However, while religion is a widespread personality characteristic, its role is disputed (Sherkat & Ellison, 1997; Watts, 2017). Some argue that religiosity influences cognition, social thought, and behaviors (Mokhlis, 2009), and structuration theories claim that it frequently transposes into "schemata and interactions with political structures" when a person uses elements of religious doctrine "as a cognitive resource" (Sherkat & Ellison, 1997, 72). Others assert that

adherence to broad and paramount beliefs—for example, the existence of a supernatural God—does not linearly transfer to specific beliefs and understandings. It is also claimed that religious people place a high value on benevolence and little value on hedonism (Watts, 2017). However, religious-based altruism does not occur if retaliation is expected because of pro-social behavior, and, furthermore, it does not automatically extend to groups that are the object of disapproval on religious or moral grounds (Batson et al., 1993; Rose & Exline, 2012).

The interplay between personal ideological and religious outlooks notably seems to be quite complex. A correlation has been ascertained between religious and socio-political conservatism, yet demographic variables can affect it (Scobie, 1975; Watts, 2017). Concerning environmental objects, as opposed to conservative ideologies, liberal ones are related to perceiving pro-environmental behavior as highly moral (Currie & Choma, 2017). CC is often framed in terms of harm and fairness, which resonates more with liberals than conservatives, making conservatives less morally motivated to act on it (Markowitz and Shariff, 2012). Regarding environmental action, meta-analyses (Bamberg & Möser, 2007; Ejelöv & Nilsson, 2020) show that its acceptability is driven by both self-interest and feelings of moral obligation, for example, a sense of responsibility toward others, including future generations, different species, and ecosystems (Newman & Fernandes, 2016, 156–157). Altruistic, or self-transcendent values, are highlighted in psychology as the major basis of individuals' dedication to environmental causes, which encompasses engaging in pro-environmental behavior (Chung et al., 2019; Thøgersen, 2000). People who demonstrate strong other-regarding preferences are more inclined to show significant concern about global warming and actively seek further information on the topic (Kennard, 2021). On the contrary, individualistic worldviews are negatively related to climate concern as well as policy support (Bretter & Schulz, 2025).

Whether religious individuals are more altruistic than non-religious ones is debated. On the one hand, most experimental studies find no or little correlation between the two (Batson et al., 1993). On the other hand, studies based on self-reports show that religion and pro-social actions are strongly paired: religion elicits self-transcendent attitudes (Mokhlis, 2009; Muralidharan et al., 2024; Saroglou et al., 2004; Sosis & Ruffle, 2003). Pro-social behavior, such as donating or volunteering, is "the most characteristic aspect of altruistic sustainable behaviors", which "prioritizes the well-being of others above that of oneself" (Muñoz-García and Villena-Martínez, 2020, 2). Some argue that religion and altruism are so closely connected in individuals' belief systems that exposure to a positive notion of religion prompts them to exhibit greater altruism (Pichon et al., 2007). The drivers of other-centered behavior should be found in the sense of shared group identity and reciprocal morality of the faithful of the same denomination (Graham & Haidt, 2010). This is likely influenced by the encouragement of altruism in all major texts in most religions, the example of selfless saints and revered faith leaders, the belief in afterlife rewards for moral standards and conducts, the priming of altruistic behavior sponsored by religious preachers, especially for more practicing persons (Djupe & Calfano, 2012; Norenzayan & Shariff, 2008; Pichon et al., 2007). But even, paradoxically, the egoistic attitude of finding gratification in helping others, seeking self-awarded or social recognition, or trying to avoid afterlife punishment (Batson, 1987; Batson et al., 1993).

The religion-altruism nexus is also argued to translate into political views and social engagement, for example, as far as foreign policy is concerned, although it may work either way (positively or negatively) depending on the denomination (Djupe & Calfano, 2012; Petrikova, 2018). Religiously-inspired pro-other behavior, however, seems to depend on contextual contingencies, notably on country and denomination, as well as the public visibility of behaviors (Hustinx et al., 2014; Norenzayan & Shariff, 2008; Pichon et al., 2007; Sosis & Ruffle, 2003).

To recap, a basic idea shared across scientific approaches on the development of social and political viewpoints is that, alongside contextual variables, "belief systems interact in attitude formation" (Arbuckle, 2016, 4). Hence, as far as environmental protection is concerned, people with normative goals, often "influenced by religious affiliation, are more likely" to recognize environmental issues and take responsibility through eco-friendly actions (Skirbekk et al., 2020, 243). In this process, religion could play a part, given the altruistic message of most religious doctrines and the pro-environment and pro-climate guidance offered by many religious leaders. As for empirical evidence, there are mixed findings on the specific contribution that religion and religiosity may bring to the intention to perform CPBs. In the following paragraphs, we will first summarize the literature on social and political determinants of environmental and, specifically, climate opinions and behaviors, to then center on their connection with religion and religiosity.

Evidence: The weight of non-religious factors

Some analyses do not find evidence of any generalized impact on environmental orientation and behavior by either denomination (Hayes & Marangudakis, 2001) or religiosity (Biel & Nilsson, 2005; Konisky et al., 2008; Newman & Fernandes, 2016). Actually, most studies do not account for either faith or religiosity and highlight the importance of other determinants of pro-environmental attitudes and behavior.

First, practical issues. Barriers to the adoption of eco-friendly action, including CPBs, are commonly identified with strong habits and the financial costs and convenience associated with such conduct (Bamberg & Schmidt, 2003; Dechezleprêtre et al., 2025; Masciangelo et al., 2024). For example, the accessibility of facilities and appliances (e.g., electric charging stations for vehicles) affects their actual utilization. Thus, income is an influential factor (Stern, 2000).

Second, sociodemographic variables. Women, young people, and urban residents with a liberal political orientation (Dunlap & McCright, 2008; Hoffarth & Hodson, 2016; Panno et al., 2015) are found to be more likely to share environmental concerns and commitment (Panno et al., 2018). In the USA, Newman and Fernandes (2016) find that gender is related to eco-friendly consumers' behaviors and the signing of pro-environment petitions, with females more likely than males to engage in the former, but less likely for the latter. Age shows a statistically significant relation with these practices, whereby Generations X and Y citizens are less likely than baby boomers to undertake eco-consumer actions and (for Generation X only) sign petitions. Income has a positive significant relation with petition-signing and green group membership. Lastly, the more educated people are more likely to have a positive and significant relationship with most pro-environmental conducts, including the willingness to pay behavioral and financial costs.

Third, personality and cognitive biases. Negative correlations have been ascertained for a right-wing authoritarian personality with climate proactivity (Cipriani et al., 2024) and for social-dominance orientation with environmentalism (Milfont & Osborne, 2024). A low self-efficacy, that is, the perception of a very weak impact of personal action on CC mitigation, also impacts people's proactivity. In contrast, the willingness to sacrifice is improved by a high level of social trust (Paulson & Büchs, 2022). In nations where the latter is high, "individual behaviors to address climate change are more likely" (Smith & Mayer, 2018, 149).

Fourth, personal values and views. Environmental concern and eco-friendly behaviors are more common among people with self-transcendent values (De Groot & Steg, 2009; Stern & Dietz, 1994) and a post-materialist worldview (Franzen & Meyer, 2010), as well as citizens embracing a frugal

lifestyle (Tapia-Fonllem et al., 2013), whereas they are negatively associated with CC skepticism and denialism.

Fifth, political alignment. The more conservative a person is, the less likely to have a positive and statistically significant relationship with environmental action (Sherkat & Ellison, 2007). Conversely, liberals tend to show higher willingness to sacrifice, to adopt sustainable consumer behaviors, to sign petitions, and to join environmentalist groups (Newman & Fernandes, 2016).

Religious influence on pro-environmental and climate-friendly behaviors

Intentions to engage in pro-environmental behaviors and actual behaviors are conceptually distinct (Kollmus and Agyeman, 2002; Klöckner, 2013; Schwartz & Howard, 1981; Stern et al., 1999, 2000) and are analytically treated as such in scholarly research (Chung et al., 2019; Hwang, 2018; Morrison et al., 2015; Muralidharan et al., 2024; Newman & Fernandes, 2016; Sherkat & Ellison, 2007; Zemo & Nigus, 2021). The most straightforward models of pro-environmental behavior assume a linear sequence: gaining environmental knowledge would foster environmental awareness and concern, which would then translate into pro-environmental actions. A linear chain linking personal values, general beliefs, beliefs about specific issues, and, finally, action (Chung et al., 2019), is also assumed by the earliest, "rigid" version of the VBN theory applied to environmental orientation (Klöckner, 2013, 1030). However, these models have long been shown to be inaccurate, as empirical research demonstrates that, in most cases, greater knowledge and awareness do not actually result in more pro-environmental behavior (Kollmuss and Agyeman, 2002). The relationship between environmental concerns and actual behavior shows higher complexity (Newman & Fernandes, 2016). Actual behavior is activated following the intervention of several other driving motivations (Gifford & Nilsson, 2014; Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002). In this respect, Kollmuss and Agyeman (2002, 239) even conclude that "the question of what shapes pro-environmental behavior is such a complex one that it cannot be visualized through one single framework or diagram" and "developing a model that tries to incorporate all factors might neither be feasible nor useful".

Empirically, while some studies find that CC beliefs and willingness to sacrifice do not "exert direct or indirect effects on pro-environmental behavior" (Chung et al., 2019, 371), other studies highlight some connection between pro-environmental behavioral intention—"viewed as summarizing the interplay of cognitive…as well as personality variables (Bamberg & Möser, 2007, 15)"—and self-reported pro-environmental behavior itself (Hines et al., 1987), with the former explaining 27% of variance in the latter in the meta-analysis by Bamberg and Möser (2007).

In respect of religion, religiosity, and CC, the largest corpus of evidence focuses on environmental concerns and policies, while CPBs are little studied. Several observational analyses point to significant variance in environmental concerns and opinions between religious people and nonbelievers (Clements et al., 2014; Skirbekk et al., 2020) as well as across confessional groups in the USA (Newman & Fernandes, 2016), Latin America (Latinobarometro, 2023), Australia (Morrison et al., 2015), and globally (World Values Survey, 2023). Buddhists seem the most engaged with climate issues and sustainable consumption (Kovács, 2014; Morrison et al., 2015). Other studies report a negative association between religiousness and sustainable consumption (Lee et al., 2017; Martin & Bateman, 2014).

Concerning religiosity, this appears to intensify environmental concern among U.S. Christian fundamentalists (Chung et al., 2019) and to positively influence the willingness to pay higher

prices and to lower living standards for environmental purposes in South Korea (Hwang, 2018), as well as green purchasing among Mexican Catholics (Felix & Braunsberger, 2016). Based on World Values Survey data covering 91 countries, Zemo and Nigus (2021) discover that religion induces both willingness to contribute to environmental protection and actual pro-environmental behavior, such as donations, particularly in low-income states. In the USA, scholars (Peifer et al., 2016; Sherkat & Ellison, 2007) find a significant positive direct effect of Church attendance on pro-environmental consumption, and motivate it not in terms of eschatology, but based on religious socialization, that is, the mobilization of religious groups in favor of pro-environmental private action, although not of political activism (Sherkat & Ellison, 2007). Religiosity here is connected to the environmental values held by Christians and the non-religious (Muralidharan et al., 2024). Minton et al. (2015) observe that both atheists and devoutly religious individuals engage in more sustainable behaviors compared to those with lower levels of religiosity. In the Arabic world, Mazaheri (2024) showcases that Muslims are less concerned with CC than Christians, yet more religious faithful are more worried than Middle Easterners with a lower sense of religiosity.

Beyond studies based on polls, in-depth qualitative analyses maintain the relevance of religion. Nche (2023, 1087) exposes that in the largest African country, Nigeria, "more frequency of attendance to church activities was associated with increased (…) climate change action, and perceived role of the church in addressing climate change", especially among Catholics. Ives and colleagues (2023) provide evidence that religious leadership is capable of steering behavioral change among their followers and, importantly, sustaining it. And yet, there is also evidence indicating a negative influence of religion. Particularly within Judaeo-Christian traditions, fundamentalist viewpoints on the human dominion over nature (White, 1967) still negatively influence environmental concern (Leary et al., 2016; Preston & Baimel, 2021), although many Churches have abandoned the traditional anthropocentric worldview. Religion also globally influences views and behaviors regarding consumption and reproduction, which in turn have marked environmental consequences in terms of energy use and greenhouse gas emissions (Skirbekk et al., 2020).

A partly alternative perspective is that religion influences pro-environmental and climate-friendly action, yet this is swayed by more powerful factors, including political ones, on which we now focus. There is evidence that in the USA, and partly Canada and Australia, differences in CC opinions within denominations largely reproduce partisan-ideological cleavages. Hence, the relationship between religion and positions on environmental protection and CC should be viewed as spurious. Particularly within U.S. Catholicism, partisanship appears to be a more powerful predictor of opinions on CC than religious affiliation (Li et al., 2016), and Catholics tend to view scientific findings on global warming and to support environmental protection alongside political party lines (Landrum & Vasquez, 2020; Pew, 2022). Moderate and conservative Catholics show no significant difference in environmental concern from unaffiliated Americans (Arbuckle, 2016). Thus, American Catholics based their response to Pope Francis's message on CC on their political views: the liberals found it consistent with their own egalitarian principles and dislike of possessive individualism and unregulated industry (Kahan et al., 2011), hence easier to embrace in its moral dimension; the conservatives were more likely to dismiss the Pope's credibility and resist his message if it conflicted with their preexisting beliefs (Li et al., 2016; Landrum & Vasquez, 2020). Hence, among U.S. Catholics, religious leaders' cues do not prevail over but rather reinforce ideological predispositions toward environmental opinions (Wilkins, 2022).

Nevertheless, some accounts argue that religion can play as a "softener" of the skepticism of ideological conservatives about CC evidence (Arbuckle, 2016) and eco-friendly consumption (Peifer et al., 2016) and reduce the politicization of environmental issues (Ives et al., 2023). In contrast,

Guth et al. (1995) contend that "religious conservatism may influence environmental orientations and activism by motivating political conservatism—hence religious factors are deemed indirectly causal" (Sherkat & Ellison, 2007, 73). Jenkins and colleagues (2018, 88) support that Pope Francis's interventions seem to have further polarized climate politics in the USA, hardening both liberal and conservative views on CC within the Church, as backed by survey evidence (Pew, 2024).

More specifically, religiosity seems to affect the environmental concern and commitment of U.S. Catholics and Evangelical Protestants, but not Jews and Black Protestants according to Arbuckle and Konisky (2015), who also underline that the more religious evangelical Protestants and Catholics are, the less concerned they tend to be about CC, and conclude that religiosity often leads people to care less about environmental issues. Other scholars support that religiosity is linked to increased skepticism about CC (Hope & Jones, 2014) and moderates the relationships between environmental beliefs and pro-environmental support (Eom et al., 2021).

Overall, religiosity seems to be a less powerful driver of environmental opinion and behavior than political orientation. It is argued that the latter is highly influential because, on one side, it acts as a shortcut to judgment formation in the context of complex and contested information on CC, and, on the other side, politically biased people rely on political leaders to filter this information (McCright and Dunlap, 2011), which fosters CC politicization.

In fact, psychologists of religion argue that religious people are so diverse that it is hard to treat them as a single homogeneous group (Watts, 2017). For example, people who have a seeking approach toward religion tend to show more pro-social behaviors than people animated by a more secure religiosity (Batson et al., 1993). Individuals inevitably interpret doctrine subjectively, and this can lead to a selective focus and understanding of Christian doctrine (Watts, 2017). The mechanism of reactance could be crucial in this regard, in determining the level of assimilation of religious doctrine by individuals. Sociologists of religion (Berger, 2014; Garelli & Palmisano, 2025) underline that, following the individualization of life habits in modern (Luckmann, 1979) and post-modern times, religious identity is, for a growing number of individuals, a liquid concept. Profane and religious criteria and judgments can coexist in the minds of people, who differentiate among them in their own various fields of life. Expressions such as "religious bricolage" and '*à la carte*' religion point to the evermore common practice of the faithful autonomously choosing which religious dogmas and guidance to follow and when not to abide by them, as a sort of cherry-picking of moral norms.

In conclusion, the literature yields a mixed picture. The connection between ideological position and partisanship with pro-environmental behavioral intention is widely attested. On the contrary, the relation between religious identity and views on CC is more complex and appears to vary "across traditions and contexts" (Jenkins et al., 2018, 102). Inevitably:

> The changing shapes of religion and religiosity are related to contingent and contextual circumstances that shape the place of religion in society, such as historical and political legacies (…), the resources of religious groups and organizations, or an increasing religious diversity (Giorgi & Fokas, 2026, 2).

In particular, as claimed by Sherkat and Ellison (2007), contradictory findings on religion's link to environmental concern and activism stem from the complex ways religious beliefs and resources affect different aspects of environmental engagement.

METHODS

Our work follows the mainstream perspectives in the exposed theoretical background, according to which religiosity is linked with altruistic predispositions predicting prosocial behavior, and hence, the acceptability of eco-friendly actions is influenced by a self-transcendent sense of moral duty toward others. Therefore, we hypothesize the positive influence of religiosity on CPB. We will check if the hypothesis holds in multivariate models, which include socio-demographic and political factors. In this section, the operationalization of the relevant variables is illustrated.

Data comes from a survey administered in December 2024 to a sample of 800 adult individuals residing in Italy. The sample design is based on quotas on gender, age cluster, geographical area, class of urban size, education level, and employment condition, with quotas allowing some flexibility (up to ±25%). Respondents are enrolled in an opt-in online panel, where participants answer CAWI-administered, device-agnostic—that is, that can be answered on various types of digital devices—questionnaires. While widely employed in contemporary survey research, this recruitment strategy is subject to potential self-selection bias (Baker et al., 2010; Callegaro et al., 2014). It is therefore appropriate to acknowledge this methodological limitation while outlining the mitigation strategies implemented. Firstly, the progressive digitalization of the Italian population has significantly reduced the gap between the population reachable online and the general population (Blom et al., 2015; Cornesse et al., 2020; Couper, 2000). According to data from the Government's Statistics Institute, ISTAT (2023), the proportion of Italian households with Internet access has reached 83.1%, with regular usage rates exceeding 90% among individuals under 55 years of age. Secondly, the sample was constructed by applying quotas proportional to the Italian population across multiple socio-demographic dimensions: gender, age brackets, macro-geographical area of residence, urban size of the municipality, educational attainment (articulated into three levels), and employment status. This multidimensional approach ensures a structurally representative sample consistent with methodological recommendations for survey-based research (Tourangeau et al., 2013). Thirdly, the polling institute that administered the questionnaire regularly surveys panelists on a wide variety of topics extending well beyond the political and social sphere, including consumption trends, health-related behaviors, and service usage. This thematic heterogeneity reduces the risk of a panel composed exclusively of individuals with heightened interest in civic matters (Hillygus et al., 2014; Krosnick et al., 2015).

From a broader perspective, methodological literature has demonstrated that online panels managed by established research institutes, when properly stratified, yield results comparable to those obtained through traditional methodologies (Ansolabehere & Schaffner, 2014; Kennedy et al., 2016; Yeager et al., 2011).

Finally, data was weighted after collection on the same socio-demographic variables used for quotas, combined with voting behavior in the 2024 European Parliament election. Post-data collection weighting relied on data from the general population provided annually by ISTAT. To this end, we adopted the iterative proportional fitting procedure, a technique that ensures the weighted sample accurately reflects key population characteristics (Kolenikov, 2014; Naszodi, 2023).

Independent variable

Most studies on the connection between religion and environmental opinions and behaviors fall victim to the problem of drawing statistical inferences from small numbers of affiliates of different

denominations emerging in representative yet small samples (Arbuckle & Konisky, 2015). In this sense, Italy is peculiar, insofar as it has a religious landscape which is much less fragmented than other global-North countries such as the USA, Canada, or the UK. Indeed, most of the Italian adult population—56.8% in our sample—consider themselves Catholic (Garelli, 2020), with roughly one third attending religious services regularly and one sixth (16.8%) also getting involved in Catholic volunteering. Non-believers make up 27.4% of the sample, and the rest is distributed across other denominations.

However, as stressed above, it appears important not to treat people of the same religious community as if they were a single homogeneous category, especially given that exterior religious belonging, affiliation, and practice, and inner religion, which is about private experience and the inner commitment of the heart, are not always overlapping (Watts, 2017). Therefore, we operationalize religion through two distinct indicators. First, self-stated religious attendance in person or via media or the Internet. Combined with the denomination stated by respondents, this enabled us to build the variable "Religion" with four categories: "practicing Catholics", that is, those who attend religious worship at least once per month (28.1% of the total Catholic sample), "non-practicing (lapsed) Catholics", "Non-believers", and "Other", that is, people of other religions. This will be used as a control factor.

Second, the actual independent variable "Religiosity" is a measure of religious strength. This indicates people's level of religious commitment and is assessed through the question: "*If you had to rate your religiosity, regardless of whether you attend religious services, how would you rate yourself on a scale of 1 to 10?*". Invalid codes were set to missing values.

Because religious affiliation and religiosity capture related but conceptually distinct dimensions of religious life, we assessed potential multicollinearity in the full models. Collinearity diagnostics show very low VIF values across all specifications (maximum adjusted GVIF = 1.44), indicating that the simultaneous inclusion of Religion and Religiosity does not compromise the stability of the estimates (see Appendix Table A4). While religious affiliation identifies denominational belonging and practice-based categories, religiosity captures individual intensity of religious commitment, allowing us to distinguish between religious identity and strength of belief.

Dependent variables

Our dependent variable consists of the intention to adopt CPBs. We propose operationalizing it through a series of indicators of the willingness to engage in climate-friendly actions that try to encompass various analytical dimensions presented in the literature. Although these indicators do not straightforwardly measure actual practices, by highlighting respondents' willingness to engage in CPBs, they "gauge individuals' hypothetical preferences" (Zemo & Nigus, 2021, 93) to protect the climate. This is a common approach (Cipriani et al., 2024; Hwang, 2018) in this field of research, whereby "the willingness to sacrifice … can also be interpreted as a hypothetical behavioral intention" (Chung et al., 2019, 373).

The indicators measure intention to engage in positive CPBs, but also in avoiding climate-damaging activities. In addition, they are concerned with both consumption (items "a", "c", "d", and "h") and transportation (items "b", "f", and "g"), behaviors that all have relevant climate footprints, but also the willingness to engage in pro-environmental activism ("e") as well as the personal disposition to risk ("i"). Descriptive statistics are reported in Table 1. Intentions were measured by proposing a series of CPBs and prompting respondents to state their agreement on a

TABLE 1 Descriptive measures of inclination toward climate-protective behaviors.

Dependent variables	Dimensions	Character	Mean (1–10)	St. dev.	*N*
b. Local products	Transportation	Private	6.15	2.55	758
f. Avoiding cars	Transportation	Private	5.70	2.74	759
e. Awareness raising	Activism	Public	5.62	2.75	758
h. Lowering temperature	Consumption	Private	5.57	2.69	756
g. Avoiding airflights	Transportation	Private	5.36	2.86	757
a. Meat consumption	Consumption	Private	5.26	2.90	757
c. Sustainable food	Consumption	Private	4.67	2.74	761
d. Sustainable clothing	Consumption	Private	4.65	2.75	758
i. Sustainable investment	Willingness to risk	Private and public	4.23	2.82	742

9-point Likert scale: "*On a scale of 1 (Not at all willing) to 9 (Totally willing), please indicate whether you would be willing to contribute to the fight against climate change*:"

1. Reduce red meat consumption.
2. Consume local products, avoiding those from areas far from your home.
3. Consume only sustainable foods (e.g., fish, fruit, and vegetables), even if it means paying more for them.
4. Purchase only certified sustainable clothing, even if it means paying more for them.
5. Raise awareness among others by talking about the importance of adopting behaviors that combat CC.
6. Walk, use a bicycle, or use public transportation instead of a car or motorcycle.
7. Reduce air travel and choose train or other less polluting modes of transport.
8. Reduce the temperature or heating hours in your home.
9. Invest your savings in certified environmental sustainability funds or business projects.

Control factors

We measure several control variables that might confound the connection between climate-friendly behavioral intention and our explanatory variable of interest. We control for gender (recoded into a binary categorical factor: *male*/*female*) and age (converted to a numeric format), which yielded mixed results in previous studies. Education is measured by the highest degree obtained by respondents and operationalized into three ordinal categories (*low—middle school, medium–high school diploma*, and *high-university and above*). Income was recoded into the "Class" variable with four socioeconomic categories (*struggling, lower middle class, middle class*, and *well-off*). "Region" is a categorical factor capturing the four standard geographic areas of Italy (*North-West, North-East, Center, South and Islands*). "Municipality Size" was recoded into four categories based on population size of municipalities (*Up to 10k, 10k–30k, 30k–100k, Over 100k*). Respondents' profession was converted into the binary "Work status" variable, distinguishing between working and non-working individuals.

Political and value-related factors were also considered, following scholarly literature. "Systemic Trust", originally a labeled numeric variable, was transformed into a continuous numeric variable using agreement with the statement: "*Italian society is now broken*" (*Strongly agree, Some-*

what agree, Slightly agree, and *Not at all agree*). "Political interest", also recoded into a continuous variable after being simplified into four categories, is derived from the respondents' answer to the question "*If you had to rate (from 1 to 10) your interest in politics, what score would you give?*", recoded respectively as none (1–3), low (4 and 5), moderate (6 and 7), and high (8–10). Lastly, "Self-Placement" is assessed with the political self-placement of respondents in 6 distinct categories (*Unplaced*, used as reference category, *Left, Centre, Centre Left, Centre Right*, and *Right*).

Analysis

We first measured bivariate relations between our main independent variable, religiosity, and our dependent variables, intentions toward CPB (Table A1 of the Appendix). We ran an OLS analysis, which considers our dependent variables as continuous, assuming a continuous latent variable, and thresholds that determine the categories. This is because the difference between OLS and ordinal logit estimates is minimal. The ordinal models produce slightly attenuated coefficients (in log-odds terms), but the substantive conclusions remain unchanged: coefficients for religiosity retain the same sign across all models and display identical patterns of statistical significance (see Figure A1 and Table A2 of the Appendix).[1] Afterwards, we estimated a series of complete linear regression models using the *lm()* function in R. Each dependent variable was regressed on the same set of predictors, thereby ensuring comparability across models. This structure allowed for a systematic assessment of how sociodemographic, political, and value-related variables influenced intentions to carry out different aspects of climate-protective action (Age, Gender, Education, Income, Region, Municipality size, Work status, Systemic Trust, and Political self-placement).

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the respondents' mean inclination toward the CPBs we tested. In general, there is readiness to engage in eco-friendly behaviors as long as they do not lead to increased economic costs (consuming only sustainable food and clothing) or reduced potential earnings (investments).

The exploratory OLS bivariate analysis (full results in Table A1 of the Appendix) highlights an overall positive relationship between religiosity and intention to adopt CPB. Coefficients are positive for 8 out of 9 dependent variables (Figure 1).

Significant effects are clearly observed for sustainable investments and sustainable clothing, both of which are positively associated with higher levels of religiosity. These are two areas that require a substantial level of individual financial commitment, and religiosity appears to act as a factor strengthening the "willingness to pay". However, they are less frequent activities than, say, buying food or using cars. In fact, behavioral intentions regarding sustainable consumption, transportation use, or raising awareness show positive but not statistically significant effects. This implies that religious and non-religious people do not significantly differ in their propensity

[1] As a robustness check, we estimated cumulative link ordinal models for all nine dependent variables. Appendix Table A2 provides a systematic comparison between OLS and ordinal specifications, including coefficients, standardized OLS effects, and fit indices. The two modeling strategies lead to fully consistent substantive conclusions, with no changes in coefficient direction or statistical significance. Because the dependent variables are measured on 9-point scales and OLS coefficients are more easily interpretable and comparable across models, we present OLS estimates in the main text and report ordinal models in the Appendix.

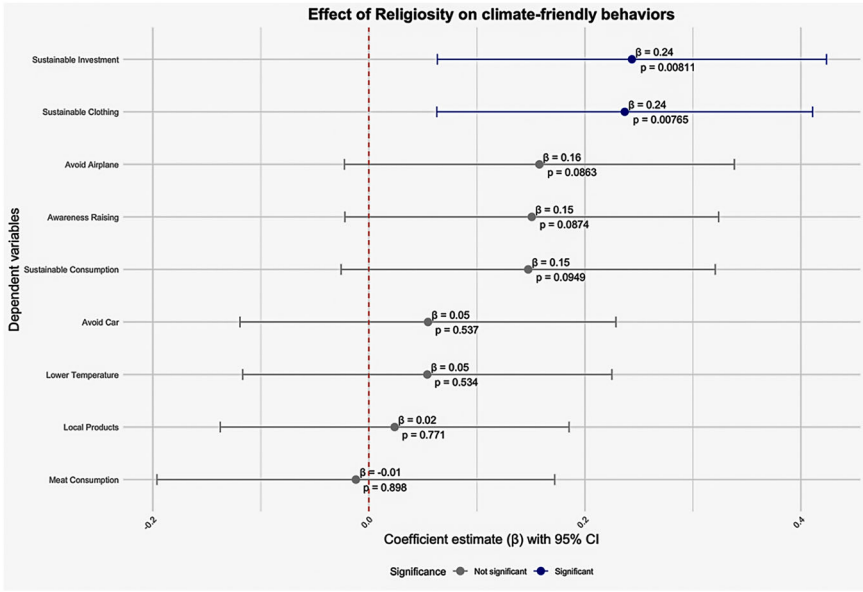

FIGURE 1 Effect of religiosity on climate-friendly behaviors (bivariate analysis).

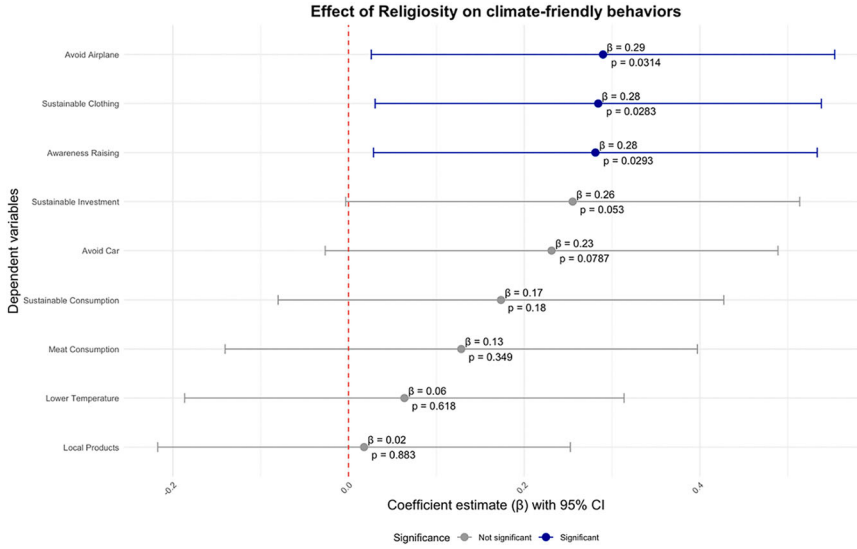

FIGURE 2 Effect of religiosity on climate-friendly behaviors (full models).

toward such CPBs. Overall, the direction of the estimates is largely consistent with the hypothesis, while significance remains limited to a small subset of indicators.

Building on these results, we advanced our analysis by testing whether, and in what ways, the effects on CPB intentions change once other variables are introduced, and what role religiosity retains in this broader framework. For each model, summary statistics were computed, reporting regression coefficients, standard errors, significance levels, and model fit indices. Table 2 and Figure 2 present the effects of religiosity net of all other independent variables. A full overview of the effects of all predictors on the dependent variables is in the Appendix (Table A3).

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TABLE 2 Effect of religiosity on climate-friendly behavior: full models.

Dependent variable									
	Meat consumption	Local products	Sustainable consumption	Sustainable clothing	Awareness raising	Avoid car	Avoid airflight	Lower temperature	Sustainable investment
Models	**(1)**	**(2)**	**(3)**	**(4)**	**(5)**	**(6)**	**(7)**	**(8)**	**(9)**
Religiosity	.128	.018	.174	**.284***	**.281***	.231	**.290***	.064	.255
	(.137)	(.120)	(.129)	**(.129)**	**(.129)**	(.131)	**(.134)**	(.127)	(.132)
Observations	681	685	684	683	684	683	684	681	672
R^2	.087	.087	.051	.066	.079	.048	.068	.060	.095
Adjusted R^2	.051	.051	.014	.029	.042	.010	.031	.022	.058
Residual Std. error	2.826	2.479	2.684	2.681	2.673	2.721	2.796	2.650	2.714
	($df = 654$)	($df = 658$)	($df = 657$)	($df = 656$)	($df = 657$)	($df = 656$)	($df = 657$)	($df = 654$)	($df = 645$)
F statistic	2.395***	2.422***	1.360	1.794**	2.159***	1.266	1.842**	1.600*	2.601***
	($df = 26; 654$)	($df = 26; 658$)	($df = 26; 657$)	($df = 26; 656$)	($df = 26; 657$)	($df = 26; 656$)	($df = 26; 657$)	($df = 26; 654$)	($df = 26; 645$)

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

The variation in sample size across models reflects listwise deletion of cases with missing values on model covariates. The missing data primarily stem from "don't know" responses to specific survey items included in the models. We opted for complete case analysis rather than imputing values for "don't know" responses, as any imputation strategy would require arbitrary assumptions about respondents' latent positions — a methodologically questionable approach when genuine uncertainty or ambivalence may underlie such responses. We acknowledge this represents a limitation. However, the missing data mechanism is plausibly related to respondent uncertainty rather than systematic bias linked to key outcome variables, suggesting a pattern closer to Missing at Random (MAR) than Missing Not at Random (MNAR). Furthermore, the retained sample sizes (approximately 84%–86% of total respondents) remain sufficiently large to ensure adequate statistical power and model stability. Future research might explore sensitivity analyses to further assess the robustness of findings under alternative missing data assumptions.

Religiosity consistently shows positive associations with intent to adopt sustainable practices, although with statistical significance only in the models using the inclination to avoid air travel, to buy sustainable clothes, and to make others aware of CC as the dependent variables. The magnitude of these effects varies. On the one hand, religiosity is particularly influential, with moderate positive effects, in the models *Avoid Airflight*, *Sustainable Clothing*, *Awareness Raising*, *Sustainable Investment*, and *Avoid Car*. Briefly, a one-unit increase on the religiosity scale is associated with an increased willingness to engage in various behaviors, notably purchasing sustainable, certified clothing, discussing climate-related action with others, and reducing air travel. These coefficients indicate that higher levels of religiosity are associated with stronger intentions in these areas. The effects are small in absolute terms on a behavioral readiness scale of 1–10 (about +.28 points per unit of religiosity for the strongest single item effects). However, given that religiosity is an antecedent characteristic and that changes between categories can extend over several units, these associations are substantially significant. On the other hand, religiosity exerts a smaller effect on *Meat Consumption*, *Local Products*, and *Lower Temperature*. Although still positively signed, these coefficients suggest a more limited impact of religiosity on dietary change, food sourcing, and household energy consumption. These are the least preferred behavioral intentions also emerging from our bivariate analysis, previously displayed. The complete graphs for each model, showing the estimated effects of all independent variables on all dependent variables, are in the appendix (Figures A2–A10 in the Appendix).

Alongside religiosity, religion itself appears to play a relatively minor role. Specifically, the variable "Religion" is statistically significant only for *Sustainable Clothing*: in this domain, lapsed Catholics, the non-religious, and adherents of other faiths are associated with greater readiness to engage in environmentally sustainable practices than Catholic churchgoers. Briefly, religion has mostly weak and non-significant effects on propensity to sustainable action, insofar as no substantial differences appear—apart from those mentioned above—in pro-climate adaptive behavioral intents among non-Catholics, practicing and lapsed Catholics, or members of other faiths.

Examining the effects of the socio-demographic and political predictors individually (Figure A11 of the Appendix), we observe that the same predictors have substantially different effects across the various CPBs. Age often matters positively: older respondents report a slightly higher willingness to adopt many CPBs. A 10-year age difference corresponds to about a +.2–.37 change on a 1–10 willingness scale for the strongest items. Additional analyses suggest that this relationship may partly reflect differences in engagement with public issues: age is positively associated with political interest ($b = .006$, $p = .012$; Appendix Table A5), which in turn is positively related to several CPB intentions in the full models. Although the magnitude of the association

is modest, this evidence supports the interpretation that older respondents may be more ready to adopt CPBs, partly because they are more attentive to public debates and policy-relevant issues.

Gender shows some weak effects, with women slightly more climate-friendly, but not always significantly. Specifically, women are more willing than men to mobilize others and to engage in the activism-type dimension we measured. Residents of mid-sized towns report a higher inclination to reduce heating use. This may reflect local norms, housing stock, or cost considerations.

Working status seems to have a negative—albeit non-significant—effect: people who do not work are less willing or able to engage in environmentally sustainable investments. We interpret this in light of the widely known barrier to pro-environmental behaviors, namely their financial cost (Masciangelo et al., 2024). Social class does not appear significantly influential. About education, the results tend to confirm the expectations: higher education tends to be associated with a greater willingness to adopt CPBs, especially buying local products.

Systemic trust tends to be positively associated with sustainable choices: higher trust in society is associated with higher personal willingness to adopt certain CPBs (reduce meat and lower temperature). Political interest is weakly but consistently positively associated with multiple behavioral intentions, namely investment-type ones. This appears to be theoretically coherent: politically attentive respondents may be better informed about climate-related risks and behavioral options and more ready to translate preferences into action.

Political position matters and does so asymmetrically: respondents on the Right are less inclined, sometimes by more than one point on a 1–10 scale, to engage others in climate protection and to invest sustainably. The negative coefficients for the Right are among the largest ones and point to strong political polarization in willingness to engage in public behaviors. At the same time, the positive and statistically significant coefficient for Left-wing voters on the disposition to reduce meat consumption confirms that some individual consumption choices are politicized.

DISCUSSION

Overall, results partially support our hypothesis: higher religiosity predicts greater willingness to choose a range of CPBs, but the effect is not common to all of them. However, all models show low R^2 values (approximately 5%–9%), as expected in survey-based studies on attitudes and behaviors. In our models, socio-demographic and values-related variables appear to explain only a small portion of the variance. Instead, consistently with the literature (Sherkat & Ellison, 2007; Dunlap & McCright, 2008; Newman & Fernandes, 2016), political factors are key covariates: self-placement—especially being on the Right—and, as previously found (Smith & Mayer, 2018; Paulson & Büchs, 2022), social trust both show among the largest coefficients. In particular, Right-wing placement is consistently associated with lower willingness for public and investment behaviors, while self-placement to the Left is associated with a reduction in red meat consumption. Center-right and Right-wing respondents display a negative association with most other behavioral intentions (and Left-wing ones the opposite), but this is not significant. Lower social trust is associated with lower willingness to adopt personal consumption changes. Political interest, as well, has a meaningful association.

At the same time, demographics and personal resources matter. Age, gender, education, and employment status have meaningful associations. In particular, political interest and age are consistently positive predictors, while not-working status reduces investment willingness. Our results align with previous findings for gender (Panno et al., 2018) but run counter to the literature emphasizing stronger climate concern among younger cohorts (Panno et al., 2015). With respect

to education, we assume that highly educated citizens are generally aware of the supply-chain sustainability of goods and have the informational capacity to evaluate product origin. Thus, they seem better equipped to grasp the consumption-related dimension of a "wicked problem" such as CC (Levin et al., 2012), which may be too challenging for less educated minds to seize and cope with (Weber & Stern, 2011). Yet, many coefficients are modest (fractions of a point on a 1–10 scale).

To recap, the Italian case broadly confirms what has been found in other global-North countries with respect to individual preferences for CPB. In respect of religion, we found that self-declared practicing Catholics are not particularly attracted toward CPBs. This outcome aligns with the broader understanding of today's religious landscape, also in Italy, as being fragmented and heterogeneous even among Catholics. Rome's Church is experiencing a "crisis of consensus and authority", with its moral guidance being less and less capable of "orienting consciences" (Garelli, 2020, 115), especially on ethical issues and among a large majority of traditional, lapsed Catholics (pp. 111–7). This might well represent a confirmation of the "radical view of secularization" (Garelli & Palmisano, 2025, 145) as a process by which religious institutions and consciousness lose their social significance and meaningfulness (Wilson, 1966), not only in the public but also in the private sphere and individual conscience (Bruce, 2002).

Within this context, regarding religiosity, an unexpected pattern emerges from our analysis: in exercising its (quite moderate) influence, religiosity offers a peculiar picture. The most widespread readiness in our sample is to buy local products and reduce central heating consumption at home (both very weakly and non-significantly affected by religiosity), to avoid car transportation (non-significantly related to religiosity), and to engage others (Table 2). Conversely, religiosity has a stronger, though still modest, impact on sustainable clothing and investments (Figures 1 and 2), which are the least preferred options of the whole sample. In this context, neither religious affiliation nor the degree of religious observance for the largest group, that is, Catholics, appears to exert differential effects. Rather, elevated favor for CPB is observed only in the *Sustainable Clothing* domain, and specifically among non-Catholics, non-practicing Catholics, and the non-religious.

A possible explanation, consistent with the literature on the role of moral norms in religion, is that religiosity may foster readiness to adopt forms of behavior that have a recognizable ethical component and communicate coherence between values and actions. The findings suggest that religiosity acts more as a motivational factor for ethical (financial and social) activism, rather than as a generalized lever for lifestyle changes in consumption patterns of a strictly private sphere, for example, red meat consumption and house heating. As discussed above, altruistic behavior driven by religious beliefs appears to be influenced by the visibility of these actions.

As regards meat consumption, experimental (Pechey et al., 2022), quasi-experimental (Dechezleprêtre et al., 2025), and observational studies (Eckert et al., 2025) conclude that curbing it has lower social acceptance compared to other pro-climate measures, given established consumption habits and the low awareness of the association between meat-eating and CC (Macdiarmid et al., 2016). In Catholicism, while the respect for animal life has entered moral doctrine (Francis, 2015), by no means has vegetarianism ever been officially preached.

Mixed findings emerge for transportation modes in our study. Avoidance of airflights may be related to the widespread knowledge of their highly polluting character. Instead, car use is, on the one hand, a daily need for many and, on the other hand, can involve hybrid or fully electric vehicles. Authors observe that the benefits of car use in terms of convenience and flexibility generally surpass any moral considerations, unless individuals possess a significant level of awareness and motivation to choose ethical actions over personal ease (Bamberg & Schmidt, 2003). Psychological research has reached inconclusive results in investigating whether subjective norms significantly

predict intentions to limit car use (Semenescu & Gavreliuc, 2019), and the perception of car use as an ethical issue varies among individuals (Bamberg & Schmidt, 2003).

In respect of food consumption, assuming that people with a high sense of religiosity cannot ignore moral duties, our results do not support claims that consumers often associate sustainable products with moral responsibility (Dean et al., 2008), and, in particular, that consumers prioritizing environmental and animal welfare issues are markedly more inclined to choose organic products (Ismael & Balogh, 2024).

Individual and contextual factors may actually be of great importance in determining to what extent moral norms transpose into intentions and actions. Research has indeed revealed that consumers whose moral identity, which for many is based on religious ethics, is activated are less likely to engage in eco-friendly consumption when their responsibility for environmental damage is reduced (Wu & Yang, 2018). Therefore, we agree with the argument that religion can shape and support environmental beliefs and actions, but both religious views and environmental perspectives are diverse and complex (Sherkat & Ellison, 2007). Core factors people care about, such as the ethical character of CPB, appear widely shared, but their importance varies.

CONCLUSIONS

Can religion precipitate lifestyle change to help protect the climate? To address this question, we checked the impact of religiosity against other determinants of individuals' inclination toward CPB in a country with little religious fragmentation and where the prevailing religious organization, the Catholic Church, has been advocating the need to combat CC through lifestyle change. Our analysis shows that the positive effect of religiosity emerges clearly, though modestly, only in some specific domains where the actions involve public, symbolic, or attitudinal dimensions (e.g., activism, sustainable investments, avoidance of certain transport modes), rather than everyday lifestyle practices such as food and heating choices, where it is generally positive but not robust. Non-believers and lapsed Catholics tend to show a higher propensity for climate protection than practicing Catholics, albeit with no statistical significance. More significant factors tend to be at play, namely Right-wing political positioning (with a negative impact on CPB intentions) and, with positive connections, political interest and age.

Therefore, in exposing for the first time such patterns of relations in the Italian case, our findings align with the vast literature that points to religiosity being one of the factors moderately influencing pro-environmental behavior, and not the primary one, with partisan alignment being more relevant. Yet, in our study, politics does not exercise a strong, generalized influence either, but is only significant for Right-wing people's aversion to publicly visible CPBs and (strongly) for Left-wing citizens' will to reduce red meat consumption.

We ought to point out the several limitations of this study. The most significant is that, as in part of the existing literature, our data is based not on directly observed behaviors but on self-reported intentions, which, nonetheless, comprehensive literature reviews conclude are typically associated with actual behaviors (Gifford & Nilsson, 2014). We also acknowledge that, despite the precautions we used to build our sample, as explained in the methodological section, a certain degree of distortion may persist in the representativeness of responses, which leads us to interpret gingerly the generalizability of results. Moreover, we only found a modest variance attributable to the independent variables we investigated. Therefore, we now advance some suggestions that should nonetheless be handled with caution.

Our results have implications for CC communication and education in politically polarized environments. Thus far, most climate communication has been technical, insisting on scientific explanations of the climate breakdown and the necessary technological, rather than politically radical (Swyngedouw, 2022) solutions. In broader terms, mainstream environmental communication seems, at least in the past, to have privileged the goal of increasing knowledge and awareness, expecting this would raise pro-environmental practices based on the linear, "simplistic assumption that more knowledge will lead to more enlightened behavior" (Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002, 241). Climate communication has largely overlooked religious beliefs, norms, and worldviews that are diffuse across the public (Ives et al., 2023).

Against this backdrop, it seems notable that religious leaders mobilize their flock in calling for behavioral changes. As many studies purport, individuals harbor significant worries about potential personal losses when climate action is implemented. As we also found in our study, the more personal the behavior to change is, the less willing one is to change. Personal perceptions, experiences, and risks can shape people's broader views regarding CC mitigation efforts. This underscores the importance of activating ethical norms to promote climate-saving action. If, according to the VBN model, altruistic behavior tends to rise when someone recognizes the suffering of others and simultaneously feels responsible for helping to relieve that suffering, then climate communication should focus on this. As posited by the NAT model, when a person's values are at risk and individual action can serve as a solution, personal ethics or a sense of duty can inspire environmentally responsible actions.

This is precisely a religious leader's task. However, religion does not prime indistinctly the faithful, also because these show varying levels of religious intensity and identity, as seen in Italy. Behaviors on which they are reluctant may not be pushed by religious appeals, as we highlight in this study with respect to practicing Catholics versus others' willingness to adopt CPB. The key to receiving audience and thus contributing to achieving behavioral change is to avoid dissonance and seek congruence with the values of message recipients (Li et al., 2016). Research shows that social leaders, including "energetic religious entrepreneurs" (Inglehart, 2018, 75), can leverage their credibility by conveying clear information, helping citizens "to connect the various environmental concerns to the appropriate policy consequences" (Rohrschneider et al., 2014), and tailoring messages to align with the ideological and value-driven interests of their audience (Herbert, 2026; Nisbet & Scheufele, 2009). There is a potential risk that environmental cues influenced by religion may only resonate with individuals who are already inclined, due to anthropological or political motivations, to engage in CC mitigation, rather than instigating authentic behavioral transformation. As seen, Pope Francis's environmental message—likewise other ethical stances (Garelli, 2020)—seems not to have had any major echo within Italy's Catholic population, which is characterized by diverse levels of readiness to adhere to the Church's moral teachings.

Focusing on the diverse ways that religion matters in political life across countries, follow-up analyses could particularly pay attention to how religion impacts CC politics, and which arguments social leaders could use to be able to transcend the growing political polarization of CC.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Martino Mazzoleni is responsible for conceptualization, supervision, and writing (original draft, review, and editing). Claudio Cozzi Fucile is responsible for methodology, formal analysis, writing (original draft and review), and visualization. Andrea Scavo is responsible for methodology, data curation, and writing (review). All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The dataset is available as: Mazzoleni, M., Cozzi Fucile, C., & Scavo, A. (2026), "Religion, politics, and climate-protective behaviors: Insights on individual intentions in Italy. Dataset", Mendeley Data, V2, doi: 10.17632/23gxj8tzzp.2

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APPENDIX

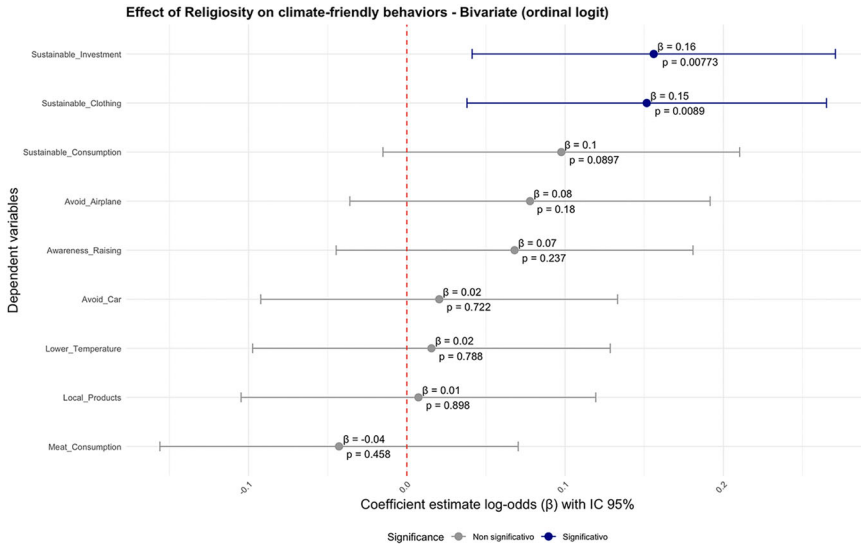

FIGURE A1 Effect of religiosity: bivariate ordinal logit models.

Figures A2–A10 – Effects of predictors in OLS regressions.

Each of the following graphs shows the estimated effects of the independent variables on the dependent variable, sorted by coefficient magnitude.

TABLE A1 Effect of religiosity on climate-friendly behavior: bivariate models.

	Dependent variable								
	Meat consumption	**Local products**	**Sustainable consumption**	**Sustainable clothing**	**Awareness raising**	**Avoid car**	**Avoid airflight**	**Lower temperature**	**Sustainable investment**
	(1)	**(2)**	**(3)**	**(4)**	**(5)**	**(6)**	**(7)**	**(8)**	**(9)**
Religiosity	−.012	.024	.148	**.237****	.151	.055	.158	.054	**.244****
	(.094)	(.082)	(.088)	**(.089)**	(.088)	(.089)	(.092)	(.087)	**(.092)**
Constant	5.313***	6.125***	4.308***	4.048***	5.253***	5.570***	4.980***	5.460***	3.610***
	(.264)	(.232)	(.249)	(.250)	(.249)	(.250)	(.259)	(.246)	(.259)
Observations	740	741	744	741	742	742	740	739	726
R^2	.00002	.0001	.004	.010	.004	.001	.004	.001	.010
Adjusted R^2	−.001	−.001	.002	.008	.003	−.001	.003	−.001	.008
Residual Std. error	2.900	2.546	2.735	2.743	2.732	2.747	2.850	2.694	2.811
	($df = 738$)	($df = 739$)	($df = 742$)	($df = 739$)	($df = 740$)	($df = 740$)	($df = 738$)	($df = 737$)	($df = 724$)
F statistic	.016	.085	2.796	7.153**	2.930	.382	2.950	.386	7.047**
	($df = 1; 738$)	($df = 1; 739$)	($df = 1; 742$)	($df = 1; 739$)	($df = 1; 740$)	($df = 1; 740$)	($df = 1; 738$)	($df = 1; 737$)	($df = 1; 724$)

**$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$.

TABLE A2 Comparison between OLS and ordinal logit estimates for religiosity.

Dependent variable	*N*	OLS *b*	OLS beta (std.)	OLS *p*	OLS R^2	Ordinal *b*	Ordinal *p*	Ordinal pseudo-R^2
Meat consumption	740	−.012	−.005	.898	0	−.043	.458	0
Local products	741	.024	.011	.771	0	.007	.898	0
Sustainable consumption	744	.148	.061	.095	.004	.098	.09	.001
Sustainable clothing	741	.237	.098	.008	.01	.152	.009	.002
Awareness raising	742	.151	.063	.087	.004	.068	.237	0
Avoid car use	742	.055	.023	.537	.001	.02	00722	0
Avoid air travel	740	.158	.063	.086	.004	.078	.18	.001
Lower temperature	739	.054	.023	.534	.001	.016	.788	0
Sustainable investment	726	.244	.098	.008	.01	.156	.008	.002

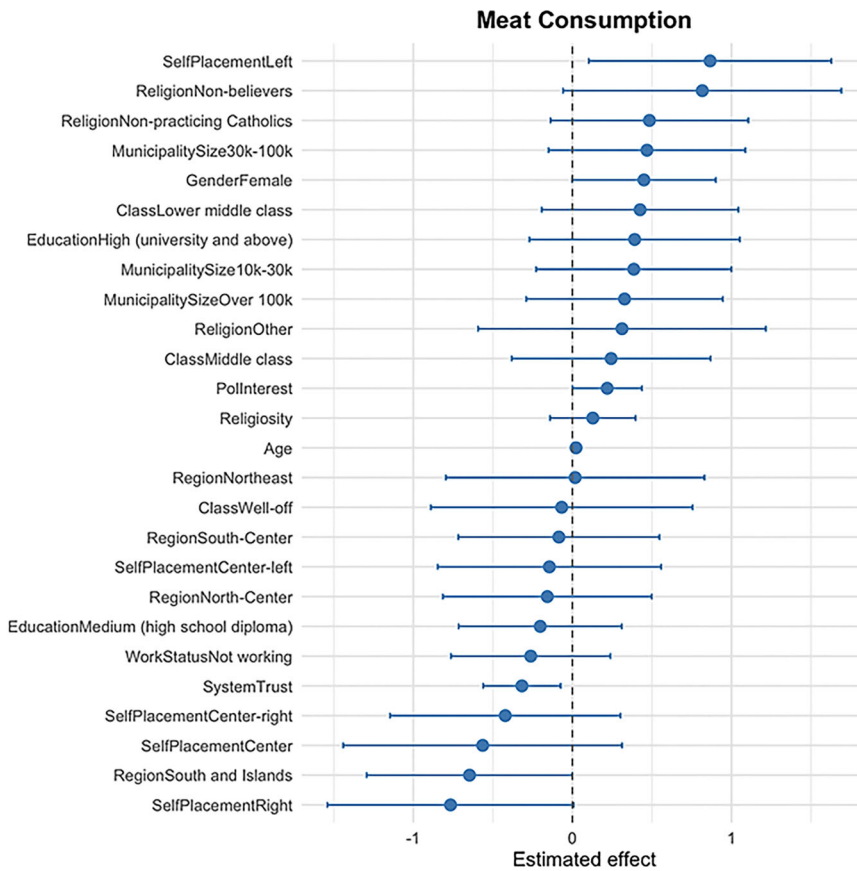

FIGURE A2 Meat consumption.

TABLE A3 Full OLS models for all dependent variables.

		Dependent variables								
		Meat cons.	Local products	Sustain. cons.	Sustain. clothing	Awareness raising	Avoid car	Avoid airflight	Lower temperature	Sustain. investment
Independent variables		(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
Religiosity	Religiosity	.128	.018	.174	**.284***	**.281***	.231	**.290***	.064	.255
		(.137)	(.120)	(.129)	**(.129)**	**(.129)**	(.131)	**(.134)**	(.127)	(.132)
Religion	Non-practicing Catholics	.484	.184	.095	.542	.376	.037	.497	.234	.326
		(.316)	(.277)	(.300)	(.301)	(.300)	(.305)	(.314)	(.297)	(.307)
	Non-believers	.816	.307	.521	**.876***	.788	.791	.725	.412	.362
		(.445)	(.390)	(.422)	**(.422)**	(.420)	(.428)	(.439)	(.417)	(.429)
	Other	.312	.001	.388	**.859***	.011	−.076	.100	.146	.020
		(.460)	(.400)	(.435)	**(.434)**	(.431)	(.437)	(.452)	(.429)	(.444)
System trust	System Trust	**−.317***	−.137	−.184	−.151	−.104	−.057	−.226	**−.249***	−.231
		(.124)	(.108)	(.117)	(.117)	(.117)	(.119)	(.122)	**(.116)**	(.121)
Self placement	Left	**.866***	.108	.306	.473	.461	.359	.742	.212	.272
		(.388)	(.339)	(.368)	(.368)	(.365)	(.373)	(.383)	(.363)	(.379)
	Center-left	−.145	−.346	.036	.305	−.163	.199	.417	−.240	.288
		(.358)	(.313)	(.341)	(.339)	(.338)	(.344)	(.353)	(.336)	(.347)
	Center	−.564	−.472	−.164	−.063	−.436	.002	−.137	−.450	−.358
		(.446)	(.391)	(.426)	(.426)	(.422)	(.430)	(.441)	(.419)	(.433)
	Center-right	−.422	−.474	−.158	.195	−.512	−.190	.081	−.305	−.267
		(.369)	(.323)	(.348)	(.349)	(.348)	(.355)	(.363)	(.346)	(.355)
	Right	−.766	−.325	−.616	−.532	**−1.143****	−.426	.038	−.653	**−.861***
		(.394)	(.346)	(.375)	(.376)	**(.373)**	(.379)	(.392)	(.373)	**(.383)**
Political Interest	Political Interest	**.219***	.182	**.263***	**.215***	.185	.105	−.001	.144	**.328****
		(.111)	(.097)	**(.105)**	**(.105)**	(.105)	(.107)	(.110)	(.104)	**(.108)**

(Continues)

TABLE A3 (Continued)

Independent variables		Dependent variables								
		Meat cons.	Local products	Sustain. cons.	Sustain. clothing	Awareness raising	Avoid car	Avoid airflight	Lower temperature	Sustain. investment
		(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
Class	Lower middle class	.425	.417	.317	.360	.215	.349	.439	.461	.378
		(.315)	(.276)	(.299)	(.298)	(.298)	(.302)	(.311)	(.295)	(.308)
	Middle class	.243	.402	.423	.348	.355	.394	.274	.213	**.642***
		(.318)	(.279)	(.301)	(.301)	(.301)	(.305)	(.315)	(.298)	**(.310)**
	Well-off	−.067	.513	.488	.303	.530	.287	.273	.130	.770
		(.419)	(.367)	(.396)	(.396)	(.397)	(.401)	(.413)	(.393)	(.405)
Education	Medium (high school diploma)	−.202	.412	.128	−.017	.159	.004	−.140	.070	.289
		(.261)	(.228)	(.247)	(.247)	(.247)	(.251)	(.259)	(.245)	(.254)
	High (university and above)	.391	**.606***	.304	.131	.249	−.054	−.268	.406	.376
		(.337)	**(.295)**	(.319)	(.321)	(.319)	(.324)	(.332)	(.316)	(.323)
Work status	Not working	−.262	−.039	−.193	−.467	.003	.268	.399	−.220	**−.500***
		(.255)	(.223)	(.242)	(.242)	(.241)	(.245)	(.252)	(.240)	**(.247)**
Region	Northeast	.017	.347	.176	−.226	.209	.080	.386	−.025	.194
		(.414)	(.362)	(.393)	(.393)	(.394)	(.398)	(.412)	(.393)	(.399)
	North-Center	−.158	−.255	−.082	−.158	−.045	.010	.139	−.196	−.345
		(.334)	(.293)	(.317)	(.317)	(.316)	(.322)	(.330)	(.314)	(.322)
	South-Center	−.085	.191	.100	.329	.383	−.057	.407	.153	.352
		(.322)	(.282)	(.305)	(.306)	(.304)	(.309)	(.317)	(.302)	(.312)
	South and Islands	−.647	−.045	.225	−.015	.121	−.319	−.265	−.245	−.190
		(.329)	(.287)	(.311)	(.311)	(.309)	(.317)	(.323)	(.307)	(.319)

(Continues)

TABLE A3 (Continued)

		Dependent variables								
		Meat cons.	Local products	Sustain. cons.	Sustain. clothing	Awareness raising	Avoid car	Avoid airflight	Lower temperature	Sustain. investment
Independent variables		(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
Municipality size	10k–30k	.386	.001	.027	.072	.148	.319	.512	**.712***	.088
		(.313)	(.274)	(.296)	(.297)	(.296)	(.301)	(.309)	**(.294)**	(.303)
	30k–100k	.469	−.127	.190	.286	.155	.157	−.092	−.004	−.017
		(.315)	(.276)	(.300)	(.299)	(.298)	(.304)	(.313)	(.298)	(.306)
	Over 100k	.328	.016	.211	.454	.265	.428	.290	.387	.214
		(.314)	(.275)	(.298)	(.296)	(.296)	(.302)	(.310)	(.294)	(.304)
Age	Age	**.022****	**.037*****	.011	**.015***	**.024****	**.016***	**.019***	**.021****	.010
		(.008)	**(.007)**	(.007)	**(.007)**	**(.007)**	**(.008)**	**(.008)**	**(.007)**	(.008)
Gender	Female	.449	.086	.314	.389	**.434***	−.155	−.275	.016	−.137
		(.230)	(.201)	(.217)	(.217)	**(.217)**	(.221)	(.227)	(.215)	(.222)
	Constant	**3.048*****	**3.371*****	**2.511****	**1.724***	**2.372****	**3.387*****	**2.949*****	**3.961*****	**2.064***
		(.862)	**(.755)**	**(.815)**	**(.816)**	**(.815)**	**(.829)**	**(.849)**	**(.810)**	**(.836)**
	Observations	681	685	684	683	684	683	684	681	672
	R^2	.087	.087	.051	.066	.079	.048	.068	.060	.095
	Adjusted R^2	.051	.051	.014	.029	.042	.010	.031	.022	.058
	Residual Std.	2.826	2.479	2.684	2.681	2.673	2.721	2.796	2.650	2.714
	error	($df = 654$)	($df = 658$)	($df = 657$)	($df = 656$)	($df = 657$)	($df = 656$)	($df = 657$)	($df = 654$)	($df = 645$)
	F statistic	2.395***	2.422***	1.360	1.794**	2.159***	1.266	1.842**	1.600*	2.601***
		($df = 26; 654$)	($df = 26; 658$)	($df = 26; 657$)	($df = 26; 656$)	($df = 26; 657$)	($df = 26; 656$)	($df = 26; 657$)	($df = 26; 654$)	($df = 26; 645$)

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

TABLE A4 Variance inflation factors (VIF) for predictors included in full models.

Predictor	Mean VIF	Max VIF
Religiosity	1.44	1.44
Age	1.21	1.21
Work status	1.18	1.18
Religion	1.16	1.16
Political interest	1.13	1.13
Education	1.08	1.08
System trust	1.07	1.07
Gender	1.06	1.06
Ideological self-placement	1.05	1.05
Social class	1.04	1.04
Municipality size	1.03	1.03
Region	1.03	1.03

Note: Values represent GVIF^(1/(2·*df*)) for categorical predictors.

TABLE A5 – Relationship between age and political interest.

Variable	Coefficient	Std. error	*p* value	R^2
Age	.006	.002	.012	.008

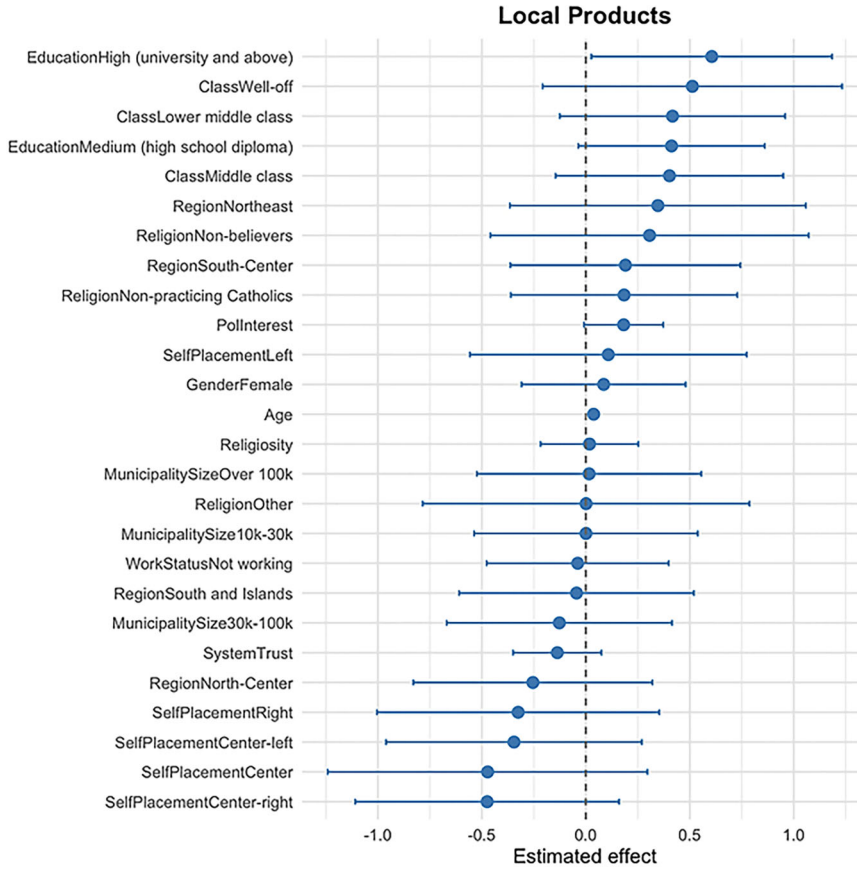

FIGURE A3 Local products.

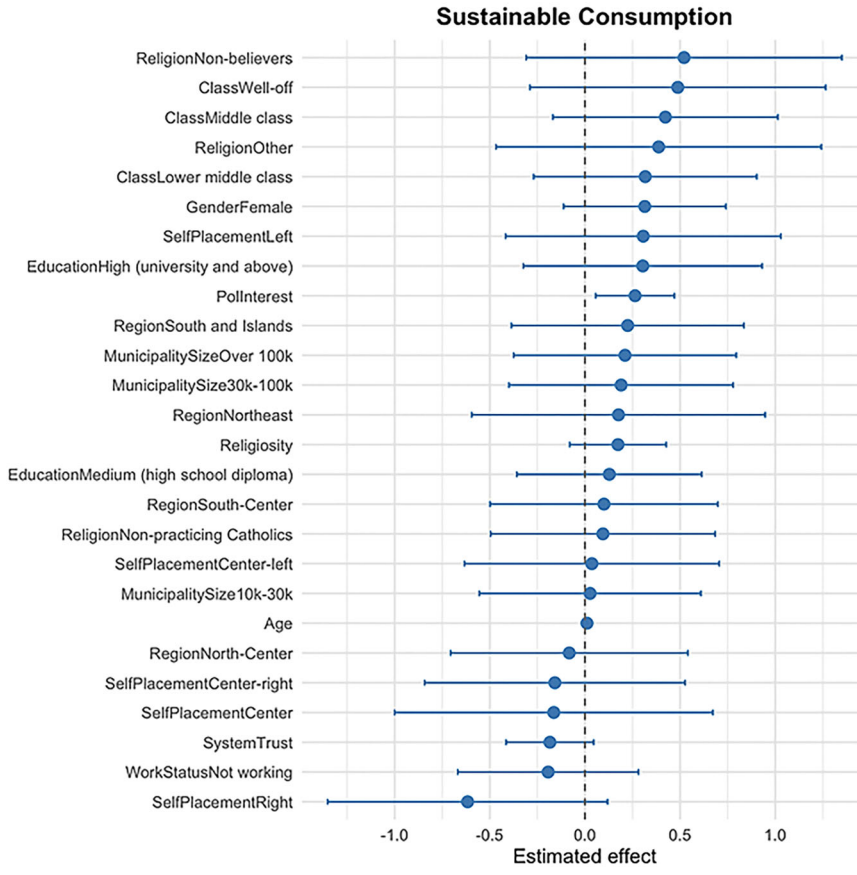

FIGURE A4 Sustainable consumption.

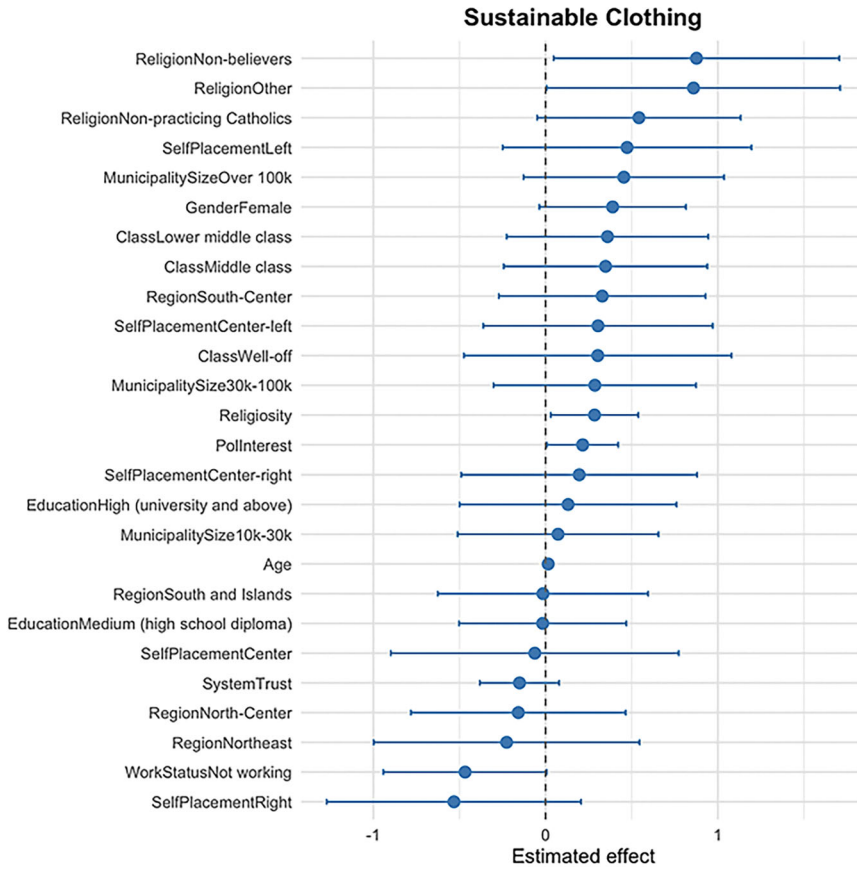

FIGURE A5 Sustainable clothing.

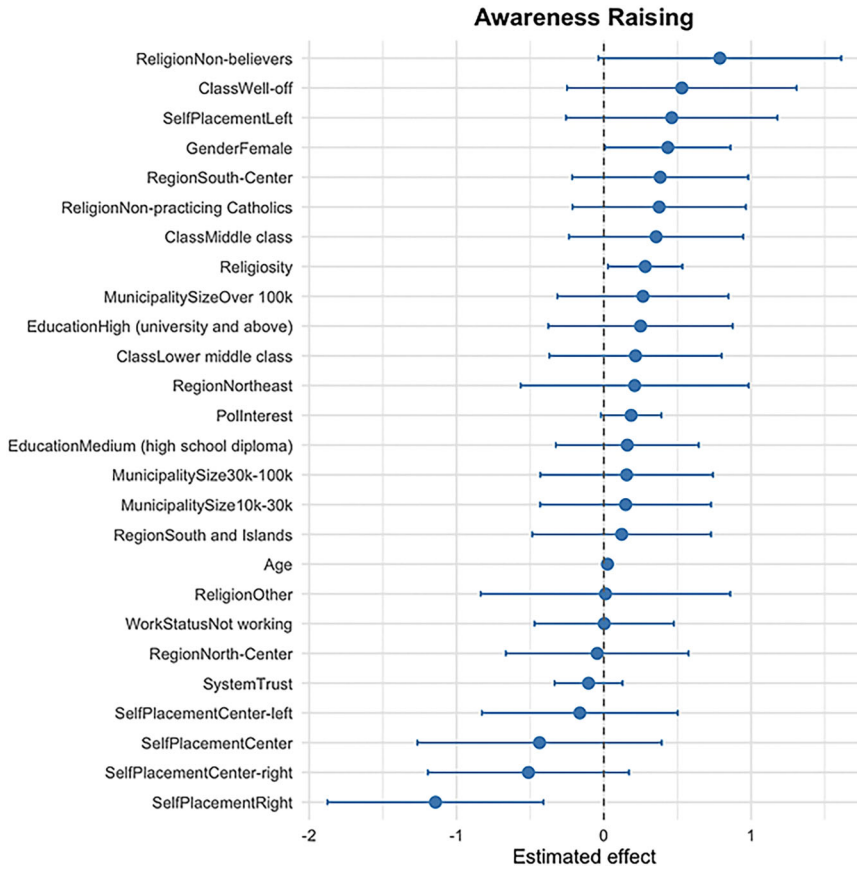

FIGURE A6 Awareness raising.

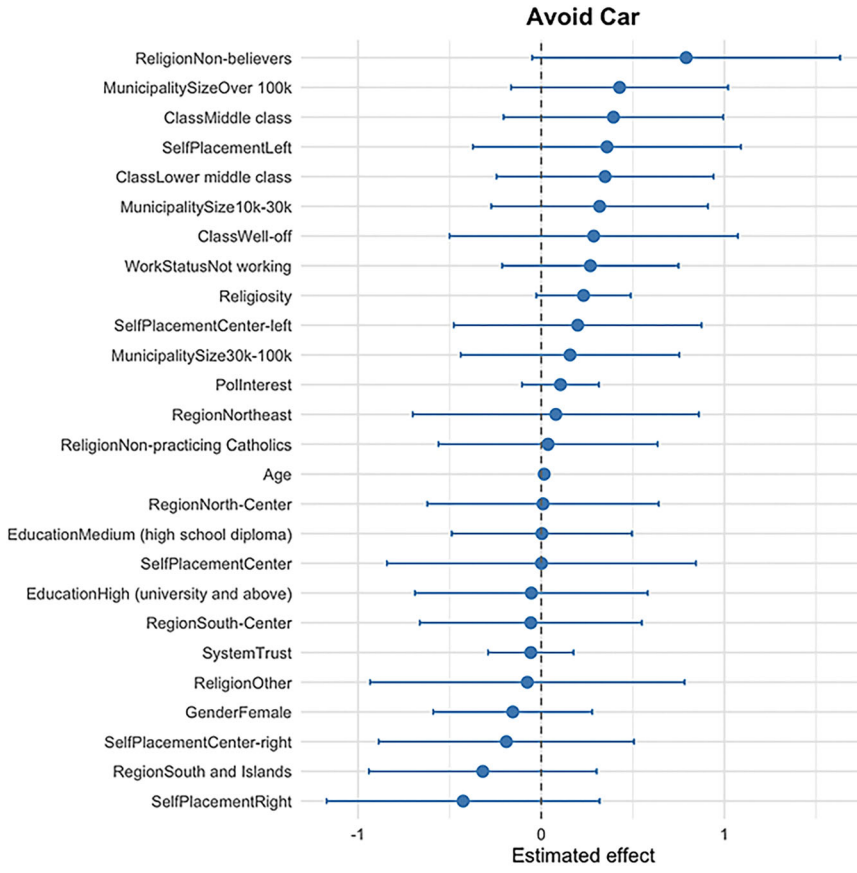

FIGURE A7 Avoid car.

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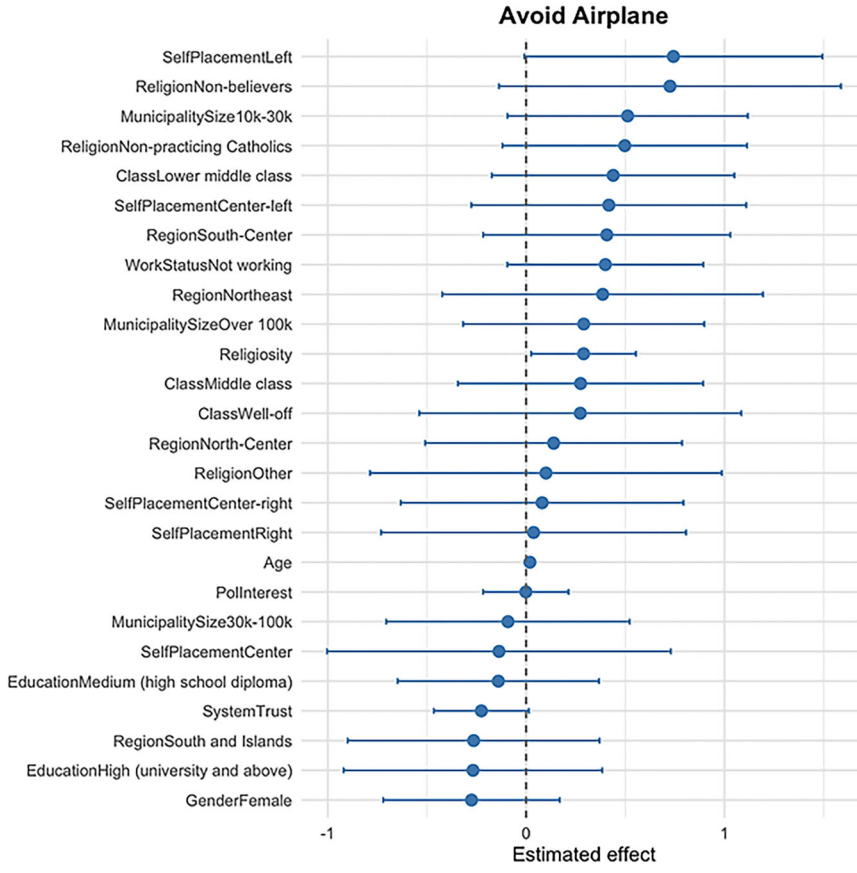

FIGURE A8 Avoid airflight.

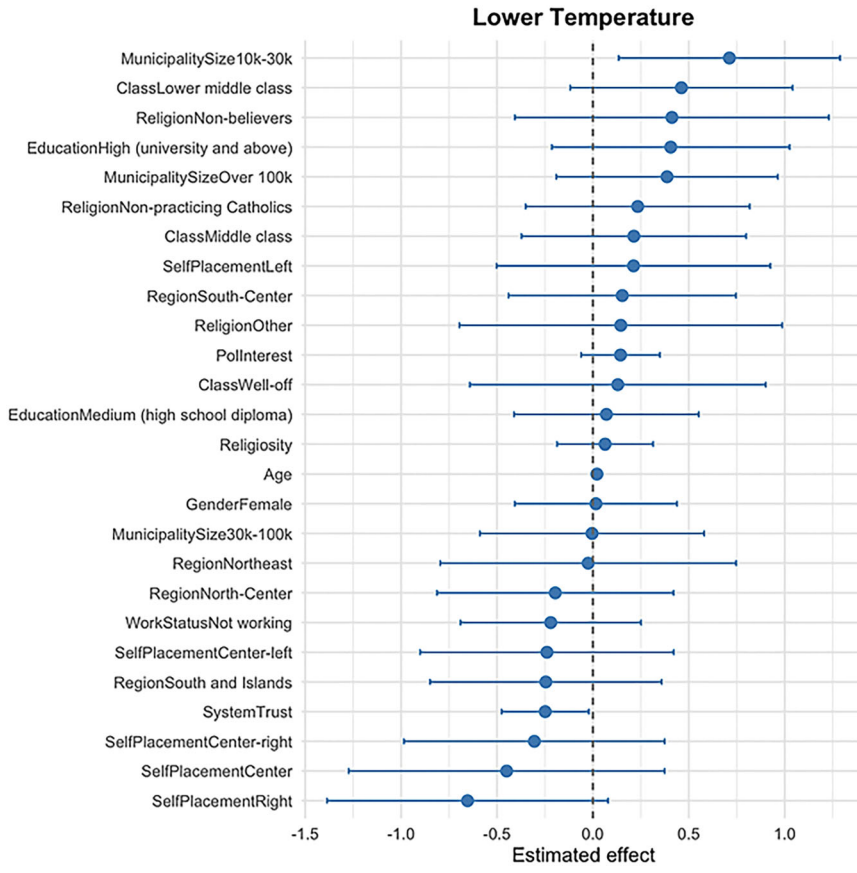

FIGURE A9 Lower temperature.

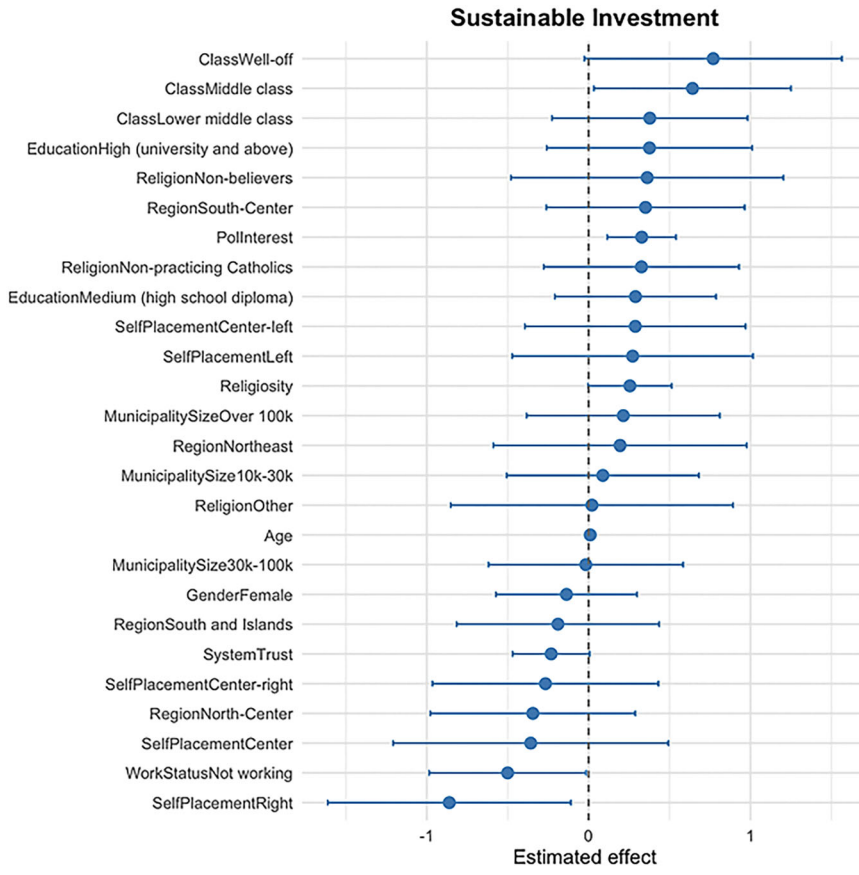

FIGURE A10 Sustainable Investment.

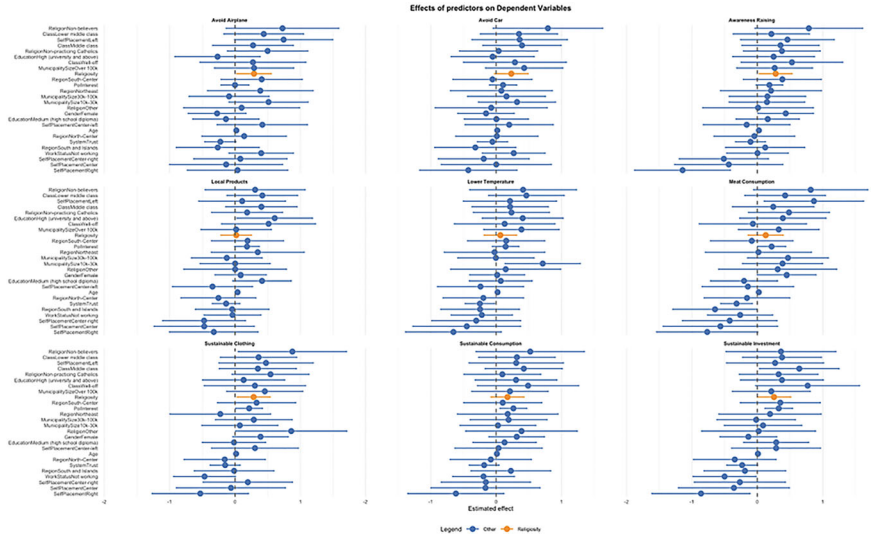

FIGURE A11 Effects of the predictor on dependent variables.