

From Politics to the Pews How Politics and Partisanship Affect Religiosity in America*

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Abstract

Scholars have consistently shown that social identities can influence political attitudes and behaviors; this paper explores the reverse relationship. Are partisan identities ever strong enough to influence involvement with a politically relevant social group? Looking at an identity that has become an increasingly strong predictor of partisanship and vote choice, religion, the paper develops and tests a theory that politics can influence a partisan's religiosity at a certain time in his or her life. An experiment and two panel studies show that when people are in the process of raising children—a time that encourages many to make decisions associated with their religious identities—their partisanship can influence these religious choices. The findings highlight partisanship's ability to influence key aspects of partisans' social identities and, ultimately, the religious makeup of the United States.

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Identifying with certain social groups and interacting with other group members—whether racial, ethnic, or religious—has been shown to influence group members’ attitudes and create politically relevant social cleavages (Conover 1988; Miller et al. 1981); however, scant attention has been paid to understanding how these group attachments form, why the strength of group identities varies, or what explains differences in group involvement (Huddy 2011). American politics scholars often ignore these questions because they assume that decisions associated with social group attachments take root outside of politics. But, what if politics plays a role in shaping parts of an individual’s social identity?

This paper focuses on religion to address this possibility. Religion is not only an identity frequently touted as a primary determinant of political attitudes in the United States (Green 2010; Kellstedt et al. 2007; Layman 2001; 1997; Leege et al. 2002; Olson and Green 2006; Putnam and Campbell 2010; Smidt et al. 2010), but the relationship between religion and politics has also changed dramatically over the past four decades. Beginning in the 1970s, partisan elites began diverging along religious and moral lines, with voters soon following suit (Hartman 2015; Layman 2001; Putnam and Campbell 2010). This transition weakened denominational differences across the parties and created new partisan coalitions based on religiosity, or level of religious involvement (Guth et al. 2006; Kohut et al. 2000; Layman 2001). Today, Republicans, on average, attend church with greater regularity than Democrats, whereas Democrats are more likely to eschew a religious identification altogether relative to Republicans (Layman 2001; 1997; Leege et al. 2002).¹ Researchers have undoubtedly uncovered an important relationship, but is it evidence of religion’s influence on politics, as many have assumed? The next sections describe a theory and present evidence that the strong association between religiosity and partisanship comes about, in part, because partisans adopt their party’s religious stances as their own.

This paper makes four contributions. First, the theory encourages scholars to carefully consider how social identities develop and whether the resultant identities are, in fact, exoge-

¹Table A1, in the Online Appendix, shows that a religiosity gap exists within the major religious traditions.

nous to politics. Second, the findings offer an alternative explanation for how the “God gap”, or “religiosity gap”, emerged. Third, the paper contributes to existing research exploring how politics can affect religion by grounding previous empirical findings in a novel theoretical framework, generating intuitive expectations regarding when this reverse relationship is likely to occur, and expanding the avenues through which politics might affect partisans’ religious choices. And fourth, the paper presents further evidence of partisanship’s power to influence, and possibly divide, Americans outside the political sphere.

A life-cycle theory of religion and politics

Claiming that politics and partisanship can affect religiosity requires that partisan identities be strong or salient enough to impact religious decisions. It is unlikely that this assumption holds true for all people at all times, leaving us to consider when partisan identities may influence religious choices. The sections below, which consider the religious and political socialization literatures together, develop a theory aimed at understanding just that.

The religious life cycle

A first step in understanding how partisanship can influence religious decisions relies on the religious socialization literature, which shows how people’s relationships with religion—marked by membership and involvement in formal institutions—change as they develop and age. In particular, the “religious life cycle” theory, discussed by sociologists, developmental psychologists, and scholars of religion, argues that teenagers and young adults distance themselves from both the religion in which they were raised and religious practice in general (Arnett and Jensen 2002; Desmond, Morga, and Kikuchi 2010; Hunsberger and Brown 1984; Willits and Crider 1989; Wilson and Sherkat 1994). Across multiple generations, young adults are the least likely to identify with a religious tradition, attend religious services, pray, and report religion being an important part of their lives (Smith 2009), and decreases in religiosity occur across region of residence (Smith et al. 2002), religious denomination (Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens 1993; Uecker, Regnerus, and Vaaler 2007), relationship with parents (Smith 2009), and parents’ religiosities (Myers 1996; Petts 2009; Sharot, Ayalon,

and Ben-Rafael 1986).²

Individuals must then decide whether to remain on the outskirts of religion or re-enter the religious realm upon reaching adulthood. Sociologists note that getting married (Hadaway and Roof 1988; Roof 1993; Sandomirsky and Wilson 1990) and having children (Arnett and Jensen 2002; Ingersoll-Dayton, Krause, and Morgan 2002; Wilson and Sherkat 1994; Wuthnow 2007) are strongly associated with increased church attendance, and that religious participation peaks when married couples have school-aged children (Argue, Johnson, and White 1999; Schleifer and Chaves 2017; Stolzenberg, Blair-Loy, and Waite 1995). While marriage and children are important impetuses for returning to the religious fold, becoming more religious is not a foregone conclusion. For some, the hiatus from religion in young adulthood becomes permanent (Roof 1993). This life-cycle transition therefore does not represent a time when people *will* return to religion, but instead marks a time during which individuals are likely making decisions regarding their religious involvement. Moreover, decisions made during this time tend to be sticky. Although certain life events can move people away from or toward religion, religious identification and participation remain largely stable in adulthood (Dillon and Wink 2007). The upper panel of Figure 1 presents a visual illustration of the religious life-cycle model.

The political life cycle

A second step in understanding how partisanship affects religiosity relies on the political socialization literature, which explores how partisan identities develop. The “impressionable years” hypothesis claims—as the name suggests—that adolescents and young adults are highly “impressionable.” During this time, outside influences and events shape long-term political outlooks, including partisan identification (Abramson 1979; Sears 1990; 1975). Both parents’ political leanings (Beck and Jennings 1991; 1975; Chaffee, McCleod, and Wackman 1973; Jennings and Niemi 1981; 1974; Niemi and Jennings 1991; Tedin 1974) as well as current events and the political climate of the day (Alwin, Cohen and Newcomb 1991; Beck 1974)

²Table A2 in the Online Appendix shows that rates of religiosity decline across diverse groups of people.

can affect adolescents' and young adults' political views. The events affecting those coming of age can be large in scale, such as wars or scandals (Dinas 2013), or regularly occurring campaigns and elections that boil down complex issues into simple, digestible ideas (Sears and Valentino 1997).

The resultant partisanship from this socialization process is more than just a stable affiliation with a political party; it is a powerful identity that often lasts a lifetime (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002) and influences other attitudes and behaviors. Partisanship shapes economic evaluations (Bartels 2002), trust in the government (Keele 2005), feelings about the fairness of elections (Sances and Stewart 2015), and even consumption patterns and spending decisions (Gerber and Huber 2009). The lower panel of Figure 1 presents the political socialization timeline.

The two panels in Figure 1 reveal that partisan identities have solidified and are stable by the time many people get married and have children. Partisans may then rely on elite cues when making religious decisions for themselves and their families. Once decisions surrounding religious involvement have been made, however, participation rates are quite stable. Consequently, for those squarely in adulthood—that is, those who have already made their re-entrance (or not) into religion—partisanship's effect on religiosity should be muted. The two socialization literatures together offer generalized predictions as to when partisanship's influence on religiosity is most likely to be seen.

Religion and politics in American politics

Having identified when partisanship is most likely to influence religious behavior, the current political landscape generates specific expectations about how average partisans might behave. The Republican Party has aligned with organized religious groups and become associated with religious values, while the Democratic Party has been linked to morally liberal positions and less religious organizations over the past four decades (Bolce and De Maio 2014; 2002; 1999; Hartman 2015; Kaylor 2011; Layman 2001; Miller 2014; Smidt et al. 2010; Wilcox 1992). In explaining the individual-level responses to these elite-level changes, schol-

ars frequently assume that as religiosity became relevant to politics, religious voters became Republicans and less religious and secular voters became Democrats. But the changing relationship between religion and politics at the elite level may have also encouraged party-driven changes in religious involvement. If so, Republicans would become more religious and Democrats would become less so over time.³ The empirical expectations comport with previous research arguing that the current religious-political landscape influences Americans' religious identifications (Hout and Fsicher 2014; 2002; Putnam and Campbell 2010) and evangelicals' church attendance (Patrikios 2008). The life-cycle theory therefore contributes to this existing strand of research by helping explain how, why, and under what conditions partisanship can shape individuals' religious choices.

The next sections present three empirical tests of the life-cycle theory. The analyses include individuals born in the United States as the same theoretical expectations may not apply to those who underwent different socialization processes. Additionally, the analyses that follow do not lend themselves to making assertions about smaller religious traditions (e.g., Jews, Hindus, Muslims) and are best suited to explain trends among members of large religious families (mainline Protestants, evangelical Protestants, and Catholics); however, the results are not dependent on smaller religious groups' inclusion or exclusion in the models. Moreover, the results generally apply to members of the largest religious categories in the United States. Finally, the empirical results include Americans of all races and ethnicities although there are valid reasons to assume the theory is most applicable to white Americans. Analyses that include non-white Americans more accurately reflect the magnitude of religious change in the general population; however, the results are statistically and substantively similar when looking at the white subsample.

³Perceiving religious differences between the parties and constituencies is an important scope condition of both a religiosity-driven explanation of political change and a partisan-driven explanation of religious change. Figure A1 and a discussion in the Online Appendix (Section A) show that Americans perceive religious differences between the parties. Moreover, selecting into specific religious communities or "church shopping"—an increasingly common occurrence and another potential form of partisan-driven religious change—allows individuals to sort into religious environments that match their political outlooks. Results looking at religiosity may therefore represent conservative estimates of partisanship's influence on religious decisions, as they do not account for the possibility of politically minded church shopping.

Partisan priming experiment

A priming experiment offers a first test of partisanship's potential influence. Priming an identity allows researchers to circumvent the problem that identities are not exogenous by instead measuring attitudes (Jackson 2011; Klar 2013) and behaviors (Dijksterhuis and van Knippenberg 1998; Shariff and Norenzayan 2007) after randomly assigning whether a particular identity is made salient. If partisans link conservative religious values with the Republican Party and equate more secular and morally permissive positions with the Democratic Party, then priming partisan identities may encourage partisans to re-evaluate their reported religious attachments.

The two-wave experiment took place in August 2013 using a diverse national sample.⁴ After asking partisanship in the first wave, the experimental portion took place two weeks later. Respondents fell into one of two randomly assigned groups at the beginning of the second wave. To prime partisan identities, treated respondents rated the aesthetics of three flyers advertising a voter registration and political engagement drive put on by the fictitious Ohio Voters' Council. Self-identified Democrats and Democratic leaners in wave 1 rated flyers for a Democratic event, while Republicans rated flyers for a Republican version of the event. Respondents rated the flyers in three head-to-head match ups, choosing which flyer was easier to read, which flyer made the event seem more attractive, and which flyer the respondent preferred overall. The experimental stimulus is a weak treatment; the flyers make no reference to specific policies, politicians, or groups. Instead, the experiment relies on respondents linking politics and religion in their own minds. After answering final questions about voter registration drives, respondents moved on to the next part of the study that asked a series of attitudinal and behavioral questions. The main dependent variable—religious

⁴The sample was obtained through Survey Sampling International (SSI). SSI recruits potential participants online and invites them into the panel. SSI then randomly selects panel participants to take part in a particular survey. There are no quotas, but SSI recruits a target population that matches the (18 and over) census population on education, gender, age, geography, and income.

identity—was asked among other demographic questions later in the survey.

The dependent variable is a four-point measure of religious identification based on two questions. Respondents first answered a standard religious identification question and then one follow-up question based on their initial response. Those who identified with a religion were asked to report whether or not they identify strongly or not strongly with the stated religion. The roughly one-quarter of respondents who did not identify with any religion were asked: “Do you think of yourself as closer to one particular religion over another?” and were given the same response options as the initial identification question along with an option of not feeling any closer to one particular religion. The resultant four-point scale of religious identification ranges from 0 (strong non-identifier) to 1 (strong identifier).⁵

The analyses focus on two subsamples. First, individuals with school-aged children have, based on predictions from the life-cycle theory, religious attachments that are more likely to change. It is during this window, therefore, that politics’ influence is most likely to be evident. Second, individuals with grown children are more likely to have already made religious decisions, which should make these parents more immune to political influence.

Figure 2 presents the experimental results for those with children at home (left) and those with grown children (right). The treatment conditions appear along the x-axis, and the y-axis represents the average strength of religious identification. Among respondents with children at home, the treatment increased the size of the identification gap between Republicans (denoted by gray squares) and Democrats (denoted by black circles). The average score for the four-point religious identification measure increased from 0.78 to 0.87 for Republicans but decreased from 0.73 to 0.67 among Democrats. The treatment increased the religiosity gap by 0.15 points, more than doubling the original identification gap (p-value = 0.02).⁶ In contrast, religious identification rates remained relatively stable among those with grown children. The identification gap actually shrunk slightly, but this result is

⁵Section B in the Online Appendix includes an extended discussion of the stimulus and dependent variable.

⁶The corresponding p-value comes from a difference-in-difference model using an ordered logistic regression. Table B4 in the Online Appendix presents the full parametric results.

statistically insignificant ($p\text{-value} = 0.42$). A further test, presented in the Table B4 in the Online Appendix, shows that the experimental treatment effect differs between those with children at home and those with grown children ($p\text{-value} = 0.02$). Respondents at a specific life stage updated their reported religious identities to be “consistent” with their previously expressed partisan identities. The experimental design, however, cannot rule out that the two cohorts are simply different nor can it tell us how partisanship might affect religious engagement in the real world. The next sections present two sets of observational results that corroborate and build on the experimental findings.

Testing partisanship’s influence using two panel studies

Scholars have identified several instances in which voters received clear signals distinguishing the parties on the basis of religiosity or morality politics. In other words, voters were afforded the opportunity to update their religiosity, partisanship, or both. For two cases, one in the 1970s and one in the 2000s, there are data measuring both religious and political variables at multiple points in time. Although the sample compositions differ, the data are collected decades apart, and the political circumstances are distinct, the underlying empirical strategy is the same. Both cases test whether partisanship—measured years before—corresponds with changing levels of attendance at religious services, generally referred to as church attendance.

1970s: The beginning of elite divergence

Religion’s role in politics as well as its association with the political parties changed in the 1970s. First, new issues, sometimes described as morality politics, created a substantively different political dimension on which the parties could differentiate themselves. Debates and discussions about legal protections for gays and lesbians, women’s equality, abortion access, and marijuana legalization (MacCoun et al. 1993; McBride and Parry 2016; Wald, Button, and Rienzo 1996) changed the types of relevant considerations available to Americans making both religious and political decisions. Second, large-scale religious organizations provided a

national platform to religious conservatives for the first time (Jelen 1993; Lassiter 2008), and their overt support for Republican candidates helped forge public linkages between religious values and the Republican Party. And third, political elites and parties began to separate themselves along religious and cultural lines during this time. Examples include, but are not limited to: Republican politicians emphasizing issues that religious voters cared about, such as abortion, prayer in public school, subsidizing private religious education, and gay rights (Hartman 2015; Layman 2001; Oldfield 1996); politicians discussing religious faith and applying religious teachings to policy positions (Domke and Coe 2008; Kaylor 2011; Smidt et al. 2010); and the party platforms slowly taking firmer, and opposing, positions on social issues, such as abortion. Together these changes constitute a reshaping of how religion and religiously tinged policy issues were addressed in the political sphere and set the stage for average Americans to respond by updating their political attachments, religious attachments, or both.

Youth-Parent Socialization Panel Study

The Youth-Parent Socialization Panel Study (YPSP) can track partisans' levels of church attendance as they transition from one life-cycle window to another.⁷ The YPSP, initially collected by M. Kent Jennings and Richard Niemi, first interviewed a national sample of high school seniors as well as their parents in 1965. Subsequent follow-up surveys were conducted using the same individuals in 1973, 1982, and 1997.

The data have three features that lend themselves to testing the life-cycle theory. First, the data capture a cohort at key ages—18, 26, 35, and 50. At 18, high school seniors live

⁷Using church attendance as the dependent variable has two main advantages. First, church attendance “stands out as a behavior practiced and viewed as normative across many traditions” (Mockabee, Monson, and Grant 2001: 677) unlike reading scripture or holding specific beliefs, which are more associated with certain religious denominations than others. Church attendance, therefore, measures religiosity in a manner that is applicable to many religious faiths. And second, the religiosity gap discussed by journalists usually refers to political differences based on church attendance. Consequently, tracking changes in church attendance can help explain how this commonly cited relationship came to pass.

at home with limited religious autonomy. By 1973, however, these same individuals have moved out of their parents' houses and started down the road of adulthood. These first two waves can test whether religiosity decreased during this time, as the religious socialization literature predicts. The third wave of data, collected in 1982, can test whether partisanship is correlated with religious decision-making as cohort members reach adulthood, defined by sociologists as getting married and having school-aged children. For the overwhelming majority of the YPSP student generation, this transition occurred by the third interview. Further, the fourth wave of data can test whether partisan-driven changes that occurred between 1973 and 1982 were still present 15 years later when respondents were 50 years old.

A second useful feature of the YPSP data is the survey's timing with respect to political changes taking place. Because the political landscape underwent important shifts between 1973 and 1982 in which the parties became divided along religious and moral lines, the high school class of 1965 represents one of the first cohorts to make religious decisions against this new political backdrop. A third feature of the YPSP data is the rich set of socio-demographic variables available, including information provided by the students' parents, which help rule out common explanations associated with religious change including: education and social mobility (Newport 1979; Smith 2009), religious upbringing (Carroll and Roof 1993; Myers 1996; Sharot, Ayalon, and Ben-Rafael 1986), and family dynamics (Myers 1996; Wilson and Sherkat 1994). Although the data have limits and cannot rule out every alternative explanation, they are well suited to test the life-cycle theory.

1965-1973: Young adults fall away from religion

Between 1965 and 1973, church attendance declined among both Democrats and Republicans in the student cohort. While roughly 67% (64%) of Republicans (Democrats) reported attending church nearly every week in 1965, that percentage plummeted to 30% (29%) in 1973.⁸ Statistical models can corroborate the raw trends. Rather than assessing

⁸In 1965 the most frequent attendance category was "almost every week." The 1973 survey included an additional category for weekly attendance. Collapsing the top two categories in 1973 allows for comparisons

how partisans' religiosities differ at a particular point in time, panel data can assess whether partisanship—asked years earlier—corresponds with changing religious responses over time (left panel of Figure 3). The top estimate is the product of a change model that uses the 1965 and 1973 waves of data and includes lagged partisanship, lagged church attendance, and religious and socio-economic control variables.⁹ The model includes binary indicators for Republicans and Independents, measured in 1965. This strategy allows for a direct comparison between Republicans and Democrats and does not assume that the relationship between partisanship and changing religiosity is linear.

The top estimate therefore represents the average difference in changing levels of church attendance, which ranges between 0 (never attend) and 1 (attend almost weekly), for Republicans compared to Democrats. A positive estimate indicates that the church attendance gap between Republicans and Democrats grew between 1965 and 1973, with Republicans becoming more frequent church attenders relative to Democrats. Given that the raw data show that church attendance decreased among both groups, a positive coefficient does not mean that Republicans became more religious over time. Rather, it indicates that Republicans' church attendance rates declined to a lesser extent than Democrats. Negative coefficients indicate the opposite: Democrats became more frequent church attenders between the two waves relative to Republicans. The null result on the Republican coefficient means that while church attendance might have declined dramatically between 1965 and 1973, Democrats and Republicans left the pews at roughly equal rates (0.02; p-value = 0.65). Additionally, the parent data rule out of the possibility that religiosity declined across all age groups. Whereas

across the two waves using a consistent scale.

⁹First, the models control for student's religious affiliation and beliefs, region of residence, gender, race, type of high school curriculum (college preparatory track or not), and stated closeness with parents in 1965. Second, measures from the 1973 survey wave control for whether the student had attended college, got married, had children, or served in the Vietnam War between 1965 and 1973 as well as his or her income in 1973. And third, the models include parent responses regarding average church attendance, mother and father's party identification, education of the household head, and family income in 1965. Standard errors are clustered at the school level.

51% of the parent generation attended church regularly in 1965, 49% reportedly did so in 1973. Consistent with the sociological literature on religion, the parents' religious involvement remained relatively stable over time, particularly when compared to their children.

1973-1982: For some, a return to the religious fold

How did Democrats' and Republicans' church attendance change between 1973 and 1982? Consistent with the life-cycle theory, church attendance increased among this cohort between the second and third survey waves; however, the percentage of Republicans who were regular church attenders increased by 10%, whereas the corresponding increase among Democrats was only 3%. While there was no church attendance gap between Democrats and Republicans in 1973, a 7% gap emerged by 1982. The second estimate of Figure 3 shows that the partisan gap in the raw data remains in a model that estimates changing levels of religious involvement between 1973 and 1982 for Republicans versus Democrats. The model controls for demographic characteristics as well as the same parent-level controls from the previous analyses.¹⁰ The model also includes measures of students' attitudes on important policy issues of the day—the Vietnam War, school busing, marijuana legalization, government aid to minorities, equal rights for women, and economic liberalism—to help stave off concerns that the real culprit behind religious change was the social upheaval and changes to broader societal attitudes that took place during the 1960s and 1970s.¹¹ A model that includes

¹⁰Demographic controls include: region of residence, education, income, marital and parental status, gender, race, service in Vietnam, and stated closeness with parents from 1973 as well as religious affiliation, church attendance, religious beliefs, high school curriculum, and stated closeness with parents from 1965. The controls account for baseline differences across the students that may correlate with partisanship and changes in religiosity. For example, controlling for religious affiliation takes into account that certain religious traditions may emphasize specific behaviors or beliefs more so than others (Mockabee, Monson, and Grant 2001). If, for example, people raised as evangelical Protestants came back to church at a higher rate than members of other religious traditions and were also disproportionately Republican, we might misattribute evangelicals' religious choices as evidence of politics' effect.

¹¹Including policy attitudes is necessary if individuals choose a party identification to match their policy positions but is inappropriate if partisans adopt policy positions to match their partisan identities. The

control variables corroborates the raw results; Republicans “returned” to the pews to a greater extent than Democrats (0.08; p-value = 0.02). Parametric results both with and without various controls are in Online Appendix Table C4.¹²

Changes in church attendance can be interpreted in two ways. First, changes in church attendance can represent real changes in partisans’ behaviors. This interpretation, however, poses a problem if people cannot accurately recall their behaviors when asked (Tourangeau, Rips, and Rasinski, 2000) or respond with their “ideal self” rather than their “actual self” in mind (Brenner 2011). To accommodate this issue, a second interpretation is to think of reported church attendance as a subjective measure. In this case, reported church attendance indicates ideal levels of religious involvement or feelings of closeness to the religious community (Brenner 2011; Chaves 2011). This interpretation more broadly reflects partisans’ self-conception while also still being correlated with actual religious behavior. Although substantively distinct, both interpretations of church attendance capture how partisans feel toward and engage with the religious realm.

Further tests of the life-cycle theory and alternative explanations

What are the long-term consequences to the main findings presented above? Perhaps the partisan-produced religious gap is merely a temporary difference between Democrats and Republicans that closes over time. The gap that appears at this critical juncture, it turns out, remains for many years to come. By 1997, Democrats had not “caught up” with Republicans with respect to church attendance (third estimate of Figure 3).

Although the results comport with the life-cycle theory, partisans of all generations might have undergone similar changes. If so, a more appropriate interpretation would be that religious attachments are always open to political influence. The bottom estimate of Figure 3 presents replicated results using only data from the parent generation to assess whether this is the case.¹³ In contrast to the over-time trends among the student cohort, there is no such

results are unchanged in models that include and exclude these control variables.

¹²Replicating the analyses excluding religious non-identifiers produces the same pattern of results.

¹³The models include controls for region of residence, gender, education, household income, marital status,

divergence among the parent generation. The results corroborate the raw data showing that religiosity remained stable among both Democrats and Republicans in the parent generation.

While newly formed adults made religious choices consistent with their pre-existing partisan identities between 1973 and 1982, it might also be the case that church attendance affected political attitudes during this time. The right panel of Figure 3 offers two tests of this possibility. The top part of the figure shows how individuals' 1973 church attendance correlates with changes in seven-point party identification between 1973 and 1982, ranging between 0 (strong Democrat) and 1 (strong Republican). Just as with the previous analyses, the model includes lagged partisanship as well as a host of control variables. Church attendance in 1973, the main independent variable of interest, appears in the model as a series of binary variables with "never attend" serving as the reference category. Church attendance is uncorrelated with changes in partisanship between 1973 and 1982. The bottom portion of the figure presents results from a model testing whether church attendance is associated with changes in the likelihood of voting for the Republican presidential candidate between the 1972 and 1980 elections (measured in 1973 and 1982, respectively). Here again, there is no evidence of religious-driven political change.

Although the results support the life-cycle theory, it is important to consider alternative explanations. Section C of the Online Appendix presents and discusses a series of plausible explanations that, if true, would undermine the life-cycle theory and main empirical results, including whether: partisans diverged in societal participation generally; the results appear because of Southern respondents; a shared genetic pathway explains both partisan identities and religious behaviors; different religious communities—and their corresponding participatory expectations—produce the results; selection bias is a concern, as some people are predisposed to both want children and return to religion; and individuals changing both their partisan identities and levels of church attendance. There are, however, two alternative religious identification, and policy attitudes. The main difference between the models using the parent and student data is that there are no measures of the parents' upbringings.

explanations that the YPSP data cannot address. First, this cohort may be unique and the results found above may not apply to other generations. Second, the results also comport with aging effects and are not specific to life-cycle transitions. To address these, the next section replicates the main findings using a different sample in a different generation experiencing a different shift in the political landscape.

2004: Moral issues claim the spotlight

Although scholars largely agree that the frenzy regarding the importance of moral values in the 2004 election was misplaced (see Hillygus and Shields 2005), the salience of moral issues—such as abortion and gay marriage—in the lead up to the election offers a second opportunity to assess what happens when visible elite cues link religion and politics.

Abortion, while always a hot topic in politics, increased its public salience with the passage of the Partial-Birth Abortion Ban Act in October 2003. The bill, which outlaws a particular method of abortion, engendered extensive floor debate in which a plurality of the discussion centered on rights and morality (Schonhardt-Bailey 2008), and the vote was largely divided along partisan lines. Abortion in 2004 was therefore not only a salient political issue, but it also had religious overtones and clearly divided the parties.

Gay marriage also claimed the national spotlight in the year before the 2004 election. In response to the Massachusetts Supreme Court declaring that gay marriage would be legal and San Francisco mayor Gavin Newsom ordering city officials to issue marriage licenses to couples of the same sex, President Bush reignited a discussion about a constitutional amendment defining marriage as between one man and one woman. Although the Federal Marriage Amendment stalled in the summer, public debate continued as eleven states had anti-gay marriage initiatives on the ballot in November. The increased salience of gay marriage in 2003-2004 even prompted scholars to ask whether the religiously laden issue influenced voters' political support in the presidential election (Abramowitz 2004; Campbell and Monson 2008).

These policy events not only reminded voters that the parties differ along a cultural

dimension but they also coincided with a dramatic shift in how journalists cover the relationship between religion and politics. Bolce and De Maio (2014) find that the number of articles that discussed Democrats and Republicans being divided along secular(ist) and religious lines increased dramatically in 2004 after previously being quite stable. Taken together, a shift took place in 2003 and 2004, both in the policy arena and in reporting practices. In contrast to the changes that took place in the 1970s and 1980s, the issues debated were not new nor did the parties change their policy positions. Instead, 2003-2004 marks a time when voters were routinely reminded that the parties differed along religious and cultural lines. This, in turn, may have made it easier for partisans to bring their religious and political attachments into alignment.

The next analyses use the American National Election Study (ANES) panel data collected in 2000, 2002, and 2004 to test how partisans' church attendance changed between 2002 and 2004 in response to the political environment. Further, the 2000 and 2002 waves serve as a placebo test of what happens when there is not a large-scale increase in discussion about the religious-political landscape. If the changing landscape allowed partisans to more readily draw on the political environment when making religious choices then the religious gap should widen between 2002 and 2004 to a greater extent than between 2000 and 2002.

The empirical approach is similar to the previous results. Church attendance, which ranges between 0 (never attend) and 1 (attend weekly), acts as the main dependent variable while lagged partisanship and church attendance serve as the main independent variables. The models include socio-demographic and attitudinal control variables that may influence both partisanship and change in religiosity across survey waves: race, age, age-squared, marital status, parental status, education, household income, employment status, region of residence, political ideology, religious identification, views of the economy, feelings toward gays and lesbians, feelings toward feminists, and attitudes on abortion and economic policy.¹⁴

¹⁴Variables measured in 2000 serve as controls in the analyses measuring change between 2000 and 2002, whereas variables measured in 2002 serve as controls in the analyses measuring change between 2002 and 2004 with two exceptions. The 2002-2004 analyses use respondents' religious identifications and abortion

And similar to the experiment, categories distinguish respondents based on their placement within the life cycle. Those who are married with children living at home during the four years of the panel are, based on the life-cycle theory, most likely to be making decisions associated with their levels of religious involvement. This should mean that their rates of church attendance are more open to external influence. In contrast, those with grown children—who have already made decisions associated with their religious involvement—should experience less movement over time.

The top set of results in Figure 4 shows comparisons for the full sample of respondents. The black circle and dashed 90% confidence interval represents the difference between Republicans' and Democrats' religious trajectories between 2000 and 2002. Just as with the YPSP data, a positive coefficient on the variable comparing Republicans and Democrats indicates that the gap in church attendance between Republicans and Democrats grew between 2000 and 2002, with Republicans becoming more frequent attenders relative to Democrats. A negative coefficient, in contrast, indicates the reverse, and a coefficient near zero indicates that the relative size of the gap remained the same. Whereas a church attendance gap existed between Republicans and Democrats in 2000—the average rate of church attendance (on a 0-1 scale) was 0.39 among Democrats and 0.54 among Republicans—average rates of church attendance remained stable over the two-year period and the partisan gap remained the same.¹⁵ The linkage between the political parties and religion became more pronounced between the second and third survey waves. The second estimate in Figure 4 shows how the church attendance gap changed between 2002 and 2004 (gray square with solid 90% confidence interval). The 2002-2004 analysis also includes a control variable measuring support for the Iraq War, also measured in 2002.

¹⁵Terror management theory (TMT) may lead us to assume that church attendance increased between 2000 and 2002 on account of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (Jonas and Fischer 2006; Vail et al. 2010). Consistent with TMT, church attendance increased in the immediate wake of the attacks (Wakin 2001); however, these increases were short-lived and rates returned to normal by the end of the year (Goodstein 2001). Consequently, it is unlikely that the ANES data would find evidence of increased religious participation in the 2002 wave.

confidence interval). Here, there is modest evidence of a changing gap between Republicans and Democrats (0.04), but the results are not statistically significant at conventional levels (p-value = 0.13).¹⁶ These results offer suggestive, but not compelling, evidence that the partisan landscape can shape religious involvement. The life-cycle theory, however, offers guidance for where politically induced religious change is likely to be found.

The second and third set of results in Figure 4 reproduce the results for the two subsamples of interest. The middle results show that while the existing church-attendance gap remained stable between 2000 and 2002 among partisans with children at home, the gap widened substantially between 2002 and 2004 (0.19; p-value < 0.01). This gap emerged because Republicans' average level of church attendance increased somewhat while Democrats' average level decreased dramatically. So while partisans of both stripes helped widen the gap, Democrats produced more of the change. The bottom results, which look at respondents with grown children, show that the church attendance gap remained stable both between 2000-2002 and 2002-2004.¹⁷ The results broken down by position in the life cycle highlight that looking at the full sample of respondents misses important differences.

These religiosity results appear despite partisans being able to change not only their levels of church attendance but also their religious communities. The ANES only measures denominational affiliation in 2000, and it is entirely possible that some Democrats responded to the changing political environment by finding a new religious community altogether. If such a change occurred, however, the data would show Democrats in 2002 retaining their levels of religious involvement between 2002 and 2004, which would mean the religiosity

¹⁶The changing gap between Republicans and Democrats is 0.06 (p-value < 0.01) in a model that only includes lagged partisanship, lagged church attendance, and marital and parental status as independent variables. The changing gap between Republicans and Democrats is 0.05 (p-value = 0.02) in a model that also includes demographic and religious control variables. The statistically suggestive results appear once the model controls for policy preferences and attitudes.

¹⁷The full models and tests confirming that the 2002 to 2004 changes for respondents with children at home are statistically different from those with grown children are in Tables D1 and D2 of the Online Appendix.

gap would not grow. In other words, these changes appear despite the possibility that partisanship influenced affiliation, not because of it.

The data again show that partisan attachments influence but are not being influenced by church attendance among those with children at home. Table D3 in the Online Appendix shows that church attendance in 2002 is uncorrelated with changing party identifications, approval of George W. Bush, and feeling thermometers between 2002 and 2004. There is also no evidence of partisans with school-aged children diverging in non-religious forms of societal participation.

The ANES data can also address two additional alternative explanations that were not possible with the YPSP data. First, the YPSP results might indicate a cohort effect. Finding the same evidence at two different time periods and using two different cohorts is therefore reassuring, particularly because members of the student generation in the YPSP data have grown children in the ANES data. Second, the YPSP data could not adjudicate between a life-cycle and aging explanation. If the findings are attributable to aging, same-aged respondents should look similar irrespective of life stage. The ANES data can address whether this is the case in two ways. First, religion, according to the life-cycle theory, should be a peripheral concern for respondents without children, and politics should therefore not be correlated with religious change over time. While politics may exert an influence on these individuals' religious decisions in the future, religious activity—or inactivity—should be relatively stable at this stage. While comparing respondents with and without children is generally a problematic strategy, as these groups likely differ on a host of dimensions, the analysis can test whether aging accounts for the changes seen over time.¹⁸ Across six age groupings (under 40, under 35, between 30 and 40, between 25 and 40, between 25 and 35), Republicans and Democrats with children diverged in their reported religious attendance

¹⁸While some childless individuals have made the active decision to forgo children, Newport and Wilkie (2013) find that 87% of individuals aged 18-40 without children plan to have them in the future and that 94% of individuals in this age category have or want to have children.

between 2002 and 2004. Among similarly aged respondents without children, however, 1) partisans attended church much less frequently than their copartisans with children, 2) levels of church attendance remained stable between 2002 and 2004, and 3) a church attendance gap did not grow. A second test shows that church attendance diverged among partisans with children at home, irrespective of respondent age, while partisans of all ages with grown children provided stable responses across the time period. These results, presented in detail in Section D of the Online Appendix, indicate that an individual's age is secondary to, albeit correlated with, her placement in the life cycle in explaining the findings.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper does not dispute that identification and interactions with a social group can influence group members and even produce cohesive political blocs. Rather, one goal of this paper has been to think about the origins of these social groups and understand what causes variation in identity strength and group involvement. It does so by asking whether partisan loyalties can influence religiosity. A novel theory and two types of analytic strategies together show that once the parties and party elites were seen as distinct on questions related to religion and morality, Americans could draw on their partisanship when making religious decisions. The elite-level changes to positions and strategies not only affected how religious people came to view the parties, but also how partisans came to view religion.

The life-cycle theory builds on and contributes to previous research exploring politics' effects on religion in three ways (Djupe, Neiheisel, and Sokhey 2017; Hout and Fischer 2014; 2002; Patrikios 2013; 2008; Putnam and Campbell 2010). First, the life-cycle theory offers an explanation for *when* politics is most likely to influence religion at the individual level, abandoning the assumption that politics should have a uniform effect across different types of people. Second, the life-cycle theory grounds the rather surprising empirical finding that politics can affect religion in an intuitive theoretical framework. And third, the theory and empirics offer additional pathways explaining why Democrats are less religious than Republicans. Research detailing how politics affects religious identification (Hout and Fischer

2014; 2002) and church attendance (Patrikios 2008) assume that politics pushes Democrats out of religion. While both the experimental and ANES data corroborate this claim, the YPSP data show that Democrats also end up being less religious than Republicans on account of returning to religion at a lower rate than Republicans. Moreover, the experimental results highlight that politics can bring Republicans deeper into the religious fold as well.

The experimental and panel data together show how the political environment can influence partisans' reported religiosities. Importantly, looking at strength of religious identity and church attendance as the two dependent variables might underestimate partisanship's influence on religious choices. For example, Putnam and Campbell (2010) argue that politics might affect religious switching or which religious community a person joins. As such, if a Democrat (Republican) chooses a liberal (conservative) religious community to join, he or she should have no problem being a strong religious identifier or attending church regularly. And yet, these results appear despite partisans previously having had an opportunity to select into religious communities that reflect their political outlooks. Future research, including original surveys asking detailed questions about respondents' religious communities, can help uncover whether and how politics plays a role in deciding which congregations partisans decide to join.

The results offer an alternative explanation of how the God gap came to pass. Both scholars and journalists have written a great deal about the political differences among those with varying levels of church attendance. This paper shows that politics helps produce this gap on account of partisans selecting into (or out of) organized religion based on their partisan identities. By gaining a better understanding of how this religiosity gap in survey research formed, the results have the inherent limitation that they do not measure actual behavior. While these data do not tell us whether attendance at religious services changed—a remaining question that is ripe for additional research—the findings indicate that, at the very least, partisans' subjective views toward organized religion diverged in response to the changing political environment.

In particular, the YPSP results put aggregate trends about religion and politics into perspective. Much of the research that links individual-level religiosity to political variables such as partisanship and vote choice do not see a strong relationship until the 1990s and onward (see Green 2010). If religion and politics became noticeably intertwined in the 1970s, why did the correlation between religiosity and partisanship become stronger decades later? The YPSP data showed that partisans in the student cohort responded to the shifting political environment while their parents did not; however, the student cohort made up a small percentage of the electorate, limiting researchers' ability to detect shifts in the full population. Instead, as younger cohorts' relative size within the electorate increased, the correlation between individual-level religiosity and political measures also increased.

The 1980 American National Election Study shows evidence of this. Church attendance is positively associated with Republican Party identification in 1980; the probability of identifying as a Republican is 0.13 higher among weekly church attenders relative to non-attenders (0.18 among the white subsample). But this difference is half the size of the religious gap among 30-35 year-old partisans—those whose ages roughly correspond to the YPSP generation (0.26 in the full sample, 0.34 in the white subsample). Looking at younger generations would have foreshadowed the large increase in the religiosity gap.

The paper's main findings also call into question the extensive research demonstrating religion's various effects on political identification, policy attitudes, and vote choice. With Republicans becoming more active in organized religion and Democrats becoming less so, it is unsurprising that personal religiosity—however measured—is strongly associated with a host of political outcomes. Those who are most receptive to religious cues are also more likely to have opted into religion in the first place, whereas those least receptive to such cues are more likely to not be religiously involved. Researchers must therefore be cautious when designing studies aimed at understanding religion's influence on political outlooks. Correlational results using cross-sectional regressions can accurately measure how religion affects political attitudes only if we assume that the religious explanatory variable is an

“unmoved mover” (Campbell et al. 1960) – itself stable but affecting political dependent variables. Scholars interested in exploring the relationship between religious and political attitudes must therefore seriously consider religion’s ability to be both an independent and dependent variable and whether religion can be considered as an “unmoved mover.”

Finally, this paper also provides a broader lesson related to partisanship. Whereas party identification is often thought of as a consequence, rather than a cause, of social cleavages in American politics, this paper demonstrates the potential power of partisan identities to affect not only apolitical attitudes and behaviors, but also key aspects of an important social identity. The paper shows that partisan divides do not merely reflect social divisions, they help create these divisions as well.

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Figures

Figure 1: A life-cycle theory of religious and political attachments

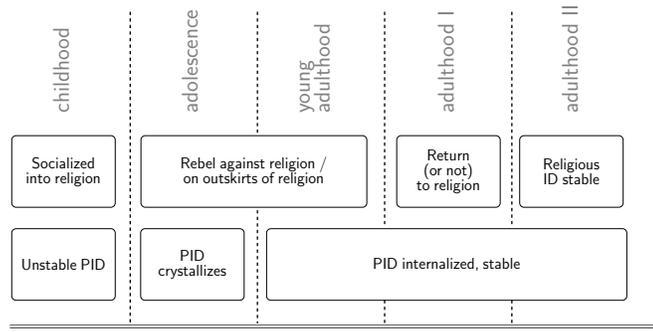
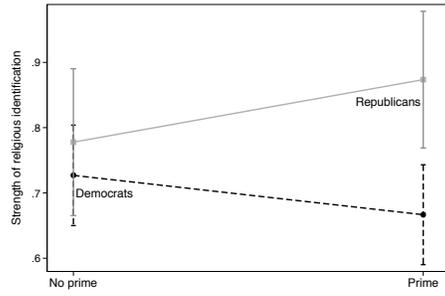
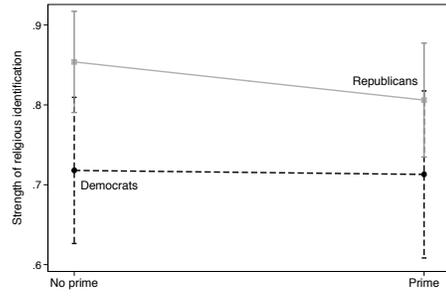


Figure 2: Experimental treatment effects vary by life-cycle position



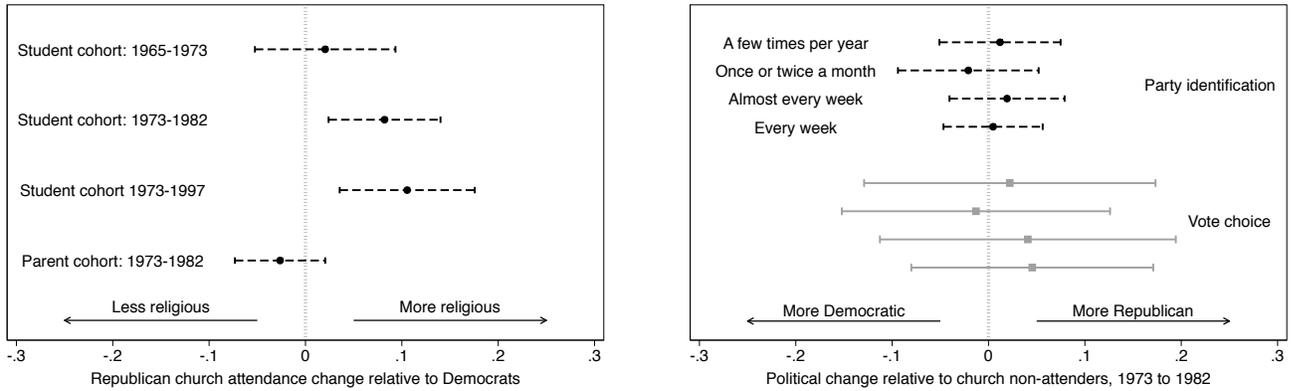
Respondents with children at home



Respondents with grown children

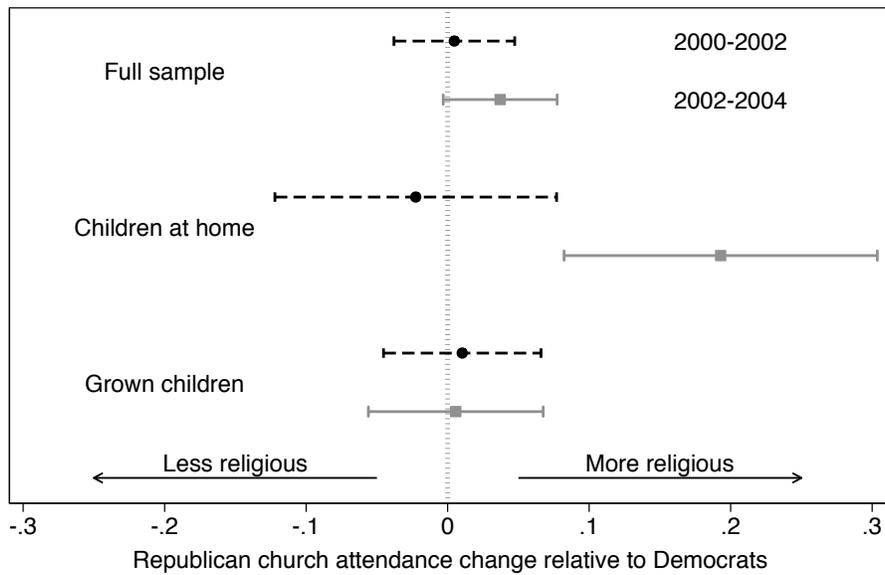
Note: Dependent variable is a four-point religious identification scale that ranges from 0 (strong non-identifier) to 1 (strong identifier). Source: Priming partisanship experiment

Figure 3: Partisanship is associated with religious decision-making



Note: The left panel presents partisan differences in changing levels of church attendance. Estimates come from change models that include lagged partisanship, lagged church attendance and control variables described in the text. Dashed lines represent 90% confidence intervals. The right panel presents religious differences in changing levels of seven-point party identification (black circles and dashed 90% confidence intervals) and vote choice (gray boxes and solid 90% confidence intervals) between 1973 and 1982 based on church attendance in 1973. Each coefficient represents the difference between a particular level of church attendance and non-attenders, who serve as the reference category. Estimates come from change models that include lagged political dependent variables and control variables described in the text. Source: Youth-Parent Socialization Panel

Figure 4: Partisans with children at home respond to the shifting political landscape



Note: The top set of results presents partisan differences in changing levels of church attendance between 2000 and 2002 (black circle and dashed 90% confidence interval) and 2002 and 2004 (gray square and solid 90% confidence interval) for the full sample. The second set of results shows changes among respondents with children at home, and the bottom set of results shows changes among respondents with grown children. Estimates come from change models that include lagged partisanship, lagged church attendance, and control variables described in the text. Source: 2000-2002-2004 American National Election Study