

# Cognitive Dissonance, Elections, and Religion: How Partisanship and the Political Landscape Shape Religious Behaviors\*

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## Abstract

How do elections affect citizens? This paper shows that elections can have an impact in an area where researchers least expect it: an individual's religious life. Drawing on psychologists' theory of compensatory control, I show that individuals' reported religious behaviors and beliefs fluctuate along with their chosen political party's fortunes. Using both an originally-collected panel dataset and over-time cross-sectional data, I find that Democrats (Republicans) are more likely to report attending religious services and praying when Republicans (Democrats) control the White House. Rates of reported religious behaviors then decline when a co-partisan is president. The results demonstrate political identities' strength and ability to influence nonpolitical behaviors, even those thought to be stable and impervious to politics.

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How do elections affect citizens? Most obviously, election results determine who wins office and therefore formulates public policy. But, election results can also affect citizens—especially partisans—even more directly. For instance, after a voter’s party wins an election, she views the economy more positively (Bartels 2002; Evans and Anderson 2006), has more trust in government (Keele 2005), and increases her spending (Gerber and Huber 2010; 2009). In this article, I demonstrate that elections can have an impact in an area where researchers least expect it: an individual’s religious life.

I show that partisans use religion to cope with politically-induced anxiety bred of their party’s election losses. More specifically, I test the psychological theory of compensatory control, which claims that when government fails to provide order and structure, people look elsewhere to fill that void, including to religion. Using both originally-collected panel data as well as over-time cross-sectional data, I test the hypothesis that partisans’ religious behaviors shift when their party loses power.

This research advances both the cognitive dissonance and religion and politics literatures. First, dissonance research within political science has largely focused on how individuals update attitudes or behaviors, with less attention given to situations in which internal dissonance cannot be achieved directly. This paper shows how and why partisans use indirect strategies to cope with negative feelings stemming from political developments. Second, the paper challenges the axiom that core social identities, such as religion, are exogenous to politics. Typically, researchers assume that religious identities influence politics, but that politics does not influence citizens’ depth of religious identification. By showing that levels of reported religiosity respond in predictable ways to the political environment, this paper demonstrates that religion is not the fixed, immutable trait it is often portrayed to be.

## **Cognitive dissonance and compensatory control**

Cognitive dissonance theories contend that individuals want consistency among their cognitions (i.e., beliefs and behaviors). Dissonance arises when elements of cognition do not

fit together, motivating a person to reduce or eliminate the dissonance, “just as, for example, the presence of hunger leads to action to reduce the hunger” (Festinger 1957, 18). A common example of dissonance includes people who smoke despite knowing the associated health risks. Smokers can reduce the psychological discomfort stemming from the dissonance by downplaying the quality of research on smoking’s effects, emphasizing the innumerable unavoidable health perils in the world, considering the potential drawbacks of quitting, and remembering that the enjoyment of smoking is worth the risk (Festinger 1957).

Often, cognitive dissonance arises in response to events outside an individual’s control that violate her worldview or expectations (for examples, see, Harmon-Jones et al. 2009). Sometimes people can directly address the cognitive dissonance arising from these unwelcome events. For example, those who undergo a grueling initiation process to join a dull group believe that the group is more interesting than those with a moderate initiation process (Aronson and Mills 1959). Despite being unable to resolve cognitive dissonance by changing the group, an individual can achieve consonance by updating her beliefs about the group. But not all scenarios lend themselves to resolving dissonance directly through attitude or behavior accommodation. An alternative, albeit less direct, strategy for reducing cognitive dissonance in these situations would be to reduce the negative feelings in “domains unrelated to the dissonance-inducing event” (Randles 2015, 697).

The compensatory control theory is one such way that individuals cope with cognitive dissonance in response to uncontrollable events (Whitson and Galinsky 2008). Unexpected events can create internal dissonance by causing people to lose the desirable feelings of control and order; however, individuals can reduce feelings of chaos and randomness in one arena with increased perceptions of control from another arena. This “compensatory control” is possible because feelings of control come from multiple sources. One source may be internal, as when an individual believes that she controls her own destiny. Other sources may be external. One common source of external control is God, as individuals may believe that God has a plan for them (Jost and Banaji 1994). Another source is stable government (Jost,

Banaji and Nosek 2004; Norris and Inglehart 2004; Sullivan, Landau, and Rothschild 2010). By providing services, such as clean drinking water, police and fire departments, and plowed roads, government creates stability and structure for its citizens.

One source of control can compensate for shortcomings in other sources of control (Kay et al. 2010; Kay et al., 2009; Kay et al., 2008; Lauren, Kay, and Moscovitch 2008). For example, external control can compensate for internal control. Kay et al. (2008) experimentally manipulated feelings of personal control by having respondents describe an event in which they either had complete or no control over the outcome. The authors find that when individuals feel that they have no control, they become more likely to believe in a controlling God; conversely, when personal agency increases, beliefs in an all-powerful entity diminish. This theory explains a phenomenon seen in everyday life, in which people “find” religion in times of personal hardship. When personal control disappears, for example when a loved one dies, people compensate by praying to a high power or adopting a belief that everything has a purpose (Cook and Wemberly 1983; Koeing et al. 1988; Park 2005). Kay et al. (2008) uncover similar findings when the source of external control is government. Respondents who wrote about an event in which they had no personal control were more likely to defend the current political system compared to those who wrote about an event in which they had complete control. Similar to religious beliefs, decreases in internal control can increase support for external systems like the government.

## **Dissonance and the relationship between religion and politics**

Elections are external events that can affect an individual’s feelings of control. When a voter’s preferred party or candidate loses, she cannot change the outcome, yet the result may upend her expectations about the world. Citizens may respond by trying to resolve these feelings of cognitive dissonance—arising from events that contradict expectations and beliefs—by changing their attitudes. Beasley and Joslyn (2001) show that cognitive dissonance encourages voters who support the losing candidate to moderate their opinions—viewing the

winning candidate more favorably and the losing candidate less so—to reduce the dissonance associated with supporting a loser. However, this strategy has limits. Even if a Republican who voted for Bush in 1992 moderated her views after the election—seeing Clinton in a more positive light and Bush more negatively—the (likely Republican) voter still almost certainly continues to feel more favorably toward Bush than Clinton. Put another way, a partisan may moderate her attitudes, but it is unlikely that this strategy would resolve the cognitive dissonance resulting from her party’s loss.

As an alternative, voters may try to address dissonant cognitions that arise in response to political events through compensatory control. In the case of an unfavorable election result, voters lose an important source of external control—government. Rather than compensating for this loss of external control with internal control, voters may instead seek an alternative source of external control: God. Kay et al. (2010) show that these two common forms of external control—God and government—are substitutable. The authors find that belief in a controlling God (supporting the Canadian government) varies after manipulating respondents’ attitudes about the competence of the Canadian government (likelihood that a God could intervene in the world’s affairs). Participants updated their beliefs about God in response to politics. With limited options of reducing dissonance in the political realm, religion may serve as a coping strategy to reduce anxiety and restore feelings of order. This version of the compensatory control theory yields a testable hypothesis: If partisans compensate for the political environment with religion, religiosity should decrease when their party takes control of the government and increase when their party loses control.<sup>1</sup>

The claim that politics produces ebbs and flows in religiosity diverges sharply from common conceptions about the relationship between religion and politics. The bulk of American politics research on religion assumes that religious behaviors stem from stable, preexisting identities that shape how individuals view and engage with politics (e.g., Green 2010; Layman 2001). A frequent explanation for differing rates of religious observance between

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<sup>1</sup>A more detailed discussion of when we might expect to find evidence of compensatory control at different points in recent American political history is available in the Online Appendix.

Democratic and Republican partisans is that attending church (or not) shapes one’s partisan affiliation. However, by re-conceptualizing religious identity as a constructed social identity that individuals choose and whose intensity may fluctuate, what is often viewed as a fixed trait becomes a mutable identity open to politics’ influence.

Other scholars have examined how politics affects religion, but their expectations differ noticeably from those predicted by the compensatory control theory. Both Hout and Fischer (2014; 2002) and Patrikios (2013; 2008) claim that the politically polarized religious environment—linking the Republican Party with evangelical Protestants and religious conservatives—influences Americans’ religious identification (Hout and Fischer 2014; 2002), church attendance (Patrikios 2008), and self-categorization into a fused religious-partisan identity (Patrikios 2013).<sup>2</sup> Thus, these scholars expect partisans’ religious identities to move in only one direction—if a Republican changes her religious identity or involvement, it is to become more religious, while a Democrat, if she changes, would become less religious. In stark contrast, the compensatory control theory predicts an ebb and flow of religiosity over time for members of both parties. Whereas the linkage between religious and politics elites offers an explanation for why the “God gap”, in which Republicans are more religious than Democrats on average, may grow, the compensatory control theory provides an explanation for why this gap varies in size over time.

In the next two sections I present two sets of results testing the compensatory control hypothesis in the American context. In the first set of results, I present findings from an original panel dataset that coincides with the 2012 presidential election. I then use cross-sectional data to more generally show how partisans’ reported levels of religiosity vary systematically as the party of the president shifts.

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<sup>2</sup>Putnam and Campbell (2010) similarly find that when answers to political and religious questions shift across a two-wave survey, people had changed their religious responses to be “consistent” with their partisanship (Democrats providing less religious responses and Republicans providing more religious responses). Though the authors attribute these results to the politically-infused religious landscape, they admit that: “We were initially skeptical of this finding since it seemed implausible that people would hazard the fate of their eternal soul over mundane political controversies.” (145).

## 2012 election panel study research design

I estimate the short-term religious consequences of the 2012 presidential election. I do so using a two-wave Internet panel with respondents recruited by Survey Sampling International (SSI).<sup>3</sup> The first wave occurred just before and the second wave took place just after the election. A panel study with a narrow time window offers three advantages over traditional cross-sectional and panel analyses. First, the panel design mitigates concern that Democrats and Republicans may answer questions differently. If, for example, Republicans feel more social pressure to attend church regularly, they may overestimate their attendance relative to Democrats, producing an inaccurately wide gap between Republican and Democrats. In a panel setting, however, I compare changes over time rather than absolute differences, thereby accommodating partisans having different response patterns. Second, omitted variable bias is less of a concern. For an unobserved variable to bias the results, not only must the omitted variable correlate with both partisanship and religiosity, but it must also correlate with change in religiosity over the span of a few weeks. If we assume that any unobservable trait has a constant effect on religiosity over the short period between the survey waves, then omitted variable bias does not pose a problem. Finally, a panel design with a small window between the waves is an improvement over panel surveys that have waves months, or sometimes years, apart. For example, Democrats and Republicans may interpret events and experience the world differently over an extended period of time. In this case, one may incorrectly attribute the changes in religious behavior to a presidential election, when another event actually produces the changes over time. As the window between the two

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<sup>3</sup>SSI recruits participants through various online communities, social networks, and website ads. SSI makes efforts to recruit hard-to-reach groups, such as ethnic minorities and seniors. These potential participants are then screened and invited into the panel. When deploying a particular survey, SSI randomly selects panel participants for survey invitations. I did not employ quotas but asked SSI to recruit a target population that matched the (18 and over) census population on education, gender, age, geography, and income (based on the premeasured profile characteristics of the respondents). The resulting sample is not a probability sample, but is a diverse national sample. SSI samples have been used in a number of recent publications in political science (Berinsky, Margolis, and Sances 2014; Kam 2012). The first wave of the survey was conducted between October 17 and October 31, 2012. The second wave of the survey was conducted between November 13 and November 27, 2012.

waves of the survey shrinks, it becomes more reasonable to assume that the effect is due to the presidential election rather than other occurrences between the two waves. The short time window between the two waves of my data increases the plausibility that I can attribute the results to the presidential election rather than another event.

Reported church attendance and prayer, two common forms of religious participation, serve as my two dependent variables of interest. Both are binary yes or no questions. The church attendance question asked: “Did you, yourself, happen to attend church, synagogue or mosque in the last seven days, or not?” The prayer question was worded as: “Did you happen to pray by yourself in the last seven days, or not?”

The purpose of asking about behavior in the past seven days is twofold. First, this strategy makes it easier for respondents to provide an accurate estimate of their behavior. For example, in Wave 1 of the study, 27% of respondents reported attending religious services in the past week. This is consistent with research estimating that approximately a quarter of Americans attend services in a given week. In contrast, when asked generally about the frequency of church attendance, 35-40% report attending on a weekly basis. Second, these questions allow for meaningful comparisons over time to be made. Despite a shift in short-term behavior, an individual may give the same response to a general behavior question.

Although there is a great deal of consistency in people’s religious behavior, it is not static. Approximately 10% of respondents gave different responses to these questions between the two waves. I estimate whether any of this movement is attributable to partisanship by running a change model in which the dependent variable is religious participation in the post-election survey and the independent variables are pre-election measures of partisanship, religious participation, and individual-level control variables. These control measures include: gender, three race dummy variables for African American, Hispanic, and other races (whites serve as the reference category), income, education, and geographic region. The model specification allows me to estimate the change in reported religious behavior for Republicans relative to the same change for Democrats. I additionally replicate the findings

using religious beliefs and identification in the Online Appendix.<sup>4</sup>

I use these data to estimate how partisans reacted to Obama’s re-election. His victory, however, was not a foregone conclusion. Table 1 illustrates that partisanship and outcome predictions (both measured in Wave 1) are highly correlated. 55% of Republicans thought Romney would win, and 82% of Republicans either believed Romney would win or were uncertain about the outcome. As such, the election outcome changed the political landscape of many Republicans who were either unsure about the election outcome or predicted incorrectly.

I use this predicted election outcome measure to more explicitly to test the compensatory control theory. Drawing on the psychological theory, I expect the partisan effect on changing religious practices to be moderated by expectations of the outcome. The political landscape remained the same for those who expected an Obama victory, but shifted for those who believed Romney would win. A second set of models includes a variable that captures predictions for the 2012 election and ranges from 1 (Romney will definitely win) to 5 (Obama will definitely win) and is interacted with the two partisanship measures.

## **2012 election panel study results**

Table 2 presents the logit coefficients for the main independent variables of interest, with the full results available in the Online Appendix. Republicans, as compared to Democrats, became more likely to report engaging in religious activity in the weeks after the election as compared to the weeks leading up to the election. Independents are indistinguishable from Democrats with respect to changing religious behavior. This result makes intuitive sense. The political landscape did not change for Democrats and political Independents have a weaker attachment to the political parties. As such, there is no reason to expect a religious

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<sup>4</sup>The dependent variables in the study correspond to Green’s (2010) typology of religious identity consisting of behaving, believing, and belonging. The dependent variables described in the main text of the paper—church attendance and prayer—correspond to traditional religious behaviors described by Green (49). The study, however, also includes dependent variables that focus on beliefs and identification as well. I describe these dependent variables in detail and replicate the results using the alternative measures in the Online Appendix.

divergence between Democrats and Independents over the course of a few weeks.<sup>5</sup>

Table 3 offers a substantive interpretation for an “average” respondent.<sup>6</sup> For both models, I set the lagged dependent variable to 0; the respondent did not report attending religious services or praying in the week before Wave 1 of the survey.<sup>7</sup> First, I present the predicted probability that the average Independent respondent reported attending church (4.3%) or praying (16.3%) in the week leading up to the second wave of the survey. Next, I look at changes in reported religious behavior based on partisanship. For the same average respondent, shifting from being a Democrat to a Republican is expected to increase the probability of attending religious services by an additional 2.7% and praying by 7.8%. The larger effect for praying likely reflects that praying can be done alone, at any time, and anywhere, whereas there are higher costs associated with attending church. Although many Democrats and Republicans alike skipped church and did not pray in the weeks leading up to the presidential election, their behaviors diverged immediately afterward.<sup>8</sup>

The first set of analyses demonstrates that Democrats and Republicans reacted differently to the presidential election, but Obama’s re-election did not change the political landscape. I incorporate Wave 1’s predicted election outcome measure into the model to test whether perceived shifts in political control explain the overall findings. Republicans who correctly predicted that Obama would win the election should experience less movement across the waves relative to Republicans who believed that Romney would win the election. Table 4 presents the substantive results from the models. Republicans believing Romney would win the election drive the findings from Tables 2 and 3. For this group, the predicted probability of an “average” respondent attending church and praying in the weeks after the election

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<sup>5</sup>There is also evidence of changing religious practices when comparing Independents and Republicans. Republicans are more likely to change both their church going (p-value=0.12) and prayer (p-value=0.14) responses relative to Independents.

<sup>6</sup>In this sample, average refers to a 48-year-old white woman living in the Midwest with some college education and a household income between the 25% and 50% percentile.

<sup>7</sup>62% and 76% of Republicans and Democrats, respectively, reported not having attended in the week before the first wave of the survey, while 25% and 37% reported not having prayed in the week before the first wave of the survey.

<sup>8</sup>Additional analyses using predicted probabilities and marginal effects for different types of people are available in the Online Appendix.

were 9.7% and 34.9%, respectively. The probability of engaging in these religious behaviors, however, was significantly lower for those Republicans who predicted that Obama would win the election (2.3% for church attendance and 17.6% for praying). These findings are consistent with Republicans compensating for a disappointing political result by going to church or praying.

An alternative interpretation of the predicted election outcome question still yields evidence supporting the compensatory control theory. Respondents may have answered the predicted outcome question by reporting who they wanted to be president, rather than whom they thought would be president. In this case, the results can be interpreted as changes in the religious behavior based on preferred elected outcome while holding partisanship constant. In this case, Republicans who strongly wanted Romney to win (and responded by saying Romney would definitely win) had more reason to compensate with religion after the election as compared to Republicans who were not as supportive of Romney's presidential bid.<sup>9</sup>

The panel results demonstrate the short-term consequences from a recent election; however, the findings leave two issues unaddressed. First, how long do these effects last? The results demonstrate an immediate reaction to an election outcome, but provide no indication of whether the shift is temporary or more long lasting. Second, are these findings generalizable, or are they specific to Obama's victory? To answer these questions, I adopt an alternative research strategy below.

## Cross-sectional research design

In this section, I analyze cross-sectional, cross-time variations in reported religiosity. Rather than looking at the same respondents directly before and after an election, I instead use the party of the president to measure changes in the political landscape. While the government

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<sup>9</sup>Additional robustness checks for two alternative explanations, Hurricane Sandy and seasonal changes in religiosity, are available in the Online Appendix.

as an institution does not change, those in charge of the government do. With each shift in the party of the president, I test whether reported levels of religiosity fluctuate based on who is in the White House.<sup>10</sup> I employ a difference-in-difference model that looks at respondents in the years directly preceding and succeeding a change in the party of the president:

$$DV_{it} = \beta_1 Rep_{it} + \beta_2 Ind_{it} + \beta_3 Switch_t + \beta_4 Switch_t X Rep_{it} + \beta_5 Switch_t X Ind_{it} + u_{it}$$

in which  $DV_{it}$  is one of three measures of religiosity, described below, for individual  $i$  in year  $t$ . The party identification of respondents is represented by dummy variables for Republicans and Independents. Democrats are excluded as the reference category.  $Switch_t$  is an indicator for whether respondents were interviewed before the switch (0) or after the switch (1). For example, when looking at a model that compares respondents interviewed when H.W. Bush was president and when Clinton was president, the Bush years are coded as 0 while the Clinton years are coded as 1. When comparing the shift between the Clinton and W. Bush presidencies, however, respondents interviewed when Clinton was president are categorized as 0, while those interviewed when W. Bush was president are categorized as 1. Both party dummy variables are interacted with the  $Switch_t$  indicator, represented by  $Switch_t X Rep_{it}$  and  $Switch_t X Ind_{it}$ , respectively. Given that certain demographic traits are strong predictors of both partisan loyalties and religiosity, I include a series of micro-level covariates including: age, age-squared, gender, race, region of residence, education, household income, and religious affiliation. I also include linear time trends to account for general changes in religiosity over time.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Party of the president is the most visible and accessible representation of the political environment. Although 85% and 84% of Americans can identify the party to which Reagan and Clinton belonged, respectively, only 61% and 55% could do the same for Nancy Pelosi and John Boehner (Pew 2012). Although Keele (2005) finds evidence that switches in party control of the House of Representatives and the Senate affect partisans' trust, the results for party of the president are between three and six times larger than for switches in congressional power, and switches in congressional power do not always produce statistically significant results.

<sup>11</sup>As a robustness check, I run models interacting each control variable with  $Switch_t$  to allow the control variables' effects to vary before and after the switch in political control. These results produce substantively

I present the results for three questions tapping into religiosity that are routinely asked in the ANES. The first measures religious behavior through reported church attendance. I rescaled the variable to range between 0 (never attend) to 1 (attend more than once a week).<sup>12</sup> The second measures how much guidance religion plays in a respondent's life, and ranges from not at all (0) to a great deal (1).<sup>13</sup> The final measure captures whether respondents identify with a religious tradition (1) or not (0). Here, the specific denomination does not matter. I instead care about whether respondents identify with a religious tradition at all. The final dependent variable may be surprising to those who assume religious identification is a stable characteristic, but scholars have long noted that denominational switching is common (Arnett and Jensen 2002; Bibby 1997; Newport 1979; Sherkat and Wilson 1995; Stump 1984). More recently, Lim, MacGregor, and Putnam (2010) introduced *liminal nones* who are not stable religious non-identifiers, but are also not stable religious affiliates. These individuals, who can be thought of leaners, have weak religious attachments leading them to identify with a religious tradition at some points, but not at others. Based on the compensatory control theory, we might expect partisans' political surroundings to affect liminal nones' affiliation decisions.<sup>14</sup> I present the results for the three most recent shifts in the party of the president—H.W. Bush to Clinton, Clinton to W. Bush, and W. Bush to Obama—below. I present and discuss the results for earlier presidential transitions in the Online Appendix.

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similar results and are available in the Online Appendix.

<sup>12</sup>The church attendance measure is created using three questions. The first asks: "Lots of things come up that keep people from attending religious services even if they want to. Thinking about your life these days, do you ever attend religious services, apart from occasional weddings, baptisms or funerals?" (if respondent answers yes) "Do you go to religious services every week, almost every week, once or twice a month, a few times a year, or never?" (if respondent says she goes to church every week) "Would you say you go to religious services once a week or more often than once a week?" The questions produce a six-point scale.

<sup>13</sup>The religious guidance question comes from two questions. Respondents are first asked, "Do you consider religion to be an important part of your life, or not?" (if respondent answers that religion is an important part of her life) "Would you say that (1996 and later: "Would you say your") religion provides some guidance in your day-to-day living, quite a bit of guidance, or a great deal of guidance in your day-to-day living (1996 and later "life"?) The questions produce a four-point scale.

<sup>14</sup>This dependent variable presents a difficult test of the theory, as religious identification elicits more stable survey responses than other religiosity questions. Further, Lim, MacGregor, and Putnam estimate the 30% of religious non-identifiers, or 10% of the population, can be classified as liminal nones. Consequently, the percentage of respondents who would potentially move in and out of identifying with a religious tradition is small, making it difficult to detect an effect.

## Cross-sectional results

I present the main results in Table 5 both with and without control variables. The coefficients are from ordinary least squares (OLS) models; however, ordered logit and logit models produce the same substantive results. The model specification allows for a simple interpretation of results, as the coefficients represent the change in the probability that  $Y=1$ . The top set of results looks at respondents interviewed when George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton were president. In this case, the *Switch* variable moves from 0, when H.W. Bush is president, to 1, when Clinton is president. The *Republican* and *Independent* coefficients represent how Republicans' and Independents' reported religiosities differ from Democrats when H.W. Bush was president ( $Switch = 0$ ). Although Republicans are no more likely to attend church (Column 1) and report that religion provides guidance in their daily lives (Column 3) in the models without control variables, religious differences emerge in the models that include control variables (Columns 2 and 4). In neither model specification is there a difference between Republicans and Democrats on rates of religious identification when H.W. Bush was president (Columns 5 and 6). Although a consistent religiosity gap exists today between Democrats and Republicans, there was not such a prominent gap between the parties in the late 1980s. Independents, on the other hand, are generally less religious than both Democrats and Republicans. This is consistent with the notion that Independents are considered "not joiners."

The *Switch* coefficient in the top panel of Table 5 represents the marginal change in religiosity for Democrats moving from a Republican president, H.W. Bush ( $Switch=0$ ) to a Democratic president, Clinton ( $Switch=1$ ). Across the three dependent variables, Democratic religiosity generally declined, although the results are not always statistically significant. For example, Democrats were 3% less likely to attend church weekly when Clinton was president compared to when H.W. Bush was president in the parsimonious model that excludes control variables (Column 1). Although instructive, looking at Democratic over-time change in isolation is of limited use. Many external factors likely influence both Democrats'

and Republicans' religiosity. As such, the *Switch* variable captures both general trends as well as any Democratic shift occurring because the party of the president changed. Instead, the interaction terms test how partisans of different stripes changed over time.

I find that Republicans' and Democrats' religious trajectories differed before and after the 1992 election: Republicans became *more* involved in religion after Clinton took office relative to Democrats' over-time changes (*Rep X Switch*). Again, looking at church attendance in Column 1, Republicans became 6% *more* likely to attend church more than once a week relative to Democrats during the same shift. When looking at the political shift between H.W. Bush and Clinton, Republicans and Democrats diverged in all three religiosity questions.<sup>15</sup>

To put these results in context, I ran the same interaction model using perceptions of the economy over the past year as the dependent variable, which ranged from "has gotten much worse" (0) to "has gotten much better" (1). We have long known that the party of the president colors partisans' responses to survey questions about the economy, providing a benchmark against which we can assess the magnitude of the religious results. The interaction on *Rep X Switch* produced a coefficient of -0.11 (p-value<0.01), meaning that Republicans and Democrats differed in their economic evaluations as the country switched from a Republican to a Democratic president: Republicans became 11% *less* likely to report that the economy has gotten much better relative to Democrats. The religious dependent variables—with *Rep X Switch* coefficients ranging from 0.04 to 0.06—produce results that are roughly half the size of the economic perception model. That the effect sizes for religious dependent variables are smaller should be expected. After all, there are many who will and will not attend church irrespective of their surroundings, political or otherwise. But the com-

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<sup>15</sup>The results for church attendance and religious guidance are consistent with Democrats and Republicans having, on average, stable responses across time, but with Democrats' religiosity decreasing slightly and Republicans' religiosity increasing slightly, together creating the gap found in *Rep X Switch*. The results for religious identification, however, show that non-identification rates increased during this time period among both Democrats and Republicans but that non-identification rates increased more among Democrats than Republicans. This result is consistent with a broader trend of religious disaffiliation that began in the early 1990s.

parison demonstrates that the changes in reported religious practices and identification are substantively meaningful. Given that perceptions of the economy serve as the quintessential example of biased perceptions along partisan lines (see Gerber and Huber (2010) for a discussion), movement on presumably stable religious variables that is roughly half that of economic perceptions is remarkable.

These results present a first look at partisan reactions to the party of the president changing; however, these findings are also consistent with the alternative explanation that Democrats and Republicans are changing their religious habits to be “consistent” with their chosen party (Patrikios 2008; Putnam and Campbell 2010). With the Republican Party seen as the party for the religious while the Democratic Party is perceived as the home for seculars, if partisans updated their reported religiosity to be aligned with their political affiliation we would expect Democrats (Republicans) to become less (more) religious over time.

The second set of results (middle panel of Table 5) diverges from the previous literature and demonstrates that partisans’ religiosity can ebb and flow. Here, I look for changes as the party of the president shifts from Clinton, a Democrat, to W. Bush, a Republican. In this case the results switch directions. Despite Republicans being more religious than Democrats both when Clinton and W. Bush were president, the religious gap between Republicans and Democrats that had expanded during Clinton’s presidency actually became smaller when W. Bush was president (*Rep X Switch*). The current explanation in the literature for how politics affects religiosity assumes that religiosity shifts in a unidirectional manner. This explanation therefore does not predict a shrinking of the religious gap, which is precisely what I find. The second set of cross-sectional findings comports with the compensatory control theory, with partisans altering their religious involvement based, in part, on their surroundings.

The bottom panel of results looks at the shift between W. Bush, a Republican, and Obama, a Democrat. These results look similar to the shift between H.W. Bush and Clinton:

Democrats became less religious over time while Republicans became more so. Across the three shifts in political control since the 1980s, partisans' religiosity changed in concert with the political environment.

Consistent with the panel data, I do not find evidence that party shifts in control influenced political Independents. The model specification interacts being a political Independent and a political switch (*Ind X Switch*), and some of these coefficients are significant in Table 5. Democrats changing their reported religiosity, not Independents, however, drive these results. The marginal effect of a political switch on Independents is consistently small and statistically insignificant. Although Republicans' and Democrats' religious responses shift, Independents remain relatively stable in response to changing political conditions.

The cross-sectional results replicate the immediate, short-term responses found in the panel data using data collected years after a presidential election took place. Not only do the panel findings show that Republicans became more likely to report attending church and praying in the weeks after the presidential election, the observational data show that these initial reactions do not dissipate quickly. Rather, elections have long-term consequences on reported religious responses.

The cross-sectional results corroborate and expand the panel results; however, alternative explanations must be addressed. First, the party of the president may not be exogenous. The models above assume that individuals have a stable partisan identification and their reported religious behaviors vary as the party of the president shifts. This assumption would be invalid if, for example, membership in the Democratic Party increased under a popular Democratic President. Although I cannot rule out this possibility, the literature on partisan stability indicates that this does not often occur. Individual-level party identification remains more or less constant, even as individuals shift their perceptions about which party is better able to handle the issues of the day (Gerber and Green 1998), during times of political and economic turmoil (Schickler and Green 1997), and retrospective assessments of presidential performance or ideological proximity to candidates (Schickler and Green 1995).

Second, the models are susceptible to reverse causation. Although it is likely that church attendance influences partisanship generally, it is less of a concern with the current model specification. In order to produce the results presented above, frequent church attenders would have to become Democratic under a Republican president. Although I cannot rule out the possibility, a look at the data reduces such concerns. During H.W. Bush's presidency, 30% of weekly church attenders identified as Republicans. This percentage increased to 36% while Clinton was in office and increased again to 41% when W. Bush occupied the White House. These data do not support reverse causation being a serious problem. A third concern relates to an unmeasured variable affecting both partisanship and reported church attendance. To pose a problem for my results, an unmeasured confounder must not only impact both partisanship and reported religiosity, but the direction of this influence must vary systematically with the party of the president.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

This paper tests politics' ability to impact seemingly apolitical identities and broadens our understanding about the relationship between religion and politics. The SSI panel data demonstrates the short-term effects of a single election. With two waves of data gathered in a small window of time, I identify the effect that the 2012 election had on partisans' reported religious practices. Republicans responded to the election results with an increase in church attendance and prayer relative to Democrats. The ANES data build on these findings to look across time and presidencies. Both Democrats and Republicans respond to changes in political control by systematically shifting their religious involvement. These results are the first to demonstrate that political identities and the political landscape can cause religiosity to ebb and flow. Although each data source and analytic method has benefits and drawbacks, one set of results corroborates and bolsters the other: politics can shape partisans' reported religious beliefs and behaviors.

Although some may find these results surprising, the psychology literature gives us reason to expect these findings. Building on cognitive dissonance research, this article explores what happens when partisans feel psychological discomfort but cannot fully address the offending inconsistencies. Although a partisan may reduce dissonance stemming from her candidate losing an election by updating her views of the candidates (Beasley and Joslyn 2001), mental gymnastics can only take a partisan so far. After all, partisan attachments are strong, enduring identities (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002). Instead, when partisans are ill at ease in the political realm they may seek solace elsewhere. Religion, in the form of praying, attending services, or believing in a higher power, is one arena that may offer comfort.

This paper contributes to three ongoing discussions in the literature: partisan identity, cognitive dissonance, and the relationship between religion and politics. First, the findings add to a body of research showing that partisanship's reach is felt beyond policy preferences and vote choice. Partisans not only view their surroundings in a more positive light—whether in assessing the state of the economy, believing that their vote mattered, or trusting the government—when a co-partisan is in the White House (Bartels 2006; 2002; 2002; Evans and Anderson 2006; Keele 2005; Lewis-Beck et al. 2008; Sances and Stewart 2012), but these views translate into actual behaviors like spending decisions (Gerber and Huber 2010; 2009). Just as partisans spend less when the out-party is in power in response to (perceptions of) a weaker economy, partisans also compensate for an unfavorable political climate using religion. On account of partisanship operating as a powerful social identity, elections cross the dividing line from affecting political attitudes to shaping apolitical behaviors. The results from this paper also highlight that identity's role in politics is not as straightforward as previously thought; identity strength and intensity are also products of politics. Public opinion scholars, who generally focus on the political consequences of holding a particular identity, must therefore also consider how an identity develops and becomes politically relevant.

Second, the compensatory control theory offers political scientists a new way to think

about cognitive dissonance within politics. Although cognitive dissonance is commonly conceptualized as internal discomfort that can be eliminated by a person changing her behavior or attitude (Beasley and Joslyn 2001; Mullainathan and Washington 2009), creating cognitive consonance is not always within a person's power (Randles 2015). This is likely the case in many political situations, such as elections and policy creation, in which individuals have virtually no control over the outcome. And in part because partisan identities are strong, citizens may attempt to resolve this dissonance using alternative strategies.

Future research can build on this work to explore how voters curb politically-induced dissonance in other, apolitical, ways. Although this paper looks at religion as a means of reducing dissonance, the proposed mechanism is broadly applicable. For example, the mentally palliative qualities of exercise and meditation are well known (Penedo and Dahn 2005). Exercise may therefore be another compensating strategy on which partisans rely. Psychologists have also noted that control can originate internally, and increased personal agency can accommodate a reduction in external control. Additional research on this question will provide for a more complete understanding of how partisans respond to external political events.

Third, this paper encourages political scientists to rethink the relationship between religious and political identities. Experimental research has found that political messages can activate existing identities, which, in turn, can change policy preferences (e.g., Klar 2013; Kuklinksi and Hurley 1994). This paper extends that argument by showing that politics can do more than increase the salience of an identity; politics can change fundamentally shape identities. Comparative scholars have long argued that politics play an important part in constructing ethnic identities (Davis 1991; Laitin 1986; Nagel 1994; Nobles 2000; Posner 2005; Waters 1990). In much the same vein, I show that religious identities are, in part, politically constructed. Rather than thinking about religion as an immutable identity, the theory and empirics in this article highlight that religion is more accurately conceptualized as a social identity open to external influence.

Although the idea that politics may affect a person’s religious identity is gaining acceptance in political science, the proposed mechanism in this paper produces a unique set of expectations and subsequent implications. To date, research looking at how politics affects religion has focused on the close, visible relationship between the Republican Party and religious conservatives and evangelicals, sometimes referred to as the “religious-political hypothesis” (Hout and Fischer 2014; 2002; Patrikios 2013; 2008; Putnam and Campbell 2010). This hypothesis assumes that if partisans update their religiosity, Republicans do so to become more religious and Democrats become less so. Further, it suggests a reinforcing implication: Republicans reach out to religious voters, religious voters help get a Republican candidate elected, partisans see and internalize the linkage between conservative politics and religion, and partisans respond accordingly by updating their religiosity. This cycle changes the religious landscape for the next election by creating a more religiously homogenous base from which Republican candidates can mobilize.

In contrast, the compensatory control mechanism suggests a very different understanding of religion and politics. The ebb and flow predictions generated by a dissonance-reduction mechanism do not restrict the direction in which a partisan’s religiosity can shift. Moreover, the compensatory control theory suggests that the link between politics and religion may not be reinforcing. After religious voters help get a Republican candidate elected, Democrats may seek solace by returning to church. In this case, the in-party’s electoral successes increases the out-party’s relative presence in church. In the following election, therefore, Republican candidates confront a more politically diverse religious landscape than when they first won power.

The compensatory control mechanism identified here suggests that the current conceptualization of how politics affects religion is incomplete, but not necessarily incorrect. It is possible, even likely, that partisans update their religious outlooks to be consistent with their chosen political identity while also compensating for their party’s electoral misfortunes in the religious sphere. Future research should bring together the two proposed mechanisms

and isolate each theory's effects. By understanding the different ways in which politics can influence religious decisions, scholars will have a better understanding of both the religious and political landscapes.

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## Tables

Table 1: 2012 Election outcome predictions

	Full	Dems	Reps
Certainly Romney	9	1	24
Probably Romney	15	3	32
Do not know	26	16	27
Probably Obama	31	44	15
Certainly Obama	19	36	3
Total	100%	100%	100%

Note: Cells contain column percentages. Columns may not add up to 100 because of rounding.

Table 2: Changes in past week's church attendance and prayer, Pre- to Post-election

	Church		Pray	
Republican	0.47**	0.44*	0.41*	0.52**
	(0.24)	(0.25)	(0.23)	(0.25)
Independent	-0.02	0.04	0.02	0.17
	(0.25)	(0.25)	(0.22)	(0.23)
Controls?		Y		Y
Constant	-3.00**	-2.14*	-1.75**	-2.38**
	(0.20)	(1.19)	(0.17)	(0.92)
N	1404	1404	1405	1405
Mean DV	0.27	0.27	0.66	0.66
Model includes pre-election responses?	Y	Y	Y	Y

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses. \* p-value < 0.1, \*\* p-value < 0.05. Two-tailed test. Democrat is excluded as the partisan reference category. All independent variables are measured in wave 1.

Table 3: Marginal effects for shifts in partisanship from Table 2

Prediction	Church	Pray
	Probability attended church past week	Probability prayed past week
Baseline prediction	4.3%	16.3%
Partisanship = Independent	(1.6%, 6.9%)	(7.8%, 24.8%)
Marginal effect of shift in partisanship from Democrat to Republican	2.2%	7.8%
	(0.1%, 4.7%)	(1.6%, 15.3%)

Note: Table entries are marginal effect calculations with simulated 90% confidence intervals (King, Tomz, and Wittenberg 2000) in parentheses. The baseline prediction and marginal effects estimates are created for the average respondent. In this sample, the estimates represent a 48-year-old white woman living in the Midwest, with some college education and falls between the 25 and 50% on household income. For both models, the lagged dependent variable is set to 0: the respondent reported not attending religious services and not praying in the previous seven days.

Table 4: Republicans thinking Romney would win drive the results

	Church	Pray
	Probability attended church past week	Probability prayed past week
Republican and believed Romney would win	9.7% (4.0%, 17.9%)	34.9% (19.2%, 53.4%)
Republican and believed Obama would win	2.3% (0.3%, 7.5%)	17.6% (8.9%, 30.0%)
Difference	7.3% (1.0%, 15.6%)	17.3% (1.5%, 35.1%)

Note: Table entries are predicted probabilities with simulated 90% confidence intervals (King, Tomz, and Wittenberg 2000) in parentheses. The estimates are created for the average respondent. In this sample, the estimates represent a 48-year-old white woman living in the Midwest, with some college education and falls between the 25 and 50% on household income. For both models, the lagged dependent variable is set to 0: the respondent reported not attending religious services and not praying in the previous seven days.

Table 5: Changes in religiosity over time

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
<b>H.W. Bush to Clinton</b>						
	Church		Rel guide		Rel ID	
Republican	0.02 (0.02)	0.05** (0.02)	-0.03 (0.02)	0.04* (0.02)	-0.04 (0.03)	0.01 (0.02)
Independent	-0.08** (0.02)	-0.04** (0.02)	-0.09** (0.02)	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.11** (0.02)	-0.08** (0.02)
Switch	-0.03** (0.02)	-0.04* (0.02)	-0.04** (0.02)	-0.04 (0.03)	-0.03 (0.02)	-0.14** (0.04)
Rep X Switch	0.06** (0.03)	0.04* (0.02)	0.06** (0.03)	0.05** (0.02)	0.06** (0.03)	0.06** (0.03)
Ind X Switch	0.05** (0.02)	0.04* (0.02)	0.06** (0.03)	0.05** (0.02)	0.07** (0.03)	0.06** (0.03)
Controls	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Linear time trends	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Intercept	0.41** (0.01)	-0.78 (6.32)	0.61** (0.01)	2.83 (6.85)	0.88** (0.01)	-32.68** (9.23)
N	6,056	6,056	6,030	6,030	4,176	4,176
Years	1988-2000		1988-2000		1988-2000	
<b>Clinton to W. Bush</b>						
	Church		Rel guide		Rel ID	
Republican	0.08** (0.01)	0.09** (0.01)	0.03** (0.01)	0.09** (0.01)	0.03 (0.02)	0.06** (0.02)
Independent	-0.03** (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	-0.03** (0.01)	0.02* (0.01)	-0.05** (0.02)	-0.02 (0.02)
Switch	0.04* (0.02)	0.21** (0.10)	0.03 (0.02)	0.21* (0.11)	0.04* (0.02)	-0.18 (0.12)
Rep X Switch	-0.13** (0.03)	-0.17** (0.03)	-0.06* (0.03)	-0.16** (0.03)	-0.06** (0.03)	-0.13** (0.03)
Ind X Switch	-0.07** (0.03)	-0.07** (0.03)	-0.05 (0.03)	-0.09** (0.03)	-0.04 (0.03)	-0.04 (0.03)
Controls	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Linear time trends	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Constant	0.38** (0.01)	-0.95 (6.34)	0.57** (0.01)	2.40 (6.88)	0.85** (0.01)	-33.20** (9.30)
N	5,365	5,365	5,342	5,342	3,918	3,918
Years	1992-2008		1992-2008		1992-2008	
<b>W. Bush to Obama</b>						
	Church		Rel guide		Rel ID	
Republican	-0.06** (0.03)	-0.07** (0.03)	-0.02 (0.03)	-0.06** (0.03)	-0.04 (0.03)	-0.09** (0.03)
Independent	-0.10** (0.03)	-0.07** (0.02)	-0.08** (0.03)	-0.06** (0.03)	-0.09** (0.03)	-0.08** (0.03)
Switch	-0.09** (0.02)	-0.08** (0.02)	-0.08** (0.02)	-0.08** (0.02)	-0.09** (0.02)	-0.13** (0.02)
Rep X Switch	0.16** (0.03)	0.16** (0.03)	0.13** (0.03)	0.16** (0.03)	0.11** (0.03)	0.19** (0.03)
Ind X Switch	0.05* (0.03)	0.04 (0.03)	0.02 (0.03)	0.03 (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)	0.04 (0.03)
Controls	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Linear time trends	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Constant	0.42** (0.02)	0.14** (0.04)	0.61** (0.02)	0.21** (0.04)	0.89** (0.02)	0.62** (0.05)
N	6,438	6,438	6,449	6,449	6,461	6,461
Years	2000-2012		2000-2012		2000-2012	

Note: Coefficients are OLS estimates. Robust standard errors in parentheses. \* p-value < 0.1, \*\* p-value < 0.05. Two-tailed test. Democrat is excluded as the partisan reference category. Control variables include: race, age, age-squared, gender, region, income, education, and year. Religious affiliation is also included as control variables in the models using church attendance and religious guidance as the dependent variable.