

COGNITIVE DISSONANCE, ELECTIONS, AND RELIGION

HOW PARTISANSHIP AND THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE SHAPE RELIGIOUS BEHAVIORS

MICHELE F. MARGOLIS*

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. It does so by drawing on psychologists' theory of compensatory control and testing whether individuals' reported religious behaviors and beliefs fluctuate with their chosen political party's fortunes. Both an originally collected panel data set and over-time cross-sectional data reveal 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 copartisan is president. The results demonstrate political identities' strength and ability to influence nonpolitical behaviors, even those thought to be stable and impervious to politics.

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 party wins an election, its supporters view the economy more positively (Bartels 2002; Evans and Anderson 2006), have more trust in government (Keele 2005), and increase their spending (Gerber and Huber 2009, 2010). This article demonstrates that elections can have an impact in an area where researchers least expect it: partisans' religious lives.

This paper claims that partisans use religion to cope with politically induced anxiety bred of their party's election losses. More specifically, it finds evidence

MICHELE MARGOLIS is an assistant professor in the Political Science Department, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, USA. The author thanks Adam Berinsky, Roberto Carlos, Justin de Benedictis-Kessner, James Dunham, Alfredo Gonzalez, Allison Harris, Elisha Heaps, Gabe Lenz, Matthew Levendusky, Chad Levinson, Krista Loose, Marc Meredith, Ethan Porter, Mike Sances, Charles Stewart III, Adam Ziegfeld, and two anonymous reviewers for helpful comments and feedback. This work was supported by MIT's Political Experiments Research Lab (PERL). *Address correspondence to Michele Margolis, University of Pennsylvania, Political Science Department, 208 S. 37th Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104, USA; e-mail: mmargo@sas.upenn.edu.

supporting 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. An originally collected panel data set as well as over-time cross-sectional data together test the hypothesis that partisans' religious behaviors shift when the party in power changes.

This research advances both the cognitive dissonance and the religion and politics literatures. First, dissonance research within political science has focused largely on how individuals update attitudes or behaviors, with less attention given to situations in which internal consonance 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).

Cognitive dissonance often arises in response to events outside an individual's control that violate her worldview or expectations (for examples, see Harmon-Jones, Amodio, and Harmon-Jones 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 et al. 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 individuals believe that they have control over their 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, such as personal agency. For example, individuals encouraged to feel that they have no personal control were more likely to believe in a controlling God, compared to individuals who were encouraged to feel as though they had a great deal of personal agency (Laurin, Kay, and Moscovitch 2008). These results resonate with 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 Wimberley 1983; Koenig, George, and Siegler 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 individuals’ feelings of control. When voters’ preferred party or candidate loses, they cannot change the outcome, yet the result may upend their 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 Republicans who voted for Bush in 1992 moderated their views after the election—seeing Clinton in a more positive light and Bush more negatively—the (likely Republican) voters still almost certainly continue to feel more favorably toward Bush than Clinton. Put another way, partisans may moderate their attitudes, but it is unlikely that this strategy would resolve the cognitive dissonance resulting from their 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. Voters may compensate for this loss with 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 believing in a controlling God (supporting the Canadian government) varies after manipulating respondents' attitudes about the competence of the Canadian government (likelihood that 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.¹

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., [Layman 2001](#); [Green 2010](#)). A frequent explanation for differing rates of religious observance between Democrats and Republicans is that attending church (or not) influences partisan affiliations. 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 \(2002, 2014\)](#) and [Patrikios \(2008, 2013\)](#) 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

1. 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](#).

attendance (Patrikios 2008), and self-categorization into a fused religious-partisan identity (Patrikios 2013).² 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 may vary in size over time.

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

2012 Election Panel Study Research Design

The first set of data estimates the short-term religious consequences of the 2012 presidential election using a two-wave Internet panel with respondents recruited by Survey Sampling International (SSI).³ 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,

2. 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).

3. 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. The sample does not include quotas, but SSI recruited 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) to take the English-language survey. 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; 54 percent of respondents from the first wave participated in the second wave.

they may overestimate their attendance relative to Democrats, producing an inaccurately wide gap between partisans of different stripes. In a panel setting, however, the estimates represent 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 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 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.

Reported church attendance and prayer, two common forms of religious participation, serve as the two dependent variables of interest. Both are binary yes/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 read: “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 accurate estimates of their behavior. For example, in Wave 1 of the study, 27 percent of respondents reported attending religious services in the past week. This finding is consistent with research estimating that approximately a quarter of Americans attend services in a given week (Brenner 2011). In contrast, when asked generally about the frequency of church attendance, 35–40 percent 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, individuals 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. A change model, which uses post-election religious participation as the dependent variable and preelection measures of partisanship and religious participation as independent variables, estimates whether behavioral shifts are attributable to partisanship. The model also includes individual-level control variables measured in the preelection wave: 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. Additional results using religious beliefs and identification are available in the online [appendix](#).⁴

Importantly, although these data estimate how partisans reacted to Obama's reelection, his victory was not a foregone conclusion. [Table 1](#) illustrates that partisanship and outcome predictions (both measured in Wave 1) are highly correlated. More than half (55 percent) of Republicans thought Romney would win, and 82 percent 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.

Further, the predicted election outcome measure allows for a more explicit test of the compensatory control theory. According to the psychological theory, expectations of the outcome should moderate partisanship's effect on changing religious practices. 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

Table 1. 2012 Election Outcome Predictions

	Full sample	Democrats	Republicans
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 due to rounding.

SOURCE.—2012 PERL election panel data set.

4. The dependent variables in the study—church attendance and prayer—correspond to [Green's \(2010\)](#) typology of religious identity consisting of behaving, believing, and belonging. The study includes dependent variables that focus on beliefs and identification as well. Descriptions of these dependent variables as well as replicated results using the additional measures can be found in the online [appendix](#).

Table 2. Changes in Past Week's Church Attendance and Prayer, Pre- to Post-Election

	Attend church in past 7 days			
	<i>Without controls</i>		<i>With controls</i>	
	<i>b</i>	<i>(SE)</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>(SE)</i>
Republican	0.47	(0.24)*	0.44	(0.25)#
Independent	-0.02	(0.25)	0.04	(0.25)
Constant	-3.00	(0.19)**	-2.14	(1.19)#
<i>N</i>	1,404		1,404	
Mean DV	0.27		0.27	
Model includes preelection responses?	Y		Y	

	Pray in past 7 days			
	<i>Without controls</i>		<i>With controls</i>	
	<i>b</i>	<i>(SE)</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>(SE)</i>
Republican	0.41	(0.23)*	0.52	(0.25)*
Independent	0.02	(0.22)	0.17	(0.23)
Constant	-1.75	(0.17)**	-2.38	(0.92)**
<i>N</i>	1,405		1,405	
Mean DV	0.66		0.66	
Model includes preelection responses?	Y		Y	

NOTE.— Table entries are logistic regression estimates. Democratic respondents serve as the partisan reference category. Control variables include gender, race, income, education, and geographic region. All independent variables are measured in Wave 1. Tables that show coefficients for control variables are available in the online [appendix](#).

SOURCE.—2012 PERL election panel data set.

$p < 0.10$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

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 divergence between Democrats and Independents over the course of a few weeks.

Table 3 offers a substantive interpretation for an “average” respondent.⁵ The first set of results presents the predicted probability that the average

5. 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 25th and 50th percentile. Additional analyses using predicted probabilities and marginal effects for different types of people are available in the online [appendix](#).

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 percent confidence intervals (King, Tomz, and Wittenberg 2000) in parentheses. The baseline prediction and marginal effects estimates are created for a 48-year-old white woman living in the Midwest with some college education and falling between the 25 and 50 percent level 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.

SOURCE.—2012 PERL election panel data set.

Independent respondent reported attending church (4.3 percent) or praying (16.3 percent) in the week leading up to the second wave of the survey, having previously reported that she did not attend religious services or pray in the week before Wave 1 of the survey. The second set of results looks at changes in reported religious behavior based on partisanship. For the same average respondent, who did not attend church or pray before Wave 1, shifting from being a Democrat to a Republican is expected to increase the probability of attending religious services by 2.2 percent and praying by 7.8 percent.⁶ 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.

The next set of analyses incorporates 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 were 9.7 and 34.9 percent, respectively. The probability of engaging in these religious behaviors, however, was significantly lower for those Republicans

6. A total of 62 and 76 percent of Republicans and Democrats, respectively, reported not having attended in the week before the first wave of the survey, while 25 and 37 percent reported not having prayed in the week before the first wave of the survey.

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 marginal effect calculations with simulated 90 percent confidence intervals (King, Tomz, and Wittenberg 2000) in parentheses. The baseline prediction and marginal effects estimates are created for a 48-year-old white woman living in the Midwest with some college education and falling between the 25 and 50 percent level 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.

SOURCE.—2012 PERL election panel data set.

who predicted that Obama would win the election (2.3 percent for church attendance and 17.6 percent for praying). Republicans who thought Obama would win behaved similarly to political Independents, shown in [table 3](#). These findings are consistent with Republicans compensating for a disappointing political loss with religion.

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 who they thought would be president. In this case, the results can be interpreted as changes in 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.⁷

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? A second empirical strategy helps answer these questions.

7. Additional robustness checks for two alternative explanations, Hurricane Sandy and seasonal changes in religiosity, are available in the online [appendix](#).

Cross-Sectional Research Design

This section explores over-time variation in reported religiosity using cross-sectional data from the American National Election Study (ANES).⁸ Rather than looking at the same respondents directly before and after an election, these analyses use the party of the president to measure changes in the political landscape. While the government as an institution does not change, those in charge of the government do. A difference-in-difference model that looks at respondents in the years directly preceding and succeeding a change in the party of the president tests whether reported levels of religiosity fluctuate based on who is in the White House. The model is

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

in which DV_{it} is one of three measures of religiosity, described below, for individual i in year t . Binary variables for Republicans and Independents measure party identification, with Democrats serving as the reference category. $Switch_t$ is an indicator for whether respondents were interviewed before the party switch (0) or after (1). For example, when looking at a model that compares respondents interviewed when George 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 George W. Bush presidencies, however, respondents interviewed when Clinton was president are categorized as 0, while those interviewed when George 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. The model also includes linear time trends and micro-level control variables: age, age squared, gender, race, region of residence, education, household income, and religious affiliation.⁹

Three questions tapping into religiosity serve as the dependent variables. The first dependent variable measures reported church attendance, with the variable ranging between 0 (never attend) and 1 (attend more than once a week).¹⁰ The second dependent variable measures how much guidance religion

8. Details about the ANES may be found in the [appendix](#).

9. Additional models that interact each control variable with $Switch_t$ to allow the control variables' effects to vary before and after the switch in political control are available in the online [appendix](#).

10. The church attendance measure is based on 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.

plays in a respondent's life and ranges from not at all (0) to a great deal (1).¹¹ The final dependent variable captures whether respondents identify with a religious tradition (1) or not (0). Here, the focus is on whether a respondent identifies with a religious tradition at all and not on the respondent's specific denomination. 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 (Newport 1979; Stump 1984; Sherkat and Wilson 1995; Bibby 1997; Arnett and Jensen 2002). More recently, Lim, MacGregor, and Putnam (2010) introduced *liminal nones* who are neither stable religious non-identifiers nor stable religious affiliates. These individuals 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. The findings below focus on the three most recent shifts in the party of the president—George H. W. Bush to Clinton, Clinton to George W. Bush, and George W. Bush to Obama. The results for earlier presidential transitions can be found in the online [appendix](#).

Cross-Sectional Results

Table 5 presents the main results 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 with the coefficients representing 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 George 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 George H. W. Bush was president (*Switch* = 0). Although Republicans are no more likely to attend church (Model 1) and report that religion provides guidance in their daily lives (Model 3) in the models without control variables, religious differences emerge in the models that include control variables (Models 2 and 4). In neither model specification is there a difference between Republicans and Democrats on rates of religious identification when George H. W. Bush was president (Models 5 and 6). Although a consistent religiosity gap exists today between Democrats and Republicans, there was not such a prominent gap between the

11. 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 you"] 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.

Table 5. Changes in Religiosity over Time

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
H. W. Bush to Clinton						
	Church attendance		Religious guidance		Religious identification	
<i>b</i>	<i>(SE)</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>(SE)</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>(SE)</i>	<i>b</i>
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)**
Switch X Rep	0.06 (0.03)*	0.04 (0.02)#	0.06 (0.03)*	0.05 (0.02)*	0.06 (0.03)*	0.06 (0.03)*
Switch X Ind	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	No	Yes	No
Time trends	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
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)**
<i>N</i>	6,056	6,056	6,030	6,030	4,176	4,176
Years	1988-2000	1988-2000	1988-2000	1988-2000	1988-2000	1988-2000

Continued

Table 5. Continued

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6					
Clinton to W. Bush											
	Church attendance			Religious guidance			Religious identification				
<i>b</i>	(<i>SE</i>)	<i>b</i>	(<i>SE</i>)	<i>b</i>	(<i>SE</i>)	<i>b</i>	(<i>SE</i>)	<i>b</i>	(<i>SE</i>)	<i>b</i>	(<i>SE</i>)
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)*	0.04 (0.03)	0.03 (0.02)	0.10 (0.04)**	0.04 (0.02)#	-0.06 (0.04)					
Switch X Rep	-0.13 (0.03)**	-0.15 (0.03)**	-0.06 (0.03)*	-0.16 (0.03)**	-0.06 (0.03)*	-0.13 (0.03)**					
Switch X Ind	-0.07 (0.03)*	-0.06 (0.03)*	-0.05 (0.03)	-0.08 (0.03)**	-0.04 (0.03)	-0.06 (0.03)#					
Controls	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Time trends	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Intercept	0.38 (0.01)**	-0.94 (6.34)	0.57 (0.01)**	2.93 (6.86)	0.85 (0.01)**	-33.09 (9.27)**					
<i>N</i>	5,365	5,365	5,342	5,342	3,918	3,918					
Years	1992-2008	1992-2008	1992-2008	1992-2008	1992-2008	1992-2008					

Continued

Table 5. Continued

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
W. Bush to Obama						
	Church attendance		Religious guidance		Religious identification	
<i>b</i>	(SE)	<i>b</i>	(SE)	<i>b</i>	(SE)	<i>b</i>
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)**
Switch X Rep	0.16 (0.03)**	0.16 (0.03)**	0.13 (0.03)**	0.16 (0.03)**	0.11 (0.03)**	0.19 (0.03)**
Switch X Ind	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
Time trends	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Intercept	0.42 (0.02)**	0.14 (0.04)**	0.61 (0.02)**	0.21 (0.04)**	0.89 (0.02)**	0.62 (0.05)**
<i>N</i>	6,438	6,438	6,449	6,449	6,461	6,461
Years	2000–2012	2000–2012	2000–2012	2000–2012	2000–2012	2000–2012

NOTE.—Table entries are OLS estimates with robust standard errors. Democratic respondents serve 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. Alternative model specifications are available in the online [appendix](#).

SOURCE.—American National Election Study.

#*p* < 0.10; **p* < 0.05; ***p* < 0.01

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, George H. W. Bush (*Switch* = 0), to a Democratic president, Clinton (*Switch* = 1). Across the three dependent variables, Democrats’ religiosities generally declined, although the results are not always statistically significant. For example, Democrats were 3 percent less likely to attend church weekly when Clinton was president compared to when George H. W. Bush was president in the parsimonious model that excludes control variables (Model 1). Although instructive, looking at Democratic over-time change in isolation is of limited use. Many external factors likely influence both Democrats’ and Republicans’ levels of religious involvement. As such, the *Switch* variable captures both general trends as well as any shift occurring because the party of the president changed. Instead, the interaction terms test how partisans of different stripes changed over time.

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 (*Switch X Rep*). Again, looking at church attendance in Model 1, Republicans became 6 percent *more* likely to attend church more than once a week relative to Democrats during the same shift. When looking at the political shift between George H. W. Bush and Clinton, Republicans and Democrats diverged in all three religiosity questions.¹²

A similar interaction model using economic perceptions as the dependent variable puts these results in context.¹³ 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 *Switch X Rep* 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 percent *less* likely to report that the economy has gotten much better relative to Democrats. The models using religious dependent variables—with *Switch X Rep* coefficients ranging from

12. The results for church attendance and religious guidance are consistent with Democrats and Republicans having, on average, stable responses across time, but with Democrats’ religiosities decreasing slightly and Republicans’ religiosities increasing slightly. These changes together create the gap found in *Switch X Rep*. 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 to a larger extent among Democrats. This result is consistent with a broader trend of religious disaffiliation that began in the early 1990s.

13. The economy question asks for perceptions of the economy over the past year, and the resultant variable ranges between “has gotten much worse” (0) and “has gotten much better” (1).

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 comparison 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 offer a first look at how partisans reacted to the president's party changing; however, these findings are also consistent with the alternative explanation that Democrats and Republicans changed 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 George W. Bush, a Republican. In this case, the results switch directions. Despite Republicans being more religious than Democrats both when Clinton and George W. Bush were president, the religious gap between Republicans and Democrats that had expanded during Clinton's presidency actually became smaller when George W. Bush was president (*Switch X Rep*). 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 what the data show. 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 George W. Bush, a Republican, and Obama, a Democrat. These results look similar to the shift between George 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, there is no evidence that party shifts in control influenced political Independents. The model specification interacts being a political Independent and a political switch (*Switch X Ind*), 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 is consistently small and statistically insignificant for

Independents. Although Republicans' and Democrats' religious responses shift, Independents remain relatively stable in response to changing political conditions.

The cross-sectional analyses replicate the immediate, short-term panel results 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 stable partisan identifications 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 a possibility, the literature on partisan stability indicates that this does not often occur. Individual-level party identification remains quite stable, 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 in retrospective assessments of presidential performance or ideological proximity to candidates (Schickler and Green 1993).

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 Democrats under a Republican president. Although I cannot rule out the possibility, a look at the data reduces such concerns. During George H. W. Bush's presidency, 30 percent of weekly church attenders identified as Republicans. This percentage increased to 36 percent while Clinton was in office and increased again to 41 percent when George 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 these 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 demonstrate 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. 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 be surprised by the results, the psychology literature gives us reason to expect these findings. This article builds on cognitive dissonance research and explores what happens when partisans feel psychological discomfort but cannot fully address the offending inconsistencies. Although partisans may reduce dissonance stemming from their candidate losing an election by updating their views of the candidates (Beasley and Joslyn 2001), mental gymnastics can only take partisans 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 matters, or trusting the government—when a copartisan is in the White House (Bartels 2002; Keele 2005; Sances and Stewart forthcoming), but these views translate into actual behaviors like spending decisions (Gerber and Huber 2009, 2010). 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. With partisanship operating as a powerful social identity, elections go beyond 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 et al. 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., Kuklinksi and Hurley 1994; Klar 2013). 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. Similar to comparative scholars who have long argued that politics play an important part in creating ethnic identities (e.g., Nobles 2000; Posner 2005), this paper shows 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 2002, 2014). 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 homogeneous 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 increase 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.

Appendix. American National Election Study, 1988–2012

The American National Election Studies (ANES) have been conducted in every presidential and most midterm election years since 1948. Only the 11 surveys conducted between 1988 and 2012 are used in the paper. The National Science Foundation (NSF) has funded the ANES between 1988 and 2012.

The sampling frames of the studies were defined to include all US citizens of voting age on or before Election Day who resided in US households (including civilian households on military bases) in the 48 coterminous states, excluding individuals living in group quarters, military facilities, and institutional populations.

According to the description of the ANES cumulative data file: "Over the years, the most common ANES study design has been a cross-section, equal probability, sample. These designs are typically "self-weighting"; that is, the respondents do not need to be weighted to compensate for unequal probabilities of selection in order to restore the "representativeness" of the sample. On several occasions, however, ANES has departed from this standard design." For example, in 2008 and 2012 the face-to-face sample featured oversamples of African Americans and Hispanics. In other years, the sample included both re-interviewed respondents who are part of a panel as well as fresh cross-sectional respondents. This includes 1992, 1996, 2002, and 2004. Additionally, 2012 marked the first instance in which interviews took place using both face-to-face (traditional method of data collection) and Internet surveys. The Internet sample made up approximately 65 percent of the 2012 ANES sample.

The ANES calculated response rates as the number of completed interviews as a percentage of the sample size. The rates were 70.5 in 1988, 70.6 in 1990, 74.1 in 1992, 72.1 in 1994, 59.8 in 1996, 63.8 in 1998, 60.5 in 2000, 55.8 in

2002, 66.1 in 2004, 59.5 in 2008, and 38 and 2 for the face-to-face and Internet samples in 2012, respectively.

Each ANES study includes two waves. The first wave takes place during the two months leading up to Election Day. Surveys begin in early September and continue until the day before the election. The second wave takes place during the two months after Election Day. The second wave frequently begins the day after the election and often runs until January.

The ANES had been conducted in English until 2008, when both English- and Spanish-language surveys became available.

Additional information about the NES data is available on the NES website (<http://www.electionstudies.org>).

Supplementary Data

Supplementary data are freely available online at <http://poq.oxfordjournals.org/>.

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