My research reexamines and challenges the conventional wisdom about the relationship between religious and political identities. Political scientists typically assume that religious identities and practices are fixed, impervious to politics. Consequently, researchers use these traits to predict political opinions. In contrast, my work addresses the reciprocal relationship between religious and political attitudes, identifying not only the conditions under which religious identities affect political stances but also when political identities influence one’s religious beliefs, practices, and identification.

In my dissertation, *The Intersection of Religion and Politics: A Two-Way Street*, I not only show that political identities influence the religious decision making of adults, but also that researchers should expect such a relationship to exist. Combining insights from the religious and political socialization literatures, I create a testable theory about how partisanship can come to shape religious beliefs and behaviors. In so doing, I explain when and why religious and political identities affect one another.

Sociologists of religion have long noted the “religious lifecycle” whereby individuals’ religious identity and religiosity ebb and flow. While teenagers and young adults distance themselves from their parents’ religion and religious practice in general, these people must decide whether to remain on the outskirts of religion or to re-enter the religious realm as they emerge into adulthood. Those who return to religion must then also decide 1) to what degree to be involved in religion and 2) what religious beliefs to accept and reject. All told, the period in adolescence and early adulthood during which many sit on the outskirts of religion creates an opportunity for outside influences to impact individuals’ religious decisions as they transition into adulthood. One such influence is politics. In political science, the “impressionable years” theory identifies adolescence and young adulthood as a period when outside influences and events shape one’s long-term political outlook, including partisan identity. The partisanship that results from this socialization process is more than just a stable affiliation with a political party; it is often a powerful identity in its own right.

The timings of the religious and political socialization processes mean that political identities form at the very time when, for many people, religion sits on the back burner. When individuals must later decide if and how they will engage in the religious world, their political identities—solidified earlier in young adulthood—may exert an important influence. Further, the impact of partisanship and politics on religion at this juncture reverberates for years to come, as an individual’s religious identification and practices are often stable throughout adulthood.

To test my theory, I employ both observational and experimental approaches. First, I looked to see if the influence of political and religious identities varied over the course of a lifetime. Using panel data that track individuals over the course of their lifetime, I find that partisanship affects decisions about religious behavior for those on the verge of returning to the religious realm after a hiatus; however, once both an individual’s religious and political identities are solidified, religious identities and religiosity tend to shape political attitudes. I then tried to corroborate these findings with a series of laboratory experiments. While I cannot randomly assign partisanship and religiosity within the population, I instead manipulate the salience of political and religious identities by exogenously bringing either respondents’ party identification or religious affiliation to the forefront of their minds. Consistent with the theoretical expectations as well as the panel data, I find heterogeneous treatment effects based on where respondents are in the lifecycle.

In another part of my dissertation I explore why the relationship between religious and political attitudes exists, and whether partisans respond to shifts in the political landscape. In particular, I test how the close relationship between the Republican Party and
The Intersection of Religion and Politics: A Two-Way Street

religious conservatives affects individuals. Estimating how the political landscape impacts people is a difficult undertaking. In an ideal world, I would manipulate the coalitions between political parties and religious groups in the public arena and see how people respond. As this is not possible, I instead seek out unexpected, but naturally occurring, changes to the political landscape. The rise in the political salience of the gay marriage issue is one such example. Although the Republican Party’s platform contained a plank opposing gay marriage since 1992, in 2004 the media frequently reminded the public that George W. Bush and the Republican Party were aligned with religious conservatives in opposing same-sex marriage. I find that, thanks to the increasing importance of gay marriage as a political issue in 2004, party identification influenced subsequent religious practices: Democrats (Republicans) reported lower (higher) rates of religiosity in 2004. However, this relationship holds only for those respondents who were of an age when they were likely considering re-engaging with or increasing participation in religious life. For those older individuals with solidified religious and political identities, the relationship was reversed: religious identities influenced feelings toward the political parties.

Building on these results, I use an experimental approach to test whether the current political landscape affects partisans’ reported religiosity. Using a nationally representative sample, I provide treated respondents with a news article linking the religious right and the Republican Party. While I cannot change the political landscape itself, the experiment alters the salience of a major coalition made up of political and religious groups. The treatment had opposite effects on Democrats and Republicans: treated Democrats reported being less religious than Democrats in the control group, while treated Republicans systematically reported being more religious than their control-group counterparts. And again, those theoretically most susceptible to politics’ influences drive these results.

Taken together, this project contributes to our knowledge about how individuals’ different, and sometimes competing, identities interact in politically relevant ways, while also presenting a new way of thinking about the contemporary political and religious landscapes. In contrast to the common assumption that one’s religious beliefs drive political attitudes in a unidirectional fashion, I find that the relationship also works in the other direction. While many bemoan religion’s role in creating a polarized political arena, this blame may be unfairly assigned as partisans themselves help produce these religious gaps.