

Decades of public opinion research have looked at the political consequences of social identities, but scant attention has been paid to understanding how these group identities form or why the strength of identities varies. This body of research has produced a conventional wisdom that cultural and social identities are drivers of political preferences and not the end result of politics. In *From Politics to the Pews: How Partisanship Affects Religious Behaviors and Identifications in America*, I refute this axiom of American politics and show that the conventional wisdom is woefully incomplete. I argue that politics can shape the very identities and memberships whose political effects scholars routinely explore. I do so by looking at religion, an identity whose impact on political attitudes and behavior within the United States is widely discussed in both academic and non-academic circles.

Over the past generation, religion's role in American politics fundamentally changed. In the past, the two parties divided along denominational lines—Catholics were typically Democrats, while mainline Protestants were largely Republican. Both parties therefore included both religious and not so religious supporters. Today, the parties are more heterogeneous in their partisans' religious denominations and instead are distinguished from one another by levels of religious observance. The highly devout and regular churchgoers now identify with and support the Republican Party, while religious non-identifiers and infrequent attendees support the Democratic Party. Indeed, the so-called "God gap" is starker than nearly any other partisan gap described in the political science literature, including gender, income, and region.

Why are Republicans religious and Democrats less so? The common explanation is that citizens adopt certain political preferences and behaviors in accordance with their religious identities. This explanation is appealing because it comports with political scientists' tendency to think of religion as a trait that is passed down from one generation to the next. This explanation, however, overlooks the complexity of religion and underestimates the strength of partisan identities. In the book, I not only show that partisanship can influence how adults engage with religion but also offer a theoretical account of when and why such a relationship exists.

By bringing together two distinct socialization literatures, religious and political, I create and test a novel theory about when partisanship can shape religious beliefs and behaviors. In brief, the distinct timings of the religious and political socialization processes create a window during which partisanship can shape religious beliefs and behaviors. Political identities typically crystallize in adolescence and early adulthood, which is the very time when many people have distanced themselves from religion. As young people emerge into adulthood, however, they must decide whether to remain on the outskirts of religion or re-enter the religious sphere. Political identity, which for many has been solidified since young adulthood, can shape this new religious identity. 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.

What causes partisans to change their religiosity? Elite polarization on social issues, such as abortion and gay marriage, as well as the close and visible relationship between

religious and political leaders serve as important cues to adults in the process of making religious decisions for themselves and their families. These elite cues provide information to voters as they transition from young adulthood into adulthood by indicating how people “like them” engage with religion.

I test my theory using two types of data. First, I use multiple panel data sets. Tracking the same individuals over time allows me to show general patterns in the population consistent with the life cycle theory’s predictions. Second, I use a series of original experiments that test the underlying mechanisms explaining why and when politics affects religious decision making.

Partisans aligning their religious identities to match their partisanship, rather than the reverse, have had effects on average citizens and elites alike. When partisanship plays a role in individuals selecting into or out of religion, partisans are left in more politically homogenous social networks and are exposed to less crosscutting political information. The religious sorting has also led to a religiously polarized electorate, which, in turn, affects elite behaviors. Republican candidates can easily mobilize their supporters through churches, while Democratic candidates lack the same captive audiences. Changing the core constituencies of the parties has therefore fundamentally changed politicians’ electoral strategies.

Beyond these substantial political implications, this book fills important gaps both in the literature on religion and politics and the study of identity. On the one hand, this book is the first to provide a comprehensive account of when, why, and how partisan identities influence key aspects of religious identities, including: identification with a religious faith, church attendance, and the place of religion in people’s lives. The findings fundamentally shift not only how political scientists theorize the role of religion but also how they measure and treat religion in empirical work.

On the other hand, the book also situates the relationship between religion and politics in a broader theoretical framework for understanding politically relevant identities. Identity politics, at its core, is interested in the political consequences of holding a particular identity, not how the identity develops or becomes politically relevant. But if identities are acquired by choice, rather than by birth, researchers must consider if politics plays a role. Identities are much less deterministic in the modern era. In fact, “This ability to recreate and refashion one’s identity many times over is arguably at its extreme in contemporary American society . . .” (Huddy 2001). *From Politics to the Pews* offers a critical first step toward understanding how politics influences group identification and when an identity becomes politically consequential.