

# Book Review

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From Politics to the Pews: How Partisanship and the Political Environment Shape Religious Identity. By Michele F. Margolis. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2018. xii+291pp. \$95.00; \$32.50 paper; \$32.50 e-book.

That religious and political identities have become powerfully linked over the last fifty years in the United States is beyond dispute. A host of scholars, along with commentators in the popular press, have argued that Americans' religious commitments increasingly shape their partisan preferences, to a degree that often exceeds the impact of gender, social class, and other salient identities. I, myself, edited a volume whose title—*From Pews to Polling Places* (Georgetown University Press, 2007)—reveals the discipline's general assumption about the mechanism underlying this relationship: that religious commitments are causally prior to the resultant political behaviors. In *From Politics to the Pews*, however, Michele Margolis offers a provocative and intriguing challenge to this conventional wisdom, arguing that the causal relationship is often reversed—"that partisan identities can profoundly shape identification with and engagement in the religious sphere" (p. 3). Margolis' argument is compelling, supported by a range of survey and experimental data, and applicable outside the current political moment (her theory's contribution to understanding the religious dynamics of the 1960 campaign is one of the book's strongest features). As a result, *From Politics to the Pews* is an exceptional contribution to the literature on religion and political behavior, one that all scholars working in the field will have to engage going forward.

The core of Margolis' argument is her "life-cycle theory." While both political and religious identification have a life cycle, they are not synchronous. Instead, partisan orientations crystallize in adolescence and young adulthood, a period during which many people's religious attachments are at low ebb. It is somewhat later, as people begin to settle into communities and start families in their mid-twenties to mid-thirties, that they make important decisions about whether they will recommit to the faith of their youth, engage with

a new religious community, or remain disengaged from religion altogether. Because their political identifications have typically already formed by this point, their religious decisions are likely to be shaped by those commitments—especially in a polarized political environment where the parties divide along lines of obvious moral/religious salience. In other words, people will gravitate toward patterns of religious identity and behavior that reinforce their partisan attachments, and avoid those that create social and cognitive dissonance. That this phenomenon is most pronounced among those with higher levels of political knowledge (i.e., that high-information Republicans are the *most* likely to commit to theologically orthodox religious traditions, and high-information Democrats are the *most* likely to be religiously unaffiliated)—and that it is borne out in panel data, not just cross-sectionally—reinforces the persuasiveness of Margolis’ central claim.

Of course, Margolis is not the first scholar to observe that features of our current political environment can shape religious identities. Robert Putnam and David Campbell, for example, in *American Grace* (Simon & Schuster, 2010) point to the increasing politicization of evangelical Christianity as one factor driving religious disaffiliation among left-leaning young people. Margolis, however, meticulously outlines the process by which this might occur, and demonstrates empirically the circumstances under which such political influences on religion are more and less likely to manifest themselves. In that sense, she has taken this underlying intuition and fleshed it out with rich theoretical foundations and extensive empirical analysis. That is the invaluable contribution of this book.

The one area where *From Pews to Politics* leaves many questions still to be answered is religious-political linkages among racial and ethnic minority populations. Margolis does devote one significant chapter to exploring why the religio-political “sort” that she finds among whites does not occur among African Americans, ultimately concluding that black Christians’ emphasis on social justice sets them apart from white evangelicals with whom they otherwise share many religious beliefs and behaviors. This explanation is plausible, but it raises some questions. Why, for example, do Catholics—whose faith features the same combination of liberal social justice commitments and conservative views on abortion, marriage, and sexuality found in the traditional black church—sort in much the same way as white Protestants? In addition, Margolis argues that “as the United States becomes more racially, ethnically, and religiously diverse through immigration, particularly from Latin America and Asia, more Americans may have religious identities that are closely tied to ethnic or cultural groups, causing politics’ influence to wane or change” (p. 202). It is not clear, however, how

much her analysis of African American exceptionalism will apply to these immigrant groups. Would we expect Asian and Latino immigrants' religious commitments to be shaped by their politics in the same way that we observe among white Americans, or do they have distinctive theologies and/or powerful ethno-political attachments that disrupt the pattern, as they do for African Americans? Answers to these questions await future research.

That the discussion of racial minorities raises as many questions as it answers should not obscure the fundamental point: *From Pews to Politics* is a superb book that significantly advances the state of knowledge in the field. It is essential reading for anyone seeking to understand the complex interplay of religion and politics in the contemporary United States.

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