

Reversing the Causal Arrow: Politics' Influence on Religious Choices

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Decades of research has explored the political consequences of religious identities, practices, and beliefs. This article describes new research that has reversed the causal arrow to look at the religious consequences of partisanship and political outlooks. The first part of the article describes the current religious-political landscape, in which religious Americans are more likely to be Republicans and less religious Americans are more likely to be Democrats. The article then goes on to introduce key theories and findings explaining how politics helped produce this religiosity gap. After discussing avenues for future research in this area, the article switches gears to describe other ways politics can shape religious choices, including pushing evangelical Republicans out of churches and encouraging short-term fluctuations in religious engagement. The article concludes with a brief discussion of how the study of religion and politics is fundamentally different on account of politics' ability to both shape and be shaped by religion.

KEY WORDS: religion and politics, public opinion, partisanship, identity, polarization

Over 75 years ago, Lazarsfeld et al. (1948) wrote that “a person thinks, politically, as he is, socially” (p. 27). This simple idea pervades decades of research; countless scholars have shown how social identities acquire political meaning and shape how people interact with their political surroundings. Importantly, however, the relationship between social identities—how we define ourselves and how others label us—and politics is rarely as straightforward as it sometimes seems. This is certainly the case when it comes to religion.

The standard narrative, both in political science and in the popular press, is that religion shapes how citizens engage in politics. Deep-seated religious beliefs about morality and salvation drive citizens' party loyalties and opinions of candidates. New research, however, turns this narrative on its head. It finds that while religion does affect politics, politics—including partisanship and ideology—also exerts influence over how people engage with religion.

This article discusses the relatively recent explosion of political science research looking at the relationship between politics and religion through this alternative lens, namely, that politics can impact religious choices. I proceed as follows. First, I describe the current religious-political landscape using cross-sectional data from the 1970s until 2020. The data show that the religiosity gap—in which Republicans are more religious than Democrats—that emerged in the tail end of the 20th century is still alive and well today. After summarizing the expansive literature that explores religiously driven political change, I introduce a potentially unconventional explanation for the emergence of the

religiosity gap: Americans make religious decisions, in part, on account of their partisan identities. Rather than bring their political outlooks into alignment with their religious faith, Americans bring their religious faith into alignment with their political outlooks. The article then lays out the key theoretical lessons—including social identity theory, self-categorization theory, and cognitive dissonance theory—that scholars have drawn on when explaining why people align their religious identities and behaviors with their preexisting political identities. After providing a generalized description of the main theories and empirical results in this research area, I then pivot to explore more nuanced theories and themes that extend our understanding about the different ways and reasons why politics may exert influence. I conclude by discussing what this strand of research means for scholars interested in religion and politics, social networks, and polarization.

Lazarsfeld et al. (1948) wrote that people think, politically, as they are, socially. The research agenda I will describe and expand on below shows that the inverse also holds: people think, socially, as they are, politically.

Understanding the Basics: The Religious-Political Landscape

An axiom of contemporary American politics is that Republicans are religious and Democrats are less so. Indeed, religious differences across partisan identifiers—sometimes referred to as the “God gap” or religiosity gap—represents one of the “most important and enduring social cleavages in the electorate” (Bolce & De Maio, 2014, p. 48). Figure 1 uses data from the 2020 Cooperative Election Study (CES) to illustrate the current magnitude of this relationship. The top panel presents the change in probability that a respondent identifies as a Republican based on common sociodemographic indicators. The gray bars represent the full sample of respondents, while the white bars with black outlines represent the White subsample. The first set of bars looks at church attendance, in which I compare those who attend church weekly or more (making up about 26% of the sample) to those who report never attending church (making up about 30% of the sample). Being a weekly church attender increases the probability of identifying as a Republican by 0.30. Put another way, only about 25% of those who never attend church identify as a Republican compared to 55% of those who attend weekly. The relationship is even starker when looking at the White subsample (change in probability = 0.37). The larger gap likely occurs because non-White Americans are, on average, both more religious and more Democratic than their White counterparts. This is an important point to which I will return below. The second set of bars compares the 44% of Americans who report praying at least once a day to the 34% of Americans who report seldom (14%) or never (20%) praying. Here, the change in probability is 0.28 among the full sample and 0.38 among the White subsample. The third set of bars looks at religious nonidentifiers, sometimes referred to as religious “nones.” The number of religious nonidentifiers has risen steadily beginning in the 1990s, and about one-third of respondents in the 2020 CES reported no religious affiliation.¹ Religious nonidentification is also strongly associated with partisan politics. Whereas 49% of the religiously affiliated identify as Republican, only 23% of nonidentifiers do (difference = -0.25). Among the White subsample, the partisan gap between religious affiliates and nonidentifiers is once again larger (-0.32).² And finally, the fourth set of bars compares the one-quarter of respondents who report that religion “is not at all important” in their lives to the one-third of respondents who report that religion is “very important.” Among the full sample of respondents, reporting that religion is very important in their lives

¹The CCES uses Pew’s religion question which includes atheist (8%), agnostic (7%), and nothing in particular (22%) as response options. For the purposes of these analyses, I combined the three groups into one composite “none” group.

²Additionally, nonidentifiers represent the single biggest religious (or in this case, nonreligious) group within the Democratic Party. In the 2020 CES, 43% of self-identified Democrats consider themselves to be atheist (11%), agnostic (9%), or nothing in particular (23%).

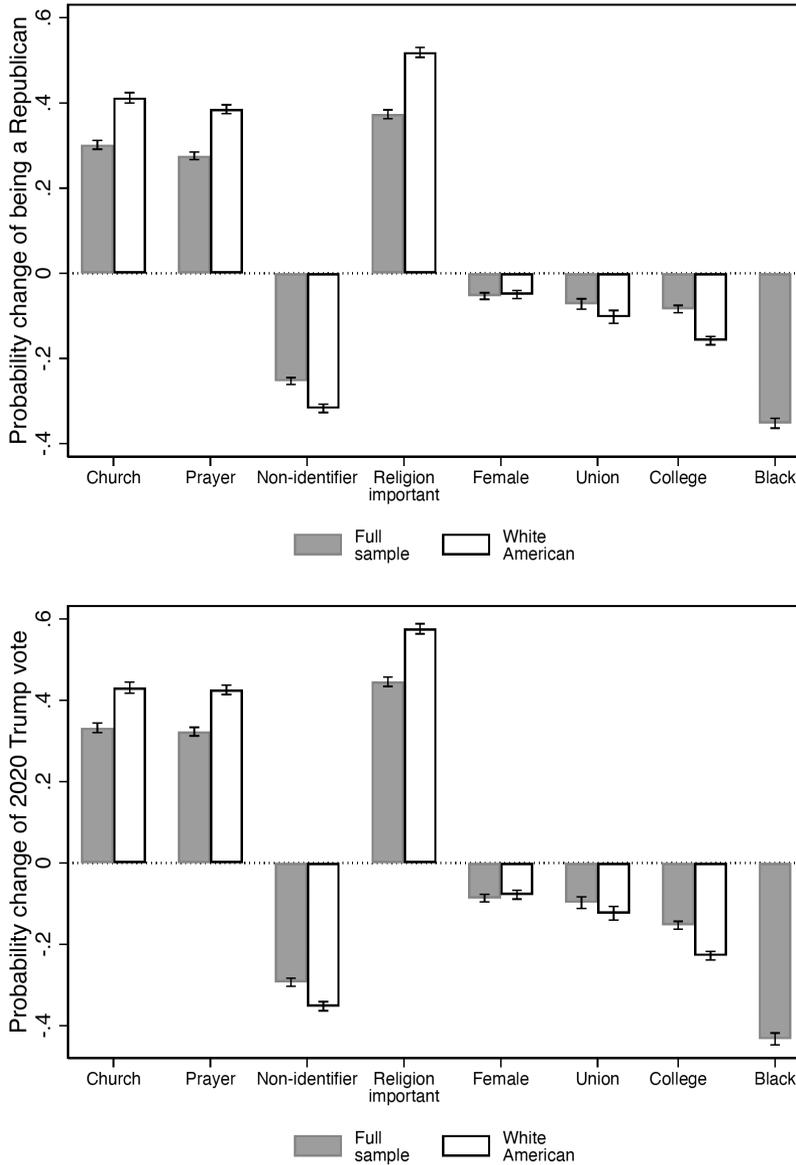


Figure 1. Demographic predictors of partisanship and vote choice. Gray bars represent the full sample of respondents; white bars represent the White subsample. *Source:* 2020 Cooperative Election Study.

corresponds to a 0.37 probability increase in identifying as a Republican compared to those for whom religion is not at all important. This gap yawns to 0.52 in the White subsample.

Are these political gaps based on religion large? Comparing the magnitude of the religious gap to other politically relevant demographic traits provides an unequivocal answer of “yes.” Looking first at the gender gap, women are about 5% less likely to identify as Republican than men. Being in a union household—that is belonging to a union or having a person in one’s household belong to a union—decreases Republican identification in both the full (–0.07) and (–0.10) White samples. Comparing education, college graduates (those with a four-year degree) are less likely to identify as a Republican compared to those who did not finish college (–0.08). Here, the “diploma divide” is

particularly stark in the White subsample (-0.16). In each of these three comparisons—gender, union, and education—there is a meaningful partisan gap that warrants scholarly and journalistic attention. These gaps, however, pale in comparison to the gaps found along religious lines. Only the racial gap—in particular, with African Americans—produces a partisan gap of a similar magnitude to that found when looking at religion. The probability of African Americans identifying as a Republican is 0.35 less than the probability of those who identify as something other than African American.³

The bottom panel replicates the results looking at vote choice in the 2020 election. Party identification is sticky, meaning that individuals may retain their party identification even if they defect in their vote. This is a particularly plausible scenario in 2020 given that President Trump was on the ballot. Here, there is stronger evidence of a gender gap, with an 8-point gap in Trump support (as opposed to a 5-point gap in Republican identification). Additionally, being a union household decreased the likelihood of supporting Trump in the 2020 election (-0.10 and -0.12). The diploma divide was quite large in the 2020 election, particularly among White Americans (difference = -0.23). And even still, these larger sociodemographic voting gaps are not as large as the voting blocs formed along religious lines, with the exception of the racial gap (-0.43).⁴

Importantly, these religiosity gaps appear even among those who share a religious tradition. Church attendance is associated with Republican identification and vote choice among Catholics, mainline Protestants, evangelical Protestants, and self-identified Christians who do not fit neatly into a category (Margolis, 2018a). The political gaps in the general sample therefore do not appear simply because one group (such as White evangelicals) are both frequent church attenders and strong Republicans. Instead, this gap appears across the broader Christian spectrum, particularly for White Christians. The research agenda explored in this article, therefore, speaks most directly to White Americans of the Christian (that is, Protestant, Catholic, or undifferentiated Christian) faith.⁵

While such a pronounced divide may lead a person to assume that the religiosity gap has been around for a long time, this gap is relatively new. The relationship between religious and political attitudes through the mid-20th century reflected the *ethnoreligious* model, in which different religious groups were aligned with the different parties (Green, 2007; Kellstedt et al., 1996). Shared ethnic and cultural features within religions produced cohesive political blocs that included both highly religious and less devout among its ranks. A religiosity gap that brings together people of different religious backgrounds who share levels of religious commitment, on the other hand, began to emerge in the 1980s and was clearly present and noticeable in survey data beginning in the 1990s.

Figure 2 draws on the General Social Survey (GSS) to show the emergence of the religiosity gap over time. The top panel plots the percentage of Democrats (black dots) and Republicans (gray squares) who report no religious identification from the 1970s until today. The figure clearly demonstrates that while there was no partisan difference in religious nonidentification throughout the 1970s and 1980s, a gap began to appear in the 1990s. While rates of nonidentification increased for both Republicans and Democrats, the increase is dramatically larger among Democrats. The right panel looks at religious engagement, measured by church attendance. Here, the vertical axis represents the percentage of Democrats and Republicans who report attending church on a regular basis, that is, weekly or more. While Republican rates of reported church attendance have remained largely stable over time—only declining slightly since 2010—Democrats' rates of attendance at religious services have plummeted.

³In a direct comparison between Black respondents and White respondents, the probability difference is -0.40 .

⁴The smallest absolute difference in 2020 vote choice is the nonidentification measure, which is -0.29 in the full sample and -0.35 in the White subsample.

⁵While I address the religiosity gap among African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Asian Americans later in the article, the research in question has little to say about the religiosity gap among non-Christian faiths. This gap in the literature is largely due to data limitations and represents an important avenue for future research.

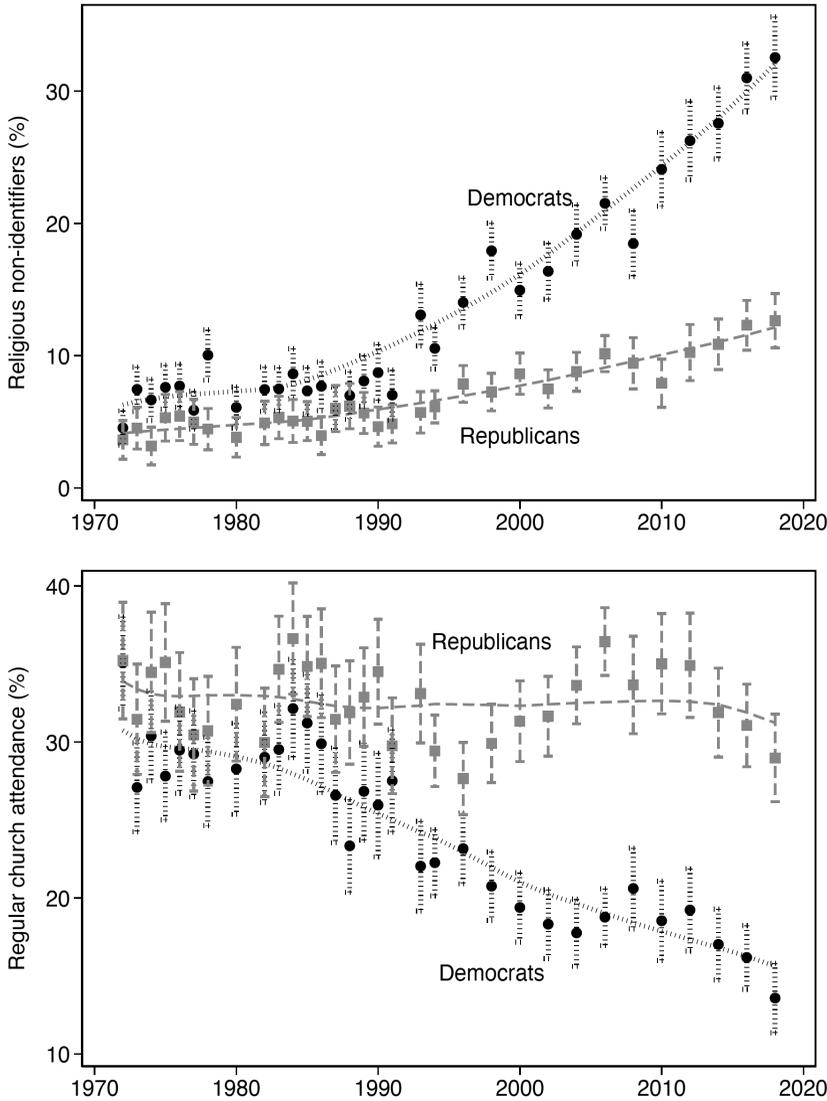


Figure 2. The religiosity gap over time. *Source:* 2020 General Social Survey.

The two panels of [Figure 2](#) not only reiterate the extent of the religiosity gap introduced in [Figure 1](#) but highlights that this gap has not been part of the American political landscape for terribly long.⁶

How Did We End Up With a Religiosity Gap?

[Figures 1](#) and [2](#) both show evidence of a religiosity gap; however, these descriptive analyses do not tell us how or why the gap appeared. I argue that the emergence of a religiosity gap occurred in

⁶Importantly, however, readers should not interpret [Figure 2](#) as evidence of an asymmetric religiosity gap in which Democrats have responded to the political landscape by moving away from organized religion while Republicans have been religiously unmoved on account of the religious-political surroundings. Repeated cross-sectional data can be misleading, and I address this in more detail in subsequent sections.

three steps. The first step is that the religious-political landscape changed dramatically and rapidly during the latter half of the 20th century. These changes include: the introduction and salience of new morally clad political issues, such as abortion, women's rights, and gay rights; conservative religious elites entering the political sphere, such as the Moral Majority; and political elites distinguishing themselves on issues related to religion and morality, with Democrats opting for more liberal standpoints and Republicans responding by promoting more conservative views.⁷ Scholars seem to agree that "religion's injection into American politics and its association with the Republican Party" (Campbell et al., 2018, p. 552), or "politicized religion" (Hout & Fischer, 2002), is what set the stage for religious-political sorting to occur.

The second step in the process is that average Americans became aware of this changing political landscape. If voters do not know that the parties take different positions on abortion or school prayer or if they do not know that conservative religious elites rally around Republican candidates, then these societal-level changes would not prompt a restructuring among average Americans. Americans do seem to meet this baseline requirement, believing that political leaders frequently discuss religion and that religious leaders are involved in politics (Campbell et al., 2020, Chap. 6), religious people and evangelicals (nonreligious people and seculars) are more likely to be Republicans (Democrats) than Democrats (Republicans) (Campbell et al., 2011; Claassen et al., 2021), and the Republican Party is "friendlier" to organized religion than the Democratic Party (Margolis, 2018a, Chap. 3). Moreover, there is some evidence of a fused evangelical-Republican identity, meaning that Americans—specifically, nonevangelicals and non-Republicans, perceive a single identity with a religious and political component rather than two separate identities (Patrikios, 2013). Taken together, the political landscape changed, and many Americans have recognized this shift, thereby setting the stage for religious sorting to occur.

The third step in the process is that Americans brought their religious and political outlooks into alignment. The direction of this realignment, however, is not obvious. For decades, scholars believed that the realignment occurred because Americans updated their political attachments and candidate preferences to comport with their preexisting religious commitments. In other words, the explanation assumed that after Americans became aware of the changes to the political landscape, less religious Americans became Democrats and their more religious counterparts became Republicans. This makes intuitive sense if you consider politics to be this thing people tolerate or pay little attention to, while you believe that religion deals with the eternal state of one's soul. The religion and politics subfield made these assumptions and subsequently demonstrated the many ways religious identification, practice, and beliefs affected political attitudes (Greeley, 1993; Guth et al., 1995; Jelen, 1988, 2017; Whitley, 2009), partisanship (Green, 2007; Kellstedt & Green, 1993; Kohut et al., 2000; Layman, 1997; McDaniel & Ellison, 2008), and vote choice (Green, 2007; Layman, 1997; Olson & Green, 2006; Smidt et al., 2010). Despite the volume of research in this area, scholars did not test the validity of the unidirectional assumption. Instead, much of the research explaining the emergence of the religiosity gap relied on cross-sectional data, such as the data used to produce Figures 1 and 2, and took as a given that religious independent variables affected political dependent variables. More recently, however, scholars have called the underlying unidirectional assumption into question and started exploring the reverse relationship: Partisans, starting as early as the 1970s, might have also been updating their religious commitments to be in line with their preexisting political outlooks. This article will focus on the relationship in which politics affects religion.

⁷See Putnam and Campbell (2010) for a more detailed discussion of the changes to the religious-political environment starting in the 1960s.

Before describing the research in this fledgling field, I take a short detour to define terms and explain how scholars employ language when writing about the relationship between religion and politics. First, scholars exploring this specific line of inquiry generally conceptualize *religion* as a social phenomenon that is something “born and nurtured among groups of people” (Iannaccone, 1994, p. 1183). In doing so, scholars have been predominantly interested in religious engagement, often measured through church attendance (Margolis, 2018a; Patrikios, 2008); the willingness to take on a religious label, thereby identifying with a religious group and as a group member (Campbell et al., 2020; Egan, 2020; Hout & Fischer, 2002, 2014; Margolis, 2018a, 2018b); and decisions surrounding which churches to join or leave (Djupe, Neiheisel, & Sokhey, 2017, 2018). Therefore, the current politics-affecting-religion research refers specifically to politics' ability to shape the *social* component of religion associated with group membership and participation.⁸

Second, the *politics* in “politics affects religion” incorporates two key features—the political landscape and individual political identities. First, the political landscape, described above, is a key part of any religious-political sorting story. Without religious (political) concerns becoming relevant in the political (religious) sphere, average Americans would not have cues to draw on when making religious or political choices. Second, scholars have focused largely on Americans' self-reported partisanship (Campbell et al., 2020; Margolis, 2018a), ideology (Hout & Fischer, 2002, 2014), or both (Egan, 2020; Patrikios, 2008) when looking for evidence of politically driven religious change. Newer research has also focused on evaluations of Donald Trump (Djupe et al., 2017) and the Christian Right (Djupe, Neiheisel, & Sokhey, 2018) in order to explore variation in religious choices among Republicans. I refer to this constellation of political variables as *political outlooks*, but I use more precise language when describing specific empirical findings. As will become evident in the sections that follow, both the political landscape and partisan/ideological identities jointly influence Americans' religious choices. With these key terms under our belts, we can now pivot to a discussion of when, why, and how politics may shape religion.

How and Why Might Politics Shape Religious Identities and Engagement?

The entire endeavor of exploring whether, to what extent, and how politics can affect religious identities and behaviors is premised on the idea that religion is, in fact, changeable. This claim seems far-fetched to some and certainly antithetical to a great deal of canonical public opinion research that takes religious group membership as fixed and causally prior to politics (Berelson et al., 1954; Campbell et al., 1960). Sociologists, however, have long documented individual-level change in religiosity and religious identification over time (Argue et al., 1999; Chaves, 1991; Hadaway & Roof, 1988; Hoge, Johnson, & Luidens, 1993, 1995; Newport, 1979; Schleifer & Chaves, 2017; Sherkat & Wilson, 1995; Smith & Snell, 2009; Stolzenberg et al., 1995; Stump, 1984; Wilson & Sherkat, 1994), and it was a pair of sociologists who first raised the possibility that politics might be a driver of religious change.

All the research discussed in this article stands on Hout and Fischer's (2002, 2014) shoulders. In brief, the authors use General Social Survey (GSS) data to show increased rates of religious

⁸Scholars can interpret religious change as evidence of changing identities and behaviors in a literal sense or as a more subjective measure that captures feelings of closeness toward religion or a person's idealized level of religious engagement. Either interpretation, however, offers insight into a person's evaluations of and toward religion. It is also possible that religious-political sorting occurs on account of social desirability bias. Importantly, this bias could work in both directions—encouraging religious and nonreligious people to report certain political views or encouraging partisans to report certain religious behaviors. That said, even evidence of religiously driven political sorting or politically driven religious sorting that comes about because of social desirability bias is informative. It means that, at the very least, misaligned cognitions (to borrow the term from Festinger, 1957) in this realm are strong enough to create dissonance that people want resolved when answering survey questions. See Margolis (2018a, Chap. 3) for more complete discussion about interpreting religious change in survey research.

nonidentification—that is, reporting to be a religious “none” or nothing in particular—occurred chiefly among political liberals and moderates. Their politicized-religion hypothesis claims that the power and prominence of the Christian Right in American politics serve as an impetus for Americans on the political left to leave organized religion.⁹ Aggregate trends follow suit: Rates of religious nonidentification climbed during the 2000s to a larger extent in Republican states and when the Christian Right was in the public eye compared to Democratic states and when culture war battles waned (Djupe, Neihsel, & Conger, 2018).

Scholars have since refined and extended this original argument about how and why politics affects religion. In particular, researchers relied on political psychology and public opinion lessons in order to make theoretical sense of what seemed to be an empirical reality. The next section begins by introducing the common theoretical underpinnings in the politics-affects-religion research and then goes on to describe more nuanced theories and findings that have emerged in this area.

Understanding Partisan-Driven Religious Sorting

In order for partisanship and the political environment to affect religious choices, partisanship must be a strong identity—strong enough to shape decisions about community ties in the here-and-now as well as possibly what lies ahead for people after death. To make this point, scholars frequently draw on the ever-growing literature that looks at partisanship through the lens of social identity theory (SIT) (Tajfel, 1970; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In brief, holding a partisan identity is a psychological expression of group membership (Campbell et al., 1960) and is akin to being part of a team—a person roots for their team, is disappointed when their team loses, remains loyal to the team, and feels both an affinity toward others on the team and antipathy for those who are not (Green et al., 2002). Consequently, partisan identities go far beyond reflecting political outlooks, and even go beyond shaping political outlooks (Lenz, 2012; Levendusky, 2009): Partisanship is a social identity in its own right (Greene, 1999, 2004; Huddy et al., 2015). And this identity affects partisans’ attitudes, emotions, and behaviors, even in seemingly apolitical situations (Devine, 2015; Gerber & Huber, 2009, 2010; Huber & Malhotra, 2017; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Lelkes & Westwood, 2017; Mason, 2015; 2018b; McConnell et al., 2018).

Applying these theoretical framework to the question of politics affecting religion, Patrikios (2008), Campbell et al. (2018), Margolis (2018a), and Egan (2020) all operate under the assumption that partisanship and ideology operate as central social identities.¹⁰ Self-categorization theory (SCT) (Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Hogg & Terry, 2000; Turner, 1975; Turner et al., 1987), a related extension of SIT, then explains how individuals may update their reported religious identities (as in the case of Campbell et al. (2018), Campbell et al. (2020), Margolis (2018a) and Egan (2020)), levels of religious participation (as in the case of Patrikios (2008) and Margolis (2018a, 2018b)), and beliefs (as in the case of Campbell et al. (2018), Campbell et al. (2020)) in light of their political identities. The logic here is that group members look to group standards or prototypical group members for guidance about behavior (Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Turner et al., 1987). In other words, once partisans (or ideologues) see themselves as group members, they take cues from their environment on how a group member behaves. By doing so, group members ensure not only that they adhere to ingroup standards but also distinguish themselves from members of the out-party who adhere to a different set of standards.

⁹“The Christian Right” is an umbrella term that includes both religious elites and those who are sympathetic to a culturally conservative political agenda, including “family values” and “religious freedom” (Djupe et al. 2018, p. 911).

¹⁰And, as noted above, scholars have used both partisan identification as well as ideological identification when empirically analyzing the data, suggesting that both partisanship (Green et al., 2002; Iyengar et al., 2012) and ideology (Malka & Lelkes, 2010; Mason, 2018a) represent group identities that can be harnessed to produce change in reported religious identities.

Once a person has a social identity that is imbued with value and tied to one's self-esteem, scholars suggest that the person will feel cognitive dissonance if the identity conflicts with another identity or behavior. In brief, cognitive dissonance theories argue that individuals want cognitive consistency and make changes—including beliefs, actions, values, or attitudes—in order to minimize feelings of dissonance (Cooper, 2019; Festinger, 1957; Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959; McKimmie, 2015).¹¹ In this case, it means that individuals do not want to feel politically isolated while at church, do not want to deal with the tensions stemming from holding two identities that seem to be at odds with each other, and would rather not cope with discomfort stemming from certain actions or beliefs going against group norms. When faced with such a tension, people may update their religious outlooks (including both identities and behaviors), political outlooks, or both.

SIT and SCT, coupled with cognitive dissonance theories, together predict that political outlooks, including partisanship and ideology, *can* influence religious choices; however, the direction of the relationship depends on the cues from the political landscape. As the relationship between religious conservatism and GOP politics became linked during the latter half of the 20th century (Putnam & Campbell, 2010), and average citizens came to recognize (Campbell et al., 2011, 2020; Margolis, 2018a; Patrikios, 2013) and even overestimate (Ahler, 2018; Ahler & Sood, 2018; Claassen et al., 2021) this relationship, the social-psychological theories predict that Democrats (Republicans) may feel pushed out of (pulled toward) organized religion on account of the cues they receive. And indeed, this is precisely what multiple researchers have found. For example, Patrikios (2008) finds an association between partisanship and changing levels of church attendance among evangelicals in the 1990s and 2000s, but he does not find that association in the 1970s. This, according to Patrikios, is likely to be due to the “absence of partisan polarization during that period. That is, the 1970s were still a time when evangelical support for the GOP was not yet salient, and the Christian Right had not emerged as a major force in American elections” (p. 383). Additionally, party-induced religious sorting occurs during times when the linkage between religious conservatism and Republican politics is in the political spotlight, but not when the relationship is less salient (Margolis, 2018a) or when religion is used as a tool on the political left (Campbell et al., 2020). All told, cues in the environment play a crucial role in producing religious-political sorting.

SIT and SCT offer a well-trodden theoretical path for researchers to use when exploring the relationship between political and religious identities, but these theories alone do not tell the full story. Focusing on individual differences, varying contexts, and distinct environments are also crucial to understanding if, when, how, and why politics affects religion.¹² Moreover, incorporating individualized context into theories can produce predictions that go beyond Republicans becoming more religious and Democrats becoming less so. In other words, while SIT and SCT may offer a common theoretical framework for much of the findings in this field, the research in this area also relies on other theories and ideas in order to provide a more complete picture of when, why, and for whom this relationship emerges. Below I detail some of the specific ideas and

¹¹Festinger (1957) notes that “new events may happen or new information may become known to a person, creating at least a momentary dissonance with existing knowledge, opinion, or cognition concerning behavior. Since a person does not have complete and perfect control over the information that reaches him and over events that can happen in his environment, such dissonances may easily arise” (p. 4). Applying this argument to the current discussion, the changing religious-political landscape is a crucial first step in dissonance arising at the individual level.

¹²Indeed, an important implicit critique of SIT is that an identity's salience may vary depending on the situation or context (see Huddy, 2013). Viewpoints and outlooks can shift in response to which of a person's many identities are salient at a particular point in time (Klar, 2013) or the specific context or environment in which a person finds oneself (Druckman et al., 2021; Klar 2014).

findings that come out of this literature, noting their implications as well as avenues for future research along the way.

When Is Partisan-Driving Sorting Most Likely to Take Place? Taking Stock of Where People Are in Their Lives Helps Explain Partisan-Driven Religious Sorting

When might the political landscape shape a partisans' choices about religious identification and practices? Are partisan identities always strong enough to induce such changes, or are there times when politically driven religious change is more likely to occur? Knowing a person's life stage can help answer these questions (Margolis, 2018a, 2018b). In particular, the timings of a person's religious and political socialization produce a window during which time we might expect politics to exert an influence on religious decision-making.

To more fully explain this argument, I will briefly describe both the religious and political socialization literatures. First, the religious-socialization literature notes that the process begins in childhood, during which time kids have very little agency over their religious decisions. Parents decide whether to enroll children in religious school or whether to attend church on Sunday. But upon reaching adolescence, it is common for individuals to assert control over their religiosity, which often includes distancing themselves from both the religion in which they were raised and religious practice in general. This pattern holds across different religious communities, varying degrees of closeness with family, and among both Democrats and Republicans (Arnett & Jensen, 2002; Desmond et al., 2010; Hoge, 1981; Hoge, Johnson, & Luidens, 1993, 1995; Koenig et al., 2008; Margolis, 2018a; Myers, 1996; Petts, 2009; Smith & Snell, 2009; Uecker et al., 2007).¹³ People, however, do not stay on the outskirts of religion indefinitely. Many choose to come back upon reaching adulthood—which sociologists note often coincides with starting a family. When people have children, they are encouraged to decide about their own religious involvement as they make decisions about how they want to raise their children. While not everyone who falls away from religion returns, this is the time period in which a return is most likely to take place and represents a time when people actively make choices regarding their religious involvement. After making a reentrance (or not) into religion during this time, religious identification and engagement are then more stable relative to previous points in a person's life. Put more plainly, the strength and salience of religious identities fluctuate over the life course. This presents an opportunity for political identities to exert influence.

Conversely, the political-socialization literature, in particular the "impressionable years" hypothesis (Sears, 1975; Sears & Brown, 2013; Sears & Funk, 1999), shows that partisanship develops during adolescence and young adulthood and then remains quite stable throughout one's life.¹⁴ Despite changing political fortunes and environments, individual-level partisan identity remains strikingly stable over long periods of time (Green et al., 2002). The resultant partisanship also operates as a strong social identity (Greene, 1999, 2004; Mason, 2015), affecting both political and apolitical attitudes and behaviors (Bartels, 2006; Gerber & Huber, 2009, 2010; Huddy et al., 2015; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Keele, 2005; Sances & Stewart, 2015). To reiterate, partisan identity develops in young adulthood, remains stable through adulthood, and has been shown to be quite powerful.

¹³Sociologists have found multiple structural, developmental, and psychological explanations for the move away from religion, including (but not limited to): changing circumstances and environments as adolescents go to college or enter the workforce that disrupt long-standing religious ties (Hoge et al., 1993; Smith & Snell, 2009); the desire to assert one's independence, particularly from one's parents (Arnett & Jensen, 2002); and to mitigate cognitive dissonance that arises due to experimentation with drinking, drugs, and premarital sex (Bryant et al., 2003; Engs & Mullen, 1999; Smith & Snell, 2009; Uecker et al., 2007).

¹⁴Because the political-socialization literature focuses on partisan identity rather than ideology, the theoretical expectations and empirical approach both focus on how partisanship shapes religious decision-making. Exploring the development of ideology as a social identity would be a natural extension of this theory.

The importance of these two socialization processes is the timing. For many, partisan identification solidifies during a time when religion is a less important feature in life. This means that when individuals come to a point when they need to make decisions for themselves and their families—whether or not to join a church, send kids to Sunday school, baptize children, etc.—these individuals are making these choices against the backdrop of many identities and beliefs, including a solidified party identification. And in striving for internal consonance, partisan identity can help guide these religious choices. In contrast, those with solidified religious identities—those who already made religious choices for themselves and their families—are less likely to update their religious outlooks on account of politics.

A key contribution of the life-cycle theory is that the expectations are not predicated on the current religious-political environment. Instead, the theory predicts *who* the religious-political environment is most likely to impact. The bulk of the empirics testing the life-cycle theory, which I discuss in more detail below, focuses on Republicans (Democrats) becoming more (less) religious in response to the changing political landscape during the latter part of the 20th century. But the life-cycle theory is agnostic as to how religious identities come into alignment with politics. Instead, the theory focuses on predicting which *types* of people will be more receptive to politics influencing their religious engagement. This means that the theory is generalizable and can be transported to different environments. For instance, church attendance also changed among Catholic and Protestant partisans in response to John F. Kennedy, a Catholic, being the Democratic nominee for President in 1960 in ways consistent with the life-cycle theory (Margolis, 2018a, Chap. 8). As the parties evolve and new issues emerge, the life-cycle theory generates predictions about whose religious identities are most likely to change in response to the political environment.

While the life-cycle theory offers testable expectations about when partisanship is most likely to influence religious choices and labeling, it does not offer a complete theory about the relationship between religion and politics. Most notably, when might we expect religion to be the more salient identity and shape political outcomes? The next logical step in this line of research is therefore to systematically generate expectations about the *reciprocal* relationship between religion and politics. When might religious identities be more salient than political identities and behaviors? Identifying when we should expect politics to affect religion and when we should expect religion to affect politics will offer a more complete picture of the relationship.

Why Does Partisan-Driven Religious Sorting Occur? Both Politicized Religion and Religiously Infused Politics Can Bring About Partisan-Driven Religious Sorting

The beginning of the article describes a host of changes to the religious and political environments during the latter part of the 20th century, including religion entering the political sphere and politics entering the religious sphere. This raises the question about what is actually producing politically driven religious change. Are individuals reacting to politicians employing religious rhetoric and trying to use religion to their political advantage? Or are they reacting to religious leaders invoking politics? In both cases, the lines between religion and politics are blurred, but in different ways. Campbell et al. (2020) tackle this precise question, showing the existence of a “political backlash,” namely, an increase in a Democrat’s likelihood of reporting being a “religious none” in two experiments: one in which a local pastor delves into the political world and one in which candidates for elected office draw on religion as part of their campaign for office. In both cases, Democrats responded to the linkages between religion and conservative politics by separating themselves from organized faith. Importantly, however, Democrats do not always distance themselves from religion. When the link is made between religion and political progressivism, there is no evidence of a religious exodus among Democrats. Margolis (2018, Chap. 6) similarly finds that when religious cues are embedded in a conservative (antireform) immigration advertisement, Democrats subsequently report weaker religious ties; however, a progressive (proreform) immigration advertisement has no

detectable effect on responses to questions tapping into participants' strength of religious identification. Democrats do not react against religion playing any role in the public sphere, just a right-leaning role. These studies represent a crucial first step in understanding what exactly produces religious change. Elite-level cues, however, do not represent the only potential mechanism.

Future research can continue to probe the various ways (and at various levels) in which religion and politics are linked in order to further our understanding about what aspects of the religious-political experience matter. For example, scholars should pay attention to the types of people Americans' *think* make up the two parties. I previously discussed that Americans are aware of the fact that there is a religiosity gap, and many actually overestimate the size of key religious groups in the two parties (Ahler & Sood, 2018; Claassen et al., 2021). These misperceptions are consequential because they affect both feelings about the parties (Ahler & Sood, 2018) and strength of identification with the parties (Claassen et al., 2021). If, however, individuals feel pressure to adopt group norms or behave as prototypical group members, as SCT suggests, then these exaggerated perceptions regarding the religiosity gap may be another mechanism through which partisan-driven religious change occurs. Relatedly, elite-level actions may have produced an environment ripe for individual-level sorting, but interpersonal pressures and local network ties may actually be the key drivers producing dissonance and prompting change. In other words, the elite cues may be necessary but not sufficient for politically driven religious change. Future research can and should explore at what level the tension is most likely to influence individuals' decisions.

For Whom Does Politics Affect Religious Decisions? Politics Can Shape Both Democrats' and Republicans' Levels of Religious Engagement

A key—but incomplete—focus in the politics-affects-religion research is that politics pushes those on the political left out of organized religion. The attention is warranted given the dramatic rise in religious nonidentification in the United States starting in the 1990s. Indeed, this trend is what sparked Hout and Fischer's (2002) interest, which resulted in their groundbreaking article. While the authors explored multiple explanations for the sharp increase of religious “nones,” the authors found evidence that it was political liberals who were disproportionately represented among this growing group. This comports with the church-attendance findings in Figure 2: Democrats have become less religious while Republicans' average level of church attendance has remained steady. Additionally, Campbell et al.'s (2018, 2020) recent research—by virtue of focusing on secularism—emphasizes the political causes of increasing secularism, which has occurred on the political left. While these findings are crucial to our understanding about the relationship between religion and politics, it would be a mistake to assume that politics' effect on American religion relates solely to Democrats leaving the religious fold. To make this argument, I first describe findings showing that politics can increase reported levels of religiosity and deepen religious ties among Republicans. In doing so, these results also offer empirical corroboration of the life-cycle theory described above. I then zoom out to discuss broader theoretical and empirical considerations for researchers to consider in this domain.

The same changes to the political landscape that have been said to push Democrats away from religion can also be credited with pulling some Republicans deeper in to the religious fold or, at the very least, stemming the tide of secularization. Take, for example, what happened in the 1970s and 1980s. During this period, we see the elite-level changes described in the previous sections take hold, so that everyday Americans were being exposed to elite rhetoric and behaviors that link organized religion and conservative politics together. If this is when elite-level changes took place, this is a good place to look for individual-level change as well. I do this using the Youth-Parent Socialization Panel (YPSP), which tracks a cohort of 18-year-olds in 1965, along with their parents, from their senior year of high school all the way through adulthood. The results suggest that as long as there has been evidence of a religiosity, or God, gap in American politics, part of the explanation for the gap has been political.

The data reveal four distinct patterns. First, Democratic and Republican respondents alike (at aged 18 in 1965) became less religious in the seven years after high school. This finding tracks with the life-cycle theory described above: Young adults distanced themselves from religion, measured by church attendance, religious nonidentification, and Biblical literalism. Importantly, however, there was no partisan dimension to this dip in religiosity. After interviewing respondents in 1973—when they were 25 years old—the political landscape began to change in ways previously described.¹⁵ And it is between the 1973 and 1982 survey waves (when these one-time high school seniors were now 35 years old) when initial evidence of a partisan-driven religious gap appears. The data, however, do not show Democrats leaving religion during this time. Instead, I find that Republicans were increasing their rates of religious participation—measured through religious identification, church attendance, membership in a church group, and Biblical liberalism—in the years between 1973 and 1982, which represents the second empirical pattern. Put another way, while 1965 partisanship did not predict the generalized decline in religiosity between 1965 and 1973, 1973 partisanship strongly predicted religiosity between 1973 and 1982, with Republicans becoming more religious than Democrats during this time. This relationship holds even after accounting for socioeconomic indicators as well religious upbringing.¹⁶ This makes sense in light of the life-cycle theory. Almost everyone in this cohort was married, and many became parents to school-aged children during the 1973–82 window. Members of this cohort were therefore making religious decisions during this time. And with the changing religious-political landscape, the first evidence of partisan-driven religious sorting comes in the form of Republicans returning to religion at higher rates than Democrats. The third empirical finding is that this partisan-driven gap that emerges between 1973 and 1982 is still evident in 1997, when this cohort is 50 years old. In other words, Republicans (measured in 1973) became more religious compared to Democrats, and they were still more religious 15 years later. And fourth, while partisanship predicted change in levels of religiosity and religious identification among the student cohort, levels of religious engagement did not change among the students' parents, who were also interviewed in 1965, 1973, and 1982. These latter two empirical findings corroborate the religious-socialization literature that finds religious identities and levels of participation are more stable later in adulthood. Together, these findings suggest that (1) partisanship exerted an influence that pulled Republicans toward religion at precisely the time that the socialization literatures would predict; and (2) politics shaped Americans' religious decisions during the period when scholars first identified and attributed associations between religiosity and political outcomes to religion's influence.¹⁷

¹⁵Between the 1973 and 1982 survey waves, the political landscape shifted dramatically. For example, abortion transformed from being an issue on which there was a great deal of intraparty heterogeneity in viewpoints to being an issue on which the Democratic (Republican) Party became the pro-choice (pro-life) party. Whereas Jimmy Carter—a Southerner and a Democrat—became the first “born-again president” in 1976, many evangelicals supported Ronald Reagan in the 1980 election. The Moral Majority—founded by Jerry Falwell in 1978—came to prominence and was seen as a key mobilizer for the Republican Party. And while the Democratic Party did not take liberal stances (based on today's understanding), the party had moved in the direction of being more open to alternative lifestyles during the 1970s (Layman, 2001).

¹⁶A key benefit of the YPSP data is that they provide measures of religiosity for both the youth and parent cohorts in 1965, when the youth cohort still lived at home. These measures allow for us to control for religious upbringing (and not a post hoc recollection of religious upbringing) in empirical analyses. This is important because one's religious upbringing is a key predictor of religiosity in adulthood, and it may be associated with the development of party identification. Additionally, levels of religiosity in 1973 are uncorrelated with change in partisan identification or presidential vote choice between 1973 and 1982. Among this cohort, therefore, there is no evidence of a reciprocal relationship; rather, only a relationship in which partisanship affects reported rates of religious engagement.

¹⁷A careful reader may ask why the YPSP data shows evidence of politically driven sorting in the 1970s and 1980s while the cross-sectional data from Figure 2 do not show a religiosity gap until the 1980s and 1990s. The response, once again, has to do with the life-cycle theory. The life-cycle theory shows evidence of partisanship affecting religious decisions *among a certain subset of individuals*, namely those with young children who are in the process of making religious decisions for themselves and their families. It therefore takes time, in the form of generational replacement, to see correlational evidence of a religiosity gap in a full sample of Americans. Looking at cross-sectional data from the early 1980s provides evidence in support of this claim; there is evidence of a relatively large religiosity gap among Americans who have young children at home (0.21 bivariate correlation) but a much smaller gap among older Americans (0.07), producing a weaker overall correlation in the full sample.

The YPSP data, while rich, represents one cohort at only a few points in time; however, other panel data reveal a similar pattern in which partisanship exerts both a push away from and a pull toward religion. Patrikios (2008) finds that, among white evangelicals, ideological conservatives increased their reported rates of church attendance over time compared to liberals. More specifically, he finds evidence of this pattern in panel data from a 4-year period in the 1990s and another 4-year window in the 2000s.^{18,19} Experiments similarly reveal that political cues can change religious responses among both Democrats and Republicans. For example, when partisanship is primed—that is, when a person’s political identity is brought to the top of the mind—Democrats report weaker levels of religious identification and Republicans report stronger levels (2018a, Chap. 5).²⁰ These findings suggest that even a subtle political prime can influence partisans’ subjective evaluations about and towards organized religion.

While the above results convey that the current nexus between religion and politics *can* produce both a push away and a pull toward religion, more research should be done with careful attention paid to uncovering when and to what extent an asymmetric relationship exists. Understanding the presence and strength of asymmetry is a thorny methodological question for a few reasons. First, religious nonidentification—measured as a binary of whether or not people identify with a religious faith or identify as a “none”—artificially produces the appearance of asymmetry. This is because the overwhelming majority of Republicans identify with a religious faith. A binary religious identification (or nonidentification) measure therefore can result in a ceiling effect in which it appears as though Republicans’ relationship with religion is unchanged on account of politics, whereas Democrats’ relationships have changed. Campbell et al. (2018, 2020), for example, do not find that their experimental treatments—which blend religion and politics in various ways—affect Republicans’ religious identities. But if well over 80% of Republicans identify with a faith (82% in the CCES; 87% in the GSS), it would be difficult to see evidence of a pull toward religion. Alternative measures are better able to identify potential changes. For example, asking follow-up questions based on a person’s initial religious identification captures variation in strength and recognizes that identifying with a faith (or not) may not be stable (Lim et al., 2010). In particular, after asking the standard religious identification question, religious identifiers can answer an additional question asking whether they identify as a weak or strong religious identifier while religious nonidentifiers can indicate whether or not they feel closer to one religion over another. By borrowing lessons from the party identification literature, the resultant 4-point scale of religious identification is able to identify variation in religious identity to a greater extent than a binary response. Relatedly, measures of church attendance and community participation—whether conceived of as accurate measures of engagement or subjective feelings of closeness—offer greater variation among partisans.²¹ The difference in measurement strategy may explain why there is no experimental evidence of Republicans becoming more likely to identify with a religion (Campbell et al., 2018, 2020), but there is experimental evidence of Republicans strengthening their religious identities (Margolis, 2018a, Chap. 5,

¹⁸As noted previously, Patrikios (2008) does not find a political influence on church attendance among white evangelicals in the middle 1970s, due to the “absence of partisan polarization during that period” (p. 383).

¹⁹Also using the ANES panel data from the 2000s, I find that the increased salience of gay marriage as a political issue coupled with increased news coverage reporting on religious divisions between the political parties corresponds with changing levels of reported church attendance in the early 2000s, specifically among partisans with school-aged children. Conversely, I do not find evidence of partisan-driven religious change among respondents with grown children. This pair of findings comports with the theoretical expectations from the life-cycle theory. In this case, however, the decline among Democrats was steeper than the corresponding increase. I once again find evidence in support of the life-cycle theory and of religious polarization occurring in both directions; however, the results in this case were not symmetric.

²⁰This is true particularly among respondents with school-aged children at home, which further reinforces the expectations from the life-cycle theory.

²¹For example, 36% of Republicans attend church weekly or more while 40% report attending “seldom” or “never.” And while 38% of Democrats report never attending church, 26% attend at least month per month. While Republicans are certainly more religious than Democrats, Democrats are not uniformly secular and Republicans are not uniformly devout.

2018b) and panel data showing that Republicans' reported levels of church attendance increase over time (Margolis, 2018a, 2018b; Patrikios, 2008). Understanding the political causes of Democrats becoming "nones" is important; however, these findings should not be automatically interpreted as asymmetric shifts.

A second reason why measuring asymmetry is difficult is because of the proverbial dog that does not bark. Even as levels of religiosity have declined in the Western world—the United States included (Inglehart, 2021)—American Republicans appear immune to this global shift. It is possible, if not likely, that politics is part of the story that has kept these Americans engaged with religion. In other words, in the absence of the religious-political nexus in the United States, some religious Republicans might have experienced a decline in their levels of religious engagement. In this case, the cross-sectional stability (or gentle increases) in religiosity that scholars have found among Republicans are misleading; The religious and political landscapes have actually helped produce the observed stability. Taking these two points together—ceiling effects in religious identification and politically induced stability—can produce incomplete empirical results, including those presented in Figure 2. Researchers should take care in their measurement and research decisions in order to identify political effects that masquerade as stability.

Finally, there is also additional evidence that politics affects Republicans' reported religious decisions—namely in the areas of church membership (Djupe, Neihsel, & Sokhey, 2017, 2018), religious participation, and frequency of prayer (Margolis, 2016). Because the theoretical setup of this research is not about Republicans becoming more religious and Democrats becoming less so, I have not delved into these empirics yet. The sections that follow, however, will explain this research in detail and will reiterate that these results demonstrate that Republicans are not immune from politics affecting their religious outlooks. These findings also serve as a reminder that researchers should choose theoretically grounded outcome variables in order to successfully measure partisan-induced religious change.

For Whom Does Politics Affect Religious Decisions? Political Engagement Plays a Key Role in Politically Induced Religious Sorting

Political engagement and interest are an important, and insidious, part of the story in which politics affects religion. In order for self-selection into (or out of) organized religion or certain churches to take place, individuals must be aware of the cues pushing them in one direction over another. As discussed above, scholars have shown that Americans, on average, have enough awareness about the religious-political landscape for the political environment to exert an influence (Ahler & Sood, 2018; Campbell et al., 2011, 2020; Claassen et al., 2021; Margolis, 2018b). That said, we should not assume that everyone has the requisite amount of awareness or a desire to bring their identities into alignment. Perhaps not surprisingly then, scholars have found that the politically induced religious sorting described in the previous sections largely takes place among politically engaged partisans. For example, the perception of a fused evangelical-Republican identity is stronger among politically interested survey respondents, "a possible product of greater exposure to the simplistic stereotype that dominates American politics" (Patrikios, 2013, p. 817). Moreover, party identification drives changes in reported levels of secularism or religiosity when partisans "see evangelicals as primarily Republican and perceive a lot of religious talk in the political environment" (Campbell et al., 2018, p. 563) or have moderate to high levels of political interest or knowledge (Margolis, 2018a, Chap. 6). To offer a more concrete example, I return briefly to the YPSP discussion from above. Politically knowledgeable Republicans returned to church between 1973 and 1982 at higher rates compared to Republicans with lower levels of knowledge. The converse is true among Democrats; Democrats with higher levels of political knowledge were less likely to return to church compared to their less knowledgeable political

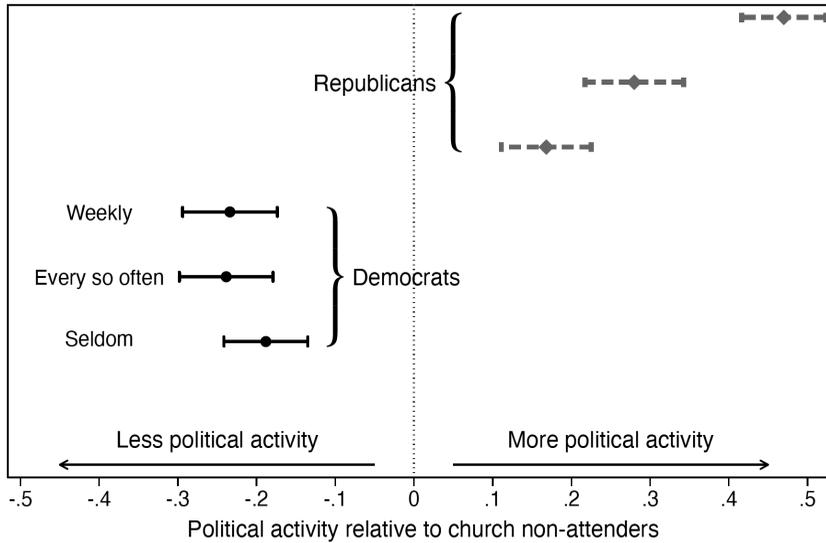


Figure 3. Political engagement varies by partisanship and church attendance. *Source:* 2020 Cooperative Election Study.

compatriots. This is a consistent finding in all the research discussed up until this point: The politically engaged, knowledgeable, and aware (depending on researchers' exact measurement) sorted to a greater extent compared to those with lower levels of political engagement, knowledge, and awareness. This is because group norms cannot exert pressure and cognitive dissonance cannot be felt if people do not know how they *should* be feeling or behaving. Individuals without the awareness that Democrat (Republican) means less (more) religious will not face the psychological tension that is necessary to encourage them to update their religious or political outlooks.

Notably, political engagement is not simply an important moderator for researchers to take into account; it has real consequences for politics. Since politically engaged Republicans become more religious on account of politics and politically engaged Democrats become less religious on account of politics, then it follows that Republicans who attend church regularly are more politically engaged than Republicans who do not attend church, while Democrats who attend church regularly are less politically engaged than Democrats who do not attend church (Margolis, 2018a, Chap. 6). In other words, who is in the pews varies both by partisanship and political engagement, and this has implications for how we study political mobilization and religion's influence on politics.

The correlational relationship between partisanship, church attendance, and political engagement—presented in Figure 3—illustrates a key consequence of the religious sorting described. The left part of the figure (black circles) presents results from a simple regression model testing the correlation between church attendance and political participation for self-identified Democrats. I created a political-activity measure using an additive scale of seven activities including: voting; attending a local political meeting; putting up a political sign; working for a candidate or campaign; attending a political protest, march or demonstration; contacting a public official; and donating money to a candidate, campaign, or political organization.²² The point estimates represent the average difference in political activity at each level of church attendance relative to respondents who report never attending church. Among Democrats, attending church with any regularity—even seldom attenders—report *less* political activity compared to Democrats who report never attending. While

²²The mean number of activities is 1.43, and the modal number of activities is 1, with 35% of respondents reporting engagement in one of the listed activities. Only 20% of the sample report engaged in three or more activities.

the magnitudes are not huge, for example, weekly attenders report one-quarter fewer political activities than never attenders on a 0–7 scale, the trends run in the opposite direction as research would predict. After all, church is a place where congregants can learn civic skills (Djupe & Gilbert, 2009), hear political messages, and take part in political conversations (Putnam & Campbell, 2010). And yet, among Democrats, the relationship runs counter to theoretical expectations: Nonattending Democrats are the most politically engaged. The right part of the figure presents the same comparisons, but for Republican identifiers. Here, the relationship looks more like we might expect if we believe that churches represent a fertile ground for political mobilization. As church attendance increases, so too does the amount of reported political activity. Republican weekly attenders report, on average, one-half an additional political activity compared to Republicans who do not attend church. To reiterate, the correlations do not show us how the world came to look like this—that is what the growing body of research described in this article has done. The correlations do, however, show an important pattern about what the world looks like as a consequence of politically induced religious sorting.

These correlations—in addition to being a consequence of religious sorting—have important practical and theoretical implications for researchers to consider. On the practical side, these findings suggest that churchgoers represent a doubly captive audience for Republican mobilization: Not only are these people more likely to be Republican, but they are more likely to be interested in politics. This gives Republican strategists a clear way to reach potential supporters come election year. Conversely, religiously engaged Democrats (in particular, White Democrats) are less likely to be politically interested, meaning that mobilizing these individuals in the pews may prove difficult. Moreover, the most politically engaged are the Democrats who rarely or never step foot inside houses of worship, which presents a challenge to Democratic elites trying to reach them. These nonattending Democrats may be anywhere on a Sunday morning and have a diverse set of interests and priorities, making a single Democratic mobilization strategy less obvious. On the theoretical side, these results reiterate the importance of considering self-selection into networks and institutions (both religious and secular) when studying political mobilization. If politically engaged Republicans *become* more religiously engaged on account of their politics, a correlational analysis (like the one presented in Figure 3) may make it seem as though churches are doing more mobilizing than they actually are. Research strategies therefore need to account for this possibility when exploring the ways in which networks and institutions affect political participation.

Not Necessarily a Divergence: The Different Ways Politics Can Affect Religion

Up until this point, I have described research that explains the emergence of a religiosity gap. This strand of research largely thinks of (White) religion as politically and socially monolithic. But in America's religiously pluralistic society, a person can join or leave churches that span the demographic, religious, cultural, and political spectrums. Moreover, people's reasons for engaging with religion may ebb and flow over time, and even politically motivated religious choices are not completely stable. The next set of research takeaways broaden the ways in which politics can shape religion.

Taking Localized Contexts Into Account Is Crucial and May Change Our Empirical Expectations

In a society with many religious options available, researchers need to consider a person's immediate surroundings—such as a congregation and religious community—when studying how religious

choices are made. In fact, recognizing that there is heterogeneity in people's communities and experiences can lead to different predictions and findings. This is precisely what Djupe, Neiheisel, and Sokhey (2018) do.

The scholarly trio explores the political reasons people disaffiliate with a congregation, noting that motivations to leave a congregation will be "localized within particular congregations" (p. 163). In other words, elite-level cues—that is, religious message from political elites or political messages from religious elites—matter less than what is happening in individuals' networks and communities. This idea leads to Djupe et al.'s main claim: "[I]nstead of driving out Democrats across the board... the Christian Right drives out those who disagree with the movement and are likely to experience disagreement in their congregations—that is, evangelical Republicans" (p. 162). Here, Djupe and his colleagues look specifically at church disaffiliation—going from considering oneself to be part of a specific congregation to not considering oneself in this way. This measure is different from becoming a religious "none" in key respects, and I will return to this point later. Using three panel data sets, the authors find not only church disaffiliation among evangelical Republicans who do not support the Christian Right but also disaffiliation occurring among the "marginally connected," that is, those with lower levels of church attendance before disaffiliation occurs. This research provides additional evidence that the politicized-religion hypothesis does more than simply push Democrats out of organized religion; Djupe, Neiheisel, and Sokhey (2018) find that the religious-political nexus can also send certain Republicans in search of new religious homes.

The authors place these findings within Olson's (1965) theory of groups, which emphasizes the cost-benefit nature of membership. Political differences represent one of many potential areas of agreement (or disagreement) among church members, and more active congregants may have stronger connections to other members and agree with them on nonpolitical dimensions. Active church members may therefore receive enough social benefits from being part of their community that political differences do not drive them away. For those who were already on the outskirts of their religious communities, however, the political disagreement is enough to produce religious disaffiliation.

Extending the general argument about politicized religion, the same set of authors finds a similar pattern when looking at support for Donald Trump. Surveying the same Americans at two times—once in September and once in November of 2016—the researchers measure how local congregational context surrounding Donald Trump affected religious disaffiliation among evangelical Protestants, mainline Protestants, and Catholics (Djupe et al., 2017). They find two sets of people left their houses of worship during the two-month window surrounding the 2016 election: those who felt warmly toward Trump but perceived that their clergy did not support Trump and those who felt cool toward Trump but perceived that their clergy supported Trump. In both groups, it is not feelings toward Donald Trump alone that resulted in congregational disaffiliation? Instead, the context matters, namely, whether congregants feel as though their religious leaders share their political outlooks. Taken together, considering a person's environment leads to a more context-dependent theory of how, when, why, and for whom politics can affect religious choices.

Church disaffiliation, the main dependent variable in the research described above, is an important phenomenon to study. After all, churches cannot survive without members, being a member of a religious congregation sends an important signal about one's religious identity, and many of the outcomes social scientists care about assume community and network effects. Djupe and his colleagues explore this churn in the religious marketplace, rightly noting that it is not the same as becoming a religious nonidentifier. The next logical question to ask then is: What happens to these evangelical Republicans who do not support the Christian Right and therefore leave their congregations? Or what happens to those who left their religious communities because they supported (opposed) Trump in 2016 but believed their clergy opposed (supported) him? It is possible that the disaffiliation process is the first stop on the road to nonidentification, but it is also possible that these individuals will instead seek out spiritual homes in which they feel more comfortable. This might mean finding a church

where politics is avoided or the political messages resonate with preexisting beliefs. Additionally, this strand of research reiterates the importance of first developing theoretically grounded hypotheses and then finding appropriate outcome measures to test the hypotheses. Much of the research looking at the relationship between religion and politics focuses on religious (non)identification and church attendance because those are the measures readily available to scholars; however, identifying and then measuring appropriate outcome variables will enable scholars to push this area of research forward in novel ways.

Future research in this area can explore how political homophily in religious communities comes about and, in the process, teach us something about the relative strength of political and religious identities. In a general sense, church shopping occurs all the time. Churches try to appeal to different demographics by offering different “amenities,” such as childcare during services, free coffee, and different types of programming. And Americans have posted detailed Yelp reviews of churches all over the country, specifically for those interested in finding a congregation. People have all sorts of different needs and preferences when they choose a spiritual home, but to what extent does politics play a role in the decision to affiliate with one church over another? Answering this question will disentangle to what extent people join a church on account of politics (either in a desire to avoid political discussions or hear a specific set of political considerations) or are influenced politically on account of their religious community (see, e.g., Wald et al., 1988).

Considering the Role of Race and Ethnicity Offers Necessary Nuance

The current literature on politics affecting religion has a gaping hole when it comes to non-White Americans. As noted above, the “God gap” or religiosity gap—shown in [Figure 1](#)—is most prominent among White Americans. [Figure 4](#) replicates the analyses presented at the article’s outset for African-American (first bar in grouping, light gray), Hispanic-American (second bar in grouping, white bars), Asian-American (third bar in grouping, dark gray), and White respondents (fourth bar in grouping, medium-gray bars). When looking at both Republican identification (top panel) and 2020 support for Donald Trump (bottom panel), the same key takeaways emerge.

The first takeaway is that a religiosity gap exists not only among White Americans, but also among African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Asian Americans as well. Second, the magnitude of each group’s religiosity gaps is as large or larger than other key demographic predictors of political outlooks within that group, including gender, union status, and education. Third, the size of the religiosity gap varies dramatically by group. At one end of the spectrum, there is a small, but persistent, religiosity gap among African Americans. For example, the probability of an African American identifying as a Republican (top panel) and voting for Donald Trump in 2020 (bottom panel) is 0.06 higher when the respondent attends church weekly compared to never attends.²³ These gaps remain even when controlling for socioeconomic characteristics.²⁴ At the other end of the spectrum are the results for White Americans, which I described in detail in [Figure 1](#). And in between are Hispanic Americans and Asian Americans. Consistent with previous research (Valenzuela, 2014; Wong, 2015), a moderate-sized religiosity gap exists among members of these groups. All told, religiosity gaps exist among non-White Americans that are relatively large compared to other group-level gaps; however, the sizes of the religiosity gaps vary across racial and ethnic group.

²³In the reported importance of religion in, African Americans who report that religion is a very important part of their lives have a 0.02 probability increase in identifying as a Republican compared to those who report that religion is not at all important (p -value of difference = 0.076).

²⁴The following set of three numbers correspond to coefficients, stand errors, and p -values from regressions that use each of the religious measures in [Figure 4](#) and also control for gender, education, region of residence, income, and age. Church: 0.06, 0.01, <0.01; Pray: 0.07, 0.01, <0.01; Religious nonidentifier: -0.06, 0.01, <0.01; Religious importance: 0.05, 0.01, <0.01.

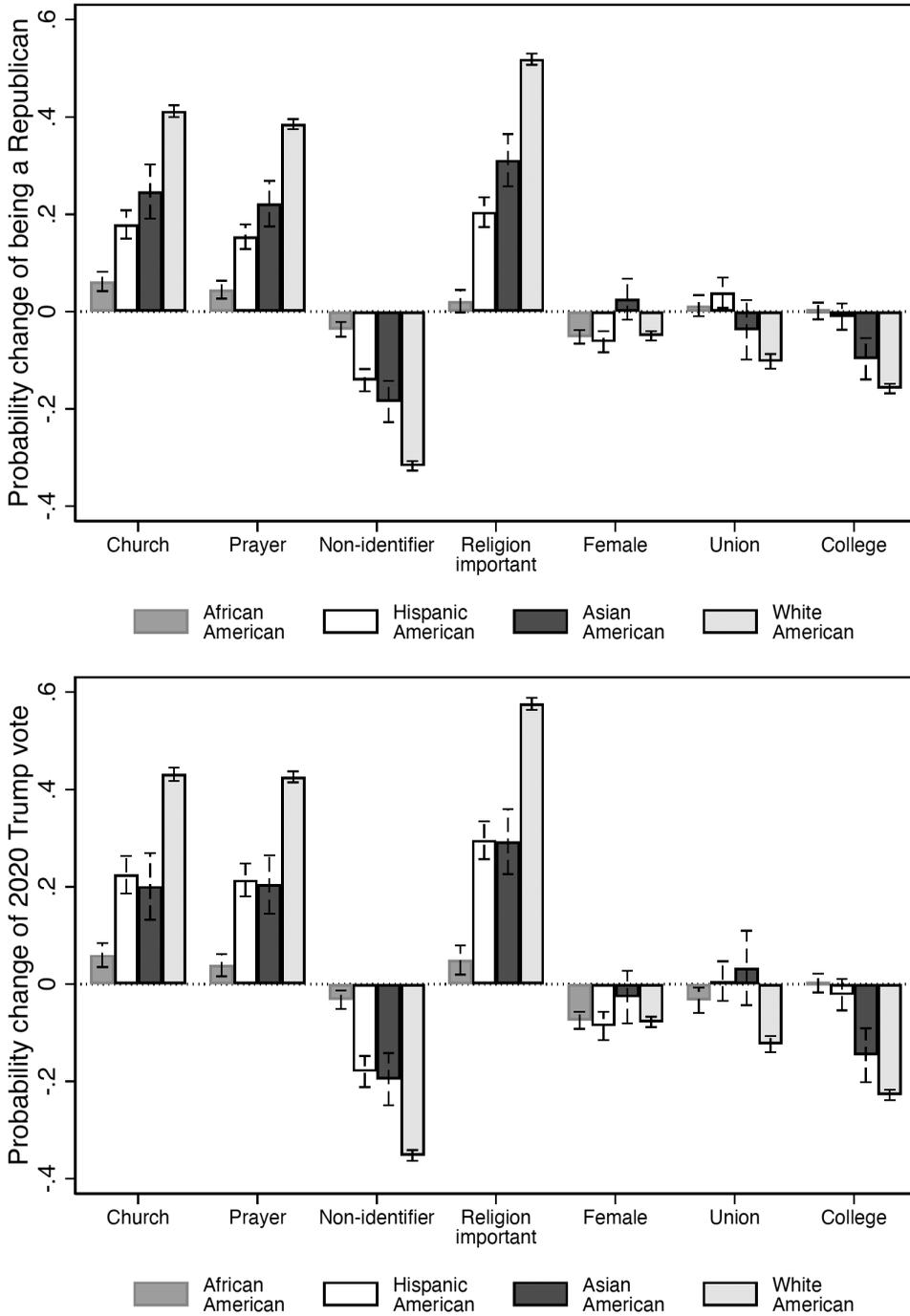


Figure 4. Demographic predictors of partisanship and vote choice. Source: 2020 Cooperative Election Study.

What are the political consequences of these religiosity gaps? The answer varies by group. For example, African-American respondents who report never attending church have a 0.06 probability of identifying as a Republican and a 0.05 probability of having voted for Donald

Trump in the 2020 election. In contrast, weekly attending African-American respondents have probabilities of 0.12 and 0.11 of identifying as a Republican and voting for Donald Trump, respectively. The religiosity gap of 0.06 is there—both statistically and substantively—but I do not want to lead the reader astray in thinking that religious African Americans are Republican and/or Donald Trump supporters. Very few African Americans—regardless of their levels of religiosity—identify as Republican and vote for Republican candidates. This differs from White Americans in which the nonattending White American has a 0.29 probability of identifying as a Republican whereas their weekly attending counterpart has a corresponding probability of 0.71. Put another way, imagine that you were asked to place a bet on a person's partisan affiliation with only two pieces of information—race and a measure of religiosity, like church attendance. When you receive information that the person is White, the piece of religious information becomes highly consequential. In fact, it should completely determine the nature of your bet. Among African Americans, however, a good bet would not change in light of the religious information even as the probability of winning the bet changes. Among Hispanic and Asian Americans, level of religiosity is also a crucial factor. Nonattending Hispanic and Asian Americans, for example, have relatively low levels of Republican identification (0.18 for both groups) and support for Donald Trump in 2020 (0.23 and 0.24, respectively). In other words, knowing that a Hispanic American or Asian American is not religious should lead you to predict low levels of Republican support; however, religious Hispanic Americans or Asian Americans are more likely to identify with (0.36; 0.43) and support Donald Trump (0.45; 0.44). These individuals are not squarely in the Republican camp—like White religious Americans are—but they represent key nonmono-lithic groups.

The results from [Figure 4](#) present multiple research questions which have received varying amounts of scholarly attention; however, all would benefit tremendously from additional research. The first question, which has received some amount of scholarly attention, asks how African Americans are simultaneously the most religiously devout racial group as well as the most loyal Democratic constituency. African Americans stand out in [Figure 4](#) as the group that has the smallest association between religiosity and partisan affiliation and vote choice. Researchers have weighed in on this question, and the key answer is that Americans of color, and African Americans specifically, have had (and continue to have) different social, cultural, and religious experiences from the White majority. In addition to the theology in Black and White churches differing with respect to their messages and emphasis, the omnipresent intermingling of faith and politics produces tight bonds, which not only allow—but actively help produce—a religious-Democratic linkage.

Studies of Black churches frequently note that religious-based activism within the congregation is the norm and is seen in sermons by the clergy, organized activities, and visits from political leaders (Calhoun-Brown, 1996; Harris, 1994; McAdam, 1982; McClerking & McDaniel, 2005; McKenzie, 2004; Morris, 1984; Putnam & Campbell, 2010). Black Protestants are more likely than white Protestants and Catholics to hear political sermons, belong to a congregation that organizes voter registration drives, and receive a voter guide at church (Putnam & Campbell, 2010; Smidt et al., 2010). Moreover, the political messages, activities, and campaign visits are often tied to liberal policies and Democratic politics. While politicized churches alone do not explain why African Americans are Democrats, the politicization reinforces a naturally occurring relationship based on racial and theological ties to the Democratic Party. (Margolis, 2018a, pp. 150–151)

In other words, the religious-political landscape does not create dissonance among African American Democrats. This is due—in large part—to the liberal politicization of the Black church

coupled with the ongoing racial segregation in houses of worship (Smietana, 2015).²⁵ Relatedly, a series of experiments show that when Black Americans think about religion and politics mixing, they conjure up images related to their own experiences, namely a mixing of religion and liberal policies (Margolis, 2018a, Chap. 7). These findings suggest that, while at first blush, African Americans who are both religious and Democratic seem to hold conflicting identities, being both religious and Democratic within the African American community is quite compatible upon closer inspection.²⁶

Figure 4 generates a second research question: Why does a religiosity gap, of any size, appear among African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Asian Americans? While there is excellent research exploring the relationship between religion and politics among non-White Americans (McDaniel, 2008; McDaniel et al., 2018; McDaniel & Ellison, 2008; Philpot & McDaniel, 2020; Putnam & Campbell, 2010; Valenzuela, 2014; Wong, 2015, 2018), the focus has been on the political consequences of religious beliefs and being part of religious communities that are also largely siloed by race or ethnicity. In contrast, the relatively nascent literature on the religious consequences of politics has either focused explicitly on White Americans or, by virtue of analyzing all the data together, have empirical results that cannot address non-White Americans' unique religious and political experiences.

Future research should explore if, to what extent, and how politics shapes religious decisions in non-White communities. For example, it may be that the social benefits that stem from being part of a religious community—particularly a non-White religious community or a religious community that shares a common non-English language (Smietana, 2015; Wong, 2018)—outweigh any potential cost associated with holding politically dissimilar views. Here, a politically moderate or conservative Black American may still feel more comfortable in a liberal Black church than a more conservative White one, in which case we may expect limited evidence of politically induced religious change. Similarly, a Hispanic American or an Asian American may opt to remain active in a church even if the person feels at political odds with the majority of the congregation or the church leadership on account of the social benefits that the person receives stemming from a shared language or culture. These examples suggest that perhaps the combination of the political landscape and a person's own political identities may not be strong enough to shape religious engagement.

That said, it is possible that politics may increasingly become the reason that people of color opt for non-White churches, particularly as partisan issues surrounding race and ethnicity remain salient (Mathis, 2020; Robertson, 2019). Similar to a previous argument that politics may encourage White Republicans to remain in the pews, it is possible that the heightened salience of issues that affect racial (for example, BLM and police funding) and ethnic (for example, immigration) minorities may encourage non-White Americans to leave predominantly White churches or to remain in churches where they are part of the racial or ethnic majority. Relatedly, it is possible that politics may influence the levels of participation among non-White Americans who are members of predominantly White churches but have no influence among those who are members of non-White churches. All told, the theories and empirical predictions about how politics may (or may not) shape the religious decisions of individuals of color will likely diverge in many respects

²⁵This argument comports with Festinger's (1957) original conception of dissonance in which he claims dissonance is culturally constructed. Communities decide what behaviors and beliefs are consonant with each other and what are not. In this case, Democratic identity and adhering to Black Protestant theology and being involved in the Black Protestant church can be thought of as consonant cognitions.

²⁶Moreover, the evidence suggests that African Americans follow the expectations stemming from the religious life-cycle, including falling away from organized religion in young adulthood and returning upon getting married and having children (Margolis, 2018a; Uecker et al., 2007). The key difference, however, is that African American Democrats are less likely to feel conflict about returning to organized religion compared to White Democrats.

from the theories presented for the White numerical majority, and scholars will need to rely on different empirical approaches to uncover politics' power.²⁷ More specifically, scholars should focus their attention away from traditional measures associated with the “God gap”—such as levels of church attendance and religious nonidentification—and more toward understanding the decisions about what churches people affiliate with (Djupe, Neihsel, & Sokhey, 2018; Wong, 2018).

Moreover, people of color cannot be treated as a catch-all categorization; careful attention must be paid to the different patterns within various racial and ethnic groups. Latinx Americans, for example, are no longer a group of steadfast Catholics, like was once the case. Instead, there are many evangelicals and religious nonidentifiers within this ethnic group, with nearly one-in-four Latinx Americans being former Catholics (Pew Research Center, 2014). Similarly, studies looking at Latinx and Asian communities need to take immigration experiences seriously, including (but not limited to): foreign versus native born; fluency in both English and originating country's language; and religious, political, and social histories of the home country. These considerations admittedly make for a tall research order, and survey data may not be the appropriate starting point for this sort of endeavor. But until we have a sense of how politics influences the lives of different groups within society, researchers are not done tackling this question.

Americans May Use Religion to Compensate for Losing in Politics

As all the previous research has shown, religion is dynamic. There is churn in the religious marketplace, and there is no guarantee that a person's religious identification and practices at one point in time will be the same at another point in time. This allows for an ebb and flow of religious practices and beliefs, and it presents another avenue through which politics might affect religion. Margolis (2016) advances a theory of compensatory control to understand politically induced religious change. Rather than predicting a religious sorting, the theory identifies relatively short-term changes in religious practices in response to the political environment.

The psychological theory of compensatory control argues that people can compensate for losing control in one arena by gaining control in another (Kay et al., 2009; Kay, Gaucher, et al., 2010; Laurin et al., 2008; Whitson & Galinsky, 2008). In doing so, a person may maintain some semblance of balance and order in her life, despite disruptions. This idea helps explain why some “find” religion or look to a higher power during difficult personal times that are outside of a person's control, such as illness and death (Cook & Winberley, 1983). Importantly, government can provide feelings of control. Governments, after all, are supposed to ensure that their citizens have maintained roads to drive on, clean water to drink, and safe neighborhoods to live in (Jost et al., 2004). Indeed, Kay, Shepherd, et al. (2010) find evidence that belief in a controlling God and belief in a competent government serve as two forms of *substitutable* external control that can also provide order and comfort to people who believe in it. Put another way, one source of control can compensate for a lack of control in another arena. Margolis (2016) draws on this theory to show that religious behaviors “fluctuate with their chosen political party's fortunes between 1988 and 2012” (p. 717): Rates of church attendance and frequency of prayer are lower when a copartisan is in the White House and increases when a person's political party is out of power. This research shows that politics can explain some of the regular ebbs and flows in religious behaviors among both Democrats and Republicans.

These findings, importantly, do not call into question the more extensive research showing a partisan-driven religiosity gap. Compensating for anxiety in the political sphere does not mean that

²⁷Similarly, no research to date has explored whether and how politics affects religion among non-Christian faiths. Many of the same lessons and ideas presented in the discussion of race applies to that of religion, namely, that how one looks for politically induced religious change might vary across different religions.

Democrats became more religious than Republicans after the 2016 election, for example. The average relative positionings of the two parties does not change. Instead, partisans of both stripes become more religious, on average, when they are in the political minority and less religious when they are part of the party in power. Even if Democrats and Republicans are separating along religious lines over the long term, the psychological theory of compensatory control helps explain systematic short-term variation.

This line of research can extend beyond that of religion. For example, many Democrats may not be religious no matter what the political landscape looks like. And yet, these individuals may still have needed to find some way to cope with the unexpected victory of Donald Trump. Looking at other ways in which partisans emotionally compensate for the political landscape, including increased exercise, certain types of volunteering, and even gun purchases, would broaden the scope of this research agenda to better understand how politics can influence seemingly apolitical behaviors.

Where Does This Leave Us? What Do We Know and Where Do We Go from Here?

This article sought to describe the key theories, themes, and findings from an emerging literature that looks at the relationship between religion and politics in a new light. Despite religion being a strong social identity that many scholars and journalists think can influence attitudes and behaviors, scholars have repeatedly shown that politics can also be in the driver's seat when it comes to church attendance, adopting (or eschewing) religious labels, beliefs about the world around them, prayer, and membership in religious communities. Scholars approached this general question in different ways, providing a great deal of nuance to this broad topic. While I already discussed future areas of research related to politics affecting religion, I conclude with thoughts about how this research affects the public opinion, political psychology, and religion and politics literatures more generally.

The traditional research exploring the relationship between religion and politics asks questions that address how, when, and why religion affects politics. The new research in this field flips the question on its head to ask how, when, and why politics affects religion. But to date, scholars have addressed the second set of questions separately from the first. The research described above convincingly shows that politics *can* affect religion, even identifying certain circumstances under which the reverse relationship is more likely to appear. And this made perfect sense as demonstrating politics' ability to shape religious decisions is both a tall theoretical and empirical order. But now that scholars have shown the reverse relationship to be possible, scholars need to start thinking about these two questions together. There is empirical evidence suggesting a reciprocal relationship exists (Campbell et al., 2018; Patrikios, 2008); however, scholars have not fully theorized when we might expect a unidirectional effect (in either direction) and when we might expect a reciprocal relationship to exist. Future research endeavors can develop hypotheses related to when we might expect different relationships between religious and political outlooks to take shape.

Additionally, scholars need to take the possibility of self-selection into (or out of) religion seriously when theorizing and writing about the relationship between religion and politics, particularly when making causal claims. If, for example, politics can play a role in religious disaffiliation and (potentially) church affiliation (Djupe, Neiheisel, & Sokhey, 2018), does it mean that religious communities do not have an independent effect on political attitudes, as others have suggested (Wald et al., 1988)? Perhaps churches—including pastors and those in the pews—do not have much sway over personal political opinions but do have influence in other political arenas, such as learning civic skills (Djupe & Gilbert, 2009) or political mobilization (Campbell, 2004; Djupe & Neiheisel, 2019; Wilcox & Sigelman, 2001). In fact, churches' ability to impact

politically relevant outcomes may occur *because* of the self-selection process that takes place. Understanding the ways in which religion does (and does not) affect politics in light of self-selection represents an important paradigm shift that should guide religion and politics research moving forward.

Lessons from this research also extend to other networks and institutions. Society is filled with civic and social organizations that can shape opinions, teach civic skills, and mobilize voters. Researchers generally attribute the correlation between group beliefs and individual beliefs to social group influence. This strand of research, however, teaches us that politics may influence organizational membership and engagement decisions. Group influence may therefore not be as strong as many scholars presume.

Lessons from this research also inform our understanding of and predictions about the religious landscape. For example, a key empirical takeaway from the life-cycle theory is that present-day parents are raising their children partially on account of their political outlooks. In other words, children with Democratic parents are currently being raised in less religious households than children with Republican parents. Importantly, a person's religious upbringing is a key predictor of religiosity in adulthood (Wilson & Sherkat, 1994), and parents can successfully impart their partisan identities to their children when cues are consistent over time (Jennings et al., 2009). These twin findings suggest that our religiously sorted electorate is unlikely to change any time soon. Imagine a young person is raised in a religious and Republican household. Assuming her parents successfully influence her religious and political viewpoints, she is poised to be both religious and Republican in adulthood. This example is no longer evidence of religious-political sorting. This woman, after all, did not sort herself but rather followed the presorted path that was laid out for her. This differs from the young adults of previous generations who were making decisions in the wake of elite-level changes and a shifting religious-political landscape. Future generations are instead being socialized by sorted parents so that even if elite cues begin to weaken, the socialization process will continue to help reproduce another generation of religiously sorted partisans. Of course, another massive shift to the political landscape could take place and shake up the linkages between religion and politics. But in the absence of that sort of seismic activity, our current landscape is likely to hold for quite some time. Incorporating the findings from this literature into the broader demographic research on religion in America can help explain macrolevel change and stability moving forward.

Finally, this strand of research contributes to the growing work describing political polarization and animosity. Partisanship has the power to influence religious identities. That finding alone is an important theoretical contribution to the literature. But politically induced religious sorting also has consequences unrelated to religion, namely, it helps create socially sorted identities in which social and political identities are closely aligned. The literature discussed in the article can be thought of as a prequel to the ongoing research showing the deleterious effects stemming from sorted identities, including greater hostility and bias toward members of the opposing party (Mason, 2015; 2018b). Politics helped create today's socially sorted identities, which matter a great deal for how partisans view and respond to the current political environment.

Lazarsfeld et al. (1948) were correct in emphasizing the close connection between the political and social worlds. But unlike their initial observations about the social world's ability to impact politics, current research shows the reverse is also possible: Politics is sufficiently powerful to shape the social world.

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