

BOOK REVIEW

Michele F. Margolis. *From Politics to the Pews: How Partisanship and the Political Environment Shape Religious Identity.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 2018. 336 pp. \$95.00 (cloth). \$32.50 (paper).

BEN GASKINS

Lewis & Clark College

It is a remarkable achievement to take long-standing conventional wisdom and produce a logical, simple, and compelling causal story that flips that wisdom on its head, and then to systematically provide evidence for this story using old and new data. In Michele Margolis's book, not only are we forced to reexamine our prior understanding of a key causal process in religion and politics, but we are given a framework to better understand the origin and impact of social group identities within the larger political context.

One of the most important developments for our current political environment is the emergence and expansion of the so-called “God gap” between the major political parties in the United States. The traditional story argues that in the wake of the upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s, the parties began to diverge on moral and social issues, with the Republicans increasingly appealing to the values of religious Americans across denominations while the Democrats were “captured” by religiously liberal/secular activists (Layman 2001; Putnam and Campbell 2010; but see Claassen 2015). In turn, voters used their religious identities to update their partisan and political choices, creating this religious-partisan polarization.

Into this established literature comes this compelling book by Michele Margolis, who provides a strikingly straightforward and convincing theoretical argument to demonstrate that the traditional narrative is at best incomplete. Margolis reexamines the causal logic that says religion is an “unmoved mover” of public opinion and partisanship. While not the first scholar to argue that politics may affect religion (e.g., Patrikios 2008), Margolis's theory outlines the process by which partisanship may affect religious choices, ultimately suggesting that any group-based social identity may be influenced by the political context.

Margolis's life-cycle theory argues that religious involvement is not stable but may wax and wane at different points in a person's life. Margolis shows that 57 percent of adults aged 18–29 who identify or were raised as Christian reported dropping out of attending church at some point in their lives.

However, once young adults reach the life stage where they are raising children, some of those who fell away from religion will choose to return.

When making this decision, they will seek to align their religious behavior with their partisan identity, which Margolis argues has already become stable by this point. Given increased social and political polarization, partisanship will provide both social and political cues. Republicans will observe the centrality of religion to party activists/elites—as well as their increasingly sorted social network—and will increase their religious activity in order to provide their family with a coherent environment that limits social or cognitive dissonance. Democrats, on the other hand, react to the close ties between religion and conservative politics and will be repelled from organized religion. This has lasting consequences, since after the child-rearing life stage both partisan and religious identities will remain largely stable. Thus, the God gap between the two political parties is created and perpetuated as religion's "bridging" ability is undermined.

Margolis amasses a remarkable amount and variety of evidence to support her novel theory. She employs cross-sectional survey data, panel data, and survey experiments to show that her causal story is not limited to one specific time or context. The book anticipates a reader's skepticism and provides an array of robustness checks to show that the outcomes are not the product of some other variable, such as genetics, region, or the aging process. The results consistently show that partisanship influences relative religious intensity *only* for adults with school-aged children, as adults with grown children or without children do not demonstrate any religious change in the face of partisan cues or context.

The writing is clear and sensitive to the implications and limitations of her theory. For example, does her theory only apply to whites? She uses her life cycle approach to examine the interplay of religion and partisanship for African Americans, who experience no dissonance between religious involvement and Democratic partisanship, and shows that they differ from whites in important ways. She further deploys her theory to examine how Catholic and Protestant partisans changed their religious activity during John F. Kennedy's presidential campaign, demonstrating that her theory does not only explain the current partisan God gap.

The book's careful attention to context outlines the conditions that must be met for her story to work, which leaves some ambiguity for what happens when those conditions are not achieved. As Margolis states: "For partisanship to influence religious identification and engagement, a person's partisan identity must be stronger or more salient than his or her religious identity. It is unlikely that this assumption holds true for all people at all times" (p. 38). Her argument is therefore predicated on people having a strong, salient partisan identity that is stabilized *prior* to establishing their religious identity or behavior. For those who lack this strong partisan identity, the rest of the theory

would not follow. She notes that pure independents will therefore not be subject to this process, though she does not examine them in depth.

Similarly, her theory is grounded in a political context where parties are perceived to differ on moral/religious issues and norms. As a result, the theory will only apply to times or contexts where a clear partisan-religious cleavage exists. Also, since the key causal mechanism works only for adults raising school-aged children, it is unclear how changes in decisions to forgo or delay having children will affect the relationship between partisanship and religious activity.

Margolis acknowledges that her theory does not mean that religion cannot still affect politics. But if partisanship only affects the religious choices of people at a specific point in their life cycle, to what degree is religion affecting politics for everyone else? The book pays scant attention to the role of religious or political entrepreneurs in creating and maintaining the God gap. Margolis pitches her story as an alternative account to the traditional narrative, but it might be that her approach is a complement rather than a replacement for it. After all, not everyone finds themselves unsettled in their religious habits/identity at the time they have young children, and those people will still likely use their religion to make sense of their political choices. Margolis does not dispute this, but by focusing on proving that politics affects religion, there is little room to examine those for whom it doesn't.

Additionally, we may expect the theoretical process to become increasingly rare in the future as the parties continue to sort socially and politically. We will see more people growing up as a secular Democrat or religious Republican, for whom partisan and religious identities are self-reinforcing and need no resolution. Any "unsorting" of religion and partisanship will be extremely unlikely in the foreseeable future, as there will be little incentive for parties to pursue identical religious appeals, or for partisans in a sorted environment to change their religious behavior.

While somewhat constrained by the theory's preconditions, Margolis's greatest contribution is the broad applicability of the theory's underlying logic. Her book does not just provide a valuable alternative explanation for the partisan God gap but gives a helpful reminder to scholars to not simply assume that social identities are stable and exogenous to politics. Instead, we need to pay closer attention to how these identities are created, and what political factors may drive the formation and relative strength of those identities, and when people are vulnerable to political influence.

Might group-centered theories of public opinion overestimate the effect of group identity on political outcomes? Margolis certainly thinks so and provides plenty of evidence for how even a foundational attachment like religion can be at the mercy of other political identities. But beyond religion, how might politics drive other behaviors and identities? We know that partisanship can drive ideology and policy attitudes, rather than the reverse (Barber and

Pope 2019). But what else will partisanship affect, and in what contexts will partisanship continue to be a primary driver of identity? In sum, this book is a call for scholars to think carefully about the complex relationships between identity formation, political behavior, and public opinion.

References

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