

The Religious Sort

The Causes and Consequences of the Religiosity Gap in America

Michele F. Margolis

The answers to two standard survey questions – “Aside from weddings and funerals, how often to attend religious services?” and “How important is religion in your daily life?” – reveal a great deal about a person’s politics, particularly among white Americans. In short, the more religious a person is, the more likely it is that he or she identifies with the Republican Party and supports Republican candidates. This *religiosity* gap brings together religious mainline Protestants, evangelical Protestants, undifferentiated Christians, and Catholics under the Republican umbrella while their less devout co-religionists sit alongside religious non-identifiers – including atheists, agnostics, and those who do not call themselves part of a religion – as Democrats.

The aim of this chapter is to explain how one of the “most important and enduring social cleavages[s]” in American politics came to pass, explore the political and social consequences of the religiosity gap, and consider what all this means for American democracy.¹ The religiosity gap in American politics is powerful not only on account of its size, but because it reflects a reciprocal relationship: not only do religious attachments shape political affiliations, but partisanship and the political landscape also shape religious decisions. I refer to these changes as *religious sorting*, the result of which is that many Americans’ religious and political identities are now aligned.² This sorting has changed how average

¹ Louis Bolce and Gerald DeMaio, “The Evolution of the Religion Gap Metaphor in the Language of American Political Journalists, 1987–2012,” *Geolinguistics* 39 (2014): 48.

² I do not use the term *polarization* in this chapter, as I interpret polarization to mean Americans separating toward the poles. While there have been a growing number of

Americans view religion, politics, and each other and, in doing so, has the power to bring about democratic erosion. Democratic erosion, by which I mean the intentional undermining of democratic values – including electoral accountability, free exchange of ideas, and recognizing the legitimacy of others’ grievances – threatens America’s democratic resilience, or the ability to withstand stresses as a nation.

THE RELIGIOSITY GAP EXPLAINED

The religiosity or “God” gap is not just an interesting statistical finding; it represents one of the largest political divides in American society today. In the 2018 General Social Survey (GSS), half of white respondents who report never attending church identify as a Democrat or Democratic leaner while only about a quarter of white respondents who attend church weekly call themselves Democrats. The relationship reverses itself when looking at Republican identification. Only 30 percent of Americans who never attend church identify as Republicans whereas 60 percent of weekly attenders do. This gap – which appears among each of the large Christian traditions – is bigger than political gaps based on gender, education, region of residence, and union status.

While American history is replete with examples of religion’s outsized role in politics, particularly during polarized times, the current religious-political landscape is different as it cuts *across* religious groups and not just *between* them. For example, the election of 1800 pitted the established orthodox churches – the Congregationalists and Episcopalians – against the emerging Baptist church. The old-guard churches teamed up with Federalists to attack Jefferson’s “heretic,” “deist,” and “atheist” beliefs, asking voters to impose a *de facto* religion test on the candidates.³ The Baptists, on the other hand, recognized that Jefferson was not “one of them” when it came to personal theology but that he

religious non-identifiers, or “nones,” in the United States and many of them identify as Democrats, I think *sorting* more accurately describes the religiosity gap as it currently exists. Matthew Levendusky, *The Partisan Sort: How Liberals Became Democrats and Conservatives Became Republican* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

³ Matthew Harris and Thomas Kidd, *The Founding Fathers and the Debate over Religion in Revolutionary America: A History in Documents* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Frank Lambert, “‘God – and a Religious President . . . [or] Jefferson and No God’: Campaigning for a Voter-Imposed Religious Test,” *Journal of Church and State* 39, no. 4 (Autumn 1997): 769–89; Stephen Prothero, *Why Liberals Win (Even When They Lose Elections): How America’s Raucous, Nasty, and Mean “Culture Wars” Make for a More Inclusive Nation* (New York: HarperOne, 2017).

would represent their interests in the public sphere, namely, to keep church and state separate.⁴ There has also been no shortage of political conflict between Protestants and Catholics, including Prohibition and the presidential campaigns of both Alfred E. Smith and John F. Kennedy.⁵ From the country's founding through the mid-twentieth century, differences (sometimes real and sometimes perceived) between religious groups translated into political factions.

What makes today's religious-political environment distinct is that religious groups, in particular Protestants and Catholics, have put aside decades of outward dislike and distrust toward one another in order to work toward a common set of social and political goals.⁶ More generally, the political landscape began changing in the 1970s: morality politics took center stage, religious elites of different faiths joined forces with common objectives, and the parties staked out positions such that the Republican Party became associated with culturally conservative policies and traditional values.⁷ The new political environment allowed for religiosity – or

⁴ After the Great Awakening (mid-1700s), it was the Baptists, Methodists, and other evangelicals – religious outsiders at the time – who pushed to disestablish America's state churches, which were Congregationalist or Episcopalian. The evangelicals wanted this separation because they were concerned about how the government would affect their ability practice their faith. Randall Balmer, *The Making of Evangelicism: From Relativism to Politics and Beyond* (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2010); Harris and Kidd, *Founding Fathers*; Lambert, "God – and a Religious President."

⁵ William G. Carleton, "Kennedy in History: An Early Appraisal," *Antioch Review* 24, no. 3 (Autumn 1964): 277–99; Michael Munger and Thomas Schaller, "The Prohibition-Repeal Amendments: A Natural Experiment in Interest Group Influence," *Public Choice* 90, no. 1 (1997): 139–63; Paul Perl and Mary E. Bendyna, "Perceptions of Anti-Catholic Bias and Political Party Identification Among U.S. Catholics," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 41, no. 4 (December 2002): 653–68; Ira M. Wasserman, "Prohibition and Ethnocultural Conflict: The Missouri Prohibition Referendum of 1918," *Social Science Quarterly* 70, no. 4 (December 1989): 886–901.

⁶ While the shared political goals began with abortion, coalitions of conservative Catholics and evangelicals have worked together to oppose gay marriage, stem-cell research, and euthanasia, and they have worked together in support of school vouchers and religious freedom. Lerond Curry, *Protestant-Catholic Relations in America: World War I Through Vatican II* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2014); "Evangelicals and Catholics Together," *First Things* (May 1994); Laurie Goodstein, "The 'Hypermodern' Foe: How the Evangelicals and Catholics Joined Forces," *New York Times*, May 30, 2004; Brian T. Kaylor, *Presidential Campaign Rhetoric in an Age of Confessional Politics* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2011); Steven Waldman, "How Abortion Unified Catholics and Evangelicals to Become a Power on the Right," *Religion News Services*, May 7, 2019.

⁷ For an overview of the changing political-religious landscape beginning in the 1970s onward, see chapter 2 of Michele F. Margolis, *From Politics to the Pews: How Partisanship and the Political Environment Shape Religious Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

how devout a person is or how engaged she is within her religious community – to become a salient dividing line in American politics.

The present-day religiosity sorting is particularly strong because it occurs on two fronts. The common explanation for the present-day religiosity gap is that religious Americans responded to the new political environment by sorting into the Republican Party while less religious and secular Americans responded by joining the Democratic ranks. My own work, however, shows that these same changes in the political environment during the latter part of twentieth century encouraged Americans – particularly white Americans – to become more or less religious on account of their preexisting partisan identities.⁸ In other words, partisans took their religious cues from the political environment rather than the other way around: Republicans became further entrenched in their religious communities while Democrats distanced themselves from organized religion. Moreover, the current political-religious landscape continues to shape partisans' decisions about religious identification and church membership.⁹

Importantly, the political-religious environment varies across states and communities, with consequences for religious affiliation. For example, Christian conservatives often wield power in local, and often lower salience, contexts, such as on school boards and at the state level.¹⁰ Religious conservative groups can therefore exert tremendous influence on policy even when the national political environment is not hospitable to their agenda (see Rocco, Chapter 12 in this volume, for a deeper discussion about American federalism and democracy). Moreover, state-level rates of religious non-affiliation increase alongside increases in the state-level presence of the Christian Right movement.¹¹ More state-level prominence

⁸ Margolis, *From Politics to the Pews*.

⁹ David E. Campbell, Geoffrey C. Layman, John C. Green, and Nathanael G. Sumaktoyo, "Putting Politics First: The Impact of Politics on American Religious and Secular Orientations," *American Journal of Political Science* 62, no. 3 (July 2018): 551–65; Paul A. Djupe, Jacob R. Neiheisel, and Anand E. Sokhey, "Reconsidering the Role of Politics in Leaving Religion: The Importance of Affiliation," *American Journal of Political Science* 62, no. 1 (January 2018): 161–75; Margolis, *From Politics to the Pews*.

¹⁰ Ruth Murray Brown, *For Christian America: A History of the Religious Right*, 1st ed. (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2002); Kimberly H. Conger, *The Christian Right in Republican State Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Kimberly H. Conger, "Same Battle, Different War: Religious Movements in American State Politics," *Politics and Religion* 7, no. 2 (June 2014): 395–417; Melissa Deckman, *School Board Battles: The Christian Right in Local Politics* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2004).

¹¹ Paul A. Djupe, Jacob R. Neiheisel, and Kimberly H. Conger, "Are the Politics of the Christian Right Linked to State Rates of the Nonreligious? The Importance of Salient Controversy," *Political Research Quarterly* 62, no. 1 (December 2018): 910–22.

is associated with greater increases in non-identification during the first decade of the twenty-first century. In shaping individuals' religious decisions, politics has transformed the religious makeup of America.

On the surface, demonstrating the reverse relationship between religion and politics seems like an academic exercise. What matters is that a correlation exists, not how it forms. But the ability of politics to affect whether a person identifies with a faith, what church a person goes to, and how involved a person should be in a religious community poses threats to our democracy, two of which I will highlight here.

One consequence of politics affecting religious identities and involvement, or really any social group attachment, is that voters may be less able to hold elected officials accountable. Americans have low levels of political knowledge, making it difficult for them to form political attitudes, choose candidates, and evaluate policy options. Social group membership, however, can offer a workaround to this problem by offering shortcuts to group members. A person does not need to know the details of a policy or specifics of a candidate's platform. Instead, she can follow the lead of others in her group and can make decisions that we might reasonably think are in her best interest. Social group membership can therefore assuage concerns about citizen competence in the United States. But, if a person's religious identity is, in part, a function of her political identity, group cues can no longer effectively compensate for low levels of political knowledge, making it more difficult for voters to identify policies that, and candidates who, support their interests. Adopting or modifying a social identity to align with a political identity threatens one of democracy's main virtues: its ability to represent the will of the people.

Politics shaping religious decisions has also stymied political discourse, shutting out views that at one time were in the political sphere. We often think of religious leaders as, well, leaders – holding sway over their flock and operating as a moral compass. Religion has a great deal to say about the political questions of the day and religious leaders have traditionally represented an important voice in our pluralist society. Politics, however, now constrains these dissident voices.

One notable example is of this is Russell Moore. Moore, the president of the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, received public pushback for his pointed criticisms of Donald Trump throughout the 2016 election.¹² Many Baptists called for his job

¹² Ana Marie Cox, "Russell Moore Can't Support Either Candidate," *New York Times Magazine*, October 12, 2016.

and Moore even went on what some dubbed an “apology tour” after the election, trying to make clear that his criticisms of President-elect Trump did not extend to Trump supporters.¹³ The blowback Moore faced highlights that evangelical Republicans will not tolerate criticism of their political leaders and views. This constraint also extends to religious leaders with less visible public profiles. Over the course of six weeks in Alabama in the Summer of 2018, I interviewed dozens of religious leaders who expressed some degree of frustration or weariness about President Trump but who also said they would not air any such grievance from the pulpit in fear of alienating members. Indeed, virtually every pastor had at least one recent story of congregants becoming upset after hearing messages that church members believed conflicted with their political outlooks.¹⁴ Rather than lead, local pastors take their cues from their followers in order to maintain their position of power, and doing so has changed – and I would argue, undermined – democratic discourse in the United States.

Having discussed what the religiosity gap is, how it formed, and some of the democratic implications of politics affecting religion, I now turn to discuss more general consequences stemming from today’s religiously sorted political environment. Both religiously induced political sorting and politically induced religious sorting have created an inextricable link in the minds (and behaviors) of average Americans. This relationship, in turn, has important consequences that extend beyond Americans’ decisions about who to vote for and how often to go to church. The next sections discuss a few consequences stemming from sorting as well as what these mean for our democracy.

ASYMMETRIC SORTING

Today’s religiously sorted political environment can best be categorized as an asymmetric sorting. While the religious makeup of the parties differs,

¹³ Chris Moody, “The Survival of a Southern Baptist Who Dared to Oppose Trump,” *CNN State Magazine*, July 2017, www.cnn.com/interactive/2017/politics/state/russell-moore-donald-trump-southern-baptists/.

¹⁴ My favorite example of this comes from a pastor of a Baptist church in the eastern part of the state who, after giving a sermon about Jesus emphasizing compassion, received the criticism that: “I don’t come to church to hear liberal propaganda.” At the time of the interview, the pastor was seeking to leave the congregation since “it is not a good match, particularly since the election.” The pastor did, in fact, leave the congregation (and the state of Alabama) in summer, 2020.

Democrats and Republicans are not equally (non)religious. Indeed, while it would be accurate to categorize the Republican Party as the party of religion (among white Americans), the Democratic Party is not the party of non-religion or secularism. Instead, the Democratic Party is a religiously pluralistic party.

Religiously induced political sorting and politically induced religious sorting has given way to a relatively homogenous Republican Party. Some 35 percent of the Republican Party is made up of white evangelical Christians, making white evangelicals the single largest religious constituency within the Republican ranks. After including mainline Protestants and Catholics, just under three-quarters of Republican identifiers are white Christians.¹⁵ Moreover, only 11 percent of Republicans do not identify with a religion, 44 percent report attending church at least once a week, 84 percent believe that religion is very or somewhat important in their lives, and 73 percent believe in God with absolute certainty.¹⁶

The Democratic Party, on the other hand, includes both believers and non-believers. Here 26 percent of Democrats do not identify with a religion, and this group has received a great deal of attention in the media, rightfully so, as it now represents the single largest religious bloc within the Democratic Party.¹⁷ But this means that the overwhelming majority of Democrats identify with a faith. And while 35 percent of Democrats report that they never or seldom attend church, about 30 percent report attending church on a weekly basis, just under 75 percent report that religion is very or somewhat important in their lives, and 55 percent believe in God with absolute certainty.¹⁸ While Democrats are less religious than the Republicans on virtually every dimension, the party is best thought of as a religious coalition.

Moreover, members of the most devout religious group in America are also the strongest Democrats. Black Protestants – many of whom self-identify as born again and adhere to an evangelical theology – are not only

¹⁵ Public Religion Research Institute, “America’s Changing Religious Identity,” PRRI (blog), 2017, www.prrri.org/research/american-religious-landscape-christian-religiously-unaffiliated/.

¹⁶ Pew Research Center, “Party Affiliation – Religion in America: U.S. Religious Data, Demographics and Statistics,” Religion and Public Life Project, 2018, www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/.

¹⁷ The second largest religious constituency – making up 17 percent of the Democratic Party – are Black Protestants. Public Religion Research Institute, “America’s Changing Religious Identity.”

¹⁸ Importantly, even some Democrats who do not identify with a religion report that religion is very or somewhat important in their lives. Pew Research Center, “Party Affiliation.”

one of the most religious racial groups in the United States, they also represent the most politically cohesive racial or ethnic group, overwhelmingly identifying as Democrats and supporting Democratic candidates.¹⁹ There are numerous reasons why Black Americans are both highly religious and strongly Democratic, including the origins of Black Protestantism stemming from racial segregation and oppression, Black Protestant theology's emphasis on social justice and equality rather than personal morality, and the continued tradition of political mobilization and activism within Black churches on the political left.²⁰ Black Protestants therefore do not see their religious and political identities as being in conflict and do not feel internal pressure to update one identity to be consistent with the other. Because the religiosity gap does not extend to African Americans, secular white Americans and highly devout Black Americans are now on the same political team.

To further underscore the religious asymmetry across the parties, religious non-identifiers in the Democratic Party are not the counterpoint to highly devout Republicans. Non-religion in America is not synonymous with hostility toward religion or strong secular identities. Over 60 percent of religious "nones" believe in God or a universal spirit, just under 40 percent report praying at least monthly, and 34 percent report that religion is somewhat or very important in their lives.²¹ Despite not identifying with a religious tradition, many non-identifiers retain basic religious beliefs.

Moreover, while Christianity is a group that people identify with and feel connected to, secularism is not a strongly held social identity. In 2018, I asked Christians and religious non-identifiers a series of questions

¹⁹ For example, in the 2018 GSS, 30 percent of Black Protestants attended church at least weekly, over 80 percent reported praying at least daily, and over 80 percent identify as a Democrat with about 7 percent identifying as a Republican. Additionally, 15 percent of Black Democrats do not identify with a religion. By way of comparison, 33 percent of white Democrats are religious non-identifiers.

²⁰ Khari R. Brown and Ronald E. Brown, "Faith and Works: Church-Based Social Capital Resources and African American Political Activism," *Social Forces* 82, no. 2 (2003): 617–41; Allison Calhoun-Brown, "African American Churches and Political Mobilization," *Journal of Politics* 58, no. 4 (1996): 935–53; Eric L. McDaniel and Christopher G. Ellison, "God's Party? Race, Religion and Partisanship Over Time," *Political Research Quarterly* 61 no. 2 (2008): 180–91; Brian D. McKenzie, "Religious Social Networks, Indirect Mobilization, and African-American Political Participation" *Political Research Quarterly* 57 no. 4 (2004): 621–32; Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010).

²¹ Pew Research Center, "Party Affiliation."

tapping into their attachment to their respective groups.²² For example, respondents offered their level of agreement to statements like “When someone criticizes [group], it feels like a personal insult” and “When talking about [group], I usually say “we” rather than “they.”²³ I scaled these six measures together to range between 0 and 1, with higher numbers indicating stronger group attachment. Figure 9.1 shows the distributions of group attachments for Christians (gray boxes) and religious non-identifiers (white boxes with black outlines).

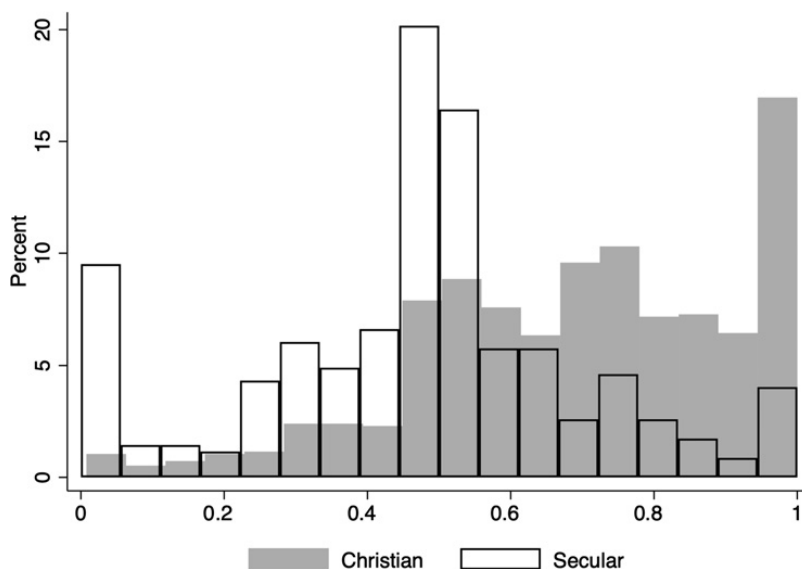


FIGURE 9.1 Attachment to Christian and secular identities

²² The data come from a nationally diverse sample collected in the fall of 2018. The data has been weighted back to the Current Population Survey (CPS).

²³ Question wordings for self-identified Protestants and other Christians. 1. How well does the term Christian describe you. Agree-disagree statements: 2. When someone criticizes Christians, it feels like a personal insult. 3. I do not act like a typical Christian. 4. If a story in the media criticized Christians, I would feel upset. 5. When someone praises Christians, it feels like a personal compliment. 6. When talking about Christians, I usually say “we” rather than “they.” [Leonie Huddy, Lilliana Mason, and Lene Aarøe, “Expressive Partisanship: Campaign Involvement, Political Emotion, and Partisan Identity,” *American Political Science Review* 109, no. 1 (February 2015): 1–17; Lilliana Mason, “A Cross-Cutting Calm: How Social Sorting Drives Affective Polarization,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 80, no. S1 (2016): 351–77.] For religious non-identifiers, I ran studies that both used the group “non-religious person/people” and “secular person/people.” The two sets of results are substantively similar to one another.

Among Christians, there is a notable skew in the data toward strongly identifying as a Christian and with other Christians. Indeed, the mean is 0.62, over 15 percent of the data have scores between 0.9 and 1, and less than 2 percent have scores between 0 and 0.1. In contrast, non-identifiers do not embrace the secular or non-religious labels to the same extent. There is a peak in the middle of the distribution – indicating that a large number of religious non-identifiers feel neither particularly close to nor distant from other group members.²⁴ Here, the mean is 0.40, only 3 percent of religious non-identifiers have scores in the 0.9 to 1 range, and 15 percent have scores between 0 and 0.1.

This asymmetry found among voters extends to asymmetric representation in Congress. Frances Lee (Chapter 4 of this volume) illustrates religious sorting among evangelical members of Congress. While the share of white evangelicals elected to Congress from the Democratic and Republican parties was the same in the late 1960s and 1970s, a 35-point gap existed by 2016. Evangelicals make up 40 percent of Republicans elected to Congress compared to just 5 percent of Democrats elected to Congress. Consequently, white evangelicals – who make up approximately one-third of the Republican Party – are somewhat overrepresented by Republicans in Congress. A corresponding trend does not exist within the Democratic Party. Despite religious non-identifiers making up the largest Democratic constituency, only a single member of the 116th Congress reports having no religion (Senator Krysten Sinema, D-Arizona) and 18 members (representing 3 percent of Congress) decline to specify.²⁵ Non-identifiers, therefore, do not have descriptive representation in Congress.

All told, Republicans are more unified in their religion than the Democrats are in their secularism, which means that the parties' abilities to mobilize and energize their bases is now different, which can ultimately threaten democratic values. Republicans take part in similar activities – such as attending religious services and being involved in their religious communities – hold similar views about God and identify strongly with

²⁴ Another interpretation of the middle peak is that respondents offered neutral positions because they had not given much thought to their secular identities. I would argue that the interpretation that a large number of people have not given this identity much thought is still evidence of a weakly held identity.

²⁵ One of the members who would not disclose his faith – Rep. Jared Huffman, D-California – identifies as a humanist and has said that he is not sure whether God exists. Pew Research Center, "Faith on the Hill: The Religious Composition of the 116th Congress," Religion and Public Life Project, January 2, 2019, <https://pewforum.org/2019/01/03/faith-on-the-hill-116/>.

the Christian label and feel attached to other Christians. Religious-political sorting therefore allows Republicans to engage in what Lacombe calls *identity-based mobilization* (Chapter 10 of this volume), a strategy emphasizing that group members' values and status are under attack. Donald Trump campaigning against the left's "War on Christmas" and Vice President Mike Pence lamenting the difficulties religious people face in America are examples of Republicans using threats to religious identity as a political tactic.²⁶ And as Lacombe argues, identity-based mobilization can transform policy debates into highly charged and personal struggles where one's survival (or in this case, soul) is at stake, thereby making compromise a less unacceptable option. While identity-based mobilization represents a politically expedient strategy for Republicans, this strategy can decrease the perceived legitimacy of political outsiders and willingness to compromise – two core values underpinning a healthy democracy.

SOCIAL SORTING AND SUPPORT FOR TRUMP

A socially sorted society, in which social and political identities are aligned, unites people on multiple dimensions, thereby increasing the possibility of generating an "us" versus "them" mentality.²⁷ For example, Republicans no longer simply share a political identity, but they also share a religious identity. Sharing multiple identities make it easier to develop an us-versus-them mentality; after all, "they" differ not only in their politics but in their faith as well. Mason goes on to show that this social sorting has observable implications, including higher levels of political bias and out-party anger. The consequences of religious sorting, therefore, goes beyond religious people supporting one party and secular people supporting another. This sorting has laid the groundwork for increasing hostility and animosity in American society.

²⁶ Democrats, on the other hand, can be anywhere on a Sunday morning – church, the grocery store, or yoga. Moreover, even the party's non-religious constituency is not avowedly secular with respect to members' beliefs or identity, making it difficult to design a strategy meant to appeal to these voters. Saba Hamedy, "Did Trump Stop the 'War on Christmas'? Some Say Yes," CNN Politics, December 22, 2017, <https://cnn.com/2017/12/22/politics/donald-trump-war-on-christmas/index.html>; Eugene Scott, "Mike Pence's Speech to Christian College Graduates Furthers 'Evangelical Persecution Complex,'" *Washington Post*, May 13, 2019.

²⁷ Lilliana Mason, *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

Indeed, the consequences of sorting help explain Trump's electoral support among religious Americans, particularly white evangelical Christians. There was a great deal of discussion surrounding whether white evangelicals – who are not only more religious on average than other religious traditions but have also tried to bring religion and morality into politics – would support Donald Trump. Donald Trump, it may go without saying, does not resemble the type of candidate religious Americans, like white evangelicals, would theoretically support.²⁸ As it turns out, they did. An extension of the social sorting argument can help us understand why.

We can think of devout, theologically defined evangelical Republicans – those who believe many or all of the core tenets associated with evangelicalism and are deeply ensconced in their religious communities – as being more effectively sorted than *nominal* evangelical Republicans – those who, despite identifying as an evangelical and a Republican, hold their religious identities less tightly. And since the consequences of social sorting include a bias in favor of one's own party and negative emotions toward the political out-party, we might expect theologically defined or highly devout evangelical Republicans to be less likely to abandon their party's standard bearer and more likely to hold negative feelings toward the out-party's candidate compared to their *nominal* or *cultural* evangelical counterparts. This is precisely what I find when looking at white evangelicals in the 2016 election. Not only did more devout evangelical Republicans support Trump at higher rates than their less devout co-partisans, but they also held much more negative affect toward Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama.²⁹

Helping make sense of the 2016 election is only one example of the consequences stemming from religious-political sorting. On the one hand, religion is an important social identity – it is a group that members can feel a part of and connected to, it is a set of people with whom members can have regular interactions, and it is a set of core beliefs that can guide all aspects of members' lives. Partisanship, on the other hand, is also an important social identity – it is not only a driver of how people vote, but also serves as a lens through which to see the world, interpret events, and evaluate others. Each identity is individually strong enough to motivate group members to take action to protect the group's status, and their

²⁸ If the reader does need it to be said – Donald Trump is currently married to his third wife, has committed adultery, owns casinos, was caught on tape denigrating women, frequently uses foul language, and committed a series of religious gaffes during the campaign.

²⁹ Michele F. Margolis, "Who Wants to Make America Great Again? Understanding Evangelical Support for Donald Trump," *Politics and Religion* 13, no. 1 (March 2020): 89–118.

combined power is even stronger.³⁰ Religious-political sorting can therefore enhance emotional responses in politics and discourage deviations from expected behaviors, sometimes to deleterious ends. Mason and Kalmoe (Chapter 7 in this volume) show that partisans feel pleasure when members of the partisan opposition suffer and some even support political violence toward them. Social sorting, including religious-political sorting, has undoubtedly contributed to partisans' intolerance and anger toward their political opponents.

SORTING AND PERCEPTIONS OF VICTIMIZATION

Not only is religious-political sorting the first step in changing how Americans view the political arena, but this sorting has also created fundamental differences in how people view the non-political world, including which groups experience discrimination and bias in society.

Pew and PRRI have been asking whether various groups face discrimination in the United States over the past decade. I pooled together five surveys between 2009 and 2015 – the survey responses are remarkably stable across time – and look at the two largest religious constituencies in the parties, white evangelicals and religious non-identifiers.³¹ Generally speaking, members of a given social group are more likely to report that their group faces discrimination compared to non-group members. This might occur because group members are more sensitive toward slights aimed at their own group or more likely to hear more about discrimination aimed at their group.³² Indeed, while just over half of white

³⁰ Importantly, social sorting does not have to produce overarching combined identities. For example, while many Democrats are not particularly religious, a non-religious or secular identity is not nearly as strong as a religious identity.

³¹ Americans recognize the political attachments of evangelicals and non-religious people. When asked about the partisanship of evangelicals, just under three-quarters reported that they are “mainly Republicans,” less than 20 percent reported “a pretty even mix of both” and less than 5 percent reported that they are “mainly Democrats.” For non-religious people, 48 percent said the group are mainly Democrats, 45 percent said they are a mix of both parties, and only 3 percent said they are mainly Republicans. David E. Campbell, John C. Green, and Geoffrey C. Layman. “The Party Faithful: Partisan Images, Candidate Religion, and the Electoral Impact of Party Identification,” *American Journal of Political Science* 55, no. 1 (January 2011): 42–58.

³² I also look at other social group identities in the survey and similarly find that Jews are more likely to report that Jews face “a lot” of discrimination compared to non-Jews; Catholics (not asked in all five survey waves) report that Catholics face more discrimination than non-Catholics do; Blacks report that Blacks face more discrimination than non-Blacks do; Hispanics report that Hispanics face more discrimination than non-Hispanics

evangelicals report that evangelicals face “a lot” of discrimination in the United States, only about one-quarter of non-evangelicals do so.³³ Similarly, while 38 percent of religious non-identifiers report that atheists face “a lot” of discrimination in the United States today, that number is less than 25 percent among those who identify with a faith.³⁴ These results, while consistent with existing literature, mask important similarities and differences when we simultaneously consider partisan identity.

Whereas 56 percent of white evangelical Republicans believe that evangelicals face “a lot” of discrimination, non-evangelical Republicans and white evangelical Democrats perceive roughly similar rates of discrimination against evangelicals (35 percent versus 32 percent).³⁵ Members of social groups usually perceive more discrimination against their own group than others do; however, non-evangelical Republicans seem as attuned to the plight of their political compatriots, despite not being members of the religious group, as white evangelical Democrats who are, themselves, members of the group in question. Non-evangelical Democrats report that evangelicals face discrimination at the lowest rate: 22 percent.³⁶

I find a similar, but reversed, relationship when looking at perceptions of discrimination against atheists. As noted, 38 percent of religious non-identifiers report that atheists face “a lot” of discrimination in the United States today.³⁷ That number rises to 43 percent when looking at religiously unaffiliated Democrats. Once again, partisan identities seem to matter in perceptions of discrimination. Roughly one-in-three Democrats who identify with a faith report that atheists experience “a lot” of discrimination in the United States today while only one-in-four Republican

do; and women report that women face more discrimination than men do. Katie Wang and John F. Dovidio, “Perceiving and Confronting Sexism: The Causal Role of Gender Identity Salience,” *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (March 2017): 65–76.

³³ Evangelicalism is measured using a self-identification question: “Do you consider yourself to be an evangelical or born-again Christian?”

³⁴ Importantly, the overwhelming majority of religious non-identifiers are not atheists. Unfortunately, due to limitations of sample size and what survey questions are available, I look at religious non-identifiers’ perceptions of discrimination against atheists, which generally represent a subsample of religious non-identifiers.

³⁵ *N* of white evangelical Democrats = 404.

³⁶ The Democratic results do not appear on account of religious non-identifiers. Looking only at non-evangelical Democrats who *do* identify with a religious faith, the percent only increases to 25.

³⁷ Importantly, the overwhelming majority of religious non-identifiers are not atheists. Unfortunately, due to limitations of sample size and what survey questions are available, I look at religious non-identifiers’ perceptions of discrimination against atheists, which represent a subsample of religious non-identifiers.

non-identifiers do so.³⁸ Put another way, Democrats who are *not* part of the non-religious group perceive *higher* levels of discrimination against atheists compared to Republicans who are group members. And finally, religiously affiliated Republicans are the least likely to report that atheists face a lot of discrimination (18 percent).

Three patterns emerge when considering the two identities together. First, perceptions of discrimination are highest when answering about a religious in-group and when religious group membership and partisanship match. In other words, evangelical Republicans and Democratic non-identifiers perceive the highest rates of discrimination against evangelicals and atheists, respectively. Second, when partisanship and religious group membership do not match, political identity matters a great deal. Non-evangelical Republicans (Religiously affiliated Democrats) perceive the same levels of (more) discrimination against evangelicals (atheists) as white evangelical Democrats (Republican non-identifiers). And third, perceptions of discrimination are the lowest when answering about a religious out-group and when group membership and partisanship match. White evangelical Republicans (Democratic non-identifiers) perceive the lowest rates of discrimination against atheists (evangelicals).

Importantly, the causal direction underpinning these trends likely runs both ways. For example, respondents who think that evangelicals face a lot of discrimination are 17 percent more likely to identify as a Republican compared to respondents who do not believe evangelicals face a lot of discrimination (p -value < 0.01).³⁹ Conversely, perceiving that atheists are on the receiving end of discrimination is associated with a 10 percent decrease in the likelihood of identifying as a Republican (p -value < 0.01).⁴⁰ It is quite possible that individuals' perceptions of the world around them – who is discriminated against and which party will better help the aggrieved group – shape their political attachments.

The reverse is also quite likely occurring. Democrats – by virtue of being on the Democratic team – identify with and feel affinity toward

³⁸ N of Republican non-identifiers = 432.

³⁹ This coefficient comes from a regression model that includes perceptions of discrimination against other groups, religious identification, church attendance, and socioeconomic indicators. When also controlling for political ideology, perceiving a lot of discrimination increases the likelihood of identifying as a Republican by 11 percent (p -value < 0.01).

⁴⁰ This number comes from a regression model that includes perceptions of discrimination against other groups, church attendance, and socioeconomic indicators. When also controlling for political ideology, respondents who perceive a lot of discrimination against atheists are 6 percent less likely to identify as a Republican (p -value < 0.01).

other groups in their political tent. In this case, even religiously affiliated Democrats may be sensitive toward slights aimed at their co-partisans or be more likely to hear about discrimination aimed at this group. And when the political and social identities match (evangelical Republicans and non-identifying Democrats), I find maximum sensitivity toward in-group slights and the least sensitivity toward the discrimination that out-groups may face. These findings illustrate how religious-political sorting corresponds with systematic differences in how Americans' view the plight of others. Recognizing that others have legitimate grievances is an essential component of creating equitable policies in a diverse society.

IDENTITY VERSUS ISSUES

While this chapter has focused on the importance of Americans' religious and political identities, issues also matter a great deal. "It's about abortion" and "It's about the Supreme Court" are two common refrains explaining religious Americans' support for Trump. Indeed, there are legitimate policy reasons for religious Americans to identify with the Republican Party and support Republican candidates for elected office. As I describe at the beginning of the chapter, the origins of the religiosity gap began when social and moral issues became salient in American politics, religious elites across multiple faiths joined forces to be a loud conservative political voice, and the Republican Party became aligned with culturally conservative positions not only on abortion, but also on policies related to the LGBTQ+ community, contraceptives, prayer in school, vouchers, and religious liberty. To this end, abortion attitudes lead to changing party affiliations in the 1980s and 1990s and more devout white mainline Protestants, evangelical Protestants, and Catholics take more conservative policy positions on a host of issues compared to their less devout co-religionists.⁴¹ But policy preferences alone cannot explain the social consequences associated with religious-political sorting, including feelings of anger, out-party hostility, and victimization (discussed in this chapter), as these consequences appear after

⁴¹ Christopher H. Achen and Larry M. Bartels, *Democracy For Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017); Michael Tesler, "Priming Predispositions and Changing Policy Positions: An Account of When Mass Opinion Is Primed or Changed," *American Journal of Political Science* 59, no. 4 (October 2015): 806–24.

accounting for policy positions.⁴² Rather, identities and feelings toward groups now play an important role in the religious-political sorting story, even if issues helped precipitate the sorting.

WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HAVE IN STORE?

The religious-political sorting described in this chapter has implications that extend far beyond who votes for whom. Indeed, these consequences affect core components of how our democracy functions. Moreover, these ties are unlikely to weaken – indeed, I would argue they will continue to grow stronger – in the future.

First, America now has a generation of Democratic (Republican) parents raising their children with little (a great deal of) religion. In other words, parents who have either sorted into the parties on account of their religion or sorted into religion on account of their politics are raising an entire generation with political and religious beliefs that cohere at the national level. And while neither partisanship nor religion are inherited identities, a person's upbringing is a strong predictor of these identities in adulthood. And, by virtue of the parent generation being sorted along religious and political lines, many members of the next generation will come of age with already-sorted identities. Inertia is strong and therefore many of these people will likely remain sorted unless given a reason to revisit one or another identity.

Second, the religious environment is unlikely to separate itself from conservative politics any time soon. There have been multiple political moments recently in which conservative religion had the opportunity to distance itself from the political right and the Trump administration. One example of this was President Trump's family separation policy at the border coupled with stories about the horrific treatment recent arrivals to the country received. Even in this extreme case in which the Bible takes a pretty unequivocal position, there was no unified religious voice speaking out against these actions and policies. On the one hand, many religious leaders may not feel comfortable criticizing Trump's policies due to concerns about potential blowback. For example, Russell Moore's more

⁴² Margolis, "Who Wants to Make America Great Again?"; Lilliana Mason, "‘I Disrespectfully Agree’: The Differential Effects of Partisan Sorting on Social and Issue Polarization," *American Journal of Political Science* 59, no. 1 (January 2015): 128–45; Mason, *Uncivil Agreement*.

recent attempts to wade into politics indicate what he has learned since the 2016 election. Moore expressed his frustration and disappointment about how children are being treated at detention centers along the border on Twitter; however, he was careful not to mention President Trump by name: “The reports of the conditions for migrant children at the border should shock all of our consciences. Those created in the image of God should be treated with dignity and compassion, especially those seeking refuge from violence back home. We can do better than this.”⁴³ On the other hand, there are also many vocal supporters of Trump’s immigration policies among evangelical elite. James Dobson – founder of Focus on the Family – wrote in the response to his visit to a detention center that, “without an overhaul of the law and the allocation of resources, millions of illegal immigrants will continue flooding to this great land from around the world. Many of them have no marketable skills. They are illiterate and unhealthy. Some are violent criminals. Their numbers will soon overwhelm the culture as we have known it, and it could bankrupt the nation.” The presence of continued support at the elite level for President Trump and his policies coupled with dissenters being silenced or antagonized creates an environment that promotes further religious-political sorting.

Third, Christianity continues to become a smaller share of the American religious landscape, which might further fuel anxiety among religious and political conservatives. Recent Pew data show that 65 percent of Americans described themselves as Christian (down from 77 percent in 2009), while non-identification rates have increased from 17 to 26 percent in the same ten-year period.⁴⁴ This trend is expected to continue, with Christianity – specifically white Christianity – making up a smaller share of the country in the future. Building on social psychology findings showing that threats to whites’ numerical dominance gives rise to conservative racial and political attitudes, including support for Trump, we might expect a similar response to the declining dominance of Christianity in America.⁴⁵ As Christianity’s numeric size and relative

⁴³ Jerry Falwell Jr. – the president of Liberty University and a vocal Trump supporter – still lashed out in response to Moore’s statement.

⁴⁴ Pew Research Center, “In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace,” Religion and Public Life Project, October 17, 2019, www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/.

⁴⁵ Maureen A. Craig and Jennifer A. Richeson, “On the Precipice of a ‘Majority-Minority’ America: Perceived Status Threat from the Racial Demographic Shift Affects White Americans’ Political Ideology,” *Psychological Science* 25, no. 6 (June 2014): 1189–97;

influence wanes, those remaining in the faith may turn to politics as a way to maintain power.

While there has been some discussion about what could disrupt these trends, none seem particularly promising. For example, some have pinned their hopes on young evangelicals and generational replacement to loosen the tight grip between evangelical Christianity and Republican politics. The data, however, do not warrant a great deal of optimism. Young evangelicals look quite similar to their older counterparts on key dimensions, including partisanship, ideology, abortion, and 2016 Trump support.⁴⁶ While there are admittedly some differences in which young evangelicals are more progressive than older generations of evangelicals, for example, gay marriage and the environment, younger evangelicals remain significantly more conservative on these issues compared to their younger non-evangelical counterparts and these issues do not rank among young evangelicals' top priorities.⁴⁷ Others have raised the possibility that a particular issue – like immigration or climate change – can serve as a wedge between white evangelicals and the Republican Party. There are, after all, clear theological reasons to support progressive immigration reform and pro-environmental policies. But once again, the data do not show evidence of a wedge. White evangelicals hold the most conservative views on immigration and are starkly out of step with the general American population on immigration.⁴⁸ While I do not have a crystal ball and cannot say with certainty that the status quo will continue, the evidence does not support some of the commonly cited potential disruptors of this trend.

Despite the official separation of church and state, religion has never been separate from politics in the United States. This chapter sought to

Brenda Major, Alison Blodorn, and Gregory Major Blascovich, "The Threat of Increasing Diversity: Why Many White Americans Support Trump in the 2016 Presidential Election," *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 21, no. 6 (September 2018): 931–40.

⁴⁶ Ryan P. Burge, "Just How Far Are White Evangelicals Out of the Mainstream? A Case Study of Immigration and Abortion," *Religion in Public*, 2019, <https://religioninpublic.blog/2019/12/26/just-how-far-are-white-evangelicals-out-of-the-mainstream-a-case-study-of-immigration-and-abortion/>; Jeremiah J. Castle, *Rock of Ages: Subcultural Religious Identity and Public Opinion Among Young Evangelicals* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2019).

⁴⁷ Ryan P. Burge, "Young Evangelicals Are as Republican as Their Grandparents," *Religion in Public*, 2018, <https://religioninpublic.blog/2018/07/18/young-evangelicals-are-as-republican-as-their-grandparents/>; Ryan P. Burge, "Let's Talk About Young Evangelicals and the Environment," *Religion in Public*, 2018, <https://religioninpublic.blog/2018/11/27/lets-talk-about-young-evangelicals-and-the-environment/>.

⁴⁸ Burge, "Let's Talk"; Burge, "Just How Far."

explain the ways in which religion and politics are linked today and discuss how these linkages have changed our society. The religiosity gap in the United States could simply represent differences in party attachment and vote choice; however, the divisions have had downstream consequences. Religious sorting has helped create a global us-versus-them mentality that supersedes differences between Democrats and Republicans, religious and secular. This sorting has changed the way partisans view each other, political elites, and their surroundings. Democracy functions best when its citizens hold elected officials accountable; are exposed to public discourse representing a wide variety of views, including dissenting ones; and consider alternative viewpoints as legitimate and compromise as an option. Religious sorting, both directly and indirectly, has undermined these key components of a healthy democracy.