



Michele F. Margolis: From Politics to the Pews: How Partisanship and the Political Environment Shape Religious Identity

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Donald Trump's election as the 45th President of the United States and his robust support from Conservative Christians have precipitated renewed attention to the relationship between religion and politics. There have been numerous theories proffered about why white evangelical Christians supported the non-religious and morally unscrupulous Trump. The simplest answer, however, points to partisanship. White Evangelicals voted for Trump and continue to support him because they are perhaps the strongest Republicans. Michele Margolis's transformative book *From Politics to the Pews* enhances this partisanship story, by demonstrating that the causal direction might also be reversed. Republican identity fosters increased religiosity, thus strengthening the ties between partisanship and conservative religion.

Underlying most research on religion and social science is an assumption that religious characteristics affect political views and attachments. Margolis does not refute this, but she establishes that the opposite is also true—politics, particularly partisanship, alters religion. As Margolis describes, “partisan identities can profoundly shape identification with and engagement in the religious sphere” (3). *From Politics to the Pews* is not the first research to point to this “politicized religion” theory, which reverses the typical causal story between religion and politics, but Margolis provides the most thorough treatment. What is novel about her work, importantly, is that it draws special attention to the role of life cycles in solidifying the relationship between partisan and religious identities.

From Politics to the Pews brings together well researched theories about partisan identity and religious socialization. Margolis suggests that partisanship is likely to precede religious identity for many. There are a variety of reasons for this expectation. First, is the role of partisanship as a core identity. This links Margolis's work to a growing line of inquiry of political science research about

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the importance of partisan identity, particularly in shaping social identities. Partisan identity is typically robust and more stable than religious identity.

Second, is the timing of when partisan and religious identities form and dissipate. Prior research suggests that partisan identities likely develop in the late teenage years, when religious attachments are waning. Religious identities, however, crystallize about a decade later in life, acutely when people have children. Partisan attachments, on the other hand, do not dissipate during this life stage. If partisan attachments form first and remain intact, it is likely they would influence religious life, especially for those who left religion in young adulthood.

Analyzing a host of survey data, including two panel studies (1965–1997 and 2008–2014), nationally representative cross-sectional data, and various survey experiments, Margolis finds strong empirical support for her expectations. Partisanship helps orient people’s religious decisions, especially at crucial junctures in the life cycle (i.e., parenthood). Democrats become less likely to return to religion (except African American Democrats, who do not perceive that their religious and political identities are in conflict), while Republicans are more likely to rededicate their religious lives. These partisan influences on religious decisions then persist through the life course. Additionally, the political environment alters partisans’ religious behavior. Individuals with unstable religious identities will alter their religiosity based on political cues, and religiosity produces an asymmetry in political interest for Democrats and Republicans—religious Republicans are more interested in politics, while religious Democrats are less interested. All of this provides an important added explanation for the current “God Gap” in partisanship.

While the evidence in *From Politics to the Pews* is convincing, there are areas where more research is needed. Margolis addresses the issue of changing relationships between evangelicals and Republicans between 1965 and 1982, but only gives slight attention to the Southern realignment (pp. 90–91). It would be helpful to analyze both party and religious switching in this period. This is particularly important as evangelicalism was growing during this era and evangelicalism is marked by higher religiosity (e.g., biblical liberalism and attendance). More contextual analyses this critical juncture would solidify the causal story.

While continued work is needed, for scholars of religion and politics, *From Politics to the Pews* should serve as a call for the importance of partisanship in understanding religious attitudes and commitments, as partisanship is often intertwined with religious identity, behavior, beliefs, and affiliation. Beyond merely including partisanship in statistical models, *From Politics to the Pews* suggests that research on religion and politics should investigate how partisanship mediates the impact of religion. Scholars would do well to pay special attention to younger individuals, particularly between the teenage years and parenthood, to understand the changing dynamics between religion and politics that may be entangled by the onset of a solidifying partisan identity.

From Politics to the Pews is an excellent, important book. It is careful, sophisticated, and nuanced. Margolis’s conclusions that the causal relationship between religion and politics is a two-way street, particularly that partisanship can affect religious commitments, will alter the way scholars understand the relationship

between religion and politics. In the coming years, I expect a growing reconsideration of the social scientific study of religion and politics. As this happens, *From Politics to the Pews* will become an indispensable resource.

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