Rethinking the Relationship between Religion and Politics
A Test of the Life Cycle Theory*

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Abstract

While social identities have long been shown to influence political attitudes and behaviors, this paper asks the reverse. Are political identities ever strong enough to influence identification and involvement with a deep-seated identity? Looking at an identity that has become an increasingly strong predictor of partisanship and vote choice, religion, I develop a theory that there is a time period in an individual’s life when a fully-formed political identity can have a meaningful effect on a weak religious identity. Using an experiment and two panel studies to test my theory, I find that when people are in the process of raising children—a time that pulls many back into the religious fold—their partisanship can change key aspects of their religious identity. Although many bemoan religion’s role in creating a polarized political arena, this blame may be unfairly assigned as partisans themselves help produce an increasingly polarized electorate.

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Scholars of identity politics have long asked how deep-seated social identities affect political attitudes. In the American context, a venerable line of research has shown how race (Kinder and Sanders 1996), social class (Brooks and Manza 1997; Hout, Brooks, and Manza 1995; Lipset 1981), and gender (Verba, Scholzman and Brady 1995) shape political attitudes, identities, and allegiances. These social identities are often taken as fixed in their salience and largely impervious to political influence. Yet, much research across political science and allied disciplines has shown that the strength of social identities varies across different times, places, and social contexts (Chandra 2001; Kasfir 1979; Posner 2005; Waters 1990). Furthermore, a long line of scholarship in American politics demonstrates that partisanship can, itself, be an important and meaningful identity (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002; Gerber and Huber 2010; 2009). Is it therefore possible that, under certain conditions, political identities influence an individual’s social identities?

To begin to answer this question, I focus on one identity often touted as one of the primary drivers of contemporary political attitudes in the United States: religion. Republicans, on average, attend church more regularly and are more likely to identify with a religious faith than Democrats. A common explanation for this gap in the religiosity of partisan groups, often known as the “God gap”, is that the highly devout have sorted into the Republican Party, while the less religious and secular have joined the Democratic ranks. But, might there not be another explanation? If political identities are potentially very strong and the salience of an individual’s religious identity waxes and wanes over the course of her lifetime, might the former ever influence the latter? This paper theorizes when a person’s political identity might impact her religious identity and provides evidence in support of the theory’s observable implications.

I begin by presenting a novel, yet intuitive, theory that explains why political identities can influence religious identities. In brief, the development of religious and political identities occurs at different periods in an individual’s life, and the distinct timings of the two socialization processes create a window during which partisanship can shape identification
with and involvement in the religious sphere. I then offer three empirical tests of my theory, one experimental and two observational. In each, I show that the contemporary political landscape—one which links the Republicans to traditional religious values and the Democrats to more secular and liberal religious beliefs—can affect partisans’ religious identifications and behaviors. Importantly, the relative strength of religious and political identities’ matters, as all three sets of results are driven by individuals at a life stage when religious identities tend to be weak and open to outside influence.

The theory and empirics make three contributions. First, this paper highlights the need for American politics scholars to consider how politically-relevant social identities are formed and made salient, as political identities may actually affect membership strength under certain circumstances. Second, building on Huddy’s claim that social identities have variable strength (2001), the paper shows that researchers miss important nuances when they assume that identities are fixed and stable. And third, the paper presents a new way of thinking about the contemporary religious and political landscape. Religion becoming increasingly intertwined in politics does more than change the political landscape; it also changes the religious make up of America.

A life cycle theory of religion and politics

Although previous work has suggested that political identities can shape religious involvement (Hout and Fischer 2014; 2002; Patrikios; Putnam and Campbell 2010), the empirical findings are limited and do not offer expectations about when political identities should shape religious outlooks.¹ I fill in this hole by developing a theory, which brings together the religious and political socialization literatures, that predicts when we should expect political

¹While Hout and Fischer (2002) open the door to the question by showing that the increases in religious non-identification comes from the rise of the Religious Right in the 1980s, concerns about omitted variable bias and reverse causation limit the inferences they can make with their cross-sectional data. Further, previous empirical work lacks a generalizable theory. Putnam and Campbell (2010) were surprised when they find that religious responses shifted over a two-wave panel to be consistent with their partisanship: “We were initially skeptical of this finding, since it seemed implausible that people would hazard the fate of their eternal soul over mundane political controversies” (145).
identities to influence religious identities.

The religious life course

For most individuals, religious identification and beliefs are dynamic, not static. Sociologists, developmental psychologists, and scholars of religion have noted that as people develop and age, their relationship with both formal religious institutions and their own personal beliefs change (Argue, Johnson, and White 1999; Chaves 1991; Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens 1993; Ingersoll-Dayton, Krause, and Morgan 2002; Roof 1993; Wilson and Sherkat 1994).

The sociological “religious life cycle” theory begins with the observation that teenagers and young adults distance themselves from both the religion in which they were raised and religious practice in general (Arnett and Jensen 2002; Desmond, Morga, and Kikuchi 2010; Gallup and Castelli 1989; Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens 1993; Hunsberger and Brown 1984; Roof 1993; Smith 2009; Uecker, Regnerus, and Vaaler 2007; Willits and Crider, 1989; Wilson and Sherkat 1994; Wuthnow 2007). Across multiple generations, young adults are the least likely to identify with a religious tradition, attend religious services, pray, and report religion being an important part of their lives (Smith 2009). Other studies have shown that Mainline Protestant, Catholic, Mormon, and Jewish faiths all lose more members during this life stage than any other single period (Albrecht, Cornwall, and Cunningham 1988; Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens 1993; Uecker, Regnerus, and Vaaler 2007). Across generations and communities, young adults’ religious identities are noticeably weaker than at other points in their lives.

There are many sociological explanations for why young adults leave religion. First, leaving home, changing peer groups, and adopting new roles and responsibilities often result in cutting ties with childhood religious institutions (Goldscheider and Goldscheider 1999; Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens 1993). These transitions automatically place young adults on the outskirts of organized religion. Second, young adults willfully assert their independence from their parents’ religious beliefs and practices (Arnett and Jensen 2002; Smith 2009). In fact, church attendance decreases most dramatically among young adults who attended religious services regularly as children and who have parents who regularly attend (Petts 2009). Third, Smith (2009) argues that the cognitive dissonance that comes from the young adults’ exposure to and experimentation with binge drinking (Perkins 1987), drug use (Engs and Mullen 1999), and premarital sex (Zaleski and Schiffino 2000) pushes young adults away from religion. A final, more passive, reason for decreased religiosity among young adults is that they simply lose interest or are too busy with other activities. For many, the decline in religiosity is not a concerted decision, but rather an unintended eventuality once given free rein over their time (Dinges et al. 1998; Smith 2009).
As these young people emerge into full adulthood, which often begins with starting a family (Chaves 2011), they must decide whether to remain on the outskirts of religion or re-enter the religious realm. Sociologists note that getting married (Hadaway and Roof 1988; Roof 1993; Sandominsky and Wilson 1990) and having children (Argue, Johnson, and White 1999; Arnett and Jensen 2002; Gallup and Castelli 1989; Ingersoll-Dayton, Krause, and Morgan 2002; Wilson and Sherkat 1994; Wuthnow 2007) are strongly associated with increased church attendance, and that religious participation peaks when married couples have school-age children (Argue, Johnson, and White 1999; Stolzenberg, Blair-Loy, and Waite 1995). Scholars claim that these parents re-embrace religion to provide the next generation with a religious upbringing.

Despite the tendency to return to religion, newly minted adults do not necessarily raise the next generation in the same way in which they were raised. Instead, individuals accept and reject religious beliefs and practices that suit their needs and are consistent with their pre-existing attitudes and identities (Arnett and Jensen 2002; Newport 1979; Sherkat and Wilson 1994; Stump 1984). And although certain life events tend to move people out of religion (like divorce) or toward religion (like death of a loved one or serious illness), an adult’s resultant religious identity—measured by beliefs and participation—remain stable over time (Dillon and Wink 2007).

The upper panel of Figure 1 presents a visual illustration of the religious life cycle model. The socialization process creates a window in adolescence and early adulthood when many people’s religious identities are relatively weak. While in this window, however, other aspects of a young adult’s identity continue to grow and develop, which can subsequently impact religious decisions as individuals transition into adulthood. One potential influence is politics.
The political life course

The political socialization literature explains how political attitudes first form and to what extent these early attitudes affect opinions and ideas later in life. Though party identification is largely stable during adulthood (Abramson 1979; Alwin, Cohen, and Newcomb 1991; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002; Sears 1983; Sears and Funk 1990), scholars have explored when these political identifications solidify. This process does not happen overnight but occurs as individuals grow, learn, and engage with the political sphere.

The “impressionable years” hypothesis claims—as the name suggests—that adolescents and young adults are highly “impressionable.” During this time, outside influences and events shape long-term political outlooks, such as political identification (Abramson 1979; Sears 1990; 1975). Adolescents’ partisanship can be affected both by their parents’ political leanings (Beck and Jennings 1991; Chaffee, McCleod, and Wackman 1973; Jennings and Niemi 1981; 1974; Niemi and Jennings 1990; Tedin 1974) as well as current events and the political climate of the day (Alwin, Cohen and Newcomb 1991; Beck 1974; Firebaugh and Chen 1995; Green, Palmquist and Schickler 2002). The events affecting those coming of age can be both large in scale, such as the Vietnam War or the September 11th terrorist attacks, or regularly occurring political events, such as campaigns and elections. Political campaigns boil down complex issues into simple, digestible ideas and allows adolescents to sort out their political leanings in the process of becoming a partisan (Sears and Valentino 1997).

The resultant partisanship from this socialization process is more than just a stable affiliation with a political party; it is a powerful identity in its own right that often lasts a lifetime (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002) and influences other relevant attitudes and behaviors. Partisanship shapes responses to survey questions asking about the economy.

3 The hypothesis distinguishes itself from previous socialization theories by recognizing that core beliefs are largely stable over the course of one’s adult life, while also conceding that attitudes can change a great deal during childhood and early adolescence (Jennings and Niemi 1984; 1981; Vaillancourt 1973).

4 Related to the impressionable years hypothesis, a generational effect occurs when people in the same age cohort experience similar, “historical, social, cultural, and political experiences” at the same period in their lives (Delli Carpini 1989). The result is groups of otherwise different individuals having a more similar outlook than they otherwise would due to the time in which they came of age (Sears 1990).
(Bartels 2002; 2000), levels of trust in the government (Keele 2005), and feelings about the fairness of elections (Sances and Stewart 2012). Gerber and Huber (2010; 2009) even show that partisanship drives consumption behavior and self-reported spending decisions. All told, partisan identification develops in adolescence and young adulthood, is quite stable throughout adulthood, and can produce meaningful changes in the attitudes and behaviors of partisans. The lower panel of Figure 1 presents the political socialization timeline.

Predictions within the American political landscape

The two panels in Figure 1 reveal that political identities are being formed and internalized at the very time when religious identities are relatively weak. Upon reaching adulthood, an individual has a solidified political affiliation as she makes decisions about her religious identity. Partisan identities, which are routinely activated through elite cues differentiating Republicans and Democrats on questions related to religion, may cause people to rely on their partisanship when updating their religious identities. Just as elite cues encourage partisans to adopt attitudes and behave politically in a manner consistent with their party (Cohen 2003; Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013; Lavine, Johnston, Steenbergen 2012), partisans at this point in their life may bring their religious identity in line with their pre-existing partisan affiliation. However, religious identities are not always in flux. Once religious identities have solidified, they are quite stable over long periods of time. Consequently, for those squarely in adulthood—that is, those who have already made their re-entrance (or not) into religion—I expect partisanship’s effect on religion to be muted.

If partisanship were to influence religious decisions, in what direction would we expect Republicans and Democrats to move? Republicans are painted as the party aligned with religious groups and the champion of morally conservative issues (Bolce and De Maio 2002; 2014), while the Democratic Party has taken liberal positions on issues related to morality and religion since the early 1970s (Layman 2001). These cues, provided by both politicians and the media, have subsequently affected partisans’ views. Voters are more likely to clas-
sify evangelical Christians and religious people as Republicans and seculars as Democrats (Campbell, Layman, and Green 2011), and they are more likely to view the Republican Party as “friendlier” toward religion than the Democratic Party (Pew 2009). Consequently, if partisans were to update their religious identity to be consistent with their partisanship, Republicans would become more religious, while Democrats would become less religious.

Below I present three empirical tests of the life cycle theory. In the analyses, all respondents were born in the United States. Individuals raised in another country experienced different socialization processes, and the same theoretical expectations may not apply. In the next section, I present an experiment whose purpose is to estimate directly how political identification can influence religious identification.

**Partisan identity priming experiment**

The goal of the experiment is straightforward: prime an individual’s partisan identity. Priming, or highlighting, an identity allows researchers to circumvent the problem that identities are not exogenous by instead measuring attitudes (Jackson 2001; Johnson, Rowatt, and LaBouff 2012; Klar 2013) and behaviors (Dijksterhuis and van Knippenberg 1998; McLeish and Oxoby 2008; Shariff and Norenzayan 2007; Shih et al. 1999) after randomly assigning whether a particular identity is made salient. In this case, if partisans link conservative religious values with the Republican Party and equate more secular and morally permissive positions with the Democratic Party, then priming an individual’s partisan identity may cause them to re-evaluate their religious identities.
Research design

The two-wave experiment took place in August 2013 using a diverse national sample. In the first wave of the survey, I collected party identification. The experimental portion of the study took place two weeks later using 1,230 respondents. In the beginning of the second wave, respondents were randomly assigned to a treatment or control condition.

In order to prime partisan identities, treated respondents rated the aesthetics of three flyers advertising a voter registration and political engagement drive put on by the fictitious Ohio Voters’ Council. Self-identified Democrats and Democratic leaners in wave 1 rated flyers for a Democratic event, while self-identified Republicans and Republican leaners rated flyers for a Republican version of the event. Respondents rated the flyers in three head-to-head match ups. For each comparison, respondents were asked to choose which flyer was easier to read, which flyer made the event seem more attractive, and which flyer the respondent preferred overall. I present the flyers and experimental text in the Appendix.

The experimental stimulus is a weak treatment whose purpose is only to remind individuals of their partisan identities, but does not make reference to specific policies, politicians, or groups linked to one of the parties. And importantly, there is no mention of religion or morality politics. After answering the final question of the section, respondents moved on to the next part of the study which asked a series of attitudinal and behavioral questions. The main dependent variable—religious identity—was asked among other demographic questions.

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5 The sample was obtained through Survey Sampling International (SSI). SSI recruits participants through online communities, social networks, and website ads, and makes efforts to recruit hard-to-reach groups, such as ethnic minorities and seniors. Potential participants are then screened and invited into the panel. When deploying a particular survey, SSI randomly selects panel participants for survey invitations. I did not employ quotas but asked SSI to recruit a target population that matched the (18 and over) census population on education, gender, age, geography, and income. The resulting sample is not a probability sample but is a diverse national sample. Numerous studies using sample from SSI have been published recently in political science (Berinsky, Margolis, and Sances 2014; Kam 2012; Malhotra and Margalit 2010; Malhotra, Margalit, and Mo 2013).

6 I randomly assigned subjects into the treatment conditions at the beginning of Wave 2 which reduces concerns related to panel attrition and internal validity.

7 Pure Independents in the political priming condition were randomly assigned to one of the two party primes.
later in the survey.\footnote{As a manipulation check, I also asked respondents attitudinal questions about whether more religious people should run for office and whether the political parties focus too much or not enough on religion. Primed partisans were more likely to move toward the extreme—Democrats wanting less religion in politics and Republicans wanting more. Half of the respondents received these questions before the religious identification question and half answered the questions after. There is no systematic difference in dependent variable based on when they answered these questions about religion in the public sphere.}

The dependent variable is a four-point measure of religious identification strength based on two questions. Respondents first answered a standard religious identification question, and then one follow-up question based on their initial response. If the respondent identifies with a religion, she receives a follow up that asks whether or not she identifies strongly or not strongly with the religion.\footnote{For example, if a respondent identifies as Catholic, her follow-up would read: “Do you identify strongly as a Catholic or not very strongly as a Catholic?” If a respondent identified as an “other” religion, the religion she specified in the open-ended box was carried over to the follow-up question.} Approximately 40\% of religious identifiers classify themselves as “weak” identifiers while 60\% think of themselves as “strong” identifiers. For the roughly 23\% of respondents who do not identify with any religion, they are asked: “Do you think of yourself as closer to one particular religion over another?” and are given the same response options as the initial identification question along with an option that they do not feel any closer to one particular religion. A full quarter of respondents who initially said that they did not identify with a religious tradition “leaned” toward one religion. The result is a four-point scale of religious identification, ranging from 0 (strong non-identifier) to 1 (strong identifier).

This paper is first and foremost interested in testing whether the relative strengths of different identities vary depending on a person’s position within the life cycle. To do so, I focus on two subsamples. First, I look at individuals with school-aged children, as they are theoretically the most likely to have weak religious identities that are open to partisanship’s influence. Second, I look at individuals with grown children, whose solidified religious identities should make them more immune to external influence. Full parametric results for the full sample, subsamples, other measures of religious identity, and models that include control variables are in the Appendix.
Primbing partisanship results

The top panels of Figure 2 presents what a hypothetical treatment and null effect look like. The x-axis represents the treatment condition and the y-axis represents the average dependent variable response for the group. Here we care how the treatment changes the relative size of the identification gap. In the left panel, Republicans (Democrats), denoted by squares (circles), in the treated condition report being a stronger (weaker) religious identifier than Republicans (Democrats) in the control condition. This hypothetical result would indicate that the partisan prime changed reported religious identities and increased the identification gap between Democrats and Republicans. The top right panel, on the other hand, indicates a null effect. Again using hypothetical data, the gap does not change on account of the treatment.

The bottom panels of Figure 2 present the average identifications scores for those with children at home (left) and those with grown children (right). Although unsurprising, I find that Republicans with children at home are stronger identifiers than Democrats in the control condition. More importantly, the partisan primes influenced religious identities among those with children at home. The average score for the four-point religious identification measure increased from 0.80 to 0.88 for Republicans, but decreased from 0.72 to 0.66 among Democrats. The partisan gap increased by 0.14 points, more than doubling the original identification gap (p-value = 0.03). In contrast, religious identification rates remained relatively stable among those with grown children. The identification gap actually shrunk slightly, but this result is statistically insignificant (p-value = 0.41). A further test confirms that the partisan treatment effect differs between those with children at home and those with grown children (p-value = 0.04).

Importantly, this divergence is not driven by strong partisans and occurs among Democrats.

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10 65% of Republicans reporting that they are a strong identifier, compared to 48% of Democrats.
11 The corresponding p-value comes from a difference-in-difference model testing whether the treatment affected Republicans and Democrats differently.
12 The parametric test involves a triple interaction model that includes treatment condition, partisanship, and parental status.
and Republicans alike. Although there is not enough data to fully explore the treatment effects using a seven-point party identification measure, the treatment effects found among strong partisans are noticeably smaller than the effects for weak partisans and partisan leaners. In fact, re-running the analyses excluding strong identifiers actually increases both the magnitude and statistical significance of the results. Religious updating is not only occurring among extreme partisans. Moreover, I find symmetric results indicating that Republicans and Democrats both contributed to the increased identity gap.

The controlled experiment provides a direct test of whether and when partisanship might influence religious identification. Despite being a weak test of politics’ influence, I find partisans updating their religious identity to be “consistent” with their partisan identity at a certain point in their lives. The experiment, however, leaves two questions unanswered. First, are the results indicative of a life cycle theory, as I suggest, or are the two cohorts simply different? Second, is there any evidence in the real world of partisanship influencing religious identities? In the sections that follow I present two sets of observational results which corroborate and build on the experimental findings.

**Testing partisanship’s influence using two panel studies**

Observational studies have explored how aspects of a person’s religious identity have come to influence political behaviors. In particular, attendance at religious services (generally referred to as church attendance) became an important predictor of Republican support for the first time beginning in the 1980s (Layman 1997) and continues today (Green 2010). Higher levels of church attendance, within any denomination, are positively correlated with Republican identification and vote choice.

In the next sections I use panel data to test whether part of this increased correlation arose from political identities influencing church attendance. Church attendance is an outward sign of and a common proxy for religious identity, and sociologists’ religious life cycle work
has focused on involvement in churches—particularly being members and attending (Argue, Johnson, and White 1999; Chaves and Schleifer 2014; Stolzenberg, Blair-Loy, and Waite 1995). Church attendance is also asked in both data sets, which allows for comparability. I discuss and replicate the main results for other dataset-specific variables in the Appendix.

I identify two cases, one in the 1970s and one in 2004, when scholars have found evidence of voters receiving clear signals distinguishing the parties on the basis of religiosity or morality politics. Although the sample composition differs and the data are collected decades apart, the empirical strategy for both cases is similar. In both cases, I measure whether an individual’s partisanship—measured years before—changes her reported church attendance over time.\(^{13}\)

Although the panel data reduce concerns about reverse causation and omitted variable bias that plague cross-sectional research, the strategy is not an inferential panacea. A first concern is that individuals may change their partisanship over time and not just their religiosity. Despite the literature noting that partisanship is stable, even over long periods of time and in the wake of political turmoil (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002), partisanship is not wholly fixed. That said, time lags are more likely to mask an effect rather than exaggerate it.\(^{14}\) The more variation there is in partisanship, the harder it will be to detect an effect. As an added measure, however, I run two robustness checks on all the results. First, I replicate the results with a restricted sample using only respondents whose answers on partisanship remained the same across the two survey waves. Second, I replicate the results using previous measures of partisanship \((X_{t-1})\) as an instrument for present-day partisanship \((X)\). Although both strategies offer their own problems, these alternative specifications produce

\(^{13}\)I run change models that includes a lagged dependent variable rather than models that use a differenced dependent variable because the differenced specification assumes that the lagged dependent variable \((Y_{t-1})\) does not influence either the dependent variable at time \(t\) \((Y_t)\) or the change in dependent variable across the survey waves \((\Delta Y)\) (Finkel 1995; Morgan and Winship 2007). It is highly improbable that partisanship or church attendance at one point in time is uncorrelated with a change in these variables over time. As a robustness check, however, I also ran the models using a differenced DV approach and find similar results.

\(^{14}\)For example, if a nonchurch-attending Democrat in time \(t\) becomes a frequently-attending Republican by time \(t+1\), my data would show a time \(t\) Democrat becoming more religious between times \(t\) and \(t + 1\). This goes against the theoretical expectation.
similar results to the main findings presented.

A second concern relates to the generalizability of these findings. The subsequent analyses include individuals of and control variables for all religious faiths, both large and small. While the samples are too small to test how minority religions, such as Jews or Mormons, behave, the main results remain the same if they are included or excluded from the models. For the larger religious faiths, however, I run a series of interaction analyses and replicate the main results excluding the large religious groups—mainline Protestants, Catholics, and evangelical Protestants—one at a time in order test whether the overall results are driven by one particular religious group. For all analyses, the results are not driven by one major religion, but rather apply broadly to (at least) the three main religious denominations.15

1970s: The beginning of religious elite divergence

The 1970s represents a watershed moment during which the Republican and Democratic Parties diverged along religious and moral lines for the first time. These elite-level changes serve as the first instance in which we might find evidence of partisanship influencing decisions related to one’s religious identity.

Although discussions about the relationship between religion and politics emphasize Republican strategies, the Democratic Party actually made the first move on cultural issues (Layman 2001). George McGovern, the party’s presidential nominee, was a liberal Senator who favored more lenient penalties for marijuana use and opposed calls to ban abortion at the national level (White 1973). 1972 also marked the first time in which secularists and cultural liberals were a significant presence among Democratic activists and convention delegates (Kirkpatrick 1976; Layman 2001) and the Democratic Party platform contained liberal stances on cultural issues, including sections on “The Right To Be Different,” “Rights of Women,” and “Family Planning” (Layman 2001, 114).

Although a wholesale Democratic shift to the cultural left was mitigated by the election

15The three major religions make up approximately 90% of the first sample and 60% of the second sample.
of Democrat Jimmy Carter, the first born-again President, Republicans began to strategi-
cally court religious activists with a culturally conservative issue agenda (Himmelstein 1983;
Oldfield 1996; Reichley 1987). In the 1980 election, Ronald Reagan reached out devout
voters—including members of Jerry Falwell’s newly-formed Moral Majority and the Religious
Roundtable—by emphasizing issues such as abortion, prayer in public school, subsidizing pri-
vate religious education, and gay rights (Layman 2001; Miller and Wattenberg 1984; Oldfield
1996). Reagan railed against federally-funded textbooks that taught “moral relativism”, the
Federal Communications Commission for trying to limit religious broadcasting, and the IRS
for launching an “unconstitutional regulatory vendetta” against Christian schools (Williams
2010, 141-2).

The large-scale shifts in official party positions, candidate rhetoric, and the salience of
moral issues mark the first instance in which the parties became known for being on opposing
sides of the religious and cultural aisle. If we think partisanship can drive religious decisions,
this would be the first time we should see this occurring.

Politics affecting religiosity for the first time

To test how partisanship influenced changes in church attendance, I use the Youth-Parent
Socialization Panel data (YPSP), started in 1965 by M. Kent Jennings. The YPSP first
interviewed a national sample of high school seniors and their parents in 1965. Subsequent
follow-up surveys were conducted using the same individuals in 1973, 1982, and 1997. The
data capture the cohort at key life stages—at ages 18, 26, 35, and 50—that allow for a test
of partisanship’s influence as life cycle status changes. At age 26 (in 1973) many, but not
all, are married and individuals have very young children, if they have children at all. In
contrast, by 35 (in 1982), nearly everyone in the sample has school-aged children. This
cohort, therefore, represents one of the first generations who were making religious decisions
for themselves and their families against the new religious-political backdrop.
Although not the primary interest of the paper, I begin by showing how young partisans’ church attendance changed after graduating from high school and becoming young adults. To provide an intuition behind the results, the left panel of Figure 3 plots the raw percentage of the student generation who reported attending church almost weekly or weekly in 1965 and in 1973, separately for self-identified Republicans and Democrats (measured in 1965). Church attendance declined dramatically for both Republicans and Democrats: while roughly 67% (64%) of Republicans (Democrats) reported attend church nearly every week, that numbers plummets to 30% (29%) in 1973. These results corroborate an expansive sociology literature showing that religion becomes a peripheral concern as students leave home and begin to make a life for themselves. The right panel of Figure 3 is a partial residual plot, which shows the variation in church attendance (ordinal measure ranging between 0 and 1) due to partisanship after accounting for 1965 levels of church attendance and control variables that may be correlated with partisanship and changing religiosity. The line represents partisanship’s effect when respondents change their church attendance over time. The flat slope indicates that while church attendance declined dramatically between 1965 and 1973, Republicans and Democrats responded in the same manner over time. Parametric models that treat party identification as binary variables, rather than linear, are presented in the Appendix. In contrast, the parent generation’s levels of church attendance remained stable between 1965 and 1973.

More pertinent to the current research question is how Democrats’ and Republicans’ church attendance changed between 1973 and 1982. The left panel of Figure 3 again assesses how an individual’s partisanship—measured in 1973—corresponds to changes in regular church attendance between 1973 and 1982. Regular church attendance among Republicans increased from 32% in 1973 to 42% in 1982, while Democrats only increased from 30% to 33%. While there was no church attendance gap between Democrats and Republicans in 1973, a 7% gap

16Controls include: 1965 measures of the student’s religion, region of residence, gender, race, high school curriculum, and closeness with parents; whether the student had attended college, was married, and had children in 1973; and measures of the student’s upbringing based on responses from the parents: average church attendance, party identification, education of head of household, and average income.
emerged by 1982. The right panel of Figure 3 corroborates the raw results with a partial residual graph from a change model. Again, I use an ordinal church attendance variable that ranges between 0 and 1.

The change model includes three sets of control variables. First, I include demographic controls: the student generation’s region of residence, education, income, marital and parental status, gender, whether they served in Vietnam, and closeness with parents from 1973, as well their religious affiliation, church attendance, and high school curriculum from 1965. Second, I include individuals’ attitudes on important policy issues of the day. The 1960s and 1970s were a time of great social upheaval and broader societal attitudes may have triggered a move toward or away from religion. I therefore include respondents’ opinions on the Vietnam War, school busing, marijuana legalization, government aid to minorities, equal rights for women, and economic liberalism. And third, I use responses from the parent generation data to control for additional aspects of students’ upbringing that likely affect the development of both partisan and religious identities: average church attendance, party identification, family income, and education of the household head. By 1982, a partisan-driven church attendance gap—representing about 7% of the church attendance scale—is noticeable in the data. Republicans “returned” to the pews to a greater extent than Democrats. Importantly, this attendance gap remains for many years to come. By 1997, Democrats’ levels of church attendance had not “caught up” to Republicans. In the Appendix I show that Democrats in 1973 are still less frequent church attenders in 1997, at 50 years old, compared to their Republican counterparts.

To understand the magnitude of the results, I compare the partisan results to a well-documented explanation of religious involvement. A child’s religious environment is a consistently strong predictor of her religiosity in adulthood. Individuals raised in religious house-

\[^{17}\text{Including policy attitudes as control variables raises concerns about whether individuals choose a partisan identification that matches their policy positions (which would make it important to control for policy preferences) or whether partisans adopt policy positions to match their partisanship (which might result in post-treatment bias on the partisanship variable). I run the model both with and without the policy control variables and the relationship between partisanship and religiosity remains the same.}\]
holds are more likely to be religious themselves (Kelly and De Graff 1997; Myers 1996). I measure an individual’s religious upbringing with a church attendance question asked of the parent generation in 1965. Students raised in households in which the parents attended church almost every week shifted 0.14 on the church attendance scale compared to those raised in homes where the parents did not attend church (p-value = 0.03), 0.09 compared to those raised in a home where the parents attended a few times per year (p-value = 0.03), and 0.06 compared to those who were raised in a home where the parents attended once or twice a month (p-value = 0.11). The gap that emerged between Republicans and Democrats is half the size of the gap that emerges between individuals raised in non-attending versus frequently attending households (0.07 versus 0.14). Partisanship’s effect is noteworthy and its effect size meaningful in comparison to one’s religious upbringing which represents an important predictor of religious identity in adulthood.

I replicate the same results among the parent generation in order to rule out the possibility that partisanship was driving changes in religious behaviors for everyone. If so, the results would be evidence of a period effect, not a life cycle effect which predicts that religious identities are stable in adulthood. Figure 4 replicates the findings for the parents’ generation. Not only are church attendance rates quite stable and the partisan attendance gap does not change statistically over time, the trend actually runs in the opposite direction: Republicans’ reported church attendance declined slightly relative to Democrats.

Finally, how does political non-identification factor in? Although nearly half–48%–of this cohort initially reported not identifying as either a Republican or Democrat, nearly 60% of these initial independents leaned toward one party. Partisanleaners look virtually indistinguishable to those who readily identified as a partisan. While the analyses looking at the leaners produces more uncertainty around the point estimates due to the smaller sample size, the substantive take away is the same: Republicans (and Republican leaners) became more religious over time relative to Democrats (and Democratic leaners).

While the small number of pure Independents (20%) makes it difficult to provide defini-
tive answers, two results are particularly suggestive. First, Independents attended church at a lower rate than both Democrats and Republicans in 1973, before religion became a salient political issue. If we think of both politics and religion as something that people join or identify with, it makes sense that political Independents are also more religiously independent. Second, Independents fall squarely between Democrats and Republicans on changing church attendance rates between 1973 and 1982. Independents returned to church at a slightly higher rate than Democrats (0.04) and a slightly lower rate than Republicans (0.03). Independents’ moderate religious shift is consistent a general move toward religion at this time coupled with the political environment sending Republicans and Democrats opposite religious cues.

Although the YPSP allows me to track changes over much of one cohort’s life, its strength is also its weakness. All cohorts are unique, and the graduating class of 1965 is especially so. Men from this cohort could have been (and were) drafted, disaffiliation from the two main political parties was high, and this cohort was coming of age during a rapid transformation about attitudes related to race, sex, and drugs. In the next section, I replicate the main findings using a different sample in a different generation that experiences a different shift in the political landscape.

**2004: Gay marriage comes to the forefront**

Gay marriage claiming the national spotlight offers a second opportunity to assess what happens when visible elite cues link religion and politics together. In November 2003, the Massachusetts Supreme Court declared that marriage licenses would be granted to same-sex couples, and three months later San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom ordered city officials to issue marriage licenses to couples of the same gender in violation of California Family Code.

At the same time, President Bush was becoming a vocal advocate in support of a constitutional amendment defining marriage as between one man and one woman. In his 2004
State of the Union address he said: “If judges insist on forcing their arbitrary will upon the people, the only alternative left to the people would be the constitutional process. Our nation must defend the sanctity of marriage” (quoted in Oldmixon and Calfano 2004). And one month later he again called for a constitutional amendment banning gay marriage in a second prime time television address. Although the Federal Marriage Amendment that was re-introduced was eventually defeated in the Senate in Summer 2004, the public debate on gay marriage did not end. Eleven states had anti-gay marriage initiatives on the ballot in November. As a result, gay marriage was a salient political issue from November 2003 through November 2004.

An original content analysis of newspapers reveals that there were three times as many articles about gay marriage in 2004 than in the previous three years combined, and that the articles in 2004 were more likely to mention religion explicitly than in previous years. \(^{18}\) My content analysis on gay marriage corroborates Bolce and De Maio’s (2014) analysis which counts the number of articles in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* that discuss Democrats and Republicans being divided along secular(ist) and religious lines between 1987 and 2012. The press rarely covered the religious divide between 1987 and 2002, averaging fewer than 5 articles per year. In 2003, however, the number of stories increased to 9 before ballooning to 52 stories in 2004. Between 2003 and 2004, the media repeatedly informed citizens about religious and secular coalitions in the political sphere. The changing media environment allows me to test whether increased attention to the prominent linkages between religion and politics changed partisans’ religious practices.

### The influence of gay marriage: a three-wave test

The American National Election Study (ANES) panel data were collected in 2000, 2002, and 2004. I use the 2002 and 2004 waves to assess whether the politicized issue of gay marriage affected individual-level survey responses about church attendance. Further, the 2000 and

\(^{18}\)Details from the content analysis are available in the Appendix.
2002 waves serve as a placebo test of what happens when there is not a large-scale increase in discussion about the current religious-political landscape. If the salience of gay marriage affected partisans’ religious practices, I expect to find a widened religious gap between 2002 and 2004, but not between 2000 and 2002.

I again use reported church attendance as the dependent variable, and replicate the results using a question that asks how much guidance religion plays in respondents’ day-to-lives in the Appendix. Once again, I include control variables in the change model that may influence both partisanship and religiosity: race, age, age-squared, marital status, parental status, education, household income, employment status, political ideology, religious identification (in 2000), and region of residence. The results are substantively unchanged when I also control for attitudinal measures of: abortion policy, feeling thermometer toward homosexuals, feeling thermometers toward feminists, economic liberalism. Similar to the experiment, I distinguish between those who are married with children living at home during the four years of the panel, who are in the process of making religious decisions, and those individuals with grown children, who should have stable religious identities.

Again using a partial residual plot, the top left panel of Figure 5 compares partisanship in 2000—ranging from Democrat to Republican along the x-axis—to the change in church attendance—ranging from 0 to 1—between 2000 and 2002 along the y-axis for the full sample of respondents. The slope is basically flat, indicating that while Republicans were more regular churchgoers than Democrats in 2000 and 2002, the size of the gap between them remained stable over time.

The third wave of interviews took place in 2004. Between the second and third waves, gay marriage became a salient political issue. The top right panel of Figure 5 shows partisanship in 2002 produced changes in church attendance between 2002 and 2004. Here, the slope

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19 I also include support for the Iraq war in the 2002-2004 models.

20 In order to have comparable subsamples across the survey waves, I classify respondents as having children at home if they have children living at home during the entire four-year period. Similarly, I classify respondents as having grown children if their children are over 18 in the 2000 wave. This strategy excludes 24 respondents who had children living at home in 2002, but not 2004. Including the additional respondents in the analysis produces identical results.
is steeper—0.05—indicating that between 2002 and 2004, Democrats changed to report lower church attendance while Republicans changed to report higher church attendance (p-value = 0.04). Partisans updated their reported church attendance between 2002 and 2004 resulting in more (less) religious Republicans (Democrats).

The lower panels of Figure 5 reproduces the results on the two subsamples of interest. The middle panels of Figure 5 graphically shows how partisans with children living at home changed over time. Again using partial residual plots, the left panel presents change in reported church attendance between 2000 and 2002, before gay marriage became salient. The partisan gap in church attendance remained stable across the two-year period. The right panel, however, tells a different story. Here I find the religious gap between Democrats and Republicans widened substantially after gay marriage became salient. Democrats’ church attendance decreased by approximately 0.10 points while Republicans’ attendance increased by roughly 0.04 points. The resultant attendance gap between Democrats and Republicans in 2004 had increased by 0.14 points—or about three-quarters of the distance between survey response options—compared to the 2002 gap (p-value < 0.01). Interestingly, Independents’ reported church attendance remained generally stable. Although a church attendance gap appears between Democrats and Independents, this occurs on account of Democrats decreasing their attendance.21 The bottom panels of Figure 5 presents a similar set of graphs for respondents with grown children. Here, both panels reveal the same trend: church attendance rates were stable among both Democrats and Republicans. Although there is some movement across the years, the results are both substantively small and statistically insignificant. Finally, parametric tests confirm that the 2002 to 2004 changes for respondents with children at home are statistically different from those with grown children (see parametric results in Appendix). Having replicated the YPSP results, I next address some remaining alternative explanations that have not yet been discussed.

21Independents’ church attendance changed from 0.38 in 2002 to 0.37 in 2004.
Alternative explanations

The results have thus far provided evidence in support of the life cycle theory. Political identities seemed to affect religious decisions at a specific time period in a person’s life, and these decisions are felt even as these individuals grow older. Evidence in support of a theory, however, does not rule out alternative explanations. In this section, I present and discuss a series of plausible explanations. Detailed results from the analyses are in the Appendix.

*What about religion affecting politics?* Newly formed adults made religious choices consistent with their pre-existing political identities in both sets of data; however, it might also be the case that religious identities affected political attitudes during this time. For example, in the YPSP data a highly devout respondent may have started to feel uneasy in the Democratic Party with its emphasis on cultural liberalism and may have appreciated the Republican Party’s religious language and emphasis on cultural issues. If so, then religious identities and religiosity are still potent predictors of change among this group. I do not find evidence that an individual’s religiosity—measured by church attendance—was a driver of political change. Church attendance did not affect reported partisanship or vote choice between 1973 and 1982 in the YPSP data, and it did not affect reported partisanship or a feeling thermometer rating toward President Bush between 2002 and 2004 in the ANES data. These findings hold even when replicating the analyses using only respondents whose level of attendance remained the same over the waves.

*Are certain generations weird? Cohort effect as an alternative.* While each set of results can be explained as a unique cohort, I find the same evidence on three cohorts from the 1970s and 1980s, early 2000s, and 2014. Moreover, the student generation in the YPSP data, for whom I found evidence of partisanship affecting religious decisions, would have grown children in the ANES data. Although their partisanship exerted influence at one point in their life, it does not at another.

*Is this a story about getting older? Aging effect as an alternative.* Another alternative explanation is that the results occur naturally because of aging, not because of changing
positions within the life cycle. While I cannot test this alternative with the YPSP data because the overwhelming majority of the student generation had children by 1982 when they were 35, I test this possibility with the ANES data by comparing respondents with and without children who are in the same narrow age bracket. Respondents without children are typically on the outskirts of religion (see second panel of Figure 1). With religious identities and practices on the backburner, we should not expect politics to have a large influence on religion. As such, despite being in the same age range, people with and without children should respond differently to the changing political landscape between 2002 and 2004. Across six age groupings (under 40, under 35, between 30 and 40, between 25 and 40, between 25 and 35), I consistently find that Republicans and Democrats with children diverged in their reported religious attendance between 2002 and 2004. Among similarly-aged respondents without children, however, partisans did not diverge. I additionally find that church attendance diverged among partisans with children at home, irrespective of respondent age, while partisans of all ages with grown children similarly provided stable responses across the time period. These results indicate that an individual’s age is secondary to, albeit correlate with, her placement in the life cycle in explaining the findings from the previous section.

Are partisans diverging in societal participation more generally? Perhaps Republicans and Democrats began to differ on all sorts of civic and political engagement. If so, my results would not be about religion but rather a broader life cycle trend of societal engagement. I test for this possibility by running a series of placebo tests using political and civic engagement questions. In the YPSP, I find no evidence of Republicans becoming more involved in politics, measured by voting rates and contacting elected officials, or other societal groups such as fraternal organizations, informal social groups, civic organizations, and professional groups.

22While possible that some young, childless individuals have made the active decision to forgo children and already made decisions pertaining to their religious identities, Gallup (2013) findings that 87% of individuals aged 18-40 without children plan to have them in the future. It is still the overwhelming norm to plan on having children. It is therefore reasonable to assume that the majority in this subsample will try to become parents in the future.
And in the ANES, I do not find evidence of Republicans becoming more likely to attend a political rally or a meeting about a community issue. In fact, Democrats with children at home actually became more likely to attend a political rally between 2002 and 2004 relative to Republicans. The behavioral divergence is constrained to religious participation.

What’s war got to do with it? The relevant waves of the YPSP data were collected during the Vietnam War, with the men in the student generation being eligible for the draft, while the Iraq war began in March of 2003 and was an important issue throughout the 2004 presidential campaign. While attitudes toward the wars are included as control variables in the models, I also look for heterogeneous effects based on attitudes toward the war. In both data sets, the magnitude of partisan effects is similar among both those who supported and opposed the war that was going on during the data collection.

Is this occurring because of the South? The South is not only the most religious region in the country, but it also underwent a major political transition in the 1970s and 1980s. This raises concerns about how Southerners and non-Southerners differed in the YPSP data. If young Southerners were disproportionately likely to become Republican and more likely to return to religion after a hiatus (possibly on account of their religious upbringing), then Southerners may be driving the main findings. I do not find evidence supporting this.

First, Southerners were not more likely to become Republicans relative to non-Southerners between 1965 and 1973. Although Republican identification increased from 21% to 26% between the first two survey waves, a full 55% of respondents living in the South identified as a Democrat in 1973. Moreover, Southerners were no more likely to become a Republican between 1965 and 1973 than individuals living in other parts of the country.

Second, Southerners’ religious trajectories did not differ from those living in the rest of the country. Southerners were no more likely to fall away from religion between 1965 and 1973 and were no more likely to return between 1973 and 1982.23 Finally, I replicate the

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23 These results are consistent with Sherkat and Wilson’s (1994) findings that conservative Protestants were no more or less likely to return to identifying with religion after previously being a non-identifier compared to other religious denominations.
main results after dropping Southern respondents. Despite the smaller sample size, the same results appear.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

This paper begins to explore how political and social identities interact, and how variation in identification strength can have meaningful effects on the development of and involvement with politically-relevant social identity groups. Using two types of analytic strategies, I show that partisanship can influence citizens’ religious identities at a particular point in their lives.

The experiment offers a controlled test of how partisans answer standard demographic questions on religion after being encouraged to “think like a partisan.” As the stimulus did not link religion and politics together, the results are from an especially difficult test that rely on how individuals themselves think about the religious-political landscape. Moreover, these results offer an important first test of the life cycle theory: individuals with theoretically weaker religious identities were more open to political influence.

I then test how, when the relationship between organized religion and politics changed, partisans’ religious involvement also changed. The YPSP data offer what is likely the first evidence of partisanship affecting church attend, a defining behavioral characteristic of one’s religious identity. Not only did partisanship affect decisions related to returning to religion, the effect was still evident when these respondents were 50 years old. I find partisanship affecting religiosity at the same time scholars have first found evidence of religiosity predicting partisanship and vote choice (Green 2010; Layman 2001; 1997). The second set of observational findings—which uses the public debate about gay marriage—produced a similar set of results. Those theoretically most susceptible to partisanship’s influence updated their religious responses to be consistent with their partisan identities.

These results begin to fill in the gaps that currently exist in the identity literature. First, rather than thinking about identities as exogenous variables that influence political attitudes
and behaviors, these results demonstrate the need to think of identities as constructs whose strength varies over time and can be partially created by politics. As this paper shows, the emergence of the “God gap” is more complicated than academics and pundits initially thought. The simple explanation that secular and less religious people moved toward the Democrats while the devout made a home within the Republican camp excludes a key element. Democrats and Republicans also alter their religious identities to better fit with their chosen political party. Second, the theory and findings also help explain how multiple identities work together to create an overarching belief structure. We see strong and stable identity coalitions in the political realm that are slow to change because identities can reinforce each other. If partisans adopt the dominant religious identities of their political party, the relationship between religious and politics identities is reinforced and become stronger.

The results from this paper not only help explain the creation of our politico-religious landscape; it also affects its future. Church is a breeding ground for political mobilization and activism (Djupe and Gilbert 2009; Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1994). By Republicans (Democrats) self-selecting into (out of) religion, Republican campaigns are well-positioned to have a direct and easy way to mobilize their constituency through churches. Religious rhetoric in speeches (Albertson 2011; Domke and Coe 2010), mobilization campaigns targeting religious voters (Green 2006), and reaching out to religious leaders (Marrapodi 2011) all excite a core part of the Republican base. Religious voters therefore are a doubly captive audience for the Republicans.

Inactivity in religion, however, does not ignite the same levels of political fervor. Although secular humanist and atheist organizations exist, their membership and reach are minuscule compared to that of organized religion. This is largely driven by the fact that most non-identifiers and non-religious people are not necessarily opposed to religion, nor do they have strong anti-religious tendencies. Rather, they simply happen to not be involved (Lim, MacGregor, and Putnam 2010). In contrast to Republicans who can rally people under the banner of religion, the Democratic Party cannot use secularism to mobilize its members.
The result of politics affecting religion is that the bases of the two parties—as well as their ability to be energized—are now also different.

This paper approaches an old question about the relationship between religion and politics from a new angle. My theory and results not only show that a reverse relationship between religious and political attitudes exists but that researchers should not find such a relationship surprising. We must reconsider the conventional wisdom linking religion and politics together and begin thinking about the conditions under which different identities are likely to exert influence.
References - to be updated


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University Press.


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Figures

Figure 1: Life cycle theory of religious and political attitudes
Figure 2: Experimental treatment effects varies by life cycle

a) Hypothetical

Example of null effect

Example of a treatment effect

b) Life cycle effects

Respondents with grown children

Respondents with children at home

Note: Top panels are examples of null and treatment effects using hypothetical data. Bottom panels compare experimental treatment effects respondents with children at home and respondents with grown children. Dependent variable is a four-point religious identification scale that ranges from 0 (strong non-identifier) to 1 (strong identifier). Parametric tests confirming raw results are in the Appendix. Data: Priming partisanship experiment.
Figure 3: Partisans return to religion at different rates

a) 1965 to 1973

Raw percentages over time  Partial residual plot

b) 1973 to 1982

Raw percentages  Partial residual plot

Note: Top panels measure change in church attendance between 1965 and 1973. Bottom panels measure change in church attendance between 1973 and 1982. Left panels present raw changes in the percentage of regular (almost every week or more) church attenders over time. Right panels are partial residual plots that show the variation in church attendance due to partisanship after accounting for previous levels of church attendance and control variables described in the text. Data: YPSP student generation
Figure 4: Parents’ church attendance rates are stable
1973 to 1982

Raw percentages

Partial residual plot

Note: Left panel presents raw changes in the percentage of regular (almost every week or more) church attenders over time. Right panels are partial residual plots that show the variation in church attendance due to partisanship after accounting for previous levels of church attendance and control variables described in the text. Data: YPSP parent generation
Figure 5: Partisans with children at home produce religious gap

a) Full sample

Before gay marriage became salient

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<th>Republican</th>
<th>Change between Reps and Dems</th>
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Change between 2000 and 2002

After gay marriage became salient

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<tr>
<td>Democrat</td>
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Change between 2002 and 2004

b) Respondents with children at home

Before gay marriage became salient

<table>
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Change between 2000 and 2002

After gay marriage became salient

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Change between 2002 and 2004

c) Respondents with grown children

Before gay marriage became salient

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Change between 2000 and 2002

After gay marriage became salient

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<tr>
<td>Democrat</td>
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<td>-0.006</td>
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Change between 2002 and 2004

Note: Three-wave test of partisanship influencing reported church attendance before and after gay marriage became a salient issue in 2004. The graphs are partial residual scatterplots and show the variation in church attendance due to partisanship after accounting for previous levels of church attendance. Left panels test change between 2000 and 2002 and right panels test change between 2002 and 2004. Panel A presents the results for the full sample, panel B shows changes among respondents with children under the age of 18, and panel C shows changes among respondents with children over the age of 18.