The “God Gap” and the Political Consequences of Secularization

Patrick Fisher

Department of Political Science
Seton Hall University
South Orange, NJ 07079
(973) 275-2866
patrick.fisher@shu.edu

Paper Presented at the Annual Meeting of the
Western Political Science Association
Portland, Oregon
March 22-24, 2012
The “God Gap” and the Political Consequences of Secularization

Religion and Political Behavior

Religion has long been an important feature in American politics. From the nation’s founding, religion has influenced Americans’ political choices and churches have been an important source for political learning.¹ As early as 1800 Thomas Jefferson had to deal with accusations that he was an atheist, in the late 1800s William Jennings Bryan invoked biblical themes to support his populist economic prescriptions, and in 1928 and 1960 Al Smith and John Kennedy faced strong anti-Catholic sentiments in their presidential runs.²

People in richer countries tend to be less religious than people in poorer countries. The United States, however, is an exception: it is a rich country with a high rate of religious observance. The United States is the most devout and orthodox of the world’s industrialized nations and compared to other wealthy countries the United States has often been seen as a religious outlier.³ In Western Europe, only minorities say that God is “very important” in their lives. In the United States, on the other hand, large majorities make such a claim, a rate similar to Latin America, Africa, and other parts of the developing world.⁴ More than four-fifths of adult Americans consider themselves Christians. About nine out of ten say they never doubt the existence of God and eight out of ten say prayer is an important part of their daily lives.⁵

Americans largely expect their elected representatives to be religious as well. Almost two-thirds of Americans have indicated that they would be less likely to support a candidate that doesn’t believe in God and only three percent claimed it would more likely
support such a candidate. One of the most underrepresented groups in Congress, in fact, is made of individuals who claimed no religious affiliation. Americans today tend to care less about sectarian affiliation and more about generally about whether the candidate believes in God and how that lends itself to a moral framework.

It is thus important to distinguish between two kinds of religious variables, one for group membership and another based on beliefs and behavior. There are thus two different types of religious gaps, one based on religious affiliation and another based on actual religious attendance and beliefs. Today the religious gap defined on the basis of worship attendance has become one of the most significant points of division in American politics. Religious traditionalism is a strong predictor of political behavior, at least as strong as traditional independent variables such as social class, occupation, or income. High levels of religious commitment foster particular connections between religion and politics by exposing individuals to special kinds of information.

Religious Attendance and Political Values

Religion’s influence on elections had long been assumed to operate through communitarian ties, with the particular values of different religions generating different voting patterns. Differences within religious groups, however, are now more politically significant than differences among religious groups. Decades ago, the Protestant-Catholic affiliation split constituted a dividing line, with Protestants favoring Republicans and Catholics preferring Democrats. Today, however, the Protestant-Catholic religious affiliation dichotomy is an insufficient measure of religion’s influence on political beliefs. Rather, religious commitment and religious belief have more significant effects on
political believes than religious affiliation. In fact, the religious attendance gap persists by gender, income level, and religious affiliation. Thus, instead of being divided along the lines of religious denomination, Americans are increasingly divided by religious devotion.

This relationship can be seen with political activists. The religious cleavage between Democratic activists and Republican activists has grown over time, with Republicans becoming more traditionally religious and the Democrats becoming more secular. The current division of the Republican and Democratic parties along religious lines can be seen as early as 1972, but this religious cleavage has grown in recent years. The Democratic Party now draws its support disproportionately from the ranks of religious liberals and secularists. Not only is religious replacement within the parties occurring, but within religious groups, Democratic activists are becoming more culturally liberal relative to Republican activists.

Figure 1 demonstrates the strong correlation between how often one attends religious services and presidential vote choice: the more often one worships, the more likely that person is to vote Republican. This has not always been the case—in 1960, for example, regular churchgoers were actually more Democratic. Since Ronald Reagan was elected in president in 1980, however, those who attend church at least weekly have strongly supported Republican presidential candidates. Those who never worship, on the other hand, have tended to strongly support Democratic candidates, especially Bill Clinton. Though there was a noticeable difference in the partisan vote in the 1990s during Clinton’s election victories between those who never worship and those who occasionally do, the gap in 2004 and 2008 between these two was miniscule (one and two
percent respectively). Thus, while those who are regular worshipers consistently have supported Republicans by large margins—and this level of support has actually been increasing in recent years—the difference between those who occasionally and never worship has actually shrunk. This suggests that real religious divide in the United States is between those who are regular worshipers and those who are not, not between those who never worship and those who at least occasionally do. Politically, those who are occasional worshipers are today much closer to those who never attend religious services than those who regularly do.

Figure 1

Partisan Vote for President by Religious Attendance, 1980-2008

The impact of religious commitment on the vote choice is thus growing, with very committed individuals becoming increasingly more likely than their less religious counterparts to vote Republican.\textsuperscript{18} The genesis of the religious gap lies with Ronald Reagan, but it took about a dozen years to take hold in the mass public.\textsuperscript{19} It was not until 1992 that a sustained gap in voting behavior between frequent and less frequent worshipers emerged and the religious attendance gap emerged as a clear feature of American voting behavior. Since the Clinton administration people who are more devout—regardless of denomination—are generally more likely to favor Republicans. At the same time, there is a strong relationship between religious commitment and political engagement. Republican gains among religious white voters have been concentrated among the most politically sophisticated members of the religiously devout.\textsuperscript{20}

The increasing political polarization based on religious attendance—the so-called “god gap”—came as a surprise to those who had been arguing that secularization in the political sphere was the inevitable wave of the future. Having assumed that religion was retiring to private life, some have became anxious about the emergence of religious faith as a political force.\textsuperscript{21} Conservative religious leaders, wanting to maximize their political influence, have argued that the emerging religious gap was evidence that electoral success might depend on wooing more religiously observant voters.\textsuperscript{22} While the Republican Party is increasingly the home of those encouraged about the public power of religion, the Democratic Party is increasingly the home of voters inclined to a secular worldview.\textsuperscript{23} The god gap terminology, in fact, has attracted attention and controversy because it suggests that the Republicans has become the party of America’s “believers” and the Democrats the party of its “non-believers.”\textsuperscript{24}
Secularists first appeared as a political force within the Democratic Party in 1972. Prior to the 1960s, there was a commitment among elites in both parties to the traditional Judeo-Christian teachings regarding authority, sexual mores, and the family. As the Democratic Party became more secular beginning in 1972, however, the Republican Party moved in the other direction as it began to be seen as more hospitable to religious traditionalists and less appealing to more secular Republicans. What was at first intraparty culture war among Democratic elites during the Vietnam War Era became by the 1980s an interparty culture war.\textsuperscript{25} By the 1980s, therefore, disputes pitting religious “traditionalists” against religious “modernists” had restructured the larger American religious traditions. Traditionalists in all communities began to find more in common with each other than with modernists in their own traditions. Consequently, traditionalists have gravitated toward the Republicans and modernists toward the Democrats.\textsuperscript{26}

Secularists today are important component of the Democratic Party. In terms of their size and party loyalty, secularists today are as important to the Democratic Party as organized labor. While traditional religious beliefs motivate people to back conservative Republican candidates, a secularist outlook encourages voting for liberal Democratic candidates.\textsuperscript{27} Just as the Republican Party has been criticized for being hijacked by fundamentalists, however, the Democrats have been criticized as the party sympathetic to militant secularists. This poses risks for the Democrats because many more Americans express unfavorable attitudes toward those with no religion than toward evangelical Christians.\textsuperscript{28}
The God Gap in 2008

There was an extensive gap in the two-party vote on the basis of religious attendance in the 2008 presidential election. The more religious one was in 2008, the more likely one was to vote for McCain for president. While Obama won three-fifths of the vote of those who never attended religious services, he won less than two-fifths of those who attended religious services weekly (see Figure 2). Though the number of voters in 2008 who attended religious services weekly was more than twice the number that never attended, Obama won those who occasionally attend services by a large margin and this group made up more than 40 percent of the electorate.29

Figure 2
2008 Presidential Vote by Religious Attendance

Unquestionably, the Republican and Democratic parties are today divided along religious lines. This is particularly evident with the religious extremes of those who are very religious and those who are not religious. Those who considered themselves “no
religion,” for example, gave Obama 75 percent of their vote in 2008. This was up considerably from the 61 percent that Al Gore won among this group in 2000, the result of a political polarization along religious lines that accorded during the Bush administration. At the other extreme were white evangelicals. White evangelicals have unquestionably become a critical part of Republican base and in 2008 the white evangelical vote that composed one-fourth of the total electorate gave John McCain three-fourths of their vote. In every state in the country, white evangelicals voted overwhelmingly for McCain; Obama’s best showing among white evangelicals in any state was the 35 percent he took in the states of Minnesota and Wisconsin. Of the ten states with the highest proportion of white evangelicals, Obama won only two: North Carolina and Indiana. The four states where the majority of the electorate was white evangelicals (Arkansas, Oklahoma, West Virginia, and Tennessee) were among the states where the Republicans made the biggest gains from 2004-2008.30

Figure 3
Electoral College Map of 2008 Presidential Vote, Non-“White Evangelical” Vote
Obama 518 McCain 20
How important white evangelicals have become to the Republican Party can be seen by Figure 3. In an electorate without any white evangelicals, McCain would have won only five small states (worth a total of 20 Electoral College votes). In other words, without the overwhelming support of white evangelicals, McCain would have lost in a landslide.

**Figure 4**

Religious Attendance by Region

![Bar chart showing religious attendance by region](image)

Source: The 2008 American National Election Study Dataset, Questions V083186 and V081204

Though a religion gap exists throughout the country, it varies by region. As Figure 4 displays, the South is far and away the most religious region of the country, with the highest percent of voters in 2008 attending religious services weekly and occasionally. The West and the East, on the other hand, are the regions with the fewest number of people attending religious services. Vote by frequency of religious attendance was relatively similar throughout the country; what varied was overall level of religious attendance.

For all four regions, Obama’s overall vote total was 13 to 17 percent higher than his vote among those who attended religious services weekly. Republican strength in the South
is enhanced by the region’s religious commitment. The fact that the South is the most Republican region of the country is a consequence of its relatively high levels of religiosity. Democratic strength in the West and East, on the other hand, is enhanced by the region’s relatively low levels of religious participation. It is not a coincidence that the least religious parts of the country are the most Democratic.

Religion also proved to be an important factor in the 2008 Democratic presidential primaries. There was a noticeable difference between Barack Obama’s and Hillary Clinton’s support by religious affiliation. While Clinton did best among Catholics—Obama only won a little more than 40 percent of the Catholic vote—Obama did best among those with no religion, a group he won 56 percent of the vote. Among other religious groups, Obama and Clinton split the Protestant vote about 50-50 and Clinton did better among Jewish voters, a group from which Obama received 44 percent of the vote (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5**
The Religion Gap in the 2008 Democratic Presidential Primaries

Source: Compiled by author from *New York Times* Presidential Election Exit Polls
Clinton’s relative strength with Catholics was instrumental in her winning a number of states with high Catholic populations. In Massachusetts, for example, Catholics made up 45 percent of the Democratic primary electorate and Clinton won 64 percent of the Catholic vote. In neighboring Rhode Island, Clinton won two-thirds of the Catholic vote, a group that made up more than half of the electorate in that state. Of the states with the 10 largest Catholic populations, Clinton won eight. Obama, on the other hand, did well in states with a relatively large number of non-churchgoers. In Oregon, nearly a quarter of the Democratic primary electorate described themselves as having no religious affiliation and Obama won this group with about two-thirds of the vote. In Montana, nearly one-fifth of the electorate was no religion and Obama won these voters with 72 percent of the vote. Obama’s strength in the Northwest and Rocky Mountain states was considerably enhanced by the region’s relatively low levels of religious participation.33

Obama’s strength among more secular voters and relative weakness among Catholics resembles the religious divide in presidential general elections between Democrats and Republicans, with Catholics far less reliably Democratic today than they were prior to the 1970s while secularists are strongly Democratic. The religion gap, even though it did not get nearly as much attention as some other gaps, may have proved pivotal in Obama winning the nomination. The United States is considerably more secular than it was a generation ago as the number of Americans who identify themselves as religious and attend church declines. This trend made the victory of a candidate like Obama a more realistic possibility.
Religion and Public Policy Preferences

The god gap bears a strong association with ideology. As Figure 6 demonstrates, weekly-religious-service attendees see themselves as considerably more conservative than less-than-weekly attendees. Those who never attend religious services, on the other hand, tend to identify themselves as being relatively left-of-center, while the mean ideological score for occasional attendees is about the average for all Americans.

Figure 6
Religious Attendance and Ideology
(Self-Identification Scale from 1-7, 1= Most Conservative, 7 = Most Liberal)

Source: The 2008 American National Election Study Dataset, Questions V083185, VO83186 and V03069a

The ideological preferences of regular worshipers are consistent with their views on equality. Those who attend religious services on a weekly basis are more likely to believe that the country should worry less about equality than those who occasionally or never attend religious services (see Figure 7). While a majority of those who worship weekly believed that we should worry less about equality, only about two-fifths agreed with this sentiment. This is consistent with findings that conservative white Protestants are more likely to prefer
individualistic rather than structuralist explanations for racial inequality. One explanation for why the United States is exceptionally high in religiosity is because it is one of the most unequal post-industrial societies. Exceptionally high levels of economic insecurity are experienced by many sectors of American society, differentiating it from relatively secular Europe.

**Figure 7
Religious Attendance and Equality**

The relationship between religious attendance and views on economic issues unsurprisingly closely resembles the relationship between religious attendance and equality (see Table 1). In regards to government services in general, the more religiously devout are less supportive than the less religious. Yet, relative to income, religion may lose some of its significance as a vote determinant. Rich churchgoers are much more Republican than poor churchgoers. Among the nonattenders, however, rich and poor alike are solid Democrats. The Democrats’ base is thus low-income churchgoers and
secular Americans, while Republicans win the votes of middle-class and upper-income churchgoers.\textsuperscript{36}

Table 1
Religious Attendance and Public Policy Preferences: Economic Issues

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious Attendance</th>
<th>Weekly</th>
<th>Occasionally</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Government Services</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government Should Provide More Services (%)</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Health Care</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Favor Universal Health Insurance (%)</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Aid to the Poor</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aid to the Poor Should be Increased (%)</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social Security</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Favor Social Security In Stocks and Bonds (%)</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: American National Elections Studies 2008 Dataset

Weekly worshipers are significantly less likely to support universal health insurance than those who occasionally or never attend religious services. While less than two-in-five of those who regularly attend religious services support universal health insurance, this figure is more than half of those who occasionally or never do. One’s view on increasing aid to the poor, however, has no real relationship with religious attendance.

The pattern with Social Security and religious attendance shows a similar pattern, one that is distinct from health care views. In regards to favoring putting Social Security in stocks and bonds, there is essentially no difference on religious attendance grounds.
Regardless of frequency of attending religious services, only about one-third favors putting Social Security in stocks and bonds. The fact that weekly worshipers are not any more likely to support partial privatization of Social Security despite the fact that they are less worried about inequality may be related to the relative age of worshippers. Older Americans who are receiving Social Security benefits (or are relatively close to receiving benefits) are more likely attend religious services than younger age cohorts.

One policy on which those who attend religious services weekly are actually slightly more liberal than those who worship less often is immigration policy (see Table 2). Only 42 percent of those who worship weekly believe that immigration levels should be reduced, as opposed to 48 percent of occasional worshippers and 45 percent of those who never worship. That those who are more religious are less supportive of reducing immigration may be due to the fact that many denominations—most noticeably the Catholic Church—are advocates of an inclusive attitude toward immigrants. Also, many recent immigrants to the United States who are supportive of increased immigration, such as Mexican-Americans, tend to be relatively religious.

Religiosity does not appear to have much of an impact on gun control beliefs; those who occasionally attend religious services are somewhat more support of making buying a gun more difficult than those who regularly attend religious services and those who never do. The least religious therefore tend to take a relatively libertarian position on gun control. This, however, is certainly not the case on environmental policy. Those who are regular worshippers are significantly less likely to believe that emissions should be reduced due to global warming that those that attend religious services occasionally or never. There does, therefore, seem to be a relationship between religion and
environmental values. Interestingly, most Americans agree with the concept of justifying environmental protection by invoking God as the creator, even though most Americans rejected the apocalyptic view described in Revelation. Even many nonbelievers argue for environmental protection on the basis of God’s creation.  

Table 2  
Religious Attendance and Public Policy Preferences: Domestic and Foreign Policy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Religious Attendance</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Weekly</td>
<td>Occasionally</td>
<td>Never</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigration</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigration Levels Should be Reduced (%)</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>45</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gun Control</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buying a Gun Should be Made More Difficult (%)</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>46</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce Emissions due to Global Warming (%)</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>79</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defense Spending</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defense Spending Should be Reduced (%)</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>31</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: American National Elections Studies 2008 Dataset

In regards to defense spending, those who attend religious services weekly are more conservative than the population as a whole, though the difference is not large. Regular worshipers are less supportive of cutting defense spending than less-than-weekly worshippers. More exposure to religion thus may make one somewhat more hawkish on defense. This is consistent with findings that religious views appear to frame some opinions about foreign policy and explain why Americans advocate a more assertive foreign policy than peoples in other democracies. For example, the concept of a ‘just
war” has many more adherents in the relatively religious United States than in the relatively secular Europe. More than three-fourths of all Americans believe that under some conditions war is justified; only one-fourth of Europeans agree. Also, Americans’ attitudes toward Israel are al heavily influenced by religion, with one in three Americans who sympathize with Israel saying that their sympathy for the Jewish state come from their religious beliefs.

**The God Gap as Part of the Cultural Divide**

The religious polarization among the parties in contemporary American politics is associated with a growing partisan polarization on “cultural” issues such as abortion, women’s rights, and gay rights. The religious and cultural polarization of party activists is the result of an inability of the parties to foster solutions to cultural policy problems. There is increasingly a polarization of American public culture into distinct moral and religious camps, with one camp adhering to an absolute standard of right and wrong and the other camp embracing a humanistic ethic drawn from person experience, reason, and science. Disagreements about the appropriate role of religion in American politics are in fact the result of disagreement about the general nature of democratic politics.

Since the Democrats have generally supported a more rigorous interpretation of the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment, this has left Democrats open to attack as “antireligious.” This is unquestionably an overly simplistic stereotype as some religious traditions, including Judaism, mainline Protestantism, and Catholicism take moderate-to-liberal positions on many issues. Unquestionably, however, the rising influence of evangelical Protestants, mobilized by abortion, gay marriage, and other
social issues, has become an important component of contemporary American political culture. Church members who hold evangelical religious goals are increasingly less hostile toward political activity on the part of religious groups.\textsuperscript{44}

Opposition to religion in politics, however, is as old as the country itself. In the 1780s, Baptists in Virginia were strong supporters of Thomas Jefferson’s campaign against aid to church for fear it would disadvantage their own lay preachers. In the 1840s, Congress heeded the call of New England clergymen to honor the Sabbath by ending Sunday mail deliveries, but Jacksonian Democrats quickly reinstated Sunday mail delivery to demonstrate the government’s impartiality among competing religious doctrines.\textsuperscript{45} This tradition of separation of church and state can be seen as late as the 1960s. In 1968, 53 percent said that “churches should keep out of politics” and 40 percent “churches should express views.” By 2005, this relationship had reversed, with only 44 percent claiming churches should keep out of politics and 51 percent responding churches should express views.\textsuperscript{46}

The secular instincts of American political institutions are thus increasingly coming under attack. To opponents of secularism, public institutions politically marginalize religious citizens except when they agree with secularism. Whether government may support a particular public policy seems to depend on that policy being defensible on nonreligious grounds. Religious citizens, it is contended, are constitutionally permitted to do so only if they can show their ideas are consistent with secular convictions. Secular democracy is thus perceived by many to be dangerous for the religiously devout because it prevents them from acting in the public sphere when their views spring peculiarly from their faith.\textsuperscript{47} Evangelicals, in fact, appear to respond to
perceived “religious threat.” The more secularists in their community, the more likely white evangelicals are to vote Republican. Secularists, however, do not appear to respond to the presence of evangelicals in their community.\textsuperscript{48}

The dramatic rise in the relationship between religiosity and the vote in the 1990s corresponded with the emergence of Bill Clinton in presidential politics.\textsuperscript{49} American politics became less about economic interests and more about lifestyle during the Clinton years. Clinton created an odd legacy in American politics by bringing the country together on policy and tearing the country apart over values.\textsuperscript{50} Under the presidency of George W. Bush this polarization continued as the Republican Party increasingly became an extension of the religious right.\textsuperscript{51} The historian Arthur Schlesinger, for example, has argued that the Bush presidency was the first faith-based administration in American history. Previous presidents did not apply religious tests to secular issues and not exploit their religion for their political benefit. Historically, this was seen as something presidents should not do. According to Schlesinger, however, Bush systematically violated these historical standards.\textsuperscript{52}

The different legacies of Clinton and Bush in regards to the religious gap in American politics are also reflected by the religious preferences of party activists. The elites of the Democratic and Republican parties differ considerably from one another on religious terms. The Democratic delegates who met in Boston in 2004 to nominate John Kerry, for example, were quite diverse in religious terms. In contrast, the Republican delegates that met in New York to re-nominate George W. Bush were relatively like-minded in regards to religion. In terms of religious attendance, only about one-fourth of Democratic delegates reported attending worship once a week or more compared with
more than one-half of the Republicans. At the same time, more than one-third of Democrats claimed to attend worship seldom or never, compared with roughly one-sixth or Republican delegates.53

This is not to imply, however, that the parties are monolithic in their views of the proper relationship in regards to the role of religion in politics. The Republicans in particular are divided between religious and secularists. In terms of voting behavior and issues preferences, a “religious” conservative Republican is qualitatively distinct from a “secular” conservative Republican.54 One of the most striking examples of the unstable coalition of economic conservatives and populists in the contemporary Republican Party is in regards to stem cell research.55

Religion is an important factor in understanding the political differences between rich and poor. Churchgoers are much more Republican than non-churchgoers. This difference, however, is much larger for in rich states.56 Since the most religious states are relatively poor, income is an important factor in moral behavior. This complicates the relationship between religious values and behavior, which is not clear. Married couples in Massachusetts (a relatively wealthy state), for example, get divorced at less than half the rate of those in Arkansas (a relatively poor state) and the divorce rate among born-again Christians is about the same as among married Americans in general.57

Higher levels of religiosity do not necessarily have to lead to an increased likelihood of cultural conservatism. On the death penalty, for example, the more religiously devout are actually more liberal than the general population often (see Table 3). That the more religious are less supportive of the death penalty, in fact, has defined the politics of the death penalty for years.58 This is especially true among Catholics;
Catholics who esteemed Pope John Paul II, for example, were found to be more negative in their evaluation of the death penalty.\textsuperscript{59} It used to be that the death penalty was a major cultural issue that divided on religious lines. Today, however, the death penalty has become much less of a prominent fissure in America’s cultural wars. Instead, gay marriage and abortion tend to be the focal points of religiously-based morality politics. The result is greater political polarization on the basis of social issues.

Table 3
Religious Attendance and Public Policy Preferences: Values and Social Issues

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious Attendance</th>
<th>Moral Standards</th>
<th>Gay Marriage</th>
<th>Abortion</th>
<th>Death Penalty</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Should be more Tolerant Of People with Different Moral Standards (%)</td>
<td>Agree that Gays Should Be Allowed to Marry (%)</td>
<td>Abortion Should Never Be Permitted/Permitted Only in Cases of Rape And Incest (%)</td>
<td>Favor Death Penalty (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weekly</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occasionally</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: American National Elections Studies 2008 Dataset

Certainly, there are large differences on perceptions of moral standards depending on one’s religiosity. The religiously devout are significantly less likely to believe that one should be more tolerant of people with different moral standards that those less religious; while less than half of those who attend religious services weekly take the position that one should be more tolerant, more than 70 percent of those who never attend
religious services take this position. The differences on moral standards foreshadow the relationship between religiosity and the issues of gay marriage and abortion.

Though rarely a topic debated on the political stage before 2000, in the first decade of the twenty-first century gay marriage emerged as a polarizing political issue. There is unquestionably an extremely strong relationship between religious attendance and support for gay marriage. While a majority of those who never attend religious services support allowing gay marriage, only 15 percent of those who worship weekly support it. Gay marriage, therefore, polarizes Americans on the basis of religious attendance more than just about any other issue. The religious gap on gay marriage is more of a chasm than a gap!

The religious subtext of the controversy over gay marriage may have even been decisive in Bush’s narrow reelection in 2004 by motivating religious voters to cast their votes in greater numbers. If John Kerry had won Ohio he would have won enough Electoral College votes to claim the presidency. Ohio, however, was one of eleven states where state measures to ban same-sex marriage was on the ballot. Though every state that had such a measure saw it passed, outside of Ohio it is not clear that issue mobilized substantially more people to vote for Bush. In states with gay marriage initiatives on the ballot, in fact, there was an overall shift away from Bush from 2000.60 Evangelicals also did not constitute an appreciably larger share of the 2004 national electorate than they did in 2000.61 In fact, there was little difference in the frequency of church attendance between the voters of 2004 and those in 2000. In Ohio, however, the ballot initiative to ban gay marriage helped George W. Bush to pick up evangelical votes.62 Ohio saw a
shift to the right among voters between 2000 and 2004 and the scale of the rural vote suggests that the issue may have given both the state and the presidency to Bush.  

Gays are far more likely to support the Democratic Party than heterosexuals. In 2008, for example, exit polls found that Obama won 70 percent of the vote of the four percent of the electorate that identified as gay, lesbian or bisexual. In regards to gay marriage, most gays are less concerned about having legally recognized marriages than about winning healthcare and other employee benefits for their spouses. It is the goal of acquiring spousal benefits, not the right to marry, that influences the degree to which gays support the Democratic Party. The sexual identity gap is thus generated more from gay concerns about acquiring tangible economic benefits than from an interest in pursuing civil rights.

Certainly, there has been a marked change in American public opinion regarding gay marriage over the past generation. For example, a 1977 poll found that 31 percent of Californians approved of same-sex marriage and 62 percent disapproved. By 2009, 49 percent of Californians approved and 44 percent disapproved. This change came largely among Democrats and independent voters: independents went from being opposed to gay marriage by 55 percent to 38 percent to being supportive of it by 57 percent to 38 percent. Democrats went from opposing the idea 29 percent to 63 percent to supporting it by 64 percent to 30 percent. Republicans, on the other hand, actually grew more strongly against same sex marriage with 65 percent opposing it in 1977 and 68 percent opposing it in 2009.

The changing attitude of Americans toward gay marriage is also reflected in the huge age gap on the issue. The widening divide on the issue by age suggests that the
potency of the marriage question may be in decline. By 2009, 31 percent of respondents over the age of 40 said they supported same-sex marriage. Of those under 40, on the other hand, 57 percent said they supported it. Thus, though in the past (such as in 2004) Republicans explicitly turned to the issue of gay marriage as a way to energize conservative religious voters, the gay marriage issue may over the long term turn into more of a hindrance than a help to the Republican Party.

Abortion, like gay marriage, is an issue that polarizes not only the basis of partisanship but levels of religiosity as well. Attitudes on abortion are strongly correlated with the depth of religious belief, as measured by religious attendance. While nearly three-fourths of those who attend religious services weekly believe that abortion should never be permitted or permitted only during cases of rape or incest, only about one-third of Americans who attend religious services occasionally or never hold this belief.

Religious attendance has become a much better predictor of attitudes on abortion that religious denomination. American Catholics, for example, are no more likely to hold anti-abortion views than the rest of the population. As many Catholics as non-Catholics believe abortion should be legal and Catholics are no more likely to be “morally opposed” to abortion than other Americans. Among regular church-attending Catholics, however, only 24 percent believe that abortion was morally acceptable while among non-regular church attending Catholics the figure was 52 percent. The political significance of abortion has increased as much among infrequent churchgoers as among those who attend religious services regularly. Thus, although religious convictions have played an important role in the rise of abortion as a political issue, the corresponding mobilization among secular voters has been every bit as powerful.
It has been argued that the American public is not polarized on the specifics of the abortion as is often stereotyped: Americans, for the most part, tend to believe that abortion should be legal but that it is reasonable to regulate it in various ways. Also, contrary to popular belief that women who obtain an abortion are not religious, most women who have had abortions identify themselves as religious. Abortion, however, has unquestionably become a much more important consideration in voting behavior since the 1980s as Democratic and Republican elites have increasingly adopted pro-choice and pro-life positions. As the partisan elites have become more polarized, so have rank-and-file party members. In California, for example, 70 percent of approved of the right of a woman to seek an abortion in 2006, a 19 percentage point jump from 1975. The change in attitudes on abortion, however, was markedly different on the basis of partisanship. While Democratic support of the right to have an abortion rose from 52 percent in 1975 to 82 percent in 2006 and support of Independents increased from 59 percent to 73 percent, Republican support grew only from 50 percent to 55 percent.

The Significance of the God Gap

What does the god gap tell us about the political role of religion? First, the god gap in part may reflect the continuing political significance of religious affiliation. Such religious communities have long been the most important means of linking religion to politics. Second, the god gap may reflect the political significance of religious beliefs. It may be, for instance, that regular worshipers are more likely to hold certain sorts of religious beliefs while those who worship less often are more likely to hold contrary beliefs. Third, the god gap may reflect the political significance of religious commitment apart from the impact of religious affiliation or belief.
It is important to denote that levels of religiosity can be measured in different ways. This paper has measured religiosity in terms of frequency of participation in religious services. It is possible, however, that whether or not one is a “believer” or not does not necessarily correspond to whether or not one attends religious services. Also, it is important to emphasize that the religious-secular divide in the United States is far from absolute, as there are important exceptions to the generalization about the religious-secular partisan divide in American politics. African-Americans, a group with one of the highest rates of religiosity, are overwhelmingly Democratic. Jews also overwhelmingly identify with the Democratic Party. Overall, however, religious attendance—as this chapter has demonstrated—is an extremely important indicator of many political and policy preferences.

Among nearly every religious group, Obama received equal or high levels of support compared to John Kerry in 2004. Obama was thus able to narrow the religious gap with Republicans in 2008. Obama targeted religious voters more than previous Democratic candidates, actively courting them. Obama’s performance led to some speculation that Obama’s performance might lead to smaller religious gaps in future elections. After he was sworn into office, however, Obama consistently has had much higher job approval ratings among those who seldom or never went to church than he did among those who attended church weekly.

Thus, if anything, the religious gap appears to have magnified during the Obama presidency. This is consistent with findings from the last three presidencies. Political scientists have traditionally worked under the assumption that religion affects politics and not vice versa. Religion, for example, plays a significant role in the evaluations of the president’s job performance in office. Orthodox religious belief was related to a decrease
in Bill Clinton’s approval ratings in 1996 and an increase in the approval ratings of George H.W. Bush in 1992 and George W. Bush in 2004. Thus, not only do presidents appeal to specific religious constituencies for electoral and policy support, but ordinary Americans also appear to respond to presidents differently on the basis of their religious beliefs. Ideology and partisanship, however, may be able to influence religious communities, by boosting movement within and perhaps eventually across these communities.

In the nineteenth century, a number of theorists (Auguste Comte, Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Sigmund Freud, among others) began to argue that religion would gradually fade in importance and cease to be significant with the advent of industrial society. The death of religion was in fact considered inevitable by many social scientists. This thesis of a slow and steady death of religion, however, is clearly not bearing fruit as it is obvious that religion has not disappeared nor does it seem likely to do so.

Figure 8
Frequency of Religious Attendance, 1980-2008

Religion may not have disappeared, but it is clear that the United States as a whole is becoming more secular as the number of Americans who identify themselves as religious and attend religious services declines. As Figure 8 demonstrates, the number of Americans who claim to never attend religious services has gone up precipitously since Ronald Reagan was elected president in 1980. While secular trends have accelerated since the Bill Clinton administration, the proportion of Americans reporting that they attended church at least weekly has also declined. Younger Americans in particular are less religious than previous generations. This is in part due to the declining status and authority of traditional church institutions, the individualism of the quest for spirituality, and the rise of New Age movements.78

Despite the overall popularity of religion in the United States, important social and regional disparities exist. Secularists are far more likely to live in urban cities and the Pacific Coast or in the Northeast, have a college degree, to be single, and to be male. Evangelicals, on the other hand, are far more likely to live in small towns or rural areas, especially in the South and Midwest, married, and to be female.79 The largest areas of no religion are on the coasts, in the most heavily populated areas of the country, whereas the Midwest and the South tend to have much higher percentages of religious adherents. Notably, this gap is widening. Although every state has seen an increase in those identifying with no religion, the largest increases have been in the Northeast and the West, which are disproportionately found at the left end of the scale. Most of the Midwest states fall somewhere in the middle, while the South has seen the least growth in non-religious individuals over the past two decades. There is thus an increasingly geographic
component to the religious gap in the United States, with red America on average being more religious than blue America.\textsuperscript{80}

Importantly, as the country has become more secular, those who regularly worship have become more conservative politically. This may be a political reaction by the religious against what they perceive to be an increasingly secular government and political establishment. Today, those who attend religious services weekly or more vote more Republican than ever relative to those who attended religious services occasionally or less. The problem for Republicans, however, is that their religious base of voters appears to be steadily shrinking.

The increasingly religious nature of the Republican Party has the potential to radically alter American politics. Strategically, the best Democratic response to the increasing power of social conservatives in the Republican Party may be to seek the support of the social liberals who are increasingly disaffected by the Republican Party. The Democratic Party can thus be expected to move to the right on economic issues while staying liberal on social issues.\textsuperscript{81} Regardless, as the United States becomes a more secular nation, current trends suggest that this will bode well for the Democrats.
Endnotes


11 Ibid.


15 Ibid.
For the purposes of our study, we classify religious attendance using ANES data (variables V083185 and V083186) as follows: 1) Weekly = those who attend church weekly + those who attend church more than weekly; 2) Occasionally = those who attend church a few times a year + those who attend church once or twice a month + those who attend church almost every week; and 3) Never = those who answered “no” to ever attending church.


Alan I. Abramowitz, *The Disappearing Center* (New Haven: Yale University, 2010), pp. 78-82.


Ibid.


Ibid.

2008 National Election Pool Exit Polls.

31 Calculated by author from the 2008 American National Election Study Dataset, questions V083185, V083186, V081204 and V085195.


Ibid., p. 78.


November 22, 2009.


