

Religion and Partisan-Ideological Sorting, 1984-2016

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This manuscript explores how religious affiliation, practice, and their joint relationship affect whether individuals connect their ideological to partisan identities – a process termed partisan-ideological sorting.

Method: To explore this linkage, I analyze data from the American National Election Studies (ANES) Time-Series surveys and the Youth-Parent Socialization (YPS) panel study.

Results: I find that a matrix of belief, belonging, and behavior – religiosity – constrains the convergence between citizens’ political identities, with one important caveat: evangelical affiliation functions as the primary conduit through which religious practice and belief shape this sorting. Building on these results, I then estimate the direct impact of religion on sorting over time.

Conclusion: These findings show how religion has produced asymmetric sorting in the mass public among persons with right-leaning identities. Further, they provide a social explanation for partisan-ideological sorting that compliments extant institutional ones.

Key words: identity sorting, ideology, religiosity, evangelicals

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“In a popular government, politics are an important part of religion. No one can possibly be benevolent or religious, to the full extent of his obligations, without concerning himself, to a greater or less extent, with the affairs of human government.”

- Charles Grandison Finney, 1851¹

“I’m a Christian, a conservative, and a Republican – in that order.”

- Vice President Mike Pence²

Introduction

American Christians became increasingly politicized throughout the 1970s and 1980s (Noll 2002). “The idea that religion and politics don’t mix was invented by the Devil to keep Christians from running their own country” exhorted prominent televangelist Jerry Falwell during a July 4, 1976 sermon, calling on congregants to bend their collective will towards shaping electoral and policy outcomes. And indeed they did. Over the next four decades, conservative Christians played a prominent role in transforming American politics (see Smidt, Kellstedt, and Guth [2017] for a recent review).

In part, these changes were spurred by the comingling of religious and partisan identification (Steensland and Wright 2014). However, while extant work connects religion to political and ideological affiliation separately (e.g. McDaniel and Ellison 2008; Patrikios 2008; Ellis and Stimson 2012), little research has explored how the nexus of religious beliefs, affiliation, and practice shape the relationship *between* Americans’ political identities. What is the relationship between religion and this partisan-ideological sorting?

This manuscript explores this question using data from the American National Election Studies (ANES) Time-Series surveys covering the period 1984 to 2016. I find that religiosity, a composite of religious preferences that includes cognitive, behavioral, and affective affinities, produces modest, but differentiated effects on identity sorting. Whereas those with right-leaning political identities exhibit greater sorting when religiosity is high, low levels of religiosity have comparatively less bearing on sorting among those with left-leaning ones.

These results, however, come with an important caveat: the effect of religiosity on sorting flows mainly through religious affiliation. In particular, while religiosity contributes to significant partisan-

¹ Finney, Charles Grandison. 1851. *Lectures on Systematic Theology*, vol. 1. Edited by Richard Friedrich. Reprint. Fairfax: Xulon Press, 2003.

² Republican National Convention Acceptance Speech. Full transcript available at: <http://time.com/4416456/republican-convention-mike-pence-video-speech-transcript/>

ideological sorting among white evangelicals, it produces modest effects on sorting among mainline Protestants and minimal ones on Catholic and Jewish identifiers. Further, a complete lack of religiosity among secular identifiers generates less total sorting than maximal levels of religiosity among evangelicals. I bookend this evidence with an analysis of panel data from the Youth-Parent Socialization (YPS) survey, which allows me to test whether the relationship between religiosity and sorting is bidirectional. It is not. Religiosity constrains the convergence between political identities; in contrast, I find little evidence that sorting affects religiosity. Taken together, these findings show how religion has generated asymmetric sorting within the mass public, contributing a social explanation for sorting that complements extant institutional ones.

The politicization of American Christianity

While the merging of Christianity and politics appears to be an inescapable feature of the contemporary American political landscape, the strength of this relationship has ebbed and flowed considerably over the course of American history.³ Jefferson's declaration that the Bill of Rights would separate the church and state like a wall, for example, stands in sharp contrast to de Tocqueville's remarks that "for the Americans the ideas of Christianity and liberty are so completely mingled that it is now almost impossible to get them to conceive of the one without the other" (de Tocqueville 1835/1969, pg. 291). This disconnect notwithstanding, the ideological, much less partisan, consequences of religion were largely dormant until the 1950s (Harder 2014). Further, it was not until the mid-1980s that a politically-conscious Christianity was identifiable, characterized by "an extraordinary level of political advocacy to defend traditional positions on abortion, marriage, and religious freedom" (Pelz and Smidt 2015, pg. 382). Although the Moral Majority's influence showed some initial signs of faltering in the 1984 presidential election and played almost no role in the 1988 one (Wilcox 1992), evangelical support for Republican causes and candidates has nevertheless grown in the interim. Most recently, nearly 80 percent of evangelicals voted for the Republican presidential candidate in 2012 (Steensland and Goff 2014), and even Donald Trump, a man not known for public displays of religious piety, enjoyed overwhelming support among Christians during the 2016 election (Pew 2016).

To what source can we attribute this political awakening? Elite-driven models of group incorporation (e.g. Karol 2009) and opinion change (e.g. Hillygus and Shields 2008) suggest that entrepreneurial elites will shift their positions to attract or capture new or unaffiliated constituencies. Given

³ Although the First Great Awakening fostered the belief that God favored the revolutionary cause (Marsden 1990), this produced minimal political mobilization among the religious in relation to political affiliation. Why? One answer lies in theological content of the period's religious revivals, which emphasized individualist attitudes that challenged fealty to and involvement with earthly institutions (Wood 1993).

that evangelicals were roughly split between the Democratic and Republican Parties in the early 1960s, they comprised something of a “sleeping giant” of a constituency (Menendez 1977). According to this narrative, then, we should observe strategic political elites reaching out to conservative evangelicals.

In fact, some evidence appears to bear this pattern out. Ronald Reagan famously signaled his support to Christian leaders in 1980, affirming their belief that American needed to return to her status as “a shining light” for the rest of the world – “I know you can’t endorse me...but I want you to know that I endorse you and what you are doing!” Once elected, he was instrumental in changing the official GOP stance on abortion from moderate to pro-life (Karol 2009) and selected prominent leaders within the Moral Majority’s ranks to serve in government positions ranging from the Department of Education to the Surgeon General (Critchlow 2007). More recently, George W. Bush’s 2004 presidential campaign featured prominent overtures to Christian preferences for traditional marriage, while Donald Trump’s campaign mobilized Christians with the promise of replacing Antonin Scalia’s vacant Supreme Court seat with a pro-life justice. And this is to say little of the growing tendency for down-ballot Republican candidates to utilize religious cues to motivate prospective voters (McLaughlin and Wise 2014; Miller 2014).

Conversely, bottom-up theories of mass realignment (e.g. Carmines and Stimson 1989; Layman 2001) convey that group incorporation—the particization of a latent constituency—occurs when issue evolution creates new dimensions of political conflict that cut across existing political cleavages (Stoll 2013). Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the partisan transformation of evangelicals drew prominently upon rich “culture wars” imagery, which pitted the forces of an evangelical worldview against the encroaching, liberal foe of secular reason (Schaeffer 1976). As Steensland and Wright (2014, pg. 707) note, framing this tension in these terms allowed evangelicals and their political allies to “unite disparate issues such as abortion, gay rights, and women’s equality as different manifestations of the same ominous and overarching foe: secular humanism.”

But there was also a prominent racial element to this grassroots transformation (Noll 2008; Williams 2012). Not only did the fundamentalist-modernist split intersect the class-based cleavages borne from the New Deal era (McTague and Layman 2009), but the passage of civil rights legislation freed Southern, religiously conservative whites from the Democratic Party.⁴ In fact, the theological divide that characterized the Northern schism between fundamentalists and modernist evangelicals did not as readily apply to the South, where such divisions essentially fractured along racial lines (see Wadsworth [2014] for a more detailed treatment of this thesis). Noll (2008, pg. 156-157) explains how a conservative, white, Southern manifestation of Christianity was subsequently exported throughout the country: “once legally

⁴ While class-based cleavages played a small(er) role in the politicization of Christianity, economic policy preferences contributed to this development (Critchlow 2007). Yet it is difficult to divorce these preferences for limited government from racial attitudes.

enforced racism was gone, the great impediment that had restricted the influence of southern religion to only the south was also gone. Stripped of racist overtones, southern evangelical religion—the preaching, the piety, the sensibilities, and above all the music—became much easier to export throughout the country.”

It’s possible, however, that these two explanations are not mutually-exclusive and, instead, are symbiotic. Indeed, if we allow both party elites and evangelicals some degree of strategic agency, then the relationship is likely reciprocal (McTague and Layman 2009; Williams 2012). Oldfield (1996) notes, for example, that activist groups make strategic calculations regarding what course of action will satisfy their political interests. The probability that a group will become involved with a particular party, then, depends on both party elites’ position-taking and the course of action that group leaders believe will produce their optimum policy preferences. Republican Party elites, for example, incorporated the language of civil religion into their platform in the early 1980s, which affirmed religious conservatives’ belief in the religious nature of the founding. In turn, evangelicals pushed the GOP further rightward to accommodate their social policy preferences (Noll 2002). Thus, the “fact that evangelical leaders, activists, and voters became fiercely loyal to the GOP and highly influential within the party may be due just as much to the strategic calculations of Christian Right leaders and activists as it is to those of Republican politicians” (McTague and Layman 2009, pg. 344). Put another way, “If evangelical Christians had become Republicans, the Republican Party had also become Christianized” (Williams 2012, pg. 231).

Religion and the sorting of political identities

This shift in behavioral support portends a broader “sorting” among individuals’ ideological and partisan identities. At the individual-level, there are complementary social and psychological mechanisms by which religion might affect the convergence between political identities. Schmidt (2017) notes, for example, that linking church teaching and theology to salient issues and topics produces significant shifts in political preferences. Yet, while religious elites might contribute to sorting by explicitly connecting theological principles to politics from the pulpit (Williams 2012), this sort of politicking could cut both ways: positively affecting some parishioners (Putnam and Campbell 2010) and alienating others (Djupe and Calfano 2013).⁵ However, pastors need not explicitly invoke politics to generate downstream sorting. In fact, the vernacular of culture wars imagery is a theological mainstay in many churches throughout the United States (Layman and Carmines 1997; McLaughlin and Wise 2014). Merely cueing the deep divisions that exist between “orthodox” or “conservative” Christian belief and those with “liberal” or “progressive” views can generate political effects (Smidt, Guth, and Kellstedt 2017). Given that theological positions on issues like abortion,

⁵ Conceivably, because clergy are competing against so many other socializing agents, their *personal* effect may be comparatively small.

homosexuality, and prayer carry serious political implications, the act of worship and religious practice within a church setting may inevitably contribute to sorting by priming these ideological divisions, increasing religious-political sophistication, and functioning as a socializing agent. As a person becomes more religious – and, consequently, as their in-group narrows and out-group expands – these changes ought to limit the *political* associations that may be deemed appropriate.

Further, consider the general motivational tendencies that underscore sorting. Individuals tend to avoid cognitive dissonance among their preferences (Festinger 1957). Past research, for example, shows that citizens acquire positive candidate impressions that correspond to their electoral choices (Caplan 2001) and harmonize their political attitudes accordingly (Mullainathan and Washington 2009; McGregor 2013). Simply put, people tend to deal with attitudinal and behavioral discrepancies because these incongruences arouse psychological discomfort (Crano and Prislin 2006).

If political ideology originates from a range of dispositional motives that also underscore religious inclinations (e.g. Jost et al. 2003; Jost et al. 2008; Friesen and Ksiazkiewicz 2015), then the relationship between political and religious affinities may be sufficiently strong to compel individuals to align their associated political identities. As religious-political sophistication increases – together with signals from elites that connect religion to politics (e.g. McLaughlin and Wise 2014) – a person may feel pressure to remove theological-political dissonance. In turn, political identities may converge as religious considerations push individuals to identify with the political groups that most closely align with their underlying moral framework, thereby filtering out psychological cross-pressures and discordance among their preferences.

In this way, religion should affect sorting through psycho-social mechanisms: individuals are exposed to theological content and develop a coherent moral framework that constrains the political groups with which they identify. Curiously, however, extant research offers only qualified evidence that, say, evangelical identification increases individuals' propensity to correctly match their policy preferences to their partisanship (Levendusky 2009). A detailed analysis of how religious belief, practice, and affiliation actually affect citizens' propensity to match their partisan to ideological identities is missing.

For my purposes, two concepts tap into different facets of religion that might shape partisan-ideological sorting: 1) religiosity, a matrix of attitudes, behavior, and values, and 2) religious or denominational affiliation. Beginning, first, with religiosity, the sociological expression of this concept often combines participation, saliency, and belief acceptance into a latent measure of religious preferences (e.g. Glock 1965; Lensk 1963; Cardwell 1980; Holdcroft 2006). In effect, this concept yields an index that juxtaposes “areligious” (or, perhaps “secular”) preferences with “conservative” or “fundamentalist” religious ones. Thus, religiosity captures the type of ideational content that might constrain political identities, with one caveat: because sorting is a measure of the integration between political identities – i.e.

it has no inherent left-right valence – we ought to expect that the effect of religiosity on sorting should be positive for those persons with right-leaning identities and negative for those with left-leaning ones. If religiosity overlays an abstract, left-right dimension that juxtaposes secular with fundamentalist religious preferences, then it is likely that it should exert different effects for persons with left- and right-leaning political identities.

H1: Higher (lower) levels of religiosity should increase sorting among individuals with right-leaning (left-leaning) identities.

Second, there is an important distinction to be made between religiosity and religious affiliation (Holdcroft 2006). It is possible that denominational affiliation resembles other types of social identities, which generate political cohesion through a common or shared group perspective and conformity to associated group norms (Huddy 2013; Miller et al. 1981; Simon and Klandermans 2001). Because social identities can bind individuals to goal-directed behaviors, religious affiliation might constrain accompanying political identities. Given past research that highlights a relationship between evangelicalism and republican identification (e.g. McDaniel and Ellison 2008; Harder 2014) and ideological preferences separately (e.g. Ellis and Simson 2012; Farizo et al. 2016), I expect that white evangelicals should be better sorted than those persons affiliated with other (or no) faith traditions.

However, as prior work outlines, “belonging” is a particularly thorny issue regarding evangelicalism (e.g. Lewis and Bernardo 2010). Identifying as both Protestant and “born-again” may not sufficiently convey the presence of an evangelical social identity – an affective, deeply-rooted group membership – compared to simple affiliation – a more nominal, though not unimportant attachment to a group. Thus, it may be the case that we only detect that evangelicalism functions as a sort of social identity *when it is accompanied by higher levels of religiosity*. Given the close correspondence between traditional evangelicalism and the type of fundamentalism embodied by the upper threshold of a religiosity index, self-identified evangelicals who espouse high levels of religiosity should be particularly likely to exhibit sorted political identities.

H2: The magnitude of the effect of religiosity on sorting should be most pronounced among white evangelicals.

Data and Measurement

The data utilized in the forthcoming analyses are drawn from two sources: The 1984-2016 American National Election Studies (ANES) Time-Series and the third (1982) and fourth waves (1997) of the Youth-Parent Socialization (YPS) surveys.⁶ Across both datasets, I code variables consistently where possible and every effort has been made to ensure model specifications are comparable.⁷

Operationalizing identity sorting

A growing body of research conveys that partisan (Greene 1999; Huddy, Mason, and Aaroe 2015) and liberal-conservative identities (Malka and Llekes 2010) can be conceptualized as forms of social identities. Partisan-ideological sorting, then, conveys the extent to which an individual's separate political identities cohere. Following past research (e.g. Mason 2015; Davis and Mason 2016), identity sorting is operationalized by creating an identity alignment score between the traditional, seven-category partisan and ideology scales, where low values convey Democrat / liberal identification and high values Republican / conservative identification. Taking the absolute difference between these two items produces a variable where low values convey perfect overlap between identities and high values weak and cross-pressured ones. This variable is reverse-coded so that the maximum value represents a perfect ideological-partisan identity match, which is then multiplied by folded measures of partisan and ideological strength. Finally, I rescale the resulting item so that sorting scores range from the least-aligned, weakest identities (0) to perfectly-aligned and maximally strong ones.⁸

Religiosity and Denominational Affiliation

A substantial body of literature has explored how belonging, behavior, and belief are measured (most recently: Smidt, Kellstadt, and Guth [2017]). Religiosity, in particular, is a somewhat thorny concept in that

⁶ However, for models which make use of pooled ANES data, I restrict analysis to years 1984 to 2012. At present (10/17/2017), the 2016 ANES Time-Series data has not yet been added to the cumulative file.

⁷ The analyses presented in the forthcoming section are also reproduced using General Social Survey data in Appendix C. Table C1 and Figure C1 show that the connection between religiosity and sorting is not an artifact of data generation, adding a valuable robustness check to this work.

⁸ In the ANES, the proportion of persons who select the response “don't know” on liberal-conservative self-identification wavers between 30% (1984) and 10% (2012). This creates a potentially serious sample selection problem because these persons are excluded from the sorting calculus. To address this issue, I estimate an alternative sorting metric that distributes these persons with the liberal-conservative scale according to relative group affect. This robustness check is available in the Appendix (see Figure A1 for a detailed description of how I construct this variable). Rerunning the analyses with this alternative sorting metric produces results that are indistinguishable from the original sorting item, which excludes “don't know” responses. Output for these analyses is available in Tables A2 and A4 and Figures A5 and A6, respectively.

it encompasses a number of broad facets of religious expression. Indeed, as Holdcroft (2006, pg. 89) notes, religiosity is colloquially “synonymous with such terms as religiousness, orthodoxy, faith, belief, piousness, devotion, and holiness.” Further, because the concept transcends a number of academic disciplines, which seem to approach the study of religion from different stylistic vantage points (Cardwell 1980), it can be difficult to establish theoretical consensus regarding the empirical expression of this concept.⁹

For the purpose of these analyses, religiosity comprises three items that share lengthy iterative histories across the ANES Time-Series surveys: attitudes regarding biblical inerrancy, frequency of church attendance, and whether respondents believe religion is important. *Biblical inerrancy* asks respondents whether they believe that the Bible is a mere book written by men (coded 0), inspired by God but not to be taken literally (coded 1), or the literal Word of God (coded 2). Self-reported *church attendance* ranges from 0 to 4, where 0 corresponds to never attending church and the value 4 conveys that an individual attends church multiple times a week. *Importance of religion* is coded 1 for “yes, religion is important” and 0 for “no, religion is not important.”

These items are subjected to a principle components factor analysis. The factor loadings for each variable exceed $r = 0.70$, and the variables load cleanly onto a single common factor (first extracted eigenvalue = 1.81, second = 0.63). To interpret the conceptual nature of this item, it helps to consider how these factor scores relate to different combinations of the constituent variables, which are coded in such a way that low values roughly approximate “secular” responses and high values “fundamentalist” ones.¹⁰ In this case, a maximally-positive religiosity score would represent a combinatory matrix of items that convey an individual attends church regularly, believes the Bible is the inerrant Word of God, and believes religion is important. Low scores, conversely, convey non-attendance, that the bible is a mere book of stories, and those who think religion is unimportant.

Separate from the concept of religiosity is the measurement of religious affiliation. Here, the operationalization of evangelicalism presents its own peculiar difficulties (Hackett and Lindsay 2008):

⁹ Lenski (1963), for example, portrays religiosity as a combination of associational, communal, doctrinal, and devotional facets. Although Glock and Stark (1965) pursue a somewhat similar operationalization strategy, they use different terminology and expand this definition to include experiential, ritualistic, ideological, intellectual, and consequential dimensions. Meanwhile, Fukuyama’s (1960) interpretation of religiosity diverges prominently from these approaches and instead comprises a combination of cognitive, cultic, creedal, and devotional qualities. Still other research argues that these multidimensional approaches problematically aggregate orthodoxy, or religious orientation, and practice, or religious commitment, together (Davidson and Knudsen 1977).

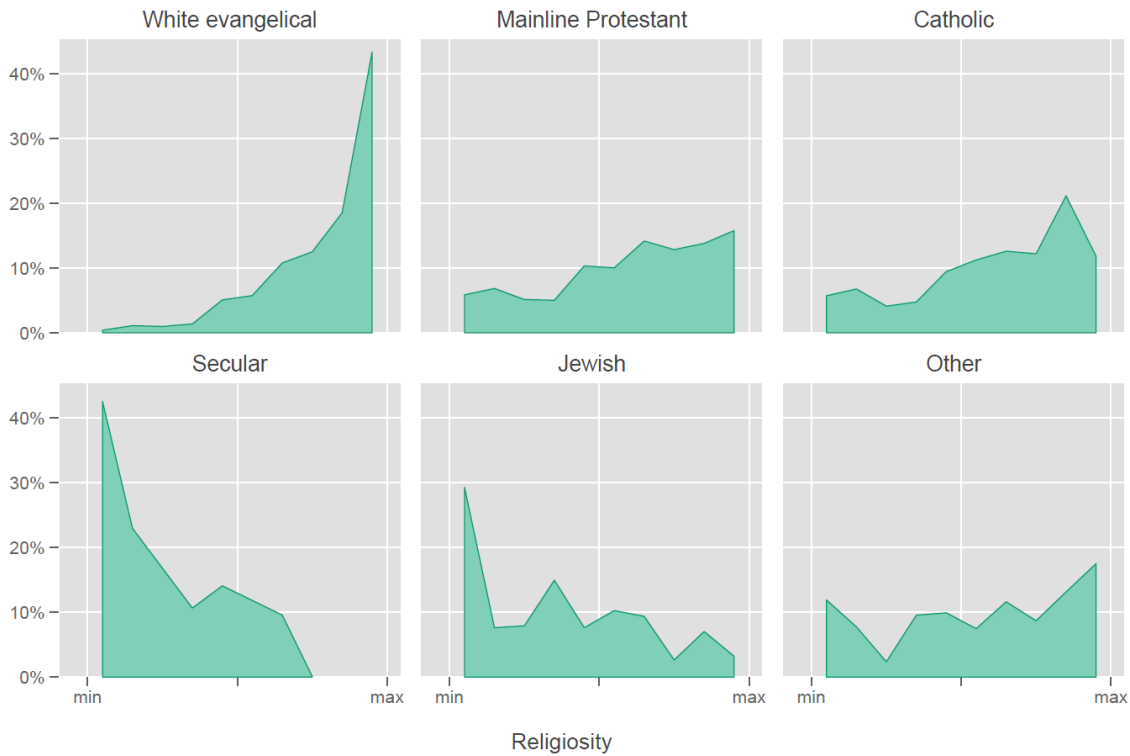
¹⁰ It is worth noting that Christian orthodoxy is separable from “fundamentalism,” although the two are occasionally (and mistakenly) used as analogues. In his “The Case for Orthodox Theology,” past Fuller Seminary president E.J. Carnell noted sardonically that “fundamentalism is orthodoxy gone cultic.” In this study, religiosity begins to shift from orthodoxy to fundamentalism, as the upper threshold of religiosity scores tie in biblical inerrancy, which is not necessary a component of orthodox belief but is a relevant, if not common litmus test for fundamentalism.

evangelicals can be classified according to particularistic beliefs about salvation, sanctification, and the devil, yet they also may literally self-identify as “evangelicals” when given the option (Barna 1994). Complicating this measurement scheme is a convoluted debate regarding the role of “belonging” (see: Lewis and Bernardo [2010] for a detailed analysis of these measurement tradeoffs). While self-identification as an evangelical conveys religious affiliation, being “born-again” is also an important spiritual marker that communicates that an individual has expressed belief in the redemptive power of Jesus Christ and now possesses a personal relationship with him (Smith 2000).

This measurement debate notwithstanding, the inclusion of germane survey instruments somewhat limits how I operationalize evangelical identity. Self-selecting born-again status is perhaps the simplest general criteria that demarcates evangelicals from other Protestants (e.g. Steensland et al. 2000), and it avoids entangling group affiliation with other belief-aspects that may be wrapped up in a measure of religiosity (Hackett and Lindsay 2008). It also benefits from being routinely included on the ANES surveys over time (explicit identification as an evangelical, for example, is available only for the years 1984 and 1988 via the variable VCF0128a). As a result, I utilize an individual’s response to the “born-again” question to discriminate between evangelicals and mainline Protestants; I assign the value 1 to respondents who identify as both “Protestant” and “born-again,” and otherwise 0.¹¹ Denominational affiliation is further broken down into the following mutually-exclusive categories that roughly follow Steensland and colleagues’ (2000) recommended taxonomy: Mainline Protestants (Protestants who do not select the “born-again” response), Catholics, those persons who identify as Jewish, secular respondents (persons who selected “atheistic,” “agnostic” or “no religion”), and an excluded category that comprises “other faith” identifiers. Individuals are coded 1 for identifying with a particular group and otherwise 0.

¹¹ Further, given that whites overwhelmingly identify as evangelicals (see Steensland et al., 2000), this variable is also restricted only to white identifiers. While it is possible for other denominational affiliates to identify as “born-again,” only Protestants are utilized to construct the evangelical item.

Figure 1. Religiosity across denominations



Source: 1984-2012 CANES Time-Series

Notes: Panels portray distribution of religiosity scores for Evangelicals (n=3,446), Mainline Protestants (n=5,879), Catholics (n=4,352), Secular / none (n=2,899), Jewish (n=374), and Other (n=1,114). Religiosity scores are binned into deciles and weighted by population weights.

Figure 1 displays a series of histograms that depict the distribution of religiosity scores among the six categories of religious affiliation (or lack thereof). Recalling that religiosity has been rescaled to range from 0 to 1, white evangelicals score highest on religiosity ($\bar{x} = 0.81$) while secular respondents score the lowest ($\bar{x} = 0.21$). Mainline Protestants possess marginally higher scores than Catholics. Curiously, the “other” category, which comprises an assortment of small samples of people who identify with other, non-Christian faiths (literally coded “other” by the CANES), actually skews toward above-average religiosity scores. Given that much of the American public overwhelmingly professes “belief” in God, however, this is perhaps not unsurprising. Although I suspect that this constitutes a case wherein social desirability pressures generate a compulsion to answer in the affirmative regarding questions about church and God, the problem cannot, unfortunately, be readily corrected across either survey (for similar issues, see: Hadaway et al. 1993; Patrikios 2008).

Additional covariates

A number of controls are also employed in the forthcoming analyses. *Political interest* ranges from 0, “low interest” to 2 “high interest.” I construct an index of *political sophistication* which includes: 1) correctly identifying the party that holds the House majority; 2) correctly placing Democrats to the left of Republicans on liberal-conservative ideology; and, 3) correctly placing Democrats to the left of Republicans on the jobs, provision of public services, and defense spending policy items. This index is rescaled to range from 0, no correct answers, to 1, correctly answered all questions.¹²

Education is measured as an ordinal variable that ranges from 0, “primary,” to 6, “post-graduate.” *Age* takes the form of a continuous variable that ranges from 17 to 99. *Male* is coded 1 for men and 0 for women. *White* and *Black* racial identification is coded 1 for individuals who select those categories and otherwise 0.¹³ *Old South* is a variable utilized commonly in studies that examine sorting over time. In part, this helps control for the effects of southern realignment; here, its inclusion is also useful to parcel out variation attributable to differences between northern and southern religious experiences. Individuals residing in one of the states that comprised the original Confederacy are coded 1 and otherwise 0 (c.f. Levendusky 2009).

Finally, past work on the nature of ideology uncovers both a social-moral and economic dimension of preferences (Feldman and Johnston 2014). As this relates to the present study, recent work argues that abortion policy transformed culture wars debates over the past two decades (Lewis forthcoming). Accordingly, *abortion preference* reflects an individual’s self-placement on a four-category abortion self-placement scale, which ranges from 0, “always permissible” to 1, “never permissible.” Second, *government spending preferences* convey whether a respondent prefers less (0) or more social service spending (1); effectively, this item juxtaposes limited government preferences with a preference for the welfare state.

Results

To illustrate the relationship between religion and sorting, I portray modeling output graphically (c.f. King, Tomz, and Wittenber 2000; Kastle and Leoni 2007; full model output, however, is available in Appendix A).¹⁴ Figure 2 depicts marginal effect estimates that correspond to a number of covariates hypothesized to affect sorting, bracketed by 95% confidence interval bands. Substantively, these estimates convey the effect of moving from minimum to maximum values on a given variable. Confidence intervals that overlap with

¹² Unfortunately, the office recognition items that are commonly utilized as measures of political knowledge in later surveys are unavailable for years 1984 and 1988.

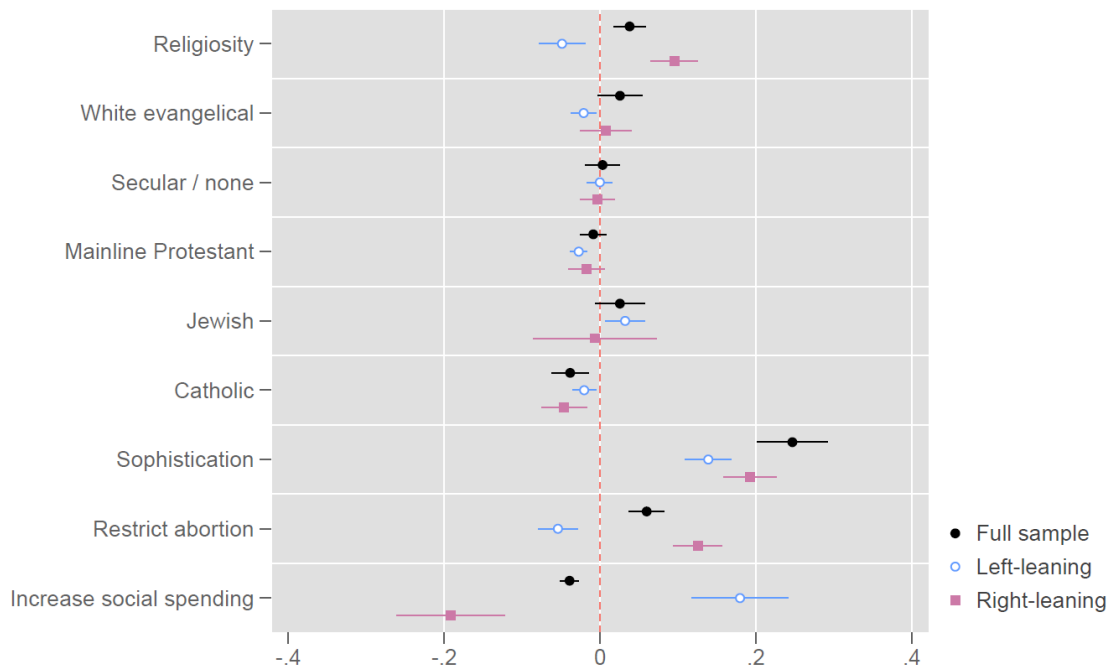
¹³ Because identification as a white person is also wrapped up in the “evangelical” item, coefficients associated with this variable are interpreted as the effect of identifying as a non-evangelical white.

¹⁴ This and the other appendices referenced by the author are available at:

http://www.nicholastdavis.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/sorting_religion_SSQ_appendix.pdf

the vertical dotted line imply that a given point estimate is indistinguishable from 0. Dark point estimates are derived from a model that analyzes the full sample. Recalling that sorting has no inherent left-right valence, I also present marginal effect estimates derived from split-sample analyses of persons with left- (hollow circular dots) and right-leaning identities (red squares). This allows the reader to assess whether certain covariates exert differentiated effects on sorting.¹⁵

Figure 2. Marginal effect estimates of the correlates of partisan-ideological sorting



Source: 1984-2012 CANES Time-Series

Notes: Plotted point estimates convey the marginal effect of transitioning from minimum to maximum values on given variable, holding other variables at respective means. Solid, dark circles are associated with estimates derived from analysis of full sample (n = 11,619); blue circles and red squares convey split-sample estimates of those with left- (n = 5,657) and right-leaning identities (n = 4,834), respectively. Originating regression models include additional controls for race, age, gender, education, whether a respondent resides in a state from the “old South,” and a series of year fixed effects. Full modeling output is available in Table A2 in the Appendix.

¹⁵ Effectively, coefficients derived from a split-sample model are interpreted as the effect of a covariate, conditional on the variable used to stratify the sample (in this case, a collapsed, three-category partisanship item). Although overlapping confidence intervals for point estimates in this figure implies a lack of statistical significance, a fully-saturated model that includes interaction terms for each of the depicted point estimates is available.

Beginning with the non-religious covariates that are presumably related to the convergence between political identities, political sophistication exerts a large, positive effect on partisan-ideological sorting. When individuals are able to correctly place the parties in ideological space and know something about which party controls Congress, they exhibit greater levels of sorting.¹⁶ Policy preferences also exert large effects on sorting; those with identity-consistent policy preferences on government spending and abortion are more likely to possess political identities that correspond. Among the various denominational affiliations, I find that Catholic identification is associated with less sorting. Although its teaching on sexual ethics is reliably “conservative,” Catholics have traditionally been less likely to identify as Republicans. As such, these cross-pressures are probably related to a decreased propensity to exhibit sorted political identities. Affiliation as an evangelical is associated with a small increase in sorting in the pooled model, but the split-sample models indicate that this effect is indistinguishable from 0 (conceivably, “pure” Independents who affiliate as evangelicals are more likely to identify as political conservatives). Changes in sorting among Jewish identifiers are only detectable among persons with left-leaning political identities. Finally, and perhaps surprisingly, a *lack* of religious affiliation is not associated with changes in sorting.

In the analysis of the full sample, religiosity has as small positive effect on the extent to which a person’s identities overlap. Compared to average levels of sorting ($\bar{y} = 0.25$), partisan-ideological sorting increases by about 20 percent as individuals transition from minimum to maximum values of religiosity. However, as the point estimates for those with left- and right-leaning identities reveals, the effect of religiosity in the full sample is depressed given that it effectively averages oppositely-signed coefficients. As the hollow point estimates reveal, higher levels of religiosity are associated with less sorting among those with left-leaning identities, whereas the square point estimates indicate that maximal levels of religiosity convert to a significant increase in sorting among those with right-leaning identities ($\delta = 0.10$, 95% CI = [.06, 0.13]).

Keeping in mind that this initial set of models analyzes pooled survey data from 1984 to 2012, it is possible that the effect of religiosity is not static. Consider that the merging of religious conservatism and Republicanism unfolded over time (Williams 2012). Structural cleavages, like religion (but also race, ethnicity, language, etc.) are often exacerbated when a cleavage is explicitly connected to political issues on which party elites stake out distinct positions (McTague and Layman 2009; Sundquist 1983; Layman 2001; Legee et al, 2002) – a process that naturally takes time to develop. If “issue orientations precede group images” (McTague and Layman 2009, pg. 353), then the degree to which religion is related to sorting

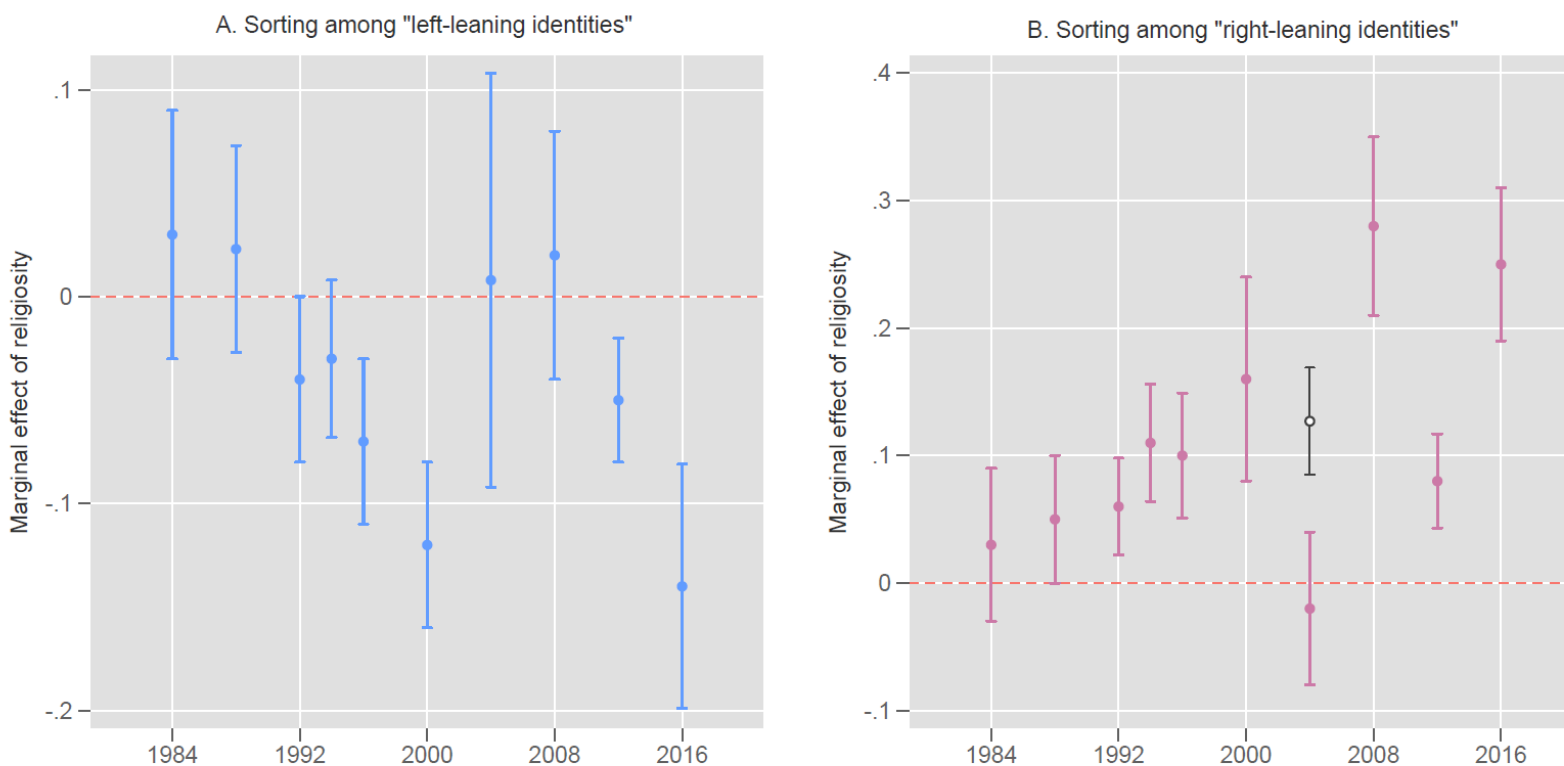
¹⁶ Here, the marginal effect derived from the full sample is larger than the ones observed in the split samples because sophistication has comparably larger effect on moving Independents toward liberal or conservative self-placement.

may be sensitive to the unfolding of the relationship between Republican Party elites and religiously-conservative constituencies.

Time, then, may moderate the effect of religiosity on sorting such that the magnitude of the effect of religiosity on sorting varies over the period in which this data was collected. However, rather than constrain the effect of time within a linear interaction model, I separately analyze the effect of religiosity among those with left- and right-leaning identities in each year for which I possess the necessary relevant data. I present these estimates in Figure 3. Panels A (left) and B (right) reveal that the direction and magnitude of the effect of religiosity on sorting varies over the period of time in which this data was collected. Regarding the relationship between religiosity and sorting among those with left-leaning identities, the effect of religiosity on sorting is appreciably messy. For many survey-years, the confidence intervals associated with the marginal effect estimates overlap with 0. In later survey-years (1992, 1996, 2000, 2012, 2016), however, we detect a negative relationship between religiosity and the extent to which liberal identities converge with Democratic ones. In other words, in these years, Democrats who *lack* religiosity exhibit greater levels of sorting when religiosity is low.

In contrast, the evidence presented in Panel B points to a robust, positive effect of religiosity on sorting. Matching historical accounts regarding the nadir of Religious Right's influence on the political landscape, the effect of religiosity on partisan-ideological sorting in 1984 is indistinguishable from 0. However, as time progresses, the magnitude of the effect of religiosity on sorting grows considerably. The strength of the relationship between religiosity and sorting peaks in 2008, where the shift from minimum to maximum values on religiosity exerts a large positive effect on the extent to which an individual's ideological and partisan identities overlap ($\delta = 0.26$, 95% CI = [0.13, 0.38]). Although the magnitude of the effect regresses in 2012, the magnitude of this effect in 2016 is again quite large.

Figure 3. Marginal effect of religiosity on sorting, by left- and right-leaning identities over time

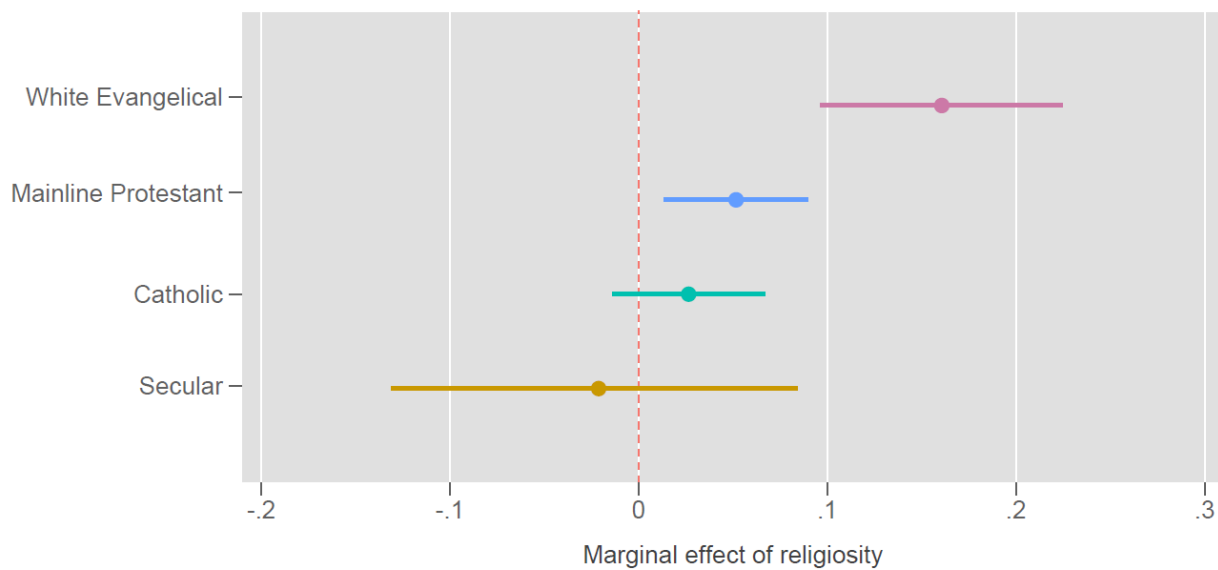


Source: 1984-2012 CANES Time-Series file & 2016 ANES Time-Series survey

Notes: Point estimates convey the marginal effect of transitioning from minimum to maximum values of religiosity for respondents with left- and right-leaning identities in given year. Year 2000 model presents a curious oddity. For roughly half the sample, ANES asked traditional seven-point, liberal-conservative placement question. The other half received an experimental instrument. The cumulative ANES data file does not include responses to the experimental item, thereby drastically reducing the size of the available sample. Additional data does not change marginal effect estimate for left-leaning identities, but does for right-leaning ones (hollow point estimate, Panel B). Originating regressions are available in the Appendix Table A4.

If the effect of religiosity on sorting varies among those with left- and right-leaning identities, then does religiosity funnel through various forms of religious affiliation in different ways as well? Drawing on a series of analyses that model the interaction between religious affiliation and religiosity, Figure 4 presents the marginal effect of religiosity on sorting among those who affiliate with various denominations or no religion at all. Specifically, the estimates convey a change in sorting as one transitions from minimum to maximum values of religiosity for different forms of religious affiliation. Here, I observe that the effect of religiosity on sorting is isolated to white evangelicals and, to a lesser degree, Mainline Protestants. At maximum levels of religiosity, white evangelicals exhibit 70% greater levels of sorting relative average levels of sorting observed in the sample, while maximum levels of religiosity for Mainline Protestants convert to about a 20% increase in sorting relative this baseline. Meanwhile, neither Catholic nor secular identifiers exhibit discernable changes in sorting at varying levels of religiosity.

Figure 4. The effect of religiosity on sorting, conditional on religious identity



Notes: Point estimates convey marginal effect of religiosity among religious identification, holding other variables at respective means. Solid bands represent 95% confidence intervals. For originating regressions from which estimates are derived, see Table A5 in Appendix A.

The evidence presented thus far reveals that the effect of religiosity on sorting is magnified among those with right-leaning partisan identities and those who identify as white Evangelicals. As such, it may be the case that the combinatory alignment of these racial, religious, *and* partisan identities – a phenomenon sometimes referred to as “social sorting” (Mason and Davis 2016) – contributes to distinct increases in

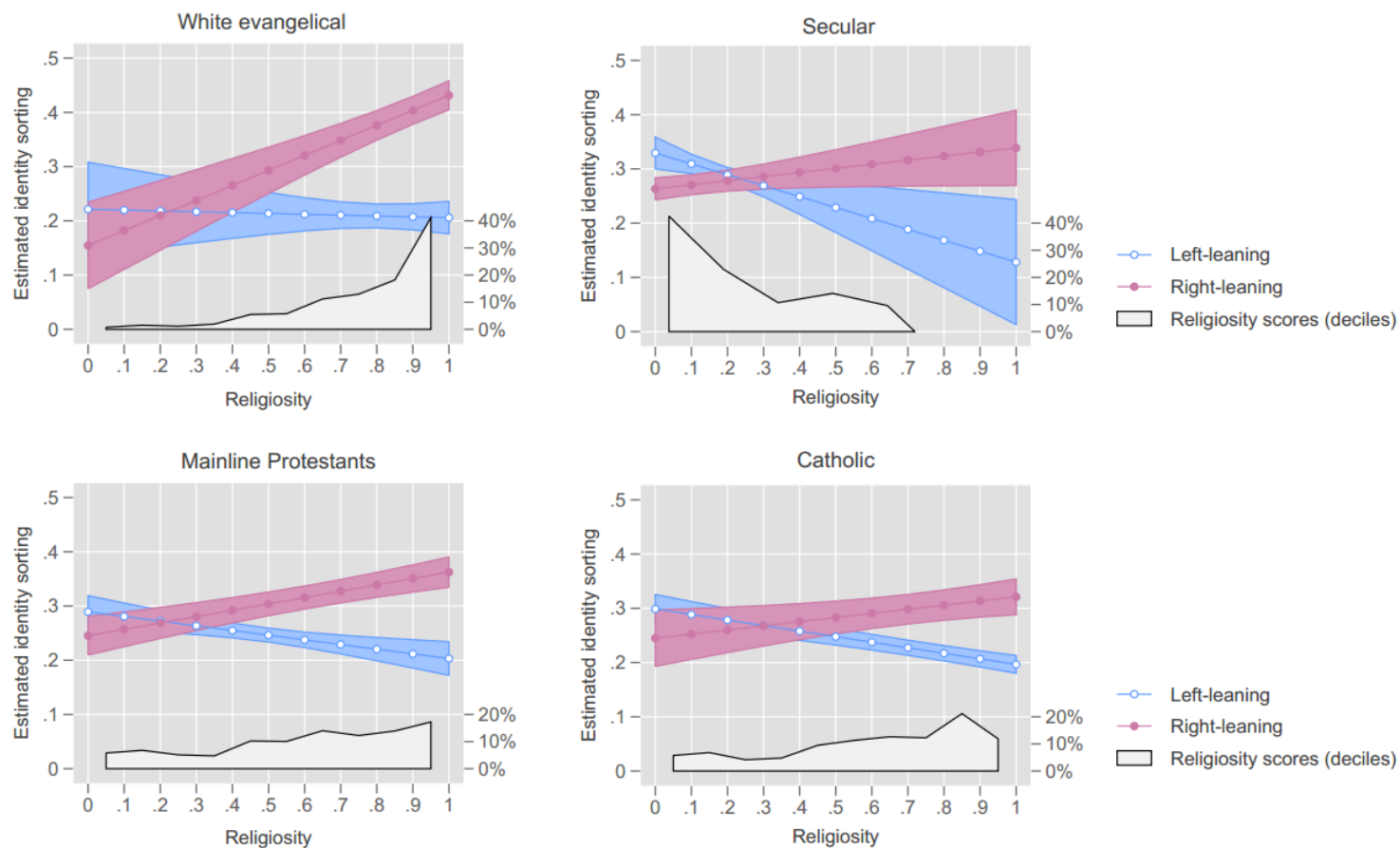
partisan-ideological sorting. In other words, we may observe that religiosity exerts a particularly strong effect on sorting through the alignment of both religious affiliation and racial identities.

Figure 5 depicts a series of illustrations that portray the results of a series of three-way interactions among a three-category partisanship item, religiosity, and religious identity. Here, the effect of religiosity on sorting is broken out by religious affiliation (the four panels) and whether an individual possesses a left- or right-leaning set of political identities (hollow and solid point estimates, respectively; the shaded bands constitute 95% confidence intervals). In each panel, I also superimpose a histogram that illustrates the distribution of religiosity scores for that population of religious affiliates. The percentage of these persons in a given category of religiosity can be ascertained by referring to the right-hand-side y-axis in each panel. The inclusion of this information facilitates contextualizing the scope and interpretation of the effect of religiosity on sorting among different types of religious affiliation – which vary widely in their average levels of religiosity.

Across the panels, an increase in religiosity translates generally into an increase (decrease) in sorting for persons with right- (left-) leaning identities. Beginning with the analysis of secular persons in the top, right panel, the effect of religiosity on sorting among left- and right-leaning persons is only detectable at minimal levels of religiosity. This finding is not surprising considering the distribution of religiosity scores, which are positively skewed toward areligious preferences (i.e. low religiosity scores). As the wide confidence interval bands indicate, these differences disappear quickly as religiosity scores increase.

For Mainline Protestants (lower left) and Catholics (lower right panel), an increase in religiosity is associated with greater (less) sorting for persons with right- (left-) leaning identities. While non-evangelical Protestants are modestly more sorted as religiosity increases, religiosity exerts a comparatively weaker effect on Catholic sorting. In this case, increases and decreases in sorting are only detectable beyond the sixth decile of religiosity scores. Presumably, this effect (or lack thereof) is partially attributable to the fact that Catholics, as noted previously, have been less likely to be both politically conservative and identify as Republican. However, as recent research indicates, significant changes have occurred among Catholics in recent years – particularly regarding the politicization of abortion politics and the pro-life movement (Lewis forthcoming). As such, it is perhaps not unsurprising to observe that religiosity destabilizes sorting among those with left-leaning orientations who otherwise might have been stereotypic liberal-Democrats.

Figure 5. The effect of religiosity on sorting, conditional on political and religious identity



Source: 1984-2012 CANES Time-Series

Notes: Estimates depict three-way interaction among partisanship, religiosity, and denominational affiliation. For originating regressions from which estimates are derived, see Table A5 in Appendix A. Estimates bracketed by 95% confidence intervals.

Finally, although religiosity does not have a meaningful effect on sorting for individuals who identify as evangelicals *and* as Democrats (borne out by the flat line of hollow point estimates), the convergence between Republican and conservative identities at high levels of religiosity is profound for evangelicals. Considering the distribution of these religiosity scores, which skew higher than other groups, the average white evangelical is likely to possess better-sorted political identities compared to other religious affiliates. Not only do white evangelicals with right-leaning identities exhibit greater sorting than Mainline Protestants at *average* levels of religiosity by group, respectively, but, the magnitude of the effect of religiosity on sorting at maximal levels of religiosity is roughly 15% larger for white evangelicals relative other Protestants.

Thinking through temporality

To this point, I have demonstrated that religiosity constrains identity sorting. Yet, at least one final question remains: If religiosity affects sorting, does sorting generate religiosity?¹⁷ In other words, what is the ordering of the relationship between these two constructs? In the absence of panel surveys that routinely poll the same group of individuals over a lengthy period of time, it is difficult to establish causality in the relationship between religion and sorting (e.g. Patrikios 2008). However, leveraging two waves of the Youth-Parent Socialization survey, which occur at 1982 and 1997, we have the opportunity to explore the nature of this relationship. This data is particularly appropriate for this task for two reasons. First, this panel data was collected at a critical point in these respondents' lives, when the effect of familial socialization begins to wane (Jennings and Stoker 2004). Second, this data was collected during the heart of the growth in correspondence between Christianity and Republican Party politics.

To explore the interdependence of religiosity and sorting, I estimate panel models that compare the extent to which a variable at T1 predicts the T2 value of a second variable (an approach used previously by Jennings and Stoker [2004]).¹⁸ Specifically, I model religiosity at the fourth wave of the YPS survey (1997) as a function of sorting and religiosity at the third wave (1982), and sorting at the fourth wave of the YPS survey (1997) as a function of religiosity and sorting at the third wave (1982). By controlling for a series of covariates measured at the same wave as the dependent variable (i.e. T2), this set of analyses reveals the

¹⁷ Recent work, for example, notes that “culture war attitudes” affect both political and religious predispositions (Goren and Chapp 2017), while other research shows partisanship can influence church attendance (Patrikios, 2008) – findings that imply that political considerations affect religious ones, rather than the inverse.

¹⁸ The variables included in the analyses found in Table 3 are coded as consistently as possible in relation to the ANES Time-Series variables. For a full discussion of these items, Appendix B lists the exact coding and summary statistics of this data.

extent to which someone who is highly religious during the first wave ends up more sorted during the second wave than would otherwise be expected given their demographic profile.

Table 1. Interdependence of religiosity and sorting, 1982-1997

	Religiosity 1997		Sorting 1997	
	Left-leaning	Right-leaning	Left-leaning	Right-leaning
Sorting 1982	0.03 (0.06)	0.05 (0.06)	0.47** (0.05)	0.44** (0.06)
Religiosity 1982	0.62** (0.04)	0.62** (0.04)	0.06 (0.04)	0.09* (0.04)
Political knowledge	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.00 (0.01)	0.02** (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
College degree	-0.01 (0.02)	0.03 (0.02)	0.04 (0.02)	-0.05 (0.02)
Catholic	-0.01 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.03)	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.04 (0.04)
Jewish	-0.06 (0.04)	-0.03 (0.09)	-0.00 (0.04)	-0.08 (0.09)
Southern Baptist	0.03 (0.04)	0.00 (0.04)	0.00 (0.03)	0.02 (0.05)
Not religious	-0.22** (0.04)	-0.18** (0.05)	0.03 (0.04)	-0.00 (0.05)
White	-0.06** (0.02)	-0.02 (0.02)	0.00 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)
Black	0.02 (0.04)	-0.12 (0.19)	0.00 (0.04)	-0.20 (0.20)
Constant	0.32** (0.04)	0.26** (0.05)	0.00 (0.04)	0.10* (0.05)
R ²	0.55	0.52	0.31	0.19
N	364	312	363	309

Source: Waves 3 (1982) and 4 (1997), Youth-Parent Socialization Survey

Notes: All covariates save “religiosity” and “sorting” are sampled from 4th wave (1997). Standard errors in parentheses. *p<0.05, **p<0.01

Beginning with the first two models presented in Table 1, respondents’ religiosity scores in 1997 are modeled as a function of sorting and religiosity in 1982 and a series of controls. Drawing from the presentational style in the previous section, I again present split-sample models; scores on all variables have been recoded to range from 0 to 1. There is little evidence that the extent to which a person was sorted in 1982 predicts their religiosity in 1997 as evidence by the large standard errors associated with the

coefficients for sorting. However, turning to the second set of models, there does appear to be a modest, but positive relationship between religiosity at 1982 and sorting in 1997. Specifically, a change from minimal to maximal levels of religiosity are related to an increase of about a half of a standard deviation in sorting over this period of time (a not insubstantial change relative other covariates). While this does not strictly reveal that religiosity *causes* sorting, it does help alleviate some of the concern about the directionality of the relationship between religion and sorting in that the effects do not to be reciprocal.

Discussion and conclusion

Conventional explanations for why Americans' political identities have converged over time focus primarily on the role of elite polarization (Levendusky 2009) and structural changes in the media environment (Davis and Dunaway 2016). In this manuscript, I show that partisan-ideological sorting also occurs in response to citizens' religious affinities. For white Americans who profess to be born-again Christians, religious fundamentalism (religiosity) constrains the extent to which one's political identities converge.

That the relationship between conservative religious preferences and conservative political ones has maintained its trajectory despite the fracturing of the original Religious Right is notable. Not only have formal religious institutions waned (e.g. Cooperman and Edsall 2006), but a new crop of less conservative religious leaders and pastors have emerged as vocal critics of those fundamentalist groups (e.g. Altman and Scherer 2012). Yet, the political durability of evangelicalism persists, generating two asymmetries regarding the extent to which Americans are sorted.

First, traditional expositions of "identity politics" often focus on the role that single identities contribute to the development of preference orientations. In the case of partisan-ideological sorting, however, the broader alignment or "intersection" of racial (white) identity and religious (evangelical) affiliation is a potent accelerant to the convergence between partisan and ideological identities. Inasmuch as changes in sorting are a function of religious preferences, it would be unwise to deemphasize the role that race plays in facilitating this sorting. Consider that white persons who identify as born-again and who score in the uppermost quartile of religiosity scores are more than 60 percent more sorted in their political identities than their black counterparts who also profess being "born again" and who possess comparative levels of religiosity.

Second, while some have suggested recently that "secularization is transforming the left" (Beinart 2017), this manuscript finds less evidence that secularism increases sorting among those with left-leaning identities. Consider, for example, that white evangelicals who score at maximum levels of religiosity are roughly 20% more well sorted than secular persons at minimum levels of religiosity. In effect, these examples portray the "maximal" versions of overlap between (a)religious and political preferences, and yet

persons with right-leaning, consistent religious and political identities are significantly more well-sorted than their left-leaning, secular counterparts.

These asymmetries comport with other evidence of social and political asymmetries in American politics. Grossman and Hopkins (2015, pg. 119) write that the differences between Republicans and Democrats can be chalked up to the former prizing “doctrinal purity” while the latter functions as a loose “coalition of social groups.” Although their invocation of “doctrinal purity” refers to the binding principles of limited government within conservatism, the evidence presented here reveals that this phrase has a second dimension of meaning. Individuals with consistent, conservative theological orientations exhibit greater matching between their political identities.

Finally, although this study shows that sorting is not merely a mechanistic reaction to institutional changes within Congress, there are still unanswered questions for which additional research is warranted. First, traditional measures of religiosity seem to juxtapose areligious preferences (no church attendance, low views of the bible) with religious fundamentalism (frequent church attendance, bible is literally “word of God”). However, where progressive or more liberal theological doctrine fits within this sliding scale is unclear. For example, where do progressive, yet orthodox Christians who both consider themselves “born-again” and hold high value of the integrity of the scriptures fit within this framework? Although these persons may present as “high” in religiosity, it may be the case, however, that the relationship between theological belief and sorting would be clearer using separate measures of theological sophistication to account for these granular, yet consequential differences. Relatedly, the measures of affiliation used here may weakly encapsulate the actual effect of religious *identity*. A social identity involves “an awareness of similarity, in-group identity, and shared fate with others who belong to the same category,” which has “pervasive effects on what people think and do” (Klandermans 2014, pg. 5). In other words, a social identity is a highly valued group membership that structures how people think about and behave within their immediate environment (Huddy 2013). Certainly, we can imagine white evangelical identification functioning in this manner, but the interaction between affiliation and religiosity used in this project only approximates this type of construct.

These limitations notwithstanding, this research presents a framework for understanding some of the consequences of asymmetric sorting over the previous three decades. While some Christians may argue that their faith supersedes other subordinate political preferences, the intersection of religious and political affiliations has nevertheless generated a potent form of superordinate identity (c.f Wenzel, Mummendey, and Waldzus 2010). By amplifying basic in-group / out-group distinctions, this sorting not only helps explain their rigid electoral behavior in the aggregate, but likely factors into the growing social divisions that characterize the American mass public. Thus, to the extent that sorting is a response to elite polarization, it also a manifestation of a broader alignment among religious, racial, and ideological preferences.

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