

The following essay is included in the fourth Spirited Debate essay collection, “Reflections on Religion and Public Life in America,” and is paired with an essay by Susan L. Marquis, “A More Perfect Union? Bending the Arc? Or a de Tocqueville American Tour?” To see all the Spirited Debate essays currently published and continue reading about the PRRUCS Religion & Democratic Renewal project, see [Spirited Debate](#).

At the Nexus of Politics and Religion: Dialoguing Toward Democratic Renewal

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In a Philadelphia neighborhood just south of the Liberty Bell, there are signs noting where all the historic religious congregations are. These include the neighboring Old Pine Street Church and St. Peter’s Church, both of which count Revolutionary-era patriots as former members. Old St. Joseph’s, the first Catholic Church in the city of Philadelphia, is around the corner. Mother Bethel AME is not only the oldest African Methodist Episcopal congregation in the country but also boasts the oldest piece of property continuously owned by African Americans in the country. Right next door is Historic Congregation B’nai Abraham, one of three Jewish synagogues in the neighborhood, and within a few more blocks a person can find a Greek Orthodox church, an active Quaker meetinghouse, and more. The neighborhood serves as a reminder that Pennsylvania’s origins are in religious pluralism. While William Penn was a Quaker, he envisioned a Pennsylvania that would allow for free religious practice and welcome religious diversity. Even by these lofty goals, William Penn would be surprised at just how pluralistic the American religious landscape is today. Religious choice goes beyond having different faiths and denominations represented. Americans today can choose whether to be part of a religious community at all and, if so, find a religious community where they feel comfortable, included, and valued.

This article explores what it means for both religion in America as well as the American political system when Americans have a great deal of religious choice. Journalists write extensively about the relationship between religiosity—that is, how frequently a person attends church or how devout a person is—and their partisanship and vote choice. And in doing so, they often assume that people are bringing their political outlooks in line with their preexisting religious values and beliefs. This helps explain the rise of [polarization](#) that many bemoan. But what if the reverse also happens? If people

make religious choices to align with preexisting political outlooks, the self-sorting and resultant polarization is happening from both directions. In other words, the religious-political bonds that mark the current American landscape may be stickier than previously assumed. In the sections that follow, I try to make sense of the complicated relationship between religion and politics, first by summarizing what scholars and journalists know and then by discussing what all this means for American discourse and civility. Try as I might while writing, this missive does not offer the solution to democratic renewal. Instead, its aim is to shine a light on the current religious-political landscape; by understanding how we got to where we are, we can start thinking about how we should move forward.

A house divided

If you gave me a person's brief religious biography, I would be able to guess that person's vote in the upcoming 2024 election. While not a perfect party trick, I would be willing to wager a bit of money on it. My confidence comes from the "God gap," an admittedly silly name for an incredibly consequential political phenomenon. Today, religious Americans—particularly White Americans—often identify as Republican and support Republican candidates while nonreligious and secular White Americans identify as Democrats and vote for Democratic candidates. This gap, which first emerged in the 1990s, has yawned in the intervening decades and has supplemented traditional cleavages that were based on religious identification with, for example, Catholics being Democrats and Mainline Protestants being Republicans.¹ Today, the more devout members of all Catholic and Protestant faiths are more likely to be on the Republican side of the aisle. Looking at all Christian denominations, [Pew](#) finds that a majority (62%) of regular churchgoers—those who attend at least monthly—identify as Republican. This is the case even when looking at White, Hispanic, and Asian respondents separately. It is only among Black Americans that Pew does not find this relationship, a point I will return to later. The Democratic camp, on the other hand, includes less religious Catholics and Protestants alongside an increasing number of religious nonidentifiers—sometimes referred to as "nones." Pew finds a majority (56%) of infrequent church attenders identify with the Democratic Party, and strong majorities of the religiously unaffiliated claim a Democratic partisan identity (70%). These divisions in partisan identification translate into vote choice, with more religious White Americans supporting Republican candidates for president.²

¹ Putnam, Robert, and David E. Campbell. 2010. *American Grace*. New York: Simon and Schuster. Pluta, Anne. 2016. "The Rise of the 'God Gap.'" *FiveThirtyEight*. January 31.

² Margolis, Michele F. 2018. *From Politics to the Pews*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

The religiosity gap is not just a staple of American political life; it represents one of the “most important and enduring social cleavages in the electorate.”³ Survey data reveal that the God gap is larger than other politically consequential social divisions in American politics, including partisan differences based on gender (sometimes referred to as the gender gap), union membership, and education (sometimes referred to as the diploma divide).⁴ The sheer magnitude of the God gap is what makes the party trick effective. Knowing a little bit about a person’s religious background allows me to have a good sense of the party and candidates they support.

The changing religious landscape set the stage for the religiosity gap to emerge

While religion has always been politicized in the United States, the contours of this politicization changed during the latter part of the 20th century. These shifts—which took place over years—set the stage for people to link their religious and political values in a new way, giving rise to today’s religiosity gap.

Changing societal values in the 1960s marks the first major shift in the religious-political landscape. Robert Putnam and David Campbell tracked this evolution, noting that societal values began to change—and change rapidly—in the 1960s with “the rapid expansion of higher education, ‘the Pill’...Vatican II, the assassinations, the Vietnam War, Watergate, pot and LSD, the civil rights movement and other movements that followed in its wake—the antiwar movement, the women’s liberation movement, and later the environmental and gay rights movements.”⁵ There was so much upheaval in the American social landscape after the post-war calm of the 1950s that Putnam and Campbell refer to it as “an earthquake.” This earthquake created natural “aftershocks,” bringing family and traditional values to the forefront as a response to the big, culturally liberal, changes.

A second key change during this period is that “morality politics” took the stage in the 1960s and never really left. These issues included legal protections for LGBT individuals, gender equality, abortion access, and marijuana legalization. This newly salient bundle of issues did not fit neatly on

³ Bolce, Louis, and Gerald De Maio. 2014. “The Evolution of the Religion Gap Metaphor in the Language of American Political Journalists: 1987–2012.” *Geolinguistics* 39: 45–62 (p. 48).

⁴ Margolis, Michele F. 2022. “Reversing the Causal Arrow: Politics’ Influence on Religious Choices.” *Advances in Political Psychology* 43 (S1): 261–290.

⁵ Putnam, Robert, and David E. Campbell. 2010. *American Grace*. New York: Simon and Schuster (p. 91).

the left–right economic spectrum that had previously dominated American politics nor the newly emerging dimension of racial politics in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement. Instead, these policies afforded the political parties an opportunity to further differentiate themselves, and Americans are still debating many of these same issues over a half century later.

We also saw religious elites—specifically conservative Christians—entering the political fray, which marks the third major shift during this time. After being on the outskirts of politics for decades, Christian political organizations began emerging in the 1970s. These national organizations—including the Christian Voice, Religious Roundtable, and the Moral Majority—in conjunction with the far-reaching voices from religious broadcasting were the first to highlight the connection between conservative religious values and the Republican Party. Individuals who had become household names, like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, spoke about political issues of the day, and the biggest Christian political organizations mobilized in support of Republican candidates. This shift meant that the public—both those who consider themselves to be conservative Christians and not—were able to learn about the changing relationship between religion and politics.

A fourth change—shifting political party strategies—further solidified the elite-level relationship between religion and politics in the United States. While we often think about the Republican Party as the champion of culturally conservative issues, it was the Democratic Party who moved on this dimension first. The Democratic platform in 1972, for example, included sections such as “The Right to Be Different,” “Rights of Women,” and “Family Planning.”⁶ Geoffrey Layman details the intra-party discussions and shifts that ultimately led the parties to look culturally distinct from each other. For example, Republican elites did not move immediately to the culturally conservative side of the aisle but instead did so after realizing the political benefits of a candidate talking about their faith, which they learned from Democrat Jimmy Carter. Ronald Reagan represented a key shift in the religious-political environment when he worked hard to appeal to these voters, with respect to both his rhetoric and campaign promises. These related to abortion, which is everyone’s first thought, but also to school curriculum, gay rights, and prayer in the public sphere.

⁶ Layman, Geoffrey. 2001. *The Great Divide: Religious and Cultural Conflict in American Party Politics*. New York: Columbia University Press.

All told, the latter part of the 20th century is marked by social and cultural upheaval. Values shifted in the progressive direction with a clear reaction from those opposed to these changes. At the same time, these values had policies associated with them. It was not simply that the values were up for discussion but also that the government saw its role as legislating issues that touched on these values. Add to these changes the fact that conservative Christian elites left the sidelines and the parties themselves began staking out different positions on these hotly debated but new-to-the-spotlight issues, and we have got a political environment that is ripe to affect everyday citizens. The question becomes, how?

The behaviors and strategies of leaders affected everyday decision-making

The agreed-upon narrative among social scientists throughout the 20th and into the 21st century is that Americans' religious identities, practices, and beliefs shape how they view and engage with politics. The explanation's staying power stems from how simple and obvious it appears to be. Religious beliefs and practices are thought to be handed down from generation to generation, and entire communities are built around the shared worldview. It is not an overstatement to say that these beliefs and values go so far as to affect prospects for eternal salvation. Considering the deeply held and highly personal nature of religious beliefs, it seemed almost unnecessary for academics and journalists to make the case that the statistical correlations between religious variables and political variables occurred because of the influence of the former on the latter. Most scholars therefore naturally assumed that the cues and messages about the religious-political environment described in the previous section afforded everyday citizens the opportunity to bring their partisan identities (whether Democratic or Republican) and vote choice in line with their deeply held religious beliefs and values.

The first scholars who looked at the reverse relationship—that political outlook might be shaping Americans' religious choices—came to the question when trying to understand the rising rates of religious nonidentification in the 1990s. Michael Hout and Claude Fischer found that the exodus from religion came mostly from political liberals and moderates.⁷ After ruling out various explanations for this pattern, Hout and Fischer were left with evidence of the politicized-religion hypothesis. Simply put, all the changes I laid out above set the stage for a close and visible relationship between religious conservatives and the Republican Party; and this relationship, in turn, served to push people on the political left out of organized religion. Decades of research has corroborated, expanded on, and added

⁷ Hout, Michael, and Claude S. Fischer. 2002. "Why More Americans Have No Religious Preference: Politics and Generations." *American Sociological Review* 67(2): 165–190.

nance to this initial core finding. Scholars have found that individuals' partisanship, ideology, and even evaluations of Donald Trump can help shape both Democrats' and Republicans' religious identifications, church membership, and attendance at religious services.⁸ The academic explanation for why this movement occurs is some combination of people (a) holding their partisan identities as a strong group attachment; and (b) not wanting to experience cognitive dissonance, meaning they do not want to be exposed to messages and ideas that conflict with their already existing views. The joint endeavors of political scientists and sociologists have convincingly shown that the political landscape can affect the American religious landscape, particularly as it relates to individuals' choices, such as whether to join a congregation, affix a label to themselves, and attend church.

The influence of politics on religion can be felt in ways that a public opinion survey cannot capture. I spent summer 2018 in Alabama observing religious services and Bible study classes as well as conducting interviews with a wide variety of individuals, including pastors, parishioners, and nonreligious people alike. One pastor told me that he received emails from church members and even received feedback from the church board to leave the "liberal propaganda" out of his sermons. His parishioners were upset that he brought politics into their religious home; they wanted the pastor to focus on the Bible and not use his pulpit to make extreme political statements. Frankly, I was surprised to hear this. Nothing up until this point in my conversation made me think that this man was a bleeding-heart liberal. In my head, I imagined the pastor giving a full-throated endorsement of Medicare for All or a screed about our foreign entanglements. The topic of the actual sermon was somehow both more banal and shocking: The Sermon on the Mount. For those unfamiliar, The Sermon on the Mount is found in the Book of Matthew and comprises teachings believed to be *spoken by Jesus Christ himself*. This pastor used Jesus's own words—in what is considered one of the most famous speeches in history—to craft a lesson of forgiveness, compassion, and caring for others. I asked if he applied the teachings to the political environment. Surely people were not upset by Jesus's own words; the pastor must have linked the lesson back to specific public policies or candidates. It turns out, the pastor did no such thing. The sermon was meant to teach his parishioners a fundamental teaching in Christianity, and in return he was accused of having a liberal agenda. I asked if this reaction affected his sermons and general approach moving forward. He said that if he continued to ruffle the

⁸ Campbell, David E., Geoffrey C. Layman, and John C. Green. 2020. *Secular Surge*. New York: Cambridge University Press. Djupe, Paul A., Jacob R. Neihsel, and Anand E. Sokhey. 2018. "Reconsidering the Role of Politics in Leaving Religion: The Importance of Affiliation." *American Journal of Political Science* 62(1): 161–175. Margolis, Michele F. 2018. *From Politics to the Pews*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

feathers of church leadership, he could be out of a job. While this pastor was hired to be a spiritual leader, he also had to follow the wishes of parishioners and church leaders: he could only lead to the extent that his flock would follow. Ultimately the pastor left his post in Alabama for another job in Virginia, which he said was a “better fit” for him.

While this anecdote is illustrative, it is not an isolated incident. Polarization surrounding Donald Trump has produced consequences for leaders in the evangelical world, among them long-time [journalists](#) and [editors](#) at evangelical news organizations losing their jobs due to their opposition to Donald Trump in 2016. The most high-profile case is the pushback that Albert Mohler, the president of the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention and one of the most visible White Evangelicals in America, received after he [criticized](#) Donald Trump throughout the 2016 election. Mohler spent part of 2017 on a sometimes-called “[apology tour](#)” trying to save his job, after many Southern Baptists took Mohler’s attacks on Donald Trump personally. The trouble Moore found himself in and the steps he had to take to stay on in his role makes plain how religious leaders of all types are constrained in the extent they can lead.

While I do not think there are any experts in this field—whether academics or journalists—who would say that religious beliefs and values have no effect on political decision-making, at this point there is ample evidence suggesting that a person’s political outlook can, and oftentimes does, influence religion in a variety of ways. This means that the previously described God gap is not just a product of people aligning their political views with their preexisting religious outlooks but also a product of people bringing their religious behaviors and views into alignment with their preexisting political outlooks. This helps explain why the gap is so large and monumentally consequential: it is self-reinforcing and therefore produces a tighter bond that is more difficult to break.

Our political-religious landscape was not inevitable

Does being a part of organized religion in the United States, by definition, go together with conservative outlooks and, by extension, Republican support? We only need to look at the Black Church to see that the answer is a definitive “no.” African Americans are more religiously devout than any other racial or ethnic group in the United States. At the same time, they represent a key Democratic constituency: the overwhelming majority of African Americans identify as Democrats. When the most

religious group in America is also the most steadfastly Democratic group, it means that this connection between the Republican Party and religion is not baked in but rather was constructed by actors.

Black Protestant theology is evangelical in its theological orientation, but the political messages coming from these churches are often tied to what we think of as liberal and Democratic policy positions. This is because the theology and Black and White churches often differ in messaging, tone, and emphasis. While people throw around the term “biblical literalist” with an ease that suggests it is an easy concept to understand, it is anything but. The Bible consists of complicated and translated text from multiple sources over a long period of time. Interpretations, by definition, are socially constructed. Indeed, passionate debates about biblical interpretations have existed for almost as long as the Bible itself. Black Protestant theology draws on its origins—the struggles of the oppressed and the need to correct injustices—when developing the lens through which it interprets the Bible. Seeing the Bible through this lens (as opposed to that of White evangelical theology, which emphasizes individual repentance and piety), does not preclude, and in fact may promote, deeply religious Black Americans from holding traditionally Democratic views on the issues of the day. Additionally, the Black Church not only has a long history of religious-based activism, but Democratic candidates have a long history of visiting Black churches when campaigning. In other words, for Black Americans there is no disconnect or dissonance between being a religiously devout person and a Democrat. That elite-level mixing of religion and politics that White Americans face is not necessarily experienced by Black Americans.

The Evangelical or Christian Left is not nearly as prominent or powerful as the storied Religious Right, but it exists. Social activism is a key tenet on Evangelical Left, with the goal of bringing about social change through action. I once asked the director of a D.C. consulting firm that does faith-based outreach on the political left how he feels about abortion. His answer was simple: “I don’t love the idea of abortion. But you know what happens when women have access to healthcare, and financial stability? When they feel secure? Abortion rates go down.” This person is not a pro-choice evangelical (although those exist as well); rather, he decided that by working to pass other policies that are consistent with his literal interpretation of the Christian Bible, abortion rates would also decrease. This line of thinking, believing, and activism naturally links biblical teachings with the political left.

The relationship between the Republican Party and religious conservatism may feel set in stone. And perhaps it is so for all practical purposes. But at its core, the connection is socially constructed.

A house divided, an addendum

A common interpretation of the God gap is that the Republican Party is the home of the godly and the Democratic Party is the home of the godless. And there is some truth to that. More (less) religious White Americans are more likely to be Republicans (Democrats) than their less (more) religious White counterparts. In fact, this is how I opened the piece. But many incorrectly interpret this finding to mean that the Democratic Party is filled solely with secularists or people who hate religion, and this is simply not the case. While the religiously unaffiliated congregate in the Democratic camp, [Pew](#) estimates that about 28% of Democratic identifiers are “nones.” The remaining 72%—an overwhelming majority—identify with a religious faith, with nearly two-thirds of Democrats identifying as some sort of Christian. Twelve percent of the Democratic camp is made up of Black Protestants, who I previously noted are extremely devout. Additionally, while the rate of religious nonidentification has exploded over time, self-reported identification as an atheist remains quite [low](#) (approximately 4–5%) and [most religious nonidentifiers](#) believe in God or a higher power. The Republican Party, on the other hand, is overwhelmingly Christian, with 82% of Republican identifiers belonging to a White Christian faith. It would therefore be incorrect to say that the Democratic Party is the party of secularism, even though it is where the most secular people situate themselves. Instead, it is more appropriate to think about the Democratic Party as a big religious tent, ranging from the most secular to the most devout, whereas the Republican Party may be considered more religiously homogenous.

What does it mean to have a religiously sorted country?

Having described the current religious-political landscape and discussed the ways in which we ended up in the current situation, I next consider the consequences for the current religious and political environments, both separately and together.

1. **There are asymmetric opportunities for developing political skills.** Participating in organized groups can help develop civic skills, and research has shown that churches can provide these

opportunities.⁹ By taking on lay leadership roles in which they find themselves speaking in public, writing, and making decisions that have community-wide consequences, individuals are honing transferable skills that can be used in the political arena. People can learn these skills elsewhere; however, the usual structure of a religious organization—which relies on members donating time and energy to ensure the health of the organization—makes the religious organization by far the most common type of organization in which people can develop these tools.

2. **The Republican Party has a doubly captive audience.** Frequent churchgoers are not simply hearing messages that may encourage support for Republican candidates, but they are attending their chosen church *because* of their support for Republican candidates. This cycle serves to strengthen the relationship between religious identities, behaviors, and beliefs with political identities and vote choice. It also means that the Republican Party has a better chance of mobilizing its supporters through religious networks. The party organizers have a direct line to reach potential voters and likely supporters through churches. On the other hand, there is no evidence to suggest that nonreligious Democrats have substituted religion for something else that is communal and identity-affirming. Democrats are less religious than Republicans, but they are not avowed atheists and very few are involved in organizations that promote secular values.¹⁰ In other words, while Republican political elites have a straightforward way to directly reach potential voters, Democratic political elites must contend with the fact that their supporters are not in a single place three days before Election Day.
3. **There is less opportunity for cross-party dialoguing.** Once political views affect religious decision-making, we are left having more siloed conversations with people who see the world through a similar lens. My colleagues at the University of Pennsylvania have shown the problems with such an outcome. Diana Mutz has written about the importance of speaking with people who are politically dissimilar to oneself. Mutz has shown that cross-party conversations legitimize alternative viewpoints and increase political tolerance.¹¹ Additionally, Matt Levendusky and Dominik Stecula spent a year organizing opportunities for cross-party dialoguing. These 15-minute in-person conversations reduced partisan animosity, not only when measured immediately

⁹ Verba, Sidney, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady. 1995. *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Djupe, Paul A., and Christopher P. Gilbert. 2008. *The Political Influence of Churches*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁰ Campbell, David E., Geoffrey C. Layman, and John C. Green. 2020. *Secular Surge*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

¹¹ 2002. “Cross-Cutting Social Networks: Testing Democratic Theory in Practice.” *American Political Science Review*. 96(1): 111–126.

following the conversation but even a week after the conversation.¹² When Americans select into or out of religious congregations and communities on account of their political outlooks, they are limiting their exposure to conversations with people who are dissimilar. In other words, people are creating echo chambers in which they only speak to people in places where they are going to hear similar ideas echoed back. In doing so, people do not exercise the civility muscles that are needed when talking to people who hold different views.

I would go so far as to say that the problem is not merely about the need for cross-cutting political conversations but also about regular everyday interactions. The social and communal aspects of religious congregations provide opportunities for people who may disagree politically to come together in a variety of affirming and positive ways. Creating a general feeling of like and trust with someone a person may disagree with politically helps transcend the growing strains that politics has put on our personal relationships. And, in fact, research backs up this intuition. Echo chambers help produce affective polarization—the political phenomenon in which people like and trust members of their own party and dislike and distrust members of the out party.¹³ Getting out of the echo chamber seems to be a necessary precursor to reducing inter-party animosity and tensions.

4. **Organized religion reflects, rather than leads, on opinions.** This statement, which may feel like I am taking a controversial stand, is nothing new. America’s religious landscape is premised on the marketplace of religion, with religions changing and updating since the country’s founding. Since the colonial era, America has been giving its residents options for worship, with religious entrepreneurs attempting to appeal to the masses with different messages, oratory styles, and religious teachings.¹⁴ And, in fact, the Baptist denomination split over a key issue in 1845: slavery. In other words, the 21st century is not the first time political, social, and moral questions have affected the religious landscape. But the current religious-political landscape reminds us that religion serves the people and only exists if people “buy” what a particular congregation or movement is “selling.”

¹² 2021. *We Need to Talk: How Cross-Party Dialogue Reduces Affective Polarization*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

¹³ Hobolt, Sara B., Katharina Lawall, and James Tilley. Forthcoming. “The Polarizing Effect of Partisan Echo Chambers.” *American Political Science Review*.

¹⁴ Smith, Mark A. 2015. *Secular Faith: How Culture has Trumped Religion in American Politics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

5. Psychological forces make it hard to undo these connections. While cross-party dialogue and meaningful interactions with people who are politically dissimilar seems to be the way to lower the political temperature among average Americans, this will ultimately require people feeling comfortable with discomfort. And psychological research tells us that human beings prefer comfort over discomfort, cognitive consonance over dissonance, making these opportunities difficult to come by.

Democratic renewal will take a concerted effort. Americans have not only aligned their political views with their religious views, but they have done the reverse as well. This was done against a backdrop when ever-evolving social and moral issues—things that are reasonably thought of as being within religion’s purview—have been and continue to be hot political issues. This creates a pair of sticky, self-reinforcing identities that can together limit opportunities for building connections with people who differ demographically, socially, and politically. As we move into and beyond the 2024 election, we must try to overcome the conversational hurdles we have created for ourselves in the hopes that we can see each other as more than an “other.”

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