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978-1-107-08844-3 - Godless Democrats and Pious Republicans?: Party Activists, Party Capture, and the “God Gap”

Ryan L. Claassen

Excerpt

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## Introduction

President Obama used his health care plan to declare *war on religion*.

– Televised Campaign Advertisement for Mitt Romney, Republican presidential candidate, 8/9/2012

I understand that there’s a *war against religion* and I am prepared to actually fight back.

– Newt Gingrich, Candidate in the Republican presidential primary, *Time*, 1/30/2012

As president, I’ll end Obama’s *war on religion*.

– Rick Perry, Candidate in the Republican presidential primary, Televised Campaign Advertisement, 12/6/2011

The most offensive instance of this *war on religion* has been the current Administration’s attempt to compel faith-related institutions, as well as believing individuals, to contravene their deeply held religious, moral, or ethical beliefs regarding health services, traditional marriage, or abortion.

– Republican Platform, 2012

The media routinely frame policy debates as battles between Secular Democrats and religious Republicans.<sup>1</sup> Religion and politics scholars describe growing partisan divisions between religious and nonreligious people as a “God gap” in American politics. And political campaigns indulge in bellicose rhetoric, even alleging that one party has declared a “war on religion.” Combined, these forces fuel a false conventional wisdom that has the Democratic Party captured by Secular activists (e.g., campaign donors and volunteers) and the Republican Party captured by Evangelical activists. Never mind that many Democrats

<sup>1</sup> I use the term “Secular” to denote survey respondents that do not indicate any association with an organized religion, but I want to be careful not to imply this group is irreligious.

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believe in God, attend religious services, formally belong to places of worship, tithe, and pray. Never mind that many Republicans do not. Obvious religious diversity among Democrats and Republicans fails to undermine the “capture” narrative precisely because “capture” implies that those wielding influence in partisan politics do not represent rank-and-file partisans. Political activism is relatively rare and so, in theory, Evangelical and Secular activists could outmobilize other groups and wield influence out of proportion with their numbers. Is the “war on religion” plank in the Republican platform emblematic of outsized influence of Evangelical activists? Have Secular activists “captured” the Democratic Party and declared “war on religion?” These are important questions and this book undertakes a careful investigation of the changing religious composition of partisan activists in order to assess how religious and nonreligious groups are represented in party politics.

Doing so reveals that the capture narrative has *some* basis in reality. Recent decades have witnessed a rising tide of Evangelical political activists on the right and a rising tide of Secular political activists on the left. However, the analyses also reveal reasons the capture narrative is misleading when it comes to understanding the role of religion in American politics. Evangelical Republican activists and Secular Democratic activists *are more* influential than in the 1960s, but they *did not outmobilize* other groups. Ralph Reed and Karl Rove had very little to do with the rise of the Evangelical Republican activists. On the contrary, birth rates and high levels of intergenerational retention among Evangelical churches deserve most of the credit. There are simply more Evangelicals in society now and the Republican activist pool reflects this demographic reality. So, too, incidentally, does the Democratic activist pool. There are more Evangelical Democratic activists now, compared to the 1960s, contrary to rumors the Democrats have been captured by Seculars. Likewise, mobilization fueled by a backlash against the association of religion and conservative politics has very little to do with the rise of Secular Democratic activists. Again, a demographic trend in society fueled by population growth and improved intergenerational retention among the “nones” (those that do not profess an association with organized religion) deserves most of the credit. In short, the groups implicated in the capture narrative did not outmobilize other groups and, as a consequence, the influence they wield is not “outsized” as the capture narrative alleges.

Related, “capture” also implies the activist pools are now less representative than they were in the past. Again the evidence does not square with the capture narrative. True, there are more Evangelical Republican activists and more Secular Democratic activists, but the correspondence between their numbers in the Republican and Democratic electorates and their numbers in the Republican and Democratic activist pools is about as good now as it was in the 1960s. And neither group is anywhere near 100 percent in either activist pool. For those worried about the implications of capture for democratic society, this book provides some reassurances. Secular Democrats’ and Evangelical

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Republicans’ influence is not outsized, nor is it anywhere near absolute. Furthermore, because the composition of the activist pools represents very basic shifts in society, the slow pace of those shifts and the fact that demographic trends, such as birth and marriage rates, are equalizing across religious and nonreligious groups indicates we are not careening toward a time when the Seculars and the Evangelicals wield absolute control over opposing parties.

All of this suggests a need to look beyond mobilization when it comes to understanding change in the activist pools. The changing composition of the partisan activist pools *represents* changes in society and within the partisan electorates. Prior work assumes change in the activist pools is a result of mobilization and raises the specter of capture and misrepresentation. This book introduces a new paradigm for understanding change in the activist pools, the *representation-based model*. Rather than assume the rise of Evangelical activists is a function of mobilization by Christian Right organizations (e.g., the Christian Right Thesis) and that the rise of Secular activists is a function of mobilization fueled by angst over the association of religion and conservative politics (e.g., the Secular Backlash Thesis), the representation-based model carefully considers a wide range of trends that could alter the composition of the partisan activist pools. In addition to mobilization, the representation-based model investigates whether basic changes in the religious composition of society and voting patterns also affect the composition of the activist pools. Viewed through the lens of this new paradigm, basic demographic forces matter far more and mobilization matters far less. The representation-based model demonstrates the forces that shape the activist pools reinforce representative linkages and make it difficult for a group to capture a major political party. Even for groups with powerful, shared belief systems and strong institutional and social connections – such as religious groups – overcoming the powerful forces that reinforce representation is extraordinarily difficult. Accordingly, the representation-based model reveals that religion is not a means of hijacking democratic politics. When evaluated through the lens of the representation-based model, the role of religion shaping the activist pools – and in American politics more generally – is to help people connect their values, attitudes, and beliefs to their political world. Partisan politics, in turn, gives voice to those values, attitudes, and beliefs, just as representative democracy demands. This book provides a new way of thinking about the way religion shapes partisan politics and arrives at a very different view of the religious divide in American politics as a consequence.

**The Perceived Religious Divide**

Although this book is quite reassuring when it comes to understanding the role of religion in partisan politics (e.g., religion is reinforcing, not undermining, representative democracy), the persistence of a conventional wisdom that has the Democrats captured by Seculars and the Republicans captured by

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Evangelicals is not reassuring. This conventional wisdom asserts itself frequently because several important national issues involve morality politics, or policy debates in which one party claims to represent the moral or religious position:

- Abortion
- Gay marriage
- Homosexuals serving in the military
- Public funding for stem cell research
- Public education and teaching the theory of evolution
- School prayer
- Public displays of *The Ten Commandments*

Accordingly, one need not look far for examples of media reporting on political events through the lens of “captured” parties. The analyses in this book demonstrate, empirically, that the parties are not captured; however, if voters *perceive* one party as representing the values of people of faith and the other party as hostile to those values, misperception may make “capture” a self-perpetuating reality. This would be a real tragedy because, at this writing, people of faith populate both parties. At this writing, the religious divide in politics is not between the Godless and the pious. And it bears emphasizing that, for some, religion *is* a force for political liberalism (Wallis 1995; 2005; 2008; 2013). For some, the connections between liberal theology (e.g., social justice) and liberal politics are strengthened by attending religious services.

Why is this point lost in scholarship that shows decreasing religiosity among Democrats and increasing religiosity among Republicans, or a widening God gap (Green 2007; 2010a; 2010b; Olson and Green 2006; Olson and Warber 2008; Smidt et al. 2010)? The phrase “God gap” implies that God is on only one side of partisan politics and the notion that one party increasingly represents people of faith suggests religion moves people in a uniform political direction. If a God gap begins with religious and nonreligious activists exercising influence in opposing parties, the logical conclusion has religious voters supporting the party shaped by religious activists and Secular voters supporting the party shaped by Secular activists. Describing a potential future scenario, John C. Green writes:

[I]magine that weekly attenders voted even more strongly for Republican candidates and the less observant voted even more strongly Democratic. . . . If such a trend persisted for long enough, religious tradition would cease to matter in politics. This scenario has been suggested by James Davidson Hunter, the chief advocate of the “culture wars” thesis. . . . Judging from the consternation provoked by the New Religion Gap in 2004, this scenario would not please many observers. After all, it conjures up the specter of the various theocracies around the world, not to mention the religious wars in history. (Green, 2007, 173–4)

True, Green goes on to describe the above scenario as very unlikely, but when the rhetoric of political leaders makes it appear “as if” a real war on

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religion is imminent, that deplorable possibility becomes more likely. How bad is the rhetoric? A major element of the 2012 U.S. presidential election involved allegations of a Democratic “war on religion.” Most of the Republican candidates accused the Democrats of waging a war on religion at some point during the Republican Primary, and the eventual nominee, Mitt Romney, continued to use the “war on religion” theme in the general election campaign. The phrase, “war on religion” was *even* – for the first time ever – enshrined in the Republican Platform. Viewed very narrowly allegations of a “war on religion,” and morality politics more generally, concern policy decisions that make it difficult for people of faith to follow their consciences. Technically, the rhetoric alleges hostility, not Godlessness, on the Democratic side. However, it is extraordinarily difficult to respect the religious beliefs of a group while accusing the group of waging a “war on religion.”

Thus, although it is theoretically possible for the perpetrators of a war on religion to be religious, the rhetoric also implies Godlessness among Democrats – as does the scholarly label “God gap.” Rick Santorum, intentionally or unintentionally, raised questions about Obama’s faith when he said of the president’s agenda, “It’s about some phony ideal, some phony theology. Oh, not a theology based on the Bible, a different theology, but no less a theology” (Oppel, *New York Times*, 2/18/2012). The same *New York Times* article went on to say:

Assertions that Mr. Obama is not a Christian, or that he is not an American, were rampant in the 2008 campaign. It got so bad at one point – in the opinion of the Republican nominee, John McCain – that Mr. McCain took back the microphone from a woman at one of his rallies who asserted that Mr. Obama was “an Arab.” Mr. McCain then corrected the woman. This year, Mr. Santorum has passed up similar opportunities to correct misstatements about the president’s background. Last month, a woman at one of Mr. Santorum’s campaign stops in Florida declared during a question-and-answer session that Mr. Obama was Muslim. According to an account by CNN, Mr. Santorum did not correct the woman’s statement, and he later said it was not his job to correct such statements.

There is no debating the effect of the “war on religion” rhetoric regarding doubts about Obama’s faith. A PEW survey fielded in July 2012 found a majority of registered voters failed to identify Obama’s religion correctly as “Christian.” In a Gallup poll fielded in June 2012, only 34 percent correctly identified Obama’s religion as “Christian.” Dick Durbin, the Democratic Senator from Illinois, was so disturbed by media coverage of the debate at the 2012 Democratic National Convention over whether the word “God” would remain in the Democratic Platform that he said in a Fox interview with anchor Bret Baier:

Those of us who believe in God and those of us who have dedicated our lives to helping others in the name of God don’t want to take a second seat to anyone who is suggesting that one word out of the platform means the Democrats across America are *Godless*. (*FoxNews Special Report with Bret Baier* interview, 9/4/2012, emphasis added)

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Dick Durban felt compelled to remind Americans that Democrats are not Godless because pundits and political elites framed the debate as evidence of Godlessness among Democrats. Lauren Markoe wrote in the *Washington Post*, “The word ‘God’ is nowhere to be found in the Democratic national platform this year, an omission Republicans have seized upon as a failure of their opponents to appreciate the divine’s place in American history” (Markoe 9/5/2012). CNN contributor Erick Erickson wrote on the RedState blog, “If booing God and his holy city is a part of the Democratic Convention happening in this universe, I’ll take the alternative universe Bill Clinton said the GOP lives in” (Erickson 9/6/2012). Eventually the word “God” was restored to the platform, but a frenzy of media reporting ensued because the story fit perfectly within the frame of “Godless Democrats vs. Pious Republicans.”

Liberal pundits and Democratic elites are no better when it comes to exploiting the idea of pious Republicans. In the wake of the Republican House takeover in 2010 and a skirmish among Republicans to chair the House Energy and Commerce Committee, the *Washington Post* reported claims by John Shimkus (Nineteenth District of Illinois) that “we don’t have to worry about global warming because God promised not to destroy the Earth” (Stromberg 2010). Again, despite the fact that Shimkus and other contenders for the leadership position articulated alternative arguments that had nothing to do with piousness, such as preferring to allow the free market to regulate pollution, pundits and Democratic elites rushed to report the silliness of quoting Genesis to refute evidence of global warming. Bill Maher went even farther, insinuating that all Republicans approached politics in the same pious way:

What I want to talk about is how it’s not a coincidence that the party of fundamentalism is also the party of fantasy. . . . Evangelicals might like to pretend that the magical thinking that they indulge in at home doesn’t affect what they do at the office, but it absolutely does. . . . Republicans would like to pretend like Congressman Akin’s substitution of superstition for science is a lone problem but it’s not: they’re all magical thinkers, on nearly every issue. They don’t get their answers on climate change from climatologists, they get them from the Book of Genesis. (quoted in *The Huffington Post*, 12/18/13)

The public are led to believe that the fault line in American politics is between the Godless and the pious. If that were the case, it would be cause for normative concern about the health of American democracy. Accordingly a rigorous examination of the religious divide in American politics is needed. This book provides an empirical look through the prism of understanding the changing religious affiliations of partisan activists. A careful study of the religious affiliations of Democratic and Republican activists will help illuminate just how godless and pious, respectively, Democrats and Republicans are. This is accomplished using American National Election Studies survey data (ANES) to compare the religious affiliations of Republican and Democratic campaign activists in the early 1960s to their affiliations in 2008.

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Although it is true that the religious affiliations of campaign activists are very different now than in the 1960s, neither party is “captured” in an absolute or even in a majoritarian sense. Still, major composition changes in the activist pools of each party are identified, and this book also seeks to explain those composition changes. Putting the lie to the myth of Godless Democrats and Pious Republicans is simple, understanding why more Republican activists are Evangelicals now than in the 1960s – and why more Democratic activists are Seculars now than in the 1960s – is more complicated. The approach taken in this book, the representation-based model, reveals that basic societal demographics, voting patterns, and mobilization jointly reverberate in the changing composition of the activist pools.

The implications of a representation-based approach to understanding the forces behind composition changes among activists are far-reaching. When mobilization alone shapes changes in activist pools, a small group can “capture” a major party because so few are campaign activists. In contrast with the undemocratic implications of mobilization-centric approaches such as the Christian Right Thesis and the Secular Backlash Thesis, the representation-based approach highlights other forces that tend to reinforce linkages between partisan activist pools and partisan electorates. The representation-based model provides unprecedented information about the reasons recent decades witnessed a rising tide of Evangelical political activists on the right and a rising tide of Secular political activists on the left. These trends have been badly misunderstood and the undemocratic implications of a “Culture War” perpetrated by recently mobilized religious and Secular extremists are misleading when it comes to understanding religious divisions in modern American politics.

**Plan of the Book and Conclusion**

Chapter 1 begins by engaging the scholarly work that brought the growing God gap in American politics to light and provides an initial empirical look into the changing religious affiliations of party activists using ANES data spanning 1960–2008. As mentioned earlier, neither party’s activist pool is accurately characterized as captured, but there is an element of truth in the capture narrative insofar as the groups implicated are present in much larger numbers now than in the early 1960s. Although the trends associated with the capture narrative, the God gap, and the culture war, are real, the implications depend upon how one views the underlying causal mechanisms. As Chapter 1 examines the scholarly roots of the God gap, important questions are raised about the Christian Right Thesis and the Secular Backlash Thesis, which attribute recent political trends to Christian Right mobilization efforts and a backlash among Seculars.

Having established the need for additional research by introducing and questioning the causal mechanisms behind a growing God gap in Chapter 1,

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the second chapter discusses the connections between mobilization, captured activist pools, and the God gap in greater detail. Chapter 2 also demonstrates that prior work generally assumes, rather than investigates, that mobilization is the driving force behind the rise of Evangelical Republican and Secular Democratic activists. And, to remedy the situation, a new framework for examining the mobilization assumption within the broader context of understanding the forces that generate change in the activist pools is introduced. This new framework, the representation-based model, is developed more formally in Chapter 3. Specifically an equation encapsulating the representation-based model is derived which shows that changes in the activist pools are a function of (1) demographic changes in society, (2) changes in the rates of voter turnout in each religious group, (3) changes in partisan loyalty within each religious group, and (4) changes in rates of party activism within each religious group.

Having laid the groundwork for an original representation-based model of composition changes among partisan activists, Chapter 4 is about the first of the four forces that shape composition changes in the activist pools, basic demographic changes in the American religious landscape. There have been dramatic shifts in the distribution of religious traditions in the mass public for several religious groups and for Seculars (e.g., Putnam and Campbell 2010; Wuthnow 2007). There has been dramatic growth in the percentage of the public associated with the Evangelical tradition, dramatic declines in the percentage of the public associated with Mainline traditions, and dramatic growth in the percentage of the public not associated with any form of organized religion (Seculars). The method discussed in Chapter 3 is used to build an easy to follow counterfactual analysis: What would each party’s activist pool look like in 2008 if basic demographic changes were the only force working on the 1960 distributions of religious tradition among partisan activists? In other words, how much change would demographics produce, *ceteris paribus*? The answer is that the lion’s share of temporal change in the composition of the activist pools can be attributed to basic demographic changes in society. The implications for understanding recent political events are profound and discussed in detail.

Chapter 5 investigates the role of voter turnout shaping changes in the partisan activist pools, Chapter 6 investigates the role of partisan voting loyalty shaping changes in the partisan activist pools, and Chapter 7 investigates the role of campaign activism shaping changes in the partisan activist pools. In each of these chapters, the method developed in Chapter 3 is used to motivate counterfactual analyses analogous to the one done in Chapter 4. Although Chapter 4 throws a bit of cold water on mobilization-centric approaches such as the Christian Right Thesis and the Secular Backlash Thesis, subsequent chapters are more supportive as mobilization and partisan loyalty are explored. Still, even when the trends support the theses, the motivations behind the trends often do not.

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Chapter 8 shifts from assessing the sources of composition change in the activist pools to revisit the consequences. The mobilization-centric approaches suggest that composition changes in the activist pools will lead to divergence from the composition of partisan electorates and distortion of the opinions of rank and file partisans. The representation-based approach, in contrast, does not anticipate divergence and distortion. Chapter 8 compares the partisan activist pools to the partisan electorates on the relevant dimensions and finds additional evidence in support of the representation-based approach.

Still, although divergence and distortion are not in evidence, composition and opinion changes are. Representativeness notwithstanding, trends seem to indicate that religiosity (a dimension of religious *traditionalism* usually measured by worship attendance) has replaced religious *tradition* as the driving force connecting religion and politics. Accordingly, Chapter 8 also undertakes a careful examination of the role of worship attendance. Attendance trends prove to be unrelated to political trends, but changes in the distribution of the religious traditions in the United States and in the partisan preferences of members of those traditions prove highly relevant. The rise of the “nones” is especially important and much of the God gap is an artifact of nonattendance among Seculars and strong (but mostly consistent) Democratic proclivities. And although the *effect* of attendance shaping political behavior also appears to increase in the electorate and among activists, the increased effect is shown to be spurious for similar reasons. Future work cannot assume religious tradition no longer matters because the “New Gap” (e.g., traditionalism, typically measured as worship attendance) is uninformative – if not misleading – when it comes to explaining political differences among the vast majority of Americans that *are* associated with organized religion.

Once one recognizes that the God gap is a function of those that never attend religious services, questions emerge regarding the political effects of attendance more generally. Does attendance inspire political conservatism (Green 2007; Green, Guth, and Fraser 1991; Cook, Jelen, and Wilcox 1992; Guth and Green 1993; Layman 1997; Layman 2001; Sherkat and Ellison 1997) or is the effect of attendance conditional, with religious observance making liberals more Democratic and conservatives more Republican (Kellstedt, Smidt, and Kellstedt 1991; Wald, Owen and Hill 1988; 1990; Wald, Kellstedt, and Legee 1993; Welch et al. 1993)? The results strongly support the latter view, that attendance has different political effects for individuals with different political proclivities. Again, the implications are reassuring when it comes to assessing the role of religion in politics. Religion is not an unrelenting force for political conservatism as the God gap label implies. On the contrary, religion appears to help individuals make important connections between their political predispositions and the political world they inhabit.

The spuriousness of the God gap and the conditional effect of worship attendance have major implications for future work exploring the role of

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religion in politics. The final chapter applies the lessons of the previous chapters and discusses the implications of having a detailed knowledge of the forces that have shaped the religious affiliations of partisan activists. A focus on the extremes of religious observance can obscure important features of the religious and political landscape. More broadly, the representation-based model reveals that basic social forces play a much larger role shaping the activist pools than previously recognized. Although this study confirms several empirical trends associated with a simmering “Culture War,” many of the trends are shown to be the inevitable result of democratic representation. On the one hand, shifts in the religious composition of the partisan coalitions appear to support Hunter’s (1991) thesis. On the other hand, culture war and God gap accounts misinterpret the causal mechanisms behind religious and political trends. Democratic representation both demands partisan change and places meaningful constraints on a system Hunter characterizes as careening toward clashing religious and Secular extremes. Scholarship investigating the social psychology of procedural justice suggests that the difference between representation and capture is incredibly important:

Recent research suggests that the key aspect of authorities and institutions that shapes their legitimacy and, through it, the willingness of people to defer to the decisions of authorities and to the rules created by institutions is the fairness of the procedures through which institutions and authorities exercise authority. This procedural justice effect on legitimacy is found to be widespread and robust and occurs in legal, political, and managerial settings. (Tyler 2006, 382)

If change in the political system is seen as capture and misrepresentation, then society may view the political process as unfair and the outcome of political competition as illegitimate. The representation-based approach highlights the invisible hand of representation and reveals that the Godless and the pious are not the only interests being represented. Also, if recognized, representation would be perceived as fair. Accordingly, correcting the perception that religious and Secular groups outmobilized others is every bit as important as developing a deeper understanding of the forces that shape activist pools and reinforce representation.