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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

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## **Godless Democrats and Pious Republicans?**

*Party Activists, Party Capture, and the “God Gap”*

Do Evangelical activists control the Republican Party? Do Secular activists control the Democratic Party? In *Godless Democrats and Pious Republicans*, Ryan Claassen carefully assesses the way campaign activists represent religious and nonreligious groups in American political parties dating back to the 1960s. By providing a new theoretical framework for investigating the connections between macro social and political trends, the results challenge a conventional wisdom in which recently mobilized religious and Secular extremists captured the parties and created a God gap.

The new approach reveals that very basic social and demographic trends matter far more than previously recognized and that mobilization matters far less. The God gap in voting is real, but it was not created by Christian Right mobilization efforts and a Secular backlash. Where others see culture wars and captured parties, Claassen finds many religious divisions in American politics are artifacts of basic social changes. This very basic insight leads to many profoundly different conclusions about the motivations of religious and nonreligious activists and voters.

Ryan L. Claassen is Associate Professor of Political Science at Kent State University. His research investigates political engagement – especially the role of engagement shaping the capacity of individuals and groups of individuals in the American public to effectively contribute to public opinion and compete democratically. His work has appeared in *American Politics Research*, the *Journal of Politics*, *Political Behavior*, *Political Research Quarterly*, and *Public Opinion Quarterly*.

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RYAN L. CLAASSEN

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*To Amy, Grace, and Amelia*

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## Acknowledgments

This book owes many intellectual debts to both mainstream American politics research and research in the field of religion and politics. A burgeoning literature investigating political polarization has created areas of mutual interest for scholars in both fields. Mainstream American politics scholars investigating polarization found a likely causal mechanism in the theory that America was undergoing a culture war. Religion and politics scholars documenting trends in the politics of religious people found, in the polarization literature, a way of problematizing key findings. As a result of vigorous research in both these fields, a great deal is known about the contours of religious divisions in American politics. Political activism fueled by Christian Right organizations and a backlash against the association of religion and conservative politics are thought to be the driving forces behind the growing importance of values voters within the Republican coalition and the growing importance of Secular voters within the Democratic coalition. As such, the religious divide within modern American politics is now described as a “God gap” – the implication being that, where religious Americans were once divided by politics, politics now divides religious people from those that are not religious. However, neither mainstream American politics research nor research within the subfield of religion and politics have questioned the assumption that political activists are the driving force behind the major trends. The rise of religious activists on the right and the rise of Secular activists on the left are well documented. Likewise, the efforts of Christian Right organizations are well documented. But no systematic research investigates alternative explanations.

For example, what if the rate of campaign activism among Evangelicals and Seculars has not changed much over time, but the size of these groups has? Could very basic demographic realities, such as intergenerational retention and birth rates, lie at the heart of trends attributed to warring Christian and Secular activists? Building on the excellent foundations that others have laid

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within the American politics and the religion and politics research traditions, I develop a new theoretical and empirical framework for understanding the rise of religious activists on the right and the rise of Secular activists on the left. In the main, this book investigates the theory that changes among partisan activists represent basic social and political changes. Accordingly, where others see captured parties, I find evidence the parties' activist pools represent their respective electorates well. Where others see culture wars, I find evidence that many religious divisions in American politics are artifacts of basic social changes. And where others see a God gap, I find evidence that religion still matters on both sides of the partisan aisle.

In addition to these intellectual debts, I also owe many personal debts of gratitude. This book has been my constant companion for most of my life, even if I did not realize it until recently. I learned some important lessons listening to my parents, Ron and Roxanne Claassen, as they discussed Carter's loss to Reagan in 1980 (when I was eight years old), and I learned a lot participating in vigorous debates about politics during Sunday School and over potluck meals in the Mennonite church where I grew up in Fresno, California. I also learned a lot about both my faith and the world in which I live while at Goshen College in Indiana, a small liberal arts college owned and operated by the Mennonite church. My advisor there, John D. Roth, ignited in me an appreciation for scholarly inquiry and mentored me as I explored the political world – even though his own theological views suggested nonparticipation in politics. He takes nothing for granted, including the normative virtue of civic participation. His careful consideration of religion and politics continues to inspire me to be rigorous in my own thinking. My spouse, Amy Gingerich, helped me to recognize that I had this book in me and her personal and professional devotion to the Mennonite church have also shaped my views about religion and politics in many ways. And I must mention the idyllic setting in which most of this book was penned, Bass Lake, California, and my gratitude to my grandparents, Glen and Helen Harvin, for a lifetime of great experiences at their family cabin.

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