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David E. Campbell, Geoffrey C. Layman, John C. Green
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Secular Surge

American society is rapidly secularizing – a radical departure from its historically high level of religiosity – and politics is a big part of the reason. Just as, forty years ago, the Religious Right arose as a new political movement, today secularism is gaining traction as a distinct and politically energized identity. This book examines the political causes and political consequences of this secular surge, drawing on a wealth of original data. The authors show that secular identity is in part a reaction to the Religious Right. However, while the political impact of secularism is profound, there may not yet be a Secular Left to counterbalance the Religious Right. Secularism has introduced new tensions within the Democratic Party while adding oxygen to political polarization between Democrats and Republicans. Still, there may be opportunities to reach common ground if politicians seek to forge coalitions that encompass both secular and religious Americans.

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Secular Surge

A New Fault Line in American Politics

DAVID E. CAMPBELL

University of Notre Dame

GEOFFREY C. LAYMAN

University of Notre Dame

JOHN C. GREEN

University of Akron



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David Campbell:

To Kirsten, Katie, and Soren

Geoffrey Layman:

To Amy, Caroline, Grace, and Kate

John Green:

To Lynn Green, Brendan Green, and Darcy Lutz

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Preface

Students of the politics of personal beliefs – religious and secular – operate in an uncertain time frame. Dramatic changes regularly loom large in the short run, but have little lasting impact, while changes modest in the moment often have consequences years hence. One of your authors (Green) remembers researching the politics of the New Christian Right circa 1980 with colleague James Guth. Guth and Green reminded each other: “we need to work fast because everybody knows these things don’t last.” Forty years later, Christian conservatives are a staple of national politics. Similarly, the New Christian Right was deeply worried about the progressive politics of “secular humanists,” a fear ridiculed by nearly everybody. Forty years on, this book is about the politics of Secularists – humanist and otherwise. Perhaps ironically, our analysis suggests that it is the stridency of the New Christian Right over those forty years that has accelerated the emergence of Secularists as a political force to be reckoned with. While we are no more prescient than anybody else, we suspect that, like the New Christian Right, secular progressives will matter for decades to come.

Many of the details of our analysis, as well as documentation of the survey instruments we have employed, are available in an online appendix. Readers interested in consulting the online appendix will find it at secularsurge.com.

Acknowledgments

Our study of the secular surge has spanned a decade, during which time we have collected a lot of data, delivered many lectures, written numerous papers, and revised countless drafts. Along the way, we have had cause to be grateful to many organizations and individuals.

This work began with a grant from the National Science Foundation, a reminder that federal funding plays a vital role in supporting political science research.¹ We are grateful to the NSF – its program officers and reviewers – for investing in what was then a nascent idea.

We also thank the American Humanist Association, particularly executive director Roy Speckhardt, for allowing us to survey the AHA membership. We particularly appreciate the many colleagues who worked with two of us (Green and Layman) to both fund and conduct the surveys of 2016 state and national party convention delegates that play a key role in our chapters on secularism and party politics. Our colleagues on the survey of national convention delegates – the latest iteration of the Convention Delegate Study series of national delegate surveys begun by Warren Miller, Kent Jennings, and their colleagues in 1972 – were Mark Brockway of Syracuse University, Kimberly Conger of the University of Cincinnati, Rosalyn Cooperman of the University of Mary Washington, Richard Herrera of Arizona State University, Ozan Kalkan of Eastern Kentucky University, and Gregory Shufeldt of Butler University. On the survey of state convention delegates, Green, Layman, and Mark Brockway were joined by Rachel Blum of Miami University (Ohio) and Hans Noel of Georgetown University. In addition to funding from the universities of our colleagues, we received funding for these delegate surveys from the Ray C. Bliss Institute of Applied Politics at the University of Akron and from the

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Institute for Scholarship in the Liberal Arts and the Rooney Center for the Study of American Democracy at the University of Notre Dame.

We have also benefitted from the work of multiple research assistants. At Notre Dame, they include Mark Brockway, Maura Bailey, Jeremy Castle, Patrick Schoettmer, and Nate Sumaktoyo. At the University of Akron, the students and staff of the Bliss Institute have been instrumental, especially Janet Bolois and Jenni Fitzgerald.

We are grateful to the pastors and congregation of Christ the King Lutheran Church in South Bend, Indiana for allowing us to take the photos for our “Clerical Campaign Experiment” on their campus, and to Todd Adkins and Dan Hubert for superbly portraying our two candidates in that experiment. We owe Jennifer Smith a debt of gratitude for creating the news stories we used in that and various other experiments.

In the course of this project, each of us has “road tested” our ideas and analysis in talks given to a wide variety of audiences. A partial list includes panels at the annual meetings of the American Political Science Association and Midwest Political Science Association; Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government; Princeton University; University of Michigan; University of Texas-Austin; University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Cornell University, Indiana University, Vanderbilt University, Temple University, Virginia Tech, University of Colorado Boulder, University of Iowa, St. Louis University, the Rooney Center for the Study of American Democracy (University of Notre Dame), and the Notre Dame Institute of Advanced Study.

We have also received assistance from multiple colleagues who have offered advice and criticism, including Chris Achen, Daniel Cox, Brendan Green, Patricia Hallam Joseph, Robert Jones, Jane Mansbridge, David Nickerson, Bob Putnam, Ben Radcliff, Tom Tweed, and Christina Wolbrecht. Over the course of this project, the discipline lost one of the pioneers in the study of religion and politics, Ted Jelen, who contributed to our earliest thinking on this project. Thanks, Ted. We also received helpful insights from the late Tom Carsey, whose untimely passing was a tremendous loss. We miss you, Tom.

In June of 2019, we gathered a group of leading scholars in both political science and sociology to critique the manuscript. And critique it they did! Their thoughtful commentary improved the book immensely. This group includes Bethany Albertson, Kraig Beyerlin, Paul Goren, Diana Mutz, Laura Olson, David Sikkink, Greg Smith, D. Sunshine Hillygus, Ken Wald, and Clyde Wilcox. In addition, John Sides and Michele Margolis provided extensive written comments. We are grateful to them all.

At Cambridge University Press, we thank editor Sara Doskow and the coeditors of the Studies in Social Theory, Religion, and Politics series, Ken Wald particularly. Thanks also to two anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments. You know who you are.

DAVID CAMPBELL ADDS:

I am grateful to the Carnegie Corporation for awarding me a Carnegie Fellowship in 2017–2018, which allowed for the essential ingredients of time and data. Their generous support was critical to this project, as it came at precisely the right time. At a time when federal support for social science is constantly under threat, I applaud Carnegie for recognizing its value.

In addition, I am thankful to my children, Katie and Soren, and my wife, Kirsten. It is because of their love and support that I dedicate this book to them.

GEOFFREY LAYMAN ADDS:

I am grateful to my parents, Barbara and Rod Layman, for dragging me to political conventions and rallies in Virginia in the 1970s and 1980s, despite my vigorous complaints at the time, thereby inspiring my love of politics. I am also grateful to my dear friend Tom Carsey for helping me become a political scientist and supporting me from grad school to tenure and beyond. Sadly, we lost both my dad and Tom in 2018 and they will be sorely missed.

I, of course, am deeply thankful to my wife, Amy, and my children Caroline, Grace, and Kate. Their love and support helped make this book possible and make life a whole lot happier.

JOHN GREEN ADDS:

I owe a special thanks to many colleagues and associates across the country, but especially at the Pew Research Center and the University of Akron, and of course, to my wife and children, without whose support my scholarly work would not have been possible.