

Are the Politics of the Christian Right Linked to State Rates of the Nonreligious? The Importance of Salient Controversy

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Abstract

Hout and Fischer have made the repeated, controversial claim that the dramatic rise of “religious nones” in the United States is due to the prominence of the politics of the Christian Right. As the argument goes, the movement’s extreme stands on gay rights and abortion make religion inhospitable to those who take more moderate and liberal positions. We take another look at this proposition with novel data drawing on expert reports and interest group counts that capture the prominence of the movement in each American state from 2000 to 2010. We attach these data to decennial religious census data on the unchurched, as well as estimates of the nones from Cooperative Congressional Election Study data. At stake is whether religion is independent of political influence and whether American religion is sowing its own fate by failing to limit taking extreme stands. Rising none rates are more common in Republican states in this period. Moreover, when the Christian Right comes into more public conflict, such as over same-sex marriage bans, the rate of religious nones climbs.

Keywords

religious nones, Christian Right, same-sex marriage, ballot measures

The marquee religious trend in the United States over the last thirty years is the rapid rise of the “religious nones”—those who claim no religious affiliation in surveys—from just 6 percent in the early 1990s to about 25 percent today (PRRI 2016; Thiessen and Wilkins-Laflamme 2017).¹ Perhaps not coincidentally, that meteoric rise started around 1994, just when the Christian Right rose to prominence within the Republican Party in government, as Republicans swept the House of Representatives for the first time in forty years.² As the argument goes, the Christian Right is the most visible manifestation of religion in the United States, and the extreme positions taken by the movement on abortion and especially gay rights made all religion inhospitable for liberals and moderates (Hout and Fischer 2002, 2014; see also Evans 2016). We aim to revisit this claim by taking one of the mechanisms seriously—Is there a relationship between Christian Right presence in (state) politics and the supply of nones?

We define the Christian Right in much the same way as others have: “as a social movement that attempts to mobilize evangelical Protestants and other orthodox Christians into conservative political action” (Wilcox and Larson 2006, 6). Moreover, we acknowledge that the Christian Right encompasses a wide variety of different actors, including “everyone from movement leaders to activists to ordinary group members and those

sympathetic to its political and religious agenda” (Klemp 2010, 25). As discussed later, our measures capture multiple facets of the movement, including a specific focus on the social movement organizations (see Miceli 2005; Rozell and Wilcox 1996; Wilcox 1992), as well as more holistic sense of anything elite observers would lump together as the movement. We use the term “Christian Right” throughout the paper to refer to both, and in this way our operational definition of the Christian Right captures both sides of what Rozell and Wilcox (1996, 7) cover: “organizations that attempt to mobilize orthodox Christian religious views behind a very conservative political agenda.”

Our works draws on a decade and a half of data gathering, surveying elite observers in the electoral moment regarding whether Christian Right organizations were active and influential in their state’s politics. Taking place in 2000, 2004, 2008, and 2016 (Conger 2010a,

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2014), we attach these elite perception data to survey estimates, religious census, and U.S. Census data, in addition to other data sources, to assess why the supply of nones changed in the states. We argue that the rate of change is uneven across the states, driven by the salient policy controversy linked to Christian Right activism. Our findings suggest that Christian Right influence in state politics seems to negatively affect religion, such that religious attachments fade in the face of visible Christian Right policy victories.

Christian Right in American Politics

Although the provenance of the modern Christian Right varies somewhat from account to account, from its infancy it has been in the mix of many of the most divisive political debates in American politics. Motivated by opposition to both African American (Claassen 2018; see also Guth 1996, 8) and LGBT civil rights (Fetner 2008) and the legalization of abortion (Zwier 1982), the Christian Right movement in its most recent incarnations has continued to be composed of a shifting mix of elites, organizations, and identifiers with a fairly broad, “family values” and “religious freedom” agenda.³ The public face of the movement has often been formed by fundamentalist leaders making extreme political and religious claims (see Evans 2016), whose image more moderate elements within the Christian Right have occasionally sought to shed (see Shields 2009). As a result, perhaps, its claim to speak for the “moral majority” did not necessarily equate to deference from the Republican Party (Oldfield 1996; Soper and Fetzer 2000), and the movement has had to compete for influence along with other interest sectors in the conservative movement and in the Republican Party.

The movement has worked to shape the platform, control party organizations, and recruit candidates, thus organizing (in part lately through the Tea Party—see Skocpol and Williamson 2013) to take the Republican Party from within (Cigler, Joslyn, and Loomis 2003; Diamond 1989; Moen 1992; Rozell and Wilcox 1996). And there is some evidence that such efforts have been successful by several measures (Conger 2010b; Layman and Brockway 2018), much as early observers predicted (Green and Guth 1988). These successes have shaped both the actions of the Republican Party and public perceptions of the movement’s values and appeal (e.g., Patrikios 2013). Intertwined with a shift toward more “movement” conservatism, the Christian Right was able to both influence and profit from a rightward shift in Republican politics over the last several decades (Levendusky 2009), even if the movement can point to few lasting policy victories (Hawley 2016).

Writing after the 2008 presidential elections—a contest in which the Republican Party nominated a candidate who was widely seen as hostile to the movement—Mark Rozell (2011, 116) opined that “the best days of the Christian Right are in its past and that the movement is without direction.” What is more, the early luminaries of the Christian Right’s leadership class have passed away or have otherwise faded from the scene (Rozell 2011), leaving the movement’s future in the uncertain hands of a new generation of evangelical elites—a group that was wholly unable to coalesce around a candidate in the 2016 Republican primaries (Merritt 2016), though many rallied behind Trump. Scholarly observers of the Christian Right have written the movement’s obituary more than a few times (e.g., Bruce 1988; Guth 1996) only to be surprised to see it make a comeback in a future contest (see Rozell 2011 for an overview). The popular perception of surge and decline may rest in part on the movement’s continued presence and influence in the politics of some states (Bentele et al. 2013; Conger 2010a, 2010b, 2014; Rozell and Wilcox 2018). So while national Christian Right organizations may finally be fading away, enough pockets of influence and activism exist in the states that continued attention to the movement is worthwhile.

The Christian Right continues to push for policies that are far right, though it is important to note that public opinion is not always opposed to them. For instance, while only a small minority supports a staunchly pro-life position, many in the public identify as pro-life and support at least some restrictions (Shaw 2003). Many Americans also support religious liberty in principle, though they do not support the right of service refusal to LGBT Americans in particular (PRRI 2017). LGBT rights are at least one issue where shifting public support has clearly undercut the Christian Right’s claim to express the moral majority opinion.

American support for gay rights generally and same-sex marriage specifically has undergone one of the most drastic changes in the history of American public opinion. Opinion has shifted from widespread opposition in the early 1990s to widespread support today (depending on the measure). Thus, the consistent stance of Christian Right-affiliated actors in opposition to same-sex marriage and other civil rights protections has become more and more out of step with American culture, especially among the young, and there are generational splits on this issue even within the evangelical community (Rozell 2011). PRRI (2016) describes a millennial “exodus” from religion precisely over the conservative stance against gay rights in their churches—fully a third of “religious nones” claim to have left religion because of disagreement over gay rights.

Even more recently, the close ties between key figures in the modern incarnation of the Christian Right (Gaffey

2017) and President Donald Trump have been linked to reports of individuals “breaking up” with their churches (and schools—Schmidt and Wang 2017) over disagreements about politics (Ansberry 2016; Djupe, Neiheisel, and Sokhey 2017). It would appear as though religious life in America is becoming increasingly fragmented along the same lines as partisan political conflict.

Although compelling, journalistic reports of such schisms and other anecdotes suggesting that politics may be driving some individuals from the pews hardly constitute the kind of evidence necessary to make broad generalizations about the degree to which changes in the American religious economy have, at root, political explanations. In isolation, such stories are easy to dismiss as outliers, particularly given journalists’ penchant for focusing on the extremes (see Hume 1996). More sober, academic analysis has largely reinforced this narrative, however, as a number of systematic studies have come to conclude that the potent mix of religion and politics is driving those on the political left away from religion. Hout and Fischer (2002), for instance, showed that the salience of the Christian Right in the early 1990s—around the time of the “Republican Revolution”—was associated with an increase in those who indicated that they have “no religion,” especially among political moderates and liberals. As the proportion of those professing a belief in the divine in the population had not changed, they asked what was driving individuals away from identifying with a religion. For those authors, that driver was the political presence of what they refer to as the Religious Right (see also Hout and Fischer 2014).

Hout and Fischer’s findings are supported by others, including Patrikios (2008), who have used panel data to explore changes over time in church attendance by party identification. As with so many other aspects of American politics, Patrikios (2008) found considerable polarization by party, as Republican identifiers grew more likely to attend church over the time period captured by his panel while Democratic identifiers drew down their attendance at religious services over the same period of observation. Putnam and Campbell (2010, chapter 5) similarly found that political liberals grew more secular over the time period that they examined, while political conservatives grew more religious. Moreover, disagreement over Trump has been linked to disaffiliation in the 2016 election, which fits a broader pattern of evidence over time (Djupe, Neiheisel, and Sokhey 2017, 2018). As such, it appears that when religious and political identities come to be viewed as being at odds with each other, politics is able to carry the day. It therefore seems reasonable to connect the Christian Right with the rise of religious non-identification and disaffiliation (see also Margolis 2018).

Accounts of the mechanisms by which the presence of the Christian Right affects people’s religious opinions

and identity continue to develop. Some scholars have looked for those mechanisms very specifically in the psychological processes at work in citizens’ beliefs and attitudes (Friesen and Ksiazkiewicz 2015; Margolis 2018); others find the growth of the nones as a by-product of congregational disaffiliation decisions (Djupe, Neiheisel, and Sokhey 2018). We take a different approach by examining the political context in which these decisions take place. We use state-level data where differing levels of Christian Right influence can be identified and linked to citizens’ aggregate affiliation/identification decisions.

This is not to imply that politics is the only or even the primary cause of the rates of nonaffiliation with religion in the United States. Those causes are well-established across a number of studies. They involve the degree of social pressure in the community (Ellison and Sherkat 1995), or in the family through marriage (Uecker, Regnerus, and Vaaler 2007), which weakens with distance (Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens 1994), and can be affected by life stressors and social disruption (Vargas 2012). Distance from home is often recruited to help explain why college education is linked to disaffiliation by some (Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens 1994), though that link is contested (Burge 2017; Uecker et al. 2007; Vargas 2012).

Mechanisms of Religious Influence

If the Christian Right is to have effects on rates of the nonreligious, we believe there are several information conditions that need to be met. As Converse (1964) noted long ago, groups are not salient to people’s thinking unless the context makes them so, which is rare or at least uneven (Djupe and Lewis 2015). To have an impact on the religious decisions of citizens, the Christian Right needs to be salient in citizens’ thinking about their own place within the spectrum of religious belief and adherence.⁴ Christian Right activity needs to be controversial, covered, and observed. Evidence for the first condition has been discussed above, so we can focus on the other two here.

By dint of their controversial stances and involvement in very public fights over abortion and gay rights, Christian Right organizations are almost always newsworthy (Bolce and De Maio 2008), though the coverage of Christian fundamentalists over time has proven to be less than extreme (Kerr 2003; Kerr and Moy 2002). Cementing this link, views of the Christian Right and fundamentalists, often conflated, bear a strong relation to media exposure (Bolce and De Maio 2008). This may make the Christian Right the most visible representative of religion for many Americans (Evans 2016).

There is another way to think about the publicness or salience of the Christian Right (and groups more

generally). If most groups have a preference to resolve problems or make changes privately, then those who are likely to suffer losses would wish to make that process more public. First outlined by E. E. Schattschneider (1960), groups attempt to change the dynamics of a losing battle by recruiting allies and thus socializing conflict, for “the only defense against organization is counterorganization” (Schattschneider 1942, 44). In some conflicts, the reciprocal efforts of each side to expand the scope of conflict yields democracy—when most of the public has been notified and invited to participate (see also Wilcox, Rozell, and Green 2003, 278).

Such a process is arguably difficult to measure outside of the outcome—did a group conflict involve the public and spur political activity? Some work has been done, however, on the Christian Right in just this way. One study found that a stronger Christian Right presence in a state was linked to greater public-wide political participation (Djupe and Conger 2012). Drawing on some of the same measures used here, the authors attributed influence to the Christian Right socializing conflict. Moreover, the public in those states was more likely to oppose a greater involvement of religion in politics, suggesting they were reacting to the Christian Right’s attempt to make religion more present.

Another way of making a conflict more public is through the countermobilization of groups. Although the evidence for pluralism’s great engine for controlling faction is sparse generally (Neiheisel and Djupe 2017) and nil in the health sector (Lowery et al. 2005), there is some good evidence for it linked to the Christian Right (Conger and Djupe 2016). That is, throughout the 2000s, the registration of a religious right group to lobby in a state was associated with the likelihood that a gay rights group would register (and vice versa)—a pattern that is consistent with one of the broader lessons of the social movements literature. As summarized by Miceli (2005, 592), “Research on social movements recognizes that the actions and demands of organizations often stimulate the formation of a countermovement that becomes their main source of opposition.” Of course, both group sectors (both pro-gay rights groups and organizations affiliated with the Christian Right) were linked in a controversial and very public fight over gay rights at this time. Ballot measures proposing to constitutionally enshrine a prohibition on same-sex marriage appeared in many states from 2004 to 2006 (see Table A2 for a list). These controversial ballot measures increased the Christian Right’s salience as a representative of religion where they were visible, which we think helped to drive up the number of religiously unaffiliated people in a state.

Stated in more formal terms, we have two hypotheses that come out of this discussion that will take the form of two interaction terms. First, when the Christian Right is

seen as influential in a state (visibility) that has a same-sex marriage ban in place (salient conflict), the number of religious nones will rise. Second, when there is a joint presence of Christian Right and gay rights groups registered to lobby (another available measure of salient conflict), the number of religious nones will rise.

Design and Data

Our strategy for investigating the role of the political context on the rise of the nones is to take a state-level approach that draws on multiple data sources for religion, Christian Right activity, and other correlates of religious activity. Recognizing that no aggregate measure can account for the important set of processes that move an individual from religious belief and adherence to religious none, we use two related measures to discern the number of nones in each state. One of them captures the pool of nonaffiliates with individual religious bodies, the other deidentification of individuals with religion. They individually capture parts of the desired whole, so we use them as separate measures of a common concept: the religious nones.

The latest religious census in 2010 (Grammich et al. 2012) captured patterns of religious affiliation across the United States. We are using these data in reverse as one of the measures of the number of nones in a state—what the religious census refers to as the “unclaimed” population. This measure includes those who have never attended a house of worship, those who have left, and those who are attending but may go unmeasured. Ideally, we would have rates of disaffiliation, the act of leaving a particular house of worship, but the religious census data yield a much more heterogeneous outcome category.⁵ We refer to this dependent variable measure of nones as the “unclaimed.”

We also use a measure of the nones that offers a closer conceptual outcome match to de-identification—the process of shedding one’s identity as a religious individual. The Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), first fielded in 2006, is the aggregation of team survey projects which enables enormous sample sizes for “common content.” Fortunately, the common content religion measures (modeled after Pew’s measurement approach) are quite good and consistent. Drawing on their religious identification measure (“What is your present religion, if any?”) we combine the categories atheist, agnostic, and “nothing in particular” and aggregate those responses by state (with the appropriate survey weight).⁶ We refer to this measure as the “nones.” Though the three groups that compose this category are different in some ways, critically they are united in their views toward religion in public life (Baker and Smith 2009).

The data on Christian Right influence in the states comes from a multiyear effort to measure the scope and

influence of the movement in state-level politics. The first measure is based on the opinions of well-placed observers of the Christian Right in each state rating the impact of the movement in various aspects of state politics in 2000, 2004, 2008, and 2016 (Conger 2010a, 2014). The sample is composed of “political observers” from each state that included Christian Right and Religious Left activists, leadership in both the Republican and Democratic parties, academic observers, members of the political media, and political consultants affiliated with both major parties. An index was created for each year that encompasses respondents’ assessment of the movement’s influence in the overall Republican politics of the state, the presidential campaign in the state, statewide elections, district elections, and ballot initiatives or referenda where appropriate. This measure is referred to as the Christian Right Influence Index. Only available in the above-mentioned years, years between data collection efforts were filled in using simple linear interpolation. Intercensal years of our measure of the unclaimed were also interpolated, as were rates of nones in the few years in which the CCES did not field a study.

The second measure of Christian Right influence focuses more specifically on the movement’s organizational attempts to influence public policy through state legislatures and executive branches. Data were collected on the number of Christian Right organizations registered to lobby in each state for the years 2001–2010 using the “Lobbying Clients” listing provided on the followthemoney.org website for the 2006–2010 time period. For the 2001–2005 time period, the lobbyist registration information available from the states themselves was used. Using the same criteria to identify Christian Right groups in both time periods, the individual groups registered for each year were compiled into an aggregate data set that contains the counts for the Christian Right and the total number of registered lobbying groups for each state for each year (Conger and Djupe 2016). We refer to this measure as “Christian Right Groups.”

Other independent variables are culled from a variety of state-level data sources including measures of LGBT Rights and religious left groups (Conger and Djupe 2016), Gross State Product, the proportion of those over the age of 25 with at least a bachelor’s degree from U.S. Census data, and the Democratic share of the two-party vote for president in the state. We also collected an indicator for whether a constitutional ban on same-sex marriage was in place in the state.

Capturing data from the same units across time constitutes a panel, which places special demands on the analyst to account for the potential link between units across space and within units over time. To deal with unmeasured unit-specific variation, and to control for any year-to-year “shocks,” we adopt a fixed effects approach (see

Clark and Linzer 2015) that includes both state and year dummies (models were estimated in Stata 14). Although this panel design may not support direct causal claims, it can provide strong evidence about whether changes in Christian Right activity are linked to upticks in the rate of religious nones and the unclaimed within the states.

Results

We begin our analysis by first confirming that the U.S. has witnessed a rise in the proportion of individuals identifying as a religious none and exploring whether such a phenomenon has played out in the same way across the states. Figure 1 showcases the percentage of CCES respondents in each state (and the District of Columbia) who indicated that they had no religion over the last decade (2006 to 2016). What is striking is that a preponderance of the states appear to have experienced some degree of growth in religious nones in recent years. This particular pattern holds regardless of whether the individual state in question is generally thought of as being a politically “red” or “blue” state. This observation would initially appear to cut against the narrative that religious activists on the right are to blame for an uptick in the percentage of religious nones in states that are traditionally Democratic strongholds. Rather, the overall pattern displayed in Figure 1 may suggest that partisan or ideological politics at the state level has little to do with aggregate rates of religious nonidentification.

Descriptive statistics can only tell us so much, however. It is possible that differences in the level of Christian Right involvement in the states might still relate to growth in the levels of religious nonidentification, even though the “eyeball” test suggests that there have been similar trends across the states. We therefore turn to a series of regression models that take full advantage of the panel structure of the data to set aside a host of potential confounds. The models reported in Table 1 seek to explain the instance of nones and the unclaimed in the states.

Key predictors in both models include a measure of the Christian Right’s perceived influence in the state, the number of registered lobbying groups associated with the Christian Right, the number of gay rights lobbies, the number of lobbying groups affiliated with the religious left, and an indicator for whether a constitutional ban on same-sex marriage was in place in the state. In addition, both models include a pair of interaction terms that test our hypothesis that Christian Right activism may relate to state-level patterns of nones, but only when the presence of such groups is salient. Finally, both model specifications include a pair of control variables—gross state product and the Democratic share of the two-party vote in the last presidential election—and both state and year fixed effects.⁷

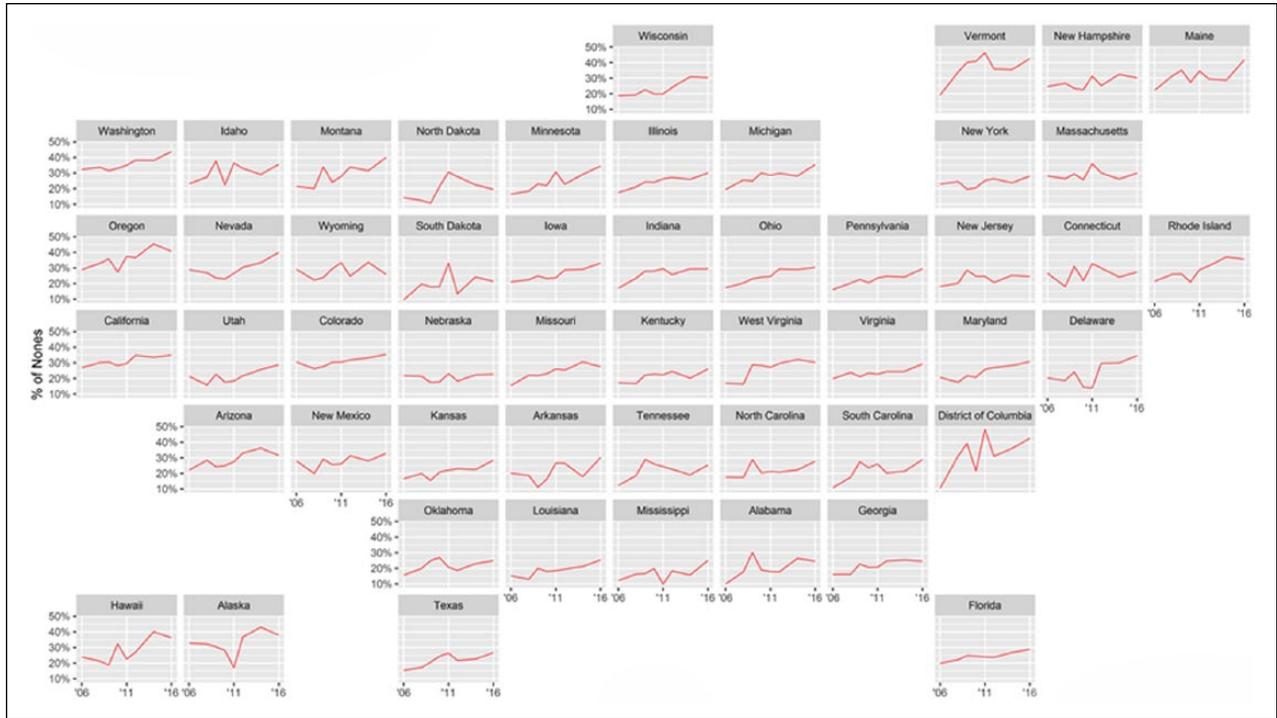


Figure 1. None growth in the states, 2006–2016.
 Source. The 2006–2016 Cooperative Congressional Election Study.

Table 1. Estimates of the Unclaimed and Self-Identified Nones with State and Year Fixed Effects.

	Unclaimed (religious census)	Nones (CCES)
CR influence index	0.02 (0.01)	-0.02 (0.10)
SSM ban in place	-0.05*** (0.01)	-0.10 (0.08)
Influence Index × Ban	0.06*** (0.02)	0.15 (0.12)
Religious left groups	0.00*** (0.00)	-0.01** (0.00)
CR groups	0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)
Gay rights groups	-0.01** (0.00)	-0.01 (0.01)
CR × Gay Rights Groups	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)
GSP, logged	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.13 (0.09)
Proportion with bachelor's degrees+	-0.00*** (0.00)	0.01 (0.01)
Democratic presidential vote share	-0.16*** (0.03)	-0.02 (0.13)
<year dummies omitted>		
Constant	0.75*** (0.18)	1.65 (1.13)
Observations	417	248
R ²	.87	.31
Number of states	50	50

CR = Christian Right; SSM = same-sex marriage; CCES = Cooperative Congressional Election Study; GSP = Gross State Product.

The variables involved in our two hypotheses are constituent parts of interaction terms, so it is best to inspect them visually. Figure 2 shows the influence of our measure of perceived Christian Right influence conditional on their salience (as proxied by the presence of a constitutional ban on same-sex marriage) on the proportion of the state that is “unclaimed” (using the religious census data) and the proportion of religious “nones” (as drawn from the CCES). Christian Right influence is associated with a growth in the rate of nones in the presence of a salient controversy—when a ban is in place in the state.⁸ Across the full range of Christian Right influence, the proportion unclaimed (left panel) climbs about .08 (8%) and the proportion of nones (right panel) climbs about .13 (13%), though the latter effect is statistically more marginal. On the contrary, when a ban on same-sex marriage is not in place, Christian Right influence has very weak to no association with the rate of nones. In the left panel, the unclaimed proportion grows an insignificant .02 as Christian Right influence runs through its full range, and it is slightly negative in the right panel using the measure of self-identified nones.⁹

A similar pattern emerges when we shift the measure of salience. The number of lobbying groups associated with the Christian Right interacts with the number of gay rights groups in the state under the assumption that opposing groups expand the scope of the conflict and make the presence of the Christian Right in the state

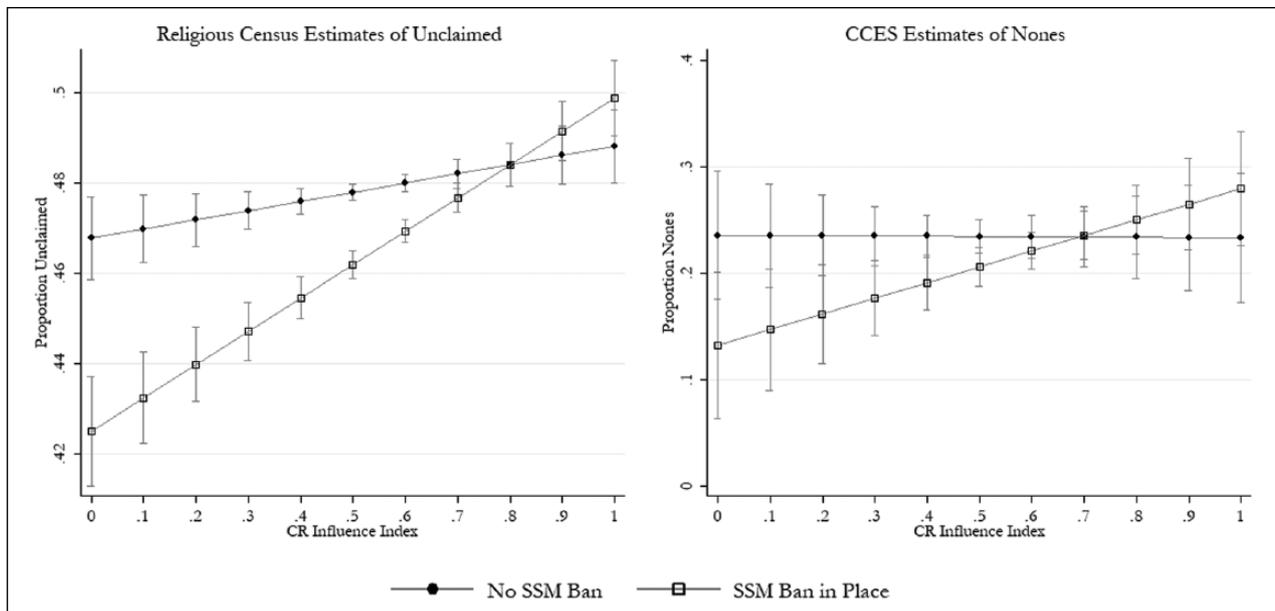


Figure 2. How the SSM bans interacted with a visible CR to influence the growth of nones and the unclaimed. CR = Christian Right; CCES = Cooperative Congressional Election Study; SSM = same-sex marriage.

known (Conger and Djupe 2016). As the plots displayed in Figure 3 demonstrate, in the absence of gay rights groups, the number of Christian Right groups in the state bears little relationship to the religiously unclaimed proportion of the state. In the presence of gay rights groups, however, the number of Christian Right groups tracks with increases in the unclaimed proportion of the state (left panel) and the nones proportion (right panel). These effects are much smaller than the salience-based effects of a same-sex marriage ban. Going from zero to eight Christian Right groups is only associated with a one point increase in the unclaimed rate (left panel) and a 3.6 point increase in the rate of self-identified nones (right panel). Of course, as the right panel shows, the self-identified none rates themselves are indistinguishable between states with and without gay rights groups.

We find this constellation of results in a fixed effects framework that also includes controls for the state partisan lean, state gross domestic product (GDP), state levels of holding a college degree, and religious left lobbying groups (which might provide a counter image of what religion and politics might look like). Intriguingly, higher levels of Democratic voting—as measured by the presidential vote in the previous election—are negatively related to both the proportion of the unclaimed in the state and the proportion of nones, but only significantly so in the case of the unclaimed. Were the traditional narrative about Democrats and liberals being more likely to leave religion to hold at this level of aggregation, we would expect the opposite relationship to emerge. The other variables are inconsistent in their effects.

Discussion

Our analyses suggest that the influence of the Christian Right in a state is linked to the decision to be religiously unaffiliated in the presence of a visible, salient, and controversial policy issue. This result is important because it suggests that larger political processes, ones linked specifically to the state policy context, impact individuals' decision making. Thus, the decisions to de-identify and disaffiliate with religion are not solely individual, psychological processes, or even limited to congregational concerns. Our results therefore add nuance and clarity to existing findings on the role of politics in driving religious belief and behavior. We agree in broad brush with others' diagnoses, but offer the insight that it is likely not just the diffuse "influence" of the movement that drives religious nones, but the specific policy skirmishes that gather public attention and shape decision making.

As an analog to this argument, if the Christian Right is making religion difficult for marginal identifiers to maintain a religious identity, then it might make it difficult for religious organizations to recruit as well by further segmenting the market. More specifically, the religious tradition most closely identified with the Christian Right—evangelical Protestants—may have reduced growth rates in states where Christian Right activity was salient and controversial. There is already evidence that the dogmatic conservative politics widespread in evangelicalism in the 1990s spawned a protest movement from within in the form of the emergent church—a small, radically decentralized movement with strong democratic

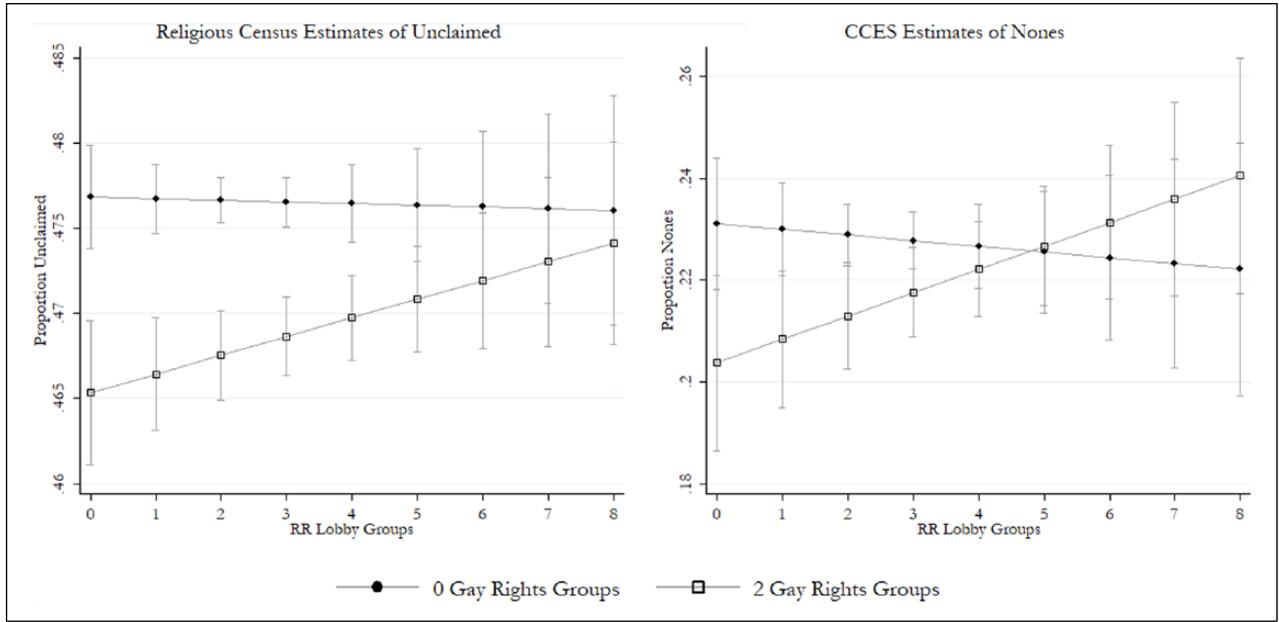


Figure 3. How the presence of gay rights and religious right groups affects the growth of the nones and the unclaimed. CCES = Cooperative Congressional Election Study; RR = Religious Right.

deliberation parallels (e.g., Burge and Djupe 2015). Is there more evidence to be found here?

Using nearly the same model specifications as in Table 1 (a panel framework with year and state fixed effects), we show some evidence for this proposition in Figure 4 by testing an interaction between a ban being in place and the Democratic two-party vote share on evangelical adherence. In most states, evangelical adherence is estimated to be lower when they had a same-sex marriage ban in place. The exceptions are the most Republican states, where the bans made no difference, and the most Democratic states (above .62), of which there are few (four states). The average gap was just below three points, while the largest gaps were about four points. This evangelical rate is measured on a thousand point scale, so the loss is minimal (~.03%), but it is distinguishable.¹⁰ That is, there is good, if measured, evidence that salient Christian Right activity restrained evangelical growth in the states.

Conclusion

Happening throughout American society, scholars have described a process of reconsidering affiliations and identities based on the partisan leanings of the state, job, neighborhood, church, and mate. It is important to document these dynamics, as they raise great fears about whether the social structure of civil society is sufficient to act as a check on government. We do not mean that religion is necessary to check government, but that a total

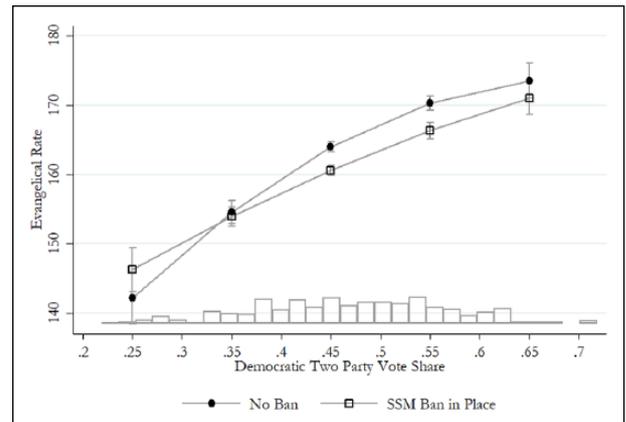


Figure 4. Evangelical adherence rates were reduced in most states with a SSM ban.

Comparing two sets of CIs is the equivalent of a 90% test. Estimates available in Table A1. SSM = same-sex marriage; CIs = confidence intervals.

partisan sort coincident with organizational ties undercuts citizen independence through the monopolization of communication channels and by co-opting value systems themselves (e.g., Bailey 2016). Our evidence adds to this narrative and so it is important to discuss the scope of the implications.

When intermittently visible, there is clear evidence that people, and probably those without strong relationships with houses of worship, use the Christian Right as a proxy for religion as a whole and discontinue their religious

identities as a result. Our results key in on one of the essential mechanisms that drives that process—salient controversy. Institutions that invite public participation, such as ballot measures, boost the salience of participant groups and shine a bright light on the policy controversies that divide them. And fights between groups that expand the scope of conflict both encourage the public to take positions on those issues and form opinions about the groups involved.

Starting in 2004, the rush to set state constitutions in opposition to LGBT rights therefore created a set of conditions ripe to make the Christian Right salient to the public in some states more than others. That did not redound to the benefit of organized religion in general. As a result, religion lost somewhere between 2 and 8 percent of the population. By 2010, a ban was in place in twenty-nine states, in which 58 percent of the population lived (see Table A2 in the Appendix for more details). These states were more likely to be evangelical and had smaller proportions of nones in them in 2006, but by 2010 that gap between the nones in marriage ban states and those in states with no marriage ban had been cut in half (it went from 3.1 percent to 1.4 percent over that period).

This pattern brings to mind the warnings of James Madison in his *Memorial and Remonstrance* arguing against the imposition of a tax to support religious education. His point 12 is synchronous with this pattern of close ties between a religious group and governing authority,

Because the policy of the Bill is adverse to the diffusion of the light of Christianity . . . it at once discourages those who are strangers to the light of revelation from coming into the Region of it; and countenances by example the nations who continue in darkness, in shutting out those who might convey it to them.

Many wish religious organizations and leaders to speak to the pressing issues of the day, but it should be done only by recognizing that political involvement subjects the group to evaluation based on political disagreement.¹¹ Doing so except when public opinion is essentially united will entail lost membership, declining rates of organizational engagement, and reduced support from outside the group by some. At times, this is the necessary price of principle, but the schedule of rates should be well understood.

American religion has faced similar trade-offs before. The turbulent 1960s witnessed a new breed of religious leaders from more liberal, mainline Protestant denominations taking positions on the pressing issues of the day, often (from the perspective of organizational maintenance, at least) to disastrous effect. Clergy involvement in the civil rights and antiwar movements precipitated

losses in lay membership. For instance, one survey found that nearly two-thirds (63%) of church leaders who participated in acts of antiwar civil disobedience reported that their churches had subsequently lost members (Quinley 1974). Another study found that Protestant ministers who were involved in efforts at desegregation faced increasingly empty pews as their flocks bolted in favor of other congregations whose leaders espoused more pro-segregationist views or stayed out of the matter altogether (Campbell and Pettigrew 1959). These “storms in the churches” (Hadden 1969) are often credited with leading to membership declines among more liberal mainline Protestant churches (e.g., Wuthnow 1999).

In light of this history, there is a certain irony to the present situation in which elements of the Christian Right find themselves, as the early movement modeled many of its tactics after those employed by mainline churches during the civil rights movement (Findlay 1990). And just as involvement in the controversies of the day ushered in a period of organizational decline in which parishioners deserted mainline Protestantism in droves, it appears as though the Christian Right is following a strikingly similar path.

Authors' Note

The data necessary to replicate our results are available here: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7910/DVN/B37PNP>. A previous version of this paper was presented at the 2017 annual meeting of the APSA, San Francisco.

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Notes

1. It is perhaps worth noting that from the late-1950s to the early-1980s the level of those reporting that they had no religion on national surveys remained between 5 and 6 percentage points (see Glenn 1987).
2. Of course, much of the rest of the developed world witnessed a retreat from organized religion that occurred much earlier and was orders of magnitude more dramatic than in the United States. In many cases, this occurred

without anything resembling the Christian Right (thanks Reviewer 1). This observation suggests that the rise of the religious “nones” in the United States cannot be wholly attributed to the public presence of religiously motivated political groups, but is a complex phenomenon that can also be explained with reference to generational and other changes (Hout and Fischer 2002; Voas and Chaves 2016). One might also argue that state regulation of the religious marketplace in many European nations *did* necessarily involve religious organizations in political affairs and cut down on viable alternatives (see, for instance, Stark and Iannaccone 1994). Thus, for many living in such countries, their options were limited to attending a religious institution sanctioned by the state or not attending at all.

3. To be sure, the origins of the Christian Right are complex, and the movement admits of a variety of different motivations. See, for example, Wilcox (1992) and Bruce (1988) for more detailed histories.
4. Saliency is “the phenomenon that when one’s attention is differentially directed to one portion of the environment rather than to others, the information contained in that portion will receive disproportionate weighting in subsequent judgments” (Taylor and Thompson 1982).
5. The “unclaimed” population is the population size in that year minus the proportion of the population that is estimated to be an adherent of a religious group. This is not the same as membership; it is more expansive. Participating religious bodies were asked to provide membership numbers, but were also asked to estimate adherents, “All members, including full members, their children and the estimated number of other participants who are not considered members; for example, the ‘baptized,’ ‘those not confirmed,’ ‘those not eligible for Communion,’ ‘those regularly attending services,’ and the like.” Census officials went through great pains to gain an inclusive figure, also including estimates of Muslims and black Protestants (who did not participate), among others. A fuller discussion is available here: <http://www.thearda.com/Archive/Files/Descriptions/RCMSCY10.asp>
6. This measure should be distinguished from nonattendance. In the 2016 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), for instance, 27 percent of the sample claimed to never attend a house of worship. Sixty-eight percent of the never attenders are nones (atheist, agnostic, and nothing in particular), which means 32 percent of identifiers never attend. Nones also make up 16 percent of attenders.
7. The addition of state and year fixed effects allow us to control for any time-invariant, unmeasured confounds as well as year-specific shocks. As Reed and Ye (2011, 990) note, “The inclusion of time period fixed effects substantially reduces (but does not eliminate) cross-sectional dependence.” What is more, a recent simulation study by Clark and Linzer (2015) found that a fixed effects approach reduced bias when compared with a pooled approach. One would assume, as a reviewer did, that some of the included variables here are too highly correlated to gain reliable estimates. The (pooled) correlations between Christian Right influence, a same-sex marriage ban, the number of religious right groups and gay rights groups registered to lobby is actually quite

moderate—under $r = .25$. Moreover, the estimates do not change almost at all when we drop one of the interactions.

8. We also tested whether the year in which a ban was considered boosted the number of nones when the Christian Right was visible. There was no effect, suggesting that the process of deidentification is not instantaneous.
9. These states tend to have higher rates of nones in the first place, which is a function of a number of factors—they are less likely to have direct democracy and are more likely to be located in the northeast, among other things.
10. We also checked whether the interplay between religious right and gay rights groups (as in Figure 3) affected evangelical adherence and found no effect.
11. Earlier work suggests that there may be one caveat to this general prescription: organizational maintenance is possible, even in the presence of conflict, when there are few alternatives to membership. This was the case in the black church during the tumultuous 1960s. Although there was likely little disagreement among churchgoers as to the basic aims of the civil rights movement and the black church’s position in that struggle, coordination problems and other conflicts almost certainly would have caused friction. Even so, the black church in the South saw little decline in membership, likely as a reflection of the fact that there were precious few alternative organizational structures or institutions to which members might have turned (Nelson and Nelson 1975). In the North, however, “greater competition from other agencies and institutions” (Nelson and Kanagy 1993, 311) afforded members of the black church with the ability to find other avenues for communal engagement (see also Pinn and Krattenmaker 2016).

Supplemental Materials

Supplemental materials for this article are available with the manuscript on the *Political Research Quarterly* (PRQ) website.

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