Reconsidering the Role of Politics in Leaving Religion: The Importance of Affiliation

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Abstract: *Studies have pointed to politics as an important force driving people away from religion—the argument is that the dogmatic politics of the Christian Right have alienated liberals and moderates, effectively threatening organized religion in America. We argue that existing explanations are incomplete; a proper reconsideration necessitates distinguishing processes of affiliation (with specific congregations) from identification (with religious traditions). Using three data sets, we find evidence that qualifies and complements existing narratives of religious exit. Evaluations of congregational political fit drive retention decisions. At the same time, opposition to the Christian Right only bears on retention decisions when it is salient in a congregational context, affecting primarily evangelicals and Republicans. These results help us understand the dynamics of the oft-observed relationship between the Christian Right and deidentification and urge us to adopt a broader, more pluralistic view of the politicization of American religion.*

It is all but settled that religion can influence political behavior through a number of mechanisms, including beliefs, identity, and communication. However, apart from some older work on loyalty to social institutions (e.g., Bergesen and Warr 1979; Djupe 2000; Hadaway and Roof 1988), scholars have largely characterized religion in much the same way as party identification once was, namely, as an "unmoved mover" (Campbell et al. 1960; though see March and Olsen 1984, 735). At the very least, religion has typically been treated—almost without question—as independent of the political process. This treatment has begun to change as studies have reversed the arrow of inquiry, exploring whether politics affects individual religious behavior.

Research has honed in on whether the extreme faith and politics of the Christian Right have driven up rates of exit from organized religion and reduced levels of religiosity. For instance, Hout and Fischer (2002) find that the rise of the Religious Right in American politics drove those with more moderate and liberal political views to claim that they had "no [religious] preference" (see also Baker and Smith 2009; Putnam and Campbell 2010). Similarly, Patrikios (2008) demonstrates that Democrats have reduced their attendance at religious services in recent years, presumably as a reaction to what they perceive to be a close connection between organized religion and the Republican Party (see also Patrikios 2013).

The implications of such findings are profound for two facets of our understanding of religion and politics. First, scholars have long presumed that religion is independent of the political attributes with which it is correlated; this new line of research asserts a degree of interdependence. Second, these findings suggest that people are willing to leave what may be long-term relationships with a religious organization because of the political presence of an unpopular group in the political environment. This latter facet could be seen as a cause of polarization and partisan sorting—and one that is beyond ideological (Levendusky 2009) or media sources (Prior 2007).

We focus on the role that politics plays in a mechanism that is crucial to this larger story. Specifically, we take up the charge from Patrikios (2008, 386) and concern ourselves with the role of politics in involvement and affiliation decisions regarding particular congregations. Notably, we draw attention to the fact that congregational *affiliation* processes are distinct from the *identification* processes that previous studies have examined. Hout and Fischer (2002, 2014) examined deidentification with religion: self-reporting as a religious "none." By contrast, our focus is on the drivers of organizational exit: church disaffiliation. While deidentification has been linked to attitudes toward the Religious Right, we question whether evaluations of the Christian Right bear on decisions about congregational affiliation unless the issue is salient (via disagreement) in the congregational context.[1]

These twin processes of disaffiliation and deidentification are not incompatible and may take place in varying orders. If there is a causal order, we suspect that disaffiliation most often precedes deidentification.[2] In the Discussion section, we detail how these perspectives can be reconciled and present some evidence to support that argument. However, our broader point is that only looking at one process—deidentification—paints an incomplete picture. Indeed, recognizing the role of politics in disaffiliation helps to connect the research agenda on religious exit with other literatures and religious patterns. While the functional result of people leaving because of political disagreement may be that disaffiliation is concentrated on the left side of the political spectrum (see Hoge 1988; Nelson 1988; Putnam and Campbell 2010; Zuckerman 2012), we suspect that result is due to the aggregation of a set of localized differences. Moreover, the decline of mainline Protestantism belies a population-level Christian Right effect—very few mainline congregations have any connection to the Christian Right. Members in such churches should be unlikely to conflate the Christian Right with their own denomination or congregation, and reactions to the movement should have no bearing on membership retention decisions for them. This suggests, in fact, that disaffiliation due to disagreement with the Christian Right should be more common *among evangelical Republicans.* In addition, we expect that people are seeking and sorting along lines of difference across the religious spectrum, such that upon closer examination, reduced religiosity and disaffiliation are in fact reasonably well distributed across religious traditions.

In this article, we attempt to sort out the degree to which individual religious involvement and retention decisions are made as a result of political disagreements. We draw on a series of data sets that are well suited to this investigation, as they combine assessments of the Religious Right with information on the dimensions of disagreement between respondents and their congregations. To preview our key results, we find that differences, political and not, felt within houses of worship are the chief culprit behind patterns of disaffiliation. We also find that the Christian Right is driving congregants out of the pews, which certainly jells with familiar narratives. *But, instead of driving out Democrats across the board, we find that the Christian Right drives out those who disagree with the movement and are likely to experience disagreement in their congregations—that is, evangelical Republicans.* This pattern serves to reinforce our notion that affiliation decisions work differently than decisions about religious identification and underscores the importance of giving attention to both processes.

We conclude, however, on a reasonably optimistic note. Political disagreement tends to drive the decision making of those marginally attached to a congregation, since more points of connection work to sustain membership even in the face of disagreement (see Cornwall 1989 for a related set of findings). Therefore, the skill-building role that religious institutions can play is maintained and is accessible to a wide range of citizens

[1] To be clear, in this article, we focus on the conditions under which individuals' feelings toward the Christian Right will bear on their decisions to draw down their participation in a particular congregation or to leave it altogether. We suspect that evaluations of (or feelings toward) the Christian Right are relevant for such determinations when the congregational context makes it difficult for individuals to ignore political differences between themselves and their fellow congregants; this recognition of difference with the congregation—organizational disagreement—is what we refer to when we talk about "salience" (we elaborate on this idea in the third section of the article). By salience we *do not* mean perceptions of threat with respect to the Christian Right, or the simple prominence of particular policies or issues.

[2] Our goal in this article is to highlight processes of affiliation as a complement to processes of identification. That said, in the supporting information (SI), we also provide some analysis of the drivers of identification. We find some suggestive evidence in the PALS data that affiliation may precede identification (please see the penultimate section of the article for a discussion).

(e.g., Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; though see Djupe, Sokhey, and Gilbert 2007 for qualifications). The drive in American religion to be politically relevant surely promotes both processes; it yields a slow but steady drip that drains marginal affiliates from congregations. However, the upshot is that religious organizations in the United States appear to be robust entities that are able to survive the negative evaluations associated with one of its most visible elements in the public sphere—the Christian Right.

Political Forces and Religious Exit

In their seminal piece, Hout and Fischer (2002) demonstrated that the increased visibility of the Religious Right in the early 1990s corresponded with an uptick in the proportion of survey respondents who indicated that they have "no religion." Since the level of religious belief (belief in God) in the population had not changed, they turned to the question of what was forcing individuals toward deidentification. For Hout and Fischer, that force was the visibility of the Religious Right. The authors have returned to this question in a recent article (2014), which reinforces the connection between political backlash and religious deidentification, while acknowledging the strong influence of generational change. The authors add panel data from the General Social Survey, which helps them to show that liberals who start with some religion are more likely to claim no religious preference later in the panel (conservatives are far less likely to adopt "no religious preference"). In essence, the message is that political identities shape religious identities.

Hout and Fischer's (2002, 2014) findings are supported by Patrikios (2008), who employs panel data to examine over-time changes in church attendance as a function of partisan identification. Republican identifiers came to attend church more often over time, whereas Democratic identifiers attended less frequently. Putnam and Campbell (2010, chap. 5) add to these studies with their own panel data, finding that political liberals grew more secular over the course of their study, whereas political conservatives became more religious over the same period of observation. They conclude that when an individual's religious identity and his or her political identity come into conflict, religious identity gives way. On the basis of these diverse but related studies,[3] it seems

reasonable to infer that the Religious Right is making religion inhospitable to those with more liberal views.[4]

Older pieces that focused on religious exit (apostasy)—whether characterized as leaving a particular congregation or falling from the faith altogether—also found it more prevalent among political liberals (e.g., Hadaway and Roof 1988; Nelson 1988). Put differently, Mainline Protestantism lost members in the post-war period, while evangelical Protestant denominations largely have not (until recently, that is; see Finke and Stark 2005). At the same time, early observers were supremely skeptical of the suggestion that political leanings *cause* individuals to disaffiliate. They dismissed the correlation between liberalism and disaffiliation as inconsequential, owing to the tendency for dropouts to be less involved politically (Nelson 1988). For instance, citing earlier research by Caplovitz and Sherrow (1977), Hoge argued that "political attitudes were [not] important in causing apostasy" (1988, 86).

We believe that this dismissal of political factors was—and remains—premature due to misspecification. The connection is not with ideological direction, per se, but with political disagreements within houses of worship. This squares with findings from other early scholarship, which found that politics played an important role in understanding how clergy and churches engaged in the movements of the 1960s and 1970s. From one view, the threat of declining donations and disaffiliation shaped whether mainline Protestant clergy participated in civil rights and antiwar struggles (Hadden 1969; Quinley 1974; Stark et al. 1971). Moreover, clergy's participation in high-profile political activities was connected to a decline of mainline denominations (Hadden 1969; Quinley 1974; Roof and McKinney 1987; Wuthnow 1988; though see Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens 1994). This link is not limited to the 1960s—there is recent evidence that the financial health of a religious institution affects whether even Catholic priests address abortion politics (Calfano, Oldmixon, and Gray 2014).

The Political Conditions for Religious Disaffiliation

We start with an expectation: If some combination of religion and politics is turning individuals away from religion, incidences of politically motivated disaffiliation will be localized within particular congregations. This

[3]Please see the SI (p. 28) for further discussion of the measurement variation in this literature.

[4]For elaboration in the sociology of religion literature, please see the SI (p. 28).

expectation turns on the fundamental logic of organizational affiliation articulated by Olson (1965), which conceptualizes membership in cost–benefit terms, the result of a range of attractive selective benefits weighed against costs. From this perspective, political difference is but one aspect of a broader calculus that may bear on membership retention (e.g., Rothenberg 1988).

Following from this logic, politics contributes to membership retention in two primary ways. First, members evaluate their fit in the congregation, with most preferring congruence over incongruence, homophily over diversity (e.g., McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001; Scheufele, Nisbet, and Brossard 2003). Not all forms of difference are salient at all times. For instance, views on gun rights may remain dormant until the church is asked to support a boycott of stores supporting open-carry laws. Simply put, anything that raises the salience of political differences should reduce the value of being a member for some. One of those conditions could be a church culture that values politics by encouraging involvement in political opportunities and making clear connections between religious values and political choices (Calhoun-Brown 1996; Djupe and Gilbert 2009). Being in such a "political church" should raise the salience of politics, which may prove problematic for political minorities in the church.

Of course, political differences may still be easy to ignore if a member values other aspects of the church experience, or is otherwise able to compensate for such differences by "seeking out religious communications that reinforce their minority (relative to the congregation) attitudes" (Jelen 1992, 708; see also Finifter 1974). If other factors lower the value of key selective benefits, this could also increase the odds of disaffiliation. In early research on the activism of religious elites in the 1960s, clergy political engagement reportedly entailed ignoring core services the church would otherwise offer (Quinley 1974; Roof and McKinney 1987; Wuthnow 1988). More recent work has found support for this notion by showing that political agreement does not bear on how congregation members evaluate the political involvement of clergy, which is instead a function of satisfaction with worship and other core church-provided services (Djupe and Gilbert 2008). Therefore, an organizational agenda that departs from some members' expectations may lead them to weigh political differences more heavily and to reduce their involvement.

Importantly, this perspective is able to incorporate the politics of the Christian Right. The proper assessment of such a story requires evidence that (ideally) consists of the following components: (1) congregations promoting Religious Right political ends and means, and (2) negative feelings toward the Religious Right being associated

with disaffiliation from those congregations. To date, no study has demonstrated both components to be true (e.g., Vargas 2012), and no study has reported measures appropriate for gauging congregational mechanisms. Moreover, even lacking these specific measures, no study has looked for effects due to disagreement over the politics of the Christian Right in those pockets of American religion where that disagreement is likely to be salient: evangelical congregations rather than non-evangelical ones. Such an analysis would go a long way toward sorting out whether observed correlations between partisanship and religious behavior are attributable to the Religious Right generally, or are perhaps part of a broader story about the politics that are on display in pews and pulpits on any given Sunday.

Designs, Data, and Measures

We draw upon three data sources—each with its own strengths—in an effort to better understand the impact of congregational difference and opposition to the Christian Right on disaffiliation processes. All three are panel designs that include different samples at different time periods, covering different spans of time between waves. The behaviors studied naturally include disaffiliation (the act of leaving a particular congregation) as well as church attendance. Full variable coding information is available in the SI appendix (pp. 2–4).

The 2012 Election Panel Study

The first panel data set we draw upon was gathered in 2012 around the general election season. In mid-October 2012, we used *Qualtrics Panels* to interview 1,753 individuals from across the United States; individuals responded to a request to complete a 10-minute, online pre-election survey.[5] In late November 2012, *Qualtrics* sent out requests for a follow-up interview, and 1,097 respondents agreed to complete our 20-minute, post-election questionnaire.[6] The structure of the data set is crucial to our enterprise and is shared to different extents with the next two studies: It includes religious attendance in both waves, comparisons of the respondent to the congregation, feelings

[5] For sample details, please see the SI (p. 28).

[6] The reinterview rate from pre- to postwaves is a respectable 62.5%. Importantly, we find no statistically significant differences between respondents who completed both waves (versus those who completed one) on education, ideology, and several other characteristics of interest.

toward Christian fundamentalists,[7] and a Wave 2 measure of whether individuals left their Wave 1 house of worship. These data enable a direct test of the two perspectives: (1) whether opposition to, in this case, Christian fundamentalists is linked to declining attendance and increased disaffiliation, and (2) whether differences felt with the congregation drive down attendance and increase disaffiliation, especially among marginal Wave 1 attenders.

The 2006 Franklin County Republican Primary Study

The second panel data set is essentially a city-study fashioned in the image of the pioneering efforts of the Columbia scholars (e.g., Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1944) and the more contemporary efforts of Huckfeldt and colleagues (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995).

It was built in 2006 from a first wave surveying participants in the Republican gubernatorial primary in Franklin County, Ohio (home to Columbus, Ohio). Following the May 2006 gubernatorial primary, a random sample of 4,000 Republican primary voters was drawn immediately after the voter file was released to the public and was surveyed by mail. In all, 1,062 usable surveys were received from three waves of mailing, for a response rate of 26.6%; the total return was a few percentage points higher. The response rate is not high, though it is in line with or greater than typical, nongovernmental mail surveys (see, e.g., Shih and Fan 2008). The follow-up wave of the panel was conducted after the general election in November 2006. Roughly 640 voters responded (again across multiple reminder waves), yielding a healthy panel retention rate of just over 60%.[8] As with the 2012 data, the key attributes of this study are that we asked respondents for comparisons of the respondent to other members of their congregation at Wave 1, their feelings toward prominent conservative Christian groups (and not just "Christian fundamentalists"), worship attendance in both waves, and whether they were still attending the same church in Wave 2 (disaffiliation).[9]

Like the 2012 study, these data enable a direct test of the two perspectives: (1) whether opposition to the Christian Right affects attendance and affiliation, and (2) whether political and other differences felt with the congregation drive down attendance and affiliation, especially among marginal attenders (at Wave 1).[10] The focus on these Republican primary voters is particularly useful, as it allows us to consider an electoral context in which Christian Right politics was made especially salient; the primary contest had pitted a candidate who was closely aligned with Christian Right organizations against a more moderate opponent. If there is anyone who is likely to experience conflict in church over the Christian Right, it should be Republicans opposed to its politics.[11]

The Portraits of American Life Study (PALS)

The third panel data set we draw on is a nationally representative sample of 1,300 that was reinterviewed after 6 years (in 2012) from an initial sample of 2,610.[12] These interviews were conducted face-to-face and included measures crucial to our enterprise, especially views toward "conservative Christian groups active in politics." The religious variables are plentiful if somewhat different from those described above, including a number of measures that capture tension and satisfaction with the congregation. The key outcome measure we consider asks

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[7]Though Americans tend to perceive Christian fundamentalists and the Christian Right as one and the same (see Bolce and De Maio 1999a, 1999b, 2008; Patrikios 2013), they are not. Nevertheless, the results across data sets here suggest that the specific question wording (whether Christian fundamentalists or conservative Christians active in politics) is not particularly influential.

[8]We found no panel retention bias on measures of interest.

[9]For discussion of mail-based panel surveys, please see the SI (p. 28).

[10]We focus on political factors throughout this article. However, to be fair, we would acknowledge that these data do not allow us to effectively adjudicate between political and *non*political sources of difference within congregations as explanations for disaffiliation; the majority of the variables included in our index of differences with the congregation could be construed as having at least some political content. Indeed, (arguably) even measures of difference that are ostensibly nonpolitical in nature (e.g., racial/ethnic or theological differences) could possibly, in today's polarized political environment, be construed by churchgoers as having a political component.

[11]During the GOP primary, the more conservative, Christian Right–affiliated candidate was Ohio Secretary of State Ken Blackwell; the moderate candidate was Ohio Attorney General Jim Petro. Blackwell won the primary 55.7% to 44.3%—a margin that would qualify as "divisive" by classic formulations (e.g., Bernstein 1977)—but would go on to lose to Democrat Ted Strickland in the general election (full results are available at http://www.sos.state.oh.us/). Aside from the leverage provided by the electoral context, focusing on Republicans also makes sense as levels of support for the Christian Right tend to be higher among such partisans, highlighting the importance of looking at variance within this group, and at the consequences of exposure to difference in congregations. For example, in the nationally representative PALS data, we find that opposition to the Christian Right is lowest among strong Republicans and highest among strong Democrats (see p. 31 of the SI).

[12]Further details about the sampling methodology (as well as the data themselves) are available here: http://www.thearda.com/pals/researchers/methodology.asp.

	% Different	N
2012 Election Panel Study		
Overall Political Opinions	35.8	618
Level of Interest in Politics	37.8	621
Age	54.1	619
Income and Social Class	45.8	622
Education Level	41.6	622
Race/Ethnicity	28.6	615
Religious Beliefs	22.5	618
2006 Franklin County Republican Primary Study		
Political Party Affiliation	45.5	365
Members' Political Activism	36.9	388
Stance on Gay Marriage	35.0	414
Support for the Religious Right	27.6	402
Theological Beliefs	31.9	442
Ethnicity/Race	30.5	455

respondents whether they left their 2006 church by 2012. The test we employ interacts partisanship and religious tradition with opposition to conservative Christians active in politics; this follows upon the logic discussed previously—an expectation that *congregational conflict will be more common for evangelical Republicans who disagree with the Christian Right.*

Results: Looking for Difference in Congregations

We begin by documenting the necessary conditions for this analysis: Do some congregants feel different from others, especially in their politics? Two of the surveys we used asked explicitly for respondents' subjective feelings of difference from fellow congregants. The results in Table 1 show that feeling different from one's fellow congregants can hardly be considered a rare event. Survey evidence from the 2006 Franklin County Republican Primary Study suggests that—across a host of dimensions— churchgoers feel different from others in their congregation at high rates. This is especially true when it comes to politics, as nearly half (45.5%) of those responding to the question perceived differences in party affiliation between themselves and other members of their congregation. Over a third (36.9%) saw their level of political activism as differing from that of their fellow churchgoers.

Importantly, these figures are not considerably different from a similar set of questions that was asked of the nationwide sample of Americans in our 2012 Election Panel Study. Also shown in Table 1, we observe just about the same levels of political difference: Just over a third perceived political interest (38%) and political opinion (36%) differences with congregants, though it is notable that socioeconomic status and education differences were reported by more. *These figures provide us with reassurance that feelings of difference are widely experienced in congregations.* Overall, three-fourths of congregants feel different on at least one dimension, and about half feel different on three or more dimensions. These results help put to rest concerns that individuals self-select into churches on political grounds (see also Djupe and Gilbert 2009; Neiheisel, Djupe, and Sokhey 2009; Sokhey and Mockabee 2012; Wald, Owen, and Hill 1988).

Attendance and Disaffiliation in Three Panel Studies

Next, we use three panel data sets to examine whether political differences in congregations and affect toward the Christian Right predict church attendance rates and, ultimately, religious disaffiliation (leaving a church). Most previous quantitative efforts that examine disaffiliation have drawn on the General Social Survey (GSS), or have effectively employed the strategy of the GSS, which is to compare a current affiliation to recalled religious affiliation at age 16. Switching rates that result are high: Rates range between 40 and 50% (Heimlich 2009). However, approaches that use broad religious tradition or even denominational identities only scratch the surface of religious change. In our surveys, we included a question asking (in Wave 2) whether the respondent was still attending the same house of worship as in Wave 1.

Starting with our 2006 panel, we find that by late fall (November), 14% had left the church they were attending in May of that year; additionally, 3% had switched, and 1% had joined (from having no church in the first wave). That is, across a 6-month span, nearly a fifth of a geographically stable, conservative population (Republican primary voters surveyed by mail) had changed a church affiliation. Notably, the disaffiliation figure was higher among mainline Protestants (18%) than evangelicals or Catholics (both 11%).

We asked this question again in the 2012 online panel, among whom the proportion attending a church was lower than among Republican primary voters in Ohio. However, the proportion who had disaffiliated from their church after 6 months was the same—14.4%. The breakdown among religious traditions in the national sample

TABLE 2 Predicting Worship Attendance and Disaffiliation by Perceived (Partisan) Difference with the Congregation, 2012

Independent Variable	Worship Attendance[a] (Ordered Logit)		Disaffiliation (Logit)	
	B	p	B	p
Partisan Difference with Church, Wave 1	—		.69	.03
Attendance, Wave 1	1.60	.00	−.23	.18
Partisan Difference × Attendance	—		−.13	.11
Differences Index, Wave 2	−2.92	.16	—	
Differences Index × Attendance	.52	.27	—	
Political Interest, Wave 1	.04	.64	−.14	.31
Church Discussant, Wave 1	−.15	.53	.05	.89
Political Ideology	−.19	.32	.01	.98
Feelings toward Christian Fundamentalists	−.52	.57	.68	.64
Ideology × Christian Fundamentalists	.21	.49	.13	.77
Female	−.07	.75	−.09	.79
Income	.07	.30	−.12	.21
Education	−.21	.07	−.06	.73
Age	−.01	.12	−.04	.01
Mainline Protestant	−.39	.21	.16	.76
Catholic	−.55	.07	.25	.61
Black Protestant	−.25	.54	.34	.60
Other Religion	.43	.28	.86	.12
Evangelical Protestant (Excluded)	—		—	
Constant	—		.40	.79
Cutpoint 1	1.39		—	
Cutpoint 2	2.56		—	
Cutpoint 3	4.42		—	
Cutpoint 4	7.95		—	
Cutpoint 5	10.24		—	
Model Statistics	N = 414 Pseudo R² = .36		N = 441, % correctly predicted = 88.0 Pseudo R² = .13	

Note: [a]Among those still affiliated with their Wave 1 house of worship.
Source: 2012 Election Panel Study.

is similar to the 2006 study as well: 15% among mainline Protestants, and about 10% among evangelicals (10%), Catholics (11%), Black Protestants (12.5%), and Jews (10%). This represents an enormous amount of churn in the religious economy.

2012 Election Panel Study Results: Attendance

In Table 2, we estimate Wave 2 attendance while including Wave 1 attendance,[13] controls, and a critical interaction

term between Wave 1 attendance and the index of differences with the congregation constructed from the items listed in Table 1.[14] Attendance at Wave 1 is a strong, significant, and positive predictor of Wave 2 attendance. Differences with the congregation experienced at Wave 2 are linked with lower levels of attendance, and the interaction between Wave 1 attendance and the congregational differences index produces distinguishable slopes (see Figure A1 in the SI).[15] Greater differences with the congregation are associated with lower levels of attendance

[13]We include the lagged value of the dependent variable, as is typical in static-score and other panel data techniques (e.g., Finkel 1995).

[14]This index holds together well (α = .81). Please see the SI for additional information on its construction (p. 3).

[15]We provide an extensive discussion of our treatment of interaction terms in the SI (p. 29).

FIGURE 1 Predicted Levels of Disaffiliation Given Feelings of Differences with the Congregation, across Wave 1 Attendance
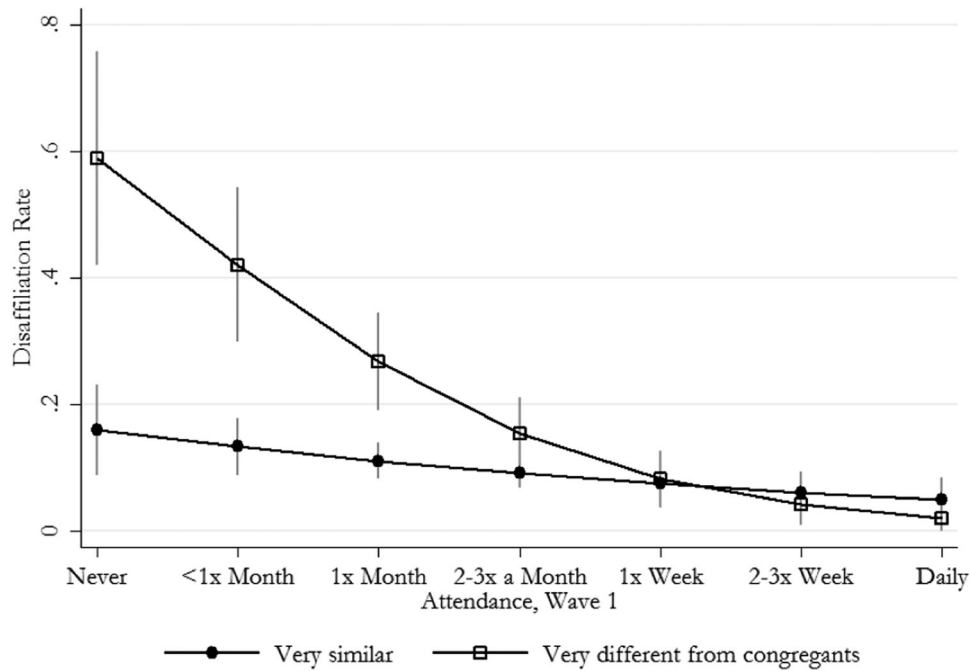
Note: Estimates are from Table 2, with 90% confidence intervals presented.
Source: 2012 Election Panel Study

at Wave 2 at low levels of initial (Wave 1) attendance. The effects of difference dissipate quickly and become indistinguishable at regular levels of Wave 1 attendance (once a month or more). Notably, once we control for congregational differences, feelings toward Christian fundamentalists have no effect on attendance rates either alone or when interacted with ideology.[16]

2012 Panel Results: Disaffiliation

In column 2 of Table 2, we show estimates for disaffiliation (leaving the Wave 1 church as reported in Wave 2; this is coded 0–1). Lagged attendance is a statistically significant predictor in the model—higher attendance serves to drive down the likelihood of leaving the church. Feelings toward the Religious Right have no effect alone or when interacted with ideology or partisanship.[17]

[16] For further analysis with the Christian Right, please see the SI (p. 29).

[17] We also looked for effects of opposition to Christian fundamentalists once congregational differences are excluded, mirroring the analysis of a triple interaction discussed in the previous note. The results here are not significant, but they are suggestive that opposition to Christian fundamentalists increases disaffiliation among strong conservatives who attend regularly.

Importantly, feeling politically different from the rest of one's congregation at Wave 1 is a positive and statistically significant predictor of leaving the church by Wave 2. As shown in Figure 1, this covariate interacts with Wave 1 attendance such that political difference only helps to push out marginal attenders. On this score, it is important to note that partisan difference with the congregation and worship attendance are *not* correlated in Wave 1 (r = −.03, p = .34). We cannot say (of course) that partisan difference is a random intervention, but this finding helps to reinforce the idea that politics is a secondary consideration for membership. Thus, we suspect that if attendance ebbs for some reason (e.g., the "summer melt," or the ability to do something else on Sunday; see Gerber, Gruber, and Hungerman 2016), individuals are likely to reflect on their fit before reengaging.

Age is the only other predictor in the model that reaches conventional levels of statistical significance, as older individuals are less likely to leave their church. Somewhat surprisingly, there is no evidence that religious tradition (denominational affiliation) matters in explaining disaffiliation net of everything else. Even in a specification without other covariates, only the catchall category of "other" religious groups is more likely to experience disaffiliation than evangelicals—no other religious

TABLE 3 **Predicting Worship Attendance and Disaffiliation by Perceived Differences with the Congregation**

	Worship Attendance (Ordered Logit)[a]		Disaffiliation (Logit)	
	B	**p**	**B**	**p**
Attendance, Wave 1	1.91	.00	−.29	.02
Differences with Congregation Index	−.09	.20	.86	.00
Attendance × Differences	—		−.22	.00
Church Member Friends	.40	.28	−.76	.18
Female	−.18	.42	.10	.73
Religious Right Support	.36	.01	.07	.72
Mainline Protestant	−.37	.18	.25	.46
Catholic	−.25	.39	.01	.99
Constant	—		−.77	.11
Cutpoint 1	3.48		—	
Cutpoint 2	6.13		—	
Cutpoint 3	8.09		—	
Cutpoint 4	12.00		—	
Model Statistics	N = 357		N = 468 Pseudo R^2 = .15	
	Pseudo R^2 = .31			

Note: [a]The Brant test is χ^2 = 20.62, p = .48.
Source: 2006 Franklin County Republican Primary Study

tradition is significantly different in this regard (results not shown).

2006 Franklin County Panel Results: Church Attendance

Now we shift gears to examine the same tests, but with a sample of Republican primary voters observed in the wake of a nomination contest that highlighted Christian Right politics. This is a group that our theory predicts should be likely to exhibit changes in religious behavior as a response to the politicization of their houses of worship by Christian conservatives. The first column of results in Table 3 shows ordered logit estimates of attendance at Wave 2, controlling for Wave 1 attendance. We find that an index of the six dimensions of difference with the congregation (this is similar to what was presented in Table 1)[18] points toward lower attendance at Wave 2 (which is 6 months later), but it is not significant at conventional levels.

We also find that support for the Christian Right is positively associated with an increase in attendance at Wave 2. This is the relationship found in the literature, only it is essential to recall the nature of the sample

[18]For this index, the alpha is .58.

and timing—as mentioned above, these data were gathered from Ohio Republican primary voters in an election cycle that involved a clearly identified Christian Right candidate (Ohio gubernatorial candidate Ken Blackwell). Accordingly, a different way to look at these results is that Republican primary voters who disliked the Christian Right opted to reduce attachment to their churches across this election cycle, in which a tough primary fight made the Christian Right salient in their houses of worship.

2006 Franklin County Panel Results: Disaffiliation

Next, we assess the same model's effect on disaffiliation. Table 3 (column 2) shows that differences felt with the congregation interact with Wave 1 attendance to predict disaffiliation. That relationship is depicted in Figure 2, which shows the sensible relationship that differences have a much greater impact on increasing disaffiliation when involvement is marginal to begin with (see also Figure 1). Feeling different has no effect if an individual is well integrated into the life of the church. None of the individual difference items stand out in the same way (see Table A2, column 2, on p. 6 of the SI), which emphasizes that political differences are not unique, but part of a

FIGURE 2 **The Marginal Effect of a Difference with the Congregation on Disaffiliation, Given Wave 1 Attendance**
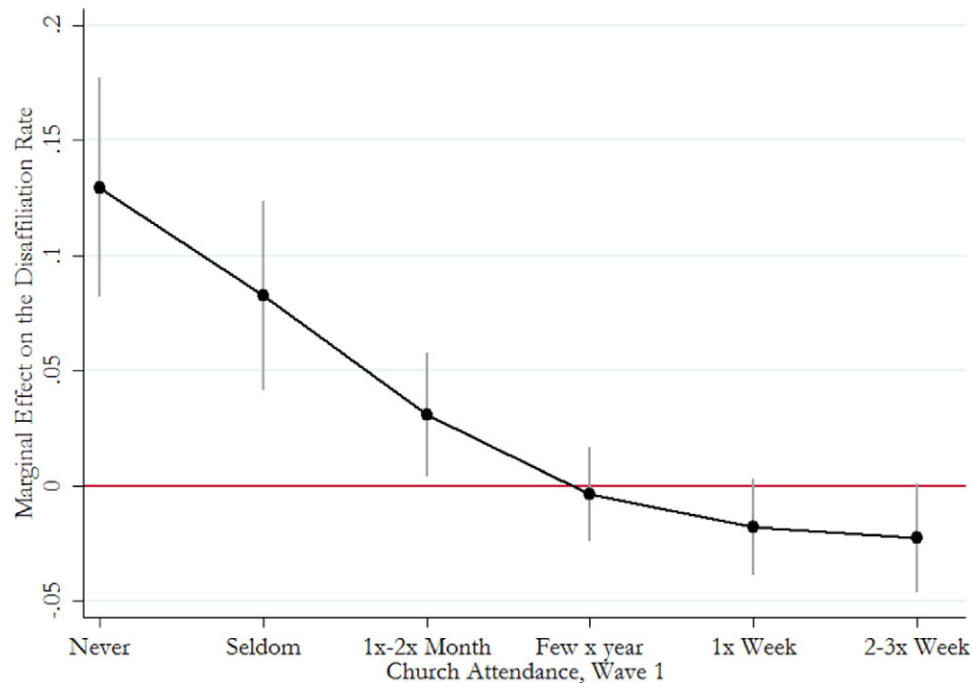
Note: Estimates are from Table 3, with 90% confidence intervals presented.
Source: 2006 Franklin County Republican Primary Study.

larger set of linked considerations.[19] In this model, feelings toward the Christian Right have no effect one way or another on disaffiliation.

Portraits of American Life Study: Disaffiliation

The last of the panel data we draw on is of a longer time span, with respondents reinterviewed a full 6 years after first contact in 2006. We focus our attention here on the key variable of whether the respondents have left the house of worship they were attending in 2006.[20] We begin with the subset of 2006 respondents who indicated a religious affiliation, and then differentiate them using an item from 2012 that asked whether they were still

attending the same church (using its actual name provided in 2006). Of those who are included in our model results, 29.4% reported that they had left their 2006 congregation in the interim 6 years.

This survey does not have an extensive battery of questions about congregational difference, though it does include questions about satisfaction with the church experience, attendance at both waves, feeling like an outsider in church, and other relevant items. While we cannot test for the role of general political difference in the congregation, we can assess the effect of support for conservative Christians active in politics, conditional on religious tradition and partisanship.[21] If Hout and Fischer (2002, 2014) and others are correct, then Democrats and moderates should be more likely to leave their 2006 congregation, especially when they oppose the Christian Right. However, if our revisions to this narrative are correct, then those opponents of the Christian Right who are likely to face disagreement over such views in their congregation—that is, evangelical

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[19]Table A3 (p. 7) in the SI presents tetrachoric correlations (given binary variables) between all items of perceived difference with the congregation. All of the items are significantly and positively correlated with each other, with the exception of "racial/ethnic differences," which is not correlated with any other measure but political activity.

[20]In the SI (Table A5, p. 9), we present results for the stability of attendance across the 6-year span. The essential result is that there is no effect of opposition to the Christian Right, either alone or in interaction with partisanship.

[21]Unlike with the other data sets, the results here are not the same when we substitute political ideology for partisanship. One possible source of this difference is that this ideology question included the option "or haven't you thought much about this?" which was subscribed to by 26.5% of the sample and was much more common among Democrats.

FIGURE 3 **The Interactive Effect of Partisanship, Evangelical Tradition, and Opposition to Conservative Christians Active in Politics on Leaving 2006 Church by 2012**
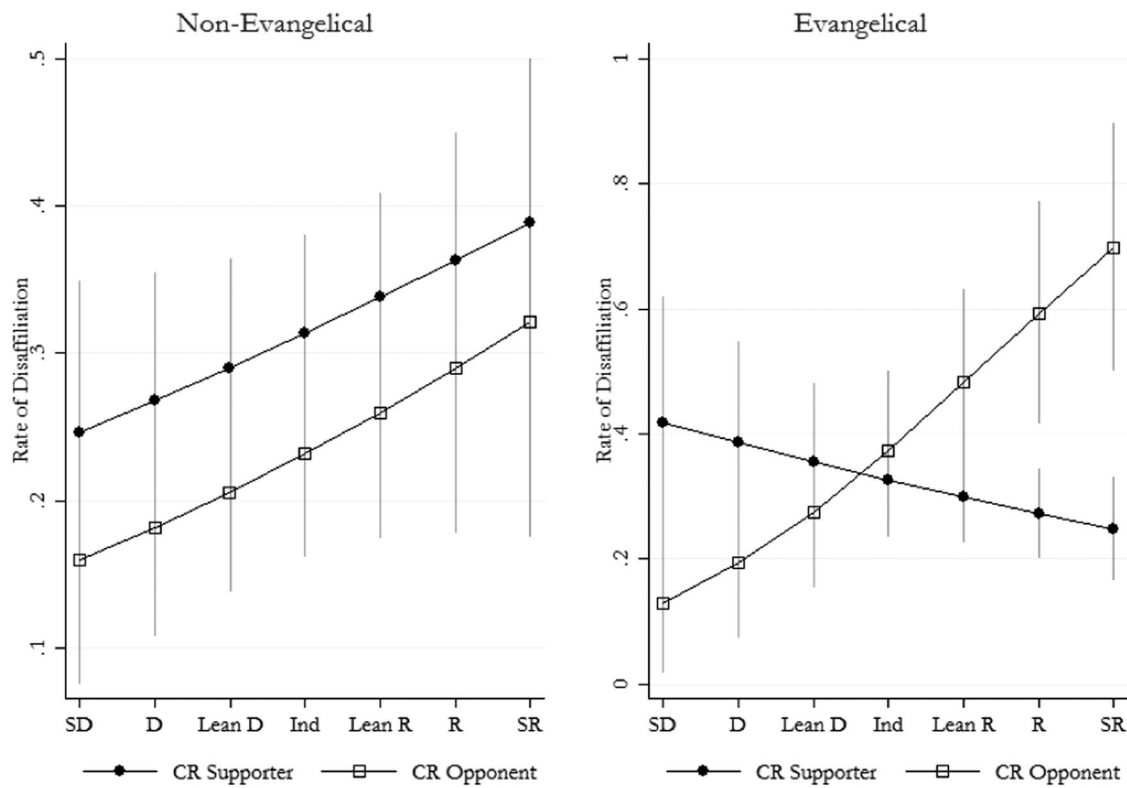
Note: Estimates are from Table A4 in the SI, with 90% confidence intervals presented.
Source: 2012 Portraits of American Life Study.

Republicans—should be the most likely to leave. In particular, we suspect that evangelical Republicans who oppose the Christian Right will exhibit the greatest propensity to disaffiliate. In an ideal world, we would have measures of perceived difference with the congregation in all of our data sets. Absent such items, however, focusing on evangelical Republicans helps to capture those most likely to experience political divisions over the Christian Right in church.[22]

The full model results are available in the SI (Table A4, p. 8). In Figure 3, we focus on the estimates of interest: the plot of a triple interaction between evangelical identification, partisanship, and opposition to the Christian Right. In contrast to the proposed relationship

in the literature, *we find that evangelical Republicans who oppose the Christian Right are more likely to have left their congregation.* Among nonevangelicals (left panel), opposition to the Christian Right has no effect, and partisans are not distinguishable from one another in their rates of disaffiliation. Among evangelicals (right panel) who support the Christian Right, we see no differences across partisanship. However, evangelicals who opposed the Christian Right and were strong Democrats were less likely to leave their congregation than Republican evangelicals who opposed the Christian Right.

While these results rely on a proxy for congregational salience rather than direct measures of it, the results lend weight to our assessment that political difference that is salient to a congregation is an important driver of congregational attachment. These results also square with our findings among Republican primary voters in Franklin County (see also Figure A2 in the SI)—individual opposition to the Christian Right helped individuals loosen ties with their congregations when subjected to Christian Right information via an electoral contest.

[22]In the SI in Figure A13 (p. 31), we use these data to look at how opposition to the Christian Right is distributed across partisanship and religious traditions—there is considerable minority opposition among evangelicals and Republicans. In doing so, we further comment on the use of such indicators to get at (likely) exposure to difference in congregations in the absence of more detailed contextual items.

Discussion: Reconciling Affiliation and Identification to Understand Religious Exit

We have presented strong evidence that the political visibility of the Christian Right is itself not driving people to disaffiliate (or at the very least, that such a dynamic is neither the sole nor the primary mover). Rather, our story focuses on how information about the Christian Right intersects with individuals in organizational contexts: opposition to the Christian Right that finds disagreement in congregations encourages disaffiliation among the marginally connected. Of course, we also believe Hout and Fischer (2002, 2014), as well as others, who show convincing evidence that people are willing to part with marginal religious *identifications* given their opposition to coverage of the Christian Right's political activities. How can these two perspectives be reconciled?

Stressing the theme that runs throughout our effort, it is critical to distinguish affiliation processes (with a congregation) from identification processes (with a religious label). Under this scheme, we suspect that media coverage of a controversial group only comes into play when the referent is no longer a local religious community, but the idea of religion in general. Put differently, once people disaffiliate from a congregation, cues that might inform what "religion" represents in public then become salient. Two pieces of evidence from the PALS data help support such speculation. First, deidentification (moving from a religious label in Wave 1 to a nonreligious label in Wave 2) is a wholly owned subsidiary of those who left their Wave 1 congregation. Of those remaining in their Wave 1 congregation, *none* are deidentifiers in Wave 2, whereas 28% of those who left their congregation deidentified. Second, we verify the Hout and Fischer story that opposition to the Christian Right is implicated in higher deidentification rates, an effect that is particularly strong among Democrats (see Figure A12 on p. 26 of the SI).[23]

Thinking more about these two processes, a broader integration of the forces involved is possible (though only a brief account of them can be shared here). In this view, the beginning of these dynamics can be found in the 1960s, during which time political issues that were salient to American clergy began to ignite their political activism (e.g., Hadden 1969; Quinley 1974). From the scant evidence available, the political involvement of clergy—including cue giving—began to grow during that time

(Djupe and Gilbert 2008; Guth 1996), and earlier differences in political activity between liberal and conservative clergy have since closed (Guth et al. 1997). Moreover, the barriers to organizational exit were falling throughout this period; the widespread decline of denominationalism (Wuthnow 1988) has been associated with intensifying rates of movement in the religious economy (Sherkat 2001). Put together, then, political engagement within congregations helped to provide the seed for recognizing difference, which has allowed members to more easily disaffiliate given declining brand loyalty.

Of course, these forces were at play at precisely the time when the Christian Right rose to prominence, a movement that was also reacting to the same set of issues that sparked clergy to act. As the story of religion in American politics is increasingly being sold as the Christian Right agenda (Bolce and De Maio 2008)—one that is generally portrayed in a negative light (Kerr 2003; Kerr and Moy 2002)—it makes sense to think that people without readily available benchmarks (the disaffiliated) would use available cues to evaluate the status of religion in their lives. Though there are other forces impinging on religious identification, we argue that a broader, more pluralistic politicization of American religion was laying the groundwork for the Hout and Fischer (2002, 2014) story—that marginal identifiers shed their identification as the prominence of the Christian Right rapidly grew during the early 1990s.

Conclusion

The evidence presented by scholars such as Hout and Fischer (2002) and Patrikios (2008) is, prima facie, consistent with a story about forces at a societal level affecting individual religious behavior. However, in our view, this narrative omits a crucial part of the overall picture: the congregation-level dynamics experienced by the faithful.

Individuals may develop notions about religion in general, but they make decisions about whether to leave particular congregations. Choosing to leave a congregation entails weighing an Olsonian (1965) mix of costs and benefits—a mix that involves politics in two forms. As political attitudes signal a vision for how society should be ordered, encountering disagreement over such core orientations raises deep questions about institutional fit. Those concerns can be papered over if other valued benefits are available: social ties, programs, and a message.[24]

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[23]To be fair, the 6-year gap—a large temporal unit—between panels leaves open the possibility that people deidentify before disaffiliating. However, there are no people still in the same congregation who can be classified as nonidentifiers.

[24]There are undoubtedly other, nonworship, activities that can help to promote congregational cohesion that we are unable to capture

However, this also suggests a path for how politics may undermine attachment to a congregation: If a political agenda weakens the provision of benefits or raises the salience of political difference, then it becomes harder for congregants to avoid evaluating their political fit.[25] In two panel data sets, while controlling for prior attendance, political differences with the congregation draw down attendance among marginal attenders. Political differences—in terms of attitudes as well as interest in politics—are part and parcel of a broader suite of differences, which are quite commonly found in congregations. These differences are not salient to retention decisions for everyone, but for those with more tenuous connections to the congregation and hence fewer benefits to outweigh the costs of diversity.

While we do find some evidence that opposition to the Religious Right influences religious behavior, we see that its impact is limited to those who are likely to confront disagreement in the context of a congregation. We capture this in several ways. In panel data collected from a single county in 2006 (an electoral context highlighting the Christian Right), we find that opposition to Christian Right groups drives Ohio Republican primary voters out of their churches.In a national sample, after 6 years we see that the rate of leaving a church is actually higher among evangelical Republicans who opposed the Christian Right.[26]

In the end, we join the chorus of other scholars who acknowledge a reversal of the usual order—the idea that politics can and does influence religion (Hout and Fischer 2002, 2014; Margolis 2016; Patrikios 2008; Putnam and Campbell 2010; Vargas 2012). Of course, we also diverge in important ways from this growing body of work, and recognizing these differences is important. While emphasizing the ways in which our work complements previous efforts, we wish to issue a call for future researchers to acknowledge the considerable difference between attachment to a congregation (affiliation) and the religious identities (identification) that may float from concrete social attachments (e.g., Welch and Leege 1991).

Indeed, religious disaffiliation is of great consequence for a number of other outcomes about which political scientists and other social scientists care greatly. Leaving a church disrupts the channels of interpersonal and organizational communication within the church environment, both of which often transmit politically relevant information and invitations to political activity (e.g., Djupe, Sokhey, and Gilbert 2007; Gilbert 1993; Huckfeldt, Plutzer, and Sprague 1993; Wald, Owen, and Hill 1988). However, we close with a bit of good news for those who care about the democratic goods that can be generated in religious institutions (e.g., Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001; Djupe and Gilbert 2009; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995): Disaffiliation appears to be most prevalent among those whose initial attachment with a church is weak. More generally, our findings spell good news for those who care about broader patterns of associational and civic health in the United States. In finding evidence to reinforce the potency of congregational evaluations, we are reminded that the logic of organizational affiliation in the United States is not as fragile as some accounts would make it out to be—rather than an affiliation that is blown about easily by the winds of group evaluations, it appears to be firmly embedded in social ties, exchange, and everyday experience.

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consistently (or at all) with the available data. Social ties, in particular, may help to keep marginal attenders in the pews. As we show in Figure A11 in the SI (p. 25), those who attend church infrequently *and* feel different from the rest of the congregation are less likely to discuss politics and other important matters with someone affiliated with the church.

[25]See the SI (pp. 12–17) for additional evidence regarding the effects of the salience of political activity on lower church attendance from the United States Congregational Life Study.

[26]For additional evidence on this point, see the discussion in the SI (p. 29) regarding results from the ANES.

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Supporting Information

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's website:

It includes variable coding information for all data used in the paper, but also features additional analyses that underpin results displays, and results from several additional data sources (ANES time series and 2001 USCLS) that support and contextualize our claims.