ABSTRACT

Political Identity Switching and Change in Religiosity among Students at a Conservative Christian University

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Research on university students' religiosity concentrates on the effect of higher education on religious behavior and belief. Some of this effect may be due to higher education's influence on political identity which – in a context of increased political polarization and expressive political identity – may impact religious commitment. Using longitudinal panel data from the Baylor Faith and Character Study, this study examines change in political identity and religiosity among students at a conservative Protestant university. Findings reveal changes in public and private religious behaviors, certainty in belief and their alignment with core tenets of the Christian faith, and spirituality and one's relationship to the divine corresponding with shifting politics. While students who become more politically conservative increase their religiosity, the inverse is true for those whose politics liberalize.

Political Identity Switching and Change in Religiosity among Students at a Conservative Christian University

by

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

DEDICATION

To my grandfathers, L.D. and Chuck, who both cultivated within me an understanding of the profound influence of politics in structuring our society. I miss you, Papa.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

One of the most enduring and robust social cleavages of the last half century is the "God Gap." Religious Americans tend to identify with and vote for the Republican Party, while those who are not actively religious typically rally behind the Democratic Party. This divergence in political commitments by religiosity has been discussed at length in the academic community (Abramowitz 2010; Layman 2001) and is an association widely known within the general public. For the majority of United States history, affiliation with religious denominations differed within party lines and each party drew comparable support from Americans of differing religious traditions. Since the 1970s and 1980s, however, this relationship has changed. Democratic and Republican parties adopted divergent positions on moral issues, and religious groups organized politically to influence public policy in ways that aligned these groups with a singular political party (Hartman 2015; Layman 2001; Putnam and Campbell 2012).

This narrative of religious voters coalescing over time in support of the Republican Party remains a persuasive explanation for the creation of the God Gap (Hout and Fischer 2002; Putnam and Campbell 2012), but many are now advancing another narrative that contends one's religiosity is no longer as determinative of political affiliation as political affiliation is of religiosity (Campbell et al. 2018; Egan 2020; Margolis 2018b). Today, this theory suggests, more and more American political

partisans have internalized the God Gap and correspondingly shifted their religious beliefs and behaviors to align with their political identity.

      This study analyzes concurrent changes in politics and religiosity among students at a conservative Protestant university in the southwest United States. Prior research shows a marked decline in religiosity, most notably religious participation, for emerging adults during their college years (Astin, Astin, and Lindholm 2010; Uecker, Regnerus, and Vaaler 2007); is this trend accelerated for those whose politics shift from toward the political left while in college? In other words, do college students who become politically liberal lose their religion in the process?

CHAPTER TWO

Background

Political Polarization and Expressive Political Identity

In the definition of one's self, people take on numerous identities – religious,

political, gender-specific, racial, regional, etc. – that define the individual and help locate

them with similar others in social groups (Stryker and Burke 2000). Once an individual

internalizes membership within a social group, they experience high levels of in-group

identification, inter-group differentiation, and in-group bias (Tajfel 1978; Roccas and

Brewer 2002). One's political identity operates as a social identity with the power to

shape individuals' policy preferences toward political and moral issues, voting behavior,

and evaluations of members who do and do not share their political identity (Green et al.

2002). In the last four decades, the United States experienced increasing affective

political polarization, in which people unconsciously employ their political identity as a

primary script for deciding everyday judgements toward others (Iyengar et al. 2012;

Iyengar and Westwood 2015).

In identifying with their political party, partisans take on negative evaluations of

the opposing party, thereby strengthening their in-group ties and distance from outsiders.

Iyengar et al. (2012) argued a perspective of polarization emphasizing the "social

distance" between adherents of the two parties. Their data demonstrate that, while

showing consistently favorable ratings of the in-group, ratings of the out-party among

Republicans and Democrats plummeted from 1978 to 2008. Partisan affect, not ideology,

seems to drive political polarization and the authors conclude there is sufficient animosity for political affiliation to be relevant in everyday interpersonal relations. Affective polarization creates social distance between parties by causing Americans to perceive those who belong to an opposing political party in stereotypical ways (Ahler and Sood 2018). Partisan identity salience, beliefs of out-party extremity, and partisan affect are associated with dramatic misperceptions of the out-party's composition. Moreover, affective polarization creates hostility toward opposing party members outside the realm of politics to a degree sometimes exceeding race-based discrimination (Iyengar and Westwood 2015).

Political identity is consequential in other ways in the US. It can operate in an expressive way that determines positions on political and moral issues such as abortion, with the effect varying according to the salience of one's political identity and their awareness of issue-based party differences (Carsey and Layman 2006). For example, although most Americans have moderate stances on the situational morality of abortion, people who change party identification from Republican to Democrat take on the position toward abortion characteristic of the Democratic Party (Killian and Wilcox 2008). Other studies document how priming one's political identity motivates changes in their voting behavior. After sending a treatment group a mailer reminding them of the need to register with a political party and vote, Gerber, Huber, and Washington (2010) found that the treatment group reported a higher level of party identification and alignment with their party on partisan political issues when surveyed four months later. Similarly, a series of experiments underscore the ability of political identity to engender emotional energy to motivate campaign activity (Huddy et al. 2015).

This expressive partisanship reifies and is reified by "social sorting", as American political identities have come to be more and more closely associated with other social identities, be they religious, racial, or another group identity (Mason 2018). This phenomenon creates an increasingly socially homogenous set of parties whose cultures are seen and internalized by members as direct counterparts. Many trace the growing linkage between religious and political identity as an instrumental relationship in which religious people are guided by their religious identity and religious values to ally with a particular political party's platform (Layman 2001), but affective polarization and social sorting makes political identity more deterministic of individuals' religious identity in recent decades (Campbell et. Al 2018; Margolis 2018b; Patrikios 2008).

Shifting Politics, Shifting Religion

Recent literature positions religious identity as a dependent variable influenced by one's political attitudes, with U.S. panel data demonstrating shifts in people's religious affiliation and behavior in response to political convictions (Hout and Fischer 2002, 2014; Patrikios 2008; Putnam and Campbell 2012; Campbell et al. 2018; Margolis 2018b). For example, Margolis (2018a) found that respondents updated their previously reported religious identity to better align with their political identity following priming of their political identity. The salience of political identities now exceeds that of religious identities for many Americans (Margolis 2018b). Conservative Republicans are more likely than liberal Democrats to be born again Christians and liberal Democrats are more likely than conservative Republicans to become less actively religious or leave religion altogether (Putnam and Campbell 2012; Egan 2020). Hout and Fischer (2002) analyzed the doubling of religious "nones" in the 1990s. They hypothesized that the rise was best

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explained as a disaffiliation from religion in rejection of traditional religion's association with conservative politics and the Republican Party. Later analysis clarifies this to be a phenomenon of religious disaffiliation and not religious disbelief, as liberalizing respondents report declines in religious participation or disaffiliation altogether but not substantial change in religious beliefs (Rhodes 2010; Hout and Fischer 2014). The image of Republicans as religious causes political conservatives to disaffiliate less from religious groups than either moderates or liberals (Loveland 2003); likewise, marginal congregants appear more likely to be Democrat than Republican (Djupe, Neiheisel, and Sokhey 2018). Democrats who are religious tend to experience dissonance between their political identity and religious identity, feel out of place, and may exit their religion (Patrikios 2008; Campbell et al. 2018). This is further illustrated by research showing that the population of those who are both religious and politically liberal steadily decreased in size and level of political involvement over the last two decades (Baker and Martí 2020). Altogether, these studies show a growing bifurcation of religion and politics, with Republicans as religious conservatives and Democrats as religious liberals or irreligious.

Leaving the Faith?

This clear separation of the religious and nonreligious by political identity is made all the more robust by the coincidence of religious and political identity formation in the life course. Adolescence and early adulthood are times of religious transition for many. As teenagers move into their early twenties, decreases typically occur in church attendance (Uecker et al. 2007; Smith 2009; Astin, Astin, and Lindholm 2010; Desmond et al. 2010; Wuthnow 2007), prayer (Smith 2009), and the importance of one's religious identity (Desmond et al. 2010; Smith 2009).

A popular belief has been that college students leave organized religion as a result of higher education (Wuthnow and Glock 1973; Hastings and Hoge 1981). The assumption is that post-secondary education encourages students to question their religious beliefs, making colleges and universities "the breeding grounds for apostasy" (Caplovitz and Sherrow 1977: 109). Yet, contemporary research contests the common wisdom that religiosity declines sharply during emerging adulthood. Analysis of the National Study of Youth and Religion shows that one half or more of all young adults retain their religious tradition from their teenage years to adulthood (Smith 2009). Similarly, Astin, Astin, and Lindholm (2010) found that though college students attend religious services less often, their levels of religious commitment (measured by a scale of religious attitude and belief items) change very little during college and they grow in measures of spirituality and spiritual seeking.

The trend of religious dropouts seems to only apply when discussing religious attendance. The most significant impediment to college students' religious lives is time. Students' decline in religious service attendance is often simply explained by conflict between their prior religious lives and the pressures attached to accumulation of academic knowledge and geographic relocation (Hill 2009; Astin, Astin, and Lindholm 2010). In fact, much contemporary research points to a weak relationship between higher education and religiosity. A decline in religious service attendance among emerging adults is no more likely for college students, and sometimes less likely, than for those who do not attend college (Uecker et al. 2007; Mayrl and Uecker 2011), buttressing Astin, Astin, and Lindholm's argument that attending college might actually positively impact students' religious lives by cultivating their spirituality. The weakening, and sometimes

disappearing, effect of higher education on religiosity has been explained by intergenerational growth in higher education (Schwadel 2014) and more educationally diverse religious organizations (Schwadel 2009). Whatever the cause, higher education is no longer associated with a loss of religion; rather it is now possible to be both religious and educated (Wuthnow 2007: 87).

Religious Engagement by College Type

Religious engagement, commitment, and attendance – three widely accepted measures of religiosity – also vary greatly by type of college or university. Astin et al. (2010:97-98) found that the percentage of incoming students who had frequently attended religious services in the year prior to enrollment was far lower for public universities (39%) and private nonreligious universities (44%) than at religiously affiliated universities. Of those attending religiously affiliated universities, the percentage was 90% for evangelical universities, 49% for Catholic universities, and 61% for other Christian universities. Religious universities provide a more comfortable, nurturing community for those who are religious, leading to a stark separation in the levels of religious engagement and belief compared to those at secular universities (Hill 2011). In addition, the rate at which students' religious engagement decreases while at college varies according to college type. Those at conservative Protestant colleges tend to decrease in religiosity at a slower rate than do students at Catholic and mainline Protestant schools, with Catholic and mainline universities students' religiosity often declining more than public schools (Hill 2009). Measures of religiosity are consistently highest for students at evangelical or conservative Protestant universities (Astin et al. 2010; Hill 2009, 2011). This is due in large part to selection as well as to the ability of conservative Protestant

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universities to create and maintain a moral community rooted in religious values. The social networks of students at these universities are more religiously homogenous, contributing to the legitimation of religious belief and practice (Hill 2009).

From the preceding sections, we see that political polarization has occurred in the United States and that increased salience of politics increasingly seems to influence religious behavior and identity. What is missing from existing research is attention to when and how in a person's life course political changes and concomitant religious changes occur. Emerging adulthood is a segment of life when individuals' partisan political identity is highly influenced (Margolis 2018a; Smith 2009). A growing body of research tracks religious changes during the college years (Smith 2009; Astin et al. 2010; Hill 2009, 2011; Hall et al. 2016). To the best of my knowledge, no previous study has examined politics and religion with longitudinal data at a religious university or, for that matter, sought an understanding of change in political identity and its relation to religious belief, spirituality, and behavior at this moment in the life course.

Hypotheses

Contemporary research has attempted to disentangle the distinct relationship between religious and political identities, showing that people make strong associations with religiosity and conservative political belief and affiliation (Hout and Fischer 2002, 2014; Putnam and Campbell 2012). At conservative Christian colleges and universities, where overlapping religious social networks establish norms of religiosity, we expect this link to be particularly robust. Shifting toward the political left would violate reciprocal norms of political and religious identity in these communities and provoke sharp dissonance from one's religious identity. This leads to the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Political liberalization in the college years will be associated with less active public and private religious activities.

Hypothesis 2: Political liberalization will be associated with more internal doubt in religious/spiritual beliefs and, ultimately, reduced belief among students.

We also consider change in one's spirituality in relation to political liberalization, operationalized by Vertical (FM-V) and Horizontal (FM-H) subscales of Benson's Faith Maturity Scale (1993). Students who receive social support signaling that their political and religious identities are aligned will be more confident in their faith, feel more at home in religious community, and more enthusiastically seek out opportunities to develop their relationship with the divine. For those that are able to negotiate this dissonance between liberal political identity and religiosity, their spirituality may change to reflect integration of general politically liberal values with their religiosity by becoming more service-minded in their spirituality, as Campbell (2006) suggests in his discourse on education and civic engagement. Previous research has shown an association between political conservatism and FM-V scores, as well as liberalism and FM-H scores (Benson 1993; Burtt et al. 2021). This leads me to hypothesize as follows:

Hypothesis 3: Political liberalization will be associated with feeling more distant in relation to the divine.

Hypothesis 4: Political liberalization will be associated with lower scores on the Vertical Faith Maturity scale, or less spiritual seeking.

Hypothesis 5: Political liberalization will be associated with higher scores on the

Horizontal Faith Maturity scale, a measure of the degree to which one's

religious faith motivates pro-social action.

CHAPTER THREE

Data, Measures, and Methods

Data

The present study uses longitudinal panel data from the Baylor Faith and Character Study, a mixed-methods research project exploring spiritual formation and character development throughout the college years at a large conservative Christian university in the South (Dougherty et al. 2021). Though it is limited to one conservative Christian university, these data are well-suited for my purposes of analyzing the changing relationship of political identity and religiosity due to its position as a leading conservative Protestant Christian university. As such, it is a bellwether for other conservative Protestant colleges and universities, where the effects of religious moral community are most robust. The first wave of data was administered in August 2018, on the first day of chapel, a weekly religious service students are required to attend in their first two semesters at the university. Students received an email from the Office of Institutional Research and Testing with a link to the online survey instrument. Of 3,718 new undergraduate students entering the university in the Fall of 2018, 3,369 completed an online religion survey for a 91% response rate. In the summer of 2020, the same survey was distributed to 2,799 students entering their third year at the university who had participated in the initial survey. A total of 561 students completed the survey for a response rate of 20%. After exclusion of cases with missing data or invalid codes for key variables, my analytic sample includes 400 students.

Dependent Variables

Religious activities. First, I analyze change in students' public and private religious activities using three measures: religious service attendance, prayer or meditation, and reading the Bible. To measure students' frequency of attending religious services (a reliable test of public religiosity and involvement in moral community), they were asked "how often do you attend religious services at a church, mosque, synagogue, or other place of worship?" Available answers ranged from 0 = "never" to 7 = "several times a week." Frequency of private prayer or meditation was included among a set of activities beneath the question "during the past year, how much time do you spend during a typical week doing the following activities?" Response categories ranged from 0 = "never" to 7 = "over 20 hours". Bible reading was assessed using the item "how often do you read the Bible?", with response options ranging from 0 = "never" to 7 = "daily". Change in the frequency of engaging in all three religious activities was assessed by a subtraction of the year 1 value from the value at year 3, so that positive scores show increased attendance, prayer, or Bible reading.

Religious belief and doubt. In examination of how one's religious beliefs change over time, I use a six-item version of the Christian Orthodoxy (CO) scale developed to assess acceptance of core Christian beliefs pertaining to God, Jesus, and the Bible (Fullerton and Hunsberger 1982; Hunsberger 1989). Items included on the Short Christian Orthodoxy (SCO) scale ask respondents to indicate their level of agreement (1 = "strongly disagree" to 7 = "strongly agree") to these statements:

1. Jesus was the divine Son of God.

2. The Bible may be an important book of moral teachings, but it was no more inspired by God than were many other such books in human history.

3. The concept of God is an old superstition that is no longer needed to explain things in the modern era.

4. Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God provided a way for the forgiveness of people's sins.

5. Despite what many people believe, there is no such thing as a God who is aware of our actions.

6. Jesus was crucified, died, and was buried but on the third day He arose from the dead.

Negatively worded statements (items 2, 3, and 5) are reverse coded so that for all items a low score indicates an unorthodox belief, and a high score indicates an orthodox belief. Scores on the Christian Orthodoxy scale range from one to seven, with higher values indicating more orthodox beliefs. Others have used this scale in the university setting to test Christian Orthodoxy among alumni at two Christian colleges (Cook et al. 2014) and students at a public university (Cummings et al. 2017). Change scores were created by subtracting year 1 Christian Orthodoxy values from year 3 Christian Orthodoxy to measure difference in belief as the students transition through the college years. Positive Christian Orthodoxy change scores correspond to increased acceptance of traditional Christian beliefs. Negative change scores show lesser agreement, or disagreement, with orthodox Christian beliefs compared to year 3.

Two key variables measure dissonance between the student and their religious beliefs as they traverse the college years. Questioning one's religious or spiritual beliefs was included in the survey as an item to the question "since entering college, please indicate how often you have participated in the following activities." Responses ranged

from 1 = "not at all" to 3 = frequently. I also include a measure of how often one is actively struggling with their religion or spirituality as a more general measure of conscious dissonance between the self and their religion. The Baylor Faith and Character Study defines religious struggles as "feelings of confusion or doubt about your religious/spiritual beliefs; feelings as though your life had no deeper meaning; conflicts with other people about religious/spiritual matters; feeling hurt/mistreated by religious people; or feeling attacked by evil forces." Response options range from 1 = "never/not at all" to 5 = "very often." For both variables, I subtracted year 1 response scores from year 3 scores to create variables depicting increasing doubt in or conscious wrestling with one's religion.

Spirituality and closeness to God. To measure the characteristics and levels of students' spirituality, I employ the Vertical Faith Maturity (FM-V) and Horizontal Faith Maturity (FM-H) subscales derived from Benson, Donahue, and Erickson's (1993) original 38-item Faith Maturity Scale (FMS). The Faith Maturity Scale contains indicators of faith as lived out in everyday life rather than general statements of belief. The Vertical Faith Maturity subscale has seven items that measure the strength of a respondent's relationship with the metaphysical, one's attempts to find God, and their personal experiences with the divine. Sample items from the FM-V scale include "I have a real sense that God is guiding me" and "I seek opportunities to help me grow spiritually." FM-V scores range from one to seven, with higher numbers indicating more active prioritization of the relationship between the believer and the divine, and greater perceived closeness to the divine. Higher scores on this scale have shown to be associated with higher church engagement (Benson, Donahue, and Erickson 1993), feeling

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connected to a higher power, and increased frequency of church attendance and personal prayer (Piedmont and Nelson 2001). Change scores measuring fluctuation in one's level of spirituality were constructed as subtractions of year 1 FM-V values from year 3 FM-V. Positive change score values show an increase in spirituality and perceived closeness with the divine. Change scores of zero indicate no change. Negative scores show decreased spirituality over time. The Horizontal Faith Maturity subscale is a five-item measure of the degree that one's faith motivates them toward prosocial or communal action, with Likert scale scores ranging from one to seven. Sample items include "I feel a deep sense of responsibility for reducing pain and suffering in the world" and "I help others with their religious questions and struggles." FM-H scores have been shown to be related to altruistic behavior (Ji, Pendergraft, and Perry 2006), agreeableness, acts of service, civic engagement and intent to engage in social justice actions (Kozlowski, Ferrari, and Odahl 2014; Piedmont and Nelson 2001). Year 1 FM-H scores were subtracted from year 3 scores to measure change in the relationship between faith and motivation to community action over time.

Finally, I measure change in one's relationship to the divine using the responses to the question "how close do you feel to God?" Answers available to students ranged from 1 = "not at all close" to 5 = "extremely close. Year 1 responses scores were subtracted from those at year 3 to show change in one's perceived intimacy with God.

Independent Variable

The key independent variable measures change in a student's political identity from year 1 to year 3 at the university. At each period, students reported their political identity on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 = "extremely conservative" to 7 =

"extremely liberal". Scores were calculated by subtracting political identity at year 1 from year 3 political identity. Hence, values less than zero indicate movement toward political conservatism over time. A value of zero would indicate no variation in one's reported political identity from year 1 to year 3. Since values greater than zero indicate movement toward political liberalism, I operationalize this as a measure of political liberalization in multivariate analyses.

Control Variables

Controls were included for students' gender, socioeconomic status (SES), race or ethnicity, and their scores on each of the dependent variables at year 1. Gender is coded as a dummy variable where 0 = male and 1 = female. Socioeconomic status was measured by asking students "which social class would you consider yourself to belong to?". Available answers were "lower class", "working class", "middle class", and "upper class". A dummy system was made for race and ethnicity to distinguish "White", "African American", "Hispanic", "Asian or Pacific Islander", and "Other race" using the data's original measures for race and ethnicity.

Analytic Approach

First, descriptive statistics for the sample are reported in Table 3.1, providing a general overview into the difference in the variables of interest for the students' first and third years at the university. Next, I show the percentages for decline and growth in each measure of religion by change in political identity, gender, race or ethnicity, and socioeconomic status in Table 4.2. Finally, I report results from ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models testing each hypothesis regarding the relationship between

change in one's political identity and their religious activities, beliefs, spirituality, and

relationship to the divine. Each model employs the regressor variable approach,

positioning one of the measures of change in religion as the dependent variable and the

constructed variable for political liberalization across waves as the key independent

variable, with controls included for gender, race and ethnicity, and socioeconomic status.

Following Allison (1990) and others, I also control for the influence of the value of each

religiosity variable at year 1 on their later values at year 3, thereby reducing the

likelihood of spuriousness.

Table 3.1. Mean, Range, and Standard Deviation of Measures (N=400)

Variable	M	SD	Min.	Max.
Student Classification				
Year 1				
Freshman	.96		0	1
Transfer	.04		0	1
Year 3				
Sophomore	.01		0	1
Junior	.86		0	1
Senior	.13		0	1
Fifth year undergraduate	.01		0	1
Graduate student	.00		0	1
Dependent Variables				
Religious service attendance (year 1)	5.34	2.44	0	7
Religious service attendance (year 3)	4.93	2.51	0	7
Prayer (year 1)	1.73	1.25	0	7
Prayer (year 3)	1.67	1.28	0	7
Bible reading (year 1)	3.74	2.20	1	7
Bible reading (year 3)	3.53	2.49	1	7
Christian Orthodoxy (year 1)	6.13	1.24	1	7
Christian Orthodoxy (year 3)	6.08	1.47	1	7
Questioning beliefs (year 1)	1.83	.71	1	3
Questioning beliefs (year 3)	1.79	.71	1	3
Religious struggles (year 1)	2.94	1.06	1	5
Religious struggles (year 3)	2.94	1.09	1	5
Closeness to God (year 1)	3.00	1.13	1	5
Closeness to God (year 3)	3.01	1.26	1	5
Vertical Faith Maturity (year 1)	4.96	1.37	1	7
Vertical Faith Maturity (year 3)	5.03	1.53	1	7
Horizontal Faith Maturity (year 1)	4.69	1.23	1	7
Horizontal Faith Maturity (year 3)	4.82	1.13	1	7
Change Scores				

(continued)

Variable	M	SD	Min.	Max.
Religious service attendance	-.41	1.94	-7	7
Prayer	-.07	1.17	-4	5
Bible reading	-.22	2.05	-6	5
Christian Orthodoxy	-.05	.97	-6	3
Questioning beliefs	-.05	.78	-2	2
Religious struggles	.01	1.16	-4	4
Closeness to God	.01	1.03	-3	4
Vertical Faith Maturity	.07	1.13	-5	4
Horizontal Faith Maturity	.13	1.26	-4	4
Independent Variables				
Political liberalization	.43	1.05	-3	4
Political Identity				
Conservative (year 1)	.55		0	1
Conservative (year 3)	.46		0	1
Moderate (year 1)	.24		0	1
Moderate (year 3)	.23		0	1
Liberal (year 1)	.20		0	1
Liberal (year 3)	.31		0	1
Gender				
Male	.30		0	1
Female	.70		0	1
Race or Ethnicity				
White	.70		0	1
African American	.03		0	1
Hispanic	.12		0	1
Asian or Pacific Islander	.11		0	1
Other race	.04		0	1
Socioeconomic Status				
Lower class	.01		0	1
Working class	.09		0	1
Middle class	.69		0	1
Upper class	.21		0	1

CHAPTER FOUR

Results

Bivariate Analyses

Each measure of religion and the percentage distribution of students by political

identity at years 1 and 3 are shown in Table 3.1. Among first year students, 55% were

conservatives, 24% were moderates, and 20% were liberals. At year 3, there is a marked

decline in the percent of students who are politically conservative (46%), little change in

the percent of moderates (23%), and an upsurge in the percent of students who are liberal

(31%). As the students completed their first two years at the university, a considerable

portion no longer identified as politically conservative or moderate, but as liberal. While

this aggregate change in political identity is interesting, the longitudinal data permit

examination of political changes by student. By year 3, 13% of students had shifted right

politically, 46% stayed the same, and 41% shifted leftward. Next, I consider the religious

implications of these changes in political identity in Table 4.

Table 4.1. Percent of students exhibiting higher or lower religiosity in year 3 compared to year 1

Variable	Religious Service Attendance		Prayer		Bible Reading		Christian Orthodoxy		Questioning Beliefs		Religious Struggles		Closeness to God		Vertical Faith Maturity		Horizontal Faith Maturity	
	-	+	-	+	-	+	-	+	-	+	-	+	-	+	-	+	-	+
All students	40.3	24.3	31.8	25.3	36.0	25.0	32.3	32.0	25.5	20.5	28.0	30.3	25.3	27.3	45.3	52.8	44.0	52.0
Political identity																		
No change	39.2	21.6	30.9	29.8	35.4	23.2	28.2	32.0	28.7	13.3	26.0	27.6	22.1	29.3	40.3	56.9	45.3	51.4
Shift toward conservatism	28.9	38.5[a]	34.6	26.9	30.8	32.7	21.2	57.7[a]	26.9	3.1	36.5	23.1	17.3	38.5	36.5	61.5	40.4	55.8
Shift toward liberalism	44.9[b]	22.8[b]	31.7	19.8[a]	38.3	24.6	40.1[ab]	24.0[b]	21.6	27.5[a]	27.5	35.3[b]	31.1[ab]	21.6[b]	53.3[ab]	45.5[ab]	43.7	51.5
Gender																		
Male	45.0	23.3	30.0	26.7	34.2	30.0	33.3	26.7	23.3	21.7	31.7	23.3*	26.7	25.0	44.2	52.5	41.7	55.0
Female	38.2	24.6	32.5	24.6	36.8	22.9	31.8	34.3	26.4	20.0	26.4	33.2*	24.6	28.2	45.7	52.9	45.0	0.7
Race/Ethnicity																		
White	40.7	25.9	34.5	24.1	37.2	27.2	27.9	32.4	26.2	18.3	29.3	30.0	25.5	27.2	44.5	53.8	41.0	55.2
African American	28.6	14.3	14.3	0.0	28.6	0.0	42.9	14.3	28.6	28.6	42.9	28.6	14.3	57.1	42.9	57.1	42.9	57.1
Hispanic	36.2	25.5	21.3	34.0	38.3	21.3	31.9	40.4	23.4	23.4	27.7	31.9	17.0	29.8	36.2	61.7	46.8	46.8
Asian or Pacific Islander	36.8	18.4	26.3	36.8[d]	23.7	23.7	50[c]	29.0	21.1	29.0	15.8	34.2	34.2	15.8[e]	63.2[ce]	31.6[ce]	60.5[c]	36.8
Other race	55.6	11.1	33.3	5.6[ef]	38.9	11.1	61.1[ce]	16.7	27.8	27.8	27.8	22.2	27.8	33.3	44.4	55.6	50.0	44.4
Socioeconomic status																		
Lower class	50.0	33.3	16.7	16.7	16.7	33.3	50.0	33.3	16.7	50.0	16.7	33.3	33.3	16.7	16.7	66.7	66.7	33.3
Working class	37.8	27.0	35.1	21.6	35.1	13.5	32.4	40.5	21.6	27.0	35.1	24.3	24.3	18.9	35.1	59.5	51.4	48.7
Middle class	39.5	24.3	31.4	25.7	36.5	24.0	32.8	31.8	25.0	21.0	27.0	31.4	25.3	27.4	47.0	51.4	45.3	50.7
Upper class	44.3	21.3	32.8	26.2	36.1	36.1[hi]	27.9	27.9	31.2	11.5[g]	29.5	27.9	24.6	32.8	45.9	54.1	31.2[i]	62.3
N	161	97	127	101	144	100	129	128	102	82	112	121	101	109	181	211	176	208

Note: "-" refers to decreased scores across survey waves, and "+" refers to increased scores on the respective measure of religion.
* Gender difference significant at p < .05; [a] Significantly different from No change at p < .05; [b] Significantly different from Shift toward conservatism at p < .05; [c] Significantly different from White at p < .05; [d] Significantly different from Black at p < .05; [e] Significantly different from Hispanic at p < .05; [f] Significantly different from Asian/Pacific Islander at p < .05; [h] Significantly different from working class at p < .05; [i] Significantly different from middle class at p < .05

Table 4.1 shows the percent of students whose religious activities, beliefs, and spirituality increased or decreased for each independent variable. Results are most clear in terms of religious activities, where students consistently reported attendance, prayer, and Bible reading less often at Year 3 than more often. The highest decline was in public religious involvement. Forty percent of students attended religious services less often, compared to nearly a third or more showing decreased frequency of prayer and Bible reading. Roughly a quarter of students attended religious services, prayed, and read the Bible more often. No clear trends are shown in terms of change in Christian Orthodoxy, questioning religious beliefs, religious struggles, and one's perceived closeness to God. More than half of all students scored higher on the Vertical Faith Maturity and Horizontal Faith Maturity subscales.

Change in the religious lives of students varies with consistent statistical and substantive significance by whether their political identity shifts to either side of the aisle across survey waves. While less than 30% of those who became more conservative attended religious services less often, this is true for 45% of those who became more politically liberal. At the same time, a significantly higher percent of those who became more conservative increased their attendance compared to those whose politics did not change (p = .012) or shifted leftward (p = .021). Those who shifted left prayed more at significantly lower rates (p = .031) than those whose political identity remained constant.

These trends hold for each measure of religious belief and doubt. Differences by political shift are most stark in the rates of students reporting lower and higher scores on the Christian Orthodoxy scale. Forty percent of students who liberalized politically also liberalized in terms of CO scores. Whereas, nearly 60% of students who shifted rightward

politically had higher CO scores in Year 3. Students liberalizing politically reported

questioning their religious beliefs more often in Year 3 at a proportion twice the size of

those whose politics did not change and almost ten times the proportion of students who

became more politically conservative. Higher proportions of liberalizing students also

struggled with their religion generally than the others.

Students' perceived closeness to God and Vertical Faith Maturity scores varied

significantly by change in political identity. A significantly higher proportion of

liberalizing students reported feeling less close to God at Year 3 than in their first year

compared to those whose politics did not change or shifted rightward. They also reported

feeling closer to God than in Year 1 at a proportion significantly lower (p = .017) than for

those who shifted rightward politically. Over half of liberalizing students' FM-V scores

dropped across survey waves, indicating less active spiritual seeking behaviors and a less

intimate relationship with the Christian god. Significantly higher proportions of those

whose politics did not change or shifted rightward rated higher on the FM-V subscale

compared to liberalizing students. There were no statistically significant differences in

the rates of change in Horizontal Faith Maturity scores from Year 1 to Year 3 by change

in political identity.

Multiple Regression Analyses

Table 4.2 reports results from regressions estimating the impact of change in my

key independent variable, political liberalization from one's first to third year at the

university, and control for gender, race or ethnicity, and socioeconomic status on the

frequency of attending religious services, prayer or mediation, and reading the Bible. The

models for change in religious service attendance and Bible reading support the

hypothesis that students would be less publicly and privately active in their faith if their politics move leftward in college. A one standard deviation increase in political liberalization is significantly associated with a .174 standard deviation lower attendance at religious services in Model 1, and a .142 standard deviation decrease in Bible reading in Model 3. Though liberalization is also associated with lower prayer frequency in Model 2, the relationship is not statistically significant.

Table 4.2. Unstandardized (and standardized) coefficients from ordinary least squares regression models predicting change in religiosity measures (N=400)

Variable	Model 1 (Religious Service Attendance)		Model 2 (Prayer)		Model 3 (Bible Reading)	
	b (β)	SE	b (β)	SE	b (β)	SE
Political liberalization	-.321*** (-.174)	.087	-.071 (-.064)	.051	-.277** (-.142)	.094
Year 1 control	-.275*** (-.346)	.037	-.419*** (-.447)	.043	-.302*** (-.325)	.044
Female[a]	.191 (.045)	.196	.034 (.013)	.115	-.073 (-.016)	.044
Race/Ethnicity[b]						
African American	-.031 (-.002)	.695	-0.081 (-.009)	.406	.324 (.021)	.752
Hispanic	.161 (.027)	.286	.260 (.072)	.167	-.409 (-.064)	.310
Asian or Pacific Islander	-.187 (-.028)	.313	.425* (.107)	.183	.124 (.018)	.338
Other race	-.349 (-.037)	.441	-0.241 (-.043)	.258	-.103 (-.010)	.477
Socioeconomic Status[c]						
Working class	-.075 (-.011)	.801	.068 (.017)	.466	-.545 (-.077)	.864
Middle class	.357 (.081)	.751	.367 (.137)	.438	-.057 (-.012)	.810
Upper class	.276 (.051)	.782	.451 (.139)	.454	.302 (.053)	.842
Constant	.783	.770	.261	.445	1.168	.833
R^2		.169		.227		.132

Notes: standardized coefficients appear in parentheses below the unstandardized coefficients.
† < .10; * p <.05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001
[a] Reference category = Male; [b] Reference category = White; [c] Reference category = Lower class

In Models 4 through 6, I find robust support for Hypothesis 2. Each measure of change in religious belief shows a statistically significant inverse relationship between liberalizing politically from years 1 to 3 and religious belief or certainty in one's belief. A one standard deviation increase in political liberalization is associated with a .203 standard deviation decrease in scores on the Christian Orthodoxy scale. Liberalizing students report more questioning of their religious beliefs and general religious struggles after two years at the university, as well. A one standard deviation increase in liberalization is associated with a .143 standard deviation increase in the frequency of questioning of beliefs and a .103 standard deviation increase in religious struggles.

Table 4.3. Unstandardized (and standardized) coefficients from ordinary least squares regression models predicting change in religiosity measures (N=400)

	Model 4		Model 5		Model 6	
	(Christian Orthodoxy)		(Questioning Religious Beliefs)		(Religious Struggles)	
Variable	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE
	(β)		(β)		(β)	
Political liberalization	-.189***	.046	.107***	.032	.114*	.048
	(-.203)		(.143)		(.103)	
Year 1 control	-.103**	.039	-.601***	.046	-.569***	.047
	(-.131)		(-.548)		(-.520)	
Female[a]	.196[†]	.103	-.008	.071	.286**	.108
	(.092)		(-.005)		(.113)	
Race/Ethnicity[b]						
African American	-.148	.365	-.161	.253	-.269	.383
	(-.020)		(-.027)		(-.031)	
Hispanic	.051	.150	-.025	.104	-.055	.157
Variable	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE
	(.017)		(-.010)		(-.015)	
Asian or Pacific Islander	-.136	.165	.035	.114	-.015	.173
	(-.041)		(.013)		(-.004)	
Other race	-.616**	.232	.076	.161	-.115	.243
	(-.131)		(.020)		(-.021)	
Socioeconomic Status[c]						
Working class	-.012	.423	-.136	.291	-.503	.440
	(-.003)		(-.050)		(-.126)	
Middle class	.009	.400	-.193	.273	-.282	.413
	(.004)		(-.109)		(-.107)	
Upper class	-.025	.415	-.234	.284	-.259	.428
	(-.009)		(-.108)		(-.081)	

(continued

Variable	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE
	(β)		(β)		(β)	
Constant	.563	.432	1.204***	.286	1.740***	.434
R^2		.093		.321		.295

Notes: standardized coefficients appear in parentheses below the unstandardized coefficients.

† < .10; * p <.05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001

[a] Reference category = Male; [b] Reference category = White; [c] Reference category = Lower class

Model 7 provides support for the hypothesis that liberalization in one's political identity is related to feeling more personally distant from the Christian God as students experience dissonance between normative expectations of religiosity and political identity within their social networks. The effect of liberalizing politically is significantly related to change in one's perceived closeness to God. Models 7 and 8 examine the effect of liberalization on students' orientation toward God, and how it influences their everyday spiritual lives. The coefficient for liberalization in Model 8 is significant and negative, indicating that a one standard deviation shift leftward in political identity across survey waves is associated with a .152 standard deviation reduction in FM-V scores. This aligns with the hypothesis predicting less active spiritual seeking behaviors and a less intimate relationship with the Christian God. The coefficient for Model 9 is negligible and insignificant, lacking any evidence in favor of Hypothesis 5. Political liberalization within the sample does not explain the gains in FM-H across waves.

Table 4.4. Unstandardized (and standardized) coefficients from ordinary least squares regression models predicting change in religiosity measures (N=400)

	Model 7		Model 8		Model 9	
	(Closeness to God)		(Vertical Faith Maturity)		(Horizontal Faith Maturity)	
Variable	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE
	(β)		(β)		(β)	
Political liberalization	-.161***	.047	-.163**	.053	.001	.050
	(-.164)		(-.152)		(.000)	

(continued)

Variable	b (β)	SE	b (β)	SE	b (β)	SE
Year 1 control	-.302*** (-.332)	.043	-.215*** (-.261)	.040	-.606*** (-.594)	.042
Female[a]	(.113) (.068)	.105	.064 (.026)	.119	.163 (.059)	.113
Race/Ethnicity[b]						
African American	.501 (.064)	.374	.233 (.027)	.421	-.340 (-.035)	.397
Hispanic	.064 (.020)	.154	.127 (.037)	.173	-.045 (-.012)	.163
Asian or Pacific Islander	-.299† (-.085)	.168	-.187 (-.049)	.189	-.169 (-.039)	.179
Other race	-.026 (-.005)	.238	-.161 (-.030)	.267	-.032 (-.005)	.253
Socioeconomic Status[c]						
Working class	.024 (.007)	.430	-.263 (-.068)	.484	.208 (.048)	.457
Middle class	.223 (.095)	.403	-.211 (-.082)	.454	.174 (.061)	.428
Upper class	.302 (.106)	.418	-.217 (-.069)	.472	.336 (.096)	.445
Constant	.679	.424	1.385**	.485	.485	.485
R^2		.151		.099		.360

Notes: standardized coefficients appear in parentheses below the unstandardized coefficients.

† < .10; * p <.05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001

[a] Reference category = Male; [b] Reference category = White; [c] Reference category = Lower class

CHAPTER FIVE

Discussion and Conclusions

Toward a Political Mega-Identity

Findings align with contemporary research showing a robust relationship between political identity and normative expectations of religious life (Hout and Fischer 2002, 2014); Rhodes 2010; Margolis 2018b). Politically conservative Republicans are popularly perceived to be inclined to be religious, and liberal Democrats are not (Hout and Fischer 2002, 2014). In this study, students' liberalization was found to be significantly associated with less frequent displays of public and private religiosity, less certainty in and reduced religious belief, a less intimate relationship with the Christian God, and fewer spiritual seeking behaviors. Conversely, those who became more conservative typically became more religious.

A relationship between liberalization and change in religiosity was found for religious activities, lending robust support for Hypothesis 1. This was most well-illustrated by change in religious service attendance, in particular, as a one standard deviation movement leftward in political identity was associated with nearly a fifth of a standard deviation decrease in one's frequency of religious service attendance. As anticipated in Hypothesis 2, liberalization was also found to be associated with less certainty in and reduced religious belief as students' political identity no longer aligns with social norms related to fervent religious belief. This also had consequences for students' relationship to the divine and spirituality in alignment with Hypotheses 3 and 4.

Though the majority of students overall increased in FM-V across waves, liberalizing students' scores increased at a rate significantly and substantively far lower than others in the sample, depicting a less intimate relationship between the Christian god and the believer. I found no support for Hypothesis 5's prediction that liberalization would be associated with a reorientation in one's spirituality toward pro-social action (measured via the FM-H scale), as is common within the political and religious left. It appears that liberalization has a particularly strong influence on the more pietistic aspects of one's faith, while the social aspects in terms of service to others are not directly affected.

Others have shown a recent decline in the proportion of the religious who are politically liberal (Baker and Martí 2020). Liberal Democrats are becoming more secular, and conservative Republicans are becoming more religious (Patrikios 2008). The alignment between political conservatism and religiosity creates dissonance for those on the political left, encouraging those on the left to become passively and actively secular (Campbell et al. 2018). The effects of this dissonance are present in the data.

The Religious Lives of College Students

Overall, students at the university report consistently lower frequency of engaging in religious activities. This is most visibly seen for change in attendance. At year 1, the average student attended religious services two to three times a month. Two years later, the average student attended once a month. Results in terms of level of belief and spirituality are more mixed. While the percentage of students attending church less often almost doubled that of those who increased their attendance, the percentages of students who experienced growth and decline in Christian Orthodoxy was nearly identical. In addition, most students (53%) Vertical Faith Maturity scores increased from year 1 to

year 3, meaning that, on average, their relationship to the divine intensified, and the frequency of their attempts to find God and grow spiritually increased. Relative to the other measures of religiosity, the inverse relationship between political liberalization and religiousness is most robust for Christian Orthodoxy scores, religious service attendance, and closeness to God – aspects of religion that are intimately and concretely tied to one's religious faith and everyday life.

These data complement findings from others showing a drop off in college students' religious activities that could in large part be explained by students' struggle to adjust their lives to competing interests (Astin, Astin, and Lindholm 2010; Hill 2009; Maryl and Uecker 2011; Uecker, Regnerus, and Vaaler 2007). Geographic relocation from childhood religious communities, academic pursuits, and available substitutes for religious service attendance provided by faith communities (such as involvement in Bible studies or campus parachurch organizations) altogether discourage formal religious participation in the college years. Further, Astin, Astin, and Lindholm's (2010) argument that the college years have an overall positive impact on the spiritual lives of emerging adults seems to be supported here. Students' overall gains in Vertical Faith Maturity show that these students were actively attempting to negotiate the complexities of religious life and their relationship to God. By Year 3, students' FM-H scores had risen as well. This, in conjunction with increased FM-V scores, depicts students' integrating their religious faith into their everyday lives in ways in that promote further connection with the divine and with their surrounding social world.

Conservative Christian University as Moral Community

Previous studies have found that the impact of educational attainment on religious belief and practice depends greatly on college or university religious affiliation (Astin, Astin, and Lindholm 2010; Hill 2009, 2011). The institutional context in which students navigate their identity can serve to either abate or exacerbate the effects of more general social trends of skepticism toward metaphysical explanations and declining religious participation in the college years (Hill 2011). This study's findings demonstrate the effect of Conservative Christian Colleges and Universities as "moral community" legitimating and reproducing religious beliefs, behaviors, and values. In providing scheduled time for and houses of worship, incorporating religious symbology and rhetoric into their missions, recruitment, orientation, student activities and traditions, and innumerable other ways conservative Protestant colleges and universities foster an environment that encourages religiosity and promotes the development of their students' religion and spirituality. Despite slight declines in religious activities compared with Year 1, students within the sample maintained high Christian Orthodoxy scores in Year 3 at the university. At the same time, these students scored higher on the FM-V and FM-H scales, depicting spiritual growth as a result of being in a moral community that prioritizes development in one's faith.

Change in one's political identity over the college years seems to suppress the overall effect of embeddedness within religious moral community as students whose politics shift leftward decline in religiosity at higher rates than the overall student population. Norms associated with religiosity most visibly permeate everyday life in these communities. In an age of social sorting (Mason 2018), this may encourage

politically liberalizing students to become more sensitized to reciprocal norms of conservative politics and religiosity by their status as a political minority in conservative Protestant universities and become less religious at higher rates than at Catholic, mainline Protestant, or religiously unaffiliated universities.

The setting for the Baylor Faith and Character study provides a unique lens through which to view this. Baylor University is a Protestant research university in Texas with undergraduate and graduate populations of more than 14,000 and 5,000, respectively. Though it is not a member but a "collaborative partner" of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities, Baylor retains many of the cultural and religious characteristics of smaller conservative Protestant Christian colleges and universities. As do many other conservative Protestant universities, Baylor requires that students attend at least two semesters of chapel and two semesters of Christian religion courses. One of the numerous ways faith and spirituality permeates everyday life at the university is the high proportion of religiously affiliated clubs and organizations. Further, employment for faculty is conditional upon signing a statement declaring oneself as a member of either the Jewish or Christian faith traditions. In this context, there are several implications for the generalizability of my findings. As a very large university, Baylor may be unique among conservative Protestant universities in the diversity of options available for those seeking community among like-minded others. Students experiencing the sort of cognitive dissonance resulting from misaligned political and religious identities discussed within this article are likely to be able to find others at the university able to offer support in integration of liberal political identity with religious life or in further dissociation from their previously held religious identity. At smaller conservative Protestant colleges and

universities, choices for community are more constrained. These students with misaligned identities may be less able to find support, and therefore feel a diminished sense of belonging at their university and either further dissociation from religious identity because of a more deeply felt separation between their self and the sorted religious and political lives of others, or social pressure to engage in typical religious behaviors at the university could keep politically liberal students in church even when their disbelief makes them feel like outsiders within the religious community. Toward this end, further research should seek a more thorough understanding of the motivating factors for students' public displays of religiosity in various types of universities. Additionally, how might students becoming politically liberal in a conservative Christian moral community feel as though they do or do not belong within their community? Answering these questions could lead to university policies providing improved care for the well-being of their students.

Limitations and Future Directions

There are limitations to this study. First, it is important to note that a definitive causal relationship between political identity change and concurrent change in religious beliefs and behavior cannot be established with these data. Findings show a clear relationship, but only qualitative interview data would be able to elucidate narratives that clearly specify the directions of influence between one's religious and political identities.

The second main limitation concerns the study's data and sample size. Though a robust relationship between change in political identity and religion is found within this sample, the sample characteristics limit my ability to test for the influence of common moderating or mediating factors in this relationship such as parents' religiosity, income,

and childhood family structure (Jones 2021; Uecker and Ellison 2012). Future research should test for these factors and seek variations among different types of universities – public or private, secular or religious, Catholic or Protestant, etc. – to understand how varying college environments and moral communities affect this process. This research may be explored in further depth using a nationally representative longitudinal sample of college students' political and religious beliefs and behavior that extends beyond the college years and into adulthood.

Additional discussion on the impact of attrition between survey waves and missing cases among variables of interest in the second wave is merited. Only 16.7% of the 3,369 students who participated in the first survey wave completed the second, and, after listwise deletion for missing cases on variables of interest, the final sample represented 11.9% of the wave 1 sample. The low response rate of 20% (561 of the available 2,799 students entering their third year) at wave 2 can be partially attributed to the survey's distribution mere months after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in the summer of 2020, when students are already less likely to check their e-mails. Those who participated in the wave 2 survey differ from those who did not in several respects. Mean initial scores on some measures of religiosity – religious service attendance, Bible reading frequency, and Christian Orthodoxy – are significantly lower for leavers than for stayers. Those who dropped out are more likely to have been male, of a minority race or ethnicity (most often African American or Hispanic), and have read the Bible less often and scored lower on the Christian Orthodoxy and Vertical Faith Maturity scales than those who completed the survey as third year students – indicating that leavers are not entirely missing at random. My sample of 400 obtained by listwise deletion had

significantly higher mean religious service attendance and Bible reading frequency; and a

higher proportion of white students compared to the full wave 2 sample of 561 students.

Multiple strategies were used to make up for these between-sample differences, including

full information maximum likelihood and multiple imputation by chained equations

(MICE), but failed to improve the results sufficiently to justify altering the data.

Controlling for the value of each religiosity measure at Year 1 in regressions should

minimize attrition bias, but if those who were excluded from the final sample vary on

their Year 3 religiosity and political identity substantively differently than the 400-person

sample, the results could be affected.

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