

ARTICLE

The politics of church shopping

Shay R. Hafner and Andre P. Audette* 

Monmouth College, Monmouth, IL, USA

*Corresponding author. E-mail: audette@monmouthcollege.edu

(Received 12 May 2022; revised 5 October 2022; accepted 3 November 2022)

Abstract

Recent political science literature notes that the relationship between religion and politics is not a one-way interaction: religion influences political beliefs and political beliefs influence religious practices. Most of these studies, however, have relied on aggregate or indirect methods of assessing individual-level religious decisions of where to attend worship services. This paper utilizes an original, nationally representative survey conducted through YouGov to directly ask about respondents' views on politics in church and how it influences their religious behaviors. We find that many respondents admit church shopping, both inside and outside of their denomination, and that politics influences their choice of congregation to attend. After examining the demographics of those who church shops for political reasons, we conclude by discussing the implications of religiopolitical sorting for tolerance and partisan reinforcement.

Key words: Church shopping; polarization; religious affiliation; religious switching; sorting

Scholars, religious leaders, and even politicians have long been interested in the growth and decline of religious organizations (e.g., Stark and Glock, 1968; Hoge and Roozen, 1979; Newport, 1979; Greeley, 1989; Roof, 1999; Kruse, 2015). Within the American religious landscape, we have observed rapid changes over the past several decades, as some religious groups grow and thrive while others appear to be dying off (Perrin *et al.*, 1997; Putnam and Campbell, 2010; Pew Research Center, 2015; Burge, 2021). Indeed, some individual congregations¹ and entire religious families are better suited to compete in the religious marketplace, while Americans have increasing choice as to where and whether they want to attend religious services (Kosmin and Keysar, 2006; Wuthnow, 2007; Audette and Weaver, 2016). They appear to be exercising that choice, as religious switching and disaffiliation are increasingly common (Putnam and Campbell, 2010; Sherkat, 2014; Pew Research Center, 2015).

These religious choices, of course, have political implications. There is a lengthy literature on the ways that religion influences individuals' politics, from direct influences like sermons and religious messages or direct mobilization to indirect influences like the development of civic skills, mobilization from co-religionists, religious teachings, and serving as an environment for identity formation (Wald *et al.*, 1988; McDaniel,

2008; Smidt *et al.*, 2008; Djupe and Gilbert, 2009; Putnam and Campbell, 2010; Boussalis *et al.*, 2020). The specific religious family and congregation that an individual chooses to attend may impact their political values, their likelihood of participating in politics, and the manner in which they engage politically, among other effects. However, recent advances in the scientific study of religion have found that the relationship between religion and politics is more reciprocal: that politics also influences religious organizations and individuals (Hout and Fischer, 2002, 2014; Patrikios, 2008; Audette and Weaver, 2016; Campbell *et al.*, 2018, 2021; Djupe *et al.*, 2018*b*; Margolis, 2018, 2022; Miles, 2019). At an individual level, some go even further to suggest that religion and politics reflect similar latent biological traits (e.g., Friesen and Ksiazkiewicz, 2015; Hatemi and McDermott, 2016). Thus, it seems plausible, at a minimum, that politics could influence religion. Indeed, research suggests that politics has a significant influence on religious affiliation and organizations.

Studies on secularization have demonstrated that the increasing politicization of religion, particularly the association between conservative politics and religion, as evidenced in the Christian Right, has driven some out of religion entirely (Hout and Fischer, 2002, 2014; Patrikios, 2008; Vargas, 2012; Djupe *et al.*, 2018*a*; Campbell *et al.*, 2021). The logic suggests that when individuals face cross-pressures between their religious faith and their political attitudes, they increasingly choose their politics over their religion to reconcile the cognitive dissonance, viewing the church as not a place for people “like me” (Hout and Fischer, 2002; Putnam and Campbell, 2010; Margolis, 2018; Campbell *et al.*, 2021), particularly when salient political values contradict church teachings (Vargas, 2012). On the other hand, those who remain may seek out political churches as part of a politically motivated niche market, desiring a church where they can live out their political values (e.g., Audette and Weaver, 2016). The close link between religion and politics continues to alter the religiopolitical landscape.

Theories of politics impacting religion are most common at the aggregate level, demonstrating broad effects of political changes on religious denominations (Hout and Fischer, 2002; Putnam and Campbell, 2010; Sherkat, 2014; Djupe *et al.*, 2018*a*; Miles, 2019; Burge, 2021). Fewer studies focus on the congregational level and how politicization impacts a congregation’s members (Audette and Weaver, 2016; Djupe *et al.*, 2018*b*). A number focus on individual-level correlates, with panel and experimental studies on religious switching and apostasy providing rich data to track religious decision making (Patrikios, 2008; Vargas, 2012; Hout and Fischer, 2014; Campbell *et al.*, 2018, 2021; Djupe *et al.*, 2018*b*; Margolis, 2018). While these methodological approaches allow us to examine church shopping from different levels, this study takes a different approach to examining the impact of politics on religion: we ask people directly about their church shopping habits and how they may be impacted by politics. Moreover, we seek to examine the individual-level factors that contribute specifically to politics influencing religious decisions. In doing so, we provide a unique look at how religious choices are influenced by politics in terms of where people choose to attend or affiliate.

In previous eras, it may have been nearly heretical to cite politics as a reason for leaving or choosing a church. Indeed, most studies in this vein have found little direct evidence for the influence of politics (e.g., Gremillion and Castelli, 1987; Legee, 1989).

Using an original survey of the American adult population, we argue that the religious marketplace has changed and find evidence that a substantial portion of the population readily admits that politics is a deciding factor in their religious choice. We find high degrees of church shopping, particularly among Evangelical Protestants, frequent church attenders, and the politically interested. Furthermore, we find evidence that Democrats and those who are interested in politics are more likely to cite politics as a factor in their decision to stop attending a religious congregation.

We conclude by arguing that this evidence of religiopolitical sorting may have negative consequences for both politics and religion. As religious adherents increasingly find themselves in a political “bubble,” we can expect to maintain the current high rates of polarization. Although religious congregations have previously served as a source of cross-cutting political messages (Putnam and Campbell, 2010), this seems less likely as churches cater to a smaller subset of those who agree with them religiously and politically. Additionally, churches may continue to feel the effect of secularization due to their involvement in politics. As such, we suggest that it is useful to continue examining the reciprocal relationship between religion and politics and its effects on tolerance, attitude, and behavior changes, and other life choices.

Church shopping and religious switching

One persistent debate within the scientific study of religion is the extent to which U.S. society is undergoing a process of secularization, particularly as those who have traditionally identified as religious are increasingly not reporting an affiliation with any religious tradition (e.g., Stark, 1999; Gill, 2001; Bruce, 2002; Finke and Stark, 2005; Schwadel, 2010; Burge, 2021). Rates of religious non-affiliation have accelerated since the 1990s, with the unaffiliated or “nones” growing at a rate that vastly exceeds most Christian denominations (Burge, 2021; Campbell *et al.*, 2021). The growth of the nonreligious has largely come at the expense of Mainline Protestantism, while the U.S. Catholic Church has maintained roughly stable numbers only because of immigration and its increasing Hispanic population (e.g., Roof and McKinney, 1987; Green and Guth, 1993; Finke and Stark, 2005; Putnam and Campbell, 2010; Matovina, 2012; Schwadel, 2012). This is often attributed to the rise of the conservative Religious Right and the subsequent backlash that pushed moderate and liberal-leaning adherents out of religion. On the other hand, most Evangelical Protestant traditions have had more stable numbers or have even grown in number, leading to a polarizing effect—or “God gap”—between religious conservatives and nonreligious liberals (Roof and McKinney, 1987; Green and Guth, 1993; Perrin *et al.*, 1997; Finke and Stark, 2005; Schwadel, 2012; Claassen, 2015). Indeed, the religiously unaffiliated are now the largest religious voting group in the Democratic Party as Evangelical Protestants claim a significant role in the Republican Party and support of candidates such as Donald Trump (Margolis, 2020; Whitehead and Perry, 2020; Campbell *et al.*, 2021).

While American religious switching may in fact—arguably—be at a historical high point (Newport, 1979; Pew Research Center, 2015; Sikkink and Emerson, 2020), the American religious marketplace has long been characterized by its dynamism. Some scholars have even likened church shopping and the vast number of religious options

to a religious marketplace (e.g., Iannaccone, 1994; Finke and Stark, 2005; Kosmin and Keysar, 2006). In order to gain and retain members, churches must effectively “sell” their products. Religious commodities and services may be viewed primarily as spiritual in nature (to save one’s soul), but may also include material support when one is in need, social benefits, or other personal reasons that one may choose to attend a church (Audette and Weaver, 2016). As such, churches may try to fill a particular niche that congregants are looking for (Ammerman, 1997; Audette and Weaver, 2016) or to market their “brand” in order to be successful when competing with other congregations (Kosmin and Keysar, 2006; Einstein, 2008). Moreover, this opens up a host of different rationale that individuals may provide for choosing a new religious “home.”

With a plethora of religious options, Americans must narrow down what factors are important when selecting a religious congregation. Statistically speaking, among the most important is the denominational family in which one was raised. While some reports suggest that one-third to almost one-half of adults in the United States have switched their original religious affiliation (Loveland, 2003; Pew Research Center, 2015), this indicates that at least a majority have only selected from among congregations within their childhood religion. This is especially true for the highly religious (e.g., Hadaway, 1980; Hadaway and Marler, 1993). Some have even switched religious traditions multiple times (Roof, 1989). Apart from denomination, other key factors include the church’s worship style and emphasis (e.g., Roof and McKinney, 1987; Wald *et al.*, 1988; Legee, 1989), along with the distance from one’s home or other personal factors such as switching due to marriage (Greeley, 1989; Musick and Wilson, 1995; Putnam and Campbell, 2010; Pew Research Center, 2018; Burge, 2021), desire for particular services (Stonebraker, 1993), social ties (Pew Research Center, 2018; Sikkink and Emerson, 2020), or the style of the pastor or minister of the church (Legee, 1989). Those who have stopped attending a congregation cite that they have not found a congregation they like, that they do not like the sermons, that they do not feel welcome or do not have time, that they have poor health, the location of churches, and unbelief in God (Pew Research Center, 2018).

As is evident in the nature of some of the personal factors—marriage, health, time, moving to a new location, etc.—these factors vary based on one’s life cycle. These may include changes in childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, and younger and older adulthood. From the beginning of one’s life, some research suggests that raising children to be religious can lead to a lower likelihood of switching (Sherkat and Wilson, 1995; Smith and Sikkink, 2003), as does formally joining a church as a child (Loveland, 2003). However, formal religious training such as Sunday school has been shown not to have a strong effect on religious switching (Sherkat, 1991; Loveland, 2003). Adolescence and young adulthood are signified by a lack of religiosity, whether it be directly rebelling or simply being more likely to be on the edges of religion. The early adulthood stage is generally where people make the decision to return to religion or not, which can be impacted by moving, marriage, and raising children, which all lead adults to make more concrete religious decisions (e.g., Wilson and Sherkat, 1994; Wuthnow, 2007; Margolis, 2018). By the later stage of adulthood, religious identification is typically more stable. These life-cycle

factors are further affected by one's identity characteristics, such as education, gender, race, and ethnicity (Smith and Sikkink, 2003).

To return to the secularization debate, another external factor that has been proposed as being critical to one's religious decision is that of politics. If indeed secularization is driven by perceptions of the political alliances of churches, this suggests that politics has either directly or indirectly entered the calculus of decision making. Politics and polarization have touched civic and lifestyle choices in a variety of ways, up to and including assessments of non-political, inanimate objects (e.g., Banda *et al.*, 2020; Hiaeshutter-Rice *et al.*, forthcoming), so it is not a stretch to think that politics could impact religious choices. However, early studies on church shopping have, in fact, not pointed to politics as a meaningful factor. For example, the 1980s Notre Dame Study on Catholic Parish Life, one of the largest social scientific studies that included questions of religious choice, found little evidence that politics or opportunities to participate in community service played any role in why parishioners selected a particular congregation (Gremillion and Castelli, 1987). This may be due in part to the lower rates of polarization during the 1980s, as well as possible social desirability bias against admitting that politics would impact one's religion. There has been a dearth of sources directly focusing on congregational and religious choice at the individual level since then, but that politics would play a critical role in one's religious decision is perhaps intuitive and even unsurprising given recent developments in our understanding of the nature of religion and politics.

Reciprocal relationship between religion and politics

When scholars discuss religion and politics, it has historically been done so in that order; that is, the causal arrow has historically suggested that religion affects one's politics and not the other way around. For example, a wealth of studies have discussed the influence of religion on political participation, vote choice, and social and political attitudes, among other impacts (Wald *et al.*, 1988; Layman, 2001; McDaniel, 2008; Smidt *et al.*, 2008; Putnam and Campbell, 2010). While this is no doubt the case, a rapidly growing literature is reconsidering the traditional order of the causal arrow and suggests that the relationship between religion and politics now appears to be more reciprocal, with politics influencing religion as well (Hout and Fischer, 2002, 2014; Patrikios, 2008; Audette and Weaver, 2016; Djupe *et al.*, 2018b; Margolis, 2018, 2022; Miles, 2019; Campbell *et al.*, 2021), or in fact operating in tandem (Friesen and Ksiazkiewicz, 2015).

Particularly in times of heated polarization, politics have influenced religious discourse and the way that churches operate. For example, religious pastors have increasingly embraced or expressed opposition to Q-Anon conspiracy theories and Christian nationalism, even in the context of religious ceremonies (e.g., Whitehead and Perry, 2020). While there is a tradition of political candidates making appeals to religious organizations, some churches have expressed an openness to skirting tax laws and endorsing political candidates, perhaps as an appeal to individuals interested in blending religion and politics (e.g., Audette and Weaver, 2016). Among the most notable and longest established effects of politics on religion, however, is that of religious and congregational affiliation.

Among the earliest to propose a relationship between politics and religion is the groundbreaking study of Hout and Fischer (2002), who demonstrate that politics led to a decline in religious affiliation, particularly among Mainline Protestants. This opened the door for a number of subsequent studies that look at the broad-scale effect of politics on affiliation and secularization, largely confirming Hout and Fischer's original thesis (e.g., Putnam and Campbell, 2010; Hout and Fischer, 2014; Campbell *et al.*, 2018, 2021; Djupe *et al.*, 2018a; Burge, 2021). While these mass changes in affiliation represent significant changes for society, such as differences among generational, life cycle, and period effects, they may also potentially mask religious switching happening at the individual level. For example, if one individual switches their identification from Evangelical to nonreligious and another from nonreligious to Evangelical, their religious switching may not register in analyses of large, cross-sectional data.

To alleviate these concerns, a select number of studies have examined changes using panel data, confirming that, indeed, politics has caused individuals to change their religious affiliation over even short spans of time (Campbell *et al.*, 2018; 2021; Djupe *et al.*, 2018b; Margolis, 2018). To expand beyond the effect of politics on mass affiliation, even a few studies have tracked changes at the congregational level, measuring religious switching within religious traditions, such as one who attends a Southern Baptist Evangelical church after leaving a non-denominational Evangelical church (Audette and Weaver, 2016; Djupe *et al.*, 2018b). Due to the nature of religious affiliation, an even smaller subset have used experimental methods to attempt to tease out the causal effect of politics on religion (Campbell *et al.*, 2018, 2021; Margolis, 2018). Even in experimental work, however, respondents are rarely asked directly about the potential political mechanisms for leaving or joining certain religious congregations, especially as it pertains to politics (Pew Research Center, 2018).

As such, evidence of religious and even congregational switching has largely relied on less direct aggregate-level data, measuring changes in mass affiliation and theorizing about the psychological causal mechanism.² In this article we attempt to more directly assess the role of politics in making religious decisions, returning to questions popular in the earlier literature on church shopping that asked people directly about why they choose to attend a particular congregation (e.g., Gremillion and Castelli, 1987; Lege, 1989). Given the aforementioned changes to the religious and political environment in the United States, we expect to see responses about the effect of politics on religion that differ substantially from previous eras. Moreover, we view this as an important step in establishing the causal mechanism between politics and religious switching: allowing respondents to speak directly about the reasons they select a place of worship.

Data and methods

To examine church shopping directly, we embedded questions about church shopping on an omnibus online survey conducted through the YouGov panel in July of 2017.³ The survey took approximately 15 minutes to complete. To ensure that the sample closely represented the adult U.S. population, YouGov matched the sample based on 11 variables from the 2010 American Community Survey, 2010 Current

Population Survey, and 2007 Pew Religious Life Survey, yielding 2000 respondents. The matched cases are also weighted to the sampling frame using propensity scores, and all results reported below employ these weights. As such, we can be reasonably confident that the data accurately represent the degree of church shopping in the United States.

The first question about church shopping posed to respondents was: “Some people have searched for a new house of worship and some people haven’t. Have you ever searched for the right house of worship—that is, gone to different ones to compare and decide which one you wanted to attend?” This introduces the concept to respondents and establishes a baseline of whether they have engaged in this behavior. If respondents answered that they had (by not selecting “Never” or “Don’t know”), they were asked this follow up question: “When you searched for the right house of worship, was it all within one particular denomination, mostly within one particular denomination, or did you consider churches from many denominations?” This allows us to see if, for example, Catholics who church shopped were only considering different Catholic parishes or if they considered a Lutheran church as well. Ultimately, we can then determine the demographics of who engages in church shopping and whether respondents of a particular religious tradition and political party are more likely to search and compare churches.

In addition to asking whether respondents church shopped, we were also interested in whether politics would play a role in their decision making. To determine this, we asked the question: “Have you ever left or considered leaving a house of worship because of political differences?” Notably, this question intentionally offers a conservative estimate, as respondents may interpret this as having joined a congregation before leaving it, as leaving during a service, or may not be willing to share that politics was part of their decision making. We wanted to learn whether politics was a serious part of peoples’ decision making. Moreover, we asked whether respondents believe that religious leaders should express their views on politics or keep out of politics to gather a sense of how the respondent viewed political churches.

Apart from our church shopping measures, we gathered a variety of standard demographic data from respondents that the literature shows are related to church shopping. We divide respondents into religious traditions using their affiliation and self-identification as born again for white Evangelical Protestants.⁴ Given the ongoing debate over secularization and the role of conservative politics in pushing people away from religion (Hout and Fischer, 2002; Patrikios, 2008; Margolis, 2018; Campbell *et al.*, 2021), we expect to see that partisan affiliation and interest in politics will be important predictors in the decision to leave a church because of its politics.

Results

Descriptive statistics

First, we asked whether respondents have ever gone to different places of worship to compare and decide which to attend. Nearly 52% of the sample said that they have done so, with 13.8% saying they have done it once, 34.6% saying they have done it a few times, and 3.6% saying that they have done so frequently. Among those who said that they have church shopped, 28.1% said they did so all within a single religious

denomination, 29.2% said that they did so mostly in one denomination, and 42.7% said that they church shopped among many religious denominations. This suggests that a fairly substantial portion of the population engages in church shopping behaviors, although perhaps irregularly, and that most are relatively open to joining other religious traditions. These numbers are slightly higher than the overall switching figure presented by the Pew Research Center (2015), which may account for increasing switching, particularly among those who shop within a single denomination. Those who do shop within a single denomination are often excluded from religious switching figures since a change in religion, rather than a change in congregation, has not been documented.

Next, we asked whether respondents ever considered leaving their house of worship because of political reasons. In total, 75% said that they had never considered leaving for political reasons. However, this suggests that a full quarter of respondents have considered leaving for political reasons, with 7% saying they “seriously considered” and 11.1% saying they left their church due to political reasons. This offers strong evidence that respondents are willing to admit the importance of politics in making their religious calculations. Moreover, as noted previously, this may be a conservative estimate of the impact of politics on church shopping, since there may be residual social desirability bias against admitting that one makes religious choices based on politics.

To further narrow down who has engaged in church shopping, including for political reasons, we examined the effect of religious tradition on church shopping. Table 1 reports the percentage of respondents from each religious tradition who have church shopped, and, among those who have, those who have left or considered leaving for political reasons.

Of note, church shopping is most common among Protestant traditions, especially Evangelical Protestants. This finding makes sense, given the dispersion of Protestant Christian groups and the comparatively similar theology among different Christian churches. A slim majority of Roman Catholics also reported church shopping, as

Table 1. Church shopping by religious tradition

Religious tradition	Ever church shopped (%)	Left/considered leaving for politics (%)
Protestant	70	25
Evangelical	81	24
Mainline	58	30
Black Protestant	60	13
Catholic	51	25
Jewish	39	20
Atheist	16	32
Agnostic	36	24
None	43	25

Entries are rounded to the nearest percentage point. Data are weighted.

well as fairly sizeable numbers of the less religiously committed, Agnostics and those whose religion is “nothing in particular.” This demonstrates that church shopping is a fairly common phenomenon in the American religious marketplace (consistent with Putnam and Campbell, 2010; Sherkat, 2014).

This does not necessarily suggest that all those who engage in church shopping are comparing vastly different religious traditions. For example, a respondent may not be comparing among Evangelical Protestantism, Buddhism, Islam, and Catholicism. Rather, many may be shopping within their own religious denominations or families. In fact, we find, for example, that 44% of Roman Catholics that church shopped did so only among Roman Catholic churches, while 29% considered churches from many denominations. Among the religious traditions in the sample, Catholics are the most likely to shop within their own religious tradition. On the other hand, Atheists, Agnostics, and the Nones are more likely to shop among many traditions (58, 70, and 54%, respectively). Evangelical, Mainline, and Black Protestants also shop among many traditions at high rates (41, 39, and 55%, respectively). This makes sense as the nonaffiliated are less likely to identify with a particular religious tradition and because there may be lower barriers to entry among various Protestant churches, which are more theologically similar.

Among those who have left or considered leaving their church for political reasons, we see the highest percentage agreeing with the prompt among Atheists and Mainline Protestants. This is consistent with the literature that shows politicized religion has pushed people out of religion, particularly moderate and liberal traditions found in Mainline Protestantism (Hout and Fischer, 2002, 2014; Putnam and Campbell, 2010; Margolis, 2018). However, discomfort with the politics of one’s church is relatively common across traditions, perhaps with the exception of Black Protestantism, which has historically been recognized as a more politically active religious tradition (e.g., Harris, 2001; McDaniel, 2008). In general, the numbers suggest that politics may be a consideration for religious adherents of many traditions when deciding whether to stay at their place of worship or find a new religious home.

Multivariate models

After examining which respondents church shopped, we next want to see which demographic variables predict church shopping and using politics as a consideration in their religious choices. We thus turn to multivariate logistic regression models to parse out what factors have a greater statistical impact on these religious decisions.

In our first model, summarized in Table 2, we include a number of different religious, political, and demographic factors, informed by the literature on church shopping, to determine the characteristics of respondents who report church shopping. Looking first at religious tradition, we see that Evangelical Protestants, the comparison category, are statistically more likely to church shop than any other religious tradition (76%). This confirms our descriptive findings. Examining the predicted probabilities for the various traditions, we can see that this is higher than the other two Protestant groups, Mainliners (62%) and Black Protestants (51%), as well as religious Nones (55%), Agnostics (54%), Jews (48%), Catholics (46%), and Atheists (33%). These findings make sense when considering broad trends in religious

Table 2. Predictors of church shopping

Mainline	−0.75** (0.19)
Black Protestant	−1.25** (0.54)
Catholic	−1.49*** (0.29)
Jewish	−1.38*** (0.41)
Atheist	−2.08*** (0.43)
Agnostic	−1.09*** (0.40)
None	−1.04*** (0.29)
Church attendance	0.35*** (0.05)
Democrat	−0.00 (0.19)
Independent	0.08 (0.18)
Political interest	0.16** (0.07)
Age	0.01 (0.01)
Woman	0.37** (0.15)
Black	0.51 (0.35)
Hispanic	0.19 (0.29)
Education	0.05 (0.05)
Income	−0.00 (0.00)
Divorced	0.69*** (0.24)
Children under 18	0.25 (0.19)
Constant	−12.14 (11.69)
Pseudo- R^2	0.14
<i>N</i>	1,777

Logistic regression coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses. “Other” religions are included in the model but omitted from the table.

*** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.10$.

affiliation; the nonreligious may have church shopped and not found a religious “home,” while Catholics may have fewer options within their religious denomination and positively identified Atheists are less likely to desire a religious affiliation. Church attendance was also a significant predictor, with the gap in predicted probability percentages between those who attend church more than once a week being 81% and those who never attend being 34%. This is unsurprising, as those more active and engaged are more likely to have a reason to switch, whereas someone who rarely attends may find switching unnecessary due to their low involvement.⁵ When adding these findings about church shopping to those studies of political disaffiliation or deidentification, this suggests that those who are involved will church shop and find a new congregation while those who are least involved may disaffiliate altogether (e.g., Djupe *et al.*, 2018b; Higgins and Djupe, 2022).

Of note, we find that political affiliation is not a significant predictor of church shopping; Republicans, Democrats, and Independents alike engage in church

shopping.⁶ This departs somewhat from previous studies, which hypothesize that Democrats and Independents may be more likely to change their religious affiliation (e.g., Hout and Fischer, 2002, but see Vargas, 2012). An important feature of our study is that we are able to capture individual-level congregational choices that are made separate from solely political considerations, which we address in Table 3. On the other hand, political interest does drive church shopping behavior, as 48% of those with the least political interest reported church shopping while 60% of those with the most political interest reported shopping for a church. In addition to a political effect, this may also serve as a latent measure of general interest in societal issues. Furthermore, we find that women are 7% more likely to church shop than men, consistent with findings that women tend to be more religiously committed (Trzebiatowska and Bruce, 2012; Audette *et al.*, 2018) and that divorced individuals

Table 3. Predictors of (considering) leaving for political reasons

Mainline	0.42 (0.28)
Black Protestant	-0.46 (0.61)
Catholic	-0.03 (0.26)
Jewish	-0.61 (0.54)
Atheist	0.47 (0.41)
Agnostic	-0.07 (0.37)
None	0.26 (0.31)
Church attendance	0.16*** (0.06)
Churches should keep out of politics	0.30* (0.16)
Democrat	0.58*** (0.21)
Independent	0.20 (0.20)
Political interest	0.31*** (0.08)
Age	0.02*** (0.01)
Woman	-0.07 (0.15)
Black	-0.21 (0.38)
Hispanic	0.17 (0.31)
Education	0.14** (0.05)
Income	-0.00 (0.00)
Divorced	0.41* (0.24)
Children under 18	-0.01 (0.19)
Constant	-42.40*** (11.77)
Pseudo- R^2	0.08
<i>N</i>	1,526

Logistic regression coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses. "Other" religions are included in the model but omitted from the table.

*** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.10$.

are 14% more likely to have church shopped than those who are married, likely reflecting the religious decision making following the dissolution of a relationship.

Next, we turn to predictors of leaving or considering leaving a church specifically due to politics, as shown in Table 3.⁷ When bringing politics into the equation, here we do find an effect for partisan affiliation: Democrats are 10% more likely than Republicans to say that they have left or considered leaving due to a church's politics. This offers reinforcement for the literature that suggests the association of religion with conservative politics drives down religious adherence (Hout and Fischer, 2002, 2014; Patrikios, 2008; Vargas, 2012; Margolis, 2018; Campbell *et al.*, 2021). It seems that Democrats are likely seeking out other churches that fit their beliefs and where they can find a more like-minded social group. Unsurprisingly, political interest becomes an even more significant predictor than church shopping generally. Those who are most interested in politics are 24% more likely to cite politics as a reason for (considering) leaving a church than those who are the least politically interested. Additionally, we add in a variable to test whether those who think that churches should be politically active or those who feel that churches should stay out of politics are likely to cite politics as a factor in determining which religious congregation to attend. Intuitively, those who believe churches should stay out of politics are more likely to cite politics as a reason to leave (Figure 1).

In addition to expressly political characteristics, we see other demographic factors that lead one to consider politics when deciding where to attend. Those who are older, and likely who have attended a church for a longer time, are more likely to cite politics as a factor. As with church shopping generally, the divorced are also

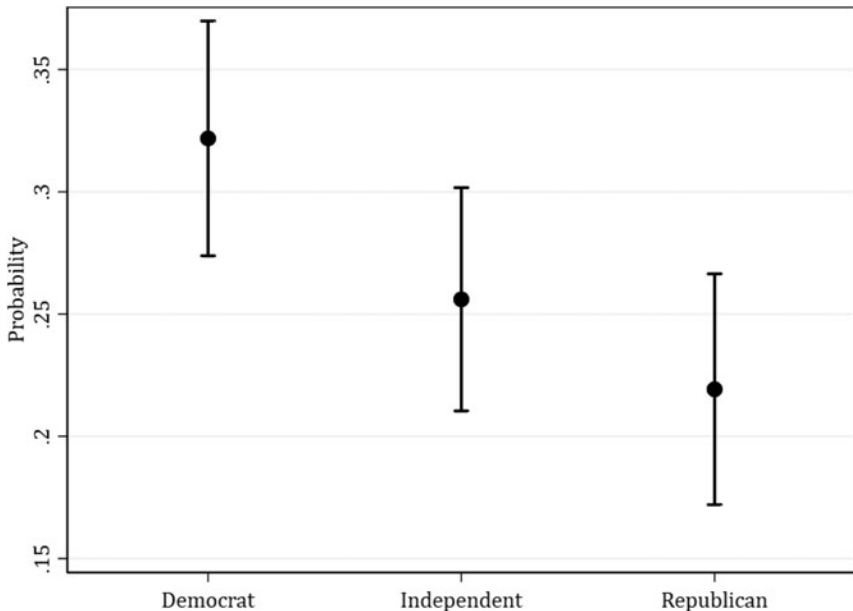


Figure 1. (Considered) leaving for political reasons by partisanship.

more likely to have left or considered leaving for political reasons. The more well-educated and religiously active (in terms of church attendance) are likewise more likely to be sensitive to a church's politics, perhaps because they have a greater sense of the political leanings of the institution and of other congregants.

Across our models, we find strong evidence that a sizable portion of the population has engaged in church shopping and that politics is emerging as a formidable reason to do so. Our results are consistent with findings that Democrats, in particular, are disenchanting with the association of religion with conservative politics, which may lead them to disaffiliate altogether (Hout and Fischer, 2002, 2014; Patrikios, 2008; Vargas, 2012; Margolis, 2018; Campbell *et al.*, 2021). Moreover, we suspect that these numbers underestimate the amount of movement in American religion and that politics is influencing choices in ways that our respondents may not know or may not admit. Nonetheless, it is significant that people are more willing to admit shopping around for a church and using politics as a deciding factor in their religious lives.

Conclusion

One broad takeaway from these findings is that scholars of religion and politics would do well to engage more direct resources to study the causes and effects of church shopping. As it becomes a common occurrence in the lives of Americans, understanding the important life choices of conversion and disaffiliation is a fruitful avenue to explore the nature of the relationship between religion and politics. The two may not be competing, but rather consistent ideologies, reinforced by churches as political spaces.

On the other hand, religion is ostensibly about one's fundamental values and worldview, answering questions about the purpose of life and, for some religions, the eternal destination of one's immortal soul. This seems to raise the stakes in the decision of if and where to attend worship services. From a religious perspective, to base religious choices on a human ideological system may be seen by some as heretical. For many years, religion played a preeminent role in society and individual life choices. Thus, the stated importance of politics in religious switching reveals how Americans negotiate occasionally competing ideologies and how institutions and organizations must respond to the increasing prominence of politics in directing social relationships. Of the many considerations that individuals make when determining which congregation to attend, we find congregation shopping on the basis of politics to be of particular interest, as both claim a broader organization of one's basic beliefs about the world (e.g., Converse, 1964; Moyser, 1991).

On a methodological note, we also view it as important to hear from people themselves about how they make these tough decisions about whether and where to attend church. Apart from the (useful) aggregate trends that have defined the literature thus far, we can learn from surveys such as these that ask people about their religious choices. Another type of less common data in this area is qualitative research. Deep learning about the process of religious switching and the influence of politics on church shopping would be a natural next step in this research area. There may also be room for experimental work to assess how people process and respond to

political messages from their congregation. Finally, one limitation of our study is that we have captured data on church shopping from a single cross section of our respondents' lives; additional quantitative panel data or qualitative interviews would help to further dig into the complex nature of church shopping over time.

Ultimately, the results of our study also speak to important trends in American democracy. The religiopolitical sorting we describe here is one small part of the growing partisan divide in the country. Americans increasingly find themselves in echo chambers in the media, their social environments, and, as we show, in their churches (see also Putnam and Campbell, 2010). This has potentially deleterious effects on democracy, as there are fewer social locations where people may be exposed to other political views, a role that some churches arguably used to play (Smidt *et al.*, 2008; Putnam and Campbell, 2010). There may be further negative effects on religious and political tolerance as these identities become more intertwined (Mason, 2016; Perry, 2022). However, noting that some congregations may benefit from serving a politically motivated niche market (e.g., Audette and Weaver, 2016), it seems unlikely that religious leaders will significantly change their present strategy without a disruption to the American religious ecosystem. As such, we find it all the more important to continue to monitor trends related to religiopolitical sorting and the role that religion plays in politics and vice versa.

Acknowledgments. This research was funded by the Faculty Research Support Program of the University of Notre Dame. The authors especially thank David Campbell for his support of the data collection for this project.

Conflict of interest. The authors declare none.

Notes

1. In this article, we use the terms "congregation" and "church" generally to refer to a house of religious worship. Although the respondents in our survey are predominantly Christian, these terms may also refer to houses of worship from other religious traditions.
2. One existing dataset, the 2012 Portraits of American Life Study (Emerson and Sikkink, 2020), asked respondents who left a congregation since the 2006 wave whether politics or social views were a factor in deciding to stop attending a congregation or to attend a different one. Of those who went to a new congregation, 36.3% said that political and social views were important factors in that decision. Of the 32 respondents who were dissatisfied with their previous congregation, 17 cited political and social views (53.1%). Unfortunately, the small sample size limits our ability to run any multivariate analyses of the data.
3. Given the increase in political polarization and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic since our 2017 survey, it is plausible that the political effects of church shopping may have been (at least temporarily) altered since the timeframe of the sample. Indeed, Higgins and Djupe (2022) find evidence that church shopping is much higher than normal during this period, but that politics may have taken a back seat to other motivations during the height of the pandemic.
4. As Smith *et al.* (2018) suggest, this method of classifying Evangelical Protestants does not lead to substantively different results than when employing the traditional RELTRAD scheme proposed by Steensland *et al.* (2000).
5. We also ran a series of interaction models to examine whether the effect for church attendance varied by party identification. We found no significant differences in any model, suggesting that the relationship between church attendance and church shopping holds regardless of party.
6. For parsimony in our tables and discussion, we discuss the results using a three-point party identification model. These findings are robust to models using other combinations of party identification, including a seven-point model. Moreover, we find no significant results for church shopping or leaving for political reasons based on strength of party identification.

7. We grouped data on those who have left or have considered leaving a church for political reasons in order to retain a larger pool of survey respondents. When disaggregating the dependent variables, we find roughly similar results, although the power of the model is reduced. Given the similarity of the disaggregated models, we feel confident that grouping the two captures a similar construct.

References

- Ammerman NT** (1997) *Congregation & Community*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Audette AP, Kwakwa M and Weaver CL** (2018) Reconciling the god and gender gaps: the influence of women in church politics. *Politics, Groups, and Identities* **6**, 682–701.
- Audette AP and Weaver CL** (2016) Filling pews and voting booths: the role of politicization in congregational growth. *Political Research Quarterly* **69**, 245–257.
- Banda KK, Carsey TM and Severenchuk S** (2020) Evidence of conflict extension in partisans' evaluations of people and inanimate objects. *American Politics Research* **48**, 275–285.
- Boussalis C, Coan TG and Holman MR** (2020) Political speech in religious sermons. *Politics and Religion* **14**, 241–268.
- Bruce S** (2002) *God is Dead: Secularization in the West*. Malden: Blackwell.
- Burge RP** (2021) *The Nones: Where They Came From, Who They Are, and Where They Are Going*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Campbell DE, Layman GC and Green JC** (2021) *Secular Surge: A New Fault Line in American Politics*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Campbell DE, Layman GC, Green JC and Sumaktoyo NG** (2018) Putting politics first: the impact of politics on American religious and secular orientations. *American Journal of Political Science* **62**, 551–565.
- Claassen RL** (2015) *Godless Democrats and Pious Republicans? Party Activists, Party Capture, and the "God Gap."* New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Converse PE** (1964) The nature of belief systems in mass publics. In Apter DE (ed.), *Ideology and Its Discontents*. New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 206–261.
- Djupe PA and Gilbert CP** (2009) *The Political Influence of Churches*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Djupe PA, Neiheisel JR and Conger KH** (2018a) Are the politics of the Christian Right linked to state rates of the non-religious? The importance of salient controversy. *Political Research Quarterly* **71**, 910–922.
- Djupe PA, Neiheisel JR and Sokey AE** (2018b) Reconsidering the role of politics in leaving religion: the importance of affiliation. *American Journal of Political Science* **62**, 161–175.
- Einstein M** (2008) *Brands of Faith: Marketing Religion in a Commercial Age*. New York: Routledge.
- Emerson MO and Sikkink DH** (2020) Portraits of American life study, 2nd Wave, 2012. Association of Religion Data Archives. Available at https://www.thearda.com/data-archive?fid=PALS_2&tab=1 (Accessed 6 September, 2022).
- Finke R and Stark R** (2005) *The Churching of America 1776–2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Friesen A and Ksiazkiewicz A** (2015) Do political attitudes and religiosity share a genetic path? *Political Behavior* **37**, 791–818.
- Gill A** (2001) Religion and comparative politics. *Annual Review of Political Science* **4**, 117–138.
- Greeley AM** (1989) *Religious Change in America*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Green JC and Guth JL** (1993) From lambs to sheep: denominational change and political behavior. In Lege DC and Kellstedt LA (eds), *Rediscovering the Religious Factor in American Politics*. Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 100–117.
- Gremillion J and Castelli J** (1987) *The Emerging Parish: The Notre Dame Study of Catholic Life Since Vatican II*. San Francisco: Harper & Row.
- Hadaway CK** (1980) Denominational switching and religiosity. *Review of Religious Research* **21**, 451–461.
- Hadaway CK and Marler PL** (1993) All in the family: religious mobility in America. *Review of Religious Research* **35**, 97–116.
- Harris FC** (2001) *Something Within: Religion in African-American Political Activism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hatemi PK and McDermott R** (2016) Give me attitudes. *Annual Review of Political Science* **19**, 331–350.
- Hiaeshutter-Rice D, Neuner FG and Soroka S** (Forthcoming) Cued by culture: political imagery and partisan evaluations. *Political Behavior*, 1–19.

- Higgins NJ and Djupe PA** (2022) Congregation shopping during the pandemic: a research note. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* **61**(3-4), 726–736.
- Hoge DR and Roozen DA** (eds) (1979) *Understanding Church Growth and Decline, 1950–1978*. New York: Pilgrim Press.
- Hout M and Fischer CS** (2002) Why more Americans have no religious preference: politics and generations. *American Sociological Review* **67**, 165–190.
- Hout M and Fischer CS** (2014) Explaining why more Americans have no religious preference: political backlash and generational succession, 1987–2012. *Sociological Science* **1**, 423–447.
- Iannaccone LR** (1994) Why strict churches are strong. *American Journal of Sociology* **99**, 1180–1211.
- Kosmin BA and Keysar A** (2006) *Religion in a Free Market: Religious and Non-Religious Americans*. Ithaca: Paramount Market Publishing.
- Kruse KM** (2015) *One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America*. New York: Basic Books.
- Layman G** (2001) *The Great Divide: Religious and Cultural Conflict in American Party Politics*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Leege DC** (1989) The parish as community. Notre Dame Study of Catholic Parish Life, University of Notre Dame. Available at <https://mcgrath.nd.edu/assets/39495/report10.pdf> (Accessed 4 May 2022).
- Loveland MT** (2003) Religious switching: preference development, maintenance, and change. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* **42**, 147–157.
- Margolis MF** (2018) *From Politics to the Pews: How Partisanship and the Political Environment Shape Religious Identity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Margolis MF** (2020) Who wants to make America great again? Understanding Evangelical support for Trump. *Politics and Religion* **13**, 89–118.
- Margolis MF** (2022) Reversing the causal arrow: politics' influence on religious choices. *Advances in Political Psychology* **43**(S1), 261–290.
- Mason L** (2016) A cross-cutting calm: how social sorting drives affective polarization. *Public Opinion Quarterly* **80**, 351–377.
- Matovina T** (2012) *Latino Catholicism: Transformation in America's Largest Church*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- McDaniel E** (2008) *Politics in the Pews: The Political Mobilization of Black Churches*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Miles MR** (2019) *Religious Identity in US Politics*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner.
- Moyser G** (1991) Politics and religion in the modern world: an overview. In Moyser G (ed.), *Politics and Religion in the Modern World*. London: Routledge, 1–27.
- Musick M and Wilson J** (1995) Religious switching for marriage reasons. *Sociology of Religion* **56**, 257–270.
- Newport F** (1979) The religious switcher in the United States. *American Sociological Review* **44**, 528–552.
- Patrikios S** (2008) American Republican religion? Disentangling the causal link between religion and politics in the U.S. *Political Behavior* **30**, 367–389.
- Perrin RD, Kennedy P and Miller DE** (1997) Examining the sources of conservative church growth: where are the new Evangelical movements getting their numbers? *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* **36**, 71–80.
- Perry SL** (2022) American religion in the era of increasing polarization. *Annual Review of Sociology* **48**, 87–107.
- Pew Research Center** (2015) America's changing religious landscape. Available at <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/> (Accessed 5 May 2022).
- Pew Research Center** (2018) Why Americans go (and don't go) to religious services. Available at <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2018/08/01/why-americans-go-to-religious-services/> (Accessed 10 May 2022).
- Putnam RD and Campbell DE** (2010) *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Roof WC** (1989) Multiple religious switching: a research note. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* **28**, 530–535.
- Roof WC** (1999) *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Roof WC and McKinney W** (1987) *American Mainline Religion: Its Changing Shape and Future*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

- Schwadel P** (2010) Period and cohort effects on religious nonaffiliation and religious disaffiliation: a research note. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* **49**, 311–319.
- Schwadel P** (2012) Changes in Americans' strength of religious affiliation, 1974–2010. *Sociology of Religion* **74**, 107–128.
- Sherkat DE** (1991) Leaving the faith: testing theories of religious switching using survival models. *Social Science Research* **20**, 171–187.
- Sherkat DE** (2014) *Changing Faith: The Dynamics and Consequences of Americans' Shifting Religious Identities*. New York: New York University Press.
- Sherkat DE and Wilson J** (1995) Preference, constraints, and choices in religious markets: an examination of religious switching and apostasy. *Social Forces* **73**, 993–1026.
- Sikkink D and Emerson M** (2020) Congregational switching in an age of great expectations. *Review of Religious Research* **62**, 219–247.
- Smidt CE, den Dulk KR, Penning JM, Monsma SV and Koopman DL** (2008) Pews, Prayers, & Participation: Religion & Civic Responsibility in America. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.
- Smith GA, Sciupac EP, Gecewicz C and Hackett C** (2018) Comparing the RELTRAD and born-again/Evangelical self-identification approaches to measuring American Protestantism. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* **57**, 830–847.
- Smith C and Sikkink D** (2003) Social predictors of retention in and switching from the religious faith of family of origin: another look using religious tradition self-identification. *Review of Religious Research* **45**, 188–206.
- Stark R** (1999) Secularization, R.I.P. *Sociology of Religion* **60**, 249–273.
- Stark R and Glock CY** (1968) *American Piety: The Nature of Religious Commitment*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Steensland B, Park JZ, Regnerus MD, Robinson LD, Bradford Wilcox W and Woodberry RD** (2000) The measure of American religion: toward improving the state of the art. *Social Forces* **79**, 291–318.
- Stonebraker RJ** (1993) Optimal church size: the bigger the better? *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* **32**, 234–241.
- Trzebiatowska M and Bruce S** (2012) *Why Are Women More Religious Than Men?* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Vargas N** (2012) Retrospective accounts of religious disaffiliation in the United States: stressors, skepticism, and political factors. *Sociology of Religion* **73**, 200–223.
- Wald KD, Owen DE and Hill SS Jr** (1988) Churches as political communities. *American Political Science Review* **82**, 531–548.
- Whitehead AL and Perry SL** (2020) *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Wilson J and Sherkat DE** (1994) Returning to the fold. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* **33**, 148–161.
- Wuthnow R** (2007) *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings are Shaping the Future of American Religion*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Shay R. Hafner is a senior at Monmouth College, studying political science and data science. His research interests include political behavior and public opinion, especially in regard to polarization.

Andre P. Audette is an assistant professor of political science at Monmouth College. He researches and teaches courses about religion and politics, law, identity politics, and political behavior.