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Culture War and Religion

Summary: In the latter half of the 20th century, as Catholics became seen more and more as American and evangelical Christianity became more prominent, religion became another source of polarization and strife. The rise of the Christian Right in the 80s is seen as the beginning of a culture war. Because of the increase in prominence and power of (overwhelmingly Christian) religion, secularism has increased steadily, and the presence or absence of religion has become another source of polarization. This memo seeks to explore the various explanations for religion's (and lack thereof) division of political beliefs (or vice versa, depending on the author) and the disagreements within the scholarship, as well as the culture war.

The Culture War

The culture war most commonly refers to the social conflict between the traditional religious right and progressive secular liberals (Hunter 1992). Common topics/fronts of conflict include The War on Christmas, abortion, LGBTQ+ rights, separation of church and state, and racism (e.g. is blackface racist, is reverse racism real, is the Confederate flag racist). The culture war as we know it today (as the culture wars of the 60s and early 70s were less religious and more generational) originated in the response of conservative Christians to Roe *v. Wade* (Rozell 1995) and their fast growth and cooperation with the Republican Party. In response, Democrats recoiled from religion and became more secular and progressive (Margolis 2018).

Explanations of Religious Polarization

The Life-Cycle Theory

The Life-Cycle Theory is a recent theory from Michele Margolis (2018) that seeks to explain the relatively recent phenomenon of increasing irreligion and secularism in the Democratic Party, as well as in comparison to the increased religiousness in the Republican Party. In the Life-Cycle Theory, Margolis posits that because there's a period between the teen years and adulthood where their political identities form that will last the rest of their lives, this political identity is more ingrained than the religious identity.

- Once young adults leave their parents, they have to deal with the real world and religion takes a smaller role (regardless of political orientation) in their lives, but the partisan identity remains steady.
- When they start having kids, they start thinking about raising their kids in religion. Depending on their political identity (Republican or Democrat), they either return to religion and raise their kids religiously or maintain the secular identity.

    - The one exception are black Protestants, who are simultaneously the most loyal Democrats and the most active religious group; because of this, they return to religion when they have kids like Republicans, but they continue to vote Democrat (Margolis 2018).
- This theory falls under the "ideological consistency" polarization, as it argues that people will change or pick their religious identity based on the party or ideology they identify with.

Division within Secularism

Secular and irreligious Democrats tend to get most of the coverage by scholars and pundits; however, the irreligious make up an unusually large part of Trump's best demographic, the white working class. They identify as religious, but their religious activity is low, especially compared with the rest of the Republican Party (Jones 2017).

Disagreements within Scholarship

Politics forming Religion or Religion forming Politics

Obviously the most prominent disagreement within the present scholarship is the chicken-and-egg problem of whether religion decides politics or politics decides religion. The orthodox position is that religion decides politics (Djupe 2001), especially among talking heads and pundits that talk about "the Catholic vote" or "the evangelical vote". However, there's both recent scholarship and punditry (Abramowitz 2014) that argues that political views decide religion (and have since the 1960 election) (Margolis 2018).

The Role of Secularism in Modern Politics

Today Democrats are increasingly seen as less religious, especially in comparison to the more religious Republicans. Margolis' writing falls into this camp (2018). On the other side is a disregard for the increase in lack of religion, whose scholars focus only on those who identify with a faith. Guth et al. take this position when writing about the 2004 Presidential Election: when they describe the religious coalitions that backed Bush and Kerry, the secular vote is treated as one entity while the various factions of Christianity are broken down far beyond the usual mainline Protestant, evangelical Protestant, Catholic, and Black Protestant. (Guth et al. 2006) However, the differences may be a reflection of the growth of the secular population since 2004.

Existence of a Culture War

The general consensus in both academia and the general population is that there is a culture war between traditional religious Republicans and progressive secular Democrats. However, detractors (Fiorina et al. 2005) say that there is no evidence for a culture war and that the discussion of the culture war is a mix of "exaggeration and…nonsense." Mouw and Sobel (2001) use polls that don't support a polarization of abortion opinions over several decades as evidence that the culture war is overblown.

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Margolis seeks to reexamine the traditional approach of social identity (specifically religion) affecting political affiliation and explores the affect of political affiliation on religious identity and activity. She uses and tests her life-cycle theory and confirms it. She finds that although people universally set religion aside after leaving home but before raising kids, when they do raise kids their political identities affect their choice of whether to raise them with religion or not. This is because political identity remains steady throughout adulthood, so people will follow it when making a decision on an inconsistent identity: religion.

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