

Michele Margolis
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Michele Margolis:

An axiom of contemporary American politics is that Republicans are religious, and Democrats are less so. This is sometimes called the God gap or the religiosity gap, and it represents one of the most important and enduring social cleavages in the electorate. This God gap is relatively new. Prior to this, we thought of religious divides and partisanship in voting being along ethno-religious lines. Catholics were Democrats, mainline Protestants were Republicans, but this God gap is a coalition based on religiosity that is how devout you are.

Devout Catholics, church attending mainline Protestants, church attending evangelicals, Christians who don't use any of those labels, they're the ones who make up the Republican Party and the less religious are more likely to be Democratic.

If you compare the partisanship to those who attend weekly, which is about a quarter of the population, compared to people who don't attend church at all, that's about a 30% of the population. Only 25% of the population who never attend church identify as a Republican compared to 55% of those who attend weekly.

The conventional story is that religion and religiosity influenced politics. The Republican Party started to use more religious rhetoric and taking up religious issues such as abortion, gay marriage, school prayer.

The parties were not separated on abortion in the '70s. And the conventional story is the parties shifted. They split and people saw these differences and then they moved their partisanship and their vote choices based on their religiosity. The religious people moved into the Republican camp; the non-religious moved into the Democratic camp.

American religion is changing. Who belongs to what faith, whether you identify with a faith or not, what church you go to, how involved you are in that church, all of these decisions are being made based on politics?

It doesn't mean that religion doesn't affect politics, but that politics are shaping religious choices. It also matters for political mobilization. If Republicans are self-selecting into churches, that means the Sunday before an election, they are all in a pew. They are easily mobilized, they're all right there.

Churches used to be one of the places where people across political spectrums came together and got to know each other and that's not happening anymore.

By being a secular Democrat or a religious Republican, if someone then criticizes religious people, they're not just criticizing your religious identity, they're also criticizing your political identity. This team that you're on is becoming more and more powerful because you have

multiple identities wrapped up in it. If you meet a secular Democrat when you're a religious Republican, that person doesn't just look different from you on political side, it's religious, gender, maybe race. These identities make it much harder to bridge the gap across people, which is problematic.

Larry Bernstein:

Robert Putnam spoke at my book club years ago about his book *American Grace*. Putnam highlights the collapse in church attendance in Christian churches over the past 60 years, what is happening with religiosity in America?

Michele Margolis:

The decline is really big. People who have no religious identification exploded in a 30-year period from zero to over a quarter of Americans.

This generalized decline in religiosity is breaking partisan. Democrats and Republicans alike become less religious, but it's far more likely that those non-religious people are Democrats.

Larry Bernstein:

How does partisanship affect your religiosity?

Michele Margolis:

Religion is about the eternal state of your soul, politics is this mundane, secular, this worldly thing. How is it possible that that is the direction of causality?

When you're a kid, you have very little agency over your religion. Your parents make these decisions for you. When you reach young adulthood is when people fall away from religion. They're not necessarily hostile to religion, but it's less important. They're asserting their independence from their parents. They might be engaging in behaviors that are incompatible with religion, whether that's experimenting with sex, drugs or alcohol. It's not a priority. Then you get married and have kids. This is the time when you think about how you want to raise your kids. Do I want to raise them going to church, send them to Sunday school? You make these decisions for your family and you've restarted that socialization with the next generation.

We form our political identities in adolescence and then they're quite stable over time. People who are Democrats when they're young are Democrats when they're older, people who are Republicans when they're young are Republicans when they're older. The generation who came of age in the 1960s, the protest generation are still more liberal than people who were raised during the Reagan era.

You form these partisan identities. I'm a Democrat or Republican and then I need to make this decision for my family. Do I want to go to church? None of us wants to say, "I'm a liberal Democrat. I'm going to take my kids to church every Sunday." But then in the car on the way home, tell my kids, "We don't believe any of that stuff." You're just going to make decisions to create a household where you're teaching kids a set of values that you believe in.

In my research, I look at data from the 1970s to today, which tracks the same individuals over periods of time, and I find that Democrats and Republican youths between 18 and 25 fall away from religion at roughly the same rate. This is universal. Religion's not important to 20-year-olds. But then you have to make these decisions about whether or not to come back. Republicans are returning to the pews at higher rates than Democrats. And that's where we see that God gap starting to emerge.

Data from the '70s and '80s is around the time that the Democrats and Republicans were starting to split on questions of religion and morality, abortion, gender norms, feminism, things like that. And that's precisely the time where we see partisanship dictate the extent to which they returned to religion.

Larry Bernstein:

I'm Jewish and whenever I move to a new community, I go synagogue shopping. I visit a variety of shuls and then pick my synagogue based on a variety of factors: level of engagement, music, interest in the rabbi's sermon, the community, etc.

We see dramatic differences in the rates of decline in various Protestant sects. Why do you think Evangelical churches are doing well with Church shopping relative to its peers?

Michele Margolis:

When you're making decisions about the religious life for your family and your church or synagogue shopping, politics can be one of the factors, but there's lots of factors. There are Yelp reviews for churches. Free childcare during church, coffee beforehand, small group activities, non-religious components to it. Creating community—am I going to be happy here?

I spent a summer in Alabama interviewing folks, talking to people, doing church shopping. Politics is definitely part of it. Something that everyone can resonate with when you first say politics can affect religion and people say, "No, no, no, that's impossible." But it's not crazy that you go synagogue shopping because at the end of the day, you want to find a community that you feel comfortable in. And one of those things is about politics.

And if you're a reformed Jew who is a Republican, you probably want to find a synagogue that doesn't talk about politics that much, because the majority of the people around you are probably going to be Democrats empirically speaking. The politics can come from the pulpit, but it can also just come from your peers.

Larry Bernstein:

Irv Gellman spoke on What Happens Next a few months ago about his new book on the 1960 Presidential Campaign between JFK and Nixon. And in that election, Catholics voted overwhelmingly for the Catholic candidate JFK. But in recent presidential elections for John Kerry and Joe Biden who are Catholic, they lost the Catholic vote. What changed? Has abortion been key to the coalition of religious Christians regardless of denomination?

Michele Margolis:

I think that's a great question. In 1960 there was real anti-Catholic discrimination among Protestants.

The states that had been liberalizing abortion laws pre-Roe v. Wade in the 1960s, those states were the states with low levels of Catholics. In the South, places like South Carolina, Georgia, Virginia, these were states that pre-Roe v. Wade had already, at the state level, rolled back abortion restrictions. The states that were also rolling it back were the states without the Catholics.

The Southern Baptist Convention up until 1978, they were saying we support Roe v. Wade. That shifted, Republicans saw this as an avenue to win over Catholic voters to take on the pro-life mantle. And they thought they could create a coalition among religious Americans, including Evangelicals. 1980, Reagan. We see it for the first time, rights to the unborn, all of that. There was some discussion between religious elites and political elites from a top down. Evangelicals used to say abortion was a Catholic issue. And then it became an Evangelical issue. And so these groups started to work together. They agree on LGBT rights and gay marriage. Those groups came together.

Larry Bernstein:

American Catholics are not monolithic. Are there differences by race or country of origin?

Michele Margolis:

In the 1960 election, 90 to 95% of Catholics were white. Today, a minority of Catholics are white because of Hispanic immigration.

Larry Bernstein:

Larry Bartels in his book *Democracy for Realists* references a study done in 1974 after Watergate. And those Republicans who switched parties because of Watergate also changed their views on abortion. Bartels thinks that once you shift partisan alignment then you will likely change all your opinions to be consistent with your new partisanship. Otherwise, cocktail parties are just going to be miserable.

Michele Margolis:

Yeah. So that book that you're mentioning by Aiken and Bartels is one of my favorites. We think about religion affecting our politics, economic views, social views. And then I pick the party that best reflects them. And obviously that's not perfect. We live in a two-party system. You're not going to be able to find a party that reflects you perfectly. But the idea is that you have these political attitudes, and they determine who you support. But what Aiken and Bartels show and my advisor Gabe Lens shows is that our partisanship is often driving our opinions.

This is the case of these people who switch from being Republican to Democratic, they became more pro-choice, especially men.

We don't pay attention to politics that much and we don't like dissonance. As you said, you don't want to be at a cocktail party, disagreeing with people. You want it to be easy. Now Trump is becoming its own sort of identity. Do you like Trump? The Aiken and Bartels argument is that it can affect your religion.

Larry Bernstein:

When I was in high school, I was on New Trier's student council. My best friend Amir Khan and I proposed closing the student smoking lounge. As incredible as it sounds today at my high school there was both a student and a separate teacher smoking lounge. Amir and I placed posters around the school scheduled a meeting in the cafeteria to discuss closing the student smoking lounge. Minutes before it started, I looked inside the cafeteria and only smokers were in attendance—and they wanted blood. Amir and I walked in and said that we would do everything in our power to make sure that individual choice would be maintained and that the smoking lounge would never be closed, and then ran off the stage.

Are politicians, political entrepreneurs who make policy or do they represent the attitudes of the public that they represent?

Michele Margolis:

That's a great anecdote because this is also in Aiken and Bartels. There are very few examples of public opinion and self-interest really being bottom up. And that's because it's hard to know what's in your self-interest because it has to be very simple cost and benefits, and tangible. And the example in the research is about smoking. Getting taxes off cigarettes, getting rid of non-smoking signs. This is tangible and has real cost and benefits. You are a smoker or a non-smoker.

Larry Bernstein:

I went back to my 25-year high school reunion and asked the principal about the school's smoking lounges, and he said they were closed years ago. Today, teachers and students walk off campus and smoke by the train tracks.

In the past few days, the Biden Administration announced that Juul products will be banned and that it plans to regulate cigarettes to remove its nicotine. In the US, smoking is class driven and white working class are the biggest smokers. They are also Republicans. What do you think about smoking regulation and partisanship?

Michele Margolis:

That's a good question. I haven't thought either party actively appeals to the smoker population as a constituency, per se. There is a huge class, education, income differential. I don't think that Republicans would necessarily say it's for a constituency purpose. This would be an example on limiting government overreach and regulation.

Larry Bernstein:

There's an old expression that Jews make money like Episcopalians but vote like Puerto Ricans. Why is that?

Michele Margolis:

Jewish voting patterns are very interesting, because they are predominantly Democratic despite the socioeconomic status of the group, which might lead it to be more fiscally conservative.

Jews have been discriminated against and there is this appreciation for liberal values. When we do see an uptick of anti-Jewish violence that keeps people in the Democratic camp, even if maybe economically they might feel like they align more with Republicans.

We're now seeing more of an education divide. People with a graduate level degree, a post-graduate degree is very predictive of being a Democrat in today's political environment. This so-called Diploma Divide. Jews are very highly educated.

Larry Bernstein:

Let's talk about African-Americans next. Martin Luther King said that the most segregated hour of the week is the hour of church services on Sunday. African Americans moved from the party of Lincoln to the party of Lyndon Johnson. African American men seem to be moving gradually to the party of Trump.

What factors would you use in your model to predict which African Americans will change parties today? Religiosity, income, gender, views on abortion? What?

Michele Margolis:

Wow. That's a lot of great questions. So, every election year there's discussion about Republicans capturing the African American vote. And every year, it doesn't really happen. Martin Luther King was right when he made that quote. He's still right today. Most churches are racially segregated. When we talk about churches in Republicanism, that is about *white* churches and Republicanism. For Democratic leaders and Civil Rights advocates the Black church was the home—that was the basis of the Civil Rights Movement. Black churches are more politicized than white evangelical churches. And, by politicized, I mean they're much more likely to do voter registration drives, hand out leaflets about how to vote, hear explicit political content from the pews.

Black churches are incredibly politicized on the Democratic side. Black Protestantism is thought to be a form of evangelicalism. It is about Biblical literalism. But remember that the Bible is massive. And, anyone who says they're a Biblical literalist, it's impossible. You can't be a Biblical literalist about everything.

White evangelical theology has evolved over the last 150 years to really be about personal salvation. The Black evangelical theology focuses on helping the less fortunate. We need to provide for people. We need to pull each other up. We need to treat each other like brothers. If you are an African-American avid churchgoer, you don't feel dissonance between being a Democrat and going to church in the same way that a white protestant, who goes to church religiously, might feel dissonance between their Democratic identity and their religious identity. To your question of who would I predict would move first? It wouldn't be the religious African Americans. Because policies that are "Democratic economics," like government safety net, social spending aligns very well with their Biblical interpretation.

Larry Bernstein:

Let's change topics to Hispanics. You mentioned earlier that the urban environments of the United States are increasingly Hispanic Catholics not white Catholics. We've seen in the recent primaries in Texas a trend in the Hispanic population to be voting Republican more than in the past. Would you expect the more religious Hispanics to change their voting to Republican relative to the non-religious Hispanics?

Michele Margolis:

It used to be Catholics meant white. And now there are also African-American Catholics, Hispanic Catholics. The other thing that has changed is 30 years ago, when I said Hispanic, that also overwhelmingly meant Catholic. But that's not the case anymore. There's a huge and growing evangelical Hispanic population. That's coming in two places through evangelism in Central America and through conversion when they're in the US.

There's also now a much larger growing population of Hispanic non-identifiers. Especially among second, third, fourth generation Hispanic Americans who have been here in the United States and becoming less religious. We used to say Hispanic and the religion would be Catholic. Now, I say Hispanic, and now we have to say, "Do you mean Catholic Hispanics? Evangelical Hispanics? Or non-religious Hispanics?"

When we talk about Hispanic evangelicals, those folks much more likely to be Republican than Hispanic Catholics. Hispanic Catholics went about two thirds, one third, Biden- Trump. Hispanic evangelicals was 55 Trump. And non-religious was overwhelmingly for Biden. What we're seeing with the Hispanic shift to the Republican party is about religious variation.

Understanding the religious heterogeneity among this group that didn't exist 20 years ago, is important because we're seeing a lot of Hispanic Catholics becoming non-identifiers, and Evangelical Catholics. Over time, the proportion of how the three religious groups break out among Hispanics change that's going to have a direct impact on the partisan makeup of Hispanics.

Larry Bernstein:

There are significant differences in our Hispanic population and partisan makeup. There is race: white Hispanic and non-white Hispanic, and I would assume that the white Hispanic is more

likely to be Republican. The second is, whether a woman is married or not, or with or without children. Level of education, [RC1] working class is mixed, college might trend Republican, post Grad would be Democrat. What variables predict Hispanic voting patterns? And how do these other variables compare to religiosity in importance to predicting Hispanic partisanship?

Michele Margolis:

All of these things go together. There are lots of people who are not religious who are married. But, being married and religious are positively correlated. Hispanic women who are married are more religious makes perfect sense because those Hispanic women who aren't married, religion frowns upon.

Now you touch on an important point, which is that race and ethnicity are not the same thing. We talk about race as being Black, white, Asian. Ethnicities, we think of it as Hispanic, non-Hispanic. There is variation in how those two questions map onto each other. Most people use those terms interchangeably and it's not. White Hispanic is often we think of as people from Spain, [RC2] but obviously this is all self-defined. Whereas a non-white Hispanic person in the US we'd say, "This person is Black." There was slave trade in Central and South America, so there's people of all kind of colors and races, in addition to the ethnic component.

And then education. When your part of a minority group, whether it's race, ethnicity, religion, education certainly matters, but might matter a little bit less. If you are a super highly-educated Hispanic person you might be more politically engaged. You also might know more about how policies affect members of your group. And so, even if economically it might make sense for you to move the Republican party, it's your education and your awareness about the political world that keeps you in the Democratic camp.

When we talk about the Catholic vote, it's complicated because there is racial and ethnic variation. And similar with African Americans, if they continue to increase their numbers in higher education and their economic prospects increase, that's just creating more heterogeneity in the group. Then the question is, do we expect to see heterogeneity in their voting, or do we expect it to stay as a cohesive homogenous group?

Larry Bernstein:

I recently moved to Miami Beach and most of my neighbors are Hispanics. On one side was an Argentine family where the husband went to MIT, as did his brother, a very intellectual, entrepreneurial family. Directly across the street, was a Cuban Catholic. And then, on my other side was a Cuban Jewish family. Cubans, Brazilians, Venezuelans, and Argentines have substantial populations in South Florida. Whereas in Chicago, where I used to live, it was predominantly Mexican population with some Central Americans. When we refer to Hispanics, it's a very broad term for a multi-ethnic population. How do you think about one's original place of birth as being a key determinant of partisanship?

Michele Margolis:

That's a great question. On another great podcast, which is called *The Experiment*[RC3], there's this great episode called "Inventing Hispanic," and it's about the history of the term Hispanic. It is a social construct. To your point about two Cubans and an Argentine, they all speak Spanish. You throw Brazil in, they speak Portuguese.

We talk about Cuban American voting patterns as a function of Cubans being from Cuba and Castro and that history. This idea that the Argentine neighbor might have a very different political outlook than the Cuban neighbor on account of when they came to the US and the political reasons why they came to America in the first place. When we talk about Hispanic American voting, we are also combining people who have lived in Texas and California for hundreds of years. That's very different than people who in the last 20 years.

Unfortunately, from a data and survey perspective, if you're looking at exit polls on the 2022 election, we're not able to break it out based on these sub groups. We clump Hispanic Americans together, regardless of whether you became a citizen last week and English is not your first language, to, "I'm a fourth-generation and I identify as Hispanic on a survey, but I actually don't speak Spanish." And by combining those two people, you're losing nuance. Asian Americans is another excellent example where there's so much variation. There's Vietnamese who came during the Vietnam War, versus Chinese, versus Japanese. Why they came to the US, the conditions under which they came to the US, and their home political environment, could not be more different. And those things affect how you view the political world. If you came from a place with a high-functioning democratic government, that's very different than fleeing because of authoritarianism. Those things affect your political views and your children because you're socializing them to think about the world in a certain way.[RC4]

Larry Bernstein:

Donald Trump is not a religious man, but recently he's been the leader of the religious party. Some academics said that doesn't make any sense, and so we should start to see splits within the party as it relates to Trump. But we've seen a continuing concentration of religious people into the Republican party led by a non-religious person. Is there no linkage between the religiosity of the leadership and its appeal to religious people?

Michele Margolis:

This is where our politics allow us to do mental gymnastics. I spent eight weeks in Alabama a couple of years ago going to churches. And I asked people about Donald Trump, and there was a lot of similar rhetoric, which is "it's about the vessel." That King David, King Saul, they are these vessels, they were imperfect men that could be used for God's furthering of his agenda. There doesn't seem to be a problem with his lack of religiosity, so long as he is doing the things that they want him to be doing. A non-religious person doing the things that the religious right wants done, not a problem.

Larry Bernstein:

I end each episode on a note of optimism. Michele, what are you optimistic about as it relates to partisanship and religiosity?

Michele Margolis:

We're in a world where we are choosing our echo chambers. Religion is creating bridges among people who are politically like-minded.

America is becoming far less white and far less Christian. As someone who is very concerned about the Trump era and what this means for the children I am currently raising in the United States, I take comfort in the fact that we are becoming more religiously diverse. We are becoming more racially and ethnically diverse. And the Republican Party by virtue of basically being a white Christian party, is eventually not going to be able to win elections without changing who they appeal to. They either need to change so that they're appealing to a broader group or they're going to be on the losing end of things.

What I'm optimistic about is that the demographics of who's voting will look very different when my five- and three-year-old are voting. It will be a group that I hope to be more inclusive and diverse and electing representatives who are inclusive and diverse. That is something I'm optimistic about in the long-term.