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The Republicanization of evangelical Protestants in the United States: An examination of the sources of political realignment



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ABSTRACT

Although the association between evangelical Protestant and Republican affiliations is now a fundamental aspect of American politics, this was not the case as recently as the early 1980s. Following work on secular political realignment and the issue evolution model of partisan change, I use four decades of repeated cross-sectional survey data to examine the dynamic correlates of evangelical Protestant and Republican affiliations, and how these factors promote changes in partisanship. Results show that evangelical Protestants have become relatively more likely to attend religious services and to oppose homosexuality, abortion, and welfare spending. Period-specific mediation models show that opposition to abortion, homosexuality, and welfare spending have become more robust predictors of Republican affiliation. By the twenty-first century, differences in Republican affiliation between evangelical Protestants and other religious affiliates are fully mediated by views of homosexuality, abortion, and welfare spending; and differences in Republican affiliation between evangelicals and the religiously unaffiliated are substantially mediated by views of homosexuality, abortion, welfare spending, and military spending. These results further understanding of rapid changes in politico-religious alignments and the increasing importance of moral and cultural issues in American politics, which supports a culture wars depiction of the contemporary political landscape.

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Although evangelical Protestants are now considerably more likely than other Americans to identify as Republican and to vote for Republican candidates, this politico-religious alignment is comparatively new (Brooks and Manza, 2004; Wald and Calhoun-Brown, 2007). Three trends contributed to the political realignment that produced the current politico-religious configurations. First, since the early 1980s Americans who affiliate with evangelical Protestant denominations have become increasingly likely to also affiliate with the Republican Party (Brooks and Manza, 2004; Fowler et al., 2014; Layman, 2001). Second, there was a decline in Republican affiliation and voting for Republican candidates among non-evangelicals, and especially religiously unaffiliated Americans (Green, 2007; Pew Research Center, 2015). Third, there was notable apostasy or religious disaffiliation among politically liberal Americans (Hout and Fischer, 2014; Putnam and Campbell, 2010). The result of these trends is that religious affiliation, particularly evangelical Protestant affiliation, is now more strongly associated with party choice than are education, income, age, gender, marital status, and union membership (Abramowitz and Saunders, 2008). This article clarifies the mechanisms producing politico-religious realignment and the issues that explain politico-religious alliances by examining the temporally dynamic nature of factors that mediate the confluence between evangelical Protestantism and affiliation with the Republican Party.

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Divisive “takeoff issues” (Baldassarri and Bearman, 2007) related to sexuality and reproduction are now fundamental to party polarization. As DiMaggio et al. (1996:738) conclude, there has been a “striking divergence of attitudes between Democrats and Republicans.” This party polarization, or party sorting (Fiorina and Abrams, 2008), is most evident in increased differences between the parties in their views of abortion and sexuality (Bafumi and Shapiro, 2009; Ura and Ellis, 2012). These same issues are strongly influenced by religion (Bolzendahl and Brooks, 2005; Wald and Calhoun-Brown, 2007). Americans have become more divided on what are often referred to as “moral” or “cultural” issues, and these divisions have been increasingly reflected in party loyalties (Abramowitz and Saunders, 1998; Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008). Consequently, after decades of party dealignment, there has been an increase in party loyalty; but, unlike older forms of partisanship, this new partisanship is highly ideological (Abramowitz, 2010; Bafumi and Shapiro, 2009; Levendusky, 2009). As partisanship became more ideological in nature, it also became more closely associated with religion; and, as I demonstrate with the analyses below, the issue composition of ideological partisanship largely explains the religious nature of contemporary American partisanship.

This article expands on previous research by 1) simultaneously modeling the influence of multiple potential mediators on the association between evangelical Protestant and Republican affiliations, 2) addressing temporal changes in this mediation, 3) quantifying indirect effects to evaluate relative mediating impact, and 4) distinguishing differences between evangelicals and other religious affiliates from differences between evangelicals and the disproportionately liberal and rapidly growing group of religiously unaffiliated Americans. Following the traditional approach to mediation (Baron and Kenny, 1986), I first examine temporal changes in the association between evangelical Protestantism and both Republican affiliation and the potential mediating factors. Following that, the focal analyses employ non-parametric bootstrapped standard errors to assess the significance of standardized direct and indirect effects in the association between evangelical Protestant and Republican affiliations. With repeated cross-sectional survey data from 1973 through 2012, I conduct separate analyses for four roughly decade-long periods. Ancillary analyses address alternative modes of social change, causality, and the potential impact of omitted variables.

The results show that differences in Republican affiliation between evangelical Protestants and other religious affiliates are predominantly due to differences in views of homosexuality and abortion. While differences in Republican affiliation between evangelicals and the religiously unaffiliated are similarly motivated by views of reproduction and sexuality, views of government spending on the military and welfare also mediate much of the difference between evangelicals and the unaffiliated, particularly in the twenty-first century. I conclude by discussing how these trends run counter to the assumption of crosscutting interests in American politics (Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008), are antithetical to the liberal viewpoint (Rawls, 1993) and secularization theories (Gorski, 2000) that emphasize a clear separation between religion and the state, and support the culture wars perspective (Hunter, 1991) by demonstrating how contemporary political mobilization relies on divisive cultural issues.

1. Potential causes of evangelical-republican confluence

The increased confluence between evangelical Protestant and Republican affiliations since the 1980s is characteristic of what Key (1959:199) termed secular political realignment: “a movement of the members of a population category from party to party that extends over several presidential elections and appears to be independent of the peculiar factors influencing the vote at individual elections.” The sources of secular political realignment manifest in both direct and indirect effects. The distinction here is between changes in the effect of being evangelical Protestant itself and changes in mediating factors associated with both evangelical Protestant and Republican affiliations. In regards to direct effects, the evangelical community may have become more Republican—and the non-evangelical community less Republican—due to qualities intrinsic to affiliating with specific religious organizations. For instance, political cues from the pulpit and from face-to-face interactions with other churchgoers can influence political perspectives and loyalties (Wald et al., 1988; Welch et al., 1993). In particular, the growth of the Christian Right in the 1980s could have promoted political realignment by drawing evangelicals to the Republican Party, by pushing non-evangelicals away, and by encouraging liberals to change religious affiliations or disaffiliate from organized religion (Putnam and Campbell, 2010).

As Wald and Calhoun-Brown (2007:229) note, however, “At best, the Christian Right intensified changes that were already under way.” It did so, they argue, by emphasizing moral and social issues, and differences between candidates on these issues. Thus, rather than religious affiliation itself, it may be views on specific issues that lead evangelical Protestants to affiliate with the Republican Party, lead non-evangelicals to not to affiliate with the Republican Party, and potentially lead some liberal evangelicals to change affiliations or disaffiliate altogether. In other words, there may have been changes in the indirect effects of religious affiliation on Republican identification. This comports with the depiction of political realignment as a response to issue evolution (Carmines and Stimson, 1989). In this case, the evolution of issues that resonate with the evangelical Protestant constituency and that are central to the Republican Party Platform. The question remains, what are the key factors mediating differences in Republican affiliation between evangelicals and other Americans? And how have these mediating factors changed over time?

1.1. Abortion and homosexuality

Although other issue domains may be relevant to the confluence between evangelical and Republican affiliations, abortion and sexuality should be the most prominent. Several researchers suggest that the mutual emphasis on “traditional values,” “family values,” or “moral values” is a key component in the connection between evangelical Protestantism and the Republican Party (e.g. Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008; Layman and Carsey, 2002); and, as Greeley and Hout (2006: 134) note, in the evangelical

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