THE EVOLUTION OF THE RELIGION GAP METAPHOR IN THE LANGUAGE OF AMERICAN POLITICAL JOURNALISM 1987-2012

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For two decades, at least since Pat Buchanan gave his famous culture wars address at the 1992 Republican convention and exhorted conservatives to rally against the forces of secularism in the "struggle for the soul of America," the question whether the nation has become polarized over religion in novel and unforeseen ways has touched-off a lively debate inside and outside academia (Layman, 2001; Fiorina et al, 2011; Abramowitz, 2010; Putnam and Campbell, 2010; Barone, 1993). Never in American history have the two major parties been divided along a European-style secular(ist) vs. religiously traditionalist dimension. The principal religious cleavage since the 1840s was the one between Catholic and Protestants.

To grasp the significance of the new divide better and capture its various dimensions, social scientists have found it necessary to develop new conceptual language and refine survey question wording. Knowing respondents' denominational preferences was no longer sufficient; information about respondents' bible beliefs, level of religious engagement, and frequency of church attendance were also necessary to understand religion's impact on politics. To keep abreast of religious trends and their storylines relevant to the changing contours of the electorate, journalists had to utilize new vocabulary to describe the opposing worldviews driving the realignments and employ new terms to identify the antagonists agitating the conflict. The longstanding narrative about the political mobilization evangelicals, for example, needed to be updated and refashioned into a more encompassing storyline that included both the alignment of Christian conservatives with the GOP and the secular pull in the Democratic Party. The polarization of the electorate along a secular(ist) vs. traditionalist cleavage has transformed the way we think and talk about religion and politics. "Religion Gap," "God gulf," "religious nones," "red state," "blue state," "Second Demographic Transition," and so on, which were coined to describe these developments, have now become part of the ongoing public conversation on the new religious factor in political life. This study assesses the relative importance of the religious divide since its onset in 1992, and examines the language employed by the press to describe and explain this development to their readers.

The Religious Divide: Old and New

Political conflict rooted in religious differences has been a perennial feature in American political life since the nation's founding. Denominational affiliation was the primary means by which an individual's faith was connected to political life. Throughout most of America's history political clashes over religion involved conflicts that brought professed believers of one or more denominations or faith traditions into partisan confrontations with committed adherents of other denominations and traditions: Catholics against Protestants (think of the Know Nothing Party circa 1850's and the 1928 and 1960 elections), and Baptists and Presbyterians doing battle with Anglicans over religious establishments in the South and clashing with Congregationalists

over this issue in New England during the Age of Federalism (Hamburger, 2002; McCormick, 1974).
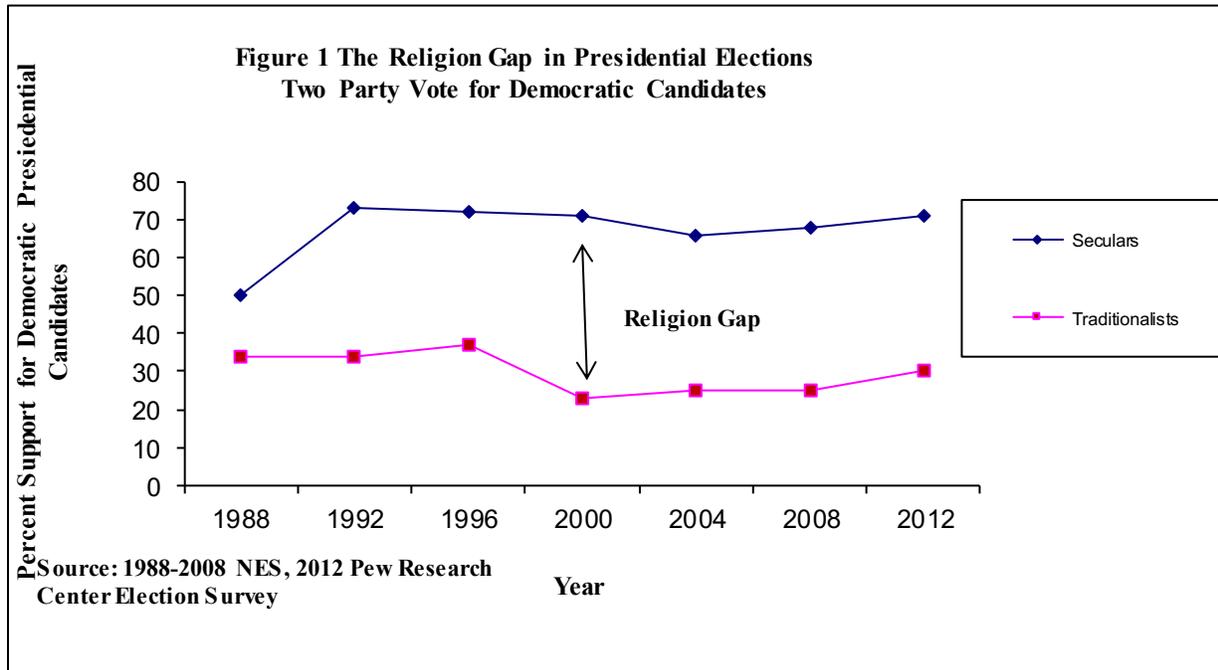
The new religious divide cuts across these historic cleavages. The restructuring has softened denominational boundaries that until a quarter century ago defined the religious dimension of partisan conflict, with Catholics, Jews, and southern evangelicals aligned with the Democratic Party and non-southern white, mostly mainline Protestants forming the religious base of the Republicans. As a result of extensive social change and post-World War II theological developments in religion, particularly within Christianity, political divisions spawned by religion are triggered less often by disagreements between religiously orthodox members of different denominations and faith communities than by theologically driven ideological clashes between traditionalists and modernists within the same churches and faith families or between traditionalists and persons who are not religious at all, i.e., secular(ist)s (Wuthnow, 1988; Bolce and De Maio, 2002). Devout Catholics today have more in common politically with observant Presbyterians, Baptists and Lutherans and other observant Protestants than with less religious members from their own Church. Today, religiously committed white Catholics strongly support the Republican Party while less religious Catholics still vote Democratic.

Pivotal to religion's resurgence as a polarizing political force is the change in the information environment provided by political elites (Zaller, 1992; Putnam and Campbell, 2010). As the language of Republican and Democratic elites and activists exhibited sharper differences on issues with religious content (reflected in polarized political rhetoric, roll call votes, and platform planks relating to abortion, vouchers, gay marriage, conscience, etc.), the Republican and Democratic Parties' diverging cultural images became salient to a larger share of the electorate. The change in partisan cues enabled voters to sort themselves into appropriate (and opposing) political camps and cast ballots on the basis of their moral and religious predispositions.

The defining feature of the new religious cleavage (or religion gap as it is popularly known) is the tendency of seculars-modernists to espouse liberal views and support Democratic candidates and the religiously orthodox to adhere to conservative political beliefs and back Republican candidates. Aligned with the "orthodox" camp are religiously committed evangelical and fundamentalist Christians along with traditionalist Catholics, Mormons, and members of mainline churches in confrontation with seculars, most Jews, theologically heterodox and less committed Catholics and mainliners, and modernists from all faith families, siding with the "progressivists" (Layman, 2001).

There is virtual consensus that the religion gap took form during the 1992 election, dubbed by one team of political scientists alternatively as "the year of the secular" and "the year of the evangelical" (Kellstedt *et al*., 1996, 286). Even scholars who downplay the larger culture wars phenomena and maintain that the clash between secularist-modernist and religiously traditionalist worldviews is a battle being waged primarily by congressional elites and political activists nevertheless acknowledge the emergence of significant religious divisions in the electorate beginning in 1992, particularly among white voters, paralleling cleavages at the elite and activist level (*e.g.*, Fiorina, *et al*., 2011).

Religiously polarized voting patterns along a secular vs. traditionalist divide are particularly noticeable in survey data from the 1988-2008 National Election Study (NES) and Pew Research Center's 2012 election poll (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 The Religion Gap in Presidential Elections Two Party Vote for Democratic Candidates

Source: 1988-2008 NES, 2012 Pew Research Center Election Survey

The figure assesses the two major party presidential candidate choices of nonobservant and religiously committed white voters in the seven presidential elections that occurred during these years. The results show that in every presidential contest since 1992 seculars gave anywhere between three-fifths to three-quarters of their votes to Democratic presidential candidates (see top line in figure 1), the mirror image of the proportion of ballots cast for Democratic candidates by religiously observant whites, who went lopsidedly for GOP standard bearers (as extrapolated from data displayed by the bottom line; see appendix A for the operationalization of seculars and traditionalists). Oddly enough, despite the Democrats' born-again resolve to try harder to shed their secular image after suffering back to back defeats at the hands of Republican campaigns emphasizing traditional Christian values (Kirkpatrick, 2004a), the religion gap was just as large in the 2008 election as it was when it was first spotted in 1992, owing to impressive Democratic gains among religiously unaffiliated and non-church attending whites (see figure 1). In recognition of the ascendancy of seculars in electorate the Obama campaign did not bother to make a pitch to religious voters in 2012, but instead focused on winning more votes from the less devout (Douthat, 2012). The strategy paid off. In the 2012 election Obama was first presidential candidate *ever* to carry the nine crucial battleground states (with the exception of North Carolina) and *lose* the Christian vote.

Overall, these data indicate there is a wide gulf in the political orientations of devout and secular whites, and that this cleavage is as large today as it was when it first emerged during the early 1990's. The centrality of religion to a person's life influences not only whether that individual favors the Republicans or Democrats, but that person's political ideology, views on a host of policy issues and cultural concerns, moral outlook, and whether or not he/she feels

antipathy toward evangelicals, Christian fundamentalists, and (traditionally) religious people in general (Hansen, 2011; Bolce and De Maio 1999b, 2007, 2012; Campbell, Green and Layman 2012). With the notable exception of race the religion gap has been the most important and enduring social cleavage – trumping even class and sectional divisions – for the past two decades. What remains to be explored is whether this historic restructuring of religious-based political conflict caught the attention of the press, and if so, when a religion gap storyline became discernible in the language of political journalists.

Media Data and Methods

        To determine whether, to what extent, and in what manner the new religious cleavage was salient to influential mainstream media, we used the LEXIS-NEXIS database to identify every domestic political news item and opinion piece that appeared in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* between 1987 to 2012 that featured a "religion gap" narrative as part of the story (see appendix B for the complete listing of keywords and syntax used in this search, coder reliabilities, and justification for use of the *Times* and the *Post* as indicators of news salience). These 25 years spanned the televangelist scandals, Pat Robertson's failed campaign for the Republican presidential nomination, the disbanding of the Moral Majority, the rise and decline of the Christian Coalition, the counter-mobilization of the seculars into the Democratic Party, and the religiously polarized elections of the Clinton and Bush years and the Obama era.

        In assessing press coverage of a particular issue it is helpful to think in terms of dominant and countervailing messages. Public opinion theorist, John Zaller (1992, 120) defines the narrative that "is more intense during a period as the *dominant* message, and the less intense message as the countervailing message." As the data presented below will show, the political mobilization of evangelicals got the lion's share of the coverage. The resurgence of evangelical Christianity was the dominant religion and politics frame throughout this period. Because the political mobilization of seculars got far less intense coverage, the alignment of seculars into the Democratic Party can be considered the countervailing message. Press accounts on the religion gap – the polarization of the parties along a secular vs. traditionalist dimension, by definition, require mentions of the political orientations of religionists and seculars. Gap metaphors, in this case the religion gap, are typically employed as metrics to indicate why a particular party or candidate is ahead in polls and the other is electorally disadvantaged (Olson and Green, 2005). The gender gap, for example, has often been used to explain Democratic congressional victories when Democratic candidates do better with women who typically outnumber men in the electorate. Keeping these points in mind will provide some context for making sense of the relatively long period of low intensity coverage of the religion gap for the years 1987 to 2002 followed by the fluctuation and change pattern in gap narratives after 2003.

        Political scientists trace the origins of the "God-gulf" to the tumultuous 1972 Democratic National Convention when seculars/modernists first became a visible and potent force within the activist base of the Democratic Party (Kirkpatrick 1976; Layman 2001, 2010). Yet it was not until the 1992 presidential election that the secular(ist) vs. traditionalist divide, long apparent in polarized rhetoric, platform positions, and political behavior of party activists and elites, was now unmistakably influencing the voting choices of mass publics. Therefore, because the religion gap prior to the first Clinton election was a conflict that primarily engaged Democratic
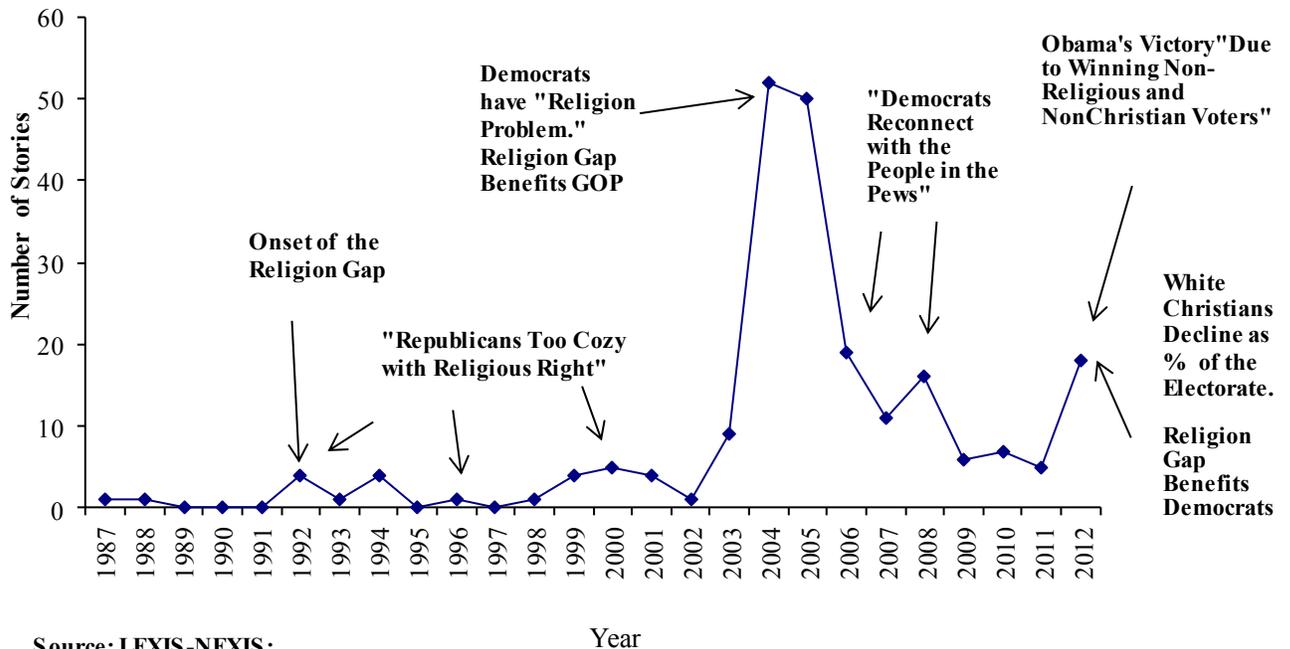
and Republican elites and activists, we anticipated relatively few press reports conveying a "God-gulf" narrative before the 1990s. We did expect to see an increase of stories on this topic in reaction to the realigned voting patterns that became evident in polling data during the 1992 elections and have persisted in survey results ever since. Certainly the emergence of sharp differences in the voting preferences of a salient demographic group are noteworthy in their own right (such gaps are hard to miss in poll data) and could become newsworthy if the polarization signals a fundamental shift in the political terrain of the electorate. Our expectation was only partially borne out.

The Media's Take on the New Religious Divide

As anticipated, the *Times* and the *Post* devoted little coverage to the religion gap prior to the 1992 election (see figure 2). In fact we found only two stories conveying this theme. But during the Clinton years, when we did expect to see a significant uptick corresponding to the sharp rise in religiously polarized rhetoric and voting patterns, we found only sporadic mentions of the religious divide, six appearing in the *Times*, 14 in the *Post*. Indeed, despite much commentary on George W. Bush's religiosity and a sharply divided electorate that produced the evocative red state/blue state electoral map conjuring images of the nation's religiously traditional heartland and Bible Belt besieged by the forces of secularism and cosmopolitanism, we came across only five stories carrying a religious divide narrative during the 2000 political season. Between 1992, the year when the religion gap first opened up, and 2002, these two newspapers of record published a total of 25 articles featuring a religious divide storyline, roughly one religion gap mention per paper per year. During this same time span readers of the *Times* and *Post* were more than two times as likely to find news accounts about fights between "fundamentalists" and moderates over the party machinery, platform planks, and control of the GOP than to come across stories about religion-driven political clashes between Republican and Democratic elites, activists, and mass publics over the stewardship and policy direction of the nation (61 vs. 25, $p<.05$; see appendix B for keywords used in this search). Partisan division rooted in religious differences -- at least from the perspective of the mainstream press -- was a Republican problem with occasional spillover affects afflicting the rest of America. The secular(ist)-Democratic contribution to an increasingly religiously polarized nation was, for all intents and purposes, invisible to the press.

["*In the United States, if a politician attacks a sect, that is no reason why the supporters of that very sect should not support him; but if he attacks all sects together, everyone shuns him, and he remains alone*." Tocqueville, [1835] 1969, P. 293.]

Figure 2 Number of Stories Appearing in the *Times* and the *Post* Depicting the Democrats and Republicans as being Divided Along a Secular(ist) vs. Religiously Tradtionalist Cleavage, 1987-2012

Democrats have "Religion Problem." Religion Gap Benefits GOP

Onset of the Religion Gap

"Democrats Reconnect with the People in the Pews"

Obama's Victory"Due to Winning Non-Religious and NonChristian Voters"

"Republicans Too Cozy with Religious Right"

White Christians Decline as % of the Electorate.

Religion Gap Benefits Democrats

Number of Stories

Year

Source: LEXIS-NEXIS: 1987-2012

To be sure, stereotypes of the "intolerant bible thumper," "huckster preacher," "itinerant tent meeting revivalist," "moralizing hypocrite," "gullible rubes," have been permanent fixtures in American culture and certainly not unknown to journalists covering contemporary politics (Weisskopf, 1993). Cultural frames of references such as these have been embellished in novels, press accounts, plays, and movies and provided ready-made narratives and colorful protagonists to be adapted to the current political scene. Images of James Bakker, Jimmy Swaggart, Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson can be easily evoked when reading H. L. Mencken's accounts of the Scopes trial and Sinclair Lewis' *Elmer Gantry* or *Babbit*. If you can imagine the characters in *Inherit the Wind* transported into the contemporary era and caucusing at the Republican National convention you might appreciate why some in the press became transfixed on the Christian Right.

No such template existed for seculars. A narrative including the importance of seculars and their agenda to the Democratic Party would have to be crafted from contemporary materials. This new storyline had to await postmortems attributing President George W. Bush's successes in 2000 and 2004 to the Democrats' "religion problem," and election analyses eight years later, oddly enough, crediting President Obama's victories in 2012 to demographic changes which made overt appeals to seculars more politically profitable than explicitly going after the votes of religiously devout Christians (Gray, 2012).

Still we must not lose sight that as far back as the early 1990's prominent journalists were aware "that the core of the Democratic Party has become secular …" while "the core of the Republican Party is made up of religious traditionalists" (Edsall, 1999). That this new religious cleavage was mentioned only sporadically – and primarily by a select group of journalists -- might reflect that a story line organized around the political clash between an increasingly "secular(ist)" Democratic Party and a religiously traditionalist Republican Party complicated a long standing political narrative thought to be more newsworthy, namely the political mobilization of the Religious Right and the threat that politicized Christian fundamentalism posed to norms of tolerance and democratic civility (cf., Shields 2009). Probably the most important reason why the religion gap narrative was largely absent in political news stories during that time span, however, was that it did not offer a compelling explanation for why the Democrats were defeating Republican candidates at the presidential level. The press was not inclined to attribute Clinton's electoral victories to his strong showing among non-religious and anti-religious voters. Such a characterization about a major American political party would fly in the face of an operative civil religion that was still deeply entrenched in public culture, would be too jarring for the period. There has never been a major American party that identified itself as the "party of secularism." A more irresistible political narrative and one consistent with both the mobilization of evangelical storyline and newsroom culture of that era was that ostensible Republican religious zealotry was more of a turnoff at the polls than the apparent Democratic embrace of modernist moral values. This mindset probably accounts for why many pundits at that time viewed the linkage of the Republican brand with the Christian Right symbol as a net negative for the Bush and Dole campaigns (Bolce and De Maio 1999b).

It was not until the 2004 presidential election season and its immediate aftermath that the editors and political journalists of the *Times* and the *Post* awakened to the importance of the secular(ist) factor in the Democratic Party and began to publish stories indicating that a secularist-modernist outlook (as well as a religiously traditional one) powerfully structures political behavior and policy preferences, and therefore, party conflict (52 stories in 2004 vs. 36 stories for the period spanning 1987-2003, $p<.05$). The press took notice, for example, that just as traditionally religious beliefs incline the devout to oppose abortion and same sex marriage and support prayer in school, conservative ideologies, and Republican candidates and so on, nonreligious/modernist outlooks dispose seculars toward the opposing political direction, that is to favor expansive abortion rights, support the legalization of gay marriage, oppose prayer in school, embrace liberal ideologies, and back Democratic candidates (Kirkpatrick, 2004a and b; Steinfels, 2004). Eight of ten (112 out of 138) news accounts featuring a religion gap motif during this 18-year time span were published between 2003 and 2005; one hundred and two appeared in 2004 and 2005 alone. Some of these stories tacitly acknowledged how the press missed the importance of the religion-gap in previous elections (see, for example, Broder and Morin 2004).

A recurring narrative which surfaced at this time concerned the Democratic Party's increasing estrangement from people in the pews. The Democrats' religion problem became the countervailing storyline for the next several years and was responsible for the spike in religion gap stories (see figure 2). The recognition of the Democratic drift toward secularism was initially triggered by poll results showing that the Democrats had lost touch with people of faith

(e.g., Brooks, 2003; Kristof, 2003) coupled by mounting apprehensions that then Democratic frontrunner Howard Dean was "too secular" to win the general election (Wilgoren , 2004). The Democrats' "religion problem" frame gained traction when John Kerry's relationship to his faith came under suspicion in some quarters. Unlike his two Catholic predecessors, Al Smith and John F. Kennedy, Democratic standard bearer Kerry caught flak from both devout Catholics and (ironically) evangelicals because he was perceived as *not* being Catholic enough (Kirkpatrick 2004a, Kirkpatrick and Goodstein, 2004). The Republican successes in November along with exit polls showing that not an insignificant fraction of the electorate were "values voters" who broke heavily for Bush reinforced the religion gap framework (Rutenberg and Kirkpatrick 2004).

(As surprising as it might appear to some -- given the ubiquity of "gap" metaphors in the vocabulary of political journalism today and an electorate that has been politically divided along a secular vs. religious split since the first Clinton election -- the "religion gap" and "God gulf" expressions are of relatively recent coinage. The first time the expression "God gulf" appeared on the pages of the *New York Times* was in a November 12, 2003 opinion piece written by columnist Nicholas Kristof about the increasing religious divisions between the Democrats and the Republicans that he traces to the Clinton era. The "religion gap" metaphor, as conventionally understood today (*i.e.*, secular(ist)s supporting Democrats and observant voters favoring the GOP), first made its way into the *Times* in a January 31, 2004 column penned by Peter Steinfels.)

Overall, the increased volume of religious divide stories appears to have reflected the growing recognition by journalists and some Democratic (and Republican) elites, abetted by twelve years of survey data and commentary insinuated into the public discourse, that religion matters to many Americans, and that a party or presidential candidate too identified in the public mind with a an increasingly militant secularist worldview could be politically damaged in the nation's heartland (Neuhaus 2003; Henninger 2003). Nearly a third (34) of political stories featuring a religion-gap frame during the 2003-2004-2005 election and post-election cycle were organized around the theme that the reconfiguration of party conflict along a secular(ist) vs. traditionalist axis could be harmful to the Democratic Party in the current era (*e.g*., VandeHei, 2004; Kirkpatrick, 2004a, 2005)**.** As one Democratic operative put it, "You can't have everyone who goes to church vote Republican; you just can't" (Kirkpatrick 2004a). More than a dozen stories, mainly election post mortems involving internal debates among Democrats --and all appearing after the 2004 November election -- emphasized the need for Democrats to take affirmative steps to reach out to religious voters so as to "shed their secular image."

Democratic concerns about being branded as the "party of secularism" appear *not* to have been unwarranted (for classic and contemporary comments about the political fallout of being labeled "anti-religious" in a nation famously described as having "the soul of a church" (Chesterton, 1922: 12; see also Tocqueville, 1969 [1835]: 293, and Wolfe, 2004). Polls showed, for example, that nonbelievers were even more disliked than the "conservative Christian movement" (52 percent unfavorable vs. 29 percent, respectively, Pew 2001). Sensing Democratic vulnerabilities on the religion issue, Senate Republicans in early Spring 2005 seized upon a variant of the "God-gulf" metaphor – Democratic antagonism to people of faith – as part of a shrewd, if cynical, strategy to undermine efforts by their opponents in the Senate to block the confirmation of high profile "religious" judicial nominees to federal courts, notably, John Roberts, Janice Rogers Brown, and William Pryor (Milbank and Cooperman 2005). Thirty-one

stories, all appearing between April and early October, carried themes along this line. (The three candidates were ultimately confirmed.) More dismaying from the Democrat point of view was that the "anti-religious" tag appeared to stick.   Language has real world consequences. According to public opinion trend data, for example, the spate of stories about the Democrats' "religion problem" during the 2004 election season and its immediate aftermath was associated with a sharp erosion in the number of Americans who viewed the Democratic Party as a "friend of religion".

This opinion shift is evident from the results of three Religion and Public Life (RPL) Surveys carried out by the Pew Research Center between July 2003 and August 2005. Pew asked its respondents whether they felt that the "Democratic Party was "generally friendly to religion," "neutral," or "unfriendly." In the August 2005 poll only 29 percent chose "friendly toward religion" – down significantly (13 percentage points) from just a two years earlier. A fifth opted for the third choice, "unfriendly." (In contrast, over a majority evaluated the Republicans as friends of religion.) The change in the image of the Democratic Party occurred across all segments of the public, but it was particularly noteworthy among religiously committed white Christians. In 2003, for example, observant whites were twice as likely to say that the Democratic Party was "friendly" toward religion than "unfriendly (41 percent vs. 20 percent). Two years the later the reverse was true; less than a quarter (23 percent) felt that the Democrats were friendly toward religion and more than a third (34 percent) said that the Democrats were hostile to religion. The Pew data indicate that the changing image of the Democrats was linked to a growing perception that the Party has been captured by secularists. A majority of white voters, and over three-fifths of frequent church going whites in the 2005 survey said that "Liberals who are not religious have too much control over the Democratic Party." From the perspective of our study, the Pew data are interesting in several other respects.   The survey results, for example, confirm that the Republican Party also has a "religious problem," which is the mirror image of the Democrats'. While a majority of voters in the 2005 survey (55 percent), including seculars, saw the GOP, as "religious friendly," most also thought that "religious conservatives have too much control over the Republican Party," and over seven in ten seculars held this view. These perceptions of the parties' opposing stances toward religion (consistent with media frames at this time) had predictable consequences in the 2004 election. Eighty-seven percent of voters who saw the Democratic Party as dominated by secularist liberals supported Bush over Kerry whereas 76 percent of those who thought religious conservatives had too much clout in the Republican Party went for Kerry. Clearly, how the new religious cleavage is framed has real world consequences. Press frames shaped popular images of the two parties and influenced voting behavior.

The Press and the Religion Gap in the Post 2004 "Values" Election Era

To some degree the explosion of news stories containing religion gap narratives is baffling. The spate, for example, cannot be explained by a dramatic upsurge in religiously polarized voting in 2004 (as is clearly evident from the data displayed in figure 1.) The divide in 2004 was actually smaller than the 2000 gap and virtually identical to the size of the gap in 1992.

When we were coding the data we surmised that the abrupt spike represented a real change in journalistic perspective on religion engendered political conflict. For one thing, the God Gulf metaphor provided a plausible partial explanation for Democratic setbacks at the polls. The Party's perceived indifference (or even antagonism) to religion, however attractive to secular(ist)s, was a turn-off to a larger core of religiously moderate and devout segments of the electorate who found the "religious friendly" Republican brand more appealing. As we have seen the press did recognize Democratic vulnerabilities on the religious issue, particularly when this vulnerability was linked to political battles over contentious values concerns and the role of religion in political life. The gap metaphor, moreover, offered journalists a handy and intuitively understandable heuristic to encapsulate complementary trends that have been redefining American political cleavages and reshaping the party coalitions since the early 1990's. We thought that the new storyline reflected a shift away from the two decade fixation on the mobilization of religiously committed evangelicals and other traditionalists toward the Republican Party to a more encompassing narrative that included both the alignment of Christian conservatives with the GOP and the secular pull in the Democratic Party. In the jargon of social science, the religion gap narrative provided a better fit of the data. What we found out is that the forces behind the religiously polarized voting patterns are more complicated than that.

As is readily apparent when we refocus our attention on figure 2, the surge, decline and resurgence trend pattern indicates that the spike in press stories containing religion gap themes during 2004 and 2005 was clearly an anomaly. Since Bush vs. Kerry, the number of stories featuring religion gap narratives declined precipitously, cascading downward from 50 in 2005 to 20 in 2006 (p<.05) and 11 in 2007, backing up to 16 in 2008, and then plunging downward again and plateauing in 2009, 2010, and 2011 (6, 7, and 5 stories respectively), until sprouting up again in 2012 (18 stories), a level appreciably above the pre-2004 levels but a far cry from the peaks in 2004 and 2005. Although the religion gap did not become a regular topic in the news, some key facets of the storyline did change appreciably and tended to dominate the God gulf narrative throughout this period.

This shift in thematic emphasis became particularly noticeable during the 2006 off-year election season. The bulk of religion gap narratives (15 stories out of 20) emphasized Democratic efforts to combat the Party's "secularist" or "anti-religious" image by burnishing the Party's religious *bona fides*. It was not uncommon, for example, to see stories about prominent Democrats discussing their personal faith histories, attending prayer breakfasts, visiting with well-known mega-pastors such as Rick Warren, participating in spiritual activism conferences, seeking "message" counseling from prominent liberal evangelical writers and preachers, and highlighting the faith-based underpinnings of Democratic social welfare programs. Rebranding initiatives are also seen in Democratic efforts to visibly recruit "religious friendly" candidates (*e.g*., Heath Schuler) to run against vulnerable Republicans in conservative districts (Burke 2006; Dionne 2006). With the Democratic takeover of Congress in an election in which the Party picked off a larger than normal share of the church vote from previous years, more stories began to feature narratives noting that Democrats were closing the gap (Goodstein 2006; Cooperman 2006). The Democratic sweep in 2008 (coupled with highly publicized victories in several red states) seemed to lend credence to a narrative pushed by party strategists that religion was no longer a Democratic albatross. Between 2007 and 2008, 21 out of 27 religion gap stories carried

frames that Democrats had reclaimed their faith and that the God gulf separating the parties, if not closed, had shrunk significantly (for an exposition on this theme see Sullivan 2008).

The press abandoned both narratives after the 2008 election cycle when it became obvious to political journalists that neither storyline accurately described the political terrain. According to poll data collected by Pew Research Center, for example, a smaller percentage of the frequent church attenders viewed the Democratic Party as a "friend of religion" during the Obama era than in previous times. The Democrats, moreover, were actually winning a larger share of the secular vote than ever before and drawing fewer votes from white religious voters. And as a result, the parties were becoming more, not less, religiously polarized. Between 2009 and 2011 the mainstream press reverted back to religion gap frames in its election coverage -- but on a much smaller scale than in 2004 (see figure 2) -- or returned to the more familiar theme about the Religious Right connection to the GOP (Pew Research Journalism Project, 2012; Kerr and Moy, 2002; cf. Shields 2012). Political reporters appeared to be hard pressed as to the applicability of either narrative, given the ambiguous electoral environment and the crowding out of the religious issue by the economy, Iran and Afghanistan, and the rise of the Tea Party phenomenon.

As the 2012 election cycle approached, political demographers began to take notice of profound changes in the American political landscape, some claiming that the country was undergoing a "second demographic transformation" (Lesthaeghe, Neidert, and Surkyn 2006) . The electorate was becoming less white, less Christian, less married, and less religious (Boorstein and Clement 2012). Romney won white, married, Christian, and religious voters handily, but unlike all other presidential candidates who did so in the past, lost the election. In recognition of these demographic trends and corresponding changes in the cultural-political environment, political journalists added a new angle to the religion gap narrative in their coverage of the 2012 election. It is now politically feasible to craft a winning coalition by targeting nonwhites, non-Christians, non-married, and non-religious voters.

This new political reality was encapsulated linguistically by the introduction of a new term to American political discourse -- the "religious nones." According the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (2012), about one-fifth of the electorate now say they are either "atheists, agnostics, or nothing in particular"; over one-third of 18-22 year olds claim to be unaffiliated with a religion group. "'Religious nones' went overwhelmingly for Obama" (Goodstein 2012). More than a half dozen stories appeared in the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* after the 2012 election discussing the "rise of the religious nones" and the implications of this cultural shift for the two political parties. Some Democratic strategists predict that the ascendancy of 'nones' in the electorate and the change in household formation patterns associated with this trend will give the Democrats majority party status is near future (Teixeira and Halpin, 2012).

Conclusion

The current state of religiously polarized America is reflected not just in the voting behavior of religious and nonreligious voters but in the opposing policy stances separating the seculars and traditionalists on divisive policy concerns. Perhaps no public policy dispute in the

contemporary era better reflects these divisions than the controversy over the Health and Human Services mandate to require religiously affiliated institutions (*e.g.*, church organizations, schools, charities, hospitals, and nursing homes, etc.) to provide coverage for contraception, sterilization, and abortifacients in their health care plans. Press reports indicate that the HHS mandate reflects a triumph of the "feminist/secularist" wing of the Obama Administration (Dorning and Talev, 2012; Henninger, 2012). According to the same press accounts, the key supporters of the directive, President Obama, White House Counselor Valerie Jarrett, and HHS Secretary Kathleen Sebelius were so out of touch with Catholic sensibilities that they did not anticipate that the mandate, viewed by traditionalists as tantamount to government claiming the authority to define a church's ministry, would unleash a torrent of political and constitutional backlash. According to the 2012 national exit poll, for example, frequent church attending white Catholics registered their disapproval of the President's policies by voting two to one against him in the November election.

The polarized secularist and traditionalist perspectives on the HHS mandate -- exemplified by the former viewing the government's directive as fundamentally a matter concerning women's rights and health and the latter seeing the mandate as an assault on religious liberty -- is emblematic of the parallel universes that these opposing religious camps inhabit today. The inability of each side to comprehend, or even consider legitimate, the moral and intellectual positions of the other side on this issue, not to mention the opposing perspectives of seculars and traditionalists on all the other controversies that the HHS mandate encapsulates (*e.g*, gay marriage and abortion) will assure that the religious divide will cut deep beyond the 2012 election. And, given the rapid rise of "religious nones" in the electorate, the increased linkage of religiosity with an expanding number of policy questions, and the growth in importance of seculars to the strategic thinking of Democratic operatives, the religion gap will remain a fixture on the American political landscape for the foreseeable future.

The seismic shift in the political and religious landscape since the 1992 election required political scientists, pollsters and journalists to create new language to capture these trends and convey their significance to the wider public. Thus "religion gap," "red state vs. blue state," "God gulf," "religious nones," and the like were coined to provide imagery for this new demographic and electoral reality. The older American political vocabulary was inadequate to depict, for example, the Obama administration's confrontation with the Little Sisters of the Poor.

Appendix A

Measuring religiosity. Our indicator assessing religiosity is a composite measure comprising belonging (affiliation), belief (attitudes toward the bible and religion's importance to the respondent's life) and behavior (attending religious services). Traditionalists are defined as respondents who indicated in NES surveys that they attend religious services weekly or more, held the view that Bible is the word of God, pray at least daily, and say that religion offers quite a bit of guidance to their daily lives. Seculars are defined as respondents who indicated that religion offers them no guidance, maintain that the "Bible was written by men and is not the word of God," never attend religious services, either do not belong to a church or are nominally

affiliated with a faith tradition, and never pray. The remainder of respondents that fell between these two poles are religious moderates. In 1988 seculars comprised roughly 11.2 percent of the NES sample, and 19.1 percent in 2008. The corresponding figures for traditionalists are 20.7 and 20.8 percent. For some analyses, when exit polls are involved, religiosity is assessed by the church attendance item. See Smidt, Kellstedt and Guth, (2010, ch. 1) and Hansen (2011) for discussions of conceptual and methodological issues that need to be considered when measuring religiosity.

Appendix B.

Keywords and syntax used in LEXIS-NEXIS searches for "religion-gap" counts appearing in figure 2: (("unbeliever" and "Democrat" or "believer" and "republican") or (("fundamentalist" or "evangelical" or "Christian right" or "religious right" or "devout" or "church goer" or "Faith" and "Republican") and ("secular" or "secularist" or "unchurched" or "unaffiliated" or "non-religious" or "anti-religious" or "less devout" or " less religious" or "religious modernist" or "religious liberal" or "liberal christian" and "Democrat")) or ("god gulf") or ("religion gap") or ("culture gap" and "republican" and "democrat") or ("religiosity" and "Democrat" and "Republican") or ("God's people" and "Republican" and "Democrat") or ("values voters" and "Republican" and "Democrat") or ("religious divide" and "republican" and "democrat") or ("religiously divided electorate" and "republican" and "democrat") or ("divided along religious lines" and "republican" and "democrat") or ("religiously polarized electorate" and "republican" and "democrat") or ("democrat" and "secular" and "republican") or ("values divide" and "republican" and "democrat") or ("moral values" and "democrat" and "republican") or ("liberal Christian" and "religious right") or ("Dean" and "secular" and "religion" and ("republican" or "Bush")) or ("anti-religious" and "democrat" and "republican") or ("godless" and "democrat") and not ("Arab" or "Mid East" or "Iran" or "Canada")

    "Dean," "Pelosi," and "Obama" were used as search words in years in which they figured prominently in the election stories.

    All foreign news stories (*e.g.* religious divisions in Northern Ireland, accounts about Islamic, Hindu, or other variants of fundamentalists and religious traditionalists, etc.), news summaries, stories involving social notes, letters to the editor, blogs, and information abstracts from other newspapers were excluded. Stories which used the keywords "evangelical," "fundamentalist," or "secular" to describe behaviors, dispositions or qualities wholly unrelated to a religious group context (*e.g.*, "he plays baseball with evangelical fervor," "she's a fundamentalist when it comes to cookbooks," "secular trend," etc.) were also considered irrelevant to our study objectives, and therefore omitted.   Stories which focused only on one side of the religious divide (*e.g.*, the growing influence of fundamentalists in the GOP but did not mention seculars as an important constituency in the Democratic Party or vice versa) were also excluded from this analysis.

    We acknowledge that our emphasis on the *Times* and *Post* as sources for press coverage of the new religious divide might be considered problematic. Most Americans do not get their political information first hand or directly from the *Times* and the *Post* and neither are perfect proxies for other news outlets (Wooley, 2000). However, because of the influential readership of these two papers, and because the *Times* and the *Post* are generally regarded as newspapers of

record, publish articles and opinion pieces that are syndicated throughout the nation, disseminate news stories to other news outlets through their wire services, have conducted political polls with major broadcast news organizations on every presidential election during the time frame of this study, have published articles, analyses, and commentaries on these poll results, are agenda setters for other media, particularly television cable network news, the news perspective of the *Times* and the *Post* on the religious factor in contemporary political conflict reaches a far greater audience than the circulation figures of these two papers might suggest (cf., Woodward, 2005; Gans, 2004; Kiousis, 2004; Soroka, 2004; Goldberg, 2002). Indeed, because stories appearing in the *New York Times*, (especially reports featured on its front pages) have been found to be valid indicators of salience or news importance (Epstein and Segal, 2000), it is not surprising that the *Times* is arguably the most commonly used data source in media-based studies in political science (Druckman and Chong, 2009). Articles selected as data for figure 2 are those in which both authors agreed contained "religion-gap" narratives in the stories. These articles can be obtained from the authors upon request.

Of a total of 1951 stories that turned-up using the above key words (1019 in the *Post* and 932 in the *Times*), 231 qualified as religion-gap stories (135 in the *Post* and 95 in the *Times*). The authors coded the stories working independently of each other. The average intercoder reliability for the 25 lists of stories for the Times and the Post was .94, using Holsti's formula (Lombard, Snyder-Duch, and Bracken, 2002). Initial disagreements between the coders for each year and newspaper were resolved through discussion. The results presented in the graphics represent the consensus. The stories were accessed on January 10, 2013.

We recognize that our keywords and keyword combinations do not constitute an exhaustive list. We might have omitted keywords that could have generated additional God-gulf stories. But we believe the ones used in this search are the most obvious keywords to capture the phenomenon, are words or phrases most likely to be used by journalists reporting on this topic, and are keywords least likely to lead to problems of coder subjectivity. We deliberately omitted "culture wars" as a keyword because the term would have substantially increased the number of stories that would have been extraneous to our principal concern – the secularist vs. traditionalist divide separating Democrats and Republicans; the specific culture war issue connected to the "God-gulf" would have been captured by the other keywords. The main point is not whether additional religion-gap stories could have been churned-up, but whether the overall pattern of the trend in the reporting of the God-gulf depicted in Figure 2 would have changed appreciably.

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