

## **Rethinking Religion & Political Participation:** Voting Among Nonreligious Americans

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**Abstract:** When people opt out of one institution, are they more likely to opt out of others? More Americans choose not to identify with a religious tradition and report never attending religious services. Classic research expects these people to be less engaged in politics, following a theory that civic disengagement diffuses across institutions. Recent research challenges this expectation, suggesting that engagement is domain-specific and varies with institutional context. I test these theories using a measure of validated voter turnout in four national elections to re-evaluate the relationship between religious identification, religious service attendance, and voter turnout. First, the gap in validated voter turnout between religiously affiliated and unaffiliated respondents is smaller than previous findings from exit polling and self-reports. Second, this gap is not robust to demographic controls. Third, and most importantly, less frequent reported attendance at religious services associates with *higher* odds of turnout among respondents who report no religious identification—contrary to expectations in the literature. These results support a theory of civic disengagement as a domain-specific process.

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Declining civic engagement in the United States is a concern for both researchers and the general public. There is good reason for scholars to study the behavioral trends that inform our normative expectations for a democratic society and to better understand why people opt out of social institutions by declining to vote, volunteer, or participate other civic organizations. Research on this topic highlights a theoretical puzzle: does civic disengagement spread across different institutions, or is it concentrated within specific institutions? When people opt out of participating in one area, are they more likely to opt out of others? Two groups of social science research provide different answers to this question. Here, I refer to them as “diffuse” and “domain-specific” perspectives on civic disengagement.

Classic work in sociology and political science supports a theory that civic disengagement is diffuse across institutions; that is, people who leave one institution are more

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likely to leave others. In this perspective, disengagement is driven by larger structural forces such as economic change (e.g. Putnam 2001) or the cultural conditions that foster a general civic spirit (e.g. Tocqueville 2003 [1835]). Just as civic engagement and mobilization can “spill over” (McAdam and Rucht 1993; Meyer and Whittier 1994), disengagement might also diffuse when people opt out of multiple institutions over time. Declining rates of voting, volunteering, and other communal activities all tend to correlate, and so civic disengagement, in this view, comes from broad social pressures that reduce both the motivation and the available resources that people need to engage with their communities.

More recent work suggests that a diffuse theory of civic disengagement may be too general. This research argues that we cannot ignore the localized, contextual factors that foster engagement in particular organizations, even those that may not typically be considered “civic groups” (Collins 2010; Joseph 2002; Klinenberg 2016; Lichterman and Eliasoph 2014; Pugh 2015). In this view, civic disengagement is a domain-specific process—a product of institutional and interactional factors in a localized setting that create specific routines of role-exit (Ebaugh 1988). Disengagement from one institutional domain does not necessarily invite disengagement in another. It may even be the case that stronger civic engagement in one institutional sphere can dampen civic engagement in other spheres (Desmond and Travis 2018).

There are real stakes to this theoretical debate, because the answers can guide policy choices toward better democratic socialization. If diffuse theories are correct, the answer is to target macro-level social forces that depress many different kinds of civic engagement, such as precarious employment or affective political polarization (Iyengar and Westwood 2015; Kalleberg 2018). If domain-specific theories are correct, then the more appropriate solutions are specific reform efforts at the mezzo-level to address why people lose trust in particular institutions such as government services, educational institutions, or religious organizations.

I address this theoretical debate with analysis of a particularly useful empirical case: the role of religious identification and participation in voter turnout. In the United States, religious engagement and political engagement are tightly coupled (Margolis 2018; Putnam and Campbell 2012). Conventional wisdom in sociology and political science holds that stronger religious engagement can spur political engagement (Brady, Verba, and Schlozman 1995). This is a model of diffuse civic engagement in which participation in one set of institutions (religious groups)

provides unique skills, resources, and motives to more fully engage with another set of institutions (the political process).

I investigate whether this relationship holds as the U.S. has experienced rapid growth in the number of people who choose not to identify with any particular religious group, who now comprise nearly a quarter of the population (Hout and Fischer 2014; Voas and Chaves 2016). Along with this change in identification, more people report never attending religious services in the General Social Survey—about thirty-one percent reported never attending in 2018, up from about nine percent in 1972 (Wood 2020). Religious disengagement gives us an opportunity to test which expectations for civic disengagement hold. If disengagement is diffuse across institutional domains, disengagement from religious institutions sets the stage for other declines in civic participation, and it may mean that these civic skills are becoming increasingly concentrated in the hands of an elite few. Despite increased organizational efforts of secular advocacy groups (Blankholm 2014; Cimino and Smith 2014; Kettell 2014), research highlights lower levels of political engagement among the religiously-unaffiliated. Surveys and exit polls find that voter registration and turnout rates among nonreligious Americans consistently lag behind the religiously affiliated by about ten percentage points (Baker and Smith 2015; Jones et al. 2016). This leads to the proposition that nonreligious Americans do not vote frequently enough to yield substantial political influence, and low levels of nonreligious representation in the U.S. Congress support this view (Sandstrom 2017).

On the other hand, religious disengagement may be a domain-specific process that does not necessarily depress political behavior later on. Research identifies many different kinds of respondents with no religious affiliation, from ideologically-motivated atheists and agnostics to “unchurched believers” and “liminal” respondents who change their religious affiliation across survey waves (Baker and Smith 2015; Hout 2017; Hout and Fischer 2002, 2014; Lim, MacGregor, and Putnam 2010). There is also evidence that progressive political views are one key motive for religious disaffiliation (Layman and Weaver 2016; Margolis 2018), and so it is plausible to expect a subset of unaffiliated respondents to be motivated partisans who are more likely to engage in political life. In line with the domain-specific perspective outlined above, these substantive differences in beliefs and practices among the unaffiliated matter for different social and political outcomes, including volunteering (Frost and Edgell 2018; LeDrew 2015; Stewart 2016).

In this study, I briefly review literature on civic engagement, religious disaffiliation, and the relationship between religious and political involvement. I then address this theoretical puzzle by using measures of voter turnout that improve on exit polls and self-reports of voting. Using measures of validated voter turnout from four national elections (2008, 2010, 2014, and 2016), I assess turnout gaps between the religiously affiliated and unaffiliated, and whether the conventional relationship between frequent reported attendance at religious services and voter turnout holds for unaffiliated respondents.

Three findings from this study advance our understanding of the relationship between religious engagement and political engagement. First, the gap in validated turnout between affiliated and unaffiliated respondents has shrunk in recent elections. At the descriptive level, this gap is smaller than previous research has reported. Second, these differences in turnout are not well explained by religious identification. Models that control for basic demographic traits associated with voting show that the gap is better explained by factors such as age, race, income, and education. The third finding is more unexpected and important for the literature at hand: less frequent attendance at religious services—an indicator often associated with lower general civic engagement—actually associates with *higher* odds of validated voter turnout for unaffiliated respondents. These findings provide support for domain-specific theories of civic disengagement, and they suggest researchers should take into account substantive practices that different social institutions provide for political behavior.

### *The Puzzle: Two Theories of Civic Engagement*

Is civic engagement diffuse or domain-specific? In what I call a “diffuse” perspective on civic engagement, participation is cumulative and spreads across institutional domains. The core assumption of the diffuse perspective is that certain practices translate well across different social contexts. Because the skills, relationships, and motivations that people develop from participating in one set of institutions translate well, they ultimately increase the likelihood that people will participate in other institutions. Alexis de Tocqueville’s classic *Democracy in America* (1835) and Robert Putnam’s *Bowling Alone* (2001) are two well-known examples of diffuse perspectives at work. In these accounts, practices such as voting, volunteering, and neighborhood engagement all move together. When they are high, common skills, relationships, and motivations can create a general “civic spirit” that creates mutually reinforcing engagement

and “spillover” between different organizations, movements, and institutional domains (McAdam and Rucht 1993; Meyer and Whittier 1994). When they decline, they decline together due to broader social and cultural changes that reach across institutional domains, such as economic precarity (Kalleberg 2018), the rise of professionalized advocacy in politics and the media (Medvetz 2012), and changes in trust and confidence in institutions (Twenge, Campbell, and Carter 2014).

In contrast, a second set of research supports what I call a “domain-specific” perspective on civic engagement. Rather than a generalized set of motivations or skills, this research understands civic engagement as a set of coordinated actions that come from specific practices within particular social groups (Becker 1999; Lichterman and Eliasoph 2014). The core point of the domain specific perspective is that similar practices do not necessarily translate well across institutional domains, because those practices mean different things in different contexts. As a result, research observes strong engagement in one institutional domain accompanied by weak engagement in another. For example, accounts of declining neighborhood engagement often overlook specific practices like voluntary childcare, a case in which addressing familial needs creates one specific kind of neighborhood cohesion (Collins 2010). Similarly, Desmond and Travis (2018) observe how poor residents in urban communities do exhibit strong local engagement by assisting their neighbors through economic precarity. However, these “survival strategies” of civic engagement through local involvement also produce political disengagement and cynicism, because residents come face-to-face with seemingly insurmountable social problems on a daily basis. While we would expect people who live alone to be socially isolated, and therefore less engaged, this group is actually more likely to volunteer and spend time with friends (Klinenberg 2013, 2016). While we often expect to find variation in voting and volunteering *between* different demographic groups, often the most substantive variation exists *within* those groups (Ansolabehere and Hersh 2012; Berent, Krosnick, and Lupia 2016; Frost and Edgell 2018).

As more Americans disengage from religious organizations by attending services less often and eschewing religious identities, the diffuse and domain-specific theories raise different expectations about their participation in other spheres of civic life. Diffuse theories would expect that they are missing out on a core source of social capital and are therefore less likely to engage in other institutions as a result. Domain-specific theories, in contrast, would question whether the

social capital acquired in religious institutions effectively translates to other civic organizations, and they would find it more plausible to observe reduced religious engagement accompanied by stronger engagement in other institutional domains. We can evaluate these expectations empirically by rigorously examining the case of voter turnout among people with lower religious engagement.

### *The Case: The Secular Voting Gap*

The “secular voting gap” is the observed difference the proportion of voters who are religiously-unaffiliated and the proportion of the American population that is religiously-unaffiliated. If the electorate represents the population, we would expect these two proportions to be fairly equal. Instead, the proportion of unaffiliated voters tends to lag behind the proportion of unaffiliated Americans by about ten percentage points. Estimates of the secular voting gap vary, and they typically come from two sources of evidence: exit polls and self-reported voting on surveys. For example, exit polls indicate 9% and 10% of voters were unaffiliated in the 2000 and 2004 elections, 12% were unaffiliated in 2008 and 2012, and 15% were in 2016 (Smith and Martinez 2016). Population estimates indicate that unaffiliated Americans were about 14% of the population in 2000 and grew to 22% by 2016 (Hout and Fischer 2014). Gaps in rates of self-reported voting between affiliated and unaffiliated respondents in the General Social Survey are of a similar magnitude, narrowing from nineteen percentage points in 1968 to ten percentage points since 2004 (Baker and Smith 2015, Jones et al. 2016).

This gap appears robust in both self-reporting and exit polling, but some skepticism is warranted in light of the fact that people tend to over-report voting on surveys (Anderson and Silver 1986; Granberg and Holmberg 1991; Katosh and Traugott 1981; Presser and Traugott 1992). Over-reporting is a motivated response, and those who misreport are often demographically similar to voters (Berent et al. 2016; Bernstein, Chadha, and Montjoy 2001; Burden 2000; Silver, Anderson, and Abramson 1986). By combining actual voters with respondents with similar demographic profiles who did not vote, but say they did, self-report measures bias our analyses toward finding sharp demographic and cultural distinctions between “voters” and “non-voters” where they may not actually exist (Ansolabehere and Hersh 2012). At the same time, other work raises concerns about non-response bias and the representation of minority populations in exit polling (Barreto et al. 2006; Kloffstad and Bishin 2012). It may be

the case that religiously-affiliated voters are more likely to over-report, rather than more likely to vote, or it may be the case that exit polls are less likely to obtain a representative sample of religiously-unaffiliated respondents. To properly assess the presence of a secular voting gap with a sufficiently conservative test, analysis requires both a sufficient number of nonreligious respondents and a valid measure of voting behavior in a data set that allows for statistical controls.

Self-reports do not actually measure behavior, but they do appear in representative survey samples. Exit polls do measure behavior well, but they risk missing a representative sample of specific minority groups. This study addresses these problems with an improved measurement approach that cuts a middle path between exit polls and self-reports: vote validation. In validation, survey respondents are matched to known government records to confirm voting, voter registration, and/ or voting method. This can be done in person (as with the American National Election Survey's validation approach discontinued in 1990), or through database matching using commercial voter files (as in the data sets discussed in detail below) (Ansolabehere and Hersh 2012; Granberg and Holmberg 1991; Katz and Katz 2010). These measures allow us to observe the relationship between religious disaffiliation in actual voting behavior.

### *Theoretical Expectations: Religious Engagement and Voting*

The key assumption that leads researchers to expect a secular voting gap is the theory that strong religious commitments go hand-in-hand with stronger political engagement, and therefore that religious disengagement accompanies a diffuse decline in civic engagement. There are two primary mechanisms through which religion can affect political participation: structural opportunities and ideological motivations. Structurally, participation in voluntary associations is linked to higher voter turnout (Olsen 1972). Religion plays a unique role here, as attendance at religious services is closely linked to voter turnout in numerous studies (Cassel 1999; Gerber, Gruber, and Hungerman 2008; Smets and Van Ham 2013; Strate et al. 1989; Wald, Owen, and Hill 1988). Brady et al. (1995) argue that churches (and, following their logic, other sites of worship) provide a unique opportunity for people of different social classes to interact, and so opportunities to develop civic skills in church groups are not limited to populations with higher income, education, or socioeconomic status.

This relationship between religious participation and structural opportunities for engagement is not simply about showing up to church. Beyerlein and Hipp (2006) demonstrate that social context and conduct both matter as well—religious traditions moderate the relationship between religious and civic engagement, and it is often religious engagement beyond attendance that matters most for fostering civic engagement. Similarly, Putnam and Campbell (2012) argue that the social ties fostered by both service attendance and membership in religious social networks foster more robust civic behaviors including voting, volunteering, and charitable donations. Congregations are also stratified along racial and socioeconomic lines, and the interaction of these factors produces notable variation in civic engagement as well (Brown 2006; Brown and Brown 2003). The problem is that current bivariate measurements of the secular voting gap have not yet investigated this context, and it is possible that there may be a different relationship between nonreligion and political engagement fostered by the unique experience of either making a clean break with organized religion or remaining partially affiliated as an “unchurched believer” or a “liminal none” (Hout 2017; Hout and Fischer 2002).

Religion also provides ideological motivations that can spur political participation. As a system of shared understanding related to matters of deep moral concern, religious ideology can become a means of “charging” political affairs to secure citizens’ commitment, engagement, or, in some cases, conflict (Brubaker 2015). Specifically, Christianity has also played a role in the historic development of civic engagement in the United States (Hecklo 2007; Tocqueville 2003 [1835]). For example, the rise of the New Christian Right spurred denominational effects on political engagement by mobilizing evangelical Christians into a powerful voting bloc and political subculture (Manza and Brooks 1997; Smith 1998). In politically active congregations, contacts about particular issues spur voter turnout (Djupe and Grant 2001; Wilcox and Sigelman 2001), and interactions between lay leaders and congregants can produce different styles of political engagement (Bean 2014; Braunstein 2017; Delehanty 2016; Lichterman 2008).

However, different measures of religious beliefs and behaviors can have divergent relationships with political participation (Driskell, Embry, and Lyon 2008). Here too, the propensity for voting among the growing unaffiliated population in the U.S. is also ambiguous. On the one hand, they may be less likely to vote than affiliated respondents. The majority of nonreligious individuals are primarily defined by their disaffiliation with religious institutions rather than theological non-belief (Baker and Smith 2015; Hout and Fischer 2002). Much of this



disaffiliation has come from moderate religious respondents, leaving a small core of ideologically committed religious respondents holding steady in the U.S. population (Schnabel and Bock 2017). There is also evidence that the unaffiliated tend to be skeptical of social institutions more broadly, a cynicism that may spill over into a lower sense of political efficacy and, in turn, a lower propensity to vote (Hout and Fischer 2014; Kasselstrand, Couse, and Sanchez 2017).

On the other hand, it is possible that ideologically-motivated unaffiliated respondents are actually *more* likely to engage in political life. Progressive political views play a key role in the choice to leave religious institutions, or never to join them in the first place (Hout and Fischer 2002, 2014; Margolis 2018). Once people are unaffiliated, these views may couple with distinct secular ideological systems to produce active and engaged secular partisans (Layman and Weaver 2016). Research identifies a blossoming movement of nonreligious social organizations and advocacy groups that are working to mobilize their members and shape social policy (Blankholm 2014; Cimino and Smith 2014; Kettell 2014). Moreover, involvement in a number of alternative community groups that are ostensibly secular, such as arts organizations, can also foster civic engagement (Baggetta 2009). People with strong nonreligious identities, especially atheists, closely align themselves with pro-science advocacy, and concerns about religion in public life structure the choice to publicly self-identify as an atheist (Stewart 2016). Baker and Smith's (2015) close treatment of descriptive analyses of the voting gap also finds that this variation in different kinds of nonreligion matters; in their analysis, agnostics were more likely to report voting than atheists or the generally non-affiliated. The same is true for specific volunteering practices (Frost and Edgell 2017). It is possible that the classic measure of church attendance—often referenced in the literature as a key mechanism that bolsters other kinds of civic engagement—works differently for unaffiliated respondents. Unaffiliated respondents with lower church attendance, for example, may be more like the ideologically-motivated respondents who we would expect to be more likely to vote.

The challenge for current work on the voting gap is that most demographic analyses of exit polls or self-reported turnout rely not on measures of religious participation but on measures of religious identification, comparing respondents with no religious affiliation to other affiliated groups. Nonreligious identification is more common among young men (but see Edgell, Frost, and Stewart 2017 for important deviations from this trend), a group distinctly less likely to vote.

It is also more common among and the well-off and the well-educated, two groups that are more likely to vote. These demographic factors are among the strongest and most common correlates of voting behavior (Edgell, Frost, and Stewart 2017), and so much of the secular voting gap could be explained by their influence alone. Moreover, combining respondents who simply do not participate in religious groups with respondents who have made a committed ideological choice to disaffiliate risks obscuring differences between the structural and the ideological mechanisms that link religious and political engagement.

In sum, research needs to consider different measures of religious disaffiliation and a range of sociodemographic controls to properly evaluate whether unaffiliated respondents are more or less likely to vote than affiliated respondents. Diffuse theories of civic disengagement would expect religious disaffiliation to “spill over” into other institutions and associate with lower political engagement. Domain-specific theories of civic disengagement, in contrast, would expect a more complicated relationship between the two that invites the possibility of unaffiliated respondents who are equally or more likely to turn out to vote than affiliated respondents. The following hypotheses allow me to test the two theories of civic disengagement across different combinations of nonreligious experiences.

### **Diffuse Disengagement**

H1: Religiously-unaffiliated respondents will have a lower probability of validated voter turnout than affiliated respondents.

H2: People who report attending religious services less often will have a lower probability of validated turnout than those who attend more often.

H3: The relationship between low services attendance and lower odds of turnout will be the same for both affiliated and unaffiliated respondents.

### **Domain-Specific Disengagement**

H1: Net of demographic controls, religiously-unaffiliated respondents will be no different from affiliated respondents in their probability of validated turnout.

H2: Net of demographic controls, less frequent church attendance will not be significantly or substantively associated with lower odds of validated turnout.

H3: The relationship between low church attendance and lower odds of turnout will **not** be the same for both affiliated and unaffiliated respondents. Instead, it will be associated with a lower probability of turnout for affiliated respondents only.

## **Data & Method**

### *Data*

Analysis tests these hypothesis about the nonreligious voting gap using two data sets. The first data set employs four separate samples from the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES 2008, 2010, 2014 and 2016) that each contain a validated measure of general election turnout. The 2008 and 2010 waves were included in the 2006-2012 cumulative CCES data set release, while the 2014 and 2016 waves were each drawn from separate releases. The CCES is an annual survey study of Americans' views of Congress, electoral experiences, and political views conducted by YouGov/Polimetrix with funding from the National Science Foundation. In addition to unique, contemporary measures of validated turnout, this data set is also useful for its range of measures of religiosity and sufficiently large sample sizes to disaggregate different nonreligious respondents and explore interaction effects.

### *Measures*

Descriptive statistics for core measures are presented in Table 1.

*Validated Turnout:* I use the CCES measure of validated general election participation in four general elections: the 2008 and 2016 presidential elections and the 2010 and 2014 midterms. These are the validated election years that are available in the CCES data in cross-sectional waves that also contain the necessary measures of religiosity, and they provide a balanced set of outcomes across different kinds of elections as turnout varies substantively during midterms.

To obtain these measures, the CCES survey program collaborated with Catalist LLC—a private vendor of political data that regularly gathers state government voting records. Polimetrix provided Catalist with information about the respondents, which the firm used to match respondents to voting records using both government and consumer financial records. Polimetrix then de-identified the data, leaving indicator variables for respondents who were successfully matched to a record of having voted in a given election year. While this matching algorithm is proprietary (Berent et al. 2016), Ansolabehere and Hersh (2012) provide a detailed account of

the logic of the matching process and successful validations of the matched data. These measures are also particularly useful for providing a more conservative test of the existence of voting gaps across demographic groups, because they reduce the prevalence of respondents who match the demographic profile of voters and say they have voted when they have not (Ansolabehere and Hersh 2012). Validated vote measures have been used in a number of influential studies in political science on core issues such as redistricting, turnout across racial and ethnic groups, and voter ID laws (Fraga 2015, 2016; Franko 2015; Hajnal, Lajevardi, and Nielson 2017).

This measure of validated turnout is dichotomous. In the 2014 and 2016 waves of the CCES, respondents received a 1 if they had a validated record of voting, regardless of method (absentee, early voting, by mail, at polling place, or “unknown”) and a 0 if they had none of these conditions. In the 2008 and 2010 waves of the CCES, I recoded this measure so that respondents received a 1 if they had a validated record of voting and a 0 if they had a verified record of being unregistered, said they were unregistered, said they didn’t vote, or had a verified record of not voting. Respondents who were non-citizens, were missing a voter history file, or had “no evidence” regarding whether they voted in the survey codebook were dropped from analysis (11% of cases in 2008 and 13% in 2010).

*Religious Disengagement:* I measure religious disengagement in two ways. First, I use a dichotomous measure of identification using the religious identification items in each survey. In the CCES data, respondents received a 0 for reporting any religious identification (Protestant, Roman Catholic, Mormon, Eastern or Greek Orthodox Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, or “Something else”) and a 1 for reporting atheist, agnostic, or “nothing in particular.” This coding scheme is similar to the approach employed in foundational research on the religiously unaffiliated (Hout and Fischer 2002, 2014), and it is also the measurement approach that underlies most reporting of the secular voting gap.

I also use a field-standard measure for attendance at religious services (a six-point likert type scale ranging from “never attending” services to “more than once a week”). This scale is reverse-coded in analysis so that higher values indicate *less* frequent attendance. This measure captures religious activity—the second key mechanism through which much of the literature expects religiosity to associate with civic engagement.

Finally, models incorporate a common suite of sociodemographic control variables for age, gender, race, marital status, education (highest degree attained), income, and political

ideology. These are among the most common correlates of voter turnout (Smets and Van Ham 2013; Wolfinger and Wolfinger 2008), and therefore provide a good test for whether the relationship between religious affiliation and voting is spurious.

### *Analytic Approach*

Analysis proceeds in three parts. First, I present descriptive visualizations of differences in turnout over time and across religious (non)affiliation. Second, I test whether these differences in turnout across four elections are robust to demographic controls using logistic regression models. Finally, to investigate the mechanisms behind these trends (Beyerlein and Hipp 2006), I pool these four election year samples together and examine the effects of both non-affiliation and low service attendance separately and together using interaction effects. All models use their appropriate survey weights and robust standard errors, with listwise deletion for missing data, and the pooled models use a categorical control for election year to account for period effects.

## **Results**

### *Descriptive Trends*

Figure 1 presents weighted proportion estimates for turnout among religiously affiliated and unaffiliated respondents across each election. This figure illustrates two important points. First, there is a secular voting gap in validated turnout, in line with gaps in self-reported turnout observed by earlier work. In 2008, for example, the estimated gap is about eight percentage points. Second, however, this gap is narrowing. By the 2016 presidential election, estimates of the secular voting gap narrow to about six percentage points—about half the gap reported in earlier literature and much closer to the margin of error. These results suggest that the secular voting gap is substantively smaller than originally reported, and it may not be robust to control measures, especially in more recent elections.

### *Demographic Controls*

Is the secular voting gap robust to controls for other common predictors of voting? Table 2 examines the gap in each election year using separately-estimated logistic regression models. Without controls, the gap is statistically significant in each election year ( $p < .001$  in each case), but it does narrow over time. For example, odds ratios from exponentiated coefficients indicate

that, in 2008, unaffiliated respondents were about 0.71 times as likely to turn out as affiliated respondents, but by 2016 they were 0.86 times as likely to turn out.

However, much of the secular voting gap disappears when we control for basic demographic factors that we know influence voter turnout, such as education, income, gender, race, and age. In the second half of Table 2, the secular voting gap is only statistically significant in the 2008 election ( $p < .01$ ). These null results are theoretically important for research that posits a relationship between religious engagement and political engagement. Simply reporting differences in turnout among the unaffiliated—as exit polling often does—ignores the extent to which these differences are due to other factors that have nothing to do with religion. For example, some of the strongest effects in these models are due to age, and we know that many religiously-unaffiliated respondents tend to be younger than their affiliated counterparts. In this case, the secular voting gap appears to be largely an artifact of other demographic patterns.

#### *Interaction Effects: Explaining Nonreligion and Turnout*

Research on religion and political engagement suggests that less frequent religious participation and the absence of religious identification would reduce the institutional and ideological motivations for political participation. However, this work also emphasizes that context matters—the relationship between religious engagement and civic engagement is also dependent on what kinds of religious engagement occur in different social contexts (Beyerlein and Hipp 2006). In this theory, reduced religious participation does not mean the same thing to every person. For an affiliated person, lower attendance could indicate a lack of commitment, uncertainty about their religion, or a simple conflict in roles or obligations that could potentially depress other kinds of civic engagement. For an unaffiliated people, however, low church attendance may be an indicator of *consistency* between identity and practice—a trait we would normally attribute to engaged and active citizens. It is possible that unaffiliated respondents who attend church more often, i.e., those who are more ambiguous in their identification and practice, are less likely to turn out. In contrast, those who make a clear and distinct break from religious affiliation and practice exhibit the traits of motivated partisans. One way to investigate this theory is to estimate interaction effects between religious affiliation and religious attendance.

Table 3 examines these possibilities using all four election years in pooled models. The two instances of Model 1 in this table show again that the difference in rates of validated voting

between religiously affiliated and unaffiliated is not robust to demographic controls. The two instances of Model 2 show a more robust, though small, relationship in which lower reported attendance at religious services associates with lower odds of turnout. When we consider both of these measures along with controls in Model 3, lower attendance has the most robust relationship with turnout.

Model 4 in Table 3 considers an interaction effect between non-affiliation and low attendance, and here we see an unexpectedly strong estimated effect. While both low attendance and non-affiliation in these models are associated with lower odds of turnout, the interaction term between the two is *positive* and significant ( $p < .001$  both with and without demographic controls).

What does this interaction effect mean? Figure 2 illustrates this pattern by plotting the predicted probability of having validated turnout from these models as service attendance declines. The left panel of Figure 2 shows the pattern for respondents who report a religious affiliation. For these respondents, the average predicted probability of turnout declines as they report less frequent service attendance on the six-point scale. Unaffiliated respondents in the right-hand panel are clearly different. Their average predicted probability of turnout *increases* as they report less frequent service attendance, to the point that unaffiliated respondents who report never attending services quite similar to affiliated respondents. Instead, it is the “inconsistently nonreligious” respondents—those who say they have no affiliation yet also say they attend services often—who are least likely to turn out. This pattern makes sense in the context of research on ideologically-motivated nonreligious respondents such as atheists, agnostics, and people who leave religious institutions as an expression of liberal political ideology (Hout and Fischer 2002; Layman and Weaver 2016; Margolis 2018).

This interaction effect presents stronger support for the domain-specific hypotheses outlined above, because it demonstrates how religious service attendance, a core mechanism in the political participation literature, works substantially differently for respondents who do not identify with any particular religious tradition. Rather than becoming less involved in voting as they reduce their religious participation, unaffiliated respondents appear either equally as likely or more likely to vote than their affiliated counterparts as both of their religious participation wanes.

In sum, results using validated voting measures provide three key takeaways that should motivate scholars to revisit the relationship between religion and political participation and account for different types of religious and nonreligious engagement. First, the secular voting gap appears much more narrow in recent election years than originally estimated. Second, much of this gap is spurious to common demographic controls. Third, contrary to expectations in the literature, the relationship between attendance at religious services and political participation works differently for unaffiliated respondents. Those who attended services less frequently with no religious affiliation are actually just as likely to be voting as their less-frequently attending affiliated counterparts.

### *Discussion & Conclusion*

The implicit assumption behind much of the current research on religion and political participation is that religious disaffiliation is a net loss for civic engagement because involvement in these institutions is cumulative and diffuse across institutional domains. Religious institutions provide both resources and ideological motivations to remain connected to one's community and society, and so religious disaffiliation is seen as one symptom of a broader decline in civic engagement and institutional trust in the United States (Hout and Fischer 2002, 2014; Kasselstrand et al. 2017; Putnam 2001; Putnam and Campbell 2012). One empirical example of this assumption at work is reporting on the secular voting gap; if unaffiliated citizens are less likely to turn out to vote, we should be concerned about the political implications of widespread declines in religious affiliation and practice.

However, this conclusion may be misleading. Substantive and methodological concerns about the quality of self-reported measures of voting and exit polling for capturing differences across demographic subgroups suggest that the secular voting gap could be smaller than originally anticipated or even spurious to other basic controls. The mechanism that links religious participation to broader trends in civic engagement is also dependent on different social contexts (Beyerlein and Hipp 2006; Putnam and Campbell 2012), and it could be the case that tried and true measures of religious engagement in the literature work differently for respondents who have actively chosen to leave religious institutions than for those who are unaffiliated, but waver in their commitment to religious practices or affinities (e.g. Hout 2017). We should expect this kind of variation because nonreligion is not monolithic, and it does not necessarily represent



a state of low civic engagement for all respondents who are not religiously unaffiliated (Baker and Smith 2015; Frost and Edgell 2017). For some, low religious participation is part of a broader drift from institutional affinities, but for others, it represents an ideological commitment to differentiate oneself from religious institutions, and we would expect this later group to behave more like motivated partisans.

The current study employed some of the latest approaches to measuring voter turnout to test whether the secular voting gap persists when we account for social context and variation among unaffiliated respondents. Analysis of validated voting gives good reason to reconsider reports of the bivariate relationship between disaffiliation and low voter turnout—whether in self-reports or exit polling. First, the secular gap in validated voting in the CCES has converged substantively. Second, multivariate analyses suggest that other demographic factors such as age, education, and income explain most of this gap. Finally, while much of the literature demonstrates how high religious involvement associates with higher rates of civic engagement, interaction effects in this study demonstrate that less frequent attendance at religious services associates with higher odds of turnout among respondents who are already religiously-unaffiliated. These results show that unaffiliated respondents with clear and consistent distinctions from religious institutions (either in identification or practice) show a greater propensity to turn out, while unaffiliated respondents who are inconsistent in their nonreligion (with more frequent service attendance) are less likely to turn out.

This finding has important implications for our understanding of the cultural conditions that promote civic engagement. They challenge the assumption that religious engagement is an unqualified good for civil society that will be eroded in the context of religious disaffiliation (Brady et al. 1995; Cassel 1999; Putnam 2001 Smets and VanHam 2013). Instead, they highlight that disengaging from one particular form of community life does not necessarily create the conditions for disengaging from other forms of community life. Rather than viewing religious disaffiliation as part of a broader decline in civic life (e.g Putnam 2001; Skocpol 2003; Voas and Chaves 2016), it may be more appropriate to engage a theoretical perspective that treats civic disengagement as a domain-specific process—one that is sensitive the cultural specificity of different institutional domains and able to articulate why core institutions work differently for different groups (e.g. Collins 2010; Frost and Edgell 2018; Klinenberg 2013). Such an approach invites future research to consider why people lose trust in *specific* institutions in detail, and how

that distrust may not simply spill over to other domains without first interacting with respondents' substantive cultural and social standpoints (see, e.g. Pugh 2015; Wuthnow; 2010; Zuckerman 2011). It also may be more appropriate to view civic disengagement as the reorganization of interest groups and coalitions around different points of mobilization and motivation (e.g. Kettell 2013; Schnabel and Bock 2017). Such an approach requires returning to fundamental questions about how social scientific research is conceptualizing and measuring what "counts" as civic engagement (e.g. Collins 2010; Joseph 2002).

These results also affirm other research that calls for understanding nonreligion as a multidimensional construct and paying attention to substantive cultural differences across nonreligious respondents (Baker and Smith 2015; Keysar 2014; Stewart 2016; Stewart, Frost, and Edgell 2017). In line with emerging research on political elites (Layman and Weaver 2016), this finding suggests that scholars should distinguish ideologically-motivated nonreligious respondents in the general population when assessing the potential political impacts of religious change and disaffiliation. These results from the CCES show how different kinds of nonreligious experience matter: people who are religiously unaffiliated but inconsistent in their behavior (i.e. attending religious services frequently) are less likely to turn out than their counterparts who are unaffiliated *and* never attend religious services. This variation *within* the religiously-unaffiliated is especially important to consider in light of claims of the secular voting gap that seek to make comparisons *between* the affiliated and the unaffiliated.

There are of course limitations to this analysis, especially that these data sets are fundamentally cross-sectional and cannot offer any insight as to whether ideological commitments to nonreligion are instrumental in respondents' decisions to vote or not (Jerolmack and Khan 2014). Other scholars raise questions about the matching procedures used to generate validated vote data (Berent et al. 2016), and so replication in additional data sets using different voter-matching procedures will be necessary in the future. Given these limitations, however, the current study is especially important for establishing that the often-repeated observation of lower voting among religiously-unaffiliated Americans may not stand up to basic confirmatory tests beyond descriptive cross-tabulation and may be hiding more positive trends toward increased civic engagement.

Finally, this work also raises two questions for future research. First, as nonreligion closely associates with age, we do not know whether the youngest cohort of Americans will age

into higher religiosity or into more robust civic engagement later in life. Life course research does establish a link between early-developed political views and religious disaffiliation (Margolis 2018). What happens after disaffiliation, and are there mechanisms through which nonreligious experiences could foster further political socialization later on? These results illustrate a mechanism through which an increasing number of Americans who leave religious institutions could become more politically engaged as they develop alternative civic commitments and drift further from religious institutions. More work focusing on nonreligious organizations and advocacy groups (e.g, Blankholm 2014; Cimino and Smith 2014; García and Blankholm 2016; Kettell 2014), as well as additional qualitative work to address the mechanisms outlined above, can help to further establish the plausibility of a cultural infrastructure to motivate secular voters.

Second, given the low proportional representation of non-religious Americans in the U.S. Legislature (Sandstrom 2017), these findings also raise questions about the future of religion and political representation. Today, many visible nonreligious advocacy groups represent a minority of ideologically committed atheist, agnostic, and secular humanist groups among the broader disaffiliated population. However, if more unaffiliated individuals who do not identify with these groups do become politically engaged, new questions arise about how political leaders will respond to this trend. Will new strategies emerge to recruit this growing group of potential voters, given that appeals to religiosity are a dominant strategy among American politicians (Domke and Coe 2008)? If not, the answer may not lie in voting constituencies alone, but in cultural norms instantiated in American political institutions and networks (e.g. Heclo 2007; Lindsay 2008).

The American religious landscape is changing, and the political landscape is changing with it. To better understand the implications of these shifts, scholars will need to attend to the substantive cultural features of different demographic groups. Trends among religiously-unaffiliated Americans provide a key example in which such attention can yield surprising findings that advance our thinking about political engagement.

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Table 1: Description of Core Measures

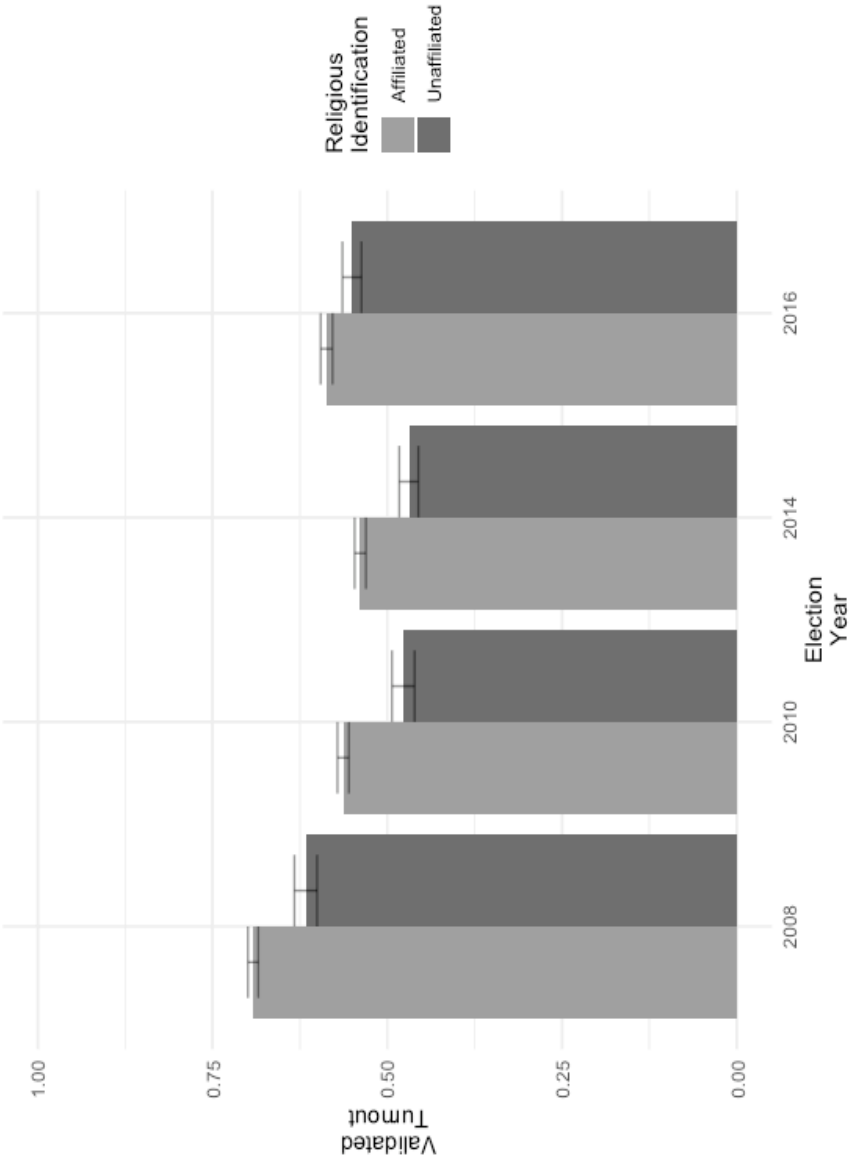
	2008	2010	2014	2016
<i>Validated Voting</i>				
Non-voting	0.29	0.37	0.52	0.38
Voting	0.71	0.63	0.48	0.62
<i>Religious Affiliation</i>				
Affiliated	0.80	0.81	0.73	0.70
Unaffiliated	0.20	0.19	0.27	0.30
<i>Church Attendance</i>				
Mean (6 pt scale)	3.71	3.75	4.01	4.14
Standard Deviation	1.70	1.69	1.70	1.69
Number of Observations	28,380	45,743	44,966	44,209

Source: Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES)

Table 1b: The Secular Voting Gap

Year	Affiliation	% Validated	95% CI
2008	Affiliated	0.69	0.69
2008	Unaffiliated	0.62	0.60
2010	Affiliated	0.56	0.56
2010	Unaffiliated	0.48	0.46
2014	Affiliated	0.54	0.53
2014	Unaffiliated	0.47	0.46
2016	Affiliated	0.59	0.58
2016	Unaffiliated	0.55	0.54

Figure 1: The Basic Secular Voting Gap



Notes: Figure illustrates the weighted proportion estimates of validated voting within each group with 95% confidence intervals.

Table 2: Logistic Regression Results - The Secular Voting Gap in Context

	2008	2010	2014	2016	2008	2010	2014	2016
<b>Unaffiliated</b>	<b>-0.33***</b> (0.04)	<b>-0.35***</b> (0.04)	<b>-0.28***</b> (0.03)	<b>-0.15***</b> (0.03)	<b>-0.12**</b> (0.04)	<b>-0.07</b> (0.04)	<b>0.02</b> (0.04)	<b>0.01</b> (0.04)
Age	0.35*** (0.02)	0.68*** (0.02)	0.35*** (0.02)	0.68*** (0.02)	0.35*** (0.02)	0.68*** (0.02)	0.80*** (0.02)	0.43*** (0.02)
Black	-0.13* (0.06)	-0.60*** (0.05)	-0.13* (0.06)	-0.60*** (0.05)	-0.13* (0.06)	-0.60*** (0.05)	-0.57*** (0.05)	-0.41*** (0.06)
Hispanic	-0.34*** (0.06)	-0.69*** (0.07)	-0.34*** (0.06)	-0.69*** (0.07)	-0.34*** (0.06)	-0.69*** (0.07)	-0.67*** (0.08)	-0.46*** (0.07)
Other	-0.36*** (0.07)	-0.25*** (0.07)	-0.36*** (0.07)	-0.25*** (0.07)	-0.36*** (0.07)	-0.25*** (0.07)	-0.40*** (0.07)	-0.55*** (0.06)
Gender (Female)	0.34*** (0.03)	0.38*** (0.03)	0.34*** (0.03)	0.38*** (0.03)	0.34*** (0.03)	0.38*** (0.03)	0.11*** (0.03)	0.09*** (0.03)
Married	0.00 (0.05)	-0.12* (0.05)	0.00 (0.05)	-0.12* (0.05)	0.00 (0.05)	-0.12* (0.05)	-0.19*** (0.05)	-0.01 (0.05)
Separated	-0.72*** (0.13)	-0.56*** (0.13)	-0.72*** (0.13)	-0.56*** (0.13)	-0.72*** (0.13)	-0.56*** (0.13)	-0.42** (0.14)	-0.12 (0.14)
Divorced	-0.26*** (0.07)	-0.29*** (0.07)	-0.26*** (0.07)	-0.29*** (0.07)	-0.26*** (0.07)	-0.29*** (0.07)	-0.35*** (0.06)	-0.20*** (0.06)
Widowed	-0.28** (0.11)	-0.31** (0.10)	-0.28** (0.11)	-0.31** (0.10)	-0.28** (0.11)	-0.31** (0.10)	-0.37*** (0.10)	-0.20* (0.09)
Domestic Partnership	-0.16 (0.08)	-0.29*** (0.08)	-0.16 (0.08)	-0.29*** (0.08)	-0.16 (0.08)	-0.29*** (0.08)	-0.11 (0.08)	-0.09 (0.08)
Parent	0.11** (0.04)	0.05 (0.04)	0.11** (0.04)	0.05 (0.04)	0.11** (0.04)	0.05 (0.04)	-0.13** (0.04)	-0.32*** (0.04)
Income	0.08*** (0.02)	0.25*** (0.02)	0.08*** (0.02)	0.25*** (0.02)	0.08*** (0.02)	0.25*** (0.02)	0.11*** (0.02)	0.04* (0.02)
Political Ideology (Conservative)	0.04* (0.02)	0.10*** (0.02)	0.04* (0.02)	0.10*** (0.02)	0.04* (0.02)	0.10*** (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)	-0.05** (0.02)
High School Grad	0.22** (0.08)	0.42*** (0.10)	0.22** (0.08)	0.42*** (0.10)	0.22** (0.08)	0.42*** (0.10)	0.36*** (0.10)	-0.05 (0.10)

Some College	0.59***	0.84***	0.95***	0.32**
	(0.08)	(0.10)	(0.11)	(0.10)
2-year	0.57***	0.80***	0.87***	0.31**
	(0.09)	(0.11)	(0.11)	(0.11)
4-year	0.61***	0.91***	1.09***	0.23*
	(0.08)	(0.10)	(0.11)	(0.10)
Post-grad	0.48***	0.83***	1.39***	0.24*
	(0.09)	(0.11)	(0.11)	(0.11)
Constant	0.36***	0.32**	-0.12	0.48***
N	28,380	45,743	44,966	44,209
Log Likelihood	-20,413.61	-28,830.76	-30,051.09	-30,216.12
AIC	40,831.22	57,665.52	60,106.18	60,436.24
Constant	0.81***	0.25***	0.15***	0.35***
N	28,380	45,743	44,966	44,209
Log Likelihood	-20,413.61	-28,830.76	-30,051.09	-30,216.12
AIC	40,831.22	57,665.52	60,106.18	60,436.24

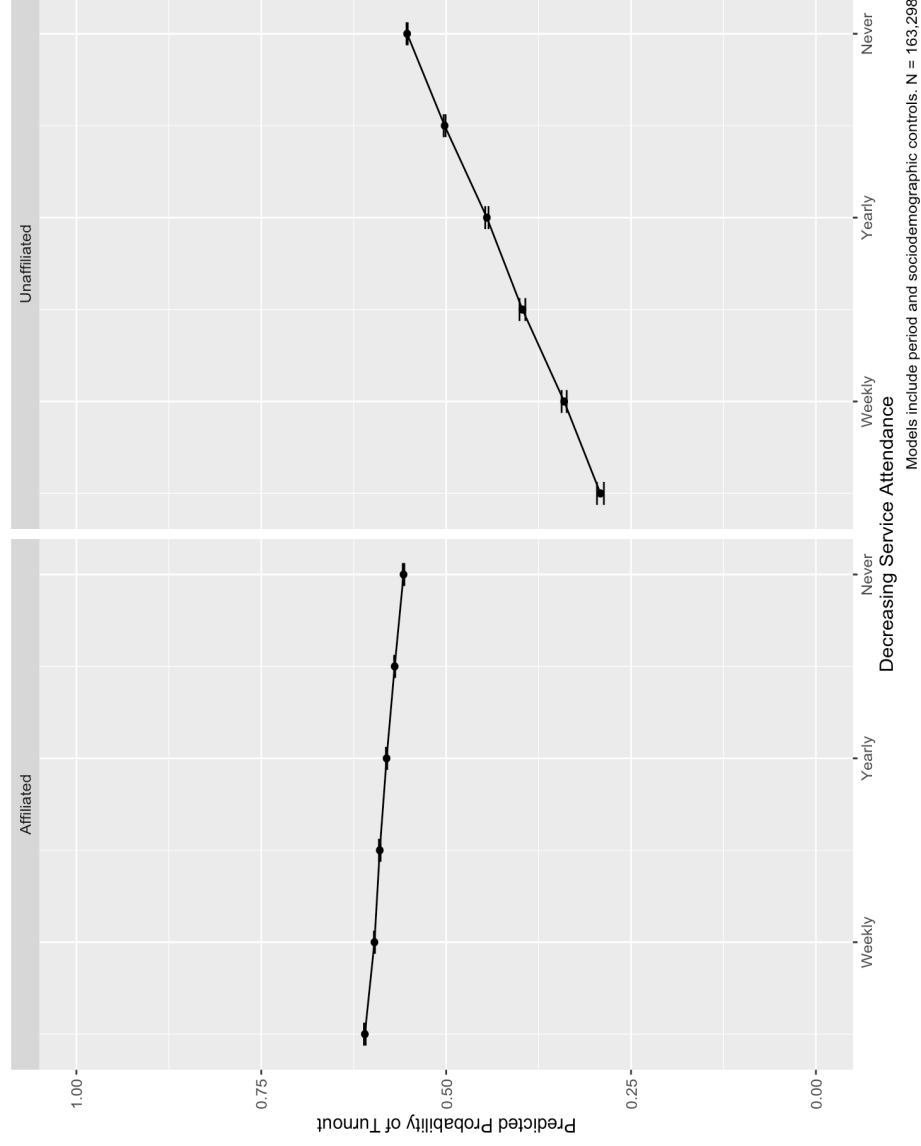
Notes: \*p<.05, \*\*p<.01, \*\*\*p<.001. All models use CCES sampling and post-stratification weights. Standard errors in parentheses.

Table 3: Interaction Effects for Nonreligion and Turnout

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Unaffiliated	-0.26*** (0.02)	—	-0.26*** (0.02)	-1.51*** (0.09)	-0.03 (0.02)	—	-0.005 (0.02)	-0.85*** (0.10)
Less Frequent Service Attendance	—	-0.03*** (0.01)	-0.003 (0.01)	-0.04*** (0.01)	—	-0.02** (0.01)	-0.02** (0.01)	-0.04*** (0.01)
Unaffiliated x Low Attendance	—	—	—	0.25*** (0.02)	—	—	—	0.17*** (0.02)
Period Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Demographic Controls	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constant	0.79***	0.87***	0.80***	0.91***	0.86***	0.92***	0.92***	0.99***
N	163,298	163,298	163,298	163,298	163,298	163,298	163,298	163,298
Log Likelihood	-110,753.70	-110,961.30	-110,754.00	-110,457.20	-101,687.30	-101,681.60	-101,681.30	-101,560.10
AIC	221,517.50	221,932.50	221,519.90	220,928.30	203,420.50	203,409.20	203,410.60	203,170.20

Notes: \*p<.05, \*\*p<.01, \*\*\*p<.001. Standard errors in parentheses. Demographic controls include age, race, gender, marital status, parental status, family income, party identification, and educational attainment.

Figure 2: Interaction Effects for Nonreligion and Turnout



Notes: Figure indicates the average predicted probability of turnout at each level of reported church attendance with 95% CIs. Predicted probabilities were estimated from a pooled model of election years including controls for period effects and demographics (Model 4 in Table 3).