



Religion, Identity and Preferences

QUANTITATIVE POLITICAL ECONOMY RESEARCH GROUP
Department of Political Economy
King's College London

QPE Working Paper 2024-59

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July 19, 2024

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Abstract

This paper provides causal evidence on the impact of religious identification on political preferences, gender norms, societal beliefs, and group behavior. Exploiting clergy sexual abuse scandals as a source of exogenous variation in Catholicism, we demonstrate that religious de-identification leads to significant shifts in individual attitudes and political alignment. Using data on millions of U.S. college freshmen and county-level voting records, we find that secularization causes more progressive positions on issues like abortion rights and same-sex marriage, but more conservative views on universal healthcare and military spending. The net effect is a substantial leftward shift in overall political orientation. We also document more progressive gender attitudes, particularly regarding women's workforce participation, among those who de-identify as Catholic. Notably, religious de-identification reduces individuals' propensity to engage in other group activities. Additional analyses suggest that as individuals disaffiliate from Catholicism, they increasingly identify with their social class, which polarizes economic preferences between high and low-income groups.

Keywords: Religion, Identity, Political Preferences, Social Norms, Group Behavior, Secularization

JEL: D02, D72, Z12

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1 Introduction

People’s identities are often centered around social categories such as politics, race, and religion (Akerlof and Kranton, 2000; Shayo, 2009). These identities carry behavioral prescriptions that influence people’s norms, values, and behaviors. Economists increasingly recognize that incorporating identity into economic analysis is important for understanding topics such as labor market discrimination (Giuliano et al., 2011; Åslund, Hensvik and Skans, 2014; Bagues et al., 2017), productivity (Bandiera et al., 2005; Hjort, 2014), and human capital formation (Gershenson et al., 2016; Lavy et al., 2018).

Among the various markers of identity, religion stands out as one of the oldest and most influential categories, governing behavior for billions of people (Iannaccone, 1998; Alesina and Giuliano, 2015; Guiso et al., 2006; McCleary and Barro, 2006). Hence, religious identity plausibly influences a wide spectrum of personal preferences, ranging from views on personal liberties and family relations to attitudes toward economic policies and civic engagement (Laliotis and Minos, 2022). Understanding this influence is important because such preferences eventually determine electoral outcomes, economic decision-making, social cohesion, and institutional development. Despite this importance, however, causal evidence on these relationships remains scarce (Iyer, 2016).

This paper aims to fill this gap by providing causal evidence on the effect of religious identification in the United States on policy preferences, gender norms, societal attitudes, and group-oriented behaviors. The main empirical challenge is the non-random nature of religious identification. Individuals often select their religious identity based on observed and unobserved factors such as economic status, geographic location, personal life experiences, and cultural compatibility. Since these factors likely also political preferences, it is unclear whether any observed correlation between religion and our outcome variables is merely a spurious consequence of omitted variables, or represents a genuine causal connection. To overcome the empirical challenge, we use clergy scandals in the Catholic church as a source of exogenous variation in religiosity (Hungerman, 2013*b*; Bottan and Perez-Truglia, 2015). We exploit both individual-level and county-level data to obtain our results.

As a first step, we provide detailed evidence that scandals cause a decline in Catholicism, as measured by a binary variable indicating whether individuals iden-

tify as Catholic. Using individual-level data for millions of US Freshmen and staggered difference-in-differences identification, we show that local scandals cause an 1.0 to 1.2 percentage point reduction in the likelihood that individuals identify as Catholic. This effect is stronger for individuals for whom church is a more important form of social support/protection such as individuals from low-income or poorly educated families. The observed decrease in Catholicism manifests as an overall decline in religiosity, rather than merely re-alignment between denominations, as in Hungerman (2013*b*). Moreover, the reduction in religious identification extends to religious practice, as scandals reduce how frequently people attend church. This pattern of secularization also applies to the wider population, as scandals cause a reduction in county-level Catholic school attendance and religious identification, which is consistent with the findings of Bottan and Perez-Truglia (2015).

Next, we leverage this quasi-experimental variation to examine how religiosity affects policy preferences. Using an instrumented difference-in-differences approach, we find that religious de-identification makes individuals adopt more progressive positions on issues like abortion rights, redistribution, same-sex marriage, immigrant rights, and employer drug testing. However, they adopt more conservative views on universal health care and military spending. These mixed effects make it unclear whether secularization shifts people toward the Democratic or Republican party.

To assess the overall impact of religiosity on political ideology, we estimate how Catholic identification influences individuals' self-reported position on the political spectrum. Our results show that individuals who de-identify with Catholicism move nearly two points to the left on a five-point political scale, indicating that progressive shifts in personal and moral attitudes outweigh conservative shifts in economic and foreign policy. This leftward shift extends to county-level outcomes, where clergy scandals both bolster support for progressive candidates and increase financial contributions to Democrats. The shift in political orientation is caused by changing values, not voter turnout. Taken together, our findings provide strong evidence that Catholicism causally sways people's political preferences in a more conservative direction. This is particularly interesting given the fact that Catholics in the U.S. are split politically, with 48% leaning Republican and 47% leaning Democratic (Smith, 2020).

We additionally provide evidence that this conservative shift extends to gender norms. In particular, our findings indicate that Catholicism leads people to adopt

more conservative norms about marriage, raising a family, sexual entitlement, and the woman’s role in the household. The effects are particularly pronounced for attitudes towards early marriage and traditional gender roles in the workforce, suggesting that religious de-identification may lead to more progressive attitudes on gender roles, particularly regarding women’s participation in the labor market and the timing of family formation.

To interpret these results, we draw on insights from identity economics (Akerlof and Kranton, 2000; Shayo, 2009; Bonomi et al., 2021; Gennaioli and Tabellini, 2023). This framework posits that individuals, by identifying with a particular group, internalize the norms of that group, and value outcomes benefiting fellow group members. Consequently, religious identification shapes personal, moral, and political preferences, as adherents align with their faith’s dominant views. Importantly, individuals possess multiple, sometimes competing identities, and switch between them based on factors such as the relative status of those identities (Shayo, 2009). Because events like clergy scandals undermine religious institutions’ moral authority, they diminish the utility of religious group membership, and induce adherents to adopt one of their alternative identities such as class or race. These identity shifts, in turn, cause individuals to internalize the norms and values of their new group, and increase support for policies favoring their newly adopted in-group members.

We provide evidence that scandals precipitate a shift towards class identification, as low-income individuals who disaffiliate from Catholicism become more supportive of redistribution, drug legalization, criminal rights, and universal healthcare, whereas the opposite holds true for higher income individuals. This divergence suggests an increased alignment with class interests following religious disaffiliation. We find limited evidence of religious de-identification leading to stronger racial or gender identification.

Our findings relate and contribute to several important strands of the literature. First, we add to the literature on the institutional and cultural determinants of preferences. While preferences have traditionally been treated as fixed and exogenously determined in economic models (Stigler and Becker, 1977), an emerging body of research highlights how preferences can be shaped by external forces like institutions, social norms, life experiences and environmental factors (Bowles, 1998; Alesina and Fuchs-Schündeln, 2007; Tabellini, 2008; Henrich et al., 2010; Nunn and Wantchekon, 2011; Fehr and Hoff, 2011; Malmendier and Nagel, 2011; Alesina and Giuliano, 2015;

Fouka, 2020). We build on and extend this literature by providing novel evidence on how a foundational societal institution like religion has a causal impact in molding preferences across personal, moral, economic and political domains.¹

We also contribute to the literature on the relationship between religion and politics. A large body of research in political science demonstrates a strong correlation between religious identification and voting behavior, with a tendency for religious individuals to favor conservative parties (Rose and Urwin, 1969; Lijphart, 1979; Legee and Welch, 1989; Gill, 2001; Green, 2007; Woodberry, 2012; Grzymala-Busse, 2012; Fowler, 2018). Enke (2020); Enke et al. (2023) find that individual differences in moral universalism—the extent to which individuals apply the same moral values and principles to all people regardless of their social or group affiliations—strongly predict political attitudes, with religiosity being a key factor promoting more communitarian value systems. Despite this well-established correlation, however, causal evidence remains scarce, and some have argued that the observed correlation results from reverse causality or omitted variable bias (Patrikios, 2008; Margolis, 2018; Campbell et al., 2018).² Our findings provide some of the first causal evidence that individuals who de-identify with Catholicism shift towards the left.

A growing body of literature examines the relationship between religion and gender-related attitudes and outcomes. Guiso et al. (2003) and Seguino (2011) find that religious individuals, particularly Muslims, tend to hold more conservative views on women’s roles. However, Clingingsmith et al. (2009) and Meyersson (2014) demonstrate that religious practices and religious rule can also foster more progressive gender norms. Within Christianity, denominational differences emerge: Nunn et al. (2014) shows that Catholic missionary activities in Africa were less effective in promoting female education compared to Protestant missions, aligning with the Protestant emphasis on literacy. Similarly, Becker and Woessmann (2008) find that Protestantism reduced the gender education gap in 19th century Prussia. These studies suggest that Catholicism may promote more conservative gender at-

¹See e.g. Guiso et al. (2003); Stegmueller et al. (2012); Stegmueller (2013) for correlational evidence.

²One exception is Gerber et al. (2016), who use Blue Law repeals to show that religion causally affects turnout. In contrast to their findings, however, we find no effect of religion on turnout. One potential reason is that Gerber et al. (2016) focus on changes in religiosity induced by a pull factor from the secular side (increased shopping opportunities), whereas we focus on a push factor from the religious side (abuse scandals). It is possible that pull factors that decrease religiosity similarly decrease other civil actions, whereas push factors do not.

titudes than Protestantism, though the overall effect of religion on gender norms remains ambiguous. We contribute to this literature by providing causal evidence on a broader range of gender-related attitudes, including views on marriage, sexual entitlement, women’s workforce participation, family importance, and casual sex, and by showing a clear conservative shift.

We furthermore provide new insights into the relationship between religious affiliation and group affiliation more broadly. In particular, we examine the effect of religion on other group activities such as joining sports teams or fraternities/sororities. Recent work in economics has examined the concept of ‘groupiness’, which is an individual’s propensity to exhibit group-oriented preferences (Kranton and Sanders, 2017; Kranton et al., 2020). A priori, the effect of religious de-identification on group membership is ambiguous. If group-orientation represents a fixed individual trait, the decline in religious participation may increase involvement in other social groups, as people reallocate their demand for group attachment. Alternatively, religion itself may nurture group-orientation, in which case declining religiosity could lower the desire to affiliate with collectives. Our results support the latter, as we find that losing one’s Catholic identity reduces the propensity to join athletic teams, college clubs, and fraternities. This suggests that religious engagement may have important positive spillovers in terms of cultivating broad social capital, and that secularization could lead to a general decline in group-oriented behavior.

More general, we contribute to the study of the causal effects of religion. A growing body of research uses natural experiments and instrumental variable analyses to identify the impacts of religiosity on a wide set of outcomes and behaviors. Examples are economic outcomes (Barro and McCleary, 2003; Gruber, 2005; Bryan et al., 2021), alcohol and drug use (Gruber and Hungerman, 2008), subjective well-being (Gruber, 2005; Campante and Yanagizawa-Drott, 2015), charitable giving (Hungerman, 2013b; Bottan and Perez-Truglia, 2015), turnout (Gerber et al., 2016), and beliefs in equality and harmony (Clingsmith et al., 2009). Our study enriches this literature by providing evidence of how religious de-identification causally affects a wide range of policy preferences as well as gender and social norms.

The rest of the paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 provides background on the clergy sexual abuse scandals in the Catholic Church. Section 3 describes our data sources and empirical strategy. Section 4 presents our main results on the causal impact of religion on political preferences, gender norms, other societal attitudes,

and group-oriented behaviors. Section 5 concludes by discussing the implications of our findings for understanding the societal consequences of secularization trends and highlighting avenues for future research.

2 Background Clergy Scandals

The quality and perceived legitimacy of institutions influences public trust and social capital, which are essential for economic and social stability (North, 1990; Acemoglu et al., 2005). Recent evidence suggests that institutional failures can lead to broader societal consequences, including changes in individual behavior and erosion of social norms (Solé-Ollé and Sorribas-Navarro, 2018; Gulino and Masera, 2023). The Catholic Church clergy abuse scandal provides a clear example of these dynamics.

Since the mid-1980s, the Catholic Church in the United States has experienced repeated revelations of sexual abuse committed by members of its clergy. The number of allegations increased rapidly after the Boston Globe published a series of articles in 2002 detailing accusations against the defrocked priest John Geoghan and his long record of sexually abusing children (Globe, 2002). These reports also brought to light the fact that Catholic Church officials were aware of the abuse but did not act to stop it. The articles triggered a surge of accusations of abuse across the country (Hungerman, 2013*a*). Additional details were released in 2018 following a detailed grand jury report on clerical sexual abuse in six Pennsylvania dioceses, outlining offenses by over 300 priests against more than 1,000 child victims that occurred over many decades (Pennsylvania Grand Jury, 2018). The report also described a pattern of cover-ups by church leaders and criticized bishops for taking measures to avoid public scandal rather than protecting victims (Pennsylvania Grand Jury, 2018).

According to reports commissioned by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and conducted by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, approximately 4% of Catholic priests who served in the U.S. between 1950-2002 faced substantiated accusations of child sexual abuse (John Jay College of Criminal Justice, 2004; Terry et al., 2011). The vast majority of the alleged abuses took place between 1960 and 1990, with a peak in the 1970s. However, most of the accusations were reported

decades later, with the peak number of allegations coming in the early 2000s (John Jay College of Criminal Justice, 2004).

The U.S. Catholic Church has taken some steps to address the scandal, including adopting a ‘zero tolerance’ policy and preventing accused priests from having contact with parishioners (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2002). However, the Church has faced criticism for an insufficient response to the crisis (Formicola, 2016). Some argue that aspects of the Church’s structure, the requirement of celibacy for priests, and the male-only priesthood have contributed to the pervasiveness of abuse, while others point to broader societal changes in attitudes toward sexual behavior since the 1960s (Plante, 1999).

The repeated revelations of abuse and the perceived failures in the Church’s response have led to a significant crisis for Catholicism in the United States. Numerous dioceses have filed for bankruptcy due to abuse-related costs, and the Church has paid over \$3 billion in lawsuit settlements and other expenditures related to the crisis (The Guardian, 2023). In addition to these direct costs, the scandals have potentially imposed even greater costs by harming the reputation of the Church, weakening adherents’ religious faith and participation, and eroding public trust in the institution (Bottan and Perez-Truglia, 2015).

3 Data and Empirical Strategy

3.1 Data

We obtain data on the occurrence and timing of abuse scandals in the Catholic church from Bottan and Perez-Truglia (2015).³ Their database covers more than 3,000 scandal revelations between 1980 and 2010, which is the end-point of our analyses. The list of scandals is based on the records published by Bishop Accountability, cross-checked with newspaper articles and court documents. The reported date of the scandal is based on the first newspaper mention rather than the actual date of the abuse. In other words, we consider the effect of abuse being revealed, rather than abuse occurring. The main justification for focusing on revelations is that the revelation date of clergy abuse scandals represents a significant information shock to the public, whereas the date of the actual abuse is mostly private information.

³We thank the authors for kindly sharing their data.

For each scandal, we know the exact zip code and county in which it took place. Figure A50 shows the frequency of scandal revelations over time. The main peak is in 2002, coinciding with the Boston Globe revelations. Figure A51 shows a map of scandals across the United States, showing that scandals are widespread across the country.

We furthermore use data from the CIRP Freshman Survey (TFS). The TFS is an annual survey of first-year college students in the US, which provides insights into their attitudes, beliefs, and aspirations about a wide range of issues. The survey is a repeated cross-section that is conducted by UCLA’s Higher Education Research Institute and has been running since 1966. The survey asks respondents about their own religious affiliation and their parents’ religious affiliation. Our main religion measures is an indicator variables that takes the value of 1 if an individual identifies as Catholic, and 0 otherwise. We additionally consider an indicator variable for whether they identify as religious or not. Individuals report their policy preferences on issues such as abortion, gay rights, and redistribution on a four-point scale, ranging from ‘strongly disagree’ to ‘strongly agree’, and their political orientation on a five-point scale from ‘far right’ to ‘far left’. Respondents additionally answer a set of questions about gender-related issues, society more general, and group-oriented behaviors. Appendix A1.1 in the Appendix provides an overview of all questions we analyze. Respondents also report their home zip code, which is the zip code in which they lived before going to college. In addition, we have information on a number of demographic and socioeconomic background characteristics such as ethnicity, gender, parents’ income, and parents’ education.⁴

We supplement the TFS data with several county-level data sets. From the Longitudinal Religious Congregations and Membership File, we obtain the fraction of people who are registered as Catholics between 1980 and 2010 (Grammich et al., 2018). This survey, designed and carried out by the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies (ASARB), measures the numbers of adherents across 302 religious groups for all US counties. It is conducted once every decade. We obtain the number of Catholic school and Catholic school students for each county from the Private School Survey (see also Bottan and Perez-Truglia (2015)).⁵ The

⁴Parents’ income is a student’s best guess for their parents’ total yearly income, reported in one of 30 categories.

⁵Most students enrolled in Catholic schools belong to Catholic families according to the National

Private School Survey is a biannual census of all private schools in the US, and our data ranges from 1989 to 2010. We consider the number of schools and students per capita. To measure county-level political orientation, we obtain Democrat and Republican vote shares in all presidential, senate, and House elections between 1980 and 2010 from David Leip’s Election Atlas (Leip, 2022), as well as the turnout rates in each of those elections. We obtain county-level political donations to Democrat and Republican candidates from the Database on Ideology, Money in Politics, and Elections (Bonica, 2015). Here, we calculate the total amount of donations to Democrats, Republicans, and in total for all US zip codes, and log-transform each of these values.

Table 1 gives summary statistics for the TFS data. Our full data set comprises 8,404,965 college freshmen between 1982 and 2010. Of these, 6,642,400 students are originally from zip codes that never experienced a clergy abuse scandal (no-scandal zips), whereas 1,762,565 students are from zip codes with at least one scandal (scandal zips). In both types of zip codes, approximately 84% of individuals are religious. Among those who are from scandal zips, approximately 40% identify as Catholic, compared to only 29% who are from non-scandal zips, indicating that scandals are relatively likely to occur in areas with large numbers of Catholics. Parents’ education levels, students’ racial composition, and gender ratios are approximately equal in scandal and no-scandal areas.

Table A19 in the Appendix gives the average policy preferences, gender norms, and societal attitudes of Catholics, non-Catholic religious people, and non-religious people. In general, Catholics hold more conservative positions than atheists on the vast majority of issues.

3.2 Empirical Strategy

Our empirical strategy builds on the notion that clergy scandals reduce Catholic identification (Bottan and Perez-Truglia, 2015). To corroborate this notion, we employ a difference-in-differences framework that compares changes in Catholicism within areas that experienced scandals to changes in areas without scandals.⁶ We extend the approach of Bottan and Perez-Truglia (2015) in two important ways. First,

Catholic Educational Association.

⁶We additionally examine the effect on identifying as religious in general.

Table 1: Summary statistics

	No scandal	Scandal
Religious	0.845	0.837
Catholic	0.291	0.400
Catholic mother	0.314	0.429
Catholic father	0.299	0.414
Mother went to college	0.468	0.444
Father went to college	0.522	0.503
Political orientation	3.058	3.126
White	0.775	0.733
Female	0.556	0.555
Observations	6,642,400	1,762,565

Notes: The table gives summary statistics for the Freshmen Survey data. The left column shows data for individuals from zip codes that did not experience a scandal, and the right column shows data for individuals from zip codes that experienced at least one scandal. *Religious* is a binary variable that takes the value of 1 if the individual identifies by any religion other than ‘none’. *Catholic* is a binary variable that takes the value of 1 if they identify as Catholic. *Catholic mother/father* take the value of 1 if the individual’s mother or father identify as Catholic, respectively. *Mother/Father went to college* take the value of 1 if an individual’s mother or father went to college. *Political orientation* is an individuals political orientation on a five-point scale from far right (1) to far left (5). *White* takes the value of 1 if the individual identifies as White. *Female* takes the value of 1 if the individual identifies as female. *Observations* gives the total number of respondents.

we use individual-level data on religious identification from TFS rather than relying solely on county-level proxies. Second, we address potential bias in difference-in-difference estimators with staggered timing by using recent advances in the econometric literature that address the problem of negative weights (Goodman-Bacon, 2021; Sun and Abraham, 2021; Callaway and Sant’Anna, 2021; Borusyak et al., 2021; Gardner, 2022). Our baseline specification is:

$$R_{ict} = \tau D_{ct} + \Omega \mathbf{X}_{ict} + \mu_c + \mu_t + \varepsilon_{ict} \quad (1)$$

where R_{ict} is an indicator that equals 1 if individual i from zip code c identifies as Catholic in year t . D_{ct} is an indicator equal to 1 if a scandal has been revealed in zip code c in year t . Zip codes remain treated for the duration of the sample period following a scandal. \mathbf{X}_{ict} is a vector of individual controls including college selectivity, gender, race, parental education, and family income.⁷ μ_c and μ_t are zip code and year fixed effects. We cluster standard errors at the home zip code level. For treated individuals, we examine a 7-year window before and after scandal

⁷Section 4.6 demonstrates that our results are robust to excluding these covariates.

revelations.⁸ It is important to re-iterate that treatment depends on the zip code where an individual lived before going to college, rather than the zip code where they currently live.

To estimate Equation (2), we apply the estimator developed by Gardner (2022).⁹ This approach estimates the zip code and time fixed effects μ_c and μ_t using only untreated/not-yet treated observations, yielding estimates $\hat{\mu}_i$ and $\hat{\mu}_t$ that are then used to residualize the outcome variable as $\tilde{Y}_{it} = Y_{it} - \hat{\mu}_i - \hat{\mu}_t$. Treatment effects τ^k are estimated by regressing \tilde{Y}_{it} on D_{it}^k via GMM, producing asymptotically correct standard errors.¹⁰

Identification relies on the parallel trends assumption, which holds that absent scandals, outcomes would have developed along the same path for treated and untreated individuals. We assess this assumption by estimating a dynamic specification that allows us to test for differential pre-trends:

$$R_{ict} = \sum_{k=-L}^K \tau^k D_{ct}^k + \Omega \mathbf{X}_{\mathbf{ict}} + \mu_c + \mu_t + \varepsilon_{ict} \quad (2)$$

Here, D_{ct}^k indicates that zip code c in year t is k years away from a scandal. The coefficients τ^{-L} to τ^{-2} capture pre-treatment effects and enable tests of the parallel trends assumption. Equation (2) also allows us to trace out the evolution of treatment effects over time. For our main estimates, we furthermore show the sensitivity of our results to potential violations of the parallel trends assumption (Rambachan and Roth, 2023).

A potential issue is the possibility that scandals in one zip code may also reduce religiosity in neighboring areas, which can generate divergent pre-trends. Indeed, if scandals are spatially correlated (i.e., more likely to occur in certain regions than in others), regions with high treatment probabilities will both have faster declines in religiosity (because neighboring zip codes are relatively likely to be treated), and higher chances of being treated themselves. Consistent with this intuition, Figure A52 in the appendix shows that ignoring spillovers leads to pre-trend violations

⁸Section 4.6 shows that the results are qualitatively similar when we consider 5-year or 10-year windows.

⁹Our estimations use the *did2s* package in R (Butts, 2021).

¹⁰Section 4.6 shows the results for an alternative estimation method (Callaway and Sant’Anna, 2021). All main conclusions remain unchanged.

in the effect of scandals on Catholic identification. To address this issue, we expand the treatment definition to include zip codes for which a scandal took place within a 50km radius of the zip code. As long as spillovers do not extend over this horizon, spillovers should not cause pre-trend violations. Section 4.6 demonstrates robustness to alternative radii.

Another important assumption is that the composition of people coming from a particular zip code does not systematically change as the result of clergy scandals. Section 4.6 provides evidence supporting this assumption.

In our next step, we use this quasi-experimental variation in Catholicism to estimate the effect of religiosity on a range of policy preferences, political orientation, gender norms, other societal values and beliefs, and group behavior. To do so, we deploy a two-stage least squares difference-in-differences (2SLS-DD) framework that uses clergy scandals as an instrument for religiosity:

$$Y_{ict} = \beta \hat{R}_{ict} + \Gamma \mathbf{X}_{ict} + \mu_c + \mu_t + \varepsilon_{ict} \quad (3)$$

$$R_{ict} = \gamma D_{ct} + \Pi \mathbf{X}_{ict} + \alpha_c + \alpha_t + \nu_{ict} \quad (4)$$

Where \hat{R}_{ict} is instrumented religiosity from the first-stage, estimated in Equation 4, and Y_{ict} is the outcome variable of interest. For identification, the 2SLS-DD approach requires parallel trends, treatment effect homogeneity, as well as the exclusion restriction assumption that scandals impact our outcomes only through their effect on Catholic identification. We again consider a 7-year window before and after scandal revelations for each treated unit.

A key concern regarding the exclusion restriction is that clergy scandals may affect preferences and beliefs of both Catholics and non-Catholics. For instance, scandals might undermine institutional trust in other religious groups, potentially altering views on government's role in society. To address this concerns, we examine how scandals affect the preferences and beliefs of Jewish individuals. Another issue is that our estimates may capture effects not only on those who completely disaffiliate from Catholicism but also on those who remain nominally Catholic while becoming less devout. Although this would not change the direction of our estimates, it may change the magnitude. Last, scandals may affect other outcomes such as charitable giving (Bottan and Perez-Truglia, 2015), which could indirectly influence political orientations. Although we cannot fully dismiss this channel, the impact is likely

small, as the effect on donations is not very large, and there is little evidence that charitable donations affect people’s policy positions. Nevertheless, we supplement our 2SLS-DD estimates with reduced form difference-in-differences estimates for the effect of scandals on Catholics’ preferences, using the identification strategy outlined earlier. While these reduced-form estimates have weaker identification assumptions, they measure the total effect of scandals rather than the specific impact of Catholic disaffiliation.

Finally, we supplement the individual analysis with a county-level investigation of the effect of scandals both on religion and on political outcomes such as voting, turnout, and political donations.¹¹ To do so, we re-estimate Equations (1) and (2) with counties as the unit of analysis. Here, we control for income-per-capita, population size, fractions of Whites and Blacks, and the fractions of the population that are below 25 or between 25 and 64.¹² We cluster standard errors at the county level.

4 Results

4.1 Effect of Scandals and Catholicism

We begin our analysis by examining the impact of clergy sexual abuse scandals on religious identification. As our main measure of religiosity, we consider whether an individual self-identifies as Catholic. We additionally consider their parents’ religious identification, and whether they attended church last year. We estimate treatment effects using the staggered difference-in-differences method outlined in Section 3.2.

Table 2 presents our baseline estimates. Exposure to a clergy scandal in a freshman’s home zip code reduces the likelihood of Catholic identification by 1.2 percentage points ($p < 0.001$). We observe comparable declines in Catholicism among both parents.¹³ Moreover, the effect extends to religious practice, with individuals being

¹¹Here we omit the spillover correction as counties are roughly 10 times larger than zips, and spillovers are less likely to be an issue.

¹²Bottan and Perez-Truglia (2015) suggest that zip-codes are a better approximation of local communities than counties. Counties are on average larger in population, such that only a relatively small share of a county’s population will be exposed to a scandal. We therefore control for population size in all our estimations. Precinct-level election results, which could theoretically be mapped to zip codes, are only available from 2016 onward.

¹³Note that we focus on scandals in the freshman’s home zip code. Hence, we should expect

Table 2: Baseline results for the effect of scandals on Catholicism

	Catholic	Catholic father	Catholic mother	Church attendance
Scandal	−0.012*** (0.001)	−0.011*** (0.001)	−0.010*** (0.001)	−0.010*** (0.002)
Zip fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	3,400,550	3,220,341	3,305,588	3,727,101
Adjusted R-squared	0	0	0	0

Notes: The table shows the baseline difference-in-difference estimates for the effect of clergy scandals on Catholicism. The outcome variable in column 1 is whether an individual identifies as Catholic, in column 2 whether an individual’s father identifies as Catholic, in column 3 whether the mother identifies as Catholic, and in column 4 whether the person went to church last year. *Scandal* is an indicator variable that takes the value of 1 for all years after a zip code has experienced a clergy scandal. Standard errors are clustered at the home zip code level and given in parentheses. Asterisks denote significance at the 0.01 (***), 0.05 (**) and 0.1 (*) level. Treatment effects are estimated using the method outlined in Gardner (2022).

1.0 percentage points less likely to attend church following a scandal ($p < 0.001$).¹⁴

Figure 1 displays the dynamic treatment effects, showing a persistent decline in Catholic identification for both freshmen and their parents following scandal revelations. Church attendance also shows a steady downward path. Importantly, we observe no clear violations of the parallel trends assumption in the pre-treatment period. Nevertheless, we provide additional robustness checks in Section 4.6.

To ensure these effects are consistent with secularization rather than people merely switching between denominations, we also examine the effect on overall religiosity, and identification with non-Catholic religions. Results in Table A18 and Figure A46 in the Appendix confirm that scandals lead to a general decline in religious identification, rather than only realignment to other denominations. While the effect on overall religiosity is smaller and noisier, it remains highly statistically significant ($\beta = -0.005$; $p < 0.001$). We therefore interpret our subsequent results as capturing the consequences of Catholics becoming non-religious.¹⁵

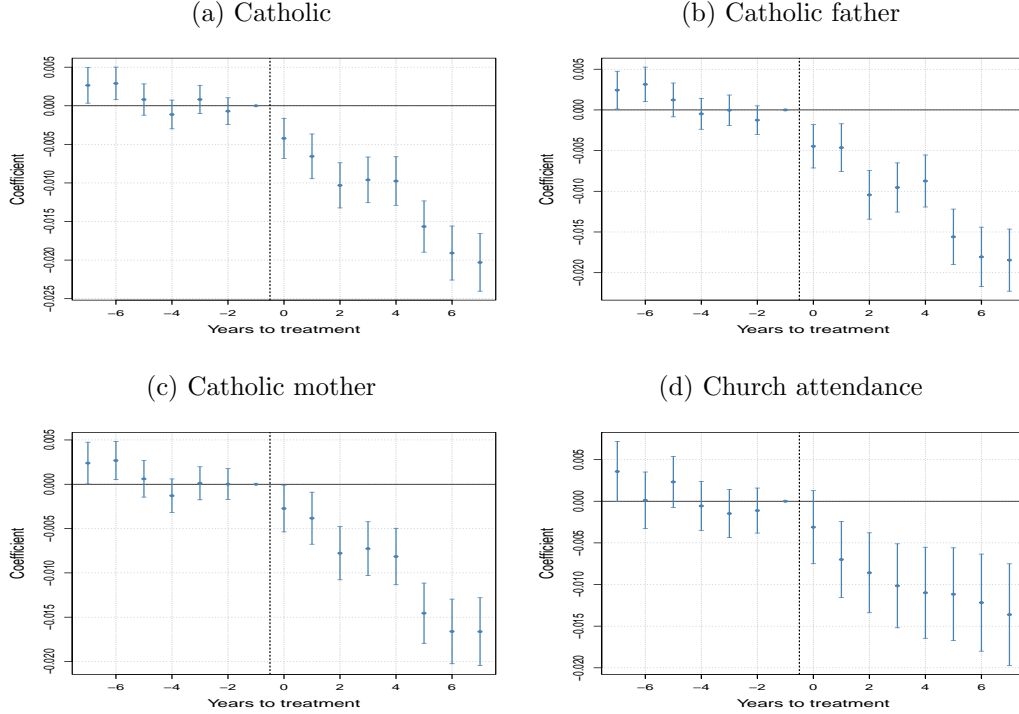
To corroborate our individual-level findings and extend them to the broader population, we analyze county-level data on Catholic adherents, schools, and students.

similar effects for parents and children.

¹⁴Because the survey asks about church attendance last year, we shift treatment back by one year for this analysis.

¹⁵Appendix A1.3.9 in the appendix shows all our main results using ‘religious’ as the treatment variable instead of ‘Catholic’. All important conclusions are the same.

Figure 1: Dynamic effects of scandals on Catholicism



Notes: The figure shows the dynamic treatment effects for the effect of clergy scandals on Catholicism. The outcome variables measure whether the respondent is Catholic (Panel A), whether their father is Catholic (Panel B), whether their mother is Catholic (Panel C), and whether they attended church last year (Panel D). *Relative time to treatment* measures years to treatment, which is given by the year of the first revelation of a clergy scandal in a zip code. Control variables are college selectivity, gender, race, parental education, and family income. Error bars depict 95% confidence intervals. All effects are estimated using the method outlined in Gardner (2022). Standard errors are clustered at the home zip code level. For treated units, we consider a time window from 7 years before to 7 years after the scandal revelation.

Table 3 presents these results, showing significant declines across all measures.¹⁶ Although the confidence intervals for the adherents' analysis are wide because the decennial nature of the data, the overall effect remains negative and significant, and quantitatively similar to our freshmen estimates. These results indicate that our freshmen results extend to the general population.

To provide further insights into the relationship between scandals and secularization, we examine heterogeneity in treatment effects across various demographic

¹⁶Figure A53 in the Appendix shows the dynamic treatment effects. We find no clear indication of pre-trend violations.

Table 3: Baseline effect of scandals on Catholicism, county-level data

	Catholic adherents	Catholic schools	Catholic students
Scandal	-0.008** (0.004)	-0.004*** (0.001)	-1.041*** (0.136)
County fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	8,008	19,283	19,283
Adjusted R-squared	0.001	0.007	0.013

Notes: The table shows the estimated effect of clergy scandals on county-level measures for Catholicism. *Catholic adherents* gives the fraction of individuals in a particular county that identifies as Catholic. *Catholic schools* is the number of Catholic schools in a county. *Catholic students* is the number of students attending Catholic schools. Control variables are income-per-capita, population size, fractions of Whites and Blacks, and the fractions of the population that are below 25 or between 25 and 64. Standard errors are clustered at the county level. All other definitions are as in Table 2.

and geographic dimensions. For our individual-level analysis, we examine variation in treatment effects by gender, race, parental education, and parental income. For the county-level analysis, we consider heterogeneity by pre-treatment political orientation, income-per-capita, and population density.¹⁷ We again remove all questions for which the confidence intervals exceed 5.

Table A21 presents individual-level heterogeneity results. We find that the secularizing effect of scandals is more pronounced among more vulnerable populations—specifically, individuals who are Black, from low-income families, and whose parents have lower levels of education. Several explanations for this heterogeneity are plausible. More vulnerable groups may rely more heavily on religious institutions for social support and community resources, making scandals more consequential for their overall well-being and identity. Alternatively, individuals from higher socioeconomic backgrounds may have more resources to rationalize scandals or face higher social and economic costs from disaffiliation, leading to greater resistance to changing their religious identification. Taken together, the observed pattern suggests that socioeconomic factors play an important role in shaping individuals’ responses to institutional failures within religious organizations.

¹⁷Because our previous analyses demonstrate that scandals affect, among other things, voting choices, we base our heterogeneity tests on pre-scandal values from 1980. For political orientation, we classify counties as Republican if the Republican party received at least 50% of the votes in the 1980 presidential election, and as Democrat otherwise. For income per capita, we split counties by above vs. below median income in 1980. For density, we consider above and below median density in 1980.

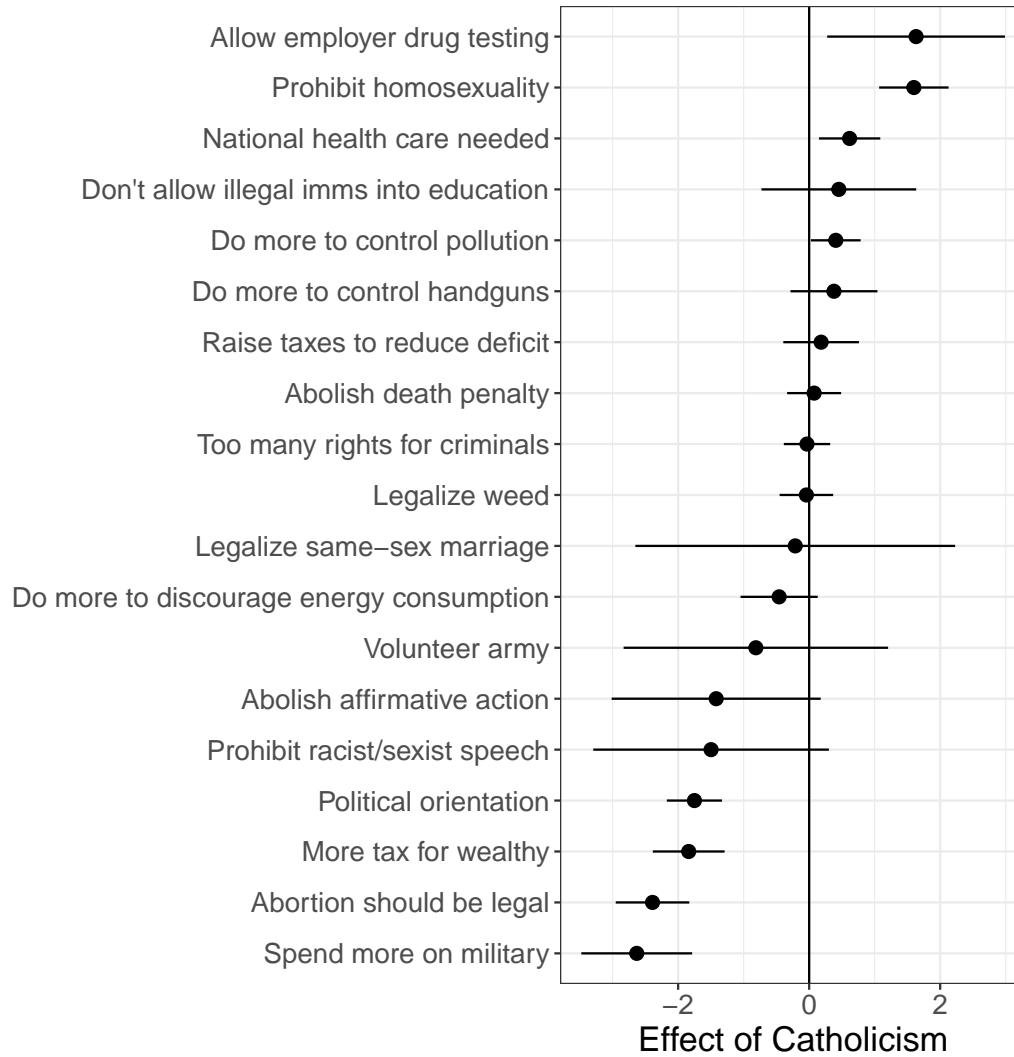
Table A22 presents county-level heterogeneity results, revealing significant variation along geographic and political lines. The secularizing impact of clergy scandals is substantially larger in counties that were Democrat-leaning and densely populated in 1980. This aligns with the notion that such environments are often characterized by greater openness to change and less deference to traditional institutions (Jost, 2017). Urban settings, with their diverse populations and exposure to varied ideologies, may facilitate easier transitions away from religious affiliations following scandals. The stronger effect in Democrat-leaning counties could reflect a political climate more conducive to questioning established religious institutions. Interestingly, we find no significant differences in scandal effects based on county-level income per capita. This suggests that the aggregate economic conditions of an area may be less influential than its political leanings or urbanization in determining responses to religious scandals.

4.2 Effect of Catholicism on Political Preferences

Our analysis next turns to the impact of Catholicism on a broad spectrum of policy preferences, spanning 19 distinct domains. These include contentious issues such as same-sex marriage, immigrant rights, environmental protection, affirmative action, and wealth redistribution. Respondents rate their stance on each issue using a four-point scale, ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. We employ the 2SLS difference-in-differences approach described in Section 3.2, instrumenting treatment (Catholic identification) with exposure to clergy scandals. This approach allows us to isolate the causal impact of religious affiliation on policy preferences. We remove outcomes for which the confidence intervals exceed -5 or 5. Figures A21 to A23 show event study plots for the effect of scandals on preferences.

The results, presented in Figure 2, reveal a mixed relationship between Catholicism and political preferences. On issues closely tied to traditional Catholic doctrine, such as prohibiting homosexuality ($\beta = 1.60$, $p < 0.001$), allowing employer drug testing ($\beta = 1.63$, $p = 0.018$), and legalizing abortion ($\beta = -2.39$, $p < 0.001$), we find that Catholic identification leads to more conservative views. This aligns with the Church's long-standing emphasis on the sanctity of life and traditional family values. However, the picture becomes more complex when we consider other policy domains. Catholicism appears to foster more progressive stances on issues

Figure 2: Effect of Catholicism on policy preferences



Notes: The figure shows the estimated effect of Catholicism on policy preferences. Each dot represents the estimated effect of Catholicism on preferences, where Catholicism is instrumented by whether a clergy scandal has occurred in an individual's home zip code. All effects are estimated using the 2SLS-DD method outlined in Section 3.2. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Standard errors are clustered at the home zip code level. Detailed descriptions of all survey questions are given in Appendix A1.1.

like lowering military spending ($\beta = 2.63$, $p < 0.001$), providing national health care ($\beta = 0.62$, $p = 0.001$) and increasing environmental protection ($\beta = 0.41$, $p = 0.036$). These findings resonate with Catholic social teachings that emphasize human life and the common good.

Given these mixed effects, the overall impact of Catholicism on political alignment is not immediately clear. We therefore also estimate the effect of Catholic identity on political orientation, measured on a five-point scale from ‘extreme right’ to ‘extreme left’. The results, shown in Table 4 indicate a significant rightward shift associated with Catholicism. Specifically, we find that Catholic identification causes a two-point move to the right on this five-point scale. This effect is both statistically significant ($p < 0.001$) and economically sizable, suggesting that the conservative influence of Catholicism on social issues far outweighs its more progressive leanings on certain other matters such as military spending.

Our instrumental variable estimates should be interpreted carefully, considering the nature of the compliers in our setting. These estimates represent the local average treatment effects for individuals whose religious affiliation changes in response to clergy scandals. This group likely differs from the average Catholic, potentially having weaker initial attachments to the Church. This selection may either amplify or mute the observed effects. On one hand, compliers could exhibit larger treatment effects because those who change their religious affiliation in response to scandals may be more prone to critically re-evaluating their beliefs across multiple domains, leading to more pronounced shifts in policy preferences. Conversely, they might display smaller effects if their initial attachment to Catholic teachings was already weak, or if they were nominal Catholics before the scandals, making disaffiliation more a formal acknowledgment of pre-existing views than a substantial shift in beliefs. Consequently, while our IV approach may provide valid causal estimates for this specific subpopulation, caution is warranted in generalizing these effects to the broader Catholic population or interpreting them as the average causal effect of religious affiliation on political and social attitudes.

To enhance the external validity of our results, we extend our analysis to county-level political outcomes. Here, we examine the impact of clergy scandals on Democratic vote shares, voter turnout, and political donations. This approach allows us to capture the aggregate effects of religious de-identification on concrete voting behavior, complementing our individual-level attitudinal findings. We use the staggered difference-in-differences methodology described in Section 3.2.

Consistent with our individual-level results, we find that clergy scandals, which reduce Catholic identification, lead to significant increases in Democratic vote shares across all levels of government (Table 5, Panel A). The magnitude of this effect is

Table 4: Effect of Catholicism on political orientation

Catholic	-1.925*** (0.246)
Zip fixed effects	Yes
Year fixed effects	Yes
Controls	Yes
Observations	3,783,021
Adjusted R-squared	0.079

Notes: The table displays the estimated effect of Catholicism on political orientation, measured on a 5-point scale from *Extreme right* to *Extreme left*. Treatment effects are estimated using the 2SLS-DD approach outlined in Section 3.2. Other definitions are as in Table 2.

substantial, ranging from a 2.8 percentage point increase in House elections to a 3.8 percentage point increase in Senate elections (all $p < 0.001$).¹⁸ These findings suggest that the leftward shift in political orientation associated with religious disaffiliation translates into tangible changes in voting behavior.

Interestingly, we find no significant effect of scandals on voter turnout rates (Panel B).¹⁹ This result contrasts with previous literature suggesting a positive relationship between religiosity and civic engagement (Gerber et al., 2016). One potential explanation for this discrepancy is that Gerber et al. (2016) focus on changes in religiosity induced by a pull factor from the secular side (increased shopping opportunities), whereas we examine a push factor from the religious side (abuse scandals). It is possible that pull factors decrease civic engagement more broadly, while push factors do not. These results are also somewhat inconsistent with the interpretation that scandals reduce trust in institutions more broadly, as a reduction in institutional trust would likely imply lower turnout rates (Grönlund and Setälä, 2007).

Finally, we observe a significant realignment in political donations following clergy scandals (Panel C).²⁰ Donations to Democratic candidates increase, while contributions to Republican candidates decrease. This shift in financial support further corroborates our political alignment results and re-iterates the impact of

¹⁸Figure A54 display the dynamic treatment effects. While we find some evidence of a pre-trend violation for presidential elections, there is no such evidence for the other two election types. Section 4.6 shows the sensitivity of these estimates to parallel trend violations.

¹⁹Figure A55 in the Appendix shows no evidence of pre-trend violations for turnout.

²⁰Appendix Figure A56 displays the dynamic treatment effects, showing no clear evidence of a pre-trend violation.

Table 5: Effect of scandals on county-level political outcomes

	Dem. vote share (pres.)	Dem. vote share (Senate)	Dem. vote share (House)
Panel A: Voting			
Scandal	0.031*** (0.002)	0.038*** (0.005)	0.028*** (0.006)
County fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	13,610	18,292	26,747
Adjusted R-squared	0.035	0.008	0.003
	Turnout rate (pres.)	Turnout rate (Senate)	Turnout rate (House)
Panel B: Turnout			
Scandal	0.001 (0.001)	0.002 (0.002)	-0.0002 (0.002)
County fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	13,608	18,292	26,985
Adjusted R-squared	0	0	0
	Donations (Dem.)	Donations (Rep.)	Donations (total)
Panel C: Political donations			
Scandal	0.122*** (0.033)	-0.065** (0.027)	-0.033 (0.021)
County fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	49,910	52,451	55,756
Adjusted R-squared	0.001	0	0

Notes: The table shows the estimated effect of clergy scandals on county-level voting outcomes (Panel A), turnout rates (Panel B), and political donations (Panel C). In Panel A, the outcome variables in columns 1-3 are the Democrat vote share in presidential elections, the Democrat vote share in Senate elections, and the Democrat vote share in House of Representatives elections. In Panel B, the outcome variables are turnout rates in the same three elections. In Panel C, the outcome variables are donations to Democrat candidates (log), donations to Republican candidates (log), and total political donations (log). Standard errors are clustered at the county level. Treatment effects are estimated using the method outlined in Gardner (2022). All other definitions are as in Table 2.

religious disaffiliation on political behavior.

To further unpack the relationship between religion and political preferences, we explore heterogeneous treatment effects across various demographic and geographic dimensions. This analysis allows us to identify which groups are most influenced by religious affiliation in shaping their political views, potentially providing insights into the mechanisms through which religion impacts political attitudes.

Our investigation is guided by two complementary hypotheses. First, we posit that the influence of religion may be inversely related to the availability of alternative sources of meaning and community. Individuals with diverse social networks and secular institutions may be less reliant on religion to shape their worldviews.

Second, we consider the possibility of identity substitution: as individuals disengage from religious identity, they may increasingly identify with other salient group characteristics such as gender, socioeconomic status, or race, potentially adopting the political preferences associated with these alternative identities.

Figure A57 reveals striking gender differences in how Catholicism shapes political attitudes. Most notably, the effect of Catholicism on opposition to homosexuality is nearly four times larger for males ($\beta = 2.69$; $p < 0.001$) than for females ($\beta = 0.71$; $p = 0.024$). This substantial gap suggests that religious teachings on sexuality may resonate more strongly with men, perhaps due to differences in how gender roles are internalized within religious contexts. Additionally, we find that Catholicism exerts a stronger influence on men’s attitudes towards abortion, criminal rights, and immigration. Despite this heterogeneity, however, we find little evidence that people who lose their religion shift their main identity towards gender (see Section 4.3 for further evidence).

Socioeconomic status, as measured by parental income, also moderates the impact of Catholicism on political attitudes (Figure A60). Interestingly, we observe divergent effects of religion on redistribution. Catholicism significantly increases support for redistribution among the poor, but tends to decrease redistributive preferences among the rich, although the latter effect is not statistically significant. This divergence is consistent with a shift from religious identity to class identity, as both groups appear to shift their altruism to those of similar income levels.

We also find divergent effects along income lines for other issues. For example, Catholicism increases support for drug legalization and criminal rights among lower-income respondents but decreases it among higher-income individuals. This pattern may reflect differing experiences with criminal enforcement across socioeconomic strata. Similarly, while Catholicism generally increases support for universal health care, these effects are more pronounced among lower-income respondents. All these results point towards stronger class identification.

When examining heterogeneity by mother’s education and race, we find relatively uniform effects across different categories (Figure A59, Figure A58). Additional analyses, shown in Appendix A1.2 in the Appendix, provide little evidence for people switching to racial identification when they secularize.

Next, we consider county-level heterogeneity for the effect of scandals on voting, turnout, and political donations. Table A23 presents the heterogeneous effects of

scandals on Democratic vote shares across elections. While we observe positive and significant effects across all subgroups, the magnitude of these effects varies substantially. Scandals induce a particularly large leftward shift in counties that were Democratic-leaning, wealthy, or densely populated in 1980. This pattern aligns with our findings on where scandals have the strongest secularizing effect, suggesting a synergy between pre-existing community characteristics and the political impact of religious disaffiliation. The amplified effect in these counties may stem from a combination of factors: reinforcement of existing progressive tendencies, higher levels of education and information access leading to quicker responses to institutional failures, and greater availability of secular alternatives in urban settings.

The heterogeneity in the effects on turnout and political donations is less noteworthy. Table A24 shows little to no variation in the effect of scandals on turnout across different counties, as the effects are consistently close to zero and mostly statistically insignificant. Table A25 shows heterogeneity in the effect of scandals on political donations. For each group, the increase in donations is considerably stronger for Democrats than Republicans, but the differences are less clear cut than in our analysis of election results.

4.3 Effect of Catholicism on Gender Norms

Many argue that the Catholic Church plays a significant role in shaping societal norms on gender roles and family structure (Guiso et al., 2003; Becker and Woessmann, 2008; Seguino, 2011; Nunn et al., 2014). To quantify this influence causally, we examine the effect of Catholic identification on five key dimensions of gender-related attitudes: attitudes towards marriage during college, sexual entitlement, women’s role in the workforce, the importance of raising a family, and views on casual sex. We employ our 2SLS difference-in-differences estimator, instrumenting Catholic identification with exposure to clergy scandals, to investigate how religious de-identification affects these gender-related beliefs. Figure A24 in the Appendix shows event study plots for the effect of scandals on gender norms.

Figure 3 presents our findings, showing that Catholicism consistently fosters more conservative gender attitudes. The effects are particularly pronounced for attitudes towards early marriage and traditional gender roles in the workforce. Specifically, Catholic identification significantly increases the likelihood of planning to

marry during college ($\beta = 1.79$, $p < 0.001$) and strengthens the belief that women should prioritize homemaking over paid employment ($\beta = 0.53$, $p = 0.010$). While the effects on attitudes towards sexual entitlement, family importance, and casual sex are directionally consistent with more conservative views, these estimates are either non-significant or marginally significant.

These results provide causal evidence for the often-hypothesized conservative influence of Catholicism on gender norms. They suggest that religious de-identification may lead to more progressive attitudes on gender roles, particularly regarding women’s participation in the workforce and the timing of marriage. This shift could have far-reaching implications for labor market dynamics, family formation patterns, and broader social structures as secularization trends continue.

Perhaps surprisingly, Figure A61 shows that these effects are relatively similar between genders. Although the treatment effects are more often statistically significant for males, the estimates for males and females are not statistically different from each other. This result provides evidence against the notion that people switch to gender as their main identity, as such a shift would require that secularizing men adopt more traditional values, whereas women adopt less traditional ones. For the other heterogeneity dimensions, we also find little systematic heterogeneity.²¹

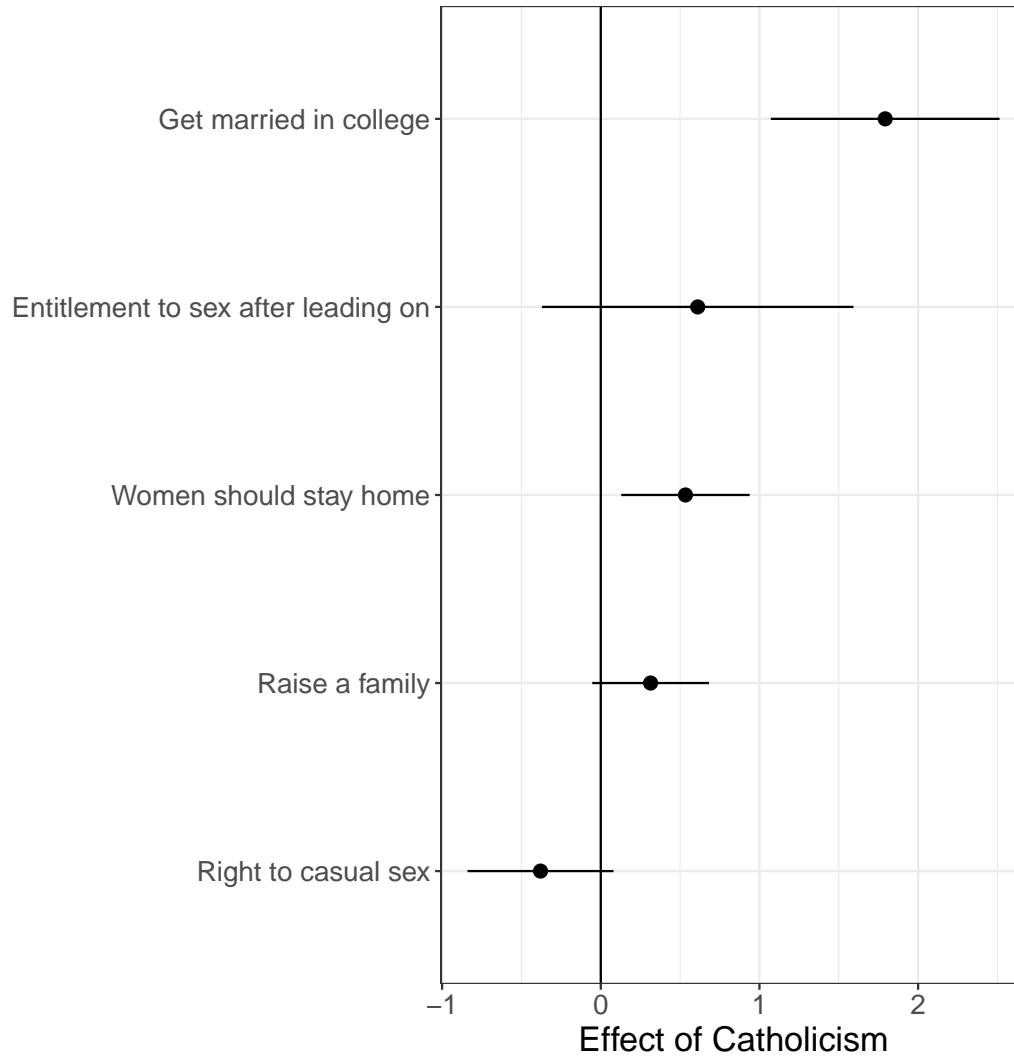
4.4 Effect of Catholicism on Societal Beliefs and Attitudes

Beyond gender norms, we explore the influence of Catholicism on broader societal beliefs and attitudes. We focus on four dimensions: (i) the tension between personal values and legal obedience, (ii) beliefs about individual agency in societal change, (iii) perceptions of ongoing racial discrimination, and (iv) attitudes towards political dissent. Figure A24 in the Appendix shows event study plots for the effect of scandals.

Figure 4 presents our findings. In contrast to our results on gender norms, we find that the effect of Catholic identification is statistically indistinguishable from zero for all four domains (all $p > 0.301$). For beliefs about individual capacity to change society and perceptions of racial discrimination, we obtain precisely estimated null effects. While the confidence intervals are wider for attitudes towards law obedience

²¹Some estimates are missing because the end-points of the confidence intervals are below -5 or above 5.

Figure 3: Effect of Catholicism on gender norms

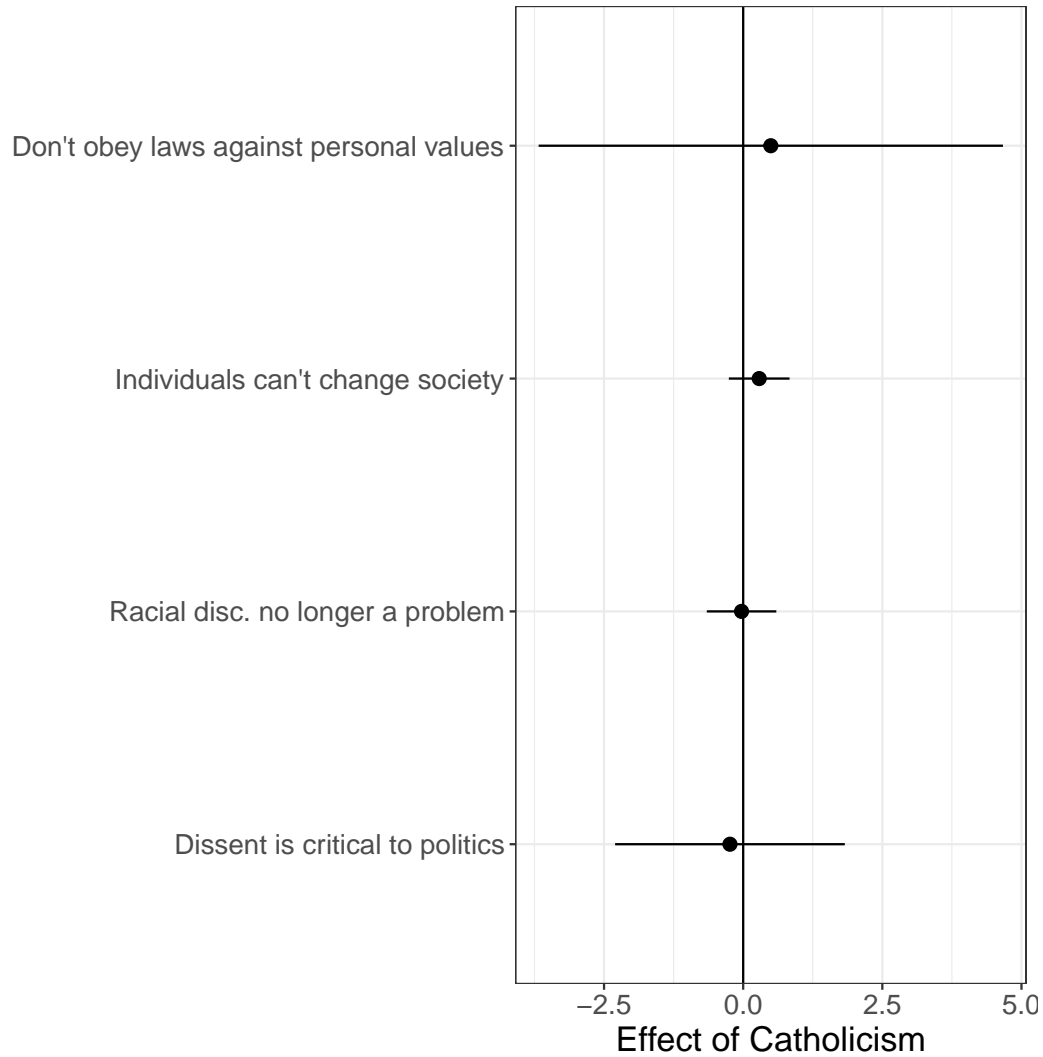


Notes: The figure shows the estimated effect of Catholicism on gender norms. Detailed descriptions of all survey questions are given in Appendix A1.1. All definitions are as in Figure 2.

and political dissent, the point estimates remain close to zero.

This pattern holds across various demographic subgroups, as shown in Figures A65 to A68, which reveal no meaningful heterogeneity in these null effects. Figures A65 to A68 also reveal no meaningful heterogeneity between groups. Taken together, these results suggest that the influence of Catholicism on societal beliefs is relatively domain-specific; while Catholic affiliation strongly shapes policy preferences and gender-related attitudes, its impact appears limited in other areas

Figure 4: Effect of Catholicism on other social norms

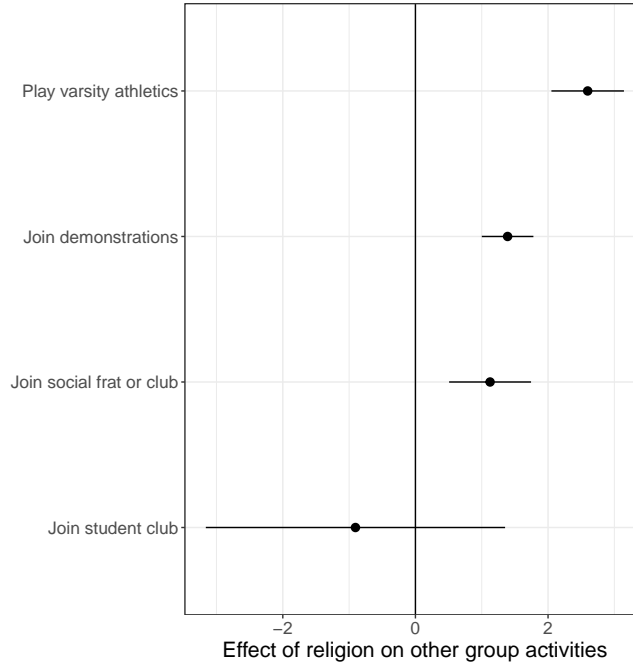


Notes: The figure shows the estimated effect of Catholicism on societal norms and beliefs. Detailed descriptions of all survey questions are given in Appendix A1.1. All definitions are as in Figure 2.

4.5 Effect of Catholicism on Group Membership

An interesting question that emerges from our analysis is how religious participation relates to broader patterns of group engagement. In particular, we address the question whether religious de-identification affects the likelihood of joining other groups. To empirically investigate the relationship between religion and group membership, we estimate the effect of Catholicism on the probability of joining various student

Figure 5: Effects of Catholicism on intended participation in group activities



Notes: The figure shows the estimated effect of Catholicism on the proclivity to join group activities. Each dot represents the estimated effect of Catholicism on the intention to join a group activity, where Catholicism is instrumented by whether a clergy scandal has occurred in an individual's home zip code. All other definitions are as in Figure 2. Appendix A1.1 in the Appendix provides more detailed descriptions of the survey questions.

groups (sports, student clubs, demonstrations, or fraternities) using our 2SLS-DD approach.

Figure 5 presents the results. We find a positive and statistically significant effect of religious identification on the likelihood of playing varsity athletics ($\beta = 2.07$, $p < 0.001$), joining demonstrations ($\beta = 1.30$, $p < 0.001$), and joining a social fraternity or club ($\beta = 1.56$, $p < 0.001$), but not on joining a student club ($\beta = 1.87$, $p = 0.221$). These results suggest that losing one's religious affiliation reduces the overall propensity to engage in group activities. This finding is particularly striking given the time demands and potential satiation of group-membership needs one might expect from religious involvement.

Our evidence challenges the notion of that group-oriented behavior is a stable trait, as proposed by Kranton and Sanders (2017); Kranton et al. (2020), instead indicating that religious participation may actively cultivate a desire for group-based

activities more broadly. One potential explanation for this phenomenon is that religious communities foster a general sense of belonging and social connection that translates into other group settings. The shared values, norms, and experiences within religious groups may engender a greater affinity for the structure and purpose of organized activities in general. Alternatively, the skills and preferences developed through religious participation—such as cooperation, shared goal-setting, and community-mindedness—may be particularly well-suited to other forms of group engagement.

4.6 Robustness Checks

To ensure the validity of our main findings, we conduct a series of robustness checks. These checks address potential concerns about sample composition, spillover effects, parallel trends violations, estimation methods, and the sensitivity of our results to various specification choices.

First, we examine whether clergy scandals alter the composition of college freshmen from affected zip codes. If scandals disproportionately deter students from certain backgrounds from attending college, our main results could reflect changes in student composition rather than changes in preferences or norms. We estimate the impact of scandals on student characteristics such as gender, race, parental education, and family income. As shown in Table A6, we find no significant effects on most characteristics. The sole exception is a small (0.3 percentage point) decrease in the likelihood of having a college-educated father. Given that lower parental education is typically associated with more conservative views, this composition change would, if anything, bias our estimates towards zero, suggesting our main results may slightly understate the true effects.

Second, we vary the assumed radius of scandal spillover effects from our baseline of 50km, to either 25km or 75km. Tables A7 and A8 and associated figures Figures A1 to A8 demonstrate that our key findings remain robust to these alternative specifications. As expected, the 25km specification shows slightly more pre-trend divergence than our baseline model, while the 75km specification shows less, confirming the importance of accounting for spillovers to satisfy the parallel trends assumption.

Third, we assess the sensitivity of our first-stage results to potential violations

of the parallel trends assumption using the method developed by Rambachan and Roth (2023). This approach relaxes the parallel trends assumption by allowing post-treatment violations up to some multiple \bar{M} of the maximum pre-treatment violation. Figure A9 shows that our primary measure of Catholic identification remains statistically significant even under the most conservative assumption ($\bar{M} = 0$). Results for parental Catholicism and church attendance are somewhat more sensitive but remain significant for most violations considered. Figures A10 to A13 show the robust confidence intervals for the county-level analyses. For the decennial religious adherence data, the effect becomes insignificant, which is perhaps unsurprising given that we only have decennial data, which leads to relatively large variation in pre-treatment estimates (and thus in maximum pre-treatment parallel trend violations). For Catholic students and schools, the results are robust to any of the considered violations.

Fourth, we assess the validity of the exclusion restriction assumption in our 2SLS-DD estimates. A key concern is that scandals might affect other religious groups, for example by undermining general institutional trust. To address this, we examine the effect of clergy scandals on the political preferences, gender norms, and societal attitudes of Jewish individuals. We focus on this group because Catholics are unlikely to switch to Judaism, and Jews are plausibly least likely to disaffiliate with their religion based on scandals in the Catholic Church. Figures A15 to A17 demonstrate that scandals have negligible effects on the political preferences, gender norms, or other societal attitudes of Jewish individuals. Out of 29 outcomes examined, only two show statistically significant effects, which is consistent with what we would expect by chance alone. Moreover, as shown in Table A9 and fig. A14, scandals do not affect the likelihood of individuals identifying as Jewish. These findings suggest that the effects of scandals are largely confined to those whose religious affiliation changes (i.e., Catholics), supporting the validity of our exclusion restriction.

Fifth, we compare our main 2SLS-DD estimates measuring the effect of Catholicism on outcomes to difference-in-differences that measure the effects of scandals. It is important to note that our IV estimates are simply rescaled versions of our scandal estimates, with the scaling factor determined by the first-stage effect of scandals on Catholic identification. Figures A18 to A20 show that these approaches yield very similar results, with, as expected, reduced-form estimates generally being the oppo-

site sign of our 2SLS-DD estimates.²² Figures A21 to A25 show the corresponding event study plots for the effect of scandals on preferences. The observed consistency suggests our findings are not artifacts of our instrumental variable strategy.

Sixth, we re-estimate our models using the difference-in-differences method of Callaway and Sant’Anna (2021) as an alternative to our primary approach based on (Gardner, 2022). The main difference between Gardner (2022) and Callaway and Sant’Anna (2021) is that the former makes comparisons relative to all pre-treatment periods, whereas the latter only to the last pre-treatment period (see e.g. Roth et al., 2023, for a more detailed discussion). We allow for a control group consisting of both never-treated units and not-yet-treated units.²³ We report baseline estimates that correspond to the weighted average of all group-time average treatment effects with weights proportional to group size, as well as plots for the dynamic treatment effects. Tables A10 and A11 and associated figures Figures A26 to A33 show that this alternative method produces results largely consistent with our main findings.

Seventh, we re-run our analyses without covariates. Tables A12 and A13 and Figures A34 to A37 demonstrate that excluding these controls has minimal impact on our estimates, suggesting our results are not driven by our choice of control variables.

Eight, we vary the pre- and post-treatment window from our baseline 7 years to 5 and 10 years. Tables A14 to A17 and figs. A38 to A45 show that our key findings are robust to these alternative time horizons.

Last, we replace our main treatment variable ‘Catholic’ (does an individual identify as Catholic) by an alternative treatment ‘religiosity’, which measures whether an individual identify with any religious or not. The first-stage results in Table A18 and fig. A46, and the second-stage results in Figures A47 to A49 provide highly similar findings to our main specification. Hence, we conclude that our results may also be interpreted as the effects of religion more broadly, rather than Catholicism alone.

²²This is consistent with negative first-stage coefficients in the 2SLS-DD approach.

²³For computational tractability, we consider the specification without covariates (besides zip and year fixed effects). However, as we show next, including covariates does not materially alter our results.

5 Conclusion and Discussion

This study provides causal evidence on the impact of religious identification on political preferences, gender norms, societal beliefs and group behavior. Leveraging clergy scandals as an exogenous shock to religious identification and using data for millions of US freshmen, we find that decreased Catholic identification leads to significant shifts in political ideology and policy preferences. Our analysis shows that religious de-identification causes individuals to adopt more progressive positions on personal and moral issues such as abortion rights, same-sex marriage, redistribution, and drug policy. Simultaneously, it leads to more conservative views on universal healthcare and military spending. These divergent effects add up to a substantial leftward shift in overall political orientation, with individuals moving nearly two points to the left on a five-point scale. These individual-level attitudinal changes are corroborated by county-level voting behavior and political contributions. Clergy scandals generate higher vote shares and campaign donations for progressive candidates. We find little impact on voter turnout, suggesting the primacy of preference changes over participatory effects.

In addition to political preferences, we find that religious de-identification leads to more progressive gender norms, particularly regarding women’s roles in the workforce and attitudes towards marriage. Our findings provide causal evidence for the often-hypothesized conservative influence of religion on gender attitudes, suggesting that the decline of religious affiliation may be a driving force behind evolving societal views on gender roles.

Our investigation of group memberships reveals that religious de-identification reduces the propensity to join other social groups and organizations. This finding challenges the notion that group-orientation is a stable personality trait, instead suggesting that religious participation may actively cultivate a desire for group-based activities more broadly. The implications of this result are significant, as it suggests that secularization may have broader consequences for civic engagement and social capital formation. As societies become increasingly secular, we may observe a general decline in group-oriented behavior, potentially affecting everything from voluntary organizations to community associations. This highlights an important and often overlooked aspect of secularization: its potential to reshape not just individual beliefs, but also patterns of social interaction and community engagement.

To explain these results, we draw on insights from the identity economics literature (Shayo, 2009; Bonomi et al., 2021). In particular, we show that individuals who de-identify with Catholicism appear to identify more strongly with their socioeconomic class. This is reflected in divergent effects on redistribution and criminal justice preferences between high and low-income individuals, suggesting that as religious identity wanes, class identity may become more salient in shaping political attitudes. This identity substitution may partly explain the policy preference changes we document. Interestingly, we do not find evidence of increased identification with other salient social categories like race, gender, other religious denominations, or political parties.

Our analysis centers exclusively on individuals who lose their religious affiliation rather than those who gain it. This focus is important for several reasons. First, it aligns with broader secularization trends observed in many developed countries, making our findings particularly relevant for understanding contemporary political dynamics. Second, it allows us to isolate the effects of religious disaffiliation from other potential confounding factors that might be associated with religious conversion. However, this approach also has limitations. By focusing solely on religious loss, we cannot definitively conclude whether the effects we observe are symmetrical for those gaining religion. The process of losing religion may involve unique psychological and social dynamics that differ from religious adoption. Moreover, our findings may not fully capture the broader effects of religion on political preferences, as we do not observe variation in religious intensity among those who remain affiliated. Despite these limitations, however, our results provide valuable insights into how the loss of a significant cultural identity—in this case, religion—can reshape political attitudes.

Some other caveats are worth noting. First and foremost, our analysis focuses on a specific religious group (Catholics) in the United States, relying primarily on data from college freshmen. Catholics are also somewhat unique in the United States in that they do not clearly align with either major political party (Brooks and Manza, 2004; Grzymala-Busse, 2012; Fowler, 2018). While we corroborate key findings with aggregate county-level data, the generalizability to other faith traditions and cultural settings merits further investigation.

Second, while we provide suggestive evidence for certain mechanisms like identity substitution, we cannot definitively rule out all alternative explanations. For

example, scandals could cause a general loss of trust in institutions, or a shift toward more secular, modernist values beyond just the decline in religious practice. A more cautious interpretation of our results would therefore be that clergy scandals, rather than losing religiosity, cause a progressive shift in attitudes and behaviors. Additional research could aim to test the channels driving our results more directly.

Notwithstanding these limitations, our study provides clear evidence on the causal effect of religious identification on personal, moral and political values. The results highlight the importance of institutional factors and identities in shaping societal beliefs and behaviors. As such, our findings suggest a need for economic models that better incorporate the role of institutions and culture in preference formation.

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