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9. The Political Implications of Religious Non-Affiliation in Emerging Adulthood

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Abstract

Religious non-affiliation has increased considerably in the U.S. over the last few decades. The contemporary generation of emerging adults is the first to have a sizable proportion raised with no religious affiliation. This article uses nationally representative, longitudinal survey data to examine how both non-affiliation in adolescence and switching to non-affiliation in emerging adulthood influence political interest, behaviors, orientation, and partisanship. The results show the following: 1) that unaffiliated emerging adults are less politically active than the religiously affiliated; 2) that the unaffiliated are relatively liberal and unlikely to be Republican; 3) that the unaffiliated are more likely than the religiously affiliated to exhibit signs of political apathy; and 4) that there is little difference in political outcomes between those who switch to no affiliation and those who were unaffiliated in adolescence. The implications of these findings for the civic and political health of the nation is discussed.

Keywords: politics, secular, religious non-affiliation, quantitative analysis, emerging adult

Introduction

A recent feature article in *National Geographic* (Bullard) declared in its title: “The World’s Newest Major Religion: No Religion.” Indeed, religious non-affiliation has become more prevalent, both in the United States and around the world. With over one billion religiously unaffiliated people worldwide (Pew Research Center 2012), the unaffiliated now constitute the second largest religious group in almost half of all nations (Pew Research Center 2015a). In the United States, religious non-affiliation was relatively rare for much of the twentieth century (Glenn). This changed in the 1990s, when non-affiliation began to increase rapidly. The proportion of Americans reporting no religious affiliation increased from 7% in the 1980s to 20% in 2012 (Hout and Fischer). The growth of non-affiliation is particularly relevant to the lives of adolescents and emerging adults. Not only are young Americans relatively likely to be unaffiliated, but the current generation of emerging adults is the first where a meaningful proportion of the generation was raised with no religious affiliation (Merino; Schwadel 2010a). The broader social implications of this religio-demographic shift remain to be seen.

Religious identities are strongly associated with political perspectives and activities in the contemporary United States (Brooks and Manza; Wald and Calhoun-Brown). The population has become increasingly polarized along both religious and political lines in recent decades (Abramowitz and Saunders). Religious non-affiliation in particular is a highly partisan identity (Schwadel 2017). Although there is a relative paucity of research on secularity and politics (Wald and Calhoun-Brown), especially among adolescents and young adults (Pearson-Merkowitz and Gimpel), what there is suggests that religious non-affiliation is associated with liberal perspectives and affiliation with the Democratic Party. Religion is also relevant to political interest and activity. Religiously active Americans appear to be relatively politically active (Peterson; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady). This suggests that religiously unaffiliated emerging adults may be less likely than other young Americans to participate in the political arena. The potential reciprocal relationship between religious and political perspectives (Patrikios) further complicates these associations. Some Americans disaffiliate from religion due to their political perspectives (Putnam and Campbell), which suggests that those who disaffiliate may differ politically from those raised with no religious affiliation.

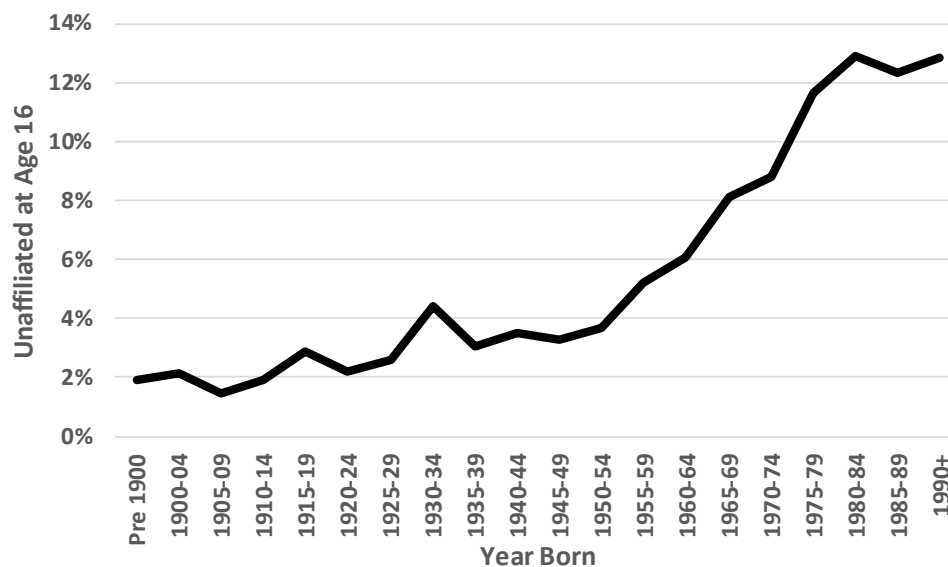
In this article, I test these propositions about the associations between religious non-affiliation and politics in the contemporary emerging adult population. I use two waves of nationally-representative survey data to examine the effects of both non-affiliation in adolescence and switching to no affiliation in emerging adulthood on measures of political participation, affiliation, and perspectives. The results show that religiously unaffiliated emerging adults are less politically active than the religiously affiliated, that the unaffiliated are relatively liberal and unlikely to affiliate with the Republican Party, and that the unaffiliated are more likely than the religiously affiliated to exhibit signs of political apathy. Moreover, there is little difference in these political outcomes between those who switch to no affiliation and those who were unaffiliated in adolescence. I conclude by discussing the implications of the findings for the future civic and political health of the nation.

Unaffiliated Emerging Adults

The United States is a relatively religious nation, particularly when compared to other advanced, industrialized democracies in the Western Hemisphere (Inglehart and Baker). Reflecting this high level of religiosity, religious non-affiliation was rare in the U.S. for much of the twentieth century, accounting for less than 5% of the population in the 1950s and 1960s (Glenn). The number of unaffiliated Americans increased moderately in the 1970s, but still less than 8% of the population was unaffiliated in the 1980s (Glenn; Hout and Fischer). Some researchers, particularly those working from the supply-side or “religious economies” perspective, saw this as evidence of the lack of secularization in the United States (e.g., Warner). Yet this began to change in the final years of the twentieth century. Religious non-affiliation increased rapidly in the 1990s and into the twenty-first century (Hout and Fischer). According to the 2016 General Social Survey (Smith et al. 2017), 22% of American adults have no religious affiliation. While the rate of growth in non-affiliation is likely to slow, the unaffiliated are still expected to make up more than one-quarter of the U.S. population at the middle of the twenty-first century (Pew Research Center 2015b).

The recent growth in religious non-affiliation is particularly relevant to the lives of adolescents and emerging adults. Historically, few Americans were raised with no religion. Instead, non-affiliation was largely in the form of apostasy, where adults switched from the religion of their childhood to no religion (Schwadel 2010a). There was a strong tendency among secular Americans to return to religion when they had children (Wilson and Sherkat), leading to relatively few children being raised with no religion. Across generations, however, there was a large increase in the proportion of Americans who report being raised with no religion (Merino; Schwadel 2010a).

Figure 1. Percent Reporting No Religious Affiliation at Age 16 by Birth Cohort



Notes: Figure based on data from the 1973-2016 General Social Survey; N=58,856; data weighted.

A brief examination of data from the 1973-2016 General Social Survey (Smith et al. 2017) demonstrates the prevalence of being raised with no religious affiliation among more recent birth cohorts. Figure 1 shows the percent of adult respondents, across five-year birth cohorts,¹ who report that they had no religious affiliation when they were 16 years of age. Among those born before the 1960s, fewer than 4% of most birth cohorts report having no religious affiliation when they were 16. The percent reporting no affiliation in adolescence then increases dramatically across birth cohorts. By the final cohort, born since 1990, 13% report having no religion at age 16. While this type of retrospective reporting is not without problems, it does suggest that the current generation of emerging adults is the first to have a relatively large proportion with no religious affiliation in adolescence. The question raised here is: what are the political implications of such non-affiliation during the formative years of adolescence and emerging adulthood?

Religious Non-Affiliation and Politics

Since the pioneering work of Alexis de Tocqueville, American social scientists have seen participation in religious organizations as a key form of associational life that promotes an active civic and political arena. Empirical research points to several ways in which religious congregations encourage political participation among their congregants. For instance, religious organizations provide opportunities to develop and maintain civic skills that are conducive to political activities (Verba, Scholzman, and Brady). The congregational context also supplies both motivation to participate in politics and knowledge about opportunities to be politically and civically active (Greeley; Harris; Lenski; Schwadel 2005; Wald, Kellstedt, and Leege). The social networks developed and maintained in religious congregations appear to be particularly important since messages conveyed in informal congregational networks encourage various forms of political participation (Djupe and Grant; McKenzie). Extant research thus suggests that non-affiliated emerging adults are disadvantaged in the political arena because they disproportionately lack the skills, motivation, knowledge, and network support to which regular churchgoers are exposed.²

Such a proposition, however, is only conjecture since the relevant research pays little attention to both secular Americans and emerging adults. The small body of research on the political activities of religiously unaffiliated Americans has produced inconsistent results. For instance, Driskell, Embry, and Lyon find that unaffiliated adults participate in politics more so than both Catholics and Protestants. In contrast, Jones and colleagues find that unaffiliated adults are relatively unlikely to vote and to express interest in elections. There is an even greater paucity of research on youth/emerging adult religion and political outcomes (see Gibson for an exception). As Pearson-Merkowitz and Gimpel conclude, “[Q]uestions such as how religious participation as an adolescent may affect their political participation and beliefs as

¹ Those born before 1900 and since 1990 are grouped into their own cohorts due to the small number of respondents in the tail ends of the cohort continuum.

² Of course, the unaffiliated may sometimes attend religious services and thus benefit politically from such attendance. Nonetheless, on average, the unaffiliated attend religious services far less often than the religiously affiliated; for instance, more than 13 fewer times per year than mainline Protestants, more than 22 fewer times per year than Catholics, and almost 30 fewer times per year than evangelicals (Schwadel 2010b).

they emerge into adulthood, when ties to a church may wane or lapse, remain unanswered” (172).

Although also largely ignoring emerging adults, research on non-affiliation and partisanship provides more consistent findings than research on non-affiliation and political participation. “Although seculars have not been subject to much research,” according to Wald and Calhoun-Brown, “it has been thought that the nonaffiliated tend to share the liberal political outlook of Jews and African-American Protestants” (33). Indeed, in their empirical analysis, Wald and Calhoun-Brown find that unaffiliated adults are relatively likely to identify as Democrat and to have voted for Barack Obama in 2012. Similarly, according to Jones and colleagues, the unaffiliated favor Democrats and third party politicians. Churchgoing is now a partisan activity (Kellstedt et al.), and recent research points to the partisanship of the unaffiliated in particular (Fowler et al.; Schwadel 2017). As Baker and Smith conclude in their thorough analysis of secular Americans, there is a “strong tendency among seculars to self-identify as more liberal than the average American” (182). In the analysis below, I expand on previous research by examining the associations between non-affiliation and both political participation/interest and partisanship among contemporary emerging adults.

Youth Non-Affiliation vs. Emerging Adult Apostasy

The associations between emerging adults’ non-affiliation and their political orientations and activities is complicated by the potential reciprocal relationship between religious and political perspectives (Patrikios). I have thus far discussed reasons why religious affiliation and non-affiliation may influence politics, and indeed social science research on the subject generally focuses on the impact of religion on politics. Yet political perspectives may also influence religious affiliations (Hout and Fischer). Putnam and Campbell, for example, argue that the politicization of religion leads some Americans who are tangentially affiliated with organized religions to disaffiliate from religion altogether. This suggests that apostates – those who disaffiliate from religion – may differ politically from those raised with no religious affiliation.

Research conducted by Green and Guth is particularly relevant here as theirs is the only research I could identify that looks at the effects of being unaffiliated in childhood on political outcomes later in the life course. They find that the unaffiliated in general are relatively unlikely to vote, but that those who were unaffiliated since childhood are particularly unlikely to vote. Unfortunately, their measure of childhood non-affiliation is a retrospective measure and, more importantly, their sample includes only 12 respondents who reported being unaffiliated in childhood. Consequently, the influence of non-affiliation in youth versus apostasy during emerging adulthood on later political interest and practices remains an open question. In the following analyses, I examine how both adolescent non-affiliation and switching to no affiliation during emerging adulthood are associated with political participation, interest, partisanship, and orientations.

Data and Methods

The data are from the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR). The first wave of the NSYR survey was collected by telephone in 2002–2003. A random sample of 3,290 U.S.

adolescents, ages 13 to 17, and one of each of their parents were surveyed in the first wave.³ The response rate was 57%, according to Response Rate 4 as defined by the American Association for Public Opinion Research. Adolescent respondents were surveyed again in the fourth wave of the NSYR, in 2013, when they were between 22 and 29 years of age (N=2,071). There was 37% attrition between Waves 1 and 4. Wave 4 was administered primarily online. Waves 2 and 3 are not employed in the analyses in this article (see Smith and Denton for more information on the NSYR).

Four dependent variables, from Wave 4, assess political interest and behaviors. First, overall political interest is based on the question, “In general, how interested are you in politics and public affairs?” Response options are: not at all interested (1), slightly interested (2), somewhat interested (3), and very interested (4). Second, “How often does the subject of politics come up in conversations with family?” Response options are: never (1), hardly ever (2), some (3), and a lot (4). Third, a dichotomous measure of voting in the 2012 election (0/1). Respondents who were ineligible to vote are removed from the sample when modeling voting. Fourth, respondents are asked if they plan to “vote regularly in [future] elections.” Response options are: vote because “it is personally what I want to do” (1), vote because “it is right thing to do” (2), and “would probably not” vote (3).

Five additional dependent variables, also from Wave 4, assess political orientation and partisanship. First, political orientation is measured on a seven-point scale ranging from extremely liberal (1) to extremely conservative (7). The roughly 18% of respondents who answered “don’t know” are removed from the sample when modeling political orientation. A “don’t know” response, however, may be substantively meaningful (Schuman and Presser). In this case, it may signify a form of political apathy, which is relatively common among emerging adults (Snell). Consequently, the second orientation/partisanship measure is a dichotomous variable indicating a “don’t know” response to the political orientation question (0/1). Third, a dichotomous measure of voting for Barack Obama in the 2012 election (0/1). Respondents who did not vote are removed from the sample for that model. Fourth, political party: Democrat (1), Republican (2), and Independent/other party (3). Roughly 12% of respondents “don’t know” their political party and are thus removed from the sample when modeling political party. The final dependent variable is a dichotomous measure of responding “don’t know” to the political party question (0/1). Similar to political orientation, a “don’t know” response to the political party question may have meaningful political implications by signifying political apathy. Descriptive statistics for all variables are reported in Table 1.

The primary independent variables assess religious non-affiliation. Two non-affiliation dummy variable are employed in the models. First, no religious affiliation in adolescence (i.e., Wave 1), which constitutes more than 12% of the sample. Second, switch to no affiliation (i.e., affiliated in Wave 1 but not in Wave 4), which constitutes more than 26% of the sample. The omitted reference category is those with a religious affiliation in both Waves 1 and 4.⁴ All

³ The 80 respondents (in Wave 1) who comprise the Jewish oversample are deleted from the sample because the Jewish oversample is not a random sample, thus those cases cannot be weighted along with the other cases. The sample sizes reported here do not include the Jewish oversample.

⁴ Eighty percent of those who were unaffiliated in Wave 1 were also unaffiliated in Wave 4. I examined two sets of alternative analyses to assess how respondents who switched from no affiliation in Wave 1 to religiously

models control for a series of relevant control variables. Gender is measured with a dummy variable for female respondents. Race is measured with dummy variables for African-American, Latino, and other race respondents (white is reference category). Parent control variables are derived from the Wave 1 survey: a dummy variable for either parent graduating from college, and dummy variables for responding parent self-identifying as politically liberal, politically conservative, or “don’t know” political orientation (politically moderate parent is reference category). The remaining control variables are from Wave 4, and, with the exception of age, are all dummy variables: age (coded in years of age), married, children, live in the South Census Region, in college, graduated from college, and live with parent(s).

I use a variety of regression techniques due to variation in the form of the dependent variables. These include OLS models for the one continuous dependent variable (political orientation), ordinal logistic models for the ordinal dependent variables (political interest and talk about politics with family), binary logistic models for the dichotomous dependent variables (voted, “don’t know” political orientation, voted for Obama, and “don’t know” party), and multinomial logistic models for the categorical dependent variables (reasons for voting in future and political party). The results section is divided into two parts: political interest and participation, and political orientation and partisanship. All models are weighted.

Results

Political Interest and Participation

Results from regression models of political interest and behavior are reported in Table 2. The first dependent variable is overall political interest. Neither being unaffiliated as an adolescent ($b=.08$, n.s.) nor switching to no affiliation ($b=-.02$, n.s.) have significant effects on political interest. As the second model in Table 2 shows, both being unaffiliated as an adolescent ($b=-.032$) and switching to no affiliation during emerging adulthood ($b=-.28$) have negative effects on the frequency of talking about politics with one’s family. Specifically, being unaffiliated as an adolescent is associated with a 27% ($e^{-.32}=.73$; $.73-1=-.27$) reduction in the odds of advancing one category on the measure of talk politics with family, and switching to no affiliation is associated with a 24% reduction in the odds of advancing one category on the measure of talk politics with family. Although religiously affiliated and unaffiliated emerging adults appear to have similar levels of political interest, they differ in their frequency of talking about politics with their families.

Turning to the most fundamental aspect of democratic political participation, the remaining models in Table 2 examine voting and future voting intentions. The third model in Table 2 shows that being unaffiliated in adolescence ($b=-.41$) and switching to no affiliation during emerging adulthood ($b=-.46$) both negatively affect voting in the 2012 election. Relative to the religiously affiliated, the odds of voting in the 2012 election were 34% lower for those who were unaffiliated as adolescents and 37% lower for those who switched to no affiliation.

affiliated in Wave 4 influence the results: 1) deleting them from the sample, and 2) recoding them as religiously affiliated (i.e. the omitted reference category). In both cases, the results are largely unchanged. The only exception is that in both alternative specifications the effect of unaffiliated as adolescent on “don’t know party” (see final column of Table 3) is no longer significant.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

Dependent Variables	Percent (Mean)	Standard Deviation	N
Political Interest	(2.44)	0.99	2,000
Talk Politics with Family	(2.86)	0.85	1,990
Voted in 2012 Election	66.0%		1,974
Reasons to Vote in Future:			2,006
It is Personally What I Would Want to do ^a	57.2%		
Right thing to do	29.9%		
Would Probably not Vote	12.9%		
Political Orientation	(3.95)	1.63	1,639
Political Orientation: Don't Know	18.2%		2,004
Voted for Obama	55.8%		1,282
Party:			1,768
Democrat	29.1%		
Republican	23.3%		
Independent/Other Party ^a	47.6%		
Don't Know	11.8%		2,004
Independent Variables			
Unaffiliated Adolescent ^b	12.2%		2,009
Switched to Unaffiliated ^c	26.2%		2,009
Never Unaffiliated ^{a, c}	61.6%		2,009
Female ^b	53.0%		2,009
African American ^b	12.2%		2,009
Latino ^b	9.3%		2,009
Other Race ^b	5.2%		2,009
White ^{a, b}	73.3%		
Married	25.4%		2,009
Children	30.2%		2,009
Age	(25.49)	1.49	2,009
South	40.6%		2,009
In College	22.3%		2,009
Bachelor's Degree	41.5%		2,009
Live with Parent(s)	21.2%		2,009
Parent Bachelor's ^b	44.9%		2,009
Parent Liberal ^b	18.8%		2,009
Parent Conservative ^b	35.4%		2,009
Parent Political Orientation: Don't Know ^b	23.0%		2,009
Parent Moderate ^{a, b}	22.8%		2,009

Notes: Unless otherwise specified, variables are from Wave 4 of the NSYR.

a: Omitted reference category in regression models.

b: Wave 1 variable.

c: Variable derived from Wave 1 and Wave 4 measures.

Table 2. Binary, Ordinal, and Multinomial Logistic Regression Models of Political Interest and Behaviors

	Political interest ^a	Talk politics w/family ^a	Voted in 2012 election ^b	Right thing to do	Reasons to vote in future ^c Would probably not vote
Unaffiliated as Adolescent ^d	0.08 (0.14)	-0.32* (0.14)	-0.41* (0.16)	-0.16 (0.18)	0.77*** (0.21)
Switched to Unaffiliated ^d	-0.02 (0.10)	-0.28** (0.10)	-0.46*** (0.12)	-0.03 (0.13)	0.60*** (0.17)
Female	-0.59*** (0.09)	-0.00 (0.09)	0.15 (0.10)	0.10 (0.11)	-0.31* (0.15)
African American ^e	0.10 (0.13)	-0.24 (0.14)	0.98*** (0.18)	-0.13 (0.17)	-0.73** (0.25)
Latino ^e	0.21 (0.14)	-0.27 (0.15)	-0.44* (0.17)	0.01 (0.18)	-0.05 (0.23)
Other Race ^e	0.14 (0.18)	0.26 (0.18)	-0.04 (0.22)	0.42 (0.22)	0.36 (0.29)
Married	0.07 (0.10)	0.18 (0.11)	0.36*** (0.13)	0.05 (0.13)	-0.29 (0.19)
Children	-0.19 (0.11)	-0.21 (0.11)	-0.28* (0.13)	0.13 (0.13)	0.55** (0.18)
Age	0.10*** (0.03)	-0.02 (0.03)	0.04 (0.03)	-0.02 (0.04)	-0.08 (0.05)
South	0.31*** (0.09)	0.18* (0.09)	-0.14 (0.10)	-0.07 (0.11)	-0.21 (0.15)
In College	0.36*** (0.10)	0.37*** (0.10)	0.27* (0.12)	-0.12 (0.12)	-0.55** (0.19)
Bachelor's Degree	0.45*** (0.10)	0.19 (0.10)	0.69*** (0.12)	-0.27* (0.12)	-0.78*** (0.19)
Live with Parent(s)	-0.31** (0.11)	-0.03 (0.11)	0.21 (0.13)	-0.05 (0.14)	0.23 (0.18)
Parent Bachelor's	0.21* (0.09)	0.24* (0.10)	0.08 (0.11)	0.08 (0.12)	-0.39* (0.17)
Parent Liberal ^f	0.28* (0.13)	0.36** (0.13)	0.38* (0.16)	-0.05 (0.17)	-0.09 (0.22)
Parent Conservative ^f	0.04 (0.11)	0.36** (0.11)	0.09 (0.13)	0.28* (0.14)	-0.06 (0.20)
Parent Orientation: DK ^f	-0.22 (0.13)	-0.27* (0.13)	-0.24 (0.15)	0.37* (0.16)	0.61** (0.21)
Constant	1.23 (0.73)	-2.97*** (.76)	-0.54 (0.89)	-0.24 (0.91)	0.76 (1.27)
N	2,000	1,990	1,974	2,006	

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses.

a: Ordinal logistic model.

b: Binary logistic model.

c: Multinomial logistic model, omitted reference category = "it is personally what I would want to do."

d: Religious affiliate in both Wave 1 and Wave 4 is omitted reference category.

e: White is omitted reference category.

f: Parent moderate is omitted reference category.

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001 (two-tailed test)

The final model in Table 2 is a multinomial model assessing expected reasons for voting in the future. The reference category, which the majority of respondents chose, is “personally what I would want to do.” Non-affiliation does not significantly affect respondents’ likelihood of saying they will vote in the future because it is the right thing to do, rather than because it is what they want to do. In contrast, both being unaffiliated as an adolescent ($b=.77$) and switching to no affiliation ($b=.60$) positively influence the likelihood of saying will probably not vote in the future. Relative to expecting to vote because it is what they want to do, being unaffiliated as an adolescent increases the odds of saying will probably not vote in the future by 116%, and switching to no affiliation increases the odds of saying will probably not vote in the future by 82%.

Overall, the results in Table 2 indicate that unaffiliated emerging adults are relatively unlikely to talk about politics with their families and to have voted in the 2012 election, and relatively likely to expect to not vote in the future. Post-hoc tests show that the coefficients for unaffiliated as an adolescent and switching to no affiliation from the models in Tables 2 are not significantly different from one another. Control variables with consistent effects across models show that higher education is positively associated with political interest and activity, and having politically moderate parents is negatively associated with political interest and activity.

Political Orientation and Partisanship

Results from regression models of political orientation and partisanship are reported in Table 3. The first model shows that being unaffiliated as an adolescent ($b=-.92$) and switching to no affiliation ($b=-1.05$) both have robust, negative effects on the measure of political orientation (higher values indicate a conservative orientation). This equates to a .93 standard deviation difference in political orientation between the affiliated and those unaffiliated as adolescents, and a 1.06 standard deviation difference between the affiliated and those who switched to no affiliation. As noted above, more than 18% of respondents said they “don’t know” their political orientation. The second model in Table 3 shows that those who switched to no affiliation ($b=.30$), but not those who were unaffiliated as adolescents ($b=-.03$, n.s.), are more likely than the religiously affiliated to say they do not know their political orientation. Specifically, switching to no affiliation is associated with a 35% increase in the odds of not knowing one’s political orientation.

The third model in Table 3 reveals large differences between the affiliated and unaffiliated in their likelihood of voting for Barack Obama in the 2012 election. Both being unaffiliated as an adolescent ($b=1.14$) and switching to no affiliation ($b=1.48$) have robust, positive effects on having voted for Obama. No religious affiliation in adolescence is associated with a 213% increase in the odds of voting for Obama in 2012, and switching to no affiliation is associated with a 339% increase in the odds of voting for Obama.

The remaining models in Table 3 examine party identification. The fourth model is a multinomial model of party identification, with Independents and affiliates of “other” parties (the largest group) serving as the reference category. Neither no affiliation in adolescence ($b=.31$, n.s.) nor switching to no affiliation ($b=.15$, n.s.) are significantly associated with identifying as a Democrat rather than Independent/other party. Conversely, both no affiliation

Table 3. OLS, Binary Logistic, and Multinomial Logistic Regression Models of Political Orientation and Partisanship

	Political orientation ^a	Don't know orientation ^b	Voted for Obama ^b	Party ^c		Don't know party ^b
				Democrat	Republican	
Unaffiliated as Adolescent ^d	-0.92*** (0.11)	-0.03 (0.21)	1.14*** (0.24)	0.31 (0.19)	-1.01*** (0.26)	0.47* (0.23)
Switched to Unaffiliated ^d	-1.05*** (0.09)	0.30* (0.15)	1.48*** (0.18)	0.15 (0.14)	-1.40*** (0.19)	0.46* (0.18)
Female	-0.33*** (0.07)	0.17 (0.13)	0.64*** (0.15)	0.70*** (0.13)	-0.03 (0.14)	0.31* (0.15)
African American ^e	-0.65*** (0.12)	0.40* (0.18)	3.99*** (0.38)	1.62*** (0.19)	-1.79*** (0.36)	-0.40 (0.25)
Latino ^e	-0.74*** (0.13)	0.15 (0.20)	2.07*** (0.32)	1.16*** (0.20)	-0.77** (0.29)	0.63** (0.21)
Other Race ^e	-0.40** (0.15)	-0.04 (0.29)	0.81* (0.33)	0.82*** (0.24)	-0.02 (0.32)	0.09 (0.32)
Married	0.60*** (0.09)	-0.15 (0.16)	-0.80*** (0.18)	-0.22 (0.17)	0.84*** (0.16)	-0.11 (0.18)
Children	0.19* (0.09)	0.56*** (0.14)	-0.28 (0.20)	-0.36* (0.17)	0.07 (0.18)	0.61*** (0.17)
Age	-0.08** (0.02)	-0.01 (0.04)	0.03 (0.05)	0.11* (0.04)	0.02 (0.05)	-0.11* (0.05)
South	0.22** (0.07)	-0.06 (0.13)	-0.77*** (0.15)	-0.04 (0.13)	0.58*** (0.14)	-0.06 (0.15)
In College	-0.01 (0.08)	-0.52** (0.16)	0.15 (0.17)	0.05 (0.14)	-0.23 (0.16)	-0.60** (0.20)
Bachelor's Degree	-0.26** (0.08)	-1.37*** (0.18)	0.45** (0.17)	0.16 (0.15)	-0.05 (0.16)	-0.97*** (0.20)
Live with Parent(s)	-0.09 (0.09)	0.10 (0.16)	0.04 (0.19)	0.10 (0.15)	0.13 (0.18)	0.18 (0.18)
Parent Bachelor's	-0.09 (0.08)	-0.48** (0.15)	0.30 (0.16)	0.16 (0.14)	-0.14 (0.15)	-0.03 (0.17)
Parent Liberal ^f	-0.37*** (0.11)	-0.54** (0.20)	0.52* (0.22)	0.43* (0.17)	-0.80** (0.27)	-0.86*** (0.26)
Parent Conservative ^f	0.69*** (0.09)	-0.59*** (0.18)	-1.31*** (0.19)	-0.86*** (0.18)	0.58*** (0.17)	-0.33 (0.20)
Parent Orientation: DK ^f	0.25* (0.11)	0.08 (0.17)	-0.10 (0.23)	0.03 (0.18)	-0.27 (0.23)	0.18 (0.20)
Constant	6.24*** (0.62)	-0.81 (1.09)	-1.28 (1.31)	-3.98*** (1.08)	-1.12 (1.23)	0.68 (1.29)
N	1,639	2,004	1,282	1,768		2,004

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses.

a: OLS model.

b: Binary logistic model.

c: Multinomial logistic model, omitted reference category = Independent/other party.

d: Religious affiliate in both Wave 1 and Wave 4 is omitted reference category.

e: White is omitted reference category.

f: Parent moderate is omitted reference category.

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001 (two-tailed test)

in adolescence ($b=-1.01$) and switching to no affiliation ($b=-1.40$) have robust, negative effects on identifying as a Republican rather than Independent/other party. No affiliation in adolescence is associated with a 65% reduction in the odds of identifying as Republican rather than Independent/other party, and switching to no affiliation is associated with a 75% reduction in the relative odds of identifying as Republican. As noted above, almost 12% of respondents “don’t know” their political orientation. The final model shows that both being unaffiliated in adolescence ($b=.47$) and switching to no affiliation ($b=.46$) have positive effects on not knowing one’s political orientation. Specifically, no affiliation as an adolescent is associated with a 60% increase in the odds of not knowing one’s political party, and switching to no affiliation is associated with a 58% increase.

Overall, the results in Table 3 suggest that religiously unaffiliated emerging adults are relatively liberal, unlikely to identify as Republican, and likely to say they do not know their party or orientation. Post-hoc tests show that the coefficients for unaffiliated as an adolescent and switching to no affiliation from the models in Tables 3 are not significantly different from one another. The control variables indicate that women, racial minorities, the highly educated, and those with liberal parents are relatively liberal, and emerging adults who are married, have children, and have conservative parents are relatively conservative. Higher education and having liberal parents are also negatively associated with not knowing both one’s party and political orientation.

Discussion and Conclusions

The results in this article demonstrate robust differences in political participation, orientation, and partisanship between emerging adults with no religious affiliation and those who are affiliated with an organized religion. Emerging adults with no religious affiliation are relatively unlikely to talk about politics with their families, to vote, and to expect to vote in future elections. Additionally, unaffiliated emerging adults are relatively likely to report that they do not know their political party and orientation, which may be further evidence of their political apathy. These findings paint a bleak picture of the future of American democracy. Compared to other western, advanced industrialized democracies, the rate of voter turnout in the U.S. is already relatively low (Dalton). With continued growth in religious non-affiliation and the replacement of older birth cohorts with younger cohorts composed of larger numbers of unaffiliated, these results suggest that voter turnout is likely to remain low in the future, and perhaps diminish even further. The above results also show that unaffiliated emerging adults are highly partisan, as evidenced by their tendency to vote for the Democratic Party candidate (when they vote), report a liberal orientation, and not identify as Republican. This suggests that the U.S. population may become more liberal as the unaffiliated constitute a larger proportion of the population. At the same time, however, American politics may skew toward the right as left-leaning, unaffiliated emerging adults are relatively unlikely to be politically active.

It is important to not overemphasize the immutability of the findings presented here. As Douglas Porpora’s article in this volume points out, secularism does not have to be an endpoint; it can instead be a stage in an individual’s spiritual and religious progression. It is thus possible, and even likely, that some unaffiliated emerging adults will return to religion as they age; or, for those who were raised with no religious affiliation, to affiliate with an

organized religion for the first time. Family formation in particular leads many secular Americans to embrace religion (Wilson and Sherkat). As unaffiliated emerging adults age, get married, and have children, some of them will choose to affiliate with a religion. It remains to be seen how their political activities and perspectives are affected by such life-course transitions. Moreover, the above results show that religiously affiliated and unaffiliated emerging adults express similar levels of political interest. This opens up the possibility that politically disengaged, unaffiliated emerging adults can be politically mobilized as they age. Finally, the robust association between non-affiliation and liberal political perspectives may be transitory for some emerging adults. As Paddy Gilger notes in his contribution to this volume, unaffiliated Americans are collectively empowered to perform and display secularity. As the unaffiliated population grows and matures, segments of the population may choose alternative ways to perform secularity, which might align with a more conservative political outlook. For instance, some unaffiliated Americans have already claimed the identity of “secular right” (e.g., <http://secularright.org/SR/wordpress>). On the other hand, Merino’s research shows that younger cohorts of unaffiliated Americans are more liberal than their predecessors, which suggests a lasting association between non-affiliation and liberal political perspectives.

In this article, I sometimes used the term *apostasy* to refer to the act of switching to no affiliation. This term implies an active rejection of religion (Bromley). I believe the term is appropriate because emerging adults who switch to no affiliation have actively chosen to leave organized religion, or to disaffiliate. Still, as noted above, some unaffiliated Americans do hold religious beliefs. For instance, in the fourth wave of the NSYR, more than 40% of those who were unaffiliated as adolescents and more than 40% of those who switched to no affiliation report both believing in God and praying at least occasionally. Clearly not all apostates, as I am using the term here, are irreligious. They have rejected organized religion, but not necessarily religious beliefs and individualized religious practices such as prayer. The political apathy of unaffiliated emerging adults, however, may be part of a larger pattern of societal detachment. In other words, religious apostates may also be social apostates. Some researchers argue that the rise of secularism, and specifically non-affiliation, is the result of an anti-institutionalism that took hold beginning in the 1960s (e.g., Fowler et al.). There is some support for this perspective in the NSYR data. For instance, in the fourth wave of the NSYR there are large differences in marriage rates by religious affiliation: 29.4% of the affiliated, 20.8% of those unaffiliated in adolescence, and 18.3% of religious apostates are married (chi-square=28.134, $p < .001$). Future research should further investigate the potential lack of social participation – broadly defined – on the part of religiously unaffiliated emerging adults.

The above results are complicated by the potential reciprocal association between religious and political affiliations. While social scientists studying religion and politics generally focus on the potential effects of religion on political perspectives, contemporary research notes that political perspectives can also influence religious beliefs and affiliations (e.g., Hout and Fischer; Patrikios). I have incorporated this possibility into the analysis by dividing the unaffiliated into those who were unaffiliated in adolescence, and thus potentially raised unaffiliated, and those who switched to no affiliation in emerging adulthood. The results show little difference in political activity and partisanship between those unaffiliated in adolescence and those who switch to no affiliation, which suggests that the effects of politics on religion are not driving the findings. While the politicization of religion in the 1970s and 1980s may

have led a notable number of liberals to disaffiliate from religion (Putnam and Campbell), the results here suggest that religious non-affiliation influences partisanship more than the other way around. Still, future research can build on these findings by explicitly modeling the reciprocal association between religious and political perspectives across the life course.

This article expands understanding of the ways in which religious non-affiliation influences political perspectives and activities. Demographic projections indicate that a large minority of Americans will have no religious affiliation as we move into the mid part of the twenty-first century (Pew Research Center 2015b). The findings here suggest that such prominence of non-affiliation will likely have a significant impact on American politics. The health of our democracy appears to be in danger as the already low levels of democratic participation may be further diminished by large numbers of politically disengaged, unaffiliated Americans. On the other hand, the finding that the religiously affiliated and unaffiliated report similar levels of political interest provides some hope that democratic participation may not dwindle. Perhaps this abstract political interest can be mobilized into political participation by the growing number of organizations aimed at secular Americans (Cimino and Smith), or by having secular role models among prominent politicians, which has thus far been relatively rare (Davidson, Kraus, and Morrissey). Democracies flourish when there is an active citizenry (Verba, Scholzman, and Brady). It therefore behooves researchers, activists, and politicians to identify ways to encourage political participation among seemingly politically apathetic, religiously unaffiliated Americans.

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