I, Paul D Anderson Jr., hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Sociology.

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Religious Differences in Attitudes about Divisive Social Issues, 1972 to 2010: A Test of the Polarization Hypothesis

Student’s name: Paul D Anderson Jr.

This work and its defense approved by:

Committee chair: Jeffrey Timberlake, PhD
Committee member: Littisha Bates, PhD
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Paul D. Anderson, Jr.
B.A., Wright State University
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Committee: Jeffrey M. Timberlake, PhD (Chair) and Littisha A. Bates, PhD
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Abstract

In recent years scholars and political analysts have claimed that extreme rhetoric on both ends of the political spectrum has contributed to a “culture war,” in which Americans are increasingly polarized on divisive social issues such as abortion and homosexuality. A key aspect of the culture war is the supposed growing divide between members of different religious affiliations and individuals with differing levels of religiosity. In this paper I use multilevel modeling techniques and data from the 1972 to 2010 General Social Surveys to examine the extent to which religious polarization has occurred over time. I find clear evidence of polarization between frequent and less frequent attenders of religious services. Additionally, on some issues, polarization has occurred both between and within certain religious groups. I conclude that the polarization thesis is somewhat overstated, since there is evidence for both convergence and divergence on attitudes toward divisive social issues based on religious group and religiosity.
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Sociologists have for many years been interested in measuring political and social attitudes (Stouffer 1955; Allport 1954; Hunter 1991). This research provides both a general window into the American mind, and clues about the likely outcomes of political debates in both the electoral and legislative realms. In recent years extreme rhetoric on both ends of the political spectrum has contributed to what Hunter (1991) described as a “culture war,” in which Americans are increasingly divided on social issues such as abortion and homosexuality. Although such polarization would be interesting sociologically in its own right, one likely effect of the culture war is loss of political compromise, leading to stalemates, filibusters, and the shutting down of the legislative process (Binder 2003; Jones 2001).

A key aspect of the culture war thesis is the supposedly growing political divide between religious groups. Religious beliefs often pit orthodox believers against secular progressives and may be responsible for the emergence of divergent opinions on moral issues in recent years (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008; Adamczyk and Pitt 2009). The relatively recent marriage of religion and politics, beginning with the founding of the Moral Majority by Jerry Falwell in the late 1970s, and continuing through to recent popular culture events such as Glen Beck’s Restoring Honor rally, suggest that the issue of religious polarization persists in importance for understanding American political culture.

Since Hunter (1991) advanced the notion of a culture war, researchers have found that the American public does not appear to be as polarized as he supposed. Despite the

1 Throughout the rest of this paper the word “polarized” will refer to a state in which the public is significantly divided into attitudinal poles of an issue, while the word “polarization” will refer to a temporal process of the public becoming polarized. These definitions are in line with the terminology utilized in DiMaggio et al. (1996).
rancorous political banter heard on the air waves in nearly every media outlet, research has found that for most issues the American public has actually gravitated toward the center, espousing moderate views (DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson 1996; Mouw and Sobel 2001). However, other research has revealed that polarization has occurred on a number of political attitudes, including those toward abortion and homosexuality (DiMaggio et al. 1996). Because these issues are highly salient to members of many conservative religious denominations, this finding suggests that religion may be an important axis on which polarization has occurred.

With respect to religious polarization, prior research has shown that the marriage of religion and politics in the late 1970s caused elite polarization on most political topics (Adams 1997; Fiorina and Abrams 2008) and created acrimonious public debates that are at least partly responsible for a growing division between the religiously orthodox and secular progressives (Hunter 1991; Wilcox and Larson 2006). There is mounting evidence that religion is responsible for opinion polarization on attitudes toward abortion, LGBT individuals, same-sex unions, and school prayer (Hoffmann and Miller 1997; Hoffmann and Johnson 2005; Hout 1999; McConkey 2001; Whitehead 2010).

Recent research has further clarified the religious polarization debate by identifying both between- and within-group divergence. For example, Wuthnow (1988) was among the first to argue that increasing levels of education for all Americans would lead to internal divisions among religious traditions based on educational attainment levels and political ideology. Religious service attendance has also been found to have significant polarization effects on divisive social issues both between and within religious traditions as well as predicting voter patterns and presidential choices (Abramowitz and
Saunders 2008; Beyerlein and Chaves; 2003; Brooks and Manza 2004; Evans 1997; Gonsoulin and LeBoeuf 2010; Strickler and Danigelis 2002).

Hence, research on religious attitudes has looked at (1) polarization over time and (2) variation by degree of religious service attendance. While religious polarization has been a topic of great interest among researchers, very little research has combined the two approaches to examine polarization over time on the basis of both religious affiliation and religious service attendance levels. In this study I contribute to the extant literature by examining religious polarization over time, both between religious groups, and within religious groups by reported levels of religious service attendance. My primary hypotheses are that religious polarization has occurred between more traditionally conservative and more traditionally liberal religious groups, and between active and nonactive members within the same religious tradition. In addition, I examine the interaction between these two variables to see whether the effect of religious affiliation or religiosity depends on the value of the other. For example, the gap between Mainline and Conservative Protestants may be greater between those who attend religious services regularly and those who attend less frequently. On the other hand, despite key differences between the teachings of Mainline and Conservative congregations, active Mainline and Conservative Protestants may hold relatively homogeneous views on moral issues.

To test these hypotheses, I analyze data from the 1972 to 2010 General Social Surveys (GSSs). In order to test the effect of a combination of religious groups and attendance determinants over time, I employ Hierarchical Linear Modeling (HLM) techniques. As discussed in further detail below, one of the great benefits of HLM is its capacity to control for the changing composition of religious groups over time. Hence, my estimates will yield information on the extent to which polarization has occurred net
of changes in the composition of religious groups and because of changes in their composition. For example, Conservative Protestants may have gotten more politically conservative over time, and this, rather than change in theological positions on abortion or homosexuality, may explain any observed polarization with Mainline Protestants.

Although several studies have explored the effect of differing levels of religious service attendance on religious polarization (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008; Evans 2002; Gonsoulin and LeBoeuf 2010; Jelen and Wilcox 2003), very few have investigated the combination of detailed religious groups and religious service attendance levels as a determinant of religious polarization on a variety of divisive social issues. Hence, this study contributes to the literature on American political culture by providing a comprehensive analysis of religious polarization over a four-decade period.

Background

The Marriage of Religion and Politics

Since the 1970s, religion has emerged as an important cleavage in the study of political attitudes. Voters tend to follow tenets of their core beliefs when choosing which candidate or which side of an issue they will ultimately support (Hunter 1991). Although religion and politics are closely intertwined, there is evidence that causality is unidirectional with religion exerting direct effects on political variables and not the other way around (Patrikios 2008). Previous research has discovered the growing political cleavages between conservatives and liberals may be fueled by religious beliefs (Abramowitz and Saunders 2005; Laymen 1997; Laymen, Carsey, and Horowitz 2006; Theriault 2006). Thus, where the majority of previous research has studied the various mechanisms of political polarization, I focus solely on religious polarization.
An important factor in the marriage of religion and politics was the rise of the New Christian Right which came on the heels of a liberal shift in America that had been occurring since the end of World War II (Davis and Robinson 1996). The official start of the New Christian Right is often attributed to Jerry Falwell, founder of the Moral Majority in 1979 (Miller and Hoffmann 1999). This in turn contributed to the creation of other right wing Christian organizations such as Pat Robertson’s Christian Coalition and John Giminez’s Washington for Jesus (Klemp 2009; Miller and Hoffmann 1999; Wilcox and Larson 2006). The growth of these organizations made for a powerful voting bloc throughout the 1980s as the New Christian right contributed to the election of Ronald Regan twice and gave Republicans the Senate, breaking the long standing Democratic hold of the Senate that existed since 1952 (Miller and Hoffmann 1999; Wilcox and Larson 2006).

The New Christian Right also contributed to the election of George H.W. Bush in 1988 and Republicans eventually gained control of the House in 1994 behind the Christian based leadership of Newt Gingrich (Miller and Hoffmann 1999; Wilcox and Larson 2006). It was previously believed that political Christian movements culminated in the early 2000’s as Evangelical Christians helped George W. Bush secure the white house in 2000 and 2004. However, considering the salience of religion on politics it is likely that these same Christian principles were repackaged into the Tea Party movement.

The “Culture Wars”

Hunter (1991) introduced the term ”culture war” to explain the American public’s growing division of opinions on political and social issues. He posited that Americans are polarizing into different attitudinal camps based on either an “impulse toward orthodoxy [or an] impulse toward progressivism” (Hunter 1991:43). According to the polarization
thesis, Americans who hold conservative or religious moral values tend to navigate toward the worldview of orthodoxy while Americans who hold liberal or nonreligious values tend to drift toward the worldview of progressivism (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008; Hunter 1991). Hence, the ideological gap between those holding differing worldviews consistently grows wider over time.

The culture war may have dire consequences for the American political system, for at least three distinct reasons. First, political polarization can abet the shutting down of the legislative process through stalemates and filibusters (Binder 2003; Jones 2001). Second, polarized politics negatively affect the degree of trust Americans feel toward governmental institutions which, in turn, affects voting habits (Hunter 1991; Wilcox and Larson 2006). Finally, political polarization splits the electorate into different camps that often vehemently oppose conflicting ideas (Baldassarri and Gelman 2008). This may tend to spawn an “us versus them” mentality, perhaps contributing to political instability and a weakening of the American political system (Kimball and Gross 2007:267).

Despite the theoretical importance of polarization for American politics, research has not yet discovered clear evidence that polarization has occurred to a significant degree (Bolzendahl and Brooks 2005; DiMaggio et al. 1996; Fiorina and Abrams 2008). Some research has found that the political divide between the masses is growing and this growing gap between political party voters is often attributed to differing religious values among the electorate (Abramowitz and Saunders 1998, 2008; Hetherington 2009; Laymen 1997; Laymen and Carmines 1997). In contrast, DiMaggio et al. (1996) studied both GSS and National Election Study (NES) data between the years 1972 and 1994 and found that the American public has not polarized on social issues other than attitudes toward abortion. However, even the issue of abortion polarization is controversial.
Although Mouw and Sobel (2001) failed to find evidence of polarization on abortion attitudes, Hoffmann and Miller (1998) found evidence for greater levels of polarization on abortion attitudes than did DiMaggio et al. (1996).

**Religious Group Polarization**

If polarization is indeed occurring in the American public then it is likely that religion is a salient dimension along which that polarization has occurred. Previous research has found that religious polarization has occurred with regards to attitudes toward abortion, homosexuality, and premarital sex. For example, abortion is often viewed as a religious issue with Catholics and fundamentalist Protestants on one side and Jews and the nonreligious on the other (Cook et al. 1993; Hunter 1991). Additionally, churches often engage in pro-life campaigns that serve to motivate followers to vote based on a candidates views toward legal abortion (Beyerlein and Chaves 2003; Klemp 2009). Conversely, religious pro-choice Americans also run supportive campaigns advocating their views in an attempt to garner votes for candidates that espouse pro-choice views (Klemp 2009). These differing opinions serve to divide the public on attitudes toward abortion and since 1972 it appears that abortion is one of the only social issues that has been experiencing polarization (DiMaggio et al. 1996; Hoffmann and Johnson 2005; Hout 1999).

Another hot button issue that could be polarizing the populace is homosexuality, specifically with regards to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) rights. Even though American attitudes have liberalized since 1972 (Loftus, 2001), previous research has shown that Evangelicals are less tolerant toward LGBT issues than other religious traditions (Adamczyk and Pitt 2009; Ellison and Musick 1993; DiMaggio et al. 1996; Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2008; McConkey 2001; Olson, Cadge, and Harrison
On the other hand, religiously progressive and nonreligious individuals are likely to extend civil rights to LGBT individuals (Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2008). Therefore, it appears that there are two distinct camps with regard to attitudes toward LGBT issues with fundamentalists on the conservative side and religious progressives on the liberal side.

Finally, attitudes toward premarital sex may be determined by religious beliefs. The issue of premarital sex became salient in the 1970s when less religious and more liberal Americans began to ignore the long standing religious dictate of sex only within marriage (Davis and Robinson 1996). These progressive lifestyle changes invoked a backlash from conservative religious groups and battle lines were drawn as McConkey (2001) found that between 1988 and 1998 the number of evangelicals who believe that sexual relations before marriage is always wrong significantly increased while the number of progressive Protestants who believe premarital sex is always wrong decreased. These results indicate the possibility of polarization, and thus I analyze premarital sex.

Polarization by Religiosity

The degree of religiosity, often measured by frequency of religious service attendance, may have significant effects on polarization. Religiosity has been found to be a significant predictor of attitudes toward a number of sociopolitical issues, with those who attend religious services more frequently being likely to hold more conservative views toward societal issues than those who attend less frequently (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008; Froese, Bader, and Smith 2008; Whitehead 2010). For example, church attendance is negatively related to support for legal abortion for any reason (Gonsoulin and LeBoeuf 2010; Jelen and Wilcox 2003) and Evans (2002) found that active evangelicals have become less accepting of abortion since 1972 than less active
evangelicals. Additionally, religious service attendance is strongly associated with negative views toward both LGBT civil rights and same-sex marriage (Froese et al. 2008; Olson et al. 2006; Sherkat, Mattias de Vries, and Creek 2010; Whitehead 2010).

**Interaction of Religious Group and Religiosity**

Differences between religious groups exist (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008; Hoffmann and Johnson 2005; McConkey 2001) but perhaps more interesting are the differences that exist within each religious tradition (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008; Ammerman 1990; Evans 2003; Hoffmann and Miller 1998). One possible explanation for within group differences is the declining denominationalism hypothesis (Miller and Hoffmann 1999). Declining denominationalism states that in modern times there has been a reduction in the cohesiveness an individual feels toward their chosen religious tradition which negatively affects within group homogeneity by reducing the influence of religious organizations on individual attitudes and behaviors (Miller and Hoffmann 1999). Previous research has found that declining denominationalism may be responsible for internal polarization on attitudes such as abortion and LGBT rights (DiMaggio et al. 1996; Gay et al. 1996; Hoffmann and Miller 1998; Miller and Hoffmann 1999).

Furthermore, declining denominationalism theory could help explain the effect of attendance on polarization as well.

In order for the social mechanisms of religion to exert influence on individuals within each group these members need to be present. Thus, those who attend religious services regularly experience more exposure to religious influence and are more likely to follow the doctrines of their chosen religious tradition. Conversely, those who attend religious services less regularly, if at all, will experience minimal exposure and be more likely to espouse views that are contradictory to the doctrines of their chosen religious
traditional. Both religiosity, measured by religious service attendance, and the declining denominationalism hypothesis may help explain any witnessed differences between active and nonactive members, regardless of religious affiliation. Additionally, considering the varying degrees of fundamentalism found within different religious traditions it is likely that less separation has occurred between active and nonactive Fundamentalists as opposed to active and nonactive Mainline Protestants. For example, nonactive Fundamentalists may still hold extremely conservative views toward sociopolitical issues since they are identified as a Fundamentalist whereas nonactive Mainline Protestants may not feel the same pressure as Fundamentalists, whether it be from family influences or internal justifications, to conform to their religious tradition.

Alternative Explanations

Because a variety of forces cause individuals’ social attitudes, some of which may be correlated with religious variables, it is important to consider confounding effects that may partially or totally explain any observed polarization. For example, attitudes toward abortion, gay and lesbian sexual relationships, and premarital sex are likely influenced by political factors (Adamczyk and Pitt 2009; Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2008; Hoffmann and Miller 1997; Hunter 1987). Indeed, both political affiliation and ideology have been shown to be cleavages in the polarization literature (DiMaggio et al. 1996; Miller and Hoffmann 1999; Patrikios 2008) as evidenced by the findings that bi-directional shifts in American attitudes toward the morality of homosexuality remain even after religious traditions have been controlled (Loftus, 2001). Additionally, demographic characteristics such as age, gender, race, marital status, and educational attainment levels may cause polarization on socially divisive issues as well (Gay and Lynxwiler 2010; Hoffmann and Miller 1997; Miller 1992; Sherkat and Ellison 1999). Certain of these variables,
particularly race, age, and educational level, are likely correlated with either religious
group affiliation, religiosity, or both. Hence, I control for such factors in the fullest
models shown in Tables 3 and 4 below.

**Hypotheses**

Despite the contradictory findings of previous research on polarization, I predict
that religious polarization has occurred on divisive social attitudes such as opinions
toward abortion and sexual issues, net of the effects of control variables such as political
affiliation and ideology. I propose three basic hypotheses: two concerning main effects of
religious affiliation and adherence, and one concerning the interaction of these two
variables.

First, the core proposition of the polarization hypothesis is that religious groups
have diverged in their attitudes toward divisive social issues. Hence, Hypothesis 1A
states that polarization has occurred between conservative groups, consisting of
Conservative Protestants and Catholics, and progressive groups, consisting of Mainline
and Liberal Protestants.

In addition, previous research has identified polarization occurring between
society’s most and least religious citizens (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008; Evans 2002;
Gonsoulin and LeBoeuf 2010; Jelen and Wilcox 2003). Hence, it stands to reason that
individuals with no religious affiliation would have diverged from members of any
religious affiliation on all four selected social issues, leading to Hypothesis 1B: those
with no religion have polarized from those who are active members of any religious
tradition.

Hypothesis 2 states that polarization has occurred between active and nonactive
groups. For example, Mainline Protestants and Catholics who attend religious services
regularly should have diverged from nonactive Mainline Protestants and Catholics, respectively, on all four of the selected sociopolitical issues.

Finally, Hypothesis 3 concerns the interaction between group affiliation and religious service attendance. Here I hypothesize that there has been less polarization between active and nonactive members of conservative religious groups than between active and nonactive liberal members.

**Data and Variables**

**Data**

In order to test these hypotheses, I analyze data from the 1972 to 2010 General Social Survey (GSS) (Davis, Smith, and Marsden 2011). The GSS is a nationally representative sample of noninstitutionalized Americans that has been conducted on either a yearly or biennial basis since 1972. Previous researchers have utilized the GSS for polarization studies (Gay and Lynxwiler 2010; Gonsoulin and LeBoeuf 2010; Miller and Hoffmann 1999) as the GSS contains a variety of measures on both religious and political affiliations and attitudes toward social issues. In this study I employ the cumulative file of the GSS which consists of 28 survey years within the 38 year period and includes data for 55,087 participants (Davis et al. 2011).

The GSS is an ideal database for this study since it began in 1972 and coincides with important milestones in the abortion debate (Cook et al. 1993), as well as extending through the rise of the Moral Majority (Klemp 2009; Miller and Hoffmann 1999; Wilcox and Larson 2006). This same time period also witnessed the emergence of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered (LGBT) rights issues such as gay marriage (Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2008; Olson et al. 2006) and the American sexual revolution of the 70s (Davis
and Robinson 1996). Other important milestones occurred during this time that may affect levels of polarization on sociopolitical issues as well. The rise of secularism led to a significant increase in the number of Americans who say they have no religion (Hout and Fischer 2002). Moreover, important political/culture figures and media outlets, keyed by talk show hosts such as Rush Limbaugh and Glenn Beck, emerged during this time and may have facilitated polarizing attitudes (Klemp 2009). By recording attitudes and opinions through a significant portion of debates such as those on abortion (Cook et al. 1993) and the subsequent emergence of the new Christian right, the GSS allows for an exact examination of the societal effects of these events.

**Dependent Variables**

In this study I measure four dependent variables that previous researchers have labeled as divisive sociopolitical issues (DiMaggio et al. 1996; Gay et al. 1996; Froese et al. 2008; Hoffmann and Miller 1997).

**Abortion.** The GSS asks six abortion questions that I recoded into two abortion indices. The first included three of the six GSS abortion questions that previous researchers have called “elective reasons for abortion” (Hoffmann and Johnson 2005) and the second included the three remaining questions that together have been labeled “traumatic reasons for abortion” (Hoffmann and Johnson 2005). Each of the six had yes or no response categories. Responses to the three elective abortion questions were summed into a new variable, as were the responses to the three traumatic abortion questions.

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2 Factor analyses were completed on both the elective and traumatic abortion questions. For the elective abortion questions, the factor analysis found only one underlying factor and a reliability test found a Cronbach’s Alpha of .915. The traumatic abortion questions revealed one underlying factor and produced a Cronbach’s Alpha of .798.
questions. All six abortion questions used in this study were asked of respondents in every year other than 1986.

For each abortion question the GSS asks “Please tell me whether or not you think it should be possible for a pregnant woman to obtain a legal abortion if…” For elective abortions opinions, the three questions were: (1) if the family has a very low income and cannot afford any more children; (2) if she is married and does not want any more children; and (3) if she is not married and does not want to marry the man. For traumatic abortion opinions, the three questions were: (1) if there is a strong chance of serious defect in the baby; (2) if she became pregnant as a result of rape; and (3) if the woman’s own health is seriously endangered by the pregnancy.

Hence, while elective abortion concerns reasons that do not directly affect the physical or psychological well-being of the woman, traumatic abortion opinions focus on attitudes toward abortion when the well-being of the mother is at risk or the pregnancy is not the “fault” of the mother. Scores on each variable range from 0 to 3 with 0 representing a respondent’s belief that abortion rights should not be extended to any woman for any elective or traumatic reason while a score of 3 represents opinions that a woman should be allowed access to a legal abortion for all three elective or traumatic reasons.

Homosexuality. The third dependent variable explored in this study is views toward gay and lesbian sexual relationships. The GSS asked respondents to consider their views on “sexual relations between two adults of the same sex?” Answer choices included “always wrong,” “almost always wrong,” “sometimes wrong,” and “not wrong at all.” This question was asked during 23 of the possible 28 survey years. This variable ranges from 1 to 4, with higher values representing more liberal views.
Premarital sex. Finally, I measure attitudes toward premarital sex with an item asked in 23 of the possible 28 survey years. The GSS asked respondents if sex between a man and a woman prior to marriage was always wrong, almost always wrong, sometimes wrong, or not wrong at all. This variable is coded identically to the homosexuality measure.

Independent Variables

Religious affiliation. The GSS determines respondents’ religious preferences, offering choices of Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, None, and Other. The GSS further divides Protestants into groups determined by the fundamentalism of the protestant denomination with fundamentalist, moderate, and liberal being the available categories. Therefore, I created three Protestant groups based on degree of fundamentalism, which are labeled “Conservative,” “Mainline,” and “Liberal.” In addition to these groups, I include categories for Catholics, other religious affiliations such as Jews and Muslims, and persons with no religious affiliation.

Frequency of religious service attendance. I measured religiosity with a question on the GSS asking about the frequency of religious service attendance. This variable had nine response categories, with choices ranging from never attending to attending more than once a week. From this measure I created a “high attendance” dummy variable, scored 1 if respondents said they attend religious services at least two to three times per month, and 0 if once a month or less. I also multiplied this variable by Liberal and Mainline Protestants, Catholics, and Other affiliations to create 4 interaction effects, shown in Table 4 below. These interaction effects will determine if religious polarization has occurred between those who attend religious services more frequently and those who attend less frequently within the same religious tradition.
Controls

Since research has shown that politics and religion are closely related (Miller and Hoffmann 1999; Patrikios 2008) it is important to account for political effects when exploring religious polarization. The GSS has several questions concerning political identification and ideology. First, to determine a respondent’s political affiliation, the GSS asked respondents if they thought of themselves as a Republican, Democrat, Independent, or other. The GSS further divided these options into an 8 point scale where 0 equals Strong Democrat and 6 equals Strong Republican with 3 being Independent and 7 being Other Party. I recoded this variable and included the small number of respondents who answered Other Party into the Independent group. Second, the GSS asked respondents to place themselves on a seven point scale, with low scores equaling liberal views and high scores equaling conservative views, to determine their political ideology. Political ideology is often viewed as a more appropriate method of determining political opinions than political affiliation since ideology is likely to reveal more exact political attitudes. Thus, this study will control for both political affiliation and ideology in an attempt to identify the social issues where religious polarization has occurred as opposed to political polarization.

Finally, I include several demographic controls. Previous research has found that age (Miller 1992), gender (Sherkat and Ellison 1999), race (Gay and Lynxwiler 2010; Hoffmann and Miller 1997), and marital status (Hoffmann and Miller 1997) have significant effects on sociopolitical attitudes towards abortion, homosexuality, and premarital sex. Gender is coded 1 if female, 0 if male, race consists of dummy variables for black, white, and other race, and marital status is measured with dummy variables for married, divorced or separated, and single. Educational attainment levels have been found
to have significant effects on civil rights issues such as gay marriage (Adamczyk and Pitt 2009; Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2008) and abortion (Hoffmann and Miller 1997) with those reaching higher levels of education espousing more liberal and accepting views (Hunter 1987). Hence, I control for the number of years of schooling each respondent attained.

Methods

I use Hierarchal Linear Modeling techniques (Raudenbush and Bryk 2002) in order to measure religious polarization over time. HLM allows for each of the dependent variables to be nested within years, producing estimates of average annual changes in attitudes for each religious group across the 38-year period. Missing data was omitted from the analysis.

Modeling Strategy

Level-1 models. The basic level-1 model is expressed as:

$$y_{it} = \beta_{0t} + \sum_{r=1}^{5} \beta_{rt} RA_{rit} + \beta_{6t} HA_{it} + \sum_{c=7}^{7+c} \beta_{ct} x_{cit} + e_{it} \tag{1}$$

In these models, $y_{it}$ is the value on dependent variable $y$ for respondent $i$ in year $t$.

Because the bolded variables have been group mean centered (i.e., centered around their year-specific means), $\beta_{0t}$ is the average score on $y$ for the omitted religious affiliation (RA) in year $t$ for respondents who are average on all covariates for that year, the $\beta_{rt}$ are gaps between the other five religious affiliations and the omitted group in year $t$, again for respondents who are average on all covariates for that year, $\beta_{6t}$ is the gap between high attenders (HA) and low attenders in year $t$, the $\beta_{ct}$ are effects of control covariates on social attitude $y$ in year $t$, and the $e_{it}$ are level-1 errors.
In Table 2 below I present results from reduced versions of these models, in which I include only the level-1 variables of interest—religious affiliation or religious service attendance. I then run the fuller models shown in equation 1 above and compare the results. The reduced models yield information on how much or little polarization has occurred over time, while the comparison of the full to the reduced models indicates the extent to which that polarization was driven by variables correlated with religious affiliation or religious service attendance, such as political conservatism or age.

**Level-2 models.** Both the constant and the coefficients in equation 1 are indexed by \( t \), to indicate the GSS year. To test for religious polarization over time, these intercepts and slopes become outcomes at level 2 to be predicted simply by a year term, as in the following models:

\[
\beta_{0t} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01} \text{Year}_t + u_{0t} \quad (2a)
\]

\[
\beta_{1t} = \gamma_{10} + \gamma_{11} \text{Year}_t + u_{1t} \quad (2b)
\]

The year variable was coded 0 for 1972, 1 for 1973, 2 for 1974, …, 38 for 2010; hence, \( \gamma_{00} \) in equation 2a is interpreted as the average score on social attitude \( y \) for the omitted religious affiliation in 1972 for respondents who are average on all covariates for 1972 and \( \gamma_{01} \) is the average annual increment or decrement to that average for 1972 to 2010. In equation 2b, \( \gamma_{10} \) is interpreted as the average gap between an included religious affiliation and the omitted category on social attitude \( y \) in 1972 for respondents who are average on all covariates for 1972, and \( \gamma_{11} \) is the average annual increment or decrement to that average gap for 1972 to 2010. Thus, \( \gamma_{11} \) is the “polarization parameter,” because it expresses whether the gap between group 1 (say, Mainline Protestants) and group 0 (the omitted group, say, Conservative Protestants) got bigger or smaller from 1972 to 2010.
Findings

Overall Trends

Descriptive statistics for all the variables in the model are listed in Table 1 and the cumulative total numbers of participants across all 28 GSS surveys are displayed in the first column. Table 1 shows that there was an adequate total number of participants for each variable, with the other religions group being the lowest at 2,100 participants. Table 1 also shows the number of respondents, the means, and the standard deviations for the 1972 to 1974 and 2006 to 2010 survey periods. This shows both the direction of opinions for the dependent variables and the compositional changes of the independent variables over the 38 year period.

The data in Table 1 show that Americans' views toward legal abortion, whether for elective or traumatic reasons, have become more conservative over time. The earliest mean (1.40) for opinions toward legal abortion for elective reasons was significantly higher than the mean found in the latest average (1.26). This indicates that American opinions toward legal abortion for elective reasons have significantly become more conservative over the last 38 years. In 1972 the traumatic abortion index had a mean of 2.49 but in 2010 the mean dropped to 2.33. This mean difference between 1972 and 2010 is significant, indicating more conservative opinions toward legal abortion for traumatic reasons.

American opinions on whether or not homosexual sex is wrong have significantly liberalized since 1972 with American opinion moving from 1.69 in the earliest average to 2.30 in the latest average. This is a shift from an average viewpoint of always or almost always wrong in 1972 to almost always and sometimes wrong in 2010. While this
average still indicates negative views toward gay and lesbian sexual relationships, the mean has liberalized since 1972 and American’s are becoming more accepting of gay and lesbian sexual relationships. Finally, Americans’ views toward premarital sex have liberalized over the last 38 years as well. The earliest mean of 2.47 was significantly lower than the latest mean of 2.94. Thus, on average, Americans have become more accepting of consensual sexual relations between a man and a woman prior to marriage. However, the 2010 mean of 2.94 still indicates that the average American believes that premarital sex is sometimes wrong.

The results of independent t-tests revealed that the latest means for the majority of the independent variables were also significantly different from the earliest means. The percentage of Mainline Protestants is significantly lower in 2010 than in 1972 while the percentage of Nones is significantly higher. Additionally, some significant changes can be seen in the control variables. For example, the percentage of married respondents in 1972 was 72% while only 47% of the respondents in 2010 were married. Conversely, around 1% of respondents were members of another race other than black or white in the early average but this number increased to 11% in the later average. Higher means in 2010 for both political party and ideology indicate that Americans have become increasingly more conservative since 1972. For example, political ideology significantly changed between 3.98 in 1972 to 4.11 in 2010. This means that the average American in 1972 held slightly more liberal political views than they did in 2010. Attained educational levels also were significantly different, with the average American completing 13.4 years of school in 2010 compared to only 11.6 years of school in 1972.

*Religious Group Polarization: Unadjusted Results*
In this section I describe the results from Table 2 and Figures 1 and 2, which report unadjusted trends in attitudes toward divisive social issues from 1972 to 2010. The top panel of Table 2 shows the results for religious groups, with Conservative Protestants the omitted category. The bottom panel shows the results for high religious service attendance compared to low attendance, the omitted category, which is the intercept in the bottom panel. These results provide baseline estimates of religious polarization or convergence. In Tables 3 and 4 I present results with covariates, to assess whether any observed polarization in Table 2 can be explained by other factors such as political affiliations or demographic characteristics.

**Abortion.** For elective abortion opinions, the intercept ($\gamma_{00}$) for Conservative Protestants of 1.359 represents the average Conservative Protestant opinion toward legal elective abortion in 1972. The associated yearly slope of -.003 means that, on average, Conservative Protestants have become more restrictive in their attitudes toward abortion for elective reasons since 1972; however, this slope is not significant at conventional levels. Nonetheless, the results show a trend toward more restrictive Conservative Protestant opinions toward abortion for elective reasons. Although Mainline Protestants held more progressive opinions than their conservative counterparts in 1972 (a gap of .438 points on the elective abortion scale, about one-third of a standard deviation), the obtained yearly slope of -0.007 indicates that over the years Mainline Protestants have become more restrictive to legal abortion for elective reasons. This polarization parameter for Mainline Protestants is significant at the .001 level. When combined with the nonsignificant Conservative Protestant Year slope, this finding indicates that Mainline and Conservative Protestants have converged over time in their opinion about legal elective abortion. These results are depicted graphically in Figure 1, Panel A.
Even stronger evidence for convergence occurred among Liberal Protestants compared to Conservative Protestants. Although in 1972 such Protestants were even more supportive of legal elective abortion, their Year slope of -.009 indicates that they converged more rapidly over time with Conservative Protestants. Individuals with no religious affiliation also converged with Conservative Protestants, while Catholics and members of other religious groups did not. Hence, the overall picture from Table 2 and Figure 1, Panel A is one of convergence, not polarization, with the exception of all denominational groups with members of “Other” faiths.

With regards to religious adherence, the low attendance intercept of 1.746 represents the average nonactive opinion toward legal elective abortion in 1972. The significant yearly slope of -0.005 indicates that nonactive members of religious groups have become more restrictive toward legal elective abortion over time. The high attendance gap of -0.775 indicates that active members of religious groups held more conservative views than their non-religious counterparts but did not experience a significantly different yearly change. Panel A of Figure 2 graphically shows these results. While there is a gap between active and nonactive members of religious groups on views toward legal elective abortion, this gap has only diverged slightly over time.

Nearly the same results were found for attitudes toward traumatic abortion. Yearly changes in only one of the six religious groups—Mainline Protestants—were significantly different from the yearly changes expected for Conservative Protestants. More importantly, the significant yearly change associated with Mainline Protestants represented convergence with Conservative Protestants on attitudes toward legal traumatic abortions. However, subsequent regression runs (tables not shown) revealed significant levels of polarization between Mainline Protestants and three religious groups,
(1) Liberal Protestants, (2) those from other religions, and (3) those with no religious affiliation. These results are presented graphically in Panel B of Figure 1.

Contrasting the results found between religious groups, significant polarization has occurred between active and nonactive respondents toward legal traumatic abortion since 1972. While both groups experienced significant yearly change, active members became more restrictive at a faster rate than nonactive members. This is graphically shown in Panel B of Figure 2. Thus, polarization between active and nonactive members of religious groups has occurred since 1972.

(Table 2 about here)

Homosexual sex. Yearly slope values for homosexual sex are shown in Table 2. Conservative Protestants increased their tolerance of homosexual sex by an average of 0.021 points per year. Only Catholics experienced yearly change that was significantly different from Conservative Protestants. Hence, opinions toward gay and lesbian sexual relationships have liberalized for the majority of religious groups since 1972. However, some religious groups have liberalized quicker than others creating polarization between groups such as between Catholics and Conservative Protestants and between Nones and those in other religions. There has also been slight polarization between Mainline and Liberal Protestants since 1972. Surprisingly, even though religious Nones have liberalized over the last 38 years as well, they have progressed slower than other groups and have therefore converged with the majority of religious groups studied. See Figure 1, Panel C for a graphical depiction of these results.

Yearly slopes for attitudes toward homosexual sex by attendance levels are also shown in Table 2. Since 1972, views toward homosexual sex have liberalized for both active and nonactive groups. However, nonactive groups have liberalized faster than
active groups and this difference has created polarization. When compared to nonactive members, active members experienced a yearly slope of -0.015. This obtained value was significant at the .001 level. These results are graphically represented in Panel C of Figure 2.

Premarital sex. For premarital sex, a yearly change value of 0.006 was obtained for Conservative Protestants. Once again, attitudes toward premarital sex have liberalized among every religious group including Conservative Protestants and High Attenders. However, again only Catholics produced a significantly different yearly slope than Conservative Protestants, representing polarization between the groups since 1972. Although the rest of the yearly slopes associated with the various religious groups were not significantly different, the results show that every group is trending away from Conservative Protestants indicating possible polarization. Since Nones were already near the top of the progressive scale on attitudes toward premarital sex they have only liberalized slightly in the last 38 years and other groups have progressed much quicker leading to convergence. Figure 1, Panel D shows these results in graph form.

Table 2 also shows the yearly slopes for attitudes toward premarital sex by attendance levels. The obtained yearly change value of -0.006 for the high attendance group is significantly different from the low attendance group at the .001 level. A graphical representation of these results can be seen in Panel D of Figure 2. Since 1972, views toward premarital sex have remained fairly consistent for active members while the views of nonactive members have liberalized. This difference has created polarization between active and nonactive members with regard to attitudes toward premarital sex.

(Figure 1 about here)

(Figure 2 about here)
Religious Group Polarization: Covariate-adjusted Results

Table 3 shows HLM estimates of covariate-adjusted trends in divisive social attitudes by religious group and religiosity between 1972 and 2010. In this section I discuss the changes in the year slopes for each of the religious groups after adding controls, to understand whether the convergence or polarization shown in Table 2 and Figures 1 and 2 was merely an artifact of the relationship of the religious categories to factors such as political affiliations or demographic characteristics.

Adding controls to the model caused more conservative values for every religious group, including Nones and High Attenders, on nearly all social attitudes. For elective abortion, the controls eliminated the significant yearly slope of Conservative Protestants and reduced the difference between Conservative Protestants and Catholics in 1972 to nonsignificance. With regards to attitudes toward legal traumatic abortion, adding controls to the model produced a significant yearly change among Catholics and Conservative Protestants even though nonsignificant values were obtained in the unadjusted models, on attitudes toward traumatic abortion. Nonetheless, the significant change is in the direction of convergence rather than polarization. Additionally, high attendance did not experience significant changes between the adjusted and unadjusted models on either abortion issue

The adjusted model also produced significant changes among the obtained values for attitudes toward homosexual sex. With controls added, the significant values found among Mainline and Liberal Protestants, Catholics, and Nones were reduced from the .001 level to the .05 level. Additionally, with controls, the yearly slope for other religions became significant and indicates polarization between those in the other religion group and Conservative Protestants. Controls did not significantly change the obtained values of
high attendance. For premarital sex, controls increased the significance of the yearly slope change found in both Conservative Protestants and Catholics. This results in an increased level of polarization between Conservative Protestants and Catholics since 1972. The adjusted model also produced a slightly less significant value for the yearly slope associated with high attendance. Overall, adding controls did not eliminate any of the polarization witnessed in the unadjusted model.

Among the controls, political ideology, party ID, education, and races other than black or white produced significantly different results from Conservative Protestants on all four divisive issues. Political ideology, party ID, and races other than black or white were associated with more conservative views while those with higher educational attainment levels held more progressive attitudes. Interestingly, being black or being married was associated with more conservative views on all social issues other than premarital sex. For elective and traumatic abortion, political ideology, party ID, education, and other race were all significant. Both age and being married produced significant values on elective abortion but not on traumatic abortion while being black had a significant impact on traumatic abortion but not on elective abortion. For both homosexual and premarital sex, with the exception of being married, all controls were found to be significant. Being married was significant on homosexual sex but not on premarital sex.

(Table 3 about here)

Interaction Effects

Table 4 presents HLM estimates of covariate-adjusted trends in divisive social attitudes by religious group, religiosity, and their interaction between 1972 and 2010. The interaction effects reveal whether the effect of religious group or religiosity on changes in
attitudes toward divisive social issues over time differs by the category of the other variable. For example, I speculated that the effect of religious service attendance might matter more for traditionally liberal religious groups than traditionally conservative ones. Due to the complexity of the models and the interaction terms I report on the statistically significant findings only, and direct readers to Figure 3 for a graphical representation of the results. In order to keep Figure 3 somewhat uncluttered, I do not show results for the Other and None religious groups.

The most consistent finding with respect to the interaction effects concerned Catholics. Note that the high attendance × Catholic intercepts are negative and significant for the two abortion items. This indicates that the gap between high and low attenders in support for legal abortion in 1972 was significantly larger (i.e., more negative) among Catholics than among Conservative Protestants. Thus, these findings indicate that church attendance “mattered more” for Catholics than Conservative Protestants in determining their views on abortion in 1972. The high attendance × Catholic year slope is significant and positive in each of the four models (though nonsignificant for the homosexual sex dependent variable). When added to the negative Conservative Protestant year slopes, these finding indicate that low-attending Catholics withdrew their support for abortion more rapidly than high-attending Catholics. In other words, high-attending Catholics have remained persistently against abortion for the whole period, while low-attending Catholics followed the dominant American trend in becoming more anti-abortion over the time series. See Figure 3, Panel A for a graphical representation of these trends.

A second finding of note concerns the significant and positive high attendance × Mainline and Liberal Protestant intercepts (or, more accurately, increments to the high vs. low attendance gap for Conservative Protestants) for the traumatic abortion dependent
variable. These findings indicate that in 1972, the attendance gap was smaller for Mainline and Liberal Protestants than for Conservative Protestants. Here, this indicates that church attendance “mattered more” for Conservative than Mainline or Liberal Protestants in determining their views on traumatic abortion.

(Table 4 about here)

In general, however, the findings in Table 4 and Figure 3 present little evidence for Hypothesis 3. For the most part, I find that religion and religious service attendance had similar effects to those shown in Tables 2 and 3 and Figures 1 and 2. In other words, I find a clear religious group gradient, in which the more liberal denominations (principally Nones, Others, and Liberal and Mainline Protestants) are more tolerant of abortion, homosexuality, and premarital sex than the more conservative denominations (Catholics and Conservative Protestants). I also find that church attendance matters, with the less intensely religious reporting more tolerant views than the more intensely religious. However, there is little evidence for an interaction between these two variables, with the exceptions noted.

Figure 3 does provide some compelling evidence for polarization, however. Note in Panel B that the three most conservative groups in the figure (high attending Catholics and Mainline and Conservative Protestants) appear to be increasingly different from all other groups. The same finding holds for high attending Conservative and Mainline Protestants in Panels C and D. While the rest of the groups are clearly trending upward in tolerance toward homosexual and premarital sex, these two groups’ trends are either less steeply positive (in the case of homosexual sex), or flat or negative (in the case of premarital sex).

(Figure 3 about here)
Conclusions

I investigated religious polarization between and within religious groups by attendance on four contentious sociopolitical issues. Previous research has found contradictory results on whether or not polarization has occurred in the United States over the last 38 years (DiMaggio et al. 1996; Hoffmann and Miller 1997; Hout 1999; McConkey 2001; Whitehead 2010). This study also found contradictory results on polarization as well with convergence occurring between some groups on select issues and divergence occurring between others, especially between active and nonactive religious groups. Additionally, these findings indicate that attitudes on only 2 of the 4 explored sociodemographic variables were liberalizing with Americans becoming more conservative on opinions toward both elective and traumatic abortion. This finding is contradictory to the findings of DiMaggio et al. (1996) which indicated that American attitudes toward all investigated political issues were liberalizing. Moreover, there are important compositional differences in some groups between 1972 and 2010 as well.

The first hypothesis examined polarization by religious groups, which is the core proposition of polarization theory. Each religious tradition brings a set of core beliefs that are at least slightly different from other religious traditions and these differing sets of core beliefs are often in opposition. For example, Fundamentalists are more likely to believe the scriptures are the inherent word of God while liberal Protestants are more likely to view the scriptures with more obscurity (Hunter 1991; Klemp 2009; Moulton, Hill, and Burdette 2006; Wilcox and Larson 2006). This division may cause members of each religious group to develop extreme views in order to combat the opposition. Additionally, mechanisms of social influence and intergroup bias increase in group
favoritism through like-minded discussions while increasing hostility toward any out
groups. Thus, it is likely that oppositional attitudes toward abortion, homosexuality,
school prayer, and pre-marital sex exist based on religious affiliation.

Like previous research (DiMaggio et al. 1996; Hoffmann and Miller 1997), there
were mixed results on levels of religious polarization depending on the issue investigated.
Thus, I was unable to confirm hypothesis 1A and the results did not clear up the debate
about whether or not polarization exists on culture war issues. Rather in opposition of
polarization theory, for the majority of comparisons, the story is one of convergence
rather than divergence. These results could indicate a growing cohesiveness between
religious traditions on socially divisive issues when all other potential differences, such
as frequency of religious attendance, are controlled. With regards to hypothesis 1B, the
obtained results confirmed polarization between religious Nones and active members of
nearly all religious traditions on the majority of social issues.

The final results also confirmed the second hypothesis concerning significant
differences between active and nonactive religious groups regardless of affiliation. The
findings for religious service attendance confirms previous research (Abramowitz and
Saunders 2008; Jelen and Wilcox 2003; Olson et al. 2006; Whitehead 2010), indicating
that high levels of attendance often result in more conservative opinions on social issues.
Conversely, low levels of religious service attendance often results in more progressive
opinions on social issues. These results should be expected as religious organizations
often exert significant control and influence over their members in all areas of their lives,
including lifestyle choices and opinion development (Beyerlein and Chaves 2003;
Brewer, Kershe, and Petersen 2003; Cook et al. 1993; Froese and Bader 2008). Religion
can serve as a strict guideline that may provide direction on social issues which could be
otherwise viewed with ambiguity. In addition to the effects felt from religious organizations, research has shown that religious belief is significantly molded by parents who influence attitudes and behaviors of their children as well (Sherkat and Ellison 1999).

Even though religiosity, as measured by religious service attendance, was found to be an important predictor of polarization, religious affiliation is still important as well. For example, Fundamentalists, whether active or nonactive, often produced the most conservative opinions on all four selected issues. On the other hand, Liberal Protestants, whether active or nonactive, often held the most progressive views on issues, other than those with Other religions or with no religion. This means that while religious service attendance is an important determinant of religious polarization, the inherent differences between religious traditions must also be considered as well.

The third hypothesis investigated the interactional effects of group affiliation and religious service attendance. In order to confirm the third hypothesis, the results would have had to shown less polarization occurring between Conservative Protestants and Catholics than those witnessed in Mainline and Liberal Protestants. However, there were mixed results with regards to this hypothesis as well. Conservative Protestants experienced the most significant levels of within group polarization over the last 38 years while, as expected, Catholics experienced the least within group polarization. Moreover, as predicted, Mainline Protestants also experienced high levels of polarization but surprisingly, Liberal Protestants experienced convergence. These mixed results could indicate that Liberal Protestants were already much more progressive on issues and therefore had little room to experience within group divergence while Fundamentalists were very low on all issues in 1972 providing adequate room for within group
polarization. Additionally, perhaps these results show that even among Conservative groups, for religion to significantly impact an individual’s decision making process they actually have to attend religious services frequently.

Limitations

The main limitation of this study can be found within the dataset used to investigate religious polarization. While the GSS is a well-researched and sustained survey, the questions used in this study may have revealed some underlying concept other than the intended model. For example, the questions concerning abortion may be viewed more as issues of personal freedom rather than as a religious issue. The same concern needs to be considered for the other three culture war issues explored in this study as well. Fortunately, the GSS asks questions about civil liberties and personal freedoms. In future research, this limitation could be avoided by controlling civil rights variables in order to see if religious values exist net of civil liberty opinions.

Future research

There are a number of directions future research could explore with regards to religious polarization. Individual level explorations of religious polarization have had mixed results with scholars falling on opposing sides of the issue (DiMaggio et al. 1996; Hoffmann and Johnson 2005). Therefore, future research could focus on contextual level determinants of polarization. While I could find no existing research on religious polarization from a contextual viewpoint, other than an investigation into the effects of living in the south (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008; Hoffmann and Miller 1997) or the growing division between individuals residing in red and blue states (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008), there have been important contextual level findings on social issues. For example, Adamczyk and Pitt (2009) found that the cultural context in which an individual
lives affects their attitudes toward homosexuality. Additional studies have found that individuals living in the South are more likely to oppose abortion, gay rights, same-sex unions, and the Supreme Court’s ruling on school prayer (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008; Hoffmann and Miller 1997).

Polarized attitudes exist on culture war issues with secular and nonactive religious Americans on one side and active religious Americans on the other, regardless of religious affiliation. Thus, this study fills a gap in the religious polarization literature with the breadth of religious groups utilized and offers more details on the social issues that create polarization between and within groups. Despite nonsignificant findings between some groups, it is easy to see why there appears to be a culture war occurring in the United States. The data reveals distinct religious differences for most groups on opinions toward sociopolitical attitudes that either have experienced similar distances or have polarized since 1972. However, even though there were non-significant findings, the trends in attitudes toward socially divisive issues still show signs of polarization between and within religious traditions. While this study did not completely clear up the confusion surrounding the polarization debate, overall, the results further our collective knowledge of what potential determinants cause religious polarization.
References


APPENDIX A: Tables 1 – 4.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Variables Used in the Analysis, by Early and Late Period

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Cumulative</th>
<th>1972 to 1974</th>
<th>2006 to 2010</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>Mean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependent variables</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elective abortion</td>
<td>38,836</td>
<td>4,528</td>
<td>1.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traumatic abortion</td>
<td>39,026</td>
<td>4,553</td>
<td>2.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homosexual sex</td>
<td>31,550</td>
<td>2,860</td>
<td>1.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Premarital sex</td>
<td>32,293</td>
<td>2,966</td>
<td>2.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focal independent variables</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fundamentalist Protestant</td>
<td>16,632</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainline Protestant</td>
<td>8,722</td>
<td>1,196</td>
<td>0.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal Protestant</td>
<td>6,806</td>
<td>412</td>
<td>0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>13,482</td>
<td>1,177</td>
<td>0.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2,100</td>
<td>209</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>5,726</td>
<td>280</td>
<td>0.06</td>
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<tr>
<td>High attendance</td>
<td>23,225</td>
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<tr>
<td>Low attendance</td>
<td>27,081</td>
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<td>0.45</td>
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<tr>
<td>Control variables</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Political ideology</td>
<td>46,002</td>
<td>1,410</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party ID</td>
<td>54,784</td>
<td>4,571</td>
<td>2.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>54,925</td>
<td>4,588</td>
<td>11.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>54,890</td>
<td>4,586</td>
<td>44.58</td>
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<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>7,625</td>
<td>617</td>
<td>0.13</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other race</td>
<td>2,589</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>30,827</td>
<td>2,402</td>
<td>0.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>29,861</td>
<td>3,301</td>
<td>0.72</td>
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<tr>
<td>Divorced/widowed</td>
<td>14,046</td>
<td>713</td>
<td>0.16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2. HLM Estimates of Unadjusted Trends in Attitudes toward Divisive Social Issues, by Religious Group and Religiosity: GSS, 1972 to 2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parameter</th>
<th>Abortion</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Elective</td>
<td>Traumatic</td>
<td>Homosexual</td>
<td>Premarital</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cons. Prot. (CP) intercept, $\gamma_{00}$</td>
<td>1.359 ***</td>
<td>2.517 ***</td>
<td>1.292 ***</td>
<td>2.706 ***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year slope, $\gamma_{01}$</td>
<td>-0.003</td>
<td>-0.001</td>
<td>0.021 ***</td>
<td>0.006 *</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainline/CP gap, $\gamma_{10}$</td>
<td>0.438 ***</td>
<td>0.336 ***</td>
<td>0.221 ***</td>
<td>0.191 **</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year slope, $\gamma_{11}$</td>
<td>-0.007 ***</td>
<td>-0.007 ***</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>0.003</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal/CP gap, $\gamma_{20}$</td>
<td>0.802 ***</td>
<td>0.452 ***</td>
<td>0.365 ***</td>
<td>0.361 ***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year slope, $\gamma_{21}$</td>
<td>-0.009 ***</td>
<td>-0.001</td>
<td>0.004</td>
<td>0.003</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic/CP gap, $\gamma_{30}$</td>
<td>0.164 ***</td>
<td>0.070 **</td>
<td>0.315 ***</td>
<td>0.410 ***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year slope, $\gamma_{31}$</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.008 ***</td>
<td>0.007 *</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other/CP gap, $\gamma_{40}$</td>
<td>0.993 ***</td>
<td>0.351 ***</td>
<td>0.876 ***</td>
<td>0.485 ***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year slope, $\gamma_{41}$</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>0.012</td>
<td>0.004</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None/CP gap, $\gamma_{50}$</td>
<td>0.924 ***</td>
<td>0.303 ***</td>
<td>1.015 ***</td>
<td>0.767 ***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year slope, $\gamma_{51}$</td>
<td>-0.006 **</td>
<td>-0.001</td>
<td>-0.001</td>
<td>-0.002</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Parameter                          |        |        |        |        |
| Low attendance intercept, $\gamma_{00}$ | 1.746 *** | 2.720 *** | 1.585 *** | 2.979 *** |
| Year slope, $\gamma_{01}$           | -0.005 ** | -0.003 ** | 0.027 *** | 0.011 *** |
| High attendance gap, $\gamma_{10}$ | -0.775 *** | -0.409 *** | -0.322 *** | -0.858 *** |
| Year slope, $\gamma_{11}$          | -0.001 | -0.007 *** | -0.015 *** | -0.006 *** |

Note: See Table 1 for Level-1 n. Level-2 n = 38. *** p < .001; ** p < .01; * p < .05, two-tailed tests.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parameter</th>
<th>Abortion</th>
<th>Sex</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Elective</td>
<td>Traumatic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative Protestant (CP) intercept, $\gamma_{00}$</td>
<td>1.219 ***</td>
<td>2.512 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year slope, $\gamma_{01}$</td>
<td>-0.004 *</td>
<td>-0.007 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainline/CP gap, $\gamma_{10}$</td>
<td>0.340 ***</td>
<td>0.231 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year slope, $\gamma_{11}$</td>
<td>-0.006 **</td>
<td>-0.005 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal/CP gap, $\gamma_{20}$</td>
<td>0.600 ***</td>
<td>0.294 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year slope, $\gamma_{21}$</td>
<td>-0.006 **</td>
<td>0.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic/CP gap, $\gamma_{30}$</td>
<td>0.047</td>
<td>-0.093 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year slope, $\gamma_{31}$</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>0.004 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other/CP gap, $\gamma_{40}$</td>
<td>0.685 ***</td>
<td>0.147 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year slope, $\gamma_{41}$</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None/CP gap, $\gamma_{50}$</td>
<td>0.642 ***</td>
<td>0.111 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year slope, $\gamma_{51}$</td>
<td>-0.003</td>
<td>0.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High vs. low attendance, $\gamma_{60}$</td>
<td>-0.652 ***</td>
<td>-0.320 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year slope, $\gamma_{61}$</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>-0.007 ***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Control variables\(^a\)

- **Political ideology**, $\gamma_{70}$: -0.128 ***
- **Party ID**, $\gamma_{70}$: -0.020 ***
- **Education**, $\gamma_{90}$: 0.085 ***
- **Age**, $\gamma_{10}$: 0.003 ***
- **Black**, $\gamma_{11}$: -0.019
- **Other race**, $\gamma_{12}$: -0.063 *
- **Female**, $\gamma_{13}$: 0.021
- **Married**, $\gamma_{14}$: -0.095 ***
- **Divorced/widowed**, $\gamma_{15}$: -0.037

Notes: See Table 1 for Level-1 n. Level-2 n = 38. Variables in bold italics have been group-mean centered at level 1. *** p < .001; ** p < .01; * p < .05, two-tailed tests.

\(^a\) Coefficients estimated with no random level-2 effect.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parameter</th>
<th>Abortion</th>
<th>Sex</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Elective</td>
<td>Traumatic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative Protestant (CP) intercept, $\gamma_{00}$</td>
<td>1.460 ***</td>
<td>2.643 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year slope, $\gamma_{01}$</td>
<td>-0.004</td>
<td>-0.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainline/CP gap, $\gamma_{10}$</td>
<td>0.385 ***</td>
<td>0.167 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year slope, $\gamma_{11}$</td>
<td>-0.006</td>
<td>-0.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal/CP gap, $\gamma_{20}$</td>
<td>0.540 ***</td>
<td>0.230 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year slope, $\gamma_{21}$</td>
<td>-0.006</td>
<td>-0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic/CP gap, $\gamma_{30}$</td>
<td>0.248 ***</td>
<td>0.092 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year slope, $\gamma_{31}$</td>
<td>-0.004</td>
<td>-0.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other/CP gap, $\gamma_{40}$</td>
<td>0.760 ***</td>
<td>0.164 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year slope, $\gamma_{41}$</td>
<td>-0.002</td>
<td>-0.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None/CP gap, $\gamma_{50}$</td>
<td>0.695 ***</td>
<td>0.130 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year slope, $\gamma_{51}$</td>
<td>-0.004</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High vs. low attendance, $\gamma_{60}$</td>
<td>-0.548 ***</td>
<td>-0.285 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year slope, $\gamma_{61}$</td>
<td>-0.002</td>
<td>-0.009 ***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interactions: high attendance times:

| Mainline, $\gamma_{70}$ | -0.078 | 0.162 ** | -0.126 | 0.025 |
| Year slope, $\gamma_{71}$ | 0.000 | -0.007 | -0.001 | -0.007 |
| Liberal, $\gamma_{80}$ | 0.201 | 0.197 * | -0.018 | 0.226 |
| Year slope, $\gamma_{81}$ | -0.001 | 0.004 | 0.007 | 0.004 |
| Catholic, $\gamma_{90}$ | -0.384 *** | -0.352 *** | -0.168 | 0.045 |
| Year slope, $\gamma_{91}$ | 0.011 ** | 0.010 ** | 0.008 | 0.010 * |
| Other, $\gamma_{10}$ | -0.184 | 0.029 | -0.857 ** | 0.229 |
| Year slope, $\gamma_{10_1}$ | 0.004 | 0.002 | 0.022 | -0.010 |

Control variables:

Political ideology, $\gamma_{11}$ | -0.127 *** | -0.074 *** | -0.155 *** | -0.121 *** |
Party ID, $\gamma_{12}$ | -0.021 *** | -0.022 *** | -0.027 *** | -0.017 *** |
Education, $\gamma_{13}$ | 0.085 *** | 0.040 *** | 0.079 *** | 0.034 *** |
Age, $\gamma_{14}$ | 0.003 *** | 0.000 | -0.006 *** | -0.016 *** |
Black, $\gamma_{15}$ | -0.022 | -0.135 *** | -0.243 *** | 0.196 *** |
Other race, $\gamma_{16}$ | -0.063 | -0.081 ** | -0.208 *** | -0.180 *** |
Female, $\gamma_{17}$ | 0.021 | 0.000 | 0.194 *** | -0.200 *** |
Married, $\gamma_{18}$ | -0.096 *** | -0.004 | -0.201 *** | 0.017 |
Divorced/widowed, $\gamma_{19}$ | -0.041 | 0.023 | -0.104 *** | 0.219 *** |

Notes: See Table 1 for Level-1 n. Level-2 n = 38. Variables in bold italics have been group-mean centered at level 1. *** p < .001; ** p < .01; * p < .05, two-tailed tests.

*Coefficients estimated with no random level-2 effect.
Appendix B: Figures 1 – 3.

Figure 1. Unadjusted Trends in Attitudes toward Divisive Social Issues, by Religious Group: GSS, 1972 to 2010
Figure 2. Unadjusted Trends in Attitudes toward Divisive Social Issues, by Attendance Group: GSS, 1972 to 2010
Figure 3. Covariate-adjusted Trends in Attitudes toward Divisive Social Issues, by Religious and Attendance Group: GSS, 1972 to 2010