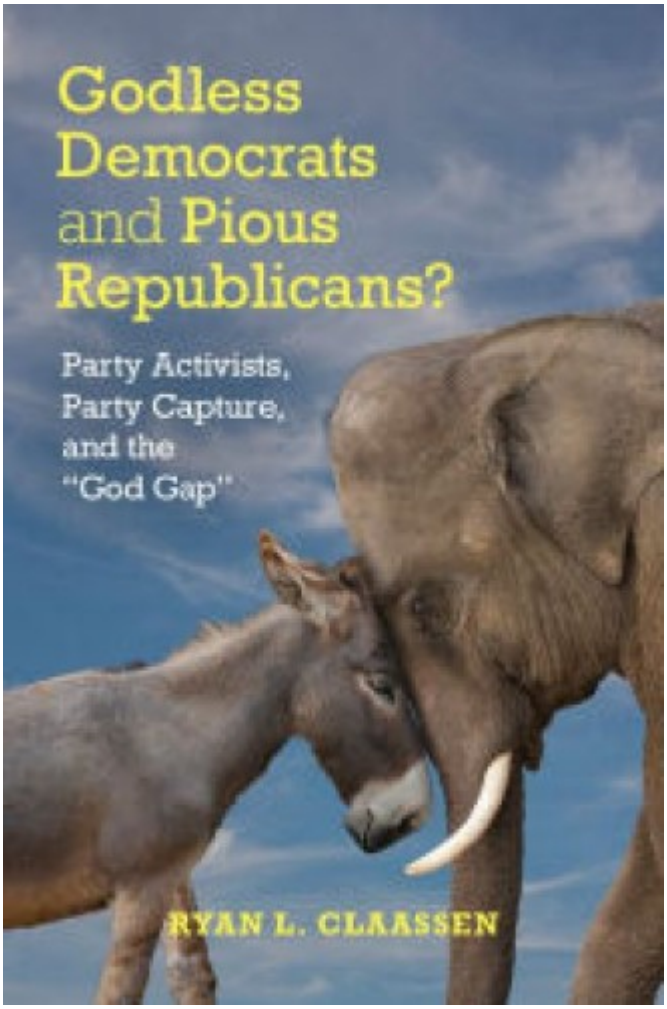
Political activism and the God gap

by James Guth in the February 3, 2016 issue

In Review



Godless Democrats and Pious Republicans?

By Ryan L. Claassen
Cambridge University Press

Over the past two decades the “God gap” has been a popular trope among political journalists. Republicans are churchgoers; Democrats are secular. For the academically inclined, this division reproduces the American culture wars made

famous by sociologist James Davison Hunter. And as Ryan Claassen notes in this sensible book, political and academic combatants alike often resort to conspiracy theories to explain the gap: Democrats claim that the Christian right mobilized hordes of religious extremists, capturing the GOP and reconfiguring its agenda to match their own regressive social ideas. Republicans reply that the Democratic Party is in the thrall of secularists conducting a war on religion, hell-bent on eliminating the influence of faith in the public square.

Ryan Claassen wants to root out this mythology of the God gap and debunk conspiratorial explanations of its origins. He juxtaposes two theories about the causes of partisan religious divisions. The group mobilization perspective, dominant in political science, stresses the leadership of activists in party transformation. In this view, the Christian right mobilized an enormous body of new activists, pulling the GOP to the right and attracting religious voters with traditionalist postures on abortion, gay rights, and other culture war issues. This invasion triggered a countermovement of secular (and often, secularist) activists into the Democratic Party, who attracted their own like-minded voters, creating the gap between faithful Republicans and faithless Democrats.

Claassen rejects this account for both empirical and normative reasons. First, it ignores the numerous party faithful who do not fit the portrait, such as religious Democrats and secular Republicans. Even worse, belief in the God gap and its origins in one-sided mobilizations might actually become a self-fulfilling prophecy, leading Americans to sort themselves politically in the very way the image suggests. As a more helpful alternative, Claassen offers a representation-based approach, arguing that party activists emerge from, rather than create, each party’s electoral base. The appropriate question is: Do party activists accurately reflect voting constituencies? If they do, the result accords with democratic theory—and belies the claims of conspiracy theorists.

Claassen tests the two approaches, using the American National Election Studies from 1960 to 2008. He classifies anyone who performs at least two political acts during an election as an activist. If the representation theory is correct, the shifting distribution of party activists over that period should reflect changing demographics, as well as turnout rates and partisan loyalty. If the mobilization approach is correct, disproportionate rates of activism, indicative of group mobilization, should account for the distribution, but only if such activism cannot be explained by social changes such as upward mobility.

Claassen finds convincing support for the representation-based approach, rather than the group mobilization perspective. Starting with the anchor groups for the supposed God gap, he shows that evangelical gains in the GOP stem from rising numbers of evangelicals in the electorate, increased voting rates, and greater loyalty to the GOP—not from surges in activism. Secular activists are more numerous among Democrats for identical reasons: more secular voters, higher turnout rates, and growing Democratic loyalty. Again, there is no evidence for disproportionate mobilization.

Mainline Protestant activism has been decimated in both parties because of declining numbers in general and, in the GOP case, fading loyalty. Catholics have held their numbers but divide by ethnicity, with white Catholics infusing the GOP while declining among Democrats, a loss that is offset somewhat by new Hispanic entrants. For African-American Protestants, numbers have changed little, turnout has increased modestly, and loyalty remains strongly Democratic. Here mobilization does play a significant role, as activists proliferated during Barack Obama's 2008 candidacy.

All this analysis is readable, methodologically sophisticated, and usually convincing. The book would benefit, however, from a little more transparency about its limits. Not only does the small activist population of the ANES preclude analysis of smaller but politically active traditions, such as Judaism and Mormonism, the ANES also lacks items on religious beliefs.

This deficiency proves especially problematic when Claassen attacks Hunter's argument that religious traditionalism underlies the God gap. Claassen has to rely on church attendance, a behavioral measure, to assess traditionalism, a theological concept. Although he finds that membership in specific traditions (not religious traditionalism) still structures partisan divisions, other studies have shown that direct religious belief items do a much better job of distinguishing partisans than church attendance does—which suggests caution about his conclusion.

The book would also benefit from deeper engagement with other studies. Although Claassen's treatment of other scholars is eminently fair, he does not always fully grapple with their work. Surveys of state and national party delegates, political contributors, and local party workers have often provided strong evidence for the group mobilization perspective, at least in some places and in some election years. To cite just two examples, the disproportionate number of secular delegates at the

1972 Democratic convention and Christian conservatives at the 1988 GOP conclave suggest more “capture” than Claassen admits. Careful comparison of studies with different targets, with varying methodologies, and from different years might provide additional insights into the validity of the two approaches he evaluates.

It is unclear to me why the religious gap between Republican and Democratic activists—and it does exist—is less troubling if it accurately represents voters rather than targeted mobilizations. If religious polarization among activists and voters is undesirable, it is undesirable regardless of its origins.

These criticisms do not minimize the significant contributions of Claassen’s fine work, which is full of small and large insights on the current state of American religious politics. If Claassen’s analysis often strains unduly toward normatively satisfying results, sympathetic readers can at least identify with his motive and learn from his efforts.