

**Irreligious Representation: An Examination of Atheist/Agnostic  
Democrats' Substantive Representation in State Policy Outcomes  
(2007 – 2014)**

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## **Introduction**

### **Abstract**

*The goal of this differences-in-differences observational study was to determine the degree to which atheist and agnostic Democrats' interests were represented in state policy outcomes relative to other Democrats in states with unified Democratic control in at least one year between 2007 and 2014. The analysis was performed using linear regressions of changes to nineteen state policy outcomes against whether the state had a unified Democratically controlled government in at least one year between 2007 and 2014. In comparing the degree of policy changes against the differences in stated interests of atheist/agnostic Democrats and other Democrats, a scatter plot was produced to model the relative substantive representation of these two groups. Based on the weakly positive relationship between the magnitude of atheist/agnostic support for a policy and a change in the policy between 2007 and 2014, I concluded that atheist/agnostic Democrats received slightly greater substantive representation of their interests relative to other Democrats.*

### **Background**

In 2014, there were an estimated 22.3 million Americans who identified as atheist or agnostic (Pew Forum 2015). Atheists and agnostics are the two major irreligious groups in the United States. These groups are characterized in their religious belief by their disbelief in a supernatural world, God or gods, or a heavenly afterlife (Pew Forum 2015). In addition to their distinctly irreligious beliefs, atheism and agnosticism shape these groups' moral beliefs, social attitudes, and political behavior. The typical atheist is a well-off, urban white male in his twenties (Edmondson 1995; Mahlamaki 2012; Zuckerman et al. 2016). While the Republican

Party has increasingly become associated with wealthier white male voters over the last thirty years, the irreligious subset of this social group has rejected conservatism and aligned themselves squarely within the most liberal wing of the modern Democratic Party (Zuckerman et al. 2016). To explain what has driven two seemingly similar groups, religious white males and irreligious white males, to opposite ends of the political spectrum, social scientists have pointed to a particularly salient identity in American life – religious identification. As the Republican Party aligned itself with Evangelical Christianity in the 1980s on a number of issues such as abortion, gay rights, and welfare, irreligious Americans (who view and are viewed by evangelicals extremely negatively) began to disaffiliate with the Republican Party (Pew Forum 2017; Zuckerman et al. 2016).

Even as atheists and agnostics have largely abandoned the Republican Party and increasingly aligned themselves with the Democratic Party, very few Democratic elected officials are “like” atheists and agnostics in terms of religious identification. Elected officials of both major political parties overwhelmingly affiliate with a religion, most frequently a Protestant Christian denomination (Wald and Brown 2014). While the modern Democratic Party can boast of some religious diversity in Congress with Catholic, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, and Muslim representatives, you can still count on one hand the number of openly atheist, agnostic, and nonaffiliate Democrats who have ever served in Congress (Pew Forum 2015; Jenkins 2014). The Democratic Party seldom rolls out the red carpet for nonbelievers, but particularly when it comes to supporting irreligious political candidates. I began to wonder why atheists and agnostics would align with the Democratic Party whose candidates and elected officials seemingly represented far less about them with regard to a number of demographic factors (such as race,

class, and gender) than those in the Republican Party. From that curiosity, this research project was born.

In addition to my personal interest in irreligious politics, atheist/agnostic representation is a subject of academic importance with relevance to political candidates, political parties, and governments. First and foremost, representation is broadly recognized as extremely important to governments and their citizenry (Pitkin 1967). Most all modern governments claim to represent their people, at least to some extent. An accurate understanding of representation is critical to evaluating these claims, specifically when it comes to minority groups like atheists and agnostics. Determining who receives representation and how is central to evaluating any claims of representativeness by governments, political parties, and/or elected officials. Furthermore, the existing academic literature surrounding atheists/agnostics is limited, dated, and sometimes inaccurate. It is necessary to supplement the existing research on irreligious politics, particularly when we consider that the rapid growth in atheist/agnostic populations over the last thirty years indicates that these groups will play increasingly important roles in American politics in years to come. As political scientists, we should take these sweeping demographic changes as evidence of the need for an accurate and in-depth examination of irreligious groups' place within American political life.

### **My Contribution to Existing Research**

Something has driven irreligious Americans to identify overwhelmingly with the Democratic Party in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but it's certainly not descriptive representation of atheists/agnostics in elected office. Assuming irreligious voters act rationally when participating in political processes like partisan affiliation and voting, there must be something else the

Democratic Party provides these groups other than actually electing atheist/agnostic candidates to political office. Although descriptive representation is a powerful indicator in determining which constituencies make palatable candidates for the sake of winning elections, it does *not* fully encapsulate what it means to be “represented”. To determine how the Democratic Party has attracted irreligious voters into their coalition, we must supplement existing research focusing on descriptive representation with analyses of non-descriptive forms of representation. These non-descriptive forms of representation might act as a mechanism that signals a place for irreligious voters within the Democratic Party sans atheist/agnostic elected officials. After reviewing past work regarding irreligious representation in the United States, I have identified a gap in the academic literature with respect to the *substantive* representation of atheist/agnostic Democrats. While I do not argue against the indisputable fact that atheist/agnostic descriptive representation falls far below their proportion of America’s overall population, I believe there is more to any story of representation than the demographic makeup of our legislatures. Through this project, I seek to analyze atheist/agnostic Democrats’ substantive representation in states with unified Democratic control in at least one year between 2007 and 2014 to help determine how atheists/agnostics garner representation in the United States.

## Theory

### **Religion and American Politics**

A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things which unite all those who adhere to them into one single moral community (Durkheim, 1912). Since the nation's inception, Americans have looked to the Christian faith for a sense of shared heritage, national ritual, and cultural coherence; in fact, the unique intensity of American religiosity can be attributed to the fact that many Americans have found in Christianity the cultural experiences which are absent in wider American society (Wald and Brown, 2014; Schielke 2013). Americans find the Christian faith "comfortable" because it fits in well with cultural values about freedom of choice and individual initiative (Lipset 1967). Researchers have estimated that there are between 255,000 and 345,000 churches (congregations) with more than 150 million adherents in the United States (Grammich 2012; Hadaway and Marler 2005).

The United States is considered to be the most religious industrial democracy today (Wald and Brown, 2014). Although an outlier in its religiosity relative to other industrial nations, the United States has still undergone notable secularization over the last thirty years. American religiosity briefly spiked in the late 1970s and 1980s but has been on a steady decline ever since (McCaffree 2017; Voas and Chaves 2016). There are undeniable signs of religious erosion, such as increasing disbelief in God, declining church attendance, and increasing disaffiliation among the American populace (Hecht 2003). These trends have only accelerated during the 21<sup>st</sup> century with the marked growth in the population of religious nonaffiliates, seculars, atheists, and agnostics among those under 30 (Kosmin et al. 2009; Zuckerman et al. 2016). However, even with these high growth rates among irreligious minority groups over the last fifty years,



Christianity still remains the dominant religion in the United States. Approximately two in three Americans self-identify as Christian (Wald and Brown 2014; Pew Forum 2015).

The members of the major American religious groups usually share regular social interaction, common status, and a distinctive way of life. Adherents share similar ways of looking at the world in what is referred to as a “group mind” (Wald and Brown, 2014). This group mind has a significant effect on religious adherents, who come to understand right and wrong not only by the shared standards of their community, but by what their religious texts, deities, and leaders have revealed as moral doctrine to live by. For this reason, religion is widely recognized as a highly salient component of ideological identity among Americans (Wald and Brown, 2014; Wald 1989; Legee and Kellstedt 1993). Even when controls are applied for other social traits like race/class/gender, differences in political identity remain significant among various religious groups (Wald 1989; Legee and Kellstedt 1993). In the political sphere, religious identity is one of the most powerful predictors of partisanship in the modern United States. Devout Christians tend towards the Republican Party and the less devout and non-Christians tend towards the Democratic Party in a political divide referred to as the “God Gap” (Wald and Brown 2014; Guth et al. 2006, Pew Forum 2015).

The intersections found between religion, culture, and politics explain the intensity that accompanies some political issues (Wald and Brown 2014). In elections, religious groups consistently exhibit distinctive priorities, attitudes, and positions on issues (Guth et al. 2006). Intense controversy is generated by contemporary social issues such as gay marriage and abortion because religious communities maintain deeply held perspectives not only on personal morality, but also on the scope and purposes of the political community (Legee et al. 2002). Highly religious persons tend to believe in one true moral order, and these individuals demand

that other citizens and the government further that moral order. This steadfastness leads many religious individuals to dislike and distrust groups with rival perspectives (Leege et al. 2002).

In principle, the United States is a politically secular state. However, religious issues have frequently challenged the normal system of governance because these types of issues often do not lend themselves to compromise (Wald and Brown 2014). Pushing for a policy because it emanates from a divine authority— particularly in the form of a personal message from God— can end productive political dialogue because the person making such a claim will dismiss an opponent as inherently wrong by a standard which their opposition does not accept (Walk and Brown, 2014). Exacerbating these challenges, political discourse has become increasingly religiously theatrical since the 1970s (Kaylor 2010). Modern political candidates have demonstrated their faith to voters with increasing frequency through publicized prayer, church attendance, religiously-themed public addresses, and/or visits to sacred religious sites (Domke and Coe 2008; McCaffree 2017). Religion is infused in the modern American political system.

### **Irreligion: Atheists, Agnostics, Seculars, and Non-Affiliates**

Secular scholars have recently established specific academic nomenclature to use when describing the nonreligious. In *The Nonreligious (2016)*, sociologist Phil Zuckerman and his colleagues set out the following definitions for atheists, agnostics, seculars, and nonaffiliates. Nonaffiliates do not belong to any specific religious denomination, though they may or may not hold personal religious beliefs. Seculars are characterized as being “unconcerned” with personal religious beliefs, though they generally oppose mixing religious belief with public activity like governance. Atheists are nonaffiliated seculars who explicitly deny belief in a supernatural world. Agnostics are very similar to atheists in that they almost always don’t believe in a

supernatural world; however, agnostics differ from atheists in that they claim an outright denial of the supernatural is beyond human understanding. Atheists and agnostics are the two largest religious identities that exhibit “active irreligion” rather than the “passive nonreligion” of nonaffiliates and seculars.

I have chosen to focus my analysis on self-identified atheists and agnostics, which means including non-affiliate Democrats with the “Other Democrat” comparison group. Lumping non-affiliate and secular Democrats with irreligious Democrats waters down important differences between these two groups. Just as there are notable differences between the dogmatically religious and the somewhat religious, there are many differences between non-affiliates and the actively irreligious (Zuckerman et al, 2016; Sherkat 2014; Baker and Smith 2015). For example, in past surveys approximately one-quarter of seculars reported that religion was important in their lives, and 60 percent indicated that they prayed (ANES, 2008). However, when atheist and agnostic respondents are disaggregated from the general secular label, a drastic decrease in religious behavior and belief is observed (ANES, 2008). Furthermore, some religious nonaffiliates are essentially open to religiously affiliating but just haven’t found the right church yet (Vernon, 1968). Many Americans nonaffiliates are attached in some way to a religious perspective, if not a specific denomination (Baker and Smith 2009). There are distinct differences in the religious behavior of non-affiliates and atheists/agnostics; thus, for the purpose of my analysis, it does not make sense to lump them together.

Socialization accounts for why most people are not religious. When children are raised in either nonchalantly secular or actively irreligious families, they tend to remain secular as they grow up (Baker and Smith 2009). Apostates are individuals who held a religious identity at some point in their lives, but no longer do (Bromley 1988). Between increasing rates of both secular

socialization and religious apostasy, the American atheist/agnostic population has exploded in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (Pew Forum 2015). Some research has estimated the current irreligious population in the United States to be somewhere between 12-21% of the overall population, representing the highest rates of irreligion ever recorded in the United States (American Religious Identification Survey 2009). The religiously unaffiliated, including atheists and agnostics, have become the fastest growing major religious segment of the last thirty years, with no evidence of slowing down anytime soon (Pew Forum 2015; Zuckerman et al, 2016).

The fastest secularizing group of Americans come from educated, higher-income backgrounds and are overwhelmingly young white men (Edmondson 1995; Kosmin 2013; Putnam and Campbell 2010; McCaffree 2017). Of those who identify as atheist or agnostic, 64% are male and 36% are female (Baker and Smith 2015). This demographic is arguably the most protected from threat and instability in American society, as educated, high-income white men are unlikely to be faced with marginalization stemming from racism, sexism, and/or poverty. As a result, this social group feels disproportionately emboldened to throw off the shackles of traditional religious dogma, voluntarily taking on stigmatizing identities like “atheist” (Sherkat 2014; Baker and Smith 2015; McCaffree 2017).

Americans who tend to be institutionally vulnerable tend to be more religious—female, Southern, African Americans with a high school degree or less, and a household income of under \$35,000 are both the most structurally vulnerable and the most religious group in the United States (Froese and Bader 2010; Sherkat 2014; Zuckerman et al. 2016). The exception to this is that being part of the LGBTQ+ community, while marginalizing, often contributes to religious apostasy because these individuals feel (or are explicitly made) unwelcome in religious groups.

Homosexuals and bisexuals are nearly three times more likely to be atheist or agnostic than heterosexuals (Linneman and Clendene 2010).

Geographic locations that contain high proportions of “vulnerable” people, whether the vulnerability stems from racism, economic depression, high crime rates or other factors, display a more religiously committed citizenry compared to geographic areas containing people who are less vulnerable (Zuckerman et al. 2016). For example, states in the United States with higher crime rates, poverty rates, teen pregnancy rates and unemployment rates are also the most religious. States like Louisiana, Arkansas, Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, South Carolina, Tennessee and Oklahoma are consistently the most religious, while states like Maine, Vermont, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Oregon and New Hampshire are consistently the least religious (Zuckerman et al. 2016).

### **The Irreligious and American Politics**

Academic literature surrounding atheist/agnostic politics most often is centered around the fact that these groups suffer *extremely* low descriptive representation in legislatures. A disproportionate number of policymakers at the federal, state, and even local level have attached themselves to a religious identity, with only two notable exceptions at the federal level (Jenkins 2014; Pew Forum 2015). Existing research has already done an excellent job illustrating why openly atheist and agnostic politicians are such a rarity, even as their share of the overall population has expanded beyond that of other religious groups like the Jews, Hindus, and Buddhists who all had representatives in the 114<sup>th</sup> Congress (Pew Forum 2015).

Atheists and agnostics are widely considered to be the black sheep of the American religious family; accordingly, these individuals have faced specific challenges in receiving

descriptive representation. For example, atheists are currently barred from serving in elected offices by eight state constitutions<sup>1</sup>. Today, these legal barriers are considered dead law (see *Torcaso v. Watkins, 1961*); however, these exclusionary provisions are just one of the more obvious manifestations of the broader effort to marginalize the irreligious from American politics. Not limited to dead law, the political exclusion of irreligious Americans has been imposed through widespread cultural beliefs and practices.

The stereotype of the immoral atheist is deeply entrenched among religious Americans. Most Americans spend their entire lives immersed in a culture that carelessly and consistently equates religious belief and practice with morality (Zuckerman et al. 2016). The irreligious do not belong to a religious community and are not beholden to the moral expectations of God; for this reason, religious Americans often (incorrectly) believe that atheists and agnostics have no moral standards for themselves (Gervais et al. 2011; Gervais and Norenzayan 2012). Numerous surveys have shown that religious Americans believe atheists are likely to be criminals: specifically, Americans believe atheists to be murderers and purveyors of rape, incest, and bestiality (Gervais et al. 2011; Gervais 2014). Religious individuals are more likely to rate someone as being more agreeable and conscientious if that person is depicted as being religious compared to an identical atheist (Galen et al. 2014). When two individuals behave identically, the nonreligious one is labeled as less moral, personable, and conscientious than the religious one (Galen et al. 2014). These social attitudes are a one-way street – the nonreligious show little preference for fellow nonreligious individuals over religious ones (Bobkowski and Kalyanaraman 2010; Galen et al. 2014) The existing body of research indicates that there is something distinctly dislikeable about atheism to religious people in the United States.

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<sup>1</sup> See the State Constitutions for: Arkansas, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee and Texas.

The view that irreligiosity is an undesirable, even disqualifying, attribute for politicians contributes to the high discrepancy between the proportion of irreligious individuals residing in the United States and the number of openly atheist/agnostic elected officials. Not only would most Americans not vote for an openly atheist presidential candidate, they'd rather vote for a Jewish, African American or gay president before even considering an atheist (Edgell et al. 2006). With the visceral disgust many Americans display to the irreligious in mind, it becomes easy to understand why so few atheists/agnostics have been elected to political office. Although one-fifth of adults are not affiliated with any particular religion, only one member of the 114th Congress, Krysten Sinema, stated that she was religiously unaffiliated (Pew Forum 2015).

Though the apparent picture of irreligious representation in America seems bleak, there are signs that the irreligious have begun exerting greater political influence in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The nonreligious population has grown exponentially over the last thirty years, and with it there has also been significant growth among atheist/secular groups in the United States, such as the American Humanist Association (Cimino and Smith 2014). Although negative views of atheists and agnostics still broadly permeate American society, analyses of General Social Survey data from 1972 to 2008 show steadily rising acceptance of the irreligious (Putnam and Campbell 2010). Social network and media exposure to the less religious or nonreligious have reduced distrust of atheists (Hunter 2010). A slim majority of U.S. adults (56%) now say it is not necessary to believe in God to be a moral being, reflecting both a continued growth in the irreligious population overall and changing attitudes towards the irreligious among religious affiliates (Smith 2017). Meaningful changes to the social standing of the irreligious are not yet reflected in descriptive political representations, but perhaps irreligious Americans have exerted their political influence in other ways in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## Representation

Representation is the act of recreating something that is not actually present – in politics, this frequently means electing and/or appointing representatives to act on behalf of constituents, whether in governments, political parties, interest groups, etc. There are several different ways in which representation can be accomplished. Descriptive representation is thought to be the most obvious form of representation, as it depends on a representative's characteristics being the same as a specific constituency's characteristics (Pitkin 1967). For example, a black elected official might be thought to be representing all black constituents under a model of descriptive representation. The representative does not necessarily need to *act* for those that their characteristics represent; they must simply “stand for” that group in the legislature (Pitkin 1967). The idea here is that if a representative government is supposed to be a more feasible substitute for direct democracy, it should approximate the populace as closely as possible (Pitkin 1967). Descriptive representation is incredibly important because it increases trust in government and political participation among adequately represented groups by making that group “feel” represented in decision-making (Burden, 2007).

Studies of representativeness will often immediately assume that a certain element in the population is inadequately represented simply because not many legislators are of this element themselves. This supposition has certainly held true for researchers of atheist/agnostic representation in the United States. However, theorists of political representation have also argued that characteristics of elected officials who enact statutes are significant *only* when they bear some relation to legislative behavior, affecting the content or form of laws (Pitkin 1967; Hyneman 1968). Descriptive representation cannot capture the full breadth of what it means to be politically represented, particularly in the United States. While descriptive representation



matters as a powerful indicator of representativeness in society, it is not the *only* meaningful way political representation occurs; thus, a comprehensive analysis of representativeness must not be restricted to the descriptive characteristics of legislatures alone.

Substantive representation defines a representative's role as "speaking for and acting on behalf of" the interests of their respective constituencies (Pitkin 1967). In this model of representation, the essence of representing is in the activity of legislating itself, rather than intrinsically tied to the legislator. Under theories of substantive representation, an elected official whose descriptive characteristics do not match a constituencies' characteristics is still able to represent that constituency by pushing forward their interests via legislation. A good example of substantive representation occurring even in the absence of descriptive representation would be a Catholic Senator like Tim Kaine voting against a 20-week abortion ban so as to represent the interests of a pro-choice constituency instead of representing white Catholic men, who largely approve of restrictions to abortion (Wald and Brown 2014; Pew Forum 2015). There are several mechanisms by which substantive representation occurs in the United States, but the two most critical to understand in the context of atheist/agnostic representation are promissory representation and coalition building strategies of political parties.

Promissory representation is a form of substantive representation that works through the explicit and implicit promises that political candidates make to their electorate during political campaigns (Mansbridge 2003). If these promises are not met in office, the electorate can sanction the representative in the next election for failing to represent their interests. In the American system of governance, legislators are largely bound to act in accord with their political party (Pitkin 1967). The party presumably has a coherent, easily accessible platform on issues; by electing members of a certain party, voters express their wishes on this platform and expect these

wishes to be fulfilled if and when legislators enter office. Individual legislators are bound to a party's platform because of the promissory expectations of constituents (Pitkin, 1967). This phenomenon has been observed with increasing frequency in recent legislative sessions. Between 1980 and 2004, both Democratic and Republican lawmakers in Congress voted in accordance with their platforms 82 percent of the time (Payne 2008). Even if individual legislators do not represent some aspect of the larger party coalition (such as religious identity), they can be encouraged (or coerced) by the party-at-large to vote in line with the larger coalition's platform. Under a model of promissory representation, irreligious Democratic voters might be able to hold religious elected Democrats accountable for their legislative actions by tying them to a broader party-building agenda that promises to substantively represent irreligious interests.

In the United States, regionally diffused minorities often turn to a political party to help advance their substantive interests. Nearly all elections use single member districts with first-past-the-post, winner-take-all majority rules (Mansbridge 2003). Under these electoral rules, regionally diffuse minorities who are unable to win a plurality in any single district could theoretically end up with no representation at all in legislatures (Mansbridge 2003). For example, LGBT Americans make up ~5% of the overall population and are somewhat evenly dispersed across the entire United States. While LGBT individuals are seldom able to win even a plurality in elections on their own, almost the entire Democratic Party has provided this group with representation by substantively forwarding LGBT interests, such as marriage equality, in an effort to draw this group into the larger party coalition. LGBT Americans and the Democratic Party each benefit from this mutually beneficial relationship, as the Democratic Party expands its vote share while giving LGBT Americans favorable policy outcomes, even as a minority faction. Through coalition-building, regionally diffuse minorities can exert influence over policy

outcomes by working within a larger party apparatus. Like LGBT Americans, atheists and agnostics are a somewhat regionally diffused minority group. Even if an elected official comes from a religious background, their dependence on public support for reelection can motivate that elected official to legislate with the preferences of other religious (or irreligious) constituencies in mind (Wald and Brown 2014). Thus, while atheists/agnostics struggle to win elections themselves, irreligious groups benefit from representation in policy outcomes via coalition-building mechanisms within the Democratic Party.

While theories of substantive representation generally focus on legislative activity, in the broader practice of governance in the United States, Americans are also represented by nonelected, non-legislative representatives in parties, interest groups, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), the media, and the citizenry itself (Mansbridge, 2011). Inequalities in some of these realms of representation can be counterbalanced by representation in others, although in practice inequalities tend to cumulate (Mansbridge, 2011). With these alternate models of representation in mind, it becomes clear that an examination of irreligious representation narrowed in scope to singularly focus on descriptive representation ignores the complex ways in which political actors are able to substantively represent elements of their constituency. To determine whether atheists/agnostics are truly underrepresented in American society, an examination of substantive representation of irreligious interests must be added to existing literature regarding descriptive representation.

### **The Irreligious and the Democratic Party**

In his first inaugural speech, newly elected Democratic President Barack Obama described the United States as a nation of “Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus – and

nonbelievers.” This was the first time that an American president had (in a positive manner) acknowledged nonbelievers’ place within American society in a public forum (Zuckerman et al. 2016). Reflecting the rapid growth of accepting attitudes towards the irreligious, Americans gave atheists an overall feeling thermometer rating of 50/100 in the Pew’s 2017 “Feeling Thermometer Survey”, up four points in only three years. While this still leaves atheists as the most disliked major religious group alongside Muslim-Americans, among Democrats and Democratic-leaning, the average feeling thermometer towards atheists was a lukewarm 57/100 (Pew Forum 2017). Atheist and agnostic Americans have found a somewhat welcome home among the Democratic Party during the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

American political parties are composed of networks of activists, donors, and the general public. The major American political parties are primarily described as “Vote-Seeking” and “Office-Seeking” under rational theories of two-party behavior (Strom 1990). Political parties do not focus on individual elections in a vacuum; instead, they seek to maximize their probability of victories across contests in multiple districts (Robertson 1976). The major American political parties are structured in such a way that new candidates, new movements, and new ideas are allowed to find a place, reinvigorating the parties themselves (Coffey et al. 2014).

Since the 1980s, the Republican Party has branded itself as the party of traditional values, signaling their moral virtues to attract conservative Christians. Over the past thirty-five years, an increasing number of politicians in the Republican Party have embraced a conservative Christian agenda that seeks to make abortion illegal, fights against gay rights (particularly gay marriage), supports religious involvement in governance, advocates “abstinence-only” sex education, opposes stem cell research, calls for cuts to social assistance, and celebrates the war on terror (Wald and Brown 2014; Zuckerman et al, 2016). The religious revival of the Republican Party

has led to a backlash among the nonreligious in the United States. Many American religious apostates cite their support of gay marriage, their opposition to the invasion of Iraq, and their overall disagreement with the Christian Right's political agenda as prompting their apostasy (Baker and Smith 2015; Zuckerman et al, 2016; Putnam and Campbell 2010).

Black Protestants, Muslims, Jews, a plurality of Catholics, and the nonreligious have come to make up the modern Democratic coalition (Greenberg and Wald 2001; Hanna 1984; Wald and Brown 2014; Mangum 2007). 73% of atheists claim Democrat affiliation or lean Democratic, with the vast majority identifying as ideologically liberal (Pew Forum 2012; Pew Forum 2015). While atheists and agnostics have overwhelmingly aligned themselves with the Democratic Party in recent years, religious Democrats have only hesitantly accepted the irreligious into their party coalition. Anti-atheist attitudes still permeate the Democratic Party, though to a significantly lesser degree than the American population at large. For example, 42% of Democrats say they would not vote for an atheist presidential candidate, reflecting the challenge atheist/agnostic candidacies still face getting on Democratic tickets (Gallup 2012b).

The dominant religious wing of the Democratic Party has made some efforts to distance itself from its atheist/agnostic base, viewing the group as a potential political liability. For example, in 2012 President Obama and other religious Democrats harshly criticized the exclusion of the word "God" from the Democratic Party's national platform, forcing its reintroduction after religious groups and right-wing media framed the Party as "Godless" (Wald and Brown 2014). For religious citizens who believe that God should have a major role in political discourse, a platform with no references to God can signal that the Democratic Party would not respect or incorporate their religious values in office (Wald and Brown 2014). Striking a delicate balance, the Democratic Party and its candidates often "narrowcast" their messages

using coded language and symbols that resonate with the faithful while not alienating less religious voters (Weber and Thornton 2012; Calfano and Djupe 2009; Domke and Coe 2008). While some Democratic state party platforms, such as Washington's 2016 platform, explicitly mention atheist/agnostic religious minorities, the national platform makes no mention of nonbelievers in the Democratic Party (Democratic Platform 2016). The Democratic Party's treatment of irreligious constituents in messaging has been noncommittal, displaying the organization's hesitance to overtly welcoming irreligious voters, particularly at the risk of alienating religious Democrats.

Although religious and irreligious Democrats currently have a somewhat cold relationship, one trend that is likely to continue is the growing political coalition between religious Democrats and atheist/agnostic Americans. Despite the absence of shared metaphysics and anti-atheist sentiments, religious Democrats and the irreligious hold similar political views on economic issues (Zuckerman et al, 2016). When interests are able to gain leverage within a political party, it becomes easier for them and the policies they favor to find institutional expression (Steigenga and Coleman 1995). Having slowly become a central component of the Democratic base, but still struggling to garner descriptive representation, the irreligious may well be leveraging their increasing political importance to gain favorable substantive policy outcomes. Through an analysis of changes in state policy outcomes in states with unified Democratic control in one or more year between 2007 and 2014, I will examine the degree to which irreligious Democrats' interests have been substantively represented relative to other Democrats.

## Research Design

### **Research Question**

In state governments with unified Democratic control for at least one year between 2007 – 2014, how did measured changes in state policy outcomes represent the interests of atheist/agnostic Democrats relative to other Democrats?

### **Hypothesis**

I hypothesize that atheist and agnostic Democrats will have received disproportionate substantive representation via changes in policy outcomes over the last decade in states with unified Democratically controlled governments, even while their descriptive representation remains incredibly low. I believe that the Democratic Party will have recognized that openly atheist/agnostic candidates struggle to win elections due to negative perceptions among voters. Therefore, the Democratic Party will strongly prefer to run religious candidates to maximize the likelihood of electoral victory. However, the size of the American irreligious population, which currently makes up ~14% of the overall American population (Pew Forum 2015), has made the irreligious an attractive addition of the Democratic coalition. I hypothesize that the Democratic Party will have acted rationally with these two considerations in mind, courting atheist/agnostic voters via disproportionate representation in substantive policy outcomes to make up for a lack of atheist/agnostic candidates. In state policy outcomes, this hypothesis would be observed as disproportionate changes between 2007 and 2014 to the policy outcomes which yield greater support from atheist/agnostic Democrats than other Democrats.

## Data

Three data sources were utilized to test my hypothesis: the Pew Religious Landscape Surveys from 2007 and 2014, the “State Party Composition” data set, and The Dynamics of State Policy Liberalism, 1936– 2014 Online Appendix. All three data sets were accessed online.

The Pew Religious Landscape Survey<sup>2, 3</sup> is a nationally representative telephone survey of ~35,000 adults in the United States that was conducted for the first time in 2007, and then for a second time in 2014. Respondents were asked a number of questions about their religious identity, beliefs, and practices. In addition, respondents were asked questions regarding their social attitudes, political views, and partisanship. Other demographic information like gender, race, and age was also collected.

The State Party Composition<sup>4</sup> data set produced by the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCLS) has collected the partisan makeup of state governments, including both legislators and the governorship, between 1997 and 2018. Particularly useful for my purpose of sub-setting changes to policy outcomes to Democratically controlled states, this data set codes for whether states did/did not have a unified Democratic government in a specific year.

The Dynamics of State Policy Liberalism, 1936– 2014 Online Appendix by Devin Caughey and Christopher Warshaw tracks changes to an exhaustive number of state policy outcomes. This data set captures an expansive number of policy outcomes including, but not limited to: tax policy, welfare benefit levels, reproductive policies, environmental regulations, and anti-discrimination laws. While not all policies are tracked across the entire date range, 70 state policy outcomes measured are within the time frame of my analysis (2007 – 2014).

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<sup>2</sup> 2007 Religious Landscape Survey Data: <http://www.pewforum.org/dataset/u-s-religious-landscape-survey/>

<sup>3</sup> 2014 Religious Landscape Survey Data: <http://www.pewforum.org/dataset/pew-research-center-2014-u-s-religious-landscape-study/>

<sup>4</sup> State Party Composition: <http://www.ncsl.org/research/about-state-legislatures/partisan-composition.aspx>



## **Research Design – Section I: Political Beliefs/Social Views of Irreligious Democrats vs. Other Democrats**

To test my hypothesis, a somewhat lengthy pre-analysis was necessary. Ultimately, I sought to compare the relative degree of representation of irreligious Democrats' interests against the representation of other Democrats' interests in state policy outcomes; unfortunately, there has been no analysis of the differences between these two groups during my time frame (to my knowledge). To generate a set of differences in policy interests between these two groups of Democrats, I needed data on political beliefs/social attitudes broken down by religious identification and partisan identification. The Pew Religious Landscape Studies from 2007 and 2014 provided the best available resource for studying religious politics in the United States. The 2007 and 2014 Religious Landscape Studies each surveyed over 35,000 Americans from all fifty states, collecting information on the respondents' religious identity, partisan identification, and beliefs on a number of policy/social attitude questions. Importantly, the Religious Landscape Survey differentiates between atheists, agnostics, and "Nothing in Particular" respondents, whereas many other surveyors lump these groups together under the umbrella of "Seculars".

After extracting the 2007 and 2014 Religious Landscape Study data sets, I trimmed each data set so as to include only variables relevant to my analysis, including religious identification, partisan identification/partisan lean, and questions regarding social attitudes and political views. These trimmed data sets can be found online with accompanying codebooks<sup>5</sup>. Most variables removed involved respondents' religious behavior, such as frequency of prayer or church attendance, as these questions fall outside the scope of my analysis.

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<sup>5</sup> [https://drive.google.com/drive/u/0/folders/1nrg-nQ80kWUbf\\_ONZdZUDZDZPntyUMm](https://drive.google.com/drive/u/0/folders/1nrg-nQ80kWUbf_ONZdZUDZDZPntyUMm)

Tabulations were performed on each remaining Religious Landscape Survey social/political attitude variable<sup>6</sup> with an atheist/agnostic comparison group and an “Other” comparison group. The Religious Landscape Studies asked respondents for their political identification, including a follow-up question for “Independent” respondents about which party they lean towards. The comparison groups were both subset to only include Democratic or Democratic leaning identifiers. The tabulations depict the proportion of responses for Democrats/Democrat-leaning broken down into two groups: atheist/agnostic Democrats and “identifier” Democrats, who represent all non-atheist/agnostic Democratic respondents. An example of one tabulation regarding preferences for legal abortion can be found here:

Q.B21. Do you think abortion should be...?	Identifies as atheist or agnostic?		
	Identifier	Atheist/agnostic	Total
Legal in all cases	25.7	46.8	27.9
Legal in most cases	39.2	45.7	39.9
Illegal in most cases	19.2	4.4	17.7
Illegal in all cases	11.8	1.7	10.8
(VOL) Don't know/Refused	4.1	1.5	3.8
Total	100	100	100

*Figure 1: Example of Policy Belief/Social Attitude – Raw Tabulation*

To determine the magnitude of difference between atheist/agnostic Democrats and other Democrats on this tabulation, the affirmative responses, “Legal in all cases” and “Legal in most cases”, were combined into one figure:

Q.B21. Do you think abortion should be...?	Identifies as atheist or agnostic?		
	Identifier	Atheist/agnostic	Total
Legal in all/most cases	64.9	92.5	67.8

*Figure 2: Example of Policy Belief/Social Attitude – Combined Tabulation*

<sup>6</sup> Code to make tabulations can be accessed here: [https://drive.google.com/drive/u/0/folders/1R1k0-OQKXoLK8REc\\_KreSbhyxA1bX11n](https://drive.google.com/drive/u/0/folders/1R1k0-OQKXoLK8REc_KreSbhyxA1bX11n)

At this point, the atheist/agnostic affirmative response on legal abortion (92.5%) was subtracted by the affirmative response on legal abortion from other Democrats (64.9%) to produce the difference in the two groups' view on legalized abortion (27.6%). This process was repeated for each political belief/social attitude variable and organized into a table in order of magnitude. This table, along with my interpretations, can be found in Section I of my Data Analysis.

### **Research Design – Section II: Unified Democratic State Governments 2007 – 2014**

To determine how the Democratic Party represented its constituencies between 2007 and 2014 in state policy outcomes, it was necessary to determine which states were controlled by Democrats during this time interval. In unified Democratic state governments (meaning there was Democratic-controlled legislature and Governorship), it is reasonable to assume that state policy outcomes will reflect the Democrats' efforts at representing their constituency. It is not reasonable to assume that the Democratic Party will be able to represent their constituents' interests through state policy outcomes in Republican controlled governments, and it's questionable whether Democrats would be able to do so in split governments. Thus, to answer the question of how the Democratic Party represents atheist/agnostic Democrats relative to other Democrats on substantive state policy outcomes, I consider how policies changed in states with unified Democratically controlled states for at least one year between 2007 and 2014.

I generated a list of states with unified Democratic control in every year between 2007 and 2014 using the State Party Composition data set produced by the NCSL. This list can be found in Section II of my data analysis.

### **Research Design – Section III: Effect of Unified Democratic State Government on Changes in Policy Outcomes from 2007 – 2014**

To determine how the political beliefs and social attitudes of atheist/agnostic Democrats from Section I of my analysis were represented by the Democratic Party between 2007 and 2014, a quantifiable measure of substantive representation was necessary. The Dynamics of State Policy Liberalism, 1936– 2014 Online Appendix<sup>7</sup> (Caughey and Warshaw 2016) is a data set measuring changes to an array of state policy outcomes between 1936 and 2014. This data set was the perfect way to determine how state policy outcomes had changed between 2007 and 2014 in the United States.

The Dynamic of State Policy Liberalism Online Appendix measures a total of 148 state policy outcomes that occurred in at least one state sometime between 1936 and 2014. Just over half of these state policy outcomes did not fall into the time frame I’m working inside (2007 – 2014) so they could not be included in my analysis. Unfortunately, there were also a number of state policy outcomes that had no quantifiable measure to compare against policy beliefs/social attitudes pulled from the Religious Landscape Studies. For example, while atheists and agnostics are known to be strong supporters of animal rights based on past research (Zuckerman, 2016), the state policy outcome “Cruelty to Animals” could not be included in this analysis because there was no way to quantify the difference between atheist/agnostic Democrats and other Democrats on this issue based on questions asked in the Religious Landscape Studies. Severely limited by the questions asked to respondents in the Religious Landscape Studies, 51 further state policy outcomes had to be discarded. This left only nineteen policy outcomes from the original 148, which I created a separate codebook for<sup>8</sup>. While it would have been better to

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<sup>7</sup> [http://cwarshaw.scripts.mit.edu/papers/CaugheyWarshaw\\_Policy\\_Dynamics150303.pdf](http://cwarshaw.scripts.mit.edu/papers/CaugheyWarshaw_Policy_Dynamics150303.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Codebook: [https://drive.google.com/drive/u/0/folders/1NPediDLdNjXtnLlzJepwGe\\_VKGOiKN\\_N](https://drive.google.com/drive/u/0/folders/1NPediDLdNjXtnLlzJepwGe_VKGOiKN_N)

include all policy outcomes measured between 2007 and 2014, at least there is variance in the remaining policies that captures several social, economic, and environmental policy outcomes. The remaining nineteen state policy outcomes touch on issues such as abortion rights, environmental regulations, integration of immigrant populations, welfare eligibility levels, LGBT rights/protections, and the passage of state Religious Freedom Restoration Acts.

After extracting the state policy outcome data from 2007 to 2014 on these nineteen issues for each of the fifty states<sup>9</sup>, a “Change in Policy” variable was created using the following criteria (anti-employment discrimination law is used as an example):

- A state that added a policy to protect gay citizens from employment discrimination in 2007 or later which remained in effect until 2014 would be coded as a “1”.
- A state that made no change on this policy would be coded as a “0”.
- A state that changed this policy in 2007 or later but then reversed the policy change by 2014 would be coded as a “0”.
- A state that removed an anti-discrimination policy that had existed prior to 2007 would be coded as a “-1”.

The policies regarding welfare eligibility levels and payouts were recoded from changes in dollar amounts to changes in direction using the following criteria<sup>10</sup> (TANF payout is used as an example):

- A decrease in TANF payouts in 2014 from 2007 would be coded as a “-1”
- No change to payout levels between 2014 and 2007 would be coded as “0”
- An increase in payouts would be coded as “1”.

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<sup>9</sup> R Code to Extract: [https://drive.google.com/drive/u/0/folders/1NPediDLdNjXtnLlzJepwGe\\_VKGOiKN\\_N](https://drive.google.com/drive/u/0/folders/1NPediDLdNjXtnLlzJepwGe_VKGOiKN_N)

<sup>10</sup> Recode can be found in “State Policy Regressions” R Code: [https://drive.google.com/drive/u/0/folders/1NPediDLdNjXtnLlzJepwGe\\_VKGOiKN\\_N](https://drive.google.com/drive/u/0/folders/1NPediDLdNjXtnLlzJepwGe_VKGOiKN_N)

To analyze the effect of unified Democratic government on the remaining nineteen state policy outcomes, a data set was created to combine the changes in state policy outcomes with the list of years in which specific states were controlled by a unified Democratic government between 2007 and 2014<sup>11</sup>. Two new variables were created to analyze the effect of having a unified Democratic state government on changes in the state policy outcomes: “ever.unified” and “years.unified”. The ever.unified variable was set to equal 1 for all the states controlled by a unified Democratic government in at least one year between 2007 and 2014. If ever.unified equals 0, this indicates that the state never had unified Democratic control between 2007 and 2014. The years.unified variable measures how many years a state had unified Democratic control between 2007 and 2014. Each of these new variables is used to regress changes in state policy outcomes against unified Democratic control.

In the first set of analyses, linear regressions were run with each state policy outcome on the ever.unified variable<sup>12</sup>. For example, the regression of changes in access to emergency contraceptives (“w\_ec\_access”) across states on the ever.unified variable was coded in R as:

```
> mod01 <- lm(formula = change.in.policy ~ ever.unified,
+             subset = variable == "w_ec_access", data = StatePolicyDataForTrent)
> mod01
```

```
Call:
lm(formula = change.in.policy ~ ever.unified, data = StatePolicyDataForTrent,
    subset = variable == "w_ec_access")
```

```
Coefficients:
(Intercept)  ever.unified
-0.11111      0.06944
```

The intercept produced by this module (-0.11111) shows that in states that never had a unified Democratic state government between 2007 and 2014, policy moved on average towards restricting access to emergency contraceptives. The coefficient of ever.unified (.06944)

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<sup>11</sup> “StatePolicyDataforTrent”: <https://drive.google.com/drive/u/0/folders/1jZIyigo96w73ZfDa6WiO789nNa2YaU2u>

<sup>12</sup> “State Policy Regressions”: <https://drive.google.com/drive/u/0/folders/1jZIyigo96w73ZfDa6WiO789nNa2YaU2u>

represents how the policy changed in states that ever had unified Democratic control between 2007 and 2014 relative to that intercept. On this policy, having a Democratically controlled state government for at least one year between 2007 and 2014 reduced the movement towards restricting access to emergency contraceptives by an average of .06944, which represents a shift in the liberal direction according to the Dynamics of State Policy Liberalism, 1936 – 2014 Online Appendix codebook. The same process used on this state policy outcome was repeated for each of the nineteen state policy outcomes. The nineteen coefficients generated were coded into a data frame and plotted into a graph that can be observed in Section III of the data analysis.

The process used in the first regression analysis of the ever.unified variable on each state policy outcome was repeated with the years.unified variable. For example, the regression of changes in access to emergency contraceptives (“w\_ec\_access”) on the years.unified variable was coded in R as:

```
> mod21 <- lm(formula = change.in.policy ~ years.unified,  
+ subset = variable == "w_ec_access", data = StatePolicyDataForTrent)  
>  
> mod21
```

```
Call:  
lm(formula = change.in.policy ~ years.unified, data = StatePolicyDataForTrent  
, subset = variable == "w_ec_access")
```

```
Coefficients:  
(Intercept)  years.unified  
-0.091269      0.006356
```

The coefficients in this second analysis calculates the effect each year of unified Democratic control had on changes to the state policy outcome relative to an intercept representing average policy changes in states that never had unified Democratic control<sup>13</sup>. The nineteen coefficients generated were coded into a data frame and plotted onto a graph that can be observed in section III of the data analysis.

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<sup>13</sup> “State Policy Regressions”: <https://drive.google.com/drive/u/0/folders/1jZlYigo96w73ZfDa6WiO789nNa2YaU2u>

It is worth noting at this point that negative coefficients indicate that policies were, on average, being removed in states between 2007 and 2014. Negative coefficients do *not* imply movement in a conservative direction. The same is true of positive coefficients – adding a policy does not always indicate shifts in the liberal direction. For example, the effect of ever.unified on making English the official language of a state (“Immigration English Language”) is positive, even though this is generally considered a conservative policy. In the next section of my analysis, I standardize all of the coefficient values so that positive coefficients indicate changes to policy in the liberal direction, and negative in the conservative direction.

#### **Research Design – Section IV: Hypothesis Tests**

I hypothesized that atheist and agnostic Democrats will have received disproportionate substantive representation via changes in policy outcomes over the last decade in states with unified Democratically controlled governments. There are several possible outcomes to my data analysis that would lead me to either confirm or reject my hypothesis.

- If a positive relationship is observed between the magnitude of atheist/agnostic Democrats’ preference for a policy and the coefficient of that policy change between 2007 and 2014 in ever unified DEM states, this provides evidence to support my hypothesis. A positive relationship indicates that there was greater substantive representation of atheist/agnostic Democrats relative to other Democrats between 2007 and 2014.
- If no relationship is observed between the magnitude of atheist/agnostic Democrats’ preference for a policy and the coefficient of that policy change between 2007 and 2014 in ever unified DEM states, this would lead me to reject my hypothesis. No



relationship indicates that there was equal substantive representation of atheist/agnostic Democrats relative to other Democrats between 2007 and 2014.

- o If a negative relationship is observed between the magnitude of atheist/agnostic Democrats’ preference for a policy and the coefficient of that policy change between 2007 and 2014 in ever unified DEM states, this would lead me to reject my hypothesis. A negative relationship indicates that there was less substantive representation of atheist/agnostic Democrats relative to other Democrats between 2007 and 2014.

To test my hypothesis, I needed to compare how policy outcomes changed in states (Section III) with at least one year of unified Democratic states control (Section II) against the difference between atheist/agnostic Democrats’ and other Democrats’ preference for the policy (Section I). To perform this analysis, each policy outcome was matched against its closest policy belief/social attitude variable from the Section I comparison of atheist/agnostic Democrats vs. other Democrats. The following policy beliefs/social attitudes were actually used in my analysis because they matched the most closely with one or more policy outcome measured:

<u>POLICY BELIEF/SOCIAL ATTITUDES</u>	<u>ATH/AG DEMS VS. OTHER DEMS (DIFFERENCE IN %)</u>
FAVOR OR STRONGLY FAVOR SAME SEX MARRIAGE	32.3
HOMOSEXUALITY SHOULD BE ACCEPTED BY SOCIETY	31.3
ABORTION LEGAL IN ALL/MOST CASES	27.6
CHURCHES SHOULD KEEP OUT OF POLITICAL MATTERS	24.1
THE GROWING POPULATION OF IMMIGRANTS IS A CHANGE FOR THE BETTER	20.2
STRICTER ENVIRONMENTAL REGULATIONS	19.4
GOVERNMENT AID TO THE POOR DOES MORE GOOD THAN HARM	16.1

*Figure 3: List of Policy Beliefs/Social Attitudes Used in Section IV Analysis*

These edited social/policy beliefs don't exactly match up to each of the nineteen state policy outcomes measured; however, the policy outcomes were matched to the closest policy/social belief available from the Religious Landscape Study. For example, acceptance of homosexuality in society (31.3 difference in percentage points between atheists/agnostics and other Democrats) was matched against anti-discrimination employment laws for gay individuals. The assumption I am making is that an individual who believes homosexuality should be accepted in society is also going to be supportive of anti-discrimination employment laws.

Having matched policy outcomes to their appropriate policy belief/social attitude, I produced a table ordered from the most positive ever.unified coefficient to the most negative ever.unified coefficient. I changed the signs of coefficients when necessary so that all positive coefficients indicate that the effect of unified Democratic government moved the policy in the liberal direction, whereas negative coefficients indicate the policy has moved in the conservative direction. For example, the positive coefficient measured in the regression of "Immigration English Language" was flipped from positive to negative, as this change represents something against atheist/agnostic Democrats' interest. This table was then used to produce a scatter plot which assesses the relationship between my dependent variable (ever.unified coefficients) and my independent variable (atheist/agnostic Democrats' interests relative to other Democrats' interests) using a linear regression. Ultimately, the relationship observed in this scatter plot will answer my research question and provide the necessary evidence for me to accept or reject my initial hypothesis.

**NOTE:** In my analysis in Section III, I regressed on two independent variables: ever.unified and years.unified. The years.unified variable better captures the effect that having multiple years of

Democratic control can have on changes to policy outcomes; unfortunately, it is not a linear variable. With the linear regression analysis I employ, it is not appropriate to use a variable that is not linear. There are almost certainly diminishing returns to unified Democratic control on policy outcomes, meaning each year unified might produce fewer substantive changes than the last. For this reason, I have not included the years.unified variable in Section IV of my data analysis. I ultimately have based my conclusions off of the regression analysis which uses the ever.unified variable. A more advanced non-linear analysis is necessary to produce an appropriate analytical model using the years.unified variable, but this is outside both the scope of this project and my personal quantitative capabilities at this point in my academic career.

**DATA ANALYSIS:**

**Section I: Comparison of Political Beliefs/Social Views Between Atheist/Agnostic**

**Democrats and Other Democrats**

The purpose of this section of the data analysis is to determine the differences between atheist/agnostic Democrats and other Democrats. Using data from the 2007 and 2014 Religious Landscape Studies, tabulations were produced to compare these two groups on 24 variables regarding social attitudes or political beliefs. I have organized the results into the following table by magnitude of difference between atheist/agnostic Democrats and other Democrats:

<b><u>POLICY BELIEF/SOCIAL ATTITUDE</u></b>	<b><u>ATH/AG DEMS VS. OTHER DEMS</u></b>
EVOLUTION EXPLAINS HUMAN ORIGINS – AGREE OR MOSTLY AGREE (2007)	36.1
LIBERAL OR VERY LIBERAL IDEOLOGY (2007)	35.1
FAVOR OR STRONGLY FAVOR SAME SEX MARRIAGE (2014)	32.3
HOMOSEXUALITY SHOULD BE ACCEPTED BY SOCIETY (2007)	31.3
LIBERAL OR VERY LIBERAL IDEOLOGY (2014)	31.0
HUMANS AND OTHER LIVING THINGS EVOLVED OVER TIME (2014)	29.3
GOVERNMENT IS GETTING TOO INVOLVED IN PROTECTING MORALITY (2007)	28.9
ABORTION LEGAL IN ALL/MOST CASES (2007)	28.5
ABORTION LEGAL IN ALL/MOST CASES (2014)	27.6
LOOKS TO RELIGIOUS TEACHINGS/BELIEFS FOR MORAL GUIDANCE (2014)	-27.0
HOMOSEXUALITY SHOULD BE ACCEPTED BY SOCIETY (2014)	26.3
CHURCHES SHOULD KEEP OUT OF POLITICAL MATTERS (2007)	24.1
LOOKS TO RELIGIOUS TEACHINGS/BELIEFS FOR MORAL GUIDANCE (2007)	-22.9
MORE KIDS OUT OF WEDLOCK IS A CHANGE FOR THE WORSE (2014)	-22.2
GROWING POPULATION OF IMMIGRANTS A CHANGE FOR THE BETTER (2014)	20.2
STRICTER ENVIRONMENTAL REGS (2014)	19.4
STRICTER ENVIRONMENTAL REGS (2007)	18.0
GOVERNMENT AID TO THE POOR DOES MORE GOOD THAN HARM (2014)	16.1
BELIEVE THE COUNTRY SHOULD BE ACTIVE IN WORLD AFFAIRS (2007)	15.2
BELIEVE DIPLOMACY IS THE BEST WAY TO ENSURE PEACE (2007)	13.4
WOMEN ENTERING WORKFORCE A CHANGE FOR THE BETTER (2014)	12.6
HARD WORK DETERMINES SUCCESS (2007)	-9.5
GOVERNMENT SHOULD BE BIGGER, PROVIDE MORE SERVICES (2014)	1.2
GOVERNMENT SHOULD BE BIGGER, PROVIDE MORE SERVICES (2007)	0.9

*Figure 4: List of Policy Beliefs/Social Attitudes and Relative Atheist/Agnostic DEM Support*

This table quantitatively measures the differences between the beliefs of atheist/agnostic Democrats and non-atheist/agnostic Democrats on a set of policy/social issues and attitudes. Based on this table, there are several issues which deeply divide atheist/agnostic Democrats from other Democrats. Unsurprisingly, atheist/agnostic Democrats are much more likely to believe in evolution as a means to explain human origins than their religious counterparts, who tend to believe in theories of creationism. Atheist/agnostic Democrats also oppose government involvement in morality and church involvement in politics to a greater degree than other Democrats. Atheist/Agnostic Democrats are much more likely to embrace a liberal or very liberal ideology, which is also reflected in substantially greater support for abortion rights, gay rights/marriage equality, and immigration. On environmental issues, atheist/agnostic Democrats are still more liberal than other Democrats, but to a less drastic degree when compared to questions of social policy/attitudes. Atheist/agnostic Democrats report greater support for involvement in world affairs, especially when it comes to peace through diplomacy. On economic issues, there was significant overlap between atheist/agnostic Democrats and other Democrats. In particular, atheist/agnostic and other Democrats have the most overlap when it comes to the scope and size of government they prefer. Both groups report support for social services, though atheists/agnostics are somewhat more likely to say government aid does more good than harm. Overall, irreligious Democrats and other Democrats broadly agree on issues of economic policy, somewhat agree on the value environmental regulations, but are divided on a number of social policies like gay rights and legalized abortion.

## Section II: Unified Democratic State Governments 2007 – 2014

The purpose of this section is to determine which states had unified Democratic control, and in what years, between 2007 and 2014. Using data from the NCLS State Party Composition data set, I determined that 24 states had unified Democratic control in at least one year between 2007 and 2014. I have organized these results in the following table in alphabetical order:

**States with Unified Democratic Control by Year (2007 – 2014)**

STATE	YEAR OF UNIFIED DEM CONTROL	TOTAL YEARS OF DEM CONTROL
ARKANSAS	2007, 2009 – 2012	5
CALIFORNIA	2011 – 2014	4
COLORADO	2007 – 2010, 2013 – 2014	6
CONNECTICUT	2011 – 2014	4
DELAWARE	2009 – 2014	6
HAWAII	2011 – 2014	4
ILLINOIS	2007 – 2014	8
IOWA	2007 – 2010	4
LOUISIANA	2007	1
MAINE	2007 – 2010	4
MARYLAND	2007 – 2014	8
MASSACHUSETTS	2007 – 2014	8
MINNESOTA	2013 – 2014	2
MONTANA	2007	1
NEW HAMPSHIRE	2007 – 2010	4
NEW JERSEY	2007 – 2009	3
NEW MEXICO	2007 – 2010	4
NEW YORK	2009 – 2010, 2014	3
NORTH CAROLINA	2007 – 2010	4
OREGON	2007 – 2010, 2013 – 2014	6
RHODE ISLAND	2014	1
VERMONT	2011 – 2014	4
WASHINGTON	2007 – 2012	6
WEST VIRGINIA	2007 – 2010	4

*Figure 5: States with Unified Democratic Control by Year(s) Controlled Between 2007 – 2014*

### Section III: Effect of Unified Democratic State Government on Changes in Policy

#### Outcomes from 2007 – 2014

The purpose of this section is to determine the effect that unified Democratic governments between 2007 and 2014 had on changes to that states' policy outcomes. Using data from the Dynamics of State Policy Liberalism Online Appendix in a linear regression analysis, I determined that states with unified Democratic control experienced different policy changes than states that did not have unified Democratic control between 2007 and 2014. The average effect of ever having a unified Democratic control of government on each state policy outcome have been organized in the following graph:

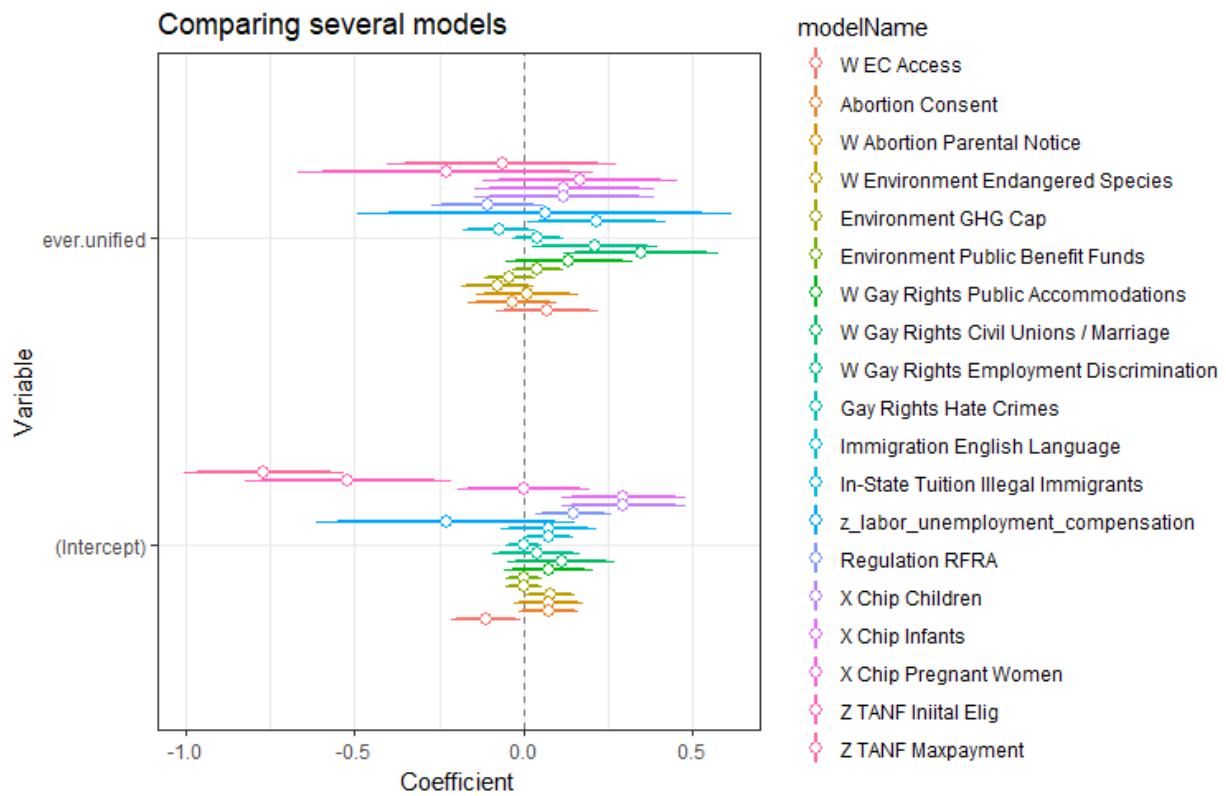


Figure 6: Ever.Unified Coefficients and Intercepts for Changes in State Policy Outcomes

Based on this table, some preliminary conclusions can be drawn. First, there appears to be little movement on abortion policy and environmental regulations. The initial TANF eligibility level

and max payment both decreased; however, CHIP eligibility levels all increased. Policies regarding gay marriage and protections against discrimination had large, positive coefficients.

In addition to the analysis using the ever.unified variable, the average effect of each year of unified Democratic control of government on each state policy outcome have been organized in the following graph:

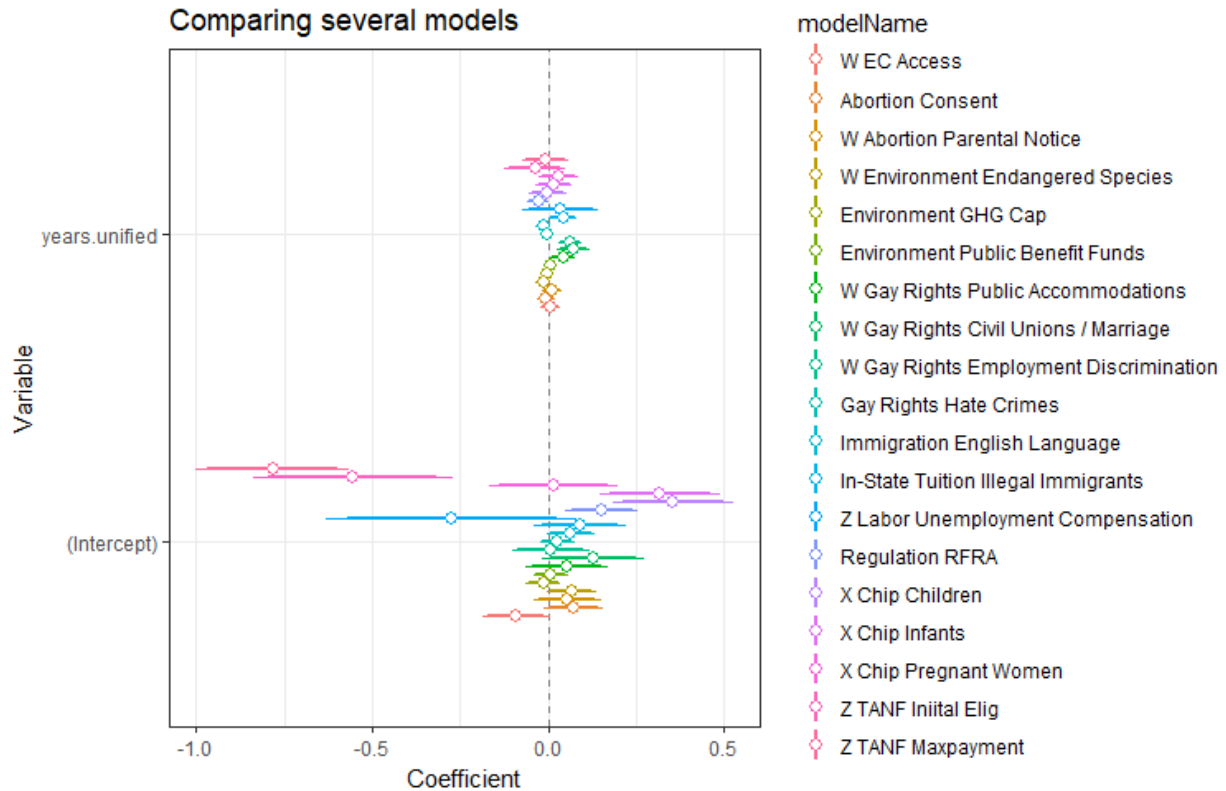


Figure 7: Years.Unified Coefficients and Intercepts for Changes in State Policy Outcomes

Almost the exact same conclusions can be drawn from this graph as the first graph using the ever.unified variable. The only difference is that the coefficients are all significantly smaller because the effect of unified government is being split across up to eight years in some cases.



## Section IV: Hypothesis Tests

The purpose of this section is to test my hypothesis that the relative degree of atheist/agnostic Democrats' substantive representation in state policy outcomes would be greater than that of other Democrats. The following table was produced by matching the ever.unified regression coefficients from Section III to the most closely related policy belief/social attitude from Section I of the data analysis:

VARIABLE	COEFFICIENT (EVER.UNIFIED)	ATH/AG VS OTHER DEMS	POLICY BELIEF/SOCIAL ATTITUDE
W_GAYRIGHTS_CIVILUNIONS_MARRIAGE	0.3472	32.3	Favor/Strongly Favor Same-Sex Marriage
IMMIGRATION_INSTATE_TUITION_ILLEGALIMMIGRANTS	0.21759	20.2	Growing Population of Immigrants is Good
W_GAYRIGHTS_EMPLOYMENT_DISCRIMINATION	0.21154	31.3	Homosexuality should be accepted by society
X_CHIP_PREGNANTWOMEN	0.167	16.1	Gov should do more to help the needy
W_GAYRIGHTS_PUBLIC_ACCOMODATIONS	0.13426	31.3	Homosexuality should be accepted by society
X_CHIP_INFANTS	0.1204	16.1	Gov should do more to help the needy
X_CHIP_CHILDREN	0.1204	16.1	Gov should do more to help the needy
REGULATION_RFRA	0.1065	24.1	Churches out of Politics
IMMIGRATION_ENGLISH_LANGUAGE	0.07407	20.2	Growing Population of Immigrants is Good
W_EC_ACCESS	0.06944	27.6	Abortion Legal in All/Most Cases
Z_LABOR_UNEMPLOYMENT_COMPENSATION	0.0641	16.1	Gov should do more to help the needy
GAYRIGHTS_HATECRIMES	0.04167	31.3	Homosexuality should be accepted by society
ENVIRONMENT_PUBLICBENEFIT_FUNDS	0.04167	19.4	Stricter Environmental Regulations
ABORTION_CONSENT_1992_2014	0.03241	27.6	Abortion Legal in All/Most Cases
W_ABORTION_PARENTAL_NOTICE_1983_2014	-0.009259	27.6	Abortion Legal in All/Most Cases
ENVIRONMENT_GHG_CAP	-0.04167	19.4	Stricter Environmental Regulations
Z_TANF_MAXPAYMENT	-0.0641	16.1	Gov should do more to help the needy
W_ENVIRONMENT_ENDANGERED_SPECIES	-0.07692	19.4	Stricter Environmental Regulations
Z_TANF_INITIALELIG	-0.23	16.1	Gov should do more to help the needy

Figure 8: Matched State Policy Outcomes and Policy Beliefs/Social Attitudes

This table was used to create the following scatter plot comparing the coefficients of the regression analysis on ever.unified with the difference between atheist/agnostic Democrats and other Democrats on the most closely related policy belief/social attitude:

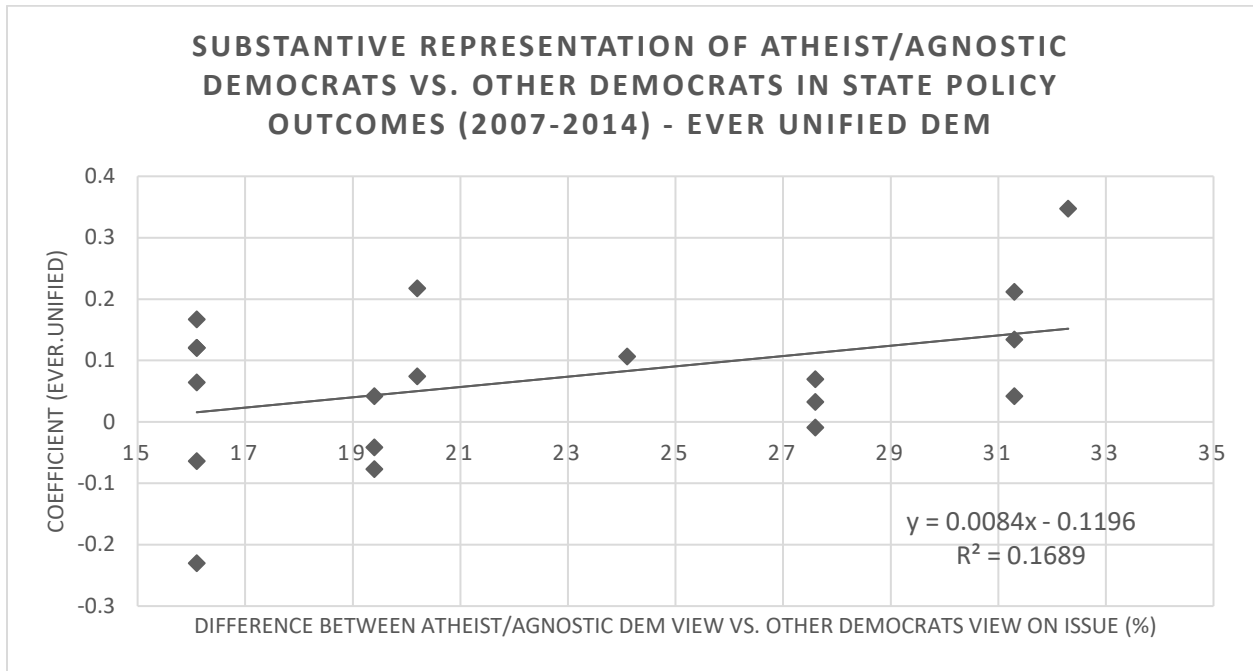


Figure 9: Scatter Plot of Ever.Unified Coefficients vs. Relative Atheist/Agnostic DEM Support

In this scatter plot, a weakly positive relationship is observed between the difference in atheist/agnostic support for an issue and changes in policy outcomes in states with unified Democratic control in at least one year between 2007 and 2014. The equation produced by the linear regression predicts that for state policy outcome coefficients in states with a unified Democratic government in at least one year between 2007 and 2014, each additional percentage of atheist/agnostic Democrats support for a policy relative to other Democrats will increase the coefficient of that policy .0084 units from an intercept of -.1196. However, there is a relatively low  $R^2$  value (.1689), and therefore the accuracy of this model for any individual policy is questionable.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this project was to examine the degree to which the Democratic Party substantively represents its irreligious constituency's interests relative to their larger religious constituency. Atheist and agnostic voters overwhelmingly associate themselves with the Democratic Party, but openly irreligious Americans are rarely elected to local, state, and federal offices even in very liberal states (Secular Elected Officials 2017). One major goal of my research was to determine whether or not the same lack of atheist/agnostic descriptive representation would be mirrored in underrepresentation of atheist/agnostic interests in state policy outcomes. Through an analysis of changes to policy outcomes in states that experienced a unified Democratic government for at least one year between 2007 and 2014, I conclude that atheist/agnostic Democrats actually received slightly greater substantive representation of their socio-political interests compared to other Democrats.

In Section I of my data analysis, I sought to determine whether or not there were significant differences between the political and social beliefs of atheist/agnostic Democrats compared to other Democrats. Analyzing the Pew Religious Landscape Studies from 2007 and 2014, significant differences were measured between the two groups on a number of issues. Atheist and agnostic Democrats were much more likely to identify as liberal or very liberal than other Democrats, and this liberal ideology is particularly apparent on social issues. Atheist/Agnostic Democrats reported far greater support for abortion, gay rights, and immigrants than other Democrats. On economic issues, such as expanding government aid to the needy and balancing environmental regulations with economic growth, atheists and agnostic Democrats still exhibited greater support for the liberal positions (more aid and regulations) than other Democrats, but to a lesser degree.

According to my analysis, Democrats across the religious spectrum seem united mostly in their view of what the proper scope and size of the government should be. However, it is apparent that these two groups are cleaved on social issues, particularly abortion and gay rights, by religious identification. There were a few possible conclusions that could be drawn from my research. If state policy changed to reflect more liberalized economic/environmental policy but *not* more liberalized social policy in unified Democratically controlled states, then this would indicate that atheist/agnostic interests were being substantively underrepresented. Observing the opposite scenario (little to no liberalization on economic/environmental policy and liberalization on social policies) would indicate that atheists and agnostics were actually garnering disproportionate substantive representation in state policy outcomes relative to other Democrats. Liberalization of both economic, environmental, and social policies would indicate that atheist/agnostic Democrats had received somewhat equal representation to other Democrats. Another unlikely possibility was that having a Democratically-controlled state government would not shift policies in the liberal direction (perhaps even regressing) on economic, environmental, and social policies. In this scenario, both irreligious and religious Democrats would be receiving little to no substantive representation by the party they identify with.

After plotting the nineteen change.in.policy coefficients against the measured political differences between atheist/agnostics and other Democrats, I performed a simple linear regression on the scatter plot. This regression displays a weakly positive relationship between atheist/agnostic beliefs and state policy outcomes in states that were ever unified Democratic between 2007 and 2014. The state policy outcomes that most shifted in a liberal direction were related to gay rights, immigrant rights, rollback of state Religious Freedom Restoration Acts, and CHIP eligibility levels. Based on these results, my initial hypothesis that atheists/agnostics would

receive disproportionate substantive representation in Democratically controlled state government policy outcomes was correct (to a slight degree).

Further work needs to be done to confirm the results found within my thesis, particularly considering some confounds and uncertainties present in the data analysis. One concern I have with my data analysis is that the date range, 2007 – 2014, captures the change between pre-recession and post-recovery policies. Unfortunately, there wasn't another range that I could have analyzed without moving outside the years where I could confidently quantify atheist/agnostic Democrats' social and political beliefs as documented in the Pew Religious Landscape Studies from 2007 and 2014. For this reason, I am limited to analyzing a period of time where drastic economic changes likely impacted programs like TANF and CHIP, which makeup five of my nineteen state policy outcomes. States' economic policies were probably greatly impacted by this period of recession, but I find it unlikely that there were significant changes to Democrats' ability to pass liberal social policies, such as legalized same-sex marriage, which are nearly cost-free. The impact of the Great Recession presents a confound by influencing some of the state party outcomes independently of unified Democratic control of state governments.

Another issue I ran into in the data analysis was that the Pew Religious Landscape Studies doesn't ask respondents a lot of specific policy questions. The Dynamics of State Policy Liberalism, 1936– 2014 Online Appendix has 70 policies measured from 2007 – 2014; however, all but nineteen of these policy outcomes had to be omitted from my analysis because there was no relevant question asked of respondents in the Religious Landscape Study to compare that policy outcome against. For example, I am *extremely* confident that the animal rights policies in the Appendix would have shown disproportionate support from atheist/agnostic Democrats, as atheists and agnostics are known animal rights activists and make up a disproportionate amount

of the vegan/vegetarian population in the United States (Burghardt 1985). Had that question been asked in the Religious Landscape Study, it would have made an excellent addition to my analysis. The nineteen policies I was able to use do represent a diverse collection of social, environmental, and economic policy outcomes. However, a more expansive and inclusive analysis of policy outcomes between 2007 and 2014 would more accurately depict the relative representation of atheist/agnostic Democrats vs. other Democrats. Were this study to be replicated, independent surveying which asked more policy-based questions to respondents would greatly improve the analysis.

The third issue with drawing conclusions from this data analysis is that many of the coefficients calculated in Section II were not significant and had wide confidence intervals. The weakly positive relationship found in Section V is the best estimate of the effect of unified Democratic control on state policy outcomes. Unfortunately, with only nineteen data points and large standard errors, it is hard to assert with confidence that my conclusion is an accurate analysis of atheist/agnostic substantive representation with regards to state policy outcomes.

While there are several weaknesses to my analysis as I've mentioned, a major strength of this analysis lies in the fact that it is easily replicable for any religious group, race, sex, age, generational cohort, education level, citizenship status, national origin, income, partisanship, or political ideology. Instead of sub-setting for atheist/agnostic Democrats vs. other Democrats, this analysis could be repeated with different comparison groups; for example, the representation of black Democrats could be compared to non-black Democrats by sub-setting on the RACE variable in the Religious Landscape Study. To perform this analysis, someone would simply need to calculate the new differences in socio-political attitudes for the two groups, then substitute these values into the tables used to create the scatter plots in Section IV. With very

little effort, this new analysis would show how black Democrats' interests are substantively represented by the Democratic Party relative to non-black Democrats in state policy outcomes.

For the purpose of additional religious comparisons, I personally think it would be illuminating to see how the Democratic Party substantively represents Muslim-Americans on these nineteen state policy outcomes relative to atheist/agnostic Democrats. As a similarly unpopular religious minority that tends towards Democratic political affiliation but receives little descriptive representation, Muslim-Americans are a natural comparison group to the irreligious. The 2014 Religious Landscape Survey suggests that Muslim-Americans are generally conservative on social policy issues (Pew Forum 2015). The results determined in Section IV of my data analysis suggest Muslim-Americans are likely getting very little substantive representation in state policy outcomes by the Democratic Party. Further research exploring which religious groups garner the best representation of their interests within state policy outcomes could yield telling results about the balance the Democratic Party strikes in substantively representing its incredibly diverse coalition.

My initial hypothesis going into this project was that atheist/agnostic Democrats would receive disproportionate substantive representation by the Democratic Party in an effort to attract their votes towards Democratic candidates that seldom (if ever) represent the irreligious component of their identity. Past research has suggested religious identifiers are more likely to vote for a candidate who matches their religious identity (Wald and Brown 2014; Zuckerman et al. 2016), while atheists/agnostics show little preference for individuals based on religious identity, with the exception of negative views towards Evangelical Christians (Pew Forum 2017; Bobkowski and Kalyanaraman 2010; Galen et al. 2014). With this in mind, I hypothesized a mechanism in which Democratic candidates and the party at-large could court religious voters by

putting forth religious candidates while courting irreligious liberals through substantive liberal policymaking.

While I am not able to conclude from my own analysis whether this hypothesis actually explains a mechanism by which the Democratic Party balances descriptive and substantive representation of its constituencies, I *have* mustered evidence that one of the underlying assumptions of my hypothesis – that Democratically controlled state governments have pushed changes which are disproportionately favorable to atheist/agnostic constituents – is plausible. Additional research on related subjects such as Democratic internal party-building, campaign strategizing, and candidate selection processes would be necessary to formulate a holistic mechanism describing how the Democratic Party represents their diverse constituency using descriptive, substantive, and perhaps even other forms of representation.



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