

Secularism, sorting, and Americans' political knowledge

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Political knowledge, including knowledge of basic civics and current political conditions, is associated with a host of pro-democratic outcomes including institutional trust and civic and political participation. Religion is also historically associated with these outcomes, yet a link between religion and indicators of political knowledge remains underexamined. Integrating research on religion/secularism and political engagement with work on partisan sorting, I theorize self-consciously secular Americans, particularly if they are sorted politically, will exhibit the strongest grasp on basic civics and current political conditions. Analyses of data from a recent, nationally representative survey affirm my expectations. Self-identified atheists/agnostics consistently score significantly higher than religious or non-affiliated Americans on questions about basic civics and current political conditions. Interactions reveal that education helps most other religious groups catch up to atheists/agnostics on civics knowledge, but not knowledge about current politics. And on knowledge of both basic civics and current politics, atheists/agnostics' advantage is strongest among liberals and Democrats and disappears among conservatives and Republicans. A similar pattern appears for evangelical Protestants in the opposite direction with their scores on both civics and current politics increasing significantly as they identify more with ideological conservatism, but this does not apply to partisan identity. Findings extend literatures on political knowledge, religious/secular political engagement, and partisan sorting by showing that (1) self-identified secular Americans, particularly if they are sorted, tend to be the most knowledgeable about basic civics and current political conditions, and (2) this pattern is to a weaker extent mirrored by evangelicals, another politicized religious group.

Key words: religion; politics; civics; atheists; knowledge; secularism.

Introduction

Among the reasons he advocated for state-funded public education, Thomas Jefferson argued the future of our democracy (or any democracy) depended on citizens being educated in the organization and workings of their own government (Meacham 2020). He explained the goals of education for each citizen would be “To expound the principles and structure of

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government [...] To understand his [sic] duties to his neighbors, and country, and to discharge with competence the functions confided to him by either. To know his rights; to exercise with order and justice those he retains; to choose with discretion [his representatives]; and to notice their conduct with diligence, with candor, and judgment" (Jefferson [1818] 2020). Other theorists of democracy and education—including Locke, Tocqueville, Mill, and Dewey—likewise argued that functioning, stable democracy requires an electorate (which certainly did not historically mean full enfranchisement) with at least some political knowledge (Dewey [1916] 2004; Locke [1703] 1997; Mill 2015; Tocqueville 2004).

To be sure, contemporary political scientists have questioned whether citizens make political choices on the basis of accurate information about American politics or its politicians (Achen and Bartels 2016). And indeed, some research suggests that for certain political groups, under certain conditions, political knowledge seems to amplify biases and susceptibility to conspiracy theories (Jardina and Traugott 2019; Miller et al. 2016). Yet, other research has shown forms of political knowledge—including textbook civics knowledge or knowledge of current political conditions—is associated with positive democratic outcomes, including skepticism toward conspiracy theories (for some), higher institutional trust, greater commitment to democratic principles, higher levels of civic and political participation, and intention to participate in politics among young people (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Cohen and Chafee 2013; Galston 2001, 2007; Jardina and Traugott 2019; Miller et al. 2016; Putnam 2000).

Previous research has also found Americans' religious or (irreligious) characteristics tied to these same outcomes (Bloom et al. 2021; Layman et al. 2024; Putnam 2000; Putnam and Campbell 2010), suggesting a common link between religious characteristics and political knowledge exists. Yet, this link has thus far remained underexamined. Previous research on the antecedents of political knowledge has seldom considered religion (e.g., Campbell 2019; Campbell and Niemi 2016; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Galston 2007; but see Gaskins 2019), despite the latter's powerful connection to political life (Kucinskas and Stewart 2022; Perry 2022). And the burgeoning research on religion, irreligion, and political engagement has not examined religion's or secularism's influence on pursuing or demonstrating political knowledge (Baker and Smith 2015; Brockway 2018; Campbell et al. 2020; Frost and Edgell 2018; Kucinskas and Stewart 2022; Layman et al. 2021; Schwadel 2020; Stewart 2024), despite the latter being not only a form of political engagement, but a catalyst and moderator of other forms of political engagement like voting. Moreover, while research on partisan sorting has frequently considered the interaction between religion, secularism, and political identities (Campbell et al. 2020; Cassese 2020; Djupe et al. 2023; Mason 2018; Perry 2022, 2023), that literature has yet to consider how religious or irreligious identities and political identities interact to increase or suppress forms of political knowledge, just as they do other forms of political engagement.

The current study thus aims to integrate and extend work on political knowledge, religion/secularism and political engagement, and partisan sorting. I propose that self-consciously secular identities are already particularly politicized compared to other religious or non-religious identities. Atheists and agnostics are historically stigmatized as a group (Campbell et al. 2020; Edgell et al. 2006, 2016, 2017; Frost et al. 2023; Scheitle et al. 2019) and thus are forced to be more aware of America's political rules and vigilant about political conditions, helping to explain why recent studies find self-conscious seculars to be particularly engaged in civic and political life (Burge 2021; Campbell et al. 2020; Frost and Edgell 2018; Schwadel 2020; Stewart 2024). Moreover, research on political sorting suggests Americans whose religious or secular identities align with political identities in more conventional ways tend to be more politically engaged (Baker and Marti 2020; Cassese 2020; Djupe et al. 2023; Mason 2018). Building on these insights, I theorize that self-consciously secular Americans, particularly if they are sorted politically, will exhibit the strongest grasp on political knowledge.

I test this expectation with recent, nationally representative data that contain measures to assess two forms of political knowledge: textbook civics and current political conditions. My analyses generally affirm my expectations. Even with controls in place,

self-identified atheist and agnostics demonstrate the strongest grasp on both basic civics and current political conditions relative to other religious or non-affiliated Americans, but this is particularly the case among sorted atheists/agnostics, specifically those who are liberal or partisan Democrats. Moreover, the reverse is partially true among evangelical Protestants, who represent another politicized religious identity (though the patterns are not symmetrical as even very conservative evangelicals are not as knowledgeable as very liberal atheists/agnostics).

The findings of this study thus extend research on political knowledge, religion/secularism and political engagement, and partisan sorting, helping to clarify how religious/secular identification works in combination with other political identities to amplify or suppress an important catalyst of political behavior—Americans' understanding of their own government and its political climate.

Background and expectations

Antecedents of political knowledge

Studies of political knowledge have considered a variety of forms, including a textbook understanding of civics (most often at the federal level), current political conditions (often called “surveillance knowledge”), and historical facts about American politics (for reviews see [Campbell 2019](#); [Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996](#); [Galston 2001, 2007](#); [Jennings 1996](#); [Somin 2016](#)). Despite the variety of outcomes considered since the 1960s, the antecedents of political knowledge have been remarkably consistent. Scholars generally find that educational attainment is among the strongest predictors of more political knowledge ([Barabas et al. 2014](#); [Campbell and Niemi 2016](#); [Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996](#); [Edgerly et al. 2018](#); [Grönlund and Milner 2006](#); [Hart et al. 2004](#); [Jerit et al. 2006](#); [Mondak and Anderson 2004](#); [Perry et al. 2022, 2024](#); [Prior 2002](#); [Prior and Lupia 2008](#)). Studies across decades had been more mixed regarding whether explicit “civics education” would reliably increase political knowledge for Americans' youth, but more recent works suggests this also has a positive impact ([Campbell 2019](#); [Campbell and Niemi 2016](#)). Likely because of their connection to educational attainment, research has also found Americans who are older, wealthier, and White also tend to score higher on measures of political knowledge ([Barabas et al. 2014](#); [Campbell and Niemi 2016](#); [Borelli and Gracia 2023](#); [Grönlund and Milner 2006](#); [Hart et al. 2004](#); [Perry et al. 2022, 2024](#); [Prior 2002](#); [Prior and Lupia 2008](#)).¹

Despite the extensive research on political knowledge going back decades, studies using survey data have rarely considered religious characteristics at all. Among the few exceptions, [Gaskins \(2019\)](#) found evangelicals tended to be less knowledgeable about politics than non-evangelicals, though the author neglected to disaggregate religious identities further, thus limiting the contribution to understanding religion's relation to political knowledge. Moreover, he was unable to include worship attendance and evangelical identity in models together, raising doubts about what drove the differences for evangelicals (religiosity or subcultural identity). A more recent study by [Perry et al. \(2022\)](#) considered how religious characteristics—identity, religious commitment, Christian nationalist ideology—predicted Americans' knowledge of religion in American political history, using a five-item true/false quiz (see also [Gorski and Perry 2022](#)). Though the authors found more conservative religious identities and views were associated with lower scores on the quiz, because the questions asked about Christianity's role in American political history, the authors argue lower scores likely reflected bias rooted in group identity rather than a lack of knowledge per se. Similarly, [Perry \(2024\)](#) found political and religious conservatives tended to be less knowledgeable about the term “Christian nationalism,” a pattern likewise reflecting bias related to in-group interest. These interpretations are consistent with other research showing that conservative Christians often score lower on tests of scientific knowledge, not necessarily because of ignorance or lack of education, but because certain questions challenge religious commitments ([Evans 2011](#); [Perry et al. 2021](#); [Roos 2014](#); but see [Sherkat 2010, 2011](#)). Questions regarding basic civics or knowledge of current political conditions would provide more unbiased measures of religion's relationship to knowledge as such.

Religion, secularism, and civic and political engagement

As indicators of religion and irreligion have increasingly become aligned with partisan politics (Campbell et al. 2018; Egan 2020; Hout and Fischer 2014; Margolis 2018; Mason 2018; Perry 2022, 2023), a burgeoning literature has sought to consider how religious/secular characteristics potentially shape political engagement. To be sure, the relationship is nuanced, with certain religious measures (e.g., specific theological beliefs, denominational characteristics, etc.) potentially serving as both catalyst and suppressant for political engagement, depending on the issues or context. Broadly speaking, however, scholars have found that personal religiosity was positively associated with civic and political engagement and religious Americans generally are more civically and politically engaged than irreligious or non-religious Americans (Bloom et al. 2021; Putnam 2000; Putnam and Campbell 2010). Scholars historically argued this disparity was likely due to the greater social connectedness of religious Americans, giving them more opportunities to participate in civic life or be mobilized toward political ends (e.g., Lewis et al. 2013; Omelicheva and Ahmed 2018; Schwadel 2020; Stewart 2024).

Yet, recent research has challenged this finding showing that the relatively greater civic or political engagement of religious Americans compared to “secular” Americans is an artifact of how “secular” is measured on surveys. While common classification schemes of religious traditions or self-identifications often lump together “nones” or “unaffiliated” Americans together, there is a considerable difference between self-consciously secular Americans who openly identify as “atheists” or “agnostics” and those who simply indicate they are “nothing in particular.” In an earlier study breaking down the secular category, Baker and Smith (2015) report that when Americans were asked about whether they follow government and public affairs, read news about politics, or show interest in international affairs (all potentially contributing to greater political knowledge), atheists and agnostics were more likely to report they paid attention “most of the time” compared to religiously affiliated Americans, while those non-affiliated or culturally religious Americans reported the lowest cognitive engagement with politics.² Similarly, Schwadel (2020) finds that Americans who identify as “nothing in particular” are relatively uninterested in politics compared to self-identified atheists and agnostics. Atheists, in fact, were more likely than religiously affiliated Americans to say they followed the 2016 election closely or that they talked about the presidential election in the previous week. Likewise, Burge (2021) shows atheists and agnostics are more politically engaged than the average American across a host of measures while “nothing in particular” Americans are less engaged than the average. And most recently, Stewart’s (2024) analysis of validated voter data showed atheists and agnostics had a significantly higher likelihood of voting in the 2016 and 2020 Presidential elections than religiously affiliated Americans, while “nothing in particular” Americans were less likely.

In seeking to explain these distinctions in political engagement, some scholars now argue that identifying as openly secular in the United States is inherently political. Being an openly secular person has historically been quite stigmatized (Campbell et al. 2020; Edgell et al. 2006, 2016, 2017; Frost et al. 2023; Scheitle et al. 2019), and thus, Americans who self-identify as “atheist” or “agnostic” or openly affirm secular society as a political goal are more likely to see themselves as part of a political project (LeDrew 2013). This dynamic is also increasingly the case among self-identified “evangelical” Protestants, for whom perceived persecution seems wrapped into the identity itself (Smith 1998) and are increasingly thought of as a socio-political category of Christian rather than a theological category (Egan 2020; Sutton 2024). The politicization of self-conscious seculars distinguishes them from the merely non-religious or non-affiliated Americans who are often on the margins of multiple spheres of life (Brockway 2018; Layman et al. 2021; Layman and Weaver 2016). Consistent with this, in their analysis of the politics of secular Americans, Campbell et al. (2020) demonstrate that while the merely non-religious tend to be “civic slackers,” self-consciously secular Americans have relatively higher levels of political engagement often surpassing religiously affiliated Americans.³ (This

tendency for merely non-affiliated Americans to be less committed politically is also likely to stem from multiple group affiliations and cross-pressures, to be discussed in the following section.)

Understanding political knowledge as a form of political engagement, this emerging work on religion, secularism, and political participation would lead me to expect that once self-identified atheists and agnostics are distinguished from “nothing in particular” Americans, the former would demonstrate greater political knowledge than non-affiliated or religiously affiliated Americans. Though evangelical Protestants, as a politicized group, might also be expected to show relatively high levels of political knowledge, there are unique countervailing trends among evangelicals including an historic tendency toward populist anti-intellectualism and (among many) to minimize politics in general (Noll 1995; Smith 1998). Thus, I anticipate that on average, self-consciously secular Americans will still score higher on political knowledge, all else equal. Yet, when the political aspects of religious identity are made more salient, this might uniquely influence both seculars and evangelicals. And here I must consider the intersection of religion with political identification.

Religion and partisan sorting

Among the most important trends in both American politics and American religion has been the increasing subordination of social identities under political identities or partisan “sorting.” As political ideology has become increasingly aligned with parties, religious identities have also become aligned (Mason 2018; Perry 2023). Among the results has been that religious identities are increasingly bound to political identities, such that rather than religious identities and commitments determining Americans’ political allegiances, their political identities and commitments often determine the religious groups with whom they identify (Campbell et al. 2018; Egan 2020; Hout and Fischer 2014; Margolis 2018; Perry 2022).

Within this context of partisan sorting, scholars have observed that Americans who are more religiously and politically “sorted” (that is, their religious, ideological, and partisan identities are aligned in more conventional ways) tend to be more polarized against partisan opponents and consequently more engaged politically. Thus, evangelical Protestants who are also conservative and Republican are among the most politically engaged as are atheists/agnostics who are liberal and Democratic (Brader et al. 2014; Cassese 2020; Mason 2018). Conversely, Americans who are less “sorted” (their religious identities are not aligned with their partisan identities in conventional ways, e.g., secular Republicans or evangelical Democrats) experience what political scientists call “cross-pressures” and they tend to be less polarized and less politically engaged (Baker and Marti 2020; Djupe et al. 2023; Mutz 2002).

While indicators of “political participation” or “political engagement” in these studies of religion and partisan sorting vary, none have considered political knowledge as a potential outcome shaped not only by religious identities and other characteristics, but by the combination of religion with partisan or ideological commitments. Based on the sorting/cross-pressure literature, I would anticipate that self-consciously secular Americans who are liberal and Democratic would be the most politically knowledgeable. To be sure, there may be a countervailing pattern in that Layman and Weaver (2016) found that secularist Republicans tended to be libertarians who might be expected to be more knowledgeable about politics due to adopting a politically contrarian stance. Nonetheless, I would still anticipate these cross-pressured seculars to be less knowledgeable than fully sorted ones. Likewise I would expect a mirror pattern among self-identified “evangelical” Protestants, being more knowledgeable if they are conservative and Republican, less knowledgeable if they are liberal or Democratic.

Another source of “sorting” and “cross-pressure” when considering religion’s relationship to political engagement would be religious behavior or practice. Research on secular political engagement (Campbell et al. 2020; Layman et al. 2021; Stewart 2024) has found that secular Americans who are most consistently secular tend to be the most political engaged, while seculars still involved in religion are less engaged. Thus, I would anticipate that the link

between religious identification and political knowledge would be moderated by one's own religious behavior, with devoutly religious adherents being more politically knowledgeable and consistently irreligious atheists/agnostics likewise demonstrating greater political knowledge.

Methods

Data

Data for this study are from Wave 129 of the Pew Research Center American Trends Panel survey (hereafter ATP 129), which are publicly available at www.pewresearch.org. The ATP 129 was fielded from June 5 to June 11, 2023, by Ipsos, a global marketing and polling firm. ATP waves are nationally representative, random-sample surveys of US adults who participate via self-administered online surveys in English or Spanish. For the ATP 129, 5,865 panelists were sampled and a total of 5,115 responded for a response rate of 87 percent. The ATP surveys are all weighted in a multiple-step process that accounts for multiple stages of sampling and nonresponse. For a full discussion of ATP 129 study design and methodology, see [Borelli and Gracia \(2023\)](#). The weights were used for the multivariate analyses in order to bring the sample into conformity with demographic and non-demographic benchmarks. Weighted descriptive statistics for all variables used in the analysis are presented in Appendix Table A1. After eliminating cases with missing data, the final N for full models is 4,571.

Outcomes

In the ATP 129, Pew gave Americans a “civics quiz” to discern their basic knowledge of how the federal government works ([Borelli and Gracia 2023](#); [Pew Research Center 2023](#)). The quiz included eight multiple-choice questions—six questions about basic civics and two about current political conditions—asked in random order with the two questions about current political conditions always asked together. Respondents were prompted “The next few questions are a little different. For each, please answer them as best you can. We want to measure what you already know. Please do not look up or ask someone for the answers. If you don't know the answer, just move on to the next one.” For the first six questions, respondents were asked questions such as “In an election for U.S. president, which of these chooses the next president if the vote in the Electoral College is tied?” Response options were then randomized, including (1) The presidential cabinet, (2) The U.S. House of Representatives, (3) The U.S. Senate, or (4) A convention of the states.

For the two questions about current political knowledge (asked randomly among all the questions, but always together), respondents were asked “Do you happen to know which political party currently has majority control in the U.S. [Senate, House of Representatives]?” Response options were randomized for the first question and kept the same for the second: (1) Republican Party and (2) Democratic Party. [Table 1](#) lists all eight of the questions and their possible responses.

For each of the questions, I recoded all responses into those who chose the correct answer (coded 1) and those who chose incorrect answers (coded 0). Because respondents were instructed “If you don't know the answer, just move on to the next one,” I recode missing responses here as incorrect (coded 0), which is the standard practice (see [Borelli and Gracia 2023](#); [Grönlund and Milner 2006](#); [Jardina and Traugott 2019](#); [Jerit et al. 2006](#); [Miller et al. 2016](#); [Perry et al. 2022](#)).⁴ The result is eight dichotomous indicators of Americans' political knowledge. For initial multivariate analyses, I predict correct responses to each item individually with binary logistic regression. Because the first six questions are asking about textbook civics knowledge, I aggregate these into a civics quiz scaled to range from 0 to 1 (7 values) and predict scores with ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models.⁵ Because the last two questions are asking about current political conditions (or surveillance knowledge), I add the two items to make an ordinal scale of current political knowledge ranging from 0 to 2 and predict scores with ordinal logistic regression.⁶

Table 1. Wording and response options for political knowledge questions.

Questions	Response options (randomized online)
In an election for U.S. president, which of these chooses the next president if the vote in the Electoral College is tied?	1) The presidential cabinet 2) The U.S. House of Representatives 3) The U.S. Senate 4) A convention of the states
Which of the following rights is guaranteed by the FIRST Amendment to the Constitution?	1) The right to freedom of religion 2) The right to bear arms 3) The right to privacy 4) The right to remain silent
Which of the following determines how many representatives a state gets in the House of Representatives?	1) The number of people who live in the state 2) The square mile area of the state 3) The number of voting-age citizens in the state 4) How much people in the state pay in federal taxes
For how many years is a U.S. senator elected—that is, how many years are there in one full term of office for a U.S. senator?	1) 2 years 2) 4 years 3) 6 years 4) 8 years
When a justice is confirmed to the U.S. Supreme Court, how long are they appointed for?	1) 17 years 2) Until a president decides to replace them 3) Until they are 75 years old 4) It is a lifetime appointment
In which part of the federal government is there a rule that requires a 60% super majority vote to end a filibuster?	1) The U.S. House of Representatives 2) The U.S. Senate 3) The U.S. Supreme Court 4) The presidential cabinet
Do you happen to know which political party currently has majority control in the U.S. Senate?	1) Republican Party 2) Democratic Party
Do you happen to know which political party currently has majority control in the U.S. House of Representatives?	1) Republican Party 2) Democratic Party

Source: Pew ATP Wave 129.

Religious identification

Religious identification is made from three measures in the ATP 129. Pew first asks respondents for their general religious identification, which I code into Protestant, Roman Catholic, Other Religion (Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Mormon, and Orthodox⁷), atheist or agnostic,⁸ and Nothing in Particular. Pew also asked self-identified Christians if they identified as “born-again or evangelical Christians.” Finally, Pew also asks respondents about their racial identity. Based on these responses, I divide Protestants into three categories: Evangelical Protestant (identifies as Protestant, born-again/evangelical, and non-Black), Non-Evangelical Protestant (identifies as Protestant, but not born-again/evangelical, and non-Black), and Black Protestant (identifies as Protestant and Black). Because I anticipate atheists and agnostics to be different from other religious or non-affiliated Americans, I use them as the reference category.

Other predictors

Multivariate analyses include a host of measures that are potentially related to both religious identification and political knowledge (Barabas et al. 2014; Borelli and Gracia 2023; Galston 2001; Gaskins 2019; Grönlund and Milner 2006; Hart et al. 2004; Jerit et al. 2006; Miller 2019;

Mondak and Anderson 2004; Perry 2024; Prior 2002; Prior and Lupia 2008). The most important of these are religious commitment, education, and political characteristics. Religious commitment is measured with worship attendance frequency from 1 = never attend to 6 = more than once a week. Education is measured in attainment categories from 1 = less than high school to 6 = postgraduate degree.

Political characteristics include ideology, party, and voter registration to account for actual political engagement. Political ideology is measured from 1 = very liberal to 5 = very conservative, with 3 = moderate. Party identification is measured with dummy variables: Republican = reference, Democrat, Independent, and Something Else.⁹ And registration status is also measured with dummy variables: Certain one is registered = reference, probably registered, and not registered.

Other demographic variables include dummy variables for age (Age 18–29 = reference, 30–49, 50–64, and 65+); race (White = reference, Black, Hispanic, Asian, and Other Race); gender (woman = 0 man = 1); income (Less than \$30 K = reference; \$30 K to \$60 K; \$60 K to \$100 K; \$100 K or More; and did not answer); region (Northeast = reference, Midwest, South, West); and birthplace (Born in the 50 states = reference, born in US territory, foreign born).

Plan of analysis

The analysis proceeds as follows. Table 2 presents average scores on all eight civics questions and the composite scores for civics knowledge and current political knowledge across religious identification. I then present results from full binary logistic regression models predicting correct versus incorrect responses on each of the eight political knowledge questions. I present results by religious identification in figure 1 with full regression models presented in Appendix Table A5. Table 3 presents OLS regression models predicting the 7-value civics knowledge score average. Model 1 presents the baseline model without religious identification. Model 2 adds religious identification. And Models 3–5 present models with interaction terms. Table 4 presents ordinal logistic regression models predicting the 3-value current political knowledge score and replicates models from Table 3. All models calculate P-values using robust standard errors to account for weighting (Acocck 2023: 297). This also raises the threshold for statistical significance, making my findings more conservative.

Results

Looking at average scores for each question and the composite scores for knowledge of civics and current political conditions in Table 2, it is apparent that Americans who self-identify as atheist or agnostic consistently score higher than Americans who identify with other religious or non-religious groups. The only exception is the question for which there was the lowest average in correct responses across the board, namely, the question asking “In an election for U.S. president, which of these chooses the next president if the vote in the Electoral College is tied?” It is the only question for which over half of Americans in each religious or irreligious category chose incorrectly or skipped. For all other questions, however, Americans who self-identify as atheist or agnostic averaged higher scores. And as the confidence intervals indicate, all of these scores are significantly higher than each religious group except for non-evangelical Protestants and the “Other Religion” category with whom several confidence intervals overlap.

Do these differences hold when accounting for likely confounders like religious commitment, education, political characteristics, or other key demographic factors? In fact, they do. Figure 1 presents eight forest plots from full binary logistic regression models predicting each of the eight outcomes. I only present results for religious identification (full results in Appendix Table A5). With the exception of the first question about choosing the president in the event of an Electoral College tie, the patterns indicate that Americans who self-identify as atheist or agnostic tend to score higher than other religious or non-affiliated Americans. Most often these differences are significant well beyond .05 level, but even in the case where they are not, they are often marginal ($p < .10$) and always in the same direction. Thus, there is a consistent pattern that Americans

Table 2. Mean scores on civics and political knowledge questions by religious identification.

Civics questions	Atheist or Agnostic	Evangelical Protestant	Non-Evangelical Protestant	Black Protestant	Roman Catholic	Other Religion	Nothing in Particular
Who chooses president if Electoral College tied (0–1)	.451 (.410, .493)	.401 (.368, .433)	.455 (.414, .496)	.355 (.313, .398)	.413 (.380, .446)	.475 (.425, .525)	.387 (.354, .420)
One of the rights guaranteed by the First Amendment (0–1)	.738 (.702, .775)	.629 (.597, .661)	.592 (.552, .632)	.477 (.433, .522)	.572 (.539, .605)	.636 (.587, .684)	.544 (.511, .578)
What determines number of House reps states get (0–1)	.843 (.813, .873)	.734 (.705, .763)	.764 (.729, .797)	.601 (.558, .645)	.739 (.710, .768)	.762 (.720, .805)	.646 (.614, .679)
Length of full Senate term (0–1)	.612 (.571, .653)	.490 (.457, .523)	.531 (.490, .572)	.411 (.367, .455)	.503 (.470, .537)	.554 (.504, .604)	.388 (.355, .422)
Length of Supreme Court appointment (0–1)	.935 (.914, .956)	.844 (.820, .868)	.891 (.865, .916)	.750 (.711, .789)	.834 (.810, .859)	.826 (.788, .864)	.736 (.706, .766)
Part of govt. requiring 60% majority to end filibuster (0–1)	.675 (.636, .714)	.526 (.493, .559)	.559 (.518, .600)	.490 (.445, .534)	.540 (.506, .573)	.580 (.531, .630)	.478 (.444, .512)
Party currently in control of Senate (in June 2023) (0–1)	.774 (.740, .809)	.677 (.646, .708)	.696 (.659, .734)	.657 (.615, .699)	.672 (.641, .704)	.726 (.681, .771)	.604 (.571, .638)
Party currently in control of House (in June 2023) (0–1)	.780 (.745, .814)	.727 (.697, .756)	.734 (.698, .770)	.645 (.602, .687)	.726 (.696, .756)	.707 (.661, .753)	.647 (.615, .680)
Average civics score (0–1)	.703 (.683, .723)	.598 (.581, .617)	.634 (.618, .662)	.521 (.495, .548)	.606 (.587, .625)	.640 (.612, .668)	.527 (.508, .547)
Average political knowledge score (0–2)	1.55 (1.49, 1.62)	1.40 (1.35, 1.46)	1.43 (1.37, 1.49)	1.30 (1.23, 1.37)	1.40 (1.35, 1.45)	1.43 (1.35, 1.51)	1.25 (1.20, 1.31)

Source: Pew ATP Wave 129 (N = 4,571). Note: Mean scores with 95% confidence intervals in parentheses.

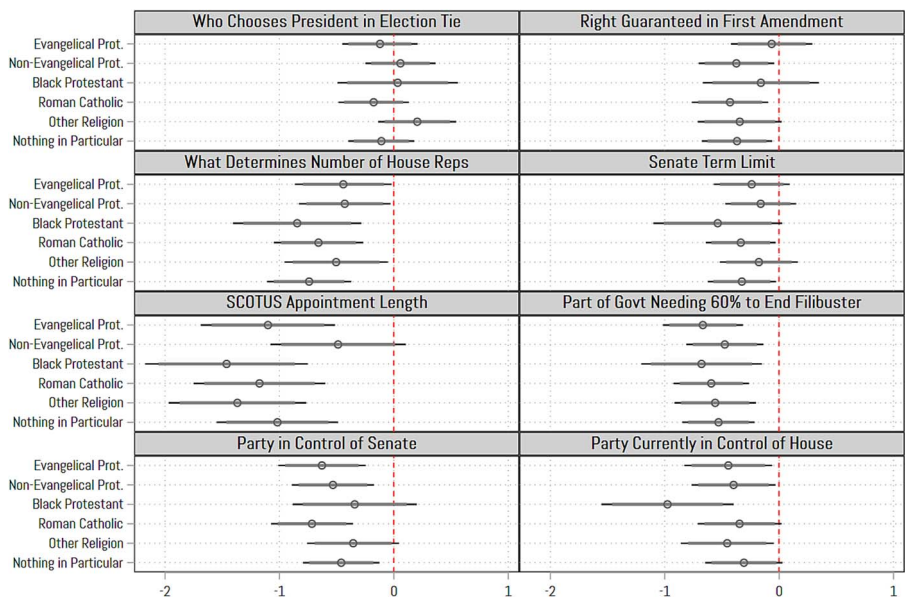


Figure 1. Predicted probabilities of Americans answering civics questions correctly by religious identity. Source: Pew ATP wave 129 (N = 4,571). Note: Comparison category is atheist or agnostic. Black bars are 95% confidence intervals; gray bars 90% confidence intervals.

who are atheist or agnostic tend to score the highest in knowledge of civics and current political conditions—a difference not rendered spurious by other key characteristics.

Tables 3 and 4 move to examine how religious identification predicts aggregated scores on civics knowledge (Table 3) and knowledge of current political conditions (Table 4). Model 1 presents the baseline and the consistent patterns for both outcomes are predictable, with educational attainment being the strongest predictor of higher scores on Americans’ knowledge of basic civics and current political conditions, along with being a registered voter (indicating engagement), older, a man, and higher income. Interestingly, when it comes to civics knowledge, being more liberal and White are associated with higher scores, while this is not the case for knowledge of current political conditions.

When religious identification is introduced in Model 2, there are few significant changes in other effects for either outcome. Despite few changes in other effects, each religious identification is significantly associated with lower scores on knowledge of basic civics and knowledge of current political conditions compared to Americans who self-identify as atheist or agnostic.

How are these differences moderated by relevant factors? My expectation that the link between religious identification and forms of political knowledge would be moderated by religious commitment (perhaps as a cross-pressure for secular Americans) was unsupported. Scores did not vary significantly across worship attendance frequency for either outcome (see Appendix Table A6; figs. A4 and A5). However, as Models 3–5 in Tables 3 and 4 show, there were significant moderating relationships between religious identification and educational attainment (for basic civics) and political characteristics (for both outcomes).

Educational attainment moderated the association between religious identification and scoring higher in knowledge of basic civics. The lower-order term for education in Model 3 is statistically significant and positive. This indicates that even for atheists and agnostics, civics knowledge rises significantly with education as it does for all religious groups (see average marginal effects for all groups presented in Appendix fig. A6). However, the significant, positive interactions for evangelical and Black Protestants, Roman Catholics, and Other religious groups

Table 3. Ordinary least squares regression models predicting Americans' civics test score.

Predictors	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Evangelical Prot.		-0.08***	-0.14***	-0.22***	0.01
Non-Evangelical Prot.		-0.05**	-0.07	-0.11***	0.03
Black Protestant		-0.11***	-0.21***	-0.13**	-0.02
Roman Catholic		-0.10***	-0.19***	-0.15***	0.01
Other Religion		-0.07**	-0.17***	-0.05	0.01
Nothing in Particular		-0.09***	-0.14***	-0.10**	-0.05
Worship Attendance	0.02	0.04*	0.04*	0.04*	0.04*
Educational Attainment	0.23***	0.23***	0.13***	0.22***	0.23***
Conservative Ideology	-0.07**	-0.05*	-0.05*	-0.16***	-0.04
Democrat	-0.01	-0.02	-0.01	-0.01	0.09*
Independent	-0.00	-0.01	-0.01	0.00	0.08
Something Else	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.07
Probably Registered	-0.08***	-0.09***	-0.09***	-0.08***	-0.09***
Not Registered	-0.05**	-0.05**	-0.05**	-0.05**	-0.05**
Age 30–49	-0.00	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.00
Age 50–64	0.04**	0.05**	0.06***	0.06***	0.05**
Age 65+	0.10***	0.11***	0.11***	0.11***	0.11***
Black	-0.07***	-0.04	-0.03	-0.04	-0.04
Hispanic	-0.06***	-0.05**	-0.05**	-0.05**	-0.05**
Asian	-0.06*	-0.06*	-0.05*	-0.06*	-0.06*
Other Race	-0.01	-0.01	-0.01	-0.01	-0.00
Man	0.11***	0.10***	0.10***	0.10***	0.10***
Income: \$30 K to \$60 K	0.05**	0.05**	0.05**	0.05**	0.05**
Income: \$60 K to \$100 K	0.06***	0.06***	0.06***	0.05***	0.06***
Income: \$100 K or more	0.12***	0.11***	0.11***	0.11***	0.11***
Income: Did not answer	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.01
Midwest	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01
South	-0.00	-0.00	0.00	0.00	-0.00
West	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.02
Born in US Territory	-0.03	-0.03	-0.03	-0.04	-0.03
Foreign Born	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01
Evangelical Prot. × Education			0.10*		
Non-Evangelical Prot. × Education			0.04		
Black Protestant			0.17**		
Roman Catholic × Education			0.17**		
Other Religion × Education			0.17*		
Nothing in Particular × Education			0.06		
Evangelical Prot. × Cons. Ideology				0.27***	
Non-Evangelical Prot. × Cons. Ideology				0.17**	
Black Protestant				0.09	
Roman Catholic × Cons. Ideology				0.16*	
Other Religion × Cons. Ideology				-0.00	
Nothing in Particular × Cons. Ideology				0.05	
Evangelical Prot. × Democrat					-0.13*
Evangelical Prot. × Independent					-0.10*
Evangelical Prot. × Something Else					-0.06
Non-Evangelical Prot. × Democrat					-0.12*
Non-Evangelical Prot. × Independent					-0.04
Non-Evangelical Prot. × Something Else					-0.07
Black Protestant × Democrat					-0.11
Black Protestant × Independent					-0.04
Black Protestant × Something Else					-0.14

(continued)

Table 3. Continued.

Predictors	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Roman Catholic × Democrat					−0.15**
Roman Catholic × Independent					−0.12*
Roman Catholic × Something Else					−0.10
Other Religion × Democrat					−0.09
Other Religion × Independent					−0.11
Other Religion × Something Else					−0.00
Nothing in Particular × Democrat					−0.05
Nothing in Particular × Independent					−0.06
Nothing in Particular × Something Else					0.01
Constant	0.37***	0.42***	0.48***	0.45***	0.34***
Adjusted R ²	0.23	0.24	0.24	0.24	0.24

Source: Pew ATP Wave 129 (N = 4,571). Note: Unstandardized betas; P-values calculated with robust standard errors. All variables rescaled to range from 0 to 1. Excluded categories are Atheist or Agnostic, Certain Registered, Republican, Age 18–29, White, Income: Less than \$30 K, Northeast, and Born in US State. *P < .05; **P < .01; ***P < .001 (two-tailed tests).

indicate that the benefits to education on civics knowledge for these groups is greater than for atheists and agnostics. Figure 2 presents contrasted marginal effects to show where each religious group differs significantly from the atheist/agnostic reference group (when 95 percent confidence bands do not overlap the dotted red line, the differences are statistically significant at .05). Though education increases civics scores for all Americans, Americans who are atheist or agnostic obtain significantly higher average civics scores than other Americans below postgraduate degree, with the only exception being that “Other Religion” Americans overlap confidence bands at the bachelor’s degree level. Once Americans reach the highest level of education, the differences by religious identification disappear for all groups except for those who identify as “nothing in particular.” They are the only group who always has significantly lower civics scores than atheists and agnostics across all levels of education.

Political characteristics also show moderating influences on the link between religious identification and Americans’ political knowledge, in directions partisan sorting research would anticipate. Interactions in Model 4 for both outcomes show significant, positive interaction terms for being more conservative and identifying with evangelical and non-evangelical Protestants and Catholics (and “nothing in particular” for current politics) compared to being an atheist or agnostic. Plotting marginal effects for non-evangelical Protestants, Catholics, and nothing in particulars (not shown) revealed their positive interaction terms were not *primarily* because ideological conservatism made them more knowledgeable about basic civics or current political conditions, but rather each stay largely the same. Rather, their positive interactions stem from the fact that conservatism is associated with the reference group (atheist or agnostic Americans) sharply becoming less knowledgeable in both. Evangelical Protestants, in contrast, seem to become more knowledgeable as they become more conservative in both civics knowledge and knowledge of current political conditions.¹⁰ I contrast these opposite patterns with marginal values presented in figure 3. The change for self-consciously secular Americans is striking. Among Americans who self-identify as atheist or agnostic, their civics scores are the highest (and higher than all groups) when they are “very liberal” and start to decline sharply as ideology shifts rightward. Evangelicals clearly show the opposite trend, though never quite surpassing atheist/agnostics at the highest levels of conservatism, and atheists and agnostics still score slightly higher than evangelical Protestants if they identify as politically moderate. (It should also be noted that very liberal atheists/agnostics are significantly more knowledgeable on both outcomes than very conservative evangelical Protestants.)

Table 4. Ordinal logistic regression models predicting Americans' civics test score.

Predictors	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Evangelical Prot.		−0.59**	−0.85*	−1.76***	0.50
Non-Evangelical Prot.		−0.52**	−0.63+	−1.28***	0.60
Black Protestant		−0.74**	−1.00**	−0.67+	0.56
Roman Catholic		−0.59***	−0.86**	−1.00***	0.54
Other Religion		−0.46*	−0.67+	−0.30	0.13
Nothing in Particular		−0.43**	−0.55+	−0.82**	0.62
Worship Attendance	0.13	0.32*	0.31*	0.30*	0.32*
Educational Attainment	0.96***	0.94***	0.60	0.93***	0.95***
Conservative Ideology	−0.25	−0.10	−0.12	−1.29**	−0.02
Democrat	−0.13	−0.13	−0.12	−0.08	1.08**
Independent	−0.23*	−0.25*	−0.25*	−0.19	0.80*
Something Else	−0.31*	−0.33*	−0.33*	−0.29*	0.95
Probably Registered	−0.13	−0.14	−0.14	−0.12	−0.12
Not Registered	−0.25*	−0.25*	−0.25*	−0.25*	−0.24*
Age 30–49	0.16	0.22	0.23*	0.24*	0.25*
Age 50–64	0.32**	0.41***	0.42***	0.41***	0.43***
Age 65+	0.74***	0.82***	0.84***	0.82***	0.84***
Black	−0.17	−0.01	−0.02	−0.05	−0.06
Hispanic	−0.20	−0.15	−0.15	−0.15	−0.14
Asian	−0.32	−0.32	−0.31	−0.35	−0.38
Other Race	0.02	0.05	0.05	0.02	0.05
Man	0.59***	0.54***	0.55***	0.54***	0.55***
Income: \$30 K to \$60 K	0.21*	0.22*	0.22*	0.22*	0.22*
Income: \$60 K to \$100 K	0.30**	0.28*	0.28*	0.26*	0.27*
Income: \$100 K or More	0.49***	0.47***	0.47***	0.46***	0.47***
Income: Did not answer	−0.11	−0.12	−0.12	−0.16	−0.12
Midwest	−0.09	−0.07	−0.07	−0.06	−0.09
South	−0.05	−0.02	−0.02	−0.02	−0.03
West	0.04	0.04	0.04	0.06	0.04
Born in US Territory	−0.15	−0.16	−0.15	−0.19	−0.16
Foreign Born	0.22	0.21	0.22	0.23	0.23
Evangelical Prot. × Education			0.51		
Non-Evangelical Prot. × Education			0.18		
Black Protestant			0.52		
Roman Catholic × Education			0.53		
Other Religion × Education			0.38		
Nothing in Particular × Education			0.17		
Evangelical Prot. × Cons. Ideology				2.39***	
Non-Evangelical Prot. × Cons. Ideology				1.88**	
Black Protestant				0.34	
Roman Catholic × Cons. Ideology				1.28*	
Other Religion × Cons. Ideology				0.09	
Nothing in Particular × Cons. Ideology				1.21*	
Evangelical Prot. × Democrat					−1.26**
Evangelical Prot. × Independent					−1.04*
Evangelical Prot. × Something Else					−1.75**
Non-Evangelical Prot. × Democrat					−1.32**
Non-Evangelical Prot. × Independent					−0.96*
Non-Evangelical Prot. × Something Else					−1.83**
Black Protestant × Democrat					−1.43*
Black Protestant × Independent					−1.33*
Black Protestant × Something Else					−1.33
Roman Catholic × Democrat					−1.43**

(continued)

Table 4. Continued.

Predictors	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Roman Catholic × Independent					−1.13*
Roman Catholic × Something Else					−1.14
Other Religion × Democrat					−0.55
Other Religion × Independent					−0.67
Other Religion × Something Else					−0.31
Nothing in Particular × Democrat					−1.13*
Nothing in Particular × Independent					−1.14*
Nothing in Particular × Something Else					−1.20*
Cut 1	−0.51*	−0.80***	−0.98**	−1.14***	0.32
Cut 2	0.75***	0.46*	0.28	0.13	1.59***
Pseudo R ²	0.05	0.06	0.06	0.06	0.06

Source: Pew ATP Wave 129 (N = 4,571). Note: Unstandardized betas; P-values calculated with robust standard errors. All variables rescaled to range from 0 to 1. Excluded categories are Atheist or Agnostic, Certain Registered, Republican, Age 18–29, White, Income: Less than \$30 K, Northeast, and Born in US State. *P < .10; *P < .05; **P < .01; ***P < .001 (two-tailed tests).

The moderating patterns for partisan identity are also consistent for both outcomes, though somewhat stronger for knowledge of current political conditions. The significant interactions between religious identification and party identity are limited to non-Black Christian groups for civics knowledge, and include all Christian groups and “nothing in particular” Americans for current political knowledge. However, the interaction terms are significant and negative. For civics knowledge, significant interactions are strongest among Democrats, while for current political conditions, there are significant interactions for all non-Republican groups. The lower-order term for party identification is only significant for Democrats regarding civics knowledge and for both Democrats and Independents regarding knowledge of current political conditions. This means that for the religious reference group (atheists and agnostics), Democrats are significantly more knowledgeable than Republicans on both outcomes, for Independents only the latter. Conversely, the lower-order terms for religious identification have all become non-significant for both outcomes. What this means is that for the partisan reference group (Republicans), atheists and agnostics are not more knowledgeable about either civics or current political conditions compared to any other religious group.

Marginal effects presented in figure 4 illustrate these patterns clearly. The stronger average quiz scores for basic civics and knowledge of current political conditions among atheists and agnostics relative to Christian Americans do not apply to Republicans. Rather, these differences are strongest among Democrats for both outcomes (though some of the error bars overlap, the differences between atheist/agnostic Democrats and every other religious group is statistically significant for both outcomes), and less consistent among Independents and those who identify with “Something Else” politically.¹¹ Thus, consistent with the pattern observed for ideological conservatism, it must be qualified that the superior average scores atheists and agnostics exhibit in their political knowledge compared to Christians in particular is strongest among Democrats and ideological liberals, less consistent among Independents and moderates, and among Republicans and conservatives there is no advantage in political knowledge.

Discussion and conclusions

Forms of political knowledge are positively associated with citizenries more trusting of political institutions, committed to democratic principles, and politically active (Cohen and Chaffee 2013; Galston 2001, 2007; Jardina and Traugott 2019; Miller et al. 2016), and thus, some knowledge of basic civics and current political conditions seems vital for stable, functioning democracy

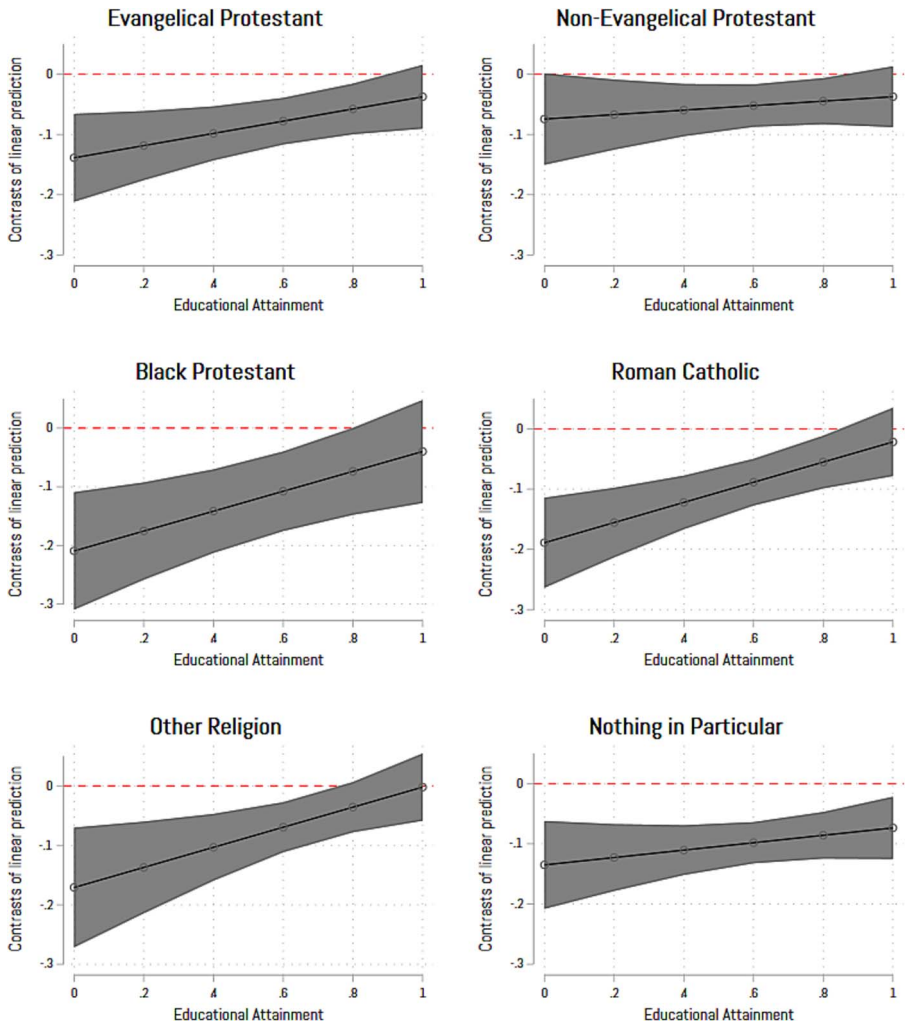


Figure 2. Americans' predicted average marginal contrasts in civics test scores by religious identification and educational attainment. Source: Pew ATP wave 129 (N = 4,571). Note: Bands are 95% confidence intervals and the dotted red line represents atheists and agnostics. All controls held at their means.

(Campbell and Niemi 2016). Given that religion is also historically positively associated with most of these outcomes, the current study considered the role of religious/secular identification in predicting Americans' knowledge of basic civics and current political conditions. Integrating work on political knowledge, secular political engagement, and partisan sorting, I anticipated that self-identified seculars, as a uniquely politicized group, would exhibit the most political knowledge, especially if they are politically sorted. Analyses affirmed my expectations, revealing that self-identified atheists/agnostics consistently scored the highest on measures of civic knowledge and current politics. Moreover, interactions indicated that while higher education mitigated the atheist/agnostic advantage on civic knowledge, it did not do so for knowledge of current political conditions. Moreover, interactions with political characteristics affirmed "sorting" effects, such that the atheist/agnostic advantage in political knowledge was strongest among ideological liberals and Democrats, inconsistent among moderates and Independent/Other Americans,

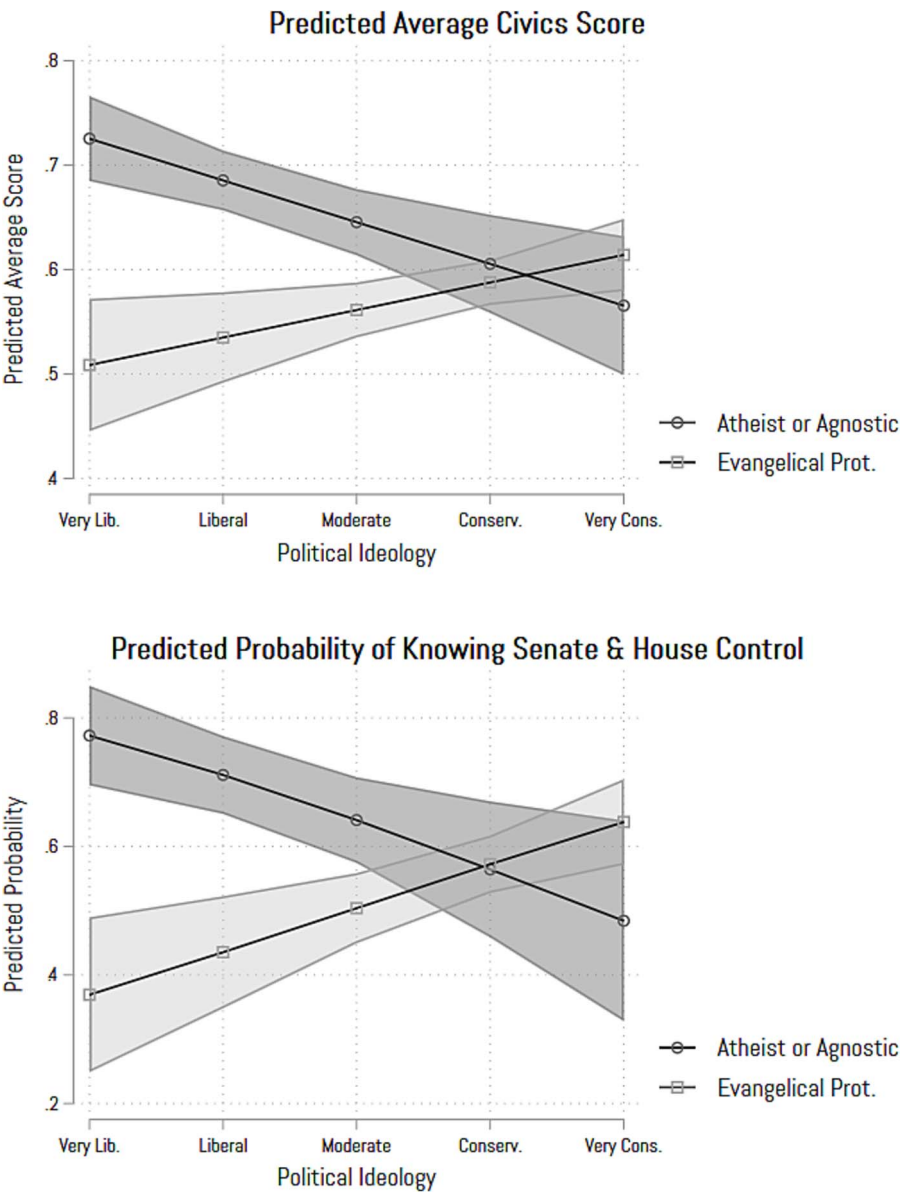


Figure 3. Americans' predicted civics test score and knowledge of current politics by religious identification and political ideology. *Source:* Pew ATP wave 129 (N = 4,571). *Note:* Bands are 95% confidence intervals. All controls held at their means.

and non-existent among conservatives and Republicans. These sorting effects were somewhat mirrored among evangelicals, also underscoring the importance of politicized religious identities combined with political identities.

Findings from this study extend research on political knowledge, partisan sorting, and secular political engagement in several ways. First, while numerous studies have sought to understand the social characteristics associated with forms of political knowledge (Barabas et al. 2014; Borelli and Gracia 2023; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Galston 2001; Gaskins 2019; Grönlund and Milner

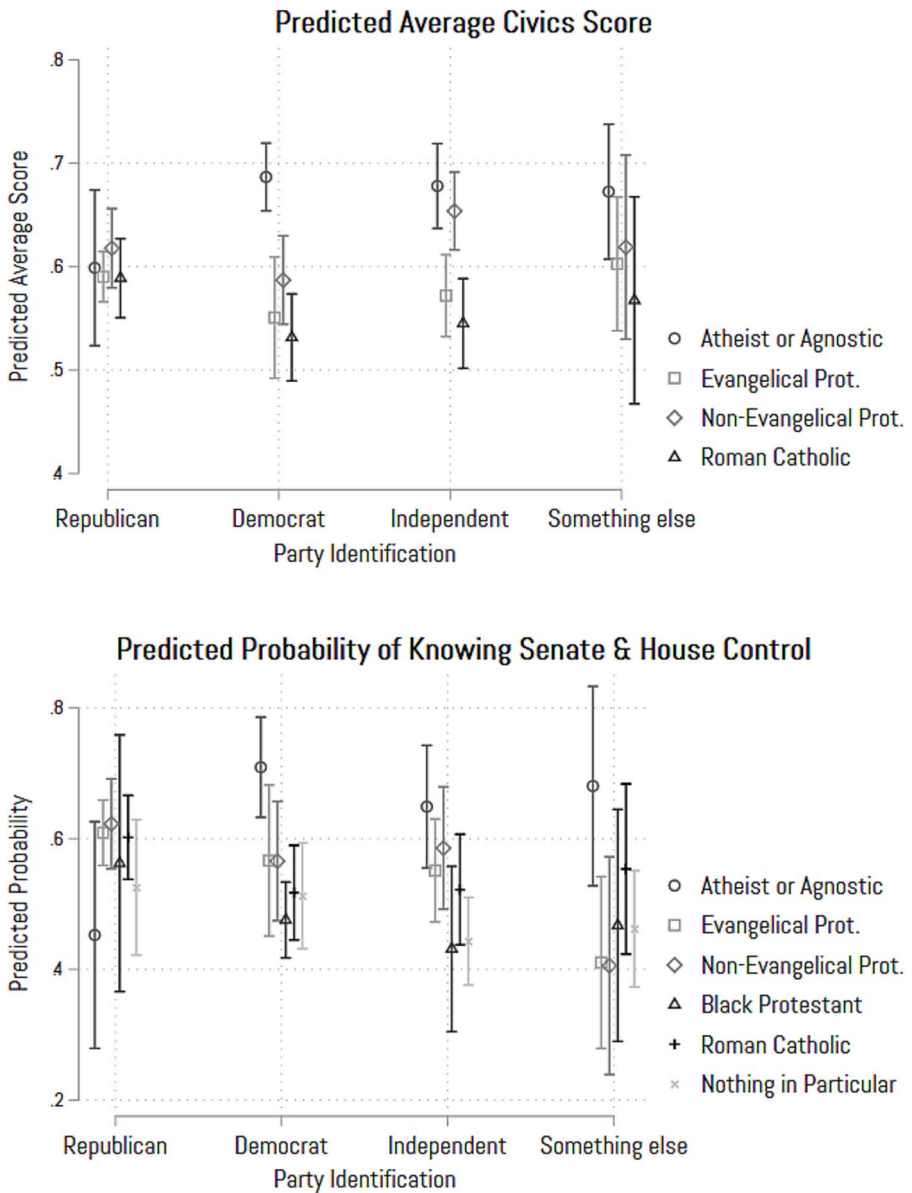


Figure 4. Americans' predicted civics test score and knowledge of current politics by religious identification and party identification. Source: Pew ATP wave 129 (N = 4,571). Note: Error bars are 95% confidence intervals. All controls held at their means.

2006; Hart et al. 2004; Jerit et al. 2006; Miller 2019; Mondak and Anderson 2004; Prior 2002; Prior and Lupia 2008), the current study is the first to examine how religious and secular identifications correspond to Americans' grasp of basic civics and current political conditions. Moreover, this association was strong even after accounting for factors that historically predict civics or political knowledge such as education, age, race, gender, income, and political interest. Furthermore, ancillary analyses in Appendix Table A2 showed the atheist/agnostic advantage in political knowledge is not an artifact of coding choices. Not only were atheists/agnostics more likely to

answer civics questions than other religious groups as opposed to skipping them, but among those who answered, atheists/agnostics still tended to score higher than other religious categories on both civics and current political knowledge. Taken together, the fact that atheists'/agnostics' superior scores on political knowledge are not epiphenomenal of education, ideological liberalism, or political interest, nor are they an artifact of coding decisions, suggests something unique to the experience or disposition of atheists and agnostics in the United States.

So what is it about being atheist or agnostic that bolsters their political knowledge compared to other Americans? Following research on secular political engagement (e.g., Baker and Smith 2015; Brockway 2018; Burge 2021; Campbell et al. 2018, 2020; Frost and Edgell 2018; Layman et al. 2021, 2024; Schwadel 2020; Stewart 2024), I propose that “atheist” or “agnostic” social identities already have a fundamentally political valence (Edgell et al. 2016; LeDrew 2013). That is, those who self-identify as either atheist or agnostic rather than “nothing in particular” are self-asserting or signaling a political orientation, one that increasingly likely had a political antecedent (Baker and Whitehead 2016; Campbell et al. 2018; Egan 2020; Hout and Fischer 2014; Margolis 2018; Perry 2022). Consequently, the relatively higher commitment to understanding civics and current politics is already “baked into” the self-consciously secular identity more so than it is for other religious groups or the merely non-affiliated. Moreover, to be a self-identified agnostic or atheist (and especially the latter) is to identify with a notoriously stigmatized group in the United States (Campbell et al. 2020; Edgell et al. 2006, 2016, 2017; Frost et al. 2023; Scheitle et al. 2019) and thus the experience of being minoritized might incline self-consciously secular Americans to better understand the workings of American government and current political situation should they need to access the levers of power.

But it should also be stressed that partisan sorting plays an important role in explaining which atheists and agnostics tend to be the most knowledgeable about civics and current political conditions. This also helps us understand the nature of the association between self-conscious secularism and political knowledge. In an increasingly sorted political environment where religious identities overlap with conservative/Republican identities and secular identities overlap with liberal/Democratic identities, those Americans with neatly sorted identities tend to be the most polarized and engaged while those who experience “cross-pressures” (e.g., evangelical and liberal, secular and conservative) are less polarized, and consequently less politically engaged (Baker and Marti 2020; Brader et al. 2014; Djupe et al. 2023; Mason 2018; Mutz 2002). My findings show this pattern extends to political knowledge, primarily for seculars, though also for evangelical Protestants (another politicized religious identity; see Egan 2020; Sutton 2024). But while among Christian groups only evangelical Protestants showed an increase in political knowledge across the ideological spectrum (fig. 3), no Christian groups showed much change in their political knowledge across parties (fig. 4). Yet, there were clear differences in sorted versus cross-pressured identities on political knowledge for atheists/agnostics; that is, knowledge was highest and most distinctively superior among atheists/agnostics who were “very liberal” or Democratic and declined in other contexts to the point where there was no knowledge advantage among the most cross-pressured atheists/agnostics. Thus, while sorted partisans on the left and right are often both activated by the combination of identities (Cassese 2020; Mason 2018), the influence of sorting versus cross-pressures as it related to religion, political characteristics, and this indicator of political engagement (knowledge acquisition) is more asymmetrical.

The finding that political knowledge is strongest among self-consciously secular Americans who are politically sorted also confirms and extends our understanding of secular political engagement. The nuance that a political knowledge advantage applies to liberal or Democratic seculars has real implications for understanding the variability of this sort of political engagement. Though it is not particularly important, practically speaking, that the secular knowledge advantage disappears among Republicans since only 7 percent of atheists/agnostics in the analytic sample are Republican, there is still partisan diversity as only 46 percent are Democrats (i.e., fully sorted) while 47 percent either identify as Independent or “Something else.”¹² Thus, there are equal proportions of atheists/agnostics who are much more likely to grasp basic civics

and current political conditions than their Christian counterparts (the Democrats) as there are atheists/agnostics who are only modestly more likely to demonstrate more knowledge than Christians (Independents and others). Similarly, >61 percent of atheists/agnostics in the analytic sample identify as “very liberal” or “liberal,” and thus a large proportion are clearly more likely to demonstrate more political knowledge than Christians who are also liberal. Yet, nearly a third (31.2 percent) identify as “moderate” and >7 percent identify as some kind of conservative meaning ~40 percent of atheists/agnostics do not necessarily enjoy a knowledge advantage over Christians. This sorting dynamic is critical to keep in mind not only in discussing the current form of political engagement, but others as well in future studies of secular political engagement.

On the topic of future studies, several data limitations should be acknowledged in order to outline a path for future research. One limitation is the limited number of questions about political knowledge, especially having to do with current political conditions. Moreover, the questions developed by Pew all have to do with the federal government, but other political knowledge questions could involve state politics, such as whether someone knows the names of their state governor, how their state voted in the last presidential election, or how many Electoral College votes their state receives. [Hersh \(2020\)](#) distinguishes between “political hobbyists” who consume large amounts of news and only know about national politics and truly engaged partisans who know and are involved in local political work. It would be interesting to see if religious identification shows the same patterns at the local level as it does in the national level.

Another limitation is that even though the sample size was >4,500 adults, numbers of non-Christian religious groups are so small that it makes estimates of their political knowledge compared to others unreliable, especially when considering the importance of social sorting that is assessed with interactions, thus requiring greater sample sizes (demonstrated in [Tables 3 and 4](#)). Future studies would thus benefit from much larger samples with sufficient enough sample sizes of groups like Jewish and Mormon/Latter-day Saint Americans who might demonstrate different patterns of political knowledge due to different combinations of education and partisan/ideological sorting.

It is worth speculating about the future connection between religious/secular identity, politics, and political knowledge in an increasingly polarized society. To the extent that being a self-consciously secular American becomes more normalized and mainstream, the identification of “atheist” or “agnostic” may lose some of its connection to partisan politics and thus we might see a diminished advantage in political knowledge. However, to the degree that partisan sorting intensifies and directs religious identities ([Campbell et al. 2018](#); [Egan 2020](#); [Hout and Fischer 2014](#); [Margolis 2018](#)), we may witness a growing distance in political knowledge across religious groups driven not primarily by the religious identities and what they signal about religious communities, but by the degree to which they overlap with other sorted identities and contribute to polarization. Future studies must therefore attend to these changes over time.

About the author

Samuel L. Perry is the Sam K. Viersen Presidential Professor of Sociology at the University of Oklahoma. His current work examines how demographic transitions and partisan realignments are shaping American political, religious, racial, and family dynamics. His recent studies have been published in *Social Forces*, *Social Problems*, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *Sociological Theory*, and *Psychological Science*. His most recent book is the award-winning *Religion for Realists: Why We All Need the Scientific Study of Religion* (Oxford 2024).

Endnotes

1. Among the consistent-but-contested findings in studies of political knowledge is the persistent gender gap, with women frequently scoring lower on political knowledge than men

- (Barabas et al. 2014; Campbell and Niemi 2016; Gaskins 2019; Grönlund and Milner 2006; Hart et al. 2004; Jerit and Barabas 2017; Perry et al. 2022, 2024; Prior 2002). While some of this difference may be due to gendered political interest (since political interest is also a predictor of political knowledge; Edgerly et al. 2018), scholars have argued that much of this disparity is attributable to the tendency for men to guess more than women and thus get answers “correct” on accident while women will skip questions and thus get more “incorrect” (Lizotte and Sidman 2009; Mondak and Anderson 2004).
2. Similar differences emerge in the realm of civic engagement. Frost and Edgell (2018) find atheists and agnostics are different from “nothing in particular” Americans in their civic engagement. And indeed, atheists were more likely to volunteer for civic groups than religious persons. Ultimately, only those who were “nothing in particular” showed low levels of civic interest compared to other groups.
 3. This distinction between open identification as secular versus simply being unattached to religion/spirituality could help explain paradoxical findings by Kucinskas and Stewart (2022) that persons who were “neither religious nor spiritual” tended to be less politically engaged than Americans who identified as either religious and/or spiritual, but those who identified as “atheist/agnostic” were not less politically engaged than religious Americans.
 4. Because some research argues certain groups (e.g., women, racial minorities) are more prone skip quiz questions or answer “don’t know,” resulting in substantive disparities in scores (Lizotte and Sidman 2009; Mondak and Anderson 2004; Perry et al. 2022), I also ran analyses predicting whether certain respondents were more likely to skip questions. Results in Appendix Table A2 show atheists/agnostics were more likely to answer civics questions than all religious groups except non-evangelical Protestants, but there was no difference on skipping current political knowledge questions. Appendix Table A2 also presents analyses in which those who did not answer the questions were excluded. Though slightly weaker due to sample size, results were substantively the same as I present here. Thus, I follow the standard practice of distinguishing between correct answers (=1) and incorrect/skipped (=0).
 5. Although technically a count variable, with a mean of .597 (SD = .26) the distribution is more normal with few zeros and thus OLS was more appropriate.
 6. Correct responses are positively correlated but only moderately. And the Cronbach’s alpha for the two aggregated measures is modest (basic civics knowledge = .62; current political knowledge = .63). However, Pew was not intending to construct a psychometric scale of some construct, but simply assessing knowledge. Thus, it is appropriate to analyze responses as quiz scores, especially since I also analyze disaggregated scores.
 7. Each of these religious minority groups on their own represent <2% of the analytic sample (none more than $n = 86$). Given the number of statistical controls, the analytic strategy involving interaction terms, and the use of ordinal logistic regression (all demanding higher sample sizes), there were not sufficient numbers of these minority religious groups to subdivide this category to produce reliable estimates. However, when I predict main effects models with the more expanded religious identification measure (see Appendix figs. A1 and A2), the patterns show each minority religious group also scores lower than atheists/agnostics in civics knowledge and (with the exception of Jewish Americans) current political knowledge.
 8. Although some studies find slight differences between atheists and agnostics in their political or civic engagement (Schwadel 2020), atheists and agnostics were quite similar in their civics knowledge, showing no statistically significant differences in response patterns either at the bivariate or multivariate levels. Thus, they were best analyzed together as self-consciously secular Americans (see also Kucinskas and Stewart 2022) as opposed to religious or merely non-affiliated (“nothing in particular”) Americans.
 9. For decades, political scientists have argued that “Independents” often lean toward Republican or Democratic parties and thus including an “Independent” category potentially masks partisan variation within the category itself (e.g., Keith et al. 1992; Klar and Krupnikov 2016). Pew fortunately includes a separate survey item in which self-identified Independents have

been separated out into partisan leaners. Tables A3 and A4 in the Supplemental Appendix replicate models in Tables 3 and 4 with the party identity separated into Republican/Lean Republican (=0) and Democrat/Lean Democrat (=1). The substantive results for religious groups are virtually identical. And when it comes to the religion $\times$ party interactions presented in Model 5 of Appendix Tables A3 and A4, the partisan story is even stronger (see Appendix fig. A3). In the current study, because respondents initially self-identified as Independents, I have opted to keep that coding.

10. When I estimate these same models with evangelical Protestants as the reference category, the lower-order term for conservative ideology (i.e., the association between conservative ideology and the outcomes among evangelicals) is positive and significant for civics knowledge and significant for knowledge of current political conditions. In contrast, the lower-order term for conservative ideology when atheists/agnostics are the reference category is negative and significant beyond .001 for civics knowledge and beyond .01 for knowledge of current political conditions. Thus, the association is markedly more pronounced for atheists/agnostics.
11. In ancillary analyses when I reassign Independent "leaners" into Republican or Democratic groups, the differences by religious identification across party identification are even more stark (see Appendix fig. A3).
12. Though the sample of atheist/agnostics who are Republican is too small to conduct meaningful analyses with controls, they are descriptively different from their Democratic and Independent counterparts in being less educated and whiter (though not necessarily older, more rural, or Southern). And compared to Democrats, they are more male. When I reassign Independent atheists/agnostics into Rep./Rep. Leaners and Dem./Dem. Leaners, 75% fall into the latter category, while the former group is less educated, older, less likely to live in the Northeast, and more male, though no different in racial composition.

Supplementary material

Supplementary material is available at *Social Forces* online.

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Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Data availability

Data for this study are publicly available at <https://www.pewresearch.org/dataset/american-trends-panel-wave-129/> and both the author's data set and Stata code for replication will be posted at the author's Harvard dataverse repository after acceptance.

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