Specifically, the direct effects of ideology are typically null, and the statistical interactions with sophistication are typically robust. In contrast, the direct effects of the principles are typically robust—with mixed results when interacted statistically with sophistication. The structure of the principles is similar across the sophistication distribution (chapter 5), the principles are founded upon basic personal values in similar ways across the sophistication distribution (chapter 7), the principles shape issue positions in similar ways across the sophistication distribution (chapter 6), and the principles shape vote choices in similar ways across the sophistication distribution (chapter 8).

Optimistically, Goren has put to rest the worry that minimum citizens cannot shoulder their democratic responsibilities by demonstrating policy voting at low levels of sophistication. More realistically, Goren has added a new and important dimension to work on voter competence. This book will be important not only for its conclusions, but also for the controversy it will no doubt stimulate. As mentioned above, many of the principles have stronger effects on more sophisticated citizens. Goren emphasizes the robust effects among the less aware; others may well continue to ponder whether the less aware, notwithstanding some policy voting, succeed in behaving “as if” they were well informed, à la Zaller. Future work will want to extend Goren’s results by exploring whether they translate into “correct voting” (Lau and Redlawsk). After all, notwithstanding widespread policy principle effects, Goren’s results are mostly consistent with prior work demonstrating ideological limitations at low levels of sophistication. That being the case, does the (nonideological) policy voting in evidence among less sophisticated individuals lead to behavior that is similar to the behavior we would observe among otherwise similar—but more sophisticated—individuals (e.g., Bartels or Althaus)? Are policy principles adequate when it comes to reacting to changes in the political environment (e.g., Jerit, Barabas, Gilens, Highton, Claassen, Nicholson, and others)? On Voter Competence blazes new trails in the ongoing debate about whether and how political sophistication matters and will undoubtedly be a new classic in a rigorous and engaging literature.


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Religion matters in U.S. politics, and has increasingly come to assume an important role in American electoral politics. Indeed, the concept of the
“God Gap,” in which religiosity is a stable source of partisan identification and vote choice, has become something of a cliché in both journalistic and academic circles.

That said, there does seem to be a paucity of studies in which the electoral effects of religion are considered as variables, which differ across candidates and political contexts. To illustrate, I have often been intrigued by the fact that recent Republican presidents have been members of mainstream denominations (Reagan as a Disciple of Christ, George H. W. Bush as an Episcopalian, and George W. Bush as a Methodist) who were conversant in the vernacular of evangelicalism. By contrast, GOP candidates who are identified with narrower traditions (e.g., Rick Santorum, Pat Robertson) have been considerably less successful.

In Religious Rhetoric and American Politics, Christopher Chapp addresses the variable nature of religious values (in particular, religious rhetoric) in a more systematic fashion. Chapp’s main argument is quite simple: There exist three approaches to religion that political candidates may take. Candidates may choose to emphasize the values of “civil religion,” which involves the use of consensual cues, with religious and quasi-religious symbols used as sources of national identity. Alternatively, candidates may employ the language of “culture wars,” in which the values of the religiously devout are distinguished from those held by more secular citizens. Finally, candidates may invoke specific religious “subgroup” identities (e.g., Roman Catholicism, evangelicalism, Judaism, etc.).

Using a variety of national surveys (to provide a temporal dimension) and a series of experiments, Chapp produces several interesting findings. First, presidential candidates are much more likely to employ the rhetoric of civil religion than to use either of the other two approaches. Second, the likelihood of using civil religious imagery does not correspond to the partisan or ideological characteristics of presidential candidates. Thus, although Chapp reports that Ronald Reagan made extensive use of civil religious language in his 1980 and 1984 campaigns, Reagan was less likely to invoke civil religion than his 1984 opponent, Walter Mondale. Third, the use of civil religious rhetoric has generally positive (and statistically significant) effects on candidate evaluation and vote choice, and this result holds up in the face of relatively elaborate multivariate controls. Chapp persuasively demonstrates the efficacy of civil religious language using both panel data and the results of experiments. Finally, the effects of civil religion rhetoric on partisan and electoral attitudes are not uniform, but are more pronounced among Christians, and particularly among religiously devout Christians.

These findings are quite interesting, and, to my knowledge, original. Chapp has provided a coherent, empirically based account of the variable role of religious rhetoric, which will provide grist for the theoretical mill of religious politics in the United States. Chapp’s work is also relevant to the growing literature on the importance (or unimportance) of political campaigns. Put simply,
Chapp shows that religion is part of the dynamics of political campaigns, and is not simply an aspect of constituency characteristics to which political candidates must adapt.

A couple of criticisms seem in order. First, I am at something of a loss to understand the conceptual and empirical basis of the three approaches to religious rhetoric. The notion of U.S. political culture as describable in terms of “the One, the Two, and the Many” goes back at least as far as a 1974 article by Samuel Huntington (to which Chapp does not refer). Of course, dividing public religious rhetoric into consensual, dualistic, and pluralistic strategies has a certain plausibility. Moreover, the coding of the categories could be much clearer. The author provides an on-line appendix, in which he addresses the issue of intercoder reliability, but the reader gets little sense of the relationships among the different categories, or the possible overlap among them.

The reference to the online appendices brings me to my second criticism: The book is simply much too short. At the risk of exposing my values as old-fashioned, I found it very annoying to toggle continually between the text and a website, which contains most of the multivariate analyses. I suppose this practice is becoming increasingly common, but all the online appendices could have been included between the covers of this book (already a brief 173 pages) while adding no more than 20 pages. The data presentation inside the book consists almost entirely of line graphs, which do not contain the results of multivariate analyses and are quite difficult to read. Further, given that the appendices were not constrained by page limits, the descriptions of the variables, and the multivariate analyses, could have been considerably more detailed.

Moreover, the problem of excessive brevity is not simply a matter of style or presentation. Given the centrality of the distinction among civil religion, culture wars, and subgroup identity rhetoric, the work should have contained considerably more examples of each type of political language, along with a much stronger sense of the distinctions among the categories. I would have liked to have seen examples of the strategies of different candidates from both parties. For example, I found the finding that Walter Mondale made extensive use of civil religion rhetoric most intriguing and counterintuitive, and would have liked to have seen examples of this pattern.

Finally, it would have been helpful to have offered some sort of explanation for the finding that there exist differential effects of civil religion rhetoric for Christians and for others; given the non-sectarian, ecumenical nature of such political speech, why should the effects be different for diverse groups of Americans? Do such differential effects vary across candidates or parties? From both empirical and normative standpoints, the notion of a civil religion that, on its face, is consensual, but is viewed differently across religious traditions poses fascinating questions, which the author would have done well to address.
Bottom line: This is an interesting, well done, and potentially important book. The fact that the work poses a number of unanswered questions simply provides the opportunity for extensive future research.

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