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11. Shifting Concerns about Social Problems

Religious and Political Identity among Evangelical and Mainline Protestants, 1960-2013

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Abstract

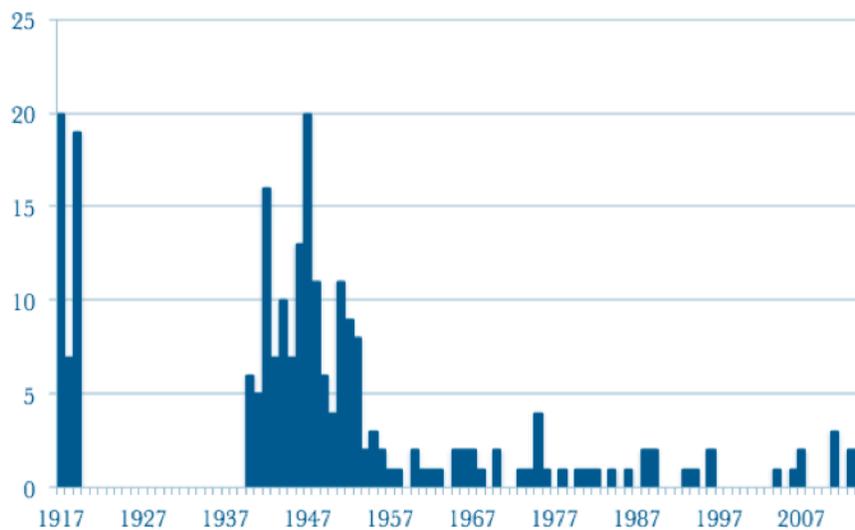
How does attention to controversial social problems rise and fall among Evangelical Protestants and Mainline Protestants over time? Drawing on content analysis from 1960-2013, I find that while attention to racial inequality distinguished these two religious traditions over the 1960s and early-1970s, attention to abortion has distinguished these two traditions since the 1980s. Moreover, I find that maintaining and strengthening religious identity is a key factor in how these controversial social problems are managed over time by religious groups. These findings suggest a close and complex relationship between religious identity and controversial social and political debates.

Keywords: religious identity, politics, social problems, racial inequality, abortion

Introduction

Attention to particular social problems rises and falls within Protestant groups over time. For example, while overindulgence of alcohol has long been an issue of private concern for some, alcohol as a social problem has risen and fallen over time. The temperance movement against alcoholic beverage consumption emerged as a national movement in the 1830s among Protestants (Young) and rose again in the early 20th century. Attention to alcohol as a social problem among Protestants was high in the late-1910s and early-1920s in the Mainline Protestant flagship periodical, *Christian Century* (see Figure 1). At this time, religious denominations and leaders, particularly Mainline Protestant ones, saw alcohol as a critical social problem that was important for them to take a strong stance on and as critical for their religious and public identity. The Congregational Christian Church in a 1918 article in their denominational periodical, *The Herald of Gospel Liberty*, drummed up concern about alcoholism and argued that the “program of booze has been against everything that the spirit of America has stood for” (Chaplain Rountree). Religious mobilization, especially among Methodists, successfully pushed for a ban in the United States on the sale and production of alcoholic beverages from 1920-1933. However this attention died out suddenly. Attention to alcohol picked up again in the late 1930s and through the 1940s, during a second push for prohibition that occurred during World War II. This general attention to alcohol consumption has largely died out since this time, although there remains attention to particular issues related to consumption, such as binge drinking.

Figure 1. Number of Articles on Alcohol or Prohibition, 1917-2014, in *Christian Century*, a Mainline Protestant Periodical



Alcohol consumption and distribution has fallen as a prominent social problem, while others have risen. Today there is some mobilization around drunk driving and binge drinking, but there is no evidence of Protestant groups similarly arguing that the distribution of alcohol is “against everything that the spirit of America has stood for,” as these Congregationalists were arguing in 1918. Instead, one does hear Protestant groups discuss

other issues, such as abortion or gay marriage, as against everything that America stands for. For example, one theologian writing in *Christianity Today*, an Evangelical Protestant periodical, argued that the United States Supreme Court decisions that decriminalized abortion (*Roe v. Wade*) and decriminalized sodomy (*Lawrence v. Texas*) “turned the nation into a pagan state” and “are catastrophic symbols of what has been happening to the country at large” (Brown: 40, 42). While the social problem of alcohol distribution was influential during the 1916 and 1932 elections, one does not hear about the prohibition voting bloc deciding elections today (Morone). However, one might hear about influential voting blocs concerned about abortion or gay marriage. For example, after the 2004 presidential election many argued that the anti-gay marriage voting bloc, composed primarily of Evangelical Protestants, was critical to the re-election of President George W. Bush (Campbell and Monson).

This article seeks to understand how Mainline Protestants and Evangelical Protestants manage key contentious social problems over time. While there is a rich literature that has sought to understand how and why social problems rise and fall in salience among the mainstream American news media as a whole, this article seeks to gain insight by comparing attention to social problems in two religious traditions. I find similarities in what issues Mainline and Evangelical Protestants have paid attention to since the 1960s, but differences in the relative attention to these social problems and the timing of the attention, particularly for abortion and racial inequality. Moreover, I find that maintaining and strengthening group identity is a key factor in how these social problems are managed over time. This study points to a close and complex relationship between religious identity and controversial social and political debates.

Literature Review

Rising and Falling of Social Problems

The social issues that a particular group collectively defines as important problems change over time. Often they rise and fall in salience and compete for public concern (Becker; Blumer; Spector and Kitsuse; Hilgartner and Bosk). An issue previously not considered important can become something that is seen as vitally important. For example, child abuse has always occurred, but it was “discovered” as a social problem in the early-1960s and resulted in a rise of criminal legislation across the United States. This rise of child abuse as a social problem did not result from a rise in child abuse incidence rates, but rather by professional interests and a desire to diminish medical marginality among pediatric radiologists who saw signs of abuse on x-ray screens (Pfohl). Later, in the 1970s and 1980s, there was again a rise of attention to child abuse, this time particularly abuse caused by deviant adults, such as kidnappers, child molesters, child pornographers, and Satanists. This new rise was driven by ongoing waves of social reform and changes in the media (Best). Scholars have sought to understand the rise in public attention to other social problems as well, including drunk driving (Gusfield), battered wives (Tierney; Loseke and Cahill), and environmental degradation (Schoenfeld, Meir, and Griffin). These studies often point to structural and cultural changes in the wider American society that affect the making of specific claims around a social problem and demonstrate the role of the media in facilitating or hindering claims.

Just as concern about certain social problems rises, the concern about other social problems may fall due to limited space in news broadcasts and audience attention to social problems (Hilgartner and Bosk). For example, American public attention to environmental issues rose in the late-1960s culminating in the first Earth Day, fell over the 1970s, rose again in the late-1980s with attention to ozone holes and drought, fell over the 1990s, and rose again in the late-2000s (Downs; Ungar; Mazur and Lee; Mzur; Amenta et al.; Danielsen 2013). Attention to issues can fall due to audience boredom with an old issue (Downs) and misalignment with political and economic interests and losing attention to a new social problem (Hilgartner and Bosk). The news media has been shown to privilege social problems that have claims-makers in positions of authority (Gans; Best; Myers and Caniglia), stories with drama or violence (Best; Myers and Caniglia; Amenta et al.), and problems that affect more privileged people (Armstrong et al.). Moreover, audience receptiveness to particular stories affects claims-making activities and whether a social problem rises in prominence, such as when the drought of 1988 facilitated a short-term attention to global warming (Ungar).

The scholarship on social problems has generally focused on mainstream American news media as a whole rather than comparisons between subgroups within America, as this article does. Scholarship has generally explained the rise and fall of a particular social problem by focusing on the professional or political interests of the claims-makers, such as feminist activists and social work professionals who brought attention to domestic violence (Tierney). Other scholars have argued we need to look at the interaction and competition between social problems in the “marketplace” of popular discourse, called a “public arenas model” (Hilgartner and Bosk; Maratea). This article seeks to bring these literatures together by comparing two different public arenas that bring attention to social problems among two related but dissimilar religious groups: Evangelical Protestants and Mainline Protestants. In doing so, this article argues that religious groups benefit from discourse about social problems, particularly as a means to solidify their religious and political identity.

Divides in the Religious Field

Religious identity in the United States has long been based in class and race divides and, increasingly today, also political divides. Historically, religious denominations are divided primarily based on social class, race, and patterns of immigration (Niebuhr; Herberg). For example, Baptists were poorer, while Episcopalians were wealthier and more elite. Congregationalists were earlier English immigrants, while Lutherans were often more recent German immigrants (Finke and Stark). However, since the 1960s, political identity has risen as an increasingly important predictor of the denomination with which a person identifies. Research reveals that divides by race and class still persist between Protestant denominations (Roof and McKinney; Darnell and Sherkat; Sherkat; Park and Reimer; Smith and Faris), but political identity is now also significant and increasingly important for denominational divides both because people are choosing religious affiliation based on their political identity and choosing their political party affiliation based on their religious identity (Wuthnow; Hout and Fischer; Putnam and Campbell). In other words, while in the 1950s political liberals and conservatives mixed together in pews, today increasingly United Church of Christ congregations are filled with Democrats and Southern Baptist Convention congregations are

filled with Republicans. In contemporary America, there is a more consistent relationship between religious identity and political identity, with attitudes on particular salient social problems, most notably abortion, often holding this relationship together (Putnam and Campbell).

Religious denominations are sociologically fruitful organizations to study because religious adherents have sorted themselves into hundreds of different denominations, which leads to many possible comparisons. Due to the “social sources of denominationalism,” when comparing Protestant groups, one is not just comparing groups divided by religious identity, but also by ethnicity, social class, and political identities. Comparisons between Protestants are particularly fruitful because they often have deeply held differences in beliefs and identities in different denominations. In contrast, Catholics often go to mass in a large congregation, filled with people of many different social classes, racial or ethnic backgrounds, or political identities. There is certainly some sorting, but whether one is an Anglo Catholic or a Hispanic Catholic, the person will identify as “Catholic” on surveys (Putnam and Campbell).

Scholars divide the hundreds of Protestant denominations into three different categories, to make them easier to study (Steensland et al.). There is also a definable identity among the denominations with these designations. First, Black Protestants are historically African-American churches and, since they are defined primarily in terms of racial divisions, are rather diverse politically. Denominations in this category include the African Methodist Episcopal Church and Church of God in Christ. Second, Evangelical Protestants are more conservative Protestants. These groups are more likely to support biblical literalism and are stricter in their adherence to religious doctrines. They are also more likely to identify as politically conservative or as Republicans. Denominations in this category include the Southern Baptist Convention and Assemblies of God. Third, Mainline Protestants include groups that are generally more tolerant toward pluralism. These denominations are generally the more established, long-standing and mainstream religious denominations in the United States and are historically more likely to be wealthier White Anglo-Saxon Protestants. They are more religiously liberal and are much more likely to identify as politically liberal or as Democrats. Denominations in this category include the United Methodist Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and the Presbyterian Church (USA).

Since this article is focused primarily on political identity, it will concentrate on comparisons within and between Evangelical Protestant and Mainline Protestant groups. The important boundaries around Black Protestants are based on race and Black Protestant denominations are much less likely to take official stances on controversial social issues or are focused on a different set of controversial social issues. This divide between Evangelical Protestants and Mainline Protestants today is increasingly rooted in political identity with a more traditional liberal vs. conservative division (Wuthnow; Smith; Wuthnow and Evans). Evangelical Protestants and Mainline Protestants often are discussing the same social issues, but in different ways and with different official stances. These two groups have often battled amongst one another on opposite sides of the same issue, such as the debate about evolution in the Scopes Trial of 1925 (Larson).

Data and Methods

How do social problems rise and fall over time and which social problems are particularly contentious among Evangelical Protestants and Mainline Protestants? To answer these questions, I first analyze *Christian Century*, Mainline Protestantism's flagship journal, and *Christianity Today*, Evangelical Protestantism's flagship journal, over the past 50 years for articles that discuss controversial social problems. Using quantitative content analysis, I assess relative attention over time to a number of controversial social problems. I look at the number of articles that mention a key social problem each year, including racial inequality, homosexuality, abortion, environmentalism, alcohol, capital punishment, sex education, healthcare, pornography, HIV/AIDS, poverty, immigration, communism, and divorce.¹ Second, I engage in qualitative content analysis on these two Mainline Protestant and Evangelical Protestant periodicals as well as archival materials. I focus on how these controversial social problems are discussed by religious claims-makers. This second part is informed by archival work that I engaged in during previous projects, particularly on how Mainline Protestants managed abortion politics (Danielsen 2014) and how Evangelical Protestants managed environmental issues (Danielsen 2013).

Findings

Quantitative Content Analysis

Across both periodicals since 1960, three social problems stand out as being significant and controversial among and between Evangelical and Mainline Protestant groups: racial inequality, homosexuality, and abortion (see Table 1). Environmentalism and climate change was discussed less frequently relative to these three issues, but the debate was notable for being heavily polarized and politicized, especially among Evangelical Protestants in *Christianity Today*.

However, these top three social problems rise and fall over time. Among Mainline Protestants, abortion has persisted as a social problem over time, racial inequality has declined as a social problem since the early-1970s, while homosexuality has risen as a social problem since the early-1990s (see Figure 2). (To interpret this chart, examine the area rather than the height to see how many articles each periodical included about each social problem.) In 2013, there were 48 articles on these three social problems in the Mainline Protestant periodical, and the majority were on homosexuality (36 articles). Racial inequality was discussed in just 7 articles and abortion was discussed in 5 articles. In the 1960s and

¹ Both *Christianity Today* and *Christian Century* were accessed electronically through EBSCOHost ATLA Religious Database with ATLASerials from 1960-2013. Some social problems were quantitatively analyzed using multiple keywords because multiple phrases are commonly used or common terminology has changed over time. Keywords on racial inequality include "race relations," "racism," or "segregation." Keywords on homosexuality include "homosexuality," "same sex marriage," "gay," or "lesbian." Keywords on abortion include "abortion," "pro-life," or "pro-choice." Keywords on environmentalism include "global warming," "climate change," "carbon emissions," "greenhouse effect," "greenhouse gas," "ecology," "creation care," "environmental stewardship," or "environmentalism." Keywords on capital punishment include "death penalty" or "capital punishment." Keywords on sex education include "sex ed" or "sex education."

1970s, during the Civil Rights Movement, Mainline Protestants paid much more attention to racial inequality than the other two issues. However, this attention has fallen over time. Since the mid-1990s, Mainline Protestants have increasingly focused on homosexuality. Much of this coverage is dedicated to fights within denominations about whether or not the group should marry gay couples and whether or not a group should ordain gay ministers. Abortion has received relatively less attention over time, but this attention has been quite consistent and is notably controversial.

Table 1. Number of Articles on Prominent Social Problems, 1960-2013

Social Problem	Mainline Protestants (<i>Christian Century</i>)	Evangelical Protestants (<i>Christianity Today</i>)	Total Articles for Both Periodicals
Homosexuality	618	319	937
Racial Inequality	718	199	917
Abortion	247	391	638
Immigration	155	71	226
HIV/AIDS	79	92	171
Communism	78	72	150
Environmentalism	93	42	135
Poverty	80	54	134
Capital Punishment	97	20	117
Divorce	48	60	108
Pornography	26	75	101
Healthcare	57	25	82
Alcohol	41	31	72
Sex Education	10	40	50

In contrast, racial inequality was not a significantly-discussed social problem in the Evangelical Protestant periodical (see Figure 3). At the time when Mainline Protestants were deeply engaged in the Civil Rights Movement (Quinley; Guth et al.; Friedland) and debating issues of racial inequality on the pages of *Christian Century*, Evangelical Protestants were barely discussing it. Until the 1980s, the Evangelical Protestant periodical paid less attention to social issues and more to foreign policy issues, particularly communism and the Cold War. Although it is popularly assumed that Evangelical Protestants began paying attention to the issue of abortion after the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision decriminalized the procedure, in fact Evangelical Protestants did not start paying significant attention to the issue until the late-1970s and early-1980s when Evangelical Protestant and Republican leaders used the issue to mobilize people at the grassroots (Bruce; Diamond). While Mainline Protestants were intensely debating abortion in *Christian Century* during the late-1960s and early-1970s, Evangelical Protestants did not begin intensely debating abortion until the late-1970s and early-1980s. Evangelical Protestants began discussing homosexuality at the same time as Mainline Protestants, during the early-1990s.

Figure 2. Number of Articles on Prominent Social Problems, 1960-2013, in Christian Century

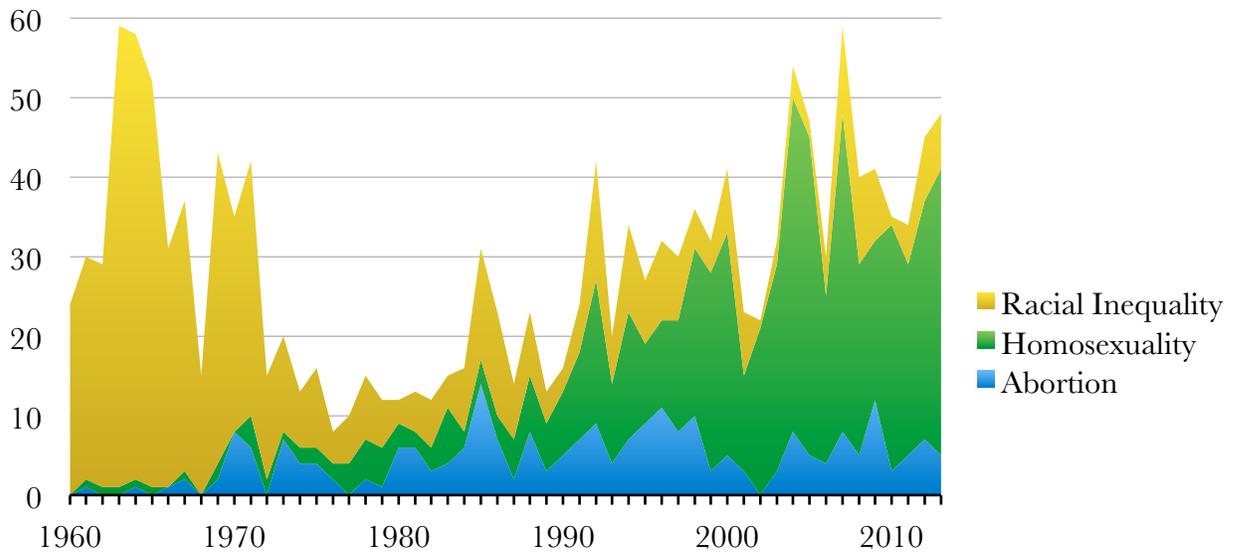
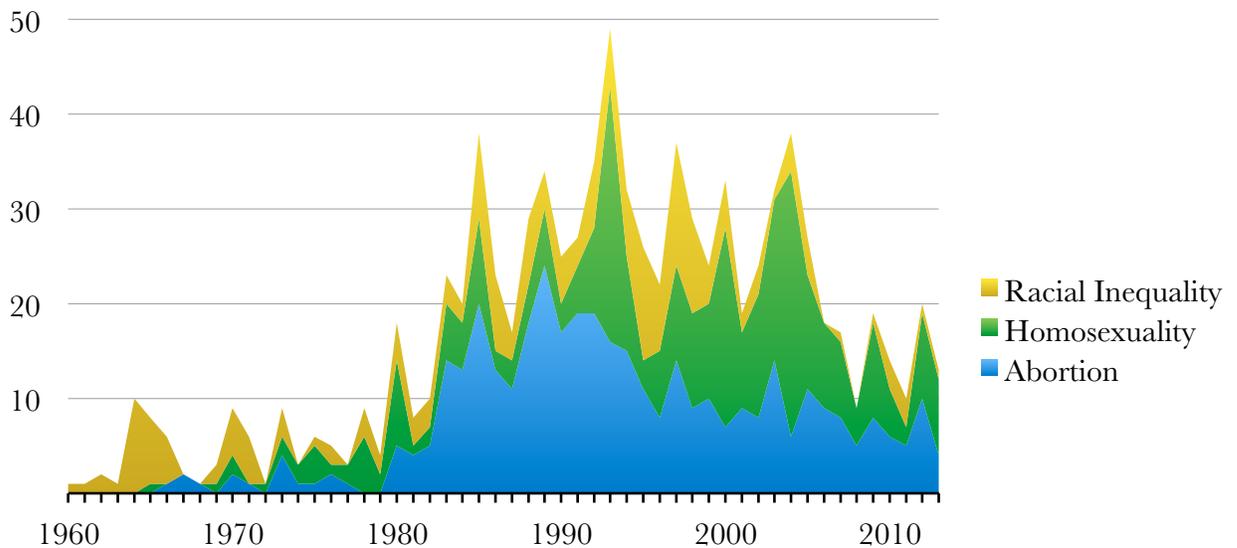


Figure 3. Number of Articles on Prominent Social Problems, 1960-2013, in Christianity Today



There are many similarities between Mainline Protestant and Evangelical Protestant attention to social problems since 1960. Both had heated discussions of homosexuality and gay marriage starting during the early-1990s, particularly during discussions of HIV/AIDS. Both had persistent discussion of environmental issues over time. Both had similar levels and persistence of discussion of poverty over time.

However, two issues have most notably distinguished Mainline Protestants and Evangelical Protestants since 1960: racial inequality and abortion. The issue of racial

inequality distinguished Mainline Protestants and Evangelical Protestants during the 1960s and early-1970s, when the former discussed the issue at length and the latter largely ignored the issue (see Table 2). However, since around 1975 this issue no longer appears to distinguish the two religious traditions as Mainline Protestants have dropped their attention to racial inequality to the same level as Evangelical Protestants.

Table 2. Percent and Number of Articles on Racial Inequality²

	Mainline Protestants (<i>Christian Century</i>)	Evangelical Protestants (<i>Christianity Today</i>)
1960-1975	4.9% (N=464)	0.9% (N=254)
1976-2013	0.9% (N=43)	1.0% (N=156)

Table 3. Percent and Number of Articles on Abortion

	Mainline Protestants (<i>Christian Century</i>)	Evangelical Protestants (<i>Christianity Today</i>)
1960-1980	0.4% (N=47)	0.3% (N=21)
1981-2013	0.8% (N=199)	2.8% (N=370)

The issue of abortion has also distinguished Mainline Protestant and Evangelical Protestant traditions. While both Mainline Protestants and Evangelical Protestants paid small levels of attention to abortion over the 1960s and 1970s (see Table 3), Mainline Protestants by the early-1970s were largely united in their support of abortion rights and Evangelical Protestants were largely ambivalent or conflicted in their stance. It is not until the early-1980s that Evangelical Protestants in *Christianity Today* began to dedicate significantly more attention to the issue of abortion and became more united in opposition to abortion rights. This increased attention to abortion among Evangelical Protestants coincides with abortion stances becoming particularly salient for and predictive of both religious identity and political identity over the 1980s (Putnam and Campbell; Fiorina, Abrams and Pope).

² Percentages were calculated by dividing the number of articles that mention a racial inequality keyword by the total number of articles for each year during the time period. So, out of 9,511 total articles in *Christian Century* from 1960-1975, 464 articles mentioned a racial inequality keyword, or 4.9%. Out of 26,935 total articles in *Christian Century* from 1976-2013, 254 articles mentioned a racial inequality keyword, or 0.9%.

Religious Identity and Social Problems

While attention to particular social problems rise and fall over time, there are commonalities to the way that Protestant groups manage these contentious social problems. These commonalities reveal that social problems help groups reinforce a sense of collective identity and draw boundaries between themselves and others. In this section, I will draw on qualitative content analysis from these two Protestant periodicals as well as periodical and archival analysis from previous research.

Protestant groups use debates around social problems to draw boundaries around themselves and other religious groups they identify as similar to themselves. Protestant groups often discuss or take a particular stance on a controversial social problem if similar Protestant groups are doing so. Individual Protestant denominations often look at what stances other Protestant denominations with similar religious and political identities are deciding upon when determining their own stance. For example, the Mainline Protestant denomination, United Church of Christ, in the 1970s looked at what issues other Mainline Protestant denominations were discussing in determining what issues they should also discuss. In the denominations' official archives, the meeting minutes for their main social action committee, the Council for Christian Social Action, often referenced looking at other denominations' stances on social problems for guidance on their own stance and for how stances should be structured. In the 1970s, if another denomination was taking a stance on a social problem that the United Church of Christ had not yet, they wanted to release their own statement (1972, 1973).

Moreover, the official statements that denominations have taken on social problems often bear striking resemblance to one another in timing and in opinions. For example, from 1929-1931, many Mainline Protestant denominations took progressive official stances in favor of access to birth control, including Methodist Episcopal Church, Congregational Churches, the Christian Church, Presbyterian Church in the USA, Protestant Episcopal Church, and the Society of Friends. During this same time, many Evangelical Protestant denominations took conservative official stances in opposition to birth control, including Southern Baptist Convention and Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod (Wilde and Danielsen).

There is similar convergence in stance and timing of stances of abortion among Protestants. Mainline Protestants have shifted much on the issue of abortion since 1960 and their stances are surprisingly homogenous in their timing and in their scope. Before the early-1960s, no Mainline Protestant denominations supported abortion access. From 1966-1972, all major Mainline Protestant denominations took stances that supported expanding abortion access. From 1988-1992, all major Mainline Protestant denominations re-looked at their abortion stances and shifted their stance conservatively (Danielsen 2014). This suggests that the religious organizational field has been powerful in shaping their decisions and actions related to the abortion debate. Protestant groups are very aware of what stances similar Protestant groups are taking when debating and taking stances on controversial social problems. In taking similar stances, these Protestant denominations reinforce their religious identity as either Mainline Protestant or Evangelical Protestant.

Protestant groups also use debates around social problems to draw boundaries between themselves and other religious groups they identify as dissimilar to themselves. In other words, not only does discussion of social problems allow Protestant groups to draw boundaries around groups they identify as similar to themselves, but also to draw boundaries to exclude groups they identify as dissimilar to themselves. For example, in the late-1960s and early-1970s, Mainline Protestants advocated expanding abortion access in part because it was the anti-Catholic stance. Advocating for abortion rights at this time became a key way for Protestant denominations to counter Catholic political power, which was a key concern among Protestants at that time (Danielsen 2014). Protestants argued that Catholic religious beliefs should not define American law on abortion. They often advocated for abortion rights by emphasizing that the prime opponents to abortion rights were Catholic groups, and to many Protestants that was enough of a reason in the late 1960s (i.e., Kinsolving; Schanberg; Sibley). For example, one *Christian Century* editorial reported on a papal statement that “abortion is always murder and that a community which legalizes abortion is barbarous” and called it “plain rubbish [that] ought to be rejected” (1309). Stances on abortion provided Mainline Protestant groups a sense of an “us” against a Catholic “them” in the 1960s and 1970s.

Later, in the 1980s, some of these same Mainline Protestant denominations used abortion again as a line in the sand between themselves and other religious groups, but this time between themselves and Evangelical Protestants (Danielsen 2014). At this time there was increasing movement of Evangelical Protestants into politics with the rise of the Religious Right and opposition to abortion became a primary rallying cry for these groups to mobilize people at the grassroots (Bruce; Diamond; Harding). Some Mainline Protestant groups reaffirmed their pro-abortion rights official stances as a way of drawing a boundary between themselves and other Evangelical Protestant denominations. The Mainline Protestants drew on their liberal official stances on abortion as evidence they remained Mainline Protestant and not Evangelical Protestant or part of the Religious Right movement (Danielsen 2014).

Challenges can arise for Protestant groups as they use debates around controversial social problems to link themselves to groups they identify as similar and oppose groups they identify as dissimilar. *Stances on a particular social problem can also threaten cohesion within a religious group.* In drawing lines between “us” and “them,” there can be a sense that some people who disagree with this official stance should leave the “us” and become the “them” if they disagree.

For example, the United Methodist Church fought over their religious and political identity by arguing over the denomination’s official abortion stance in the 1980s. As the largest Mainline Protestant denomination and the largest religious group in the United States after the Catholic Church and the Southern Baptist Convention, the United Methodist Church is generally characterized by scholars as the most centrist and moderate denomination in America, but with a diverse membership theologically, politically, and demographically (Norwood; Guth et al.; Newman and Halvorson). With such a large and diverse membership, the UMC General Conference, the policy-making body that meets every four years, is deeply divided over social issues and negotiations over official policy stated in their *Book of Discipline* are often quite contentious. Historically, the Methodist

Church has been no stranger to contentious issues, having split into North and South factions over slavery during the Civil War and as a critical force in the temperance movement that led to prohibition in the United States from 1920-1933. The United Methodist Church has advocated for abortion rights since their official abortion reform stance in 1968 (United Methodist Church General Conference 1968) and abortion repeal stance in 1972 (United Methodist Church General Conference 1972). By the end of the 1960s, the United Methodist Church had become a heavily urbanized and bureaucratized institution that struggled to deal with national and global conflicts arising at that time. It also sidelined theological arguments as liberal social activism became the prime concern for the church (Norwood).

This liberal social activism has led to tension among the diverse membership of the United Methodist Church. The Good News Movement is an evangelical movement within the United Methodist Church that was formed in 1967 by Rev. Charles Keysor who argued that “the Methodist Church needed to renew its historical Biblical beliefs” and that Methodism was dominated by humanists. He argued that the United Methodist Church emphasized “social issues ahead of worship” and, in particular, was too lax about abortion (Vecsey). The Good News Movement distributed materials that used the denominations’ liberal stance on abortion as proof that it did not represent the beliefs of most in the denomination. In one 1977 pamphlet, Good News characterized Ms. Theresa Hoover, Associate General Secretary of Women’s Division Board of Global Ministries of the United Methodist Church, as “a widely known pro-abortionist and denominational leader [who is allowed] to express the official position of the United Methodist Church” (United Methodist Archive). In response, the United Methodist Church leadership characterized the constituency of the Good News Movement as a very small but very vocal minority and, in correspondence, sought to marginalize the group (United Methodist Archive). While the Good News movement was credited with pushing United Methodist official stances in a more conservative direction (Vecsey; Guth et al.), the United Methodist Church has officially remained firmly pro-choice and firmly Mainline Protestant in its religious identity, despite the internal Evangelical Protestant social movement within it (Danielsen 2014).

There is not always a simple relationship between religious and political identities and sometimes the two can conflict as a Protestant group seeks to come to a stance on a controversial social problem. *It can be difficult for a religious group to take a particular stance on a social problem if the stance conflicts with their political identity.* Protestant official stances on controversial social problems do not happen in isolation, but in the context of political parties also taking official stances on these same controversial social problems. Often religious stances on a particular social problem are accompanied by pressure or encouragement to vote in particular ways. In both survey data and qualitative data, scholars have provided much evidence that religious identity can affect political partisan identity and voting behavior (Williams and Demerath; Brooks and Manza; Regnerus, Sikkink and Smith). Tension can arise when religious and political identity conflict on a particular issue.

For example, moderate Evangelical Protestants since the early-2000s have expressed concern about how to be liberal on climate change when it goes against their general Republican identity. Moderate evangelical Protestants in *Christianity Today* during the early 1990s were hesitant towards environmentalism because they saw it as “an infectious carrier

of New Age ideas” (Wilkinson). Conservative evangelicals argued that environmentalism was just another component of liberal politics and antithetical to evangelicalism, saying: “A big part of the problem is that the current environmental movement has been hijacked by the far left . . . amidst the calls to save the earth, you will find the whole agenda of today’s socialists, feminists, gays, abortionists, and pacifists” (Veith). Despite this, moderate evangelicals tried to carve out a place for a non-liberal religious version of environmentalism, by calling it “creation care” or “environmental stewardship” instead of environmentalism (Danielsen 2013).

Moderate evangelicals who sought to embrace environmental issues struggled when this stance began to conflict with their generally Republican identity. By the mid-2000s, moderate evangelicals expressed concern that they generally agreed with the Bush White House on stances on key social problems, but that they disagreed with Republicans when it came to their stance on climate change. In 2004, an article in the moderate Evangelical Protestant periodical, *Christianity Today*, reported: “Some evangelical leaders – including the editors of this magazine – have called for action to address climate change. But the Bush administration, which generally listens carefully to conservative Christians, apparently hasn’t heard enough to reconsider its indifference” (Crouch: 66). While embracing the idea of action on climate change, these moderate evangelicals still struggled with what that means. Action on climate change must involve governmental policy. Moderate evangelicals struggled with what this policy could entail, especially given their general agreement with Republican policies. In one article in *Christianity Today*, they note that “when it comes to climate change, collective action is a touchy subject” (Editorial Board: 26). Evangelical Protestants expressed tension that they generally agree with Republicans, but disagree on environmental issues and to what extent evangelical politics needed to be focused on the issues that Republicans cared about (particularly sexuality issues), versus issues that Republicans did not care about or disagreed with (like poverty or environmental issues). It is argued by some that a “good” evangelical cares deeply about abortion and homosexuality, taking the conservative side on each of these issues. The argument against embracing environmentalism as an important social problem in *Christianity Today* seems to be based less on anti-environmentalism and more on a concern that a good evangelical should not ally themselves with the American Left on environmentalism, since they are a key enemy in the “culture wars” over abortion and homosexuality. This is a fight less over environmentalism and more over whether or not political identity as an evangelical should be solely defined by the family and sexuality social problems like abortion and gay marriage (Danielsen 2013).

Discussion

This tension between progressive stances on an environmental issue and their political identity among Evangelical Protestants demonstrates the intense competition among social problems and the ways that religious and political identities affect this competition. Environmentalism competes with other issues such as abortion, homosexuality, marriage, and abstinence, for the finite Evangelical Protestant attention span. As Hilgartner and Bosk point out, “except to the extent that the carrying capacity of the institutional arenas is expanding, the ascendance of one social problem will tend to be accompanied by the decline of one or more others” (61). In the pages of *Christianity Today*, there are clear concerns that

environmentalism has been used as a wedge issue within evangelicalism to fracture it and to turn their attention from the issues they see as more pressing. Moreover, this is a fight over the very identity of evangelicals. Those on the Religious Right argue that issues of family and sexuality should be most salient for evangelical identity and that environmental issues should be irrelevant.

This article has sought to show the way that social problems compete with one another for scarce attention among Mainline and Evangelical Protestants. While there are many similarities between these two religious traditions in their attention to key social problems, two issues distinguish them since 1960: racial inequality and abortion. First, over the 1960s and early-1970s, racial inequality used to distinguish Mainline Protestants from Evangelical Protestants as the former paid significant attention to the issue and the latter did not. However, since the mid-1970s, this distinction has fallen away and Mainline Protestant attention to abortion has dropped to the level of Evangelical Protestants. Second, over the 1980s the issue of abortion rights has increasingly captured the attention of Evangelical Protestants and they have become increasingly united in an anti-abortion-rights stance. This has not happened among Mainline Protestants, who have largely kept their pro-abortion-rights stances that they developed before 1973 and who continue to discuss abortion less frequently.

This article argues that the way that religious groups manage controversial issues reveals an intertwined relationship between stances on particular social problems, religious identity, and political identity for Mainline Protestants and Evangelical Protestants. A group's religious and political identity may facilitate or hinder whether it embraces a particular social problem. Social identities are defined by symbolic boundaries, which individuals and groups draw using beliefs, symbols, and behaviors to make a distinction between themselves and others. One's understanding of what a "good Protestant" or "good Evangelical" or "good Republican" or "Good Democrat" believes may impact what social problem a particular individual or group will or will not embrace given their various identities. Further, not only does religious identity impact the social problems a group focuses on, but stances on these social problems can be used to define religious identity. Religious groups can use stances on controversial social problems to draw boundaries in the religious fields between themselves and others. For instance, stances on abortion were used in the 1960s and 1970s to draw boundaries between Protestants and Catholics and in the 1980s to draw boundaries between Evangelical Protestants and Mainline Protestants. While drawing these boundaries around religious groups using stances on controversial social problems, this can create rancor or alienation for those within the group that disagree with the group's stance.

One can see some of these tensions reveal themselves in how people identify their religious affiliation on surveys. Over the past several decades, large mainstream and moderate Protestant denominations have declined in political power and membership. To their right, conservative Protestant denominations have grown in numbers (Iannaccone; Hout, Greeley and Wilde; Finke and Stark) and non-denominational mega-churches have gained membership and clout within religious and political spheres (Ellingson). To their left, an increasing proportion of Americans identify as having no religious preference. This change is not due to demographic shifts or secularization. Rather, these religious "nones" are political moderates and liberals with weak religious affiliation who no longer identify with

organized religion since it has become increasingly linked to the conservative agenda of the Religious Right (Hout and Fischer; Putnam and Campbell). What are the effects of political identity's increasing influence on religious identity? What does religious identity mean in the 1926 American Census when people identified with the German Reformed Church or with the Norwegian Lutheran Church? What does religious identity mean today when people who see themselves as conservative increasingly might migrate towards a non-denominational evangelical megachurch that shares their conservative views on abortion and gay marriage? Or when someone switches to a United Church of Christ church because it shares their liberal views on social problems and the congregants vote similarly in presidential elections? While race, ethnicity, and social class remain influential for religious identity, more research is needed to better understand this role political identity is increasingly playing in defining religious identity.

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