SECULARISM AND AMERICAN POLITICAL BEHAVIOR

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Abstract   The recent growth of the secular population in the United States has implications for American politics. However, our understanding of these implications has been hindered by oversimplified concepts and measures that equate secularism with non-religion. We separate the two concepts, distinguishing "non-religiosity," or the absence of religion, from "secularism," or a positive embrace of secular beliefs and identities. Using original national-sample cross-sectional and panel surveys, we introduce new measures of secularism, evaluate their properties, and assess their connection to political attitudes and behavior. We find a clear distinction between secularism and non-religiosity in the American public and show that secularism is more closely related than non-religiosity to political attitudes, identifications, and engagement. In fact, while secularism is related to changes over time in political orientations, non-religiosity is not.

In the last quarter century, the United States has experienced sizeable increases in its nonreligious and secular populations—related, but distinct, groups. The percentage of Americans claiming no religious affiliation has tripled (Hout and Fischer 2002, 2014), while an increasing percentage of Americans doubt the existence of God and say religion has no importance in their lives (Hansen 2011).[1] This "secular turn" potentially may reshape the American political landscape because religion is important for political behavior (Smidt, Kellstedt, and Guth 2009), there is a growing religious-secular divide between the Republican and Democratic parties (Green 2007; Layman and Weaver 2016), and there is a clear link between religiosity and civic engagement (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995).

However, social scientists' understanding of the political implications of rising secularism is hindered by conceptual ambiguity and inadequate measurement, failing to capture important differences among secular people. We distinguish secularism from non-religion, defining non-religiosity as the simple absence of religion and secularism as the positive embrace of secular beliefs and identities. Using national-level surveys, we introduce new measures of secularism, evaluate their properties, and assess their connection to politics. We find a clear distinction between secularism and non-religiosity, and show that secularism is more closely related than non-religiosity to political attitudes, identities, and engagement.[2] Using panel data, we find that secularism is related to growing liberalism and support for the Democratic Party over time, but non-religiosity is not.

Conceptualizing Secularism in the American Public

Political scientists' understanding and measurement of secularism is plagued by conceptual imprecision and oversimplification.[3] Researchers treat secularism almost entirely as the absence of religion—ignoring positive attachments to secular beliefs and identities (Green 1996; Layman 2010; Hansen 2011). For example, the most publicized aspect of the secular turn is the growth of

1. Note that the trends for different measures of non-religion vary, underscoring the importance of improved measures of non-religion and secularism. For example, according to the General Social Survey, no religious preference has increased more or less steadily from 1991 to 2018—from 6 to 23 percent. Over that same period there has been an increase from 12 to 30 percent for never attending worship services. However, the increase in non-belief in God has only been from 6 to 11 percent. These differing trends indicate that non-affiliation, non-attendance, and non-belief are not the same. Secularists (like the religious population) are multifaceted.

2. In recent work (Campbell et al. 2018), we distinguish between non-religiosity and secularism, but concentrate on how political attachments affect these orientations, especially religious non-affiliation. Here, we focus on the distinction between non-religiosity and secularism and how they relate independently to political orientations.

3. We focus on private secularism—individuals' personal orientations toward religion and secularism—rather than *public* secularism, or views about religion in the public square.

the "nones"—people with no religious preference (Hout and Fischer 2002; Putnam and Campbell 2010). This change is unquestionably important. But only a few researchers note heterogeneity among the nones or that secularism may extend beyond the nones, to people with a religious affiliation (Hout and Fischer 2002; Kosmin and Keysar 2006, 2009; Putnam and Campbell 2010; Hansen 2011). Lim, MacGregor, and Putnam (2010), for example, find that many nones are "liminal"—moving back and forth between identifying with a religion and as unaffiliated. Fewer still distinguish between different types of secular people (see Beard et al. 2013), and even that work focuses on religion and religious attitudes—ignoring the prospect of distinctly secular beliefs and identities.

In short, we agree that "the various forms, types, and shades of secularity are overlooked or ignored, and all manifestations of irreligion are lumped together" (Zuckerman, Galen, and Pasquale 2016, p. 7) in the literature and that research should conceptualize "secularisms as assertive worldviews in their own right, rather than merely negated reflections of religion" (Baker and Smith 2015, p. 6). Secularism is not the opposite of religiosity. It includes a positive commitment to secular beliefs and identities—a commitment that may be most prevalent among the nones but also present for some religious people. Avowedly secular organizations like the American Humanist Association (AHA) not only reject religion, but also promote secular principles such as science, reason, and human experience as the proper bases for understanding and morality. Just as people diverge in religious commitment, both nonreligious and religious people vary in their acceptance of secular principles and identities. Thus, fully understanding the secular population requires classifying citizens not just by their rejection of religion, but also by their embrace of secularism.

Accordingly, we distinguish between *non-religiosity* and *secularism*. Non-religiosity is simply the absence of religion, including not belonging to a religious body, non-participation in religion (not praying or attending worship), non-salience (viewing religion as unimportant in one's life), and non-belief (not believing in God or the divine origins of Scripture). Secularism, in contrast, is an affirmative commitment to secular beliefs and identities. Just as religion is multifaceted, including beliefs, devotion, and identity (Smidt, Kellstedt, and Guth 2009), secularism should encompass secular beliefs, devotion, and identity.

An examination of secular thought—including work by social theorists (Holyoake 1871; Kant 2007); recent volumes by "new atheists" (Hitchens 2007; Dawkins 2008); and statements of secular organizations such as the AHA and Humanists International—points to three core secular beliefs. One is a commitment to science and objective evidence as bases for understanding the world. Kant contends that "everything in the world happens solely in accordance with laws of nature" (2007, p. 485). The AHA (2003) argues that

"Knowledge of the world is derived by observation, experimentation, and rational analysis."

A second core tenet is humanism: the belief that human experience and knowledge provide the proper basis for comprehending reality and making ethical judgments. In *Principles of Secularism Illustrated*, renowned secularist George Holyoake contends that "Secularism relates to the present existence of man [and] the practical sufficiency of natural morality" (1871, p. 11). Humanists International (n.d.) champions "an ethics based on human and other natural values."

A third concept is "freethinking," the idea that human understanding should be based on reason, rather than tradition and dogma. Kant proposed that "The death of dogma is the birth of morality" (quoted in Taber 1897, p. 86). Holyoake said "Secularism . . . utterly disowns tradition as a ground of belief" (1871, p. 14).

Committed secularists also should hold secular identities, adopting labels such as "secular humanist," "atheist," or "agnostic." In this sense, secularism entails an explicit sense of social identity—providing a lens through which people view the social and political world (Tajfel and Turner 1979). Secularists also should be guided by secular principles, using them as guideposts for structuring their lives. This discussion points to our first hypothesis:

> H1: Secularism and non-religiosity should be related but distinct orientations.

Secularism and Political Orientations

We expect secularism and non-religiosity to connect differently to political attitudes, identities, and behavior. Generally speaking, secularism encompasses distinctive beliefs and social identities, and those motivate policy preferences (Brady and Sniderman, 1985; Goren 2004), electoral decisions (Campbell et al. 1960; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002), and political engagement (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Thus, it should be important for political orientations. Because non-religiosity is defined by an absence of belief, commitment, and identity, it should not encourage similarly distinct political tendencies.

The implications of secularity and non-religiosity should be particularly different for political participation. Because religious participation tends to spur political activity by enhancing civic skills and fostering social concern (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Smidt et al. 2008), the absence of religion should dampen political involvement. Moreover, lack of religious participation may characterize "civic dropouts" who avoid participating in most societal organizations. Indeed, nonreligious people are relatively inactive in politics (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Wielhouwer 2009).

In contrast, secularism should encourage political activity. A key factor in Verba, Schlozman, and Brady's (1995) Civic Voluntarism Model is "engagement"—having clear views on political issues. Commitment to secular values should foster clear policy perspectives and thus political engagement. Secular identity also may promote secular group consciousness, further encouraging political engagement (Fowler and Kam 2007). This suggests our second hypothesis:

> H2: Secularism should be associated with higher levels of political participation. Non-religiosity should be associated with lower levels of political participation.

Secularism and non-religiosity also should have distinct connections to electoral choice and the factors underlying it. That is particularly true for party identification. Nonreligious people tend to be independents (Layman 2001), perhaps reflecting a detachment from social and political institutions. Secularists, however, should be Democrats. Secular beliefs and identity should foster a rejection of the GOP—and its espousal of traditional religiosity—and an attachment to the Democratic Party and its relative hospitality toward secular values (Campbell, Green, and Layman 2011).

Turning to policy attitudes, non-religion and secularism both should be related to views on cultural issues like LGBTQ rights. Secularism's view that morality is grounded in human experience, science, and reason should encourage cultural liberalism. Because religion is connected to cultural conservatism, nonreligious people should be cultural liberals.

The impact of non-religiosity should be weaker and less consistent for other issues. Research demonstrates links between religiosity and attitudes on social welfare (Barker and Carman 2000), foreign policy (Barker, Hurwitz, and Nelson 2008; Guth 2009), and the environment (Guth et al. 1995). However, those links vary across religious traditions and political contexts (Layman and Green 2006; Wilson 2009).

Secularism should align with liberalism on a wider variety of issues. Because a devotion to science and evidence lies at the heart of secularism, it should be associated with support for scientific funding and positions on issues like environmental protection about which the scientific community has reached consensus.

Secularism also should encourage support for redistributive social welfare programs. As the Council for Secular Humanism (n.d.) declares, "We believe in support for the disadvantaged and the handicapped so that they will be able to help themselves." The humanist element of secularism emphasizes human welfare and equality, thus promoting values like humanitarianism and egalitarianism that underlie social welfare liberalism (McClosky and Zaller, 1984; Feldman and Steenbergen, 2001). For example, Holyoake contends that "Secularism is the study of promoting human welfare [and] making the service of others a duty of life" (1871, p. 11). Former AHA president

David Niose (2015) notes that "egalitarianism [comes] from the naturalistic and pragmatic principles underlying humanism."

Humanism's concern for human development and the skepticism of "freethinkers" about tradition should mean that secularists prioritize immigrants' rights over the sanctity of traditional borders. In fact, the AHA "affirms its support for immigration policies based on human need and human interest that are inclusive of: a path to citizenship for undocumented persons [and] decriminalization of undocumented border crossings" (2019).

The prominence secularism attaches to human rights and freedom should lead secularists to reject isolationism and support active US engagement with the international community to address human needs. The AHA (n.d.) contends that cooperation "and diplomacy through multilateral institutions, such as the United Nations, are the most appropriate ways to respect human rights and make the world a safer place."

Finally, if secularism is linked to Democratic partisanship and policy liberalism, it should be strongly related to voting for Democratic candidates. Non-religion's weak and inconsistent links to these orientations should lessen its connection to Democratic candidate support. This suggests two more hypotheses:

> H3: Both secularism and non-religiosity should be associated with liberal cultural attitudes.
> H4: Secularism should be associated with Democratic Party identification, support for Democratic candidates, and liberal views on policy issues other than cultural issues. Non-religiosity should not be related to these orientations.

That secularism should have stronger and more consistent links than non-religiosity to political variables may be important for its relationship over time with political proclivities. Recent work identifies politics as a causal mover in these relationships, with liberal Democrats abandoning religion as it becomes more associated with conservatism and the Republican Party (Hout and Fischer 2002, 2014; Campbell et al. 2018; Margolis 2018) while conservative Republicans grow even more religious (Patrikios 2008; Putnam and Campbell 2012). However, non-religion and secularism still may effect political change—possibly increasing support for the Democratic Party and policy liberalism. And, secular commitment may exert more pressure on political ties than does not being religious. Changes in the link between citizens' social identities and social group images of the two parties spur partisan change (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002). Thus, as Democrats increasingly become known as the "secular party" and Republicans as the "religious party," secularity may be related to stronger Democratic and liberal orientations. That suggests our final hypothesis:

> H5: Secularism should be more closely associated than non-religiosity with increases over time in Democratic identification and policy liberalism.

Data and Measures

We employ original surveys designed to capture the full diversity of nonreligious and secular people. For all cross-sectional analyses, we use a survey we conducted online in 2017 through the national YouGov panel, which is recruited via online convenience sampling. While not a probability sample, we apply the weights created by YouGov to match the US population's demographics as closely as possible. The survey includes 3,000 respondents and indicators of a range of religious, secular, and political orientations.[4] To assess the relationship between secularism, non-religiosity, and politics over time, we employ a four-wave panel survey we conducted online between 2010 and 2012 through Knowledge Networks, using their probability-based US national panel.[5] Because our core indicators of secularism first appeared in the second panel wave, we confine our analysis to the second through fourth waves.

Our measure of non-religiosity incorporates standard indicators of religiosity, coded with higher scores representing lower levels. These include a dummy variable for "nones,"[6] non-participation in worship attendance and prayer, not receiving guidance from religion, and rejection of religious belief (not believing in God or the Bible).[7]

Our secularism measures tap directly into secular belief and identity rather than juxtaposing secularism with religion. We measure secular beliefs

4. The survey was conducted between October 4 and October 15, 2017. YouGov invited 9,894 of its panelists to participate. The eligibility rate for the invited panelists was 94.7 percent. The number of invited respondents completing the survey was 3,482, yielding a participation rate (accounting for respondent eligibility) of 37.2 percent. Accounting for partial completion of the survey yields our final sample size of 3,000, providing an effective participation rate of 32 percent. All analyses apply YouGov's general population sampling weight.

5. To recruit its nationally representative respondent panel, Knowledge Networks (KN, now GfK) used random digit telephone dialing (RDD) exclusively until 2009, then added an address-based probability sample (ABS) from the U.S. Postal Service's Delivery Sequence File. The respondents to our panel study were recruited through both RDD and ABS. To construct the sample for the panel survey, 4,450 panelists were randomly drawn from the respondent panel. A total of 2,635 of those panelists completed the survey for a completion rate of 59.2 percent. KN's recruitment rate was 16.3 percent and the profile rate was 64.3 percent, for a cumulative response rate of 6.2 percent. In the Supplementary Material, section 1, we show the rates of panel attrition and the demographic profile of the respondents in each panel wave. The number of panel respondents was 2,635 in wave 1 (October 20–November 10, 2010), 1,909 in wave 2 (June 25–July 19, 2011), 1,541 in wave 3 (March 7–20, 2012), and 1,412 in wave 4 (October 13–November 6, 2012). Our analyses use wave 4 as the final panel wave and apply KN's post-stratification sampling weight for wave 4 respondents.

6. Our dummy for nones includes only respondents identifying their religion as "nothing in particular" because identification as atheist or agnostic is included in our secular identity measure.

7. We present the question and response wording for all variables in the Supplementary Material, section 2.

through questions about secular principles such as rationalism, humanism, and freethinking. Our question battery includes eight statements, five of which we worded to affirm secular perspectives:

Factual evidence from the natural world is the source of true beliefs.
The great works of philosophy and science are the best source of truth, wisdom, and ethics.
To understand the world, we must free our minds from old traditions and beliefs.
When I make important decisions in my life, I rely mostly on reason and evidence.
All of the greatest advances for humanity have come from science and technology.

The other three statements represent the rejection of secular values:

It is hard to live a good life based on reason and facts alone.
What we believe is right and wrong cannot be based only on human knowledge.
The world would be a better place if we relied less on science and technology to solve our problems.[8]

To capture secular identity, we asked respondents to identify religious and secular terms that describe them. The terms were "ecumenical, mainline, charismatic/Pentecostal, humanist, non-traditional believer, secular, atheist, fundamentalist, born again/evangelical, agnostic," and "spiritual, but not religious." Exploratory factor analyses of these identities find clear evidence of a secular dimension consisting of the secular, humanist, atheist, and agnostic labels. We measure secular identity as the number of secular labels selected.[9]

To measure secular devotion, we created a "secular guidance" question paralleling the religious guidance questions. It asks how much guidance respondents receive from "nonreligious beliefs, such as derived from science or philosophy."[10]

Assessing the Structure of Private Secularism

To see if secularism and non-religiosity are distinct orientations, we employ confirmatory factor analysis. We estimate two models—one with all variables loading on a single factor, the other with our secularism indicators

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8. The 2010–2012 panel only included four statements—the first three worded in a secular direction and the "hard to live a good life" statement. Analyses of 2017 data with just these items produce results nearly identical to those presented here.
9. These exploratory factor estimates are in the Supplementary Material, section 3. Our secular identity variable includes respondents identifying themselves as atheist or agnostic in either the secular and religious labels or the religious affiliation question.
10. Our Supplementary Material, section 4, provides descriptive statistics for all secularism and non-religiosity indicators in the 2017 survey and their stability levels in the 2010–2012 panel.

loading on one factor and non-religiosity indicators loading on another factor.[11] Because secular beliefs and identity may be present among both nones and people claiming a religious affiliation, we show, in table 1, the estimates for all respondents. However, we also estimated models only for nones (see the Supplementary Material, section 7). The results are nearly identical to those shown here.

Our models treat secular guidance, secular identity, and all indicators of non-religiosity as having random measurement error.[12] Because our secular belief indicators come from a single question battery with statements worded in opposite directions, there is a possibility of correlated, or "non-random," measurement errors across the indicators.[13] To account for this, we allow the measurement errors for all of our belief indicators to be correlated with each other.[14]

All of the factor loadings are statistically significant in both models. However, while the loadings for the non-religiosity variables are noticeably larger than those for the secularism indicators in the one-factor model, these loadings are comparable in the two-factor model. Moreover, taking into account non-random measurement error in the secular belief indicators, the negative loadings for the items worded in a non-secular direction are generally as strong as the positive loadings for the pro-secular indicators. Perhaps most importantly, the two-factor model has a smaller chi-square value, a smaller value of the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), and

11. We estimate all of the confirmatory factor and structural equation models in this paper with Mplus 8.2, using full information maximum likelihood (FIML) estimation with robust standard errors and applying the survey's full-sample sampling weights ("MLR" estimation in Mplus). This produces estimates for all of the observations in the sample, even those with missing values on variables in the model (unless they are missing on the observed exogenous variables).

12. In all of our confirmatory factor models, we set the covariances between the measurement errors and both the latent variables and disturbance terms to zero, and the factor loading for one observed indicator of each latent variable to one. For the single-factor model, that indicator is worship attendance. For the two-factor model, the indicators are worship attendance and agreement with the "factual evidence" statement.

13. Green and Citrin (1994) show that such survey batteries can introduce non-random measurement error in the indicators, producing the appearance of two underlying dimensions in analyses that assume random measurement error. We found just that in an exploratory factor analysis (see the Supplementary Material, section 5). While the non-religion variables loaded strongly on a separate factor from all the secular variables, the analysis uncovered two secularism factors. The indicators worded in a secular direction loaded strongly on one factor and the items worded in a non-secular direction loaded on another factor. Suspecting that this was an artifact of oppositely worded statements in the same battery (as suggested by Weisberg 2005), we followed Green and Citrin's suggestion for uncovering the true latent variable structure through confirmatory factor analysis that allows for the possibility of non-random measurement error. We conducted that analysis for secular beliefs and found a unidimensional structure (see the Supplementary Material, section 6).

14. Following Green and Citrin (1994), we constrain all of the correlations between measurement errors to be equal, estimating a single error covariance parameter for all secular belief indicators.

Table 1. Confirmatory factor analyses of secularism and non-religiosity

Indicators	One-factor model		Two-factor model			
			Secularism factor		Non-religiosity factor	
	Coefficient	p-value	Coefficient	p-value	Coefficient	p-value
Secularism						
Factual evidence source of true beliefs	1.000	—	1.000	0.000	—	—
Great works best source of truth	1.448	0.000	1.332	0.000	—	—
Hard to live based on reason alone	−1.265	0.000	−1.009	0.000	—	—
Free minds from old traditions and beliefs	1.398	0.000	1.202	0.000	—	—
Important decisions based on reason/evidence	1.060	0.000	1.016	0.000	—	—
Greatest advances from science/technology	1.487	0.000	1.346	0.000	—	—
Right and wrong not based only on knowledge	−1.308	0.000	−1.030	0.000	—	—
World better if relied less on science/technology	−1.504	0.000	−1.397	0.000	—	—
Secular guidance	0.891	0.000	0.989	0.000	—	—
Secular identity	1.016	0.000	0.825	0.000	—	—
Non-religiosity						
Religious guidance	3.184	0.000	—	—	1.000	—
Religious attendance	2.558	0.000	—	—	0.801	0.000
Frequency of prayer	3.244	0.000	—	—	1.017	0.000
Belief in God	2.738	0.000	—	—	0.811	0.000
View of the Bible	2.599	0.000	—	—	0.767	0.000
No religious affiliation	1.096	0.000	—	—	0.391	0.000
Correlation between latent factors	—	—	0.74			
Goodness of Fit						
χ^2 (df)	1688.01 (103)		1102.62 (102)			
χ^2 scaling correction factor	2.07		2.04			
CFI	0.80		0.88			
RMSEA	0.072		0.057			
Satorra-Bentler difference in χ^2 (df)	—		292.22 (1)			
N = 3,000						

Source.—2017 survey conducted by the authors.

Note.—Coefficients are unstandardized maximum likelihood coefficients.

a larger value of the comparative fit index (CFI)—all indicating a better fit to the data (Bollen 1989). An appropriate test of whether the difference in fit is statistically significant is the difference in the chi-square values for the two models. Confirming hypothesis 1, the difference here is very significant.[15] Secularism is not just the opposite of religiosity.[16] It is a distinct orientation.[17]

Secularism, Non-Religiosity, and Political Orientations

How are secularism and non-religion related to Americans' political attitudes, identification, and engagement? To answer that, we estimate linear regression models with various political orientations as the dependent variables. Table 2 presents the results with standardized regression coefficients.[18]

We begin with political involvement, using participation in campaign activities—attending a political meeting or rally; displaying a campaign button, bumper sticker, or sign; doing any work for a party or candidate; giving money to a party or candidate; trying to convince anyone to vote a certain way; and voting in the 2016 election—as the latent dependent variable. The independent variables are secularism, non-religiosity, strength of partisanship, political efficacy, and sociodemographic controls.[19]

15. The chi-square statistics produced by the MLR estimator are scaled to be robust to non-normality and non-independence of observations. Thus, our chi-square difference testing uses the scaled difference in chi-square test suggested by Satorra and Bentler (1994).

16. The correlation of 0.74 between the factors is strong, but, given our corrections for measurement error, does not suggest that secularism and non-religiosity are equivalent. The correlation between additive indices of non-religiosity and secularism—created from observed indicators—is only 0.54.

17. If our measures of secularism and non-religiosity are valid, they should be related to public secularism—preferring a limited public role for religion. A confirmatory factor analysis (in the Supplementary Material, section 8) shows that non-religiosity and private secularism are distinct from public secularism, but strongly related to it.

18. To account for the non-random measurement error in our secular belief indicators, we estimate these regressions as structural equation models, treating secularism, non-religiosity, and some policy attitudes as latent variables estimated through confirmatory factor analysis. However, the results can be interpreted simply as estimates from a linear regression model. In fact, we estimated all of the models with OLS regression—measuring all multi-indicator variables as additive scales—and the results (in the Supplementary Material, section 9) are very similar.

19. Strength of party identification is the seven-point partisanship scale folded at the pure independent category. Political efficacy is reaction to the statement "People like me don't have any say about what the government does." In our model, efficacy is endogenous to secular orientations, sociodemographic controls, and partisan strength—and secular orientations are endogenous to demographics and partisan strength. The sociodemographic variables are income, gender, age, race (dummy variable for whites), region (dummies for Southerners, Northeasterners, and Westerners), a dummy for married people, and dummies for members

Table 2. The relationship of non-religiosity and secularism with political orientations

Political orientation	Secular orientation		χ^2 (df)	R^2
	Non-religiosity	Secularism		
Political participation[a]	−0.37	0.37	3222.57	0.14
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(473)	
Party identification[b]	−0.10	0.41	2273.52	0.23
	(0.085)	(0.000)	(284)	
Policy attitudes[c]				
Cultural issues	0.19	0.45	2662.27	0.54
	(0.002)	(0.000)	(356)	
Science issues	−0.01	0.81	3313.27	0.81
	(0.882)	(0.000)	(419)	
Social welfare issues	−0.12	0.44	2473.83	0.45
	(0.068)	(0.000)	(356)	
Non-isolationism	−0.26	0.33	2333.07	0.15
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(298)	
Immigration	−0.06	0.25	2318.35	0.19
	(0.322)	(0.000)	(298)	
Candidate evaluations and vote choice[c]				
Comparative candidate evaluations	−0.07	0.21	2306.32	0.57
	(0.148)	(0.000)	(298)	
Two-party presidential vote	−0.07	0.16	2334.12	0.64
	(0.071)	(0.000)	(298)	

SOURCE.—2017 survey conducted by the authors.

NOTE.—The top entries are standardized maximum likelihood coefficients; *p*-values are in parentheses. All observed variables range from 0 for the least secular/liberal/Democratic orientation to 1 for the most secular/liberal/Democratic orientation. The number of observations is 2,499 for all models except political participation ($N = 2,423$).

[a]The model includes controls for education, income, gender, age, race (dummy for whites), region, marital status, religious tradition (dummies for evangelical Protestants, mainline Protestants, and Catholics), strength of party identification, and political efficacy.

[b]Model includes controls for all sociodemographic variables.

[c]Models include controls for all sociodemographic variables and party identification.

of the three largest religious traditions: evangelical Protestants, mainline Protestants, and Catholics. We also control for educational attainment, although we recognize that there is much more to learn about the relationship between education and secularism. In addition to education level, future research should explore how different types of education affect the development of secularism (and vice versa). For example, researchers might examine institution type (religious-private, secular-private, public), college major, and graduate program.

The results highlight the differential political impact of secularism and non-religiosity and confirm hypothesis 2.[20] Non-religion has a strong, statistically significant and negative coefficient, confirming the traditional view that nonreligious people are less politically involved than are religious people. However, the influence of secularism is strongly positive and statistically significant. Secular identity and commitment are connected to greater political engagement.

We turn next to party identification, with which non-religiosity has no relationship.[21] Secularism, however, is strongly and significantly related to Democratic identification. Defining secularism in the conventional way—as the absence of religion—produces the conventional result: "seculars" (i.e., nonreligious people) lack a distinct partisan profile. However, when conceptualized as commitment to secular principles and identities, secularism corresponds clearly to identification with the Democratic Party.

We next examine the relationship between secularism and attitudes on five policy dimensions. These are cultural issues (same-sex marriage, abstinence-only sex education, and feeling thermometer ratings of gay men and lesbians), science policies (government prioritizing science and technology, environmental regulations, evolution, global warming, and vaccines), social welfare policies (government services and spending, government-provided health insurance, and the role of government vs. the free market in the economy), the United States taking an active role in world affairs (labeled "non-isolationism"), and a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants.

The results show that secularism is strongly related to liberal cultural attitudes and support for science and scientific approaches to societal issues. It also has a positive and statistically significant connection to social welfare liberalism, non-isolationist perspectives on foreign policy, and citizenship opportunities for undocumented immigrants.

The same is not true for non-religiosity. Low religiosity is connected to cultural liberalism, but has no relationship with views on science, social welfare, or immigration. Its relationship with foreign policy attitudes is significant, but negative—moving people closer to isolationism. In short, thought

20. To illustrate the estimation of our models, we show all of the estimates for party identification in the Supplementary Material, section 10.
21. Our partisanship model controls only for sociodemographic factors. In the other models, we also control for partisanship and treat it as endogenous to sociodemographic variables. The number of observations for these analyses is less than 3,000 (the total number of respondents) because there are missing values on some of the control variables and the MLR estimator drops observations that are missing on observed exogenous variables. For dependent variables other than political participation, we lose 501 observations due to missing values on income and religious affiliation. In the participation model, we lose 76 additional observations because we include strength of partisanship as an observed exogenous variable. We estimated all our models without controls for income and religion. The results are nearly identical to those shown here.

of as the absence of religion, secularism has no connection to liberalism outside of the cultural domain. Viewed as a positive commitment to secularist principles, it is related to liberalism on a wide range of issues.

We turn finally to candidate preference in the 2016 presidential election, measured in two ways: the comparative feeling thermometer ratings of the major-party candidates (ratings of Donald Trump subtracted from ratings of Hillary Clinton) and the two-party presidential vote (coded one for Clinton and zero for Trump).[22] The results again demonstrate the greater importance of secularism relative to non-religiosity. Non-religion has no connection to either candidate evaluations or presidential vote choice, but secularism is positively and significantly related to support for Clinton over Trump, in both thermometer ratings and vote choice. Because we control for partisanship, this means secularists' support for Clinton went above and beyond their attachment to the Democratic Party.

Our analyses confirm hypotheses 3 and 4. Both secularism and non-religiosity are associated with cultural liberalism. Secularism is associated with support for the Democratic Party and its candidates, and with liberalism on various policy issues. Non-religiosity is not.

Secular Adjustment or Political Updating?

There are strong cross-sectional relationships between secularism and political orientations. However, political orientations may be propelling these connections as people bring their non-religiosity and secularity into line with their political tendencies. We hypothesize that while non-religiosity is largely endogenous to political perspectives, secularism's link to politics is due partly to people updating their political orientations based on how committed they are to secularist perspectives.

Our 2010–2012 panel data give us leverage in assessing this expectation. Because the panel covers a short time period (made even shorter by our core measures not appearing until the second panel wave in summer 2011 and some policy issues not arriving until the third wave in late winter 2012), it cannot tell us definitively if secularism influences politics or politics shapes secularism. But it can offer insight into whether people are adjusting their secular tendencies in a way that is consistent with their politics or updating their political orientations consistent with their level of secularism. To that end, we use panel waves 2–4 to estimate structural equation models of the following type:

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22. For comparability with other dependent variables, the presidential vote estimates are from linear regression models. However, we also used Mplus's binary probit estimator and the results (in the Supplementary Material, section 11) are very similar.

$$\text{SecularOrientation}_{it} = \alpha_1 + \lambda_1 \text{SecularOrientation}_{i,t-1}$$
$$+ \beta_1 \text{PoliticalOrientation}_{i,t-1} + \varepsilon_{1,it} \quad (1)$$
$$\text{PoliticalOrientation}_{it} = \alpha_2 + \lambda_2 \text{PoliticalOrientation}_{i,t-1}$$
$$+ \beta_2 \text{SecularOrientation}_{i,t-1} + \varepsilon_{2,it} \quad (2)$$

This model tests "cross-lagged" relationships between a particular political orientation and secular orientations, with both variables shaped by their own past values and the past value of the other variable. The parameters connecting each factor at time t to its value at time $t\text{-}1$, labeled λ_1 and λ_2, capture the individual-level stability in secular and political orientations, respectively, over time. Then, because we control for the influence of past values on current values of secularism and political orientations, the β parameters capture the degree to which past values of each variable are associated with change from $t\text{-}1$ to t in the other variable (Finkel, 1995). The parameter β_1 indicates whether people who are more liberal or Democratic in one panel wave are more likely than people who are more conservative or Republican to grow more secular over time; β_2 indicates whether being more secular in one wave is associated with becoming more liberal or Democratic.

Cross-lagged models tell us more about the reciprocal relationships between secular and political orientations than cross-sectional analysis does, but they cannot establish causality. These models capture "between-person effects"—the extent to which change in one variable can be predicted from existing differences between individuals on another variable. They can tell us, for example, whether people who were more secular at one time point were more likely than less-secular people to grow more Democratic in their partisanship between that and future time points. The cross-lagged models do not capture "within-person effects"—whether differences or changes in one variable for an individual are associated with differences or changes in another variable for that same person (Allison 2009; Morgan and Winship 2014; Hamaker, Kuiper, and Grasman 2015; Vaisey and Miles 2017). Accordingly, their ability to establish that secularism influences political orientations (or vice versa) is limited.[23]

23. A key limitation of our cross-lagged models is that if, for example, secularism is associated with increases in Democratic partisanship, we cannot rule out the possibility that other factors related to differences across individuals in both secularism and change in partisanship are the causes of increasing Democratic loyalty. Our models include sociodemographic controls (education, income, age, race, religious tradition, region, and dummy variables for married people and people with children living at home), measured in the second panel wave and connected to secular and political orientations in waves 3 and 4. So, any relationship between secularism and change in political orientations should not be due to those variables. However, we cannot be sure that other unmeasured variables are not the causal agents. An advantage of models that capture within-person effects is that by using only variation within individuals, they control for any confounding of the relationship between the two variables of interest by time-invariant factors—though not by time-varying variables (Allison 2009; Vaisey and Miles 2017).

However, we would not expect within-person effects—for example changes in individuals' secularism levels coinciding with or preceding changes in the same individuals' political orientations—to take shape over the relatively short period of our panel study. More likely is people who already were more secular in the summer of 2011 being more likely than people who were less secular at that time to grow more politically liberal or Democratic by the late winter or fall of 2012. Cross-lagged models can capture that sort of process.

They may provide other important insights. For example, if secularism's relationship to Democratic partisanship results entirely from Democrats being more likely than Republicans to gravitate toward secularism, then we should see a relationship between lagged partisanship and secularism, but not the reverse. If the relationship also takes shape because secularists are more likely than non-secularists to increase their attachment to the Democratic Party, then we should see lagged relationships in both directions.

Each of panel waves 2 through 4 include all of our non-religiosity indicators as well as secular guidance, secular identity, and four secular belief statements (factual evidence, great works, hard to live, and free minds). Thus our measurement models are nearly identical to those in the cross-sectional analyses—including corrections for non-random measurement error in secular beliefs. These panel waves also include identically worded indicators of party identification and same-sex marriage attitudes. Having three waves of data enables corrections for measurement error in these indicators (Wiley and Wiley 1970; Bollen 1989).

To expand the political factors considered, we also examine two policy attitudes measured identically in the third and fourth panel waves—views on government providing health insurance and environmental regulations. With only two waves of data and a single indicator of each issue, we cannot correct for measurement error in these attitudes.

In table 3, we show the estimated stabilities of the latent variables and the cross-lagged relationships between political orientations and both secularism and non-religiosity.[24] In the models for partisanship and same-sex marriage, it is not surprising that, correcting for measurement error, all variables are highly stable—stability coefficients are each above 0.85.

Despite this stability, lagged party identification is significantly related to change in both secularism and non-religiosity. Democratic partisanship is associated with increases in both orientations. Support for same-sex marriage also is related to significant increases in secularism levels. The sizes of these lagged coefficients pale in comparison to the variables' stabilities, but the changes should not be large given measurement error corrections and periods

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24. To illustrate the estimation of our cross-lagged models, we show the full set of estimates for party identification in the Supplementary Material, section 12.

Table 3. Cross-lagged relationships between political orientations, non-religiosity, and secularism

	Political orientations			
	Party identification[a]	Same-sex marriage attitude[a]	Attitude on government insurance plan[b]	Attitude on environmental regulations[b]
Cross-lagged relationships				
Secularism$_t$ → Political$_{t+1}$	0.03	0.06	0.07	0.12
	(0.098)	(0.007)	(0.042)	(0.002)
Non-relig$_t$ → Political$_{t+1}$	−0.01	0.02	0.003	−0.01
	(0.596)	(0.322)	(0.923)	(0.655)
Political$_t$ → Secularism$_{t+1}$	0.05	0.11	0.02	0.01
	(0.032)	(0.000)	(0.589)	(0.807)
Political$_t$ → Non-relig$_{t+1}$	0.02	0.01	0.03	0.03
	(0.050)	(0.341)	(0.038)	(0.032)
Stabilities				
Political$_t$ → Political$_{t+1}$	0.98	0.93	0.55	0.53
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Secular$_t$ → Secular$_{t+1}$	0.87	0.86	0.57	0.57
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Non-relig$_t$ → Non-relig$_{t+1}$	0.97	0.97	0.68	0.68
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Goodness of fit				
χ^2	3,100.37	3,229.27	2,398.79	2,292.37
(df)	(1,168)	(1,168)	(590)	(590)
CFI	0.89	0.88	0.80	0.81
RMSEA	0.038	0.039	0.051	0.050

SOURCE.—2010–2012 panel survey conducted by the authors.

NOTE.—Entries are standardized maximum likelihood coefficients; *p*-values are in parentheses. All models control for education, income, sex, age, race, region, religious affiliation, marital status, and whether or not the respondent has children at home. The number of observations for all models is 1,170.
[a]Models use data from waves 2–4 and account for measurement error in all observed indicators.
[b]Models use data from waves 3 and 4 and account for measurement error in all indicators of secularism and non-religiosity, but not in indicators of political orientations.

of less than one year between panel waves. Cumulatively, these results could represent substantial change, with Democrats growing markedly less religious and more secular than Republicans over time. In short, politics may have contributed to the recent growth of non-religion and secularism.

What about the reverse? Are non-religion and secularism associated with increases in Democratic identification and support for same-sex marriage? For non-religiosity, the answer is no. However, confirming hypothesis 5, secularism has a statistically significant lagged relationship with partisanship and marriage attitudes. Secularists are more likely than non-secularists to grow more Democratic and more supportive of same-sex marriage.

In the last two columns of the table, the stabilities are less impressive, which is expected with only two panel waves and no measurement error corrections for policy attitudes. However, there remains a strong consistency in individuals' policy and secular orientations.

The cross-lagged relationships provide further evidence of secularism's political importance and support for hypothesis 5. Secularism is positively and significantly related to growing more supportive of a government insurance plan and environmental regulations. Meanwhile, neither of these policy attitudes is related to a change in secularism. In contrast, non-religion is not associated with changes in health insurance or environmental views, while liberal policy attitudes are associated with decreases in religiosity.

These results do not establish that secularism causes change in political orientations. The period of our panel study is too short and our statistical models are too simple for that. But they suggest that the relationship between secularism and politics is not due *entirely* to politics causing secularism. It may result *partly* from politics—both partisanship and marriage attitudes were associated with changes in secularism. However, the significant lagged connections of secularism to political orientations suggest that even taking into account more liberal and Democratic people being more secular, secularism is still associated with people growing more liberal and more Democratic over time.

Conclusion

A growing body of research documents the recent expansion of America's nonreligious and secular populations. However, by focusing primarily on the absence of religion, scholars have painted an incomplete, possibly misleading, portrait of the political implications of this secular turn. We distinguish between non-religiosity, or the absence of religion, and secularism, or the embrace of secular worldviews and identity. The data confirm a distinction between the two orientations and show that secularism is more closely related than non-religiosity to political attitudes and behavior.

Given the political significance of secularism, important questions are how large the secularist population is and how that compares to the nonreligious population. To answer, we formed secularism and non-religiosity scales in our 2017 data and computed scores on these scales for individuals with reasonably high values on various indicators—for example, people who receive "quite a bit" or more guidance from nonreligious beliefs for secularism.[25] Based on these values, about 11 percent of Americans are secularists and over 33 percent are nonreligious—and about 25 percent of nonreligious people are secularists. If secularists were a religious denomination, they would be one of the largest—larger, for example, than Southern Baptists (Pew Research Center 2015). But as important as their size is their likely growth. As nones continue to grow, so will secularists, with consequences for American politics.

Our objectives have been both methodological and substantive. Methodologically, we hope other researchers will employ and refine our measures of secularism.[26] Substantively, distinguishing between secularism and non-religiosity underscores the political implications of growing secularism. With improved conceptualization and measurement comes better understanding of this important cultural and political development.

Data Availability Statement

REPLICATION DATA AND DOCUMENTATION are available at https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/VUD3M2.

Supplementary Material

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL may be found in the online version of this article: https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfab011.

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25. We explain how we derived the secular and nonreligious prototypes in the Supplementary Material, section 13.
26. It may be possible to tap into secularism without all our measures. We formed a simple measure of secular identity with 2016 American National Election Studies data and find (in the Supplementary Material, section 14) that it is related to political participation, liberal policy attitudes, and Democratic Party support.

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